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Interview by John Needham (UPI)

Mike Mansfield 1903-2001

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This is the transcript of yesterday's Needham interview. I checked with Press Off. to find why last page ends in mid-question; apparently, that was the point at which tape of interview ended.

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AMBASSADOR MANSFIELD INTERVIEW WITH JOHN NEEDHAM (UPI)
August 13, 1980

MR. NEEDHAM: I'm here today because New York would like a piece on you as ambassador. I don't know the timing or anything. So rather than go into NTT or cars or anything, I would like to ask you things of...

What did you expect the job to be like when you took it?

AMBASSADOR: Just about what it turned out to be, except not quite as difficult as I had anticipated but, fortunately, this Embassy has a first rate staff, people with experience, some of them with a knowledge of the language, a few who have been back here two and three times, and people whose advice and counsel I found very good. And while I think we have gone through the most difficult three-year period in our bilateral relationship, thanks to the high caliber of the staff, we've been able to cope with the problems, find solutions, and keep things on a fairly even level. What we've achieved, the staff deserves the credit for it.

Q: Well, from what I'm told by our people in Washington, you get a lot of credit from people there. Among other things, they say that it's their impression, people
at the State Department, you of all the ambassadors have the easiest access to the President. Do you think that still holds true? Are you still in a position? I remember you saying over here at the beginning that you could just pick up the phone if it's important enough to get through him.

AMBASSADOR: I still can, but I do it very rarely and under the most important of circumstances. It has been helpful, and also I have been able to maintain my close contacts with the House and Senate, and that's been very helpful, too.

Q: Would you consider it perhaps the main advantage of having you here rather than a career diplomat?

AMBASSADOR: Very likely. I would say yes, because every person wouldn't have those contacts, and as far as I am concerned with my background in both Houses, and with all the presidents since Roosevelt, my contact with them, that's built up a reservoir over the years that one can fall back on in time of need.

I've also made it a point to stress upon the Japanese governmental and business officials and Japanese
in general the importance of the Congress in our relation­ship, and those pictures are there not to remind me of my
days on the Hill, but to bring home to the Japanese the
fact that it's not just the President and the Secretary of
State but it's the Congress as well, and sometimes the
Congress will exercise an overriding influence.

Q: You've always been very involved with the
Japanese on various problems, but to take cars for one
second, do you think you have had any role in limiting the
exports of Japanese cars to the States to whatever extent
they may be limited?

AMBASSADOR: None.

Q: How do you spend your time? What's the day
like for an ambassador?

AMBASSADOR: Well, I come to work around 7:30, get up about
5:30, and stay until about 5 o'clock. Once in a while
later than that, depending upon circumstances. We don't go
out too much, my wife and I, but we do go to as many
national days as possible.
Do you find it a chore? Galbraith in "Ambassador's Journal" bemoaning periodically about the time he has had to spend meeting new ambassadors and saying goodbye and going to national days.

AMBASSADOR: No, I don't think it's a chore. I think it's part of the job, and I think it reaps benefits, establishes contacts. In the process you lose nothing, but gain a little.

Q: Do you make any concessions to age at all?

AMBASSADOR: Age?

Q: Yes, napping during the day?

AMBASSADOR: No, no, and I didn't make any concessions when I retired three years ago to age, so I guess being of Irish peasant stock my ancestry stands me in good stead. I go to bed early, but always have.

Q: You are not one of the great socializers in Washington?

AMBASSADOR: No.
Q: When you announced your retirement and then you were approached to take this job, was it approached as, would you go as ambassador to Japan, or was it would you be an ambassador? Would you have preferred to be ambassador to another country like China?

A: No, the furthest from my thoughts was becoming an ambassador. Never gave it any consideration. When I left the leadership, I left with a clean slate. Nobody owed me anything. I didn't owe anybody anything, and I didn't expect anything.

But the President did offer me several ambassadorships. I wasn't too interested. I was enjoying my retirement, first time in my life. But when he offered me Japan, I talked it over with my wife, and we accepted it.

But it goes back to my lifelong interest in the Far East, beginning in the twenties, with the marines, Philippines and China, carrying through in school which my wife in effect forced me to go to. I had to finish the eighth grade, so she, a Butte girl--I met her while I was working in the mines--said: "You've got to get an education or you won't live too long," and so I went to the School of Mines in Butte and they said: "We can't enroll you as a regular
student because you haven't finished the eighth grade. You have no high school credits, but we'll take you on because of your service in the First War as a specialist, and if you make the grade, fine, and if you don't, that's your responsibility."

So I went to the Montana School of Mines for a year, worked in the mines at night, five days a week, barely scraped through. The professors were very kind to me. They gave me the benefits of any doubts, and some of them were quite big.

And then I went back in the mines. It was too tough to carry on that kind of a schedule, and then the depression really came and I went down to the university, my time at Missoula-- my wife was teaching in a high school at the time--enrolled as a special student. She gave up her job, cashed her insurance, saw me through the university, and then in the last quarter of my senior year I made up my 15 high school credits and became in effect a high school graduate and a regular student. That's how I got that far.

Q: When you first came to Asia, it was as a marine at that point, having originally gone in as a sailor?
A: Well, I was in the war as a seaman second class for about 19 months. They had duration of the war enlistments at that time. And then I went into the army for a year. Seaman second class in the navy, and a private in the army, and then I went into the marines for two years and emerged as a PFC. It was when I was in the marines that I developed my interest in this part of the world.

I taught Far Eastern history at the university, did my master's on U.S.-Korean relations, 1866 to 1910, and as soon as I got to the House I was fortunate enough to get on the Foreign Affairs Committee, kept up my interest in the Far East. In the Senate I had the same good fortune, and what concerned me was that most of the time I was almost alone in the House and the Senate in showing an interest in this part of the world.

Q: Do you think things have changed that much in the last ten years, Vietnam aside?

A: Congressional interest?

Q: Yes.

A: Yes, I think so. Not enough, by any means,
but you've got groups like the Wolfe Committee which seems to make a yearly pilgrimage to Southeast Asia especially, but this part of the world as well, though not to the same degree. You have a tremendous interest in China on the part of Congress, which seems to be diminishing.

One of the side effects of that has been that many of these groups came through Japan on a stopover basis and spent more time in China—it was the magnet—and unfortunately didn't spend enough time here to appreciate that the most important bilateral relationship in the world was developing and has now developed into a factor to be considered, and that is the relationship between Japan and the United States.

And the European bias is still maintained, but I think that a shift has taken place and more interest, much more interest, is being shown about the Pacific and East Asia.

Q: What would you say was the previous major bilateral relationship, and when would you think Japan came in as number one?

A: Probably our relationship with the United Kingdom, but as the U.K. has been regressing the Japanese
have been progressing, and I think that business is beginning to understand the great potential which the Pacific and East Asia offers and they are gradually increasing their investments here, achieving much more in the way of return from investments out here compared with any other part of the world, and the economic factor is becoming increasingly significant.

In 1975, the two-way trade between the U.S. and Japan and East Asia amounted to $42 billion; last year it was $93.6 billion, and the trend is up. But, unfortunately, only $5 billion is invested in Japan and $18 billion in East Asia, out of a total of $168 billion invested worldwide.

But things are changing for the better, and more American businesses are beginning to realize that the opportunities are in the Pacific and East Asia.

Q: And the flag will follow trade, or as business becomes more involved out here its influence on the rest of the American public will shift the Americans to a greater interest in Asia?

A: Gradually, but the flag was here before trade. When Dewey attacked Manila, he left from Hong Kong. You had the Asiatic Squadron in those days, that was before the turn
of the century. When I was out here, you had the Asiatic Fleet. Now you've got the Seventh Fleet, so the flag has been here for almost a hundred years. American business is a factor which has only become really evident since the end of the Second War.

Q: Has it been true in your experience that the Pacific is a Republican ocean? The Republican Administration, say, stopping at Carter, let's say, paid more attention to this part of the world than the Democrats did?

A: No, I think both Democratic and (Republican) Administrations are to blame equally for a lack of interest in this part of the world and for a predominant interest in the affairs of Western Europe.

But the push of history has consistently been westward, and that is being accentuated because it is out here where it all is and what it's all about, and it's out here where our future lies.

Q: Have you always felt that way? Say, before World War II, what would your feelings have been?
The same. Preached the doctrine when I was teaching at the university, believed it while I was studying it, and became interested in it when I served out here.

And I think events, in addition to business opportunities and returns and an increase in two-way trade, are bringing that picture home, because the two most difficult areas in the world today are, one, the Middle East, the Arab-Israeli area, and the only way that we can really approach it is through the Pacific and Indian Oceans in a backdoor manner, and by the front door the Indian Ocean leads right into the oil rich producing areas of the Middle East. So, defensively and strategically, we have to give that factor consideration.

I have advocated for a long time that the Seventh Fleet should be increased in size and strength. It has been increased in quality and effectiveness, and that we ought to have at least one carrier with an appropriate escort group, battle groups, stationed in the Indian Ocean.

Now I think we ought to have two stationed there permanently with battle groups because of the importance of the area, but we didn't act. We reacted to developments in Iran and Afghanistan instead of taking the initiative, but now that I think that the spring has been broken, that we will see a permanent stationing of forces in the Indian
Ocean, not I hope in a new fleet but, rather, as an extension of the Seventh Fleet which is within the area of its responsibility anyway.

Q: Which would mean more carriers, two in the Indian Ocean, two out here, still left out here.

A: I'd like to see two out there and at least one out here, preferably two, because of the huge area that the fleet's responsibility encompasses.

And then, of course, our people are going to have to realize in time that the most important strategic area in the world in my opinion—the point is arguable—is in the North Pacific with the PRC, Soviet Union, U.S., Japan and Korea right in the middle. And it just happens to be that our third nearest neighbor next to Canada and Mexico is the Soviet Union. You have those two little islands, Big Diomede and Little Diomede, in the Bering Straits, the big one Russian, the little one ours. About 20 miles separate the two. That's just an incidental factor.

Q: You've done a lot of travelling this year. Are you a collector? Do you collect anything, Orientalia or Chinese antiques, or Japanese antiques?
A: No, I'm not much of a collector. If I were, I don't think I could afford it. It's very expensive, and getting more expensive all the time, but I'm not an expert on the Far East. I don't think there is any such animal. I'm a student of the Far East. I learned a lot since I've been out here and have a lot to learn, and I've been trying to get into all the prefectures.

First of next month I'm going to get into the last three, and when that's done I will have made a complete round. Didn't go to all of them officially, most of them, but officially and unofficially I would have been in the whole 47 or 48.

Q: You have stated that you will stay here through the first term, but when the time does come for you to go, what sort of recommendations would you make for your successor, another politician? The Japanese have gotten along very well with you. Is that because of you or because of political contacts?

A: It's the latter, the political contacts. I'm quite sure that's the big factor, and I've tried to understand them. I've tried to see their point of view, and I've explained our point of view. I have had arguments with the Defense and State Departments and the Administration. I have never
believed in the old adage that a diplomat, if a political appointee can be so described, is a person sent abroad to lie for his country, and I've tried to operate out here as I operated in the Senate as majority leader, and that was to tell the truth, lay all the cards on the table, consider the plus and minuses, and I think it has paid off.

They have been candid in their contacts with me. I am pleased with the personal relationship I've developed with the three administrations which have been in office since I've been here, and with the Miki Administration before I came here, and I've tried to operate on the basis of equality, which I think is very important, mutual trust, mutual confidence, and have sought to find solutions which are as mutually acceptable as possible.

Q: How much of your time is taken up with meeting with Japanese government officials? I don't mean like right after an election or right after the prime minister dies, but during a stable period, say, three months or a year or whatever? How much time do you spend meeting with Japanese officials?

A: Hard to say. It depends on circumstances. I try to meet with the Japanese people as such in all walks of
life rather than too much with the government officials. I don't think I should take up their time unless I've got something to discuss, and I think I can use my time on that basis much better getting into the prefectures and meeting the people down there, governmental and otherwise, and in that way getting a feel of the country, and that's about the best anyone can do out here.

I can't say I know the Japanese. I don't know anyone who really does who is an outsider. I'm not sure the Japanese understand themselves any more than we do, that is understand ourselves. But I'm impressed with what Japan has done with practically nothing in the way of natural resources. They have to fall back on imports from the outside, and they have to import to manufacture, to export, to survive.

What they have, though, is a tremendous asset in their people, and those people have productivity and pride. They are interested in their work. They turn out quality products at competitive prices. They have a reputation for excellence, and they have created a demand for the products they produce.

When I compare Japan with my own state of Montana, which is the closest in size to Japan, 3,000 square miles or bigger, with all the resources we have--coal, 15% of the U.S. reserves, we have coal in Montana for 300-400 years,
beef, wheat, middling amounts of oil and gas, copper, tungsten, manganese, timber—Japan has practically nothing in those respects, a little coal, becoming more expensive, harder to extract, quality decreasing. And we have less than 800,000 people in my state, and some of us think it's too many. And then you have 116 million here, and I understand that 60% of the population lives on 2% of the land.

So it's extremely vulnerable economically. It's vulnerable militarily, and compared with 20 years ago the Japanese, who demonstrated and rioted then, now accept the Self Defense Forces despite Article 9 and the U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty. And people say the Japanese spend less than 1% of their GNP on defense.

As a matter of fact, they spend somewhere close to 1.2%, and their increases have been steady and significant down through the past decade, and they will continue to be so in this decade.

I would say that today, depending upon the value of the yen, that Japan ranks seventh or eighth in defense expenditures, and they play a very important part in the defense of this part of the world, primarily their own, solely their own area, and this part of the world is within our defense perimeter as well.
So it isn't a one-way street. We have the use of bases here. The Japanese are paying pretty close to $800 million for the upkeep of the U.S. forces, and I think if you brought in all the invisible factors, it would come to around one billion dollars, the cost which we would have to assume ourselves if the Japanese didn't.

And what they are doing, they are doing on their own. As Japan is a sovereign nation and should exercise its own responsibility as such, I'm disturbed sometimes by the threats, demands and pressures coming out of Washington because that is not the way to get the Japanese to do what we want them to do and what they will do, but it is a way to create a counterproductive reaction which will not be beneficial to either of our countries.

Q: In your three years here, what has been your main disappointment?

A: I've had none. What we tried to achieve, we've done. What we set out to accomplish, we've accomplished, but I want to emphasize that it's not because of me, but because of the superb staff we have here and the excellent relationship and understandings we've had with the Japanese governments.
Q: How about, aside from anything, one specific thing that you were more happy to get?

A: Yes, the settlement of the Tokai-mura dispute which tended to blow up into a grave political issue, and which mutually we were able to work out to our joint satisfaction. That's the reprocessing of plutonium in Ibaraki.

A: And I think that so far they've stood up very well, and we think we know more about what's going on in Japan and what the prospects and possibilities are than do the people in Defense and State. We're charged with this special responsibility. We're supposed to know something about it. We do, and we would like to be listened to and consulted with before some of these statements are made, whether they be in Washington or as they were in Paris last December.

The Japanese have been our first and foremost supporters and friends on the issues of Afghanistan and Iran. They haven't gotten much credit, publicitywise, but last March I think it was, early this year anyway, when they refused to pay the $2.50 a barrel extra which Iran was demanding, which would raise the price to $35, and they did it in
support of us, two days later Iran cut off Japan's oil exports which amounted to 13% of Japan's imports from Iran. So they paid a price, and they haven't been given enough credit, in my opinion, and the truth ought to prevail. They haven't got the headlines like some of our European allies who, when the showdown came, were somewhere else, but the Japanese were in there, and of all our friends and allies they were, and are, first and foremost in their support of us.

Q: There are, however, reports that the National Iranian Oil Company has called 13 Japanese firms to Teheran... August to offer to resume oil supplies in September or October.

A: Right, but they are still cut off. What the future holds remains to be seen.

Q: If the Japanese did resume the imports at the higher price, would you consider that a blow?

A: I wouldn't want to render an opinion, John, till I had the facts before me, but if I read the world market prices right, I believe that the price is declining because of the
glut in the markets of the importing nations. But all you can do is talk about what's happened up to this time, and it's foolish to conjecture about the future because no one knows what will happen or what the circumstances will be at that time.

Q: What happens when something like that—Iranian oil, say, do you as subtly as possible indicate to the Japanese that the United States will be very happy if they did not pay the higher price?

A: Not as subtly as possible. It's laid out on the basis of suggestions or requests from Washington. But the decisions have to be theirs because Japan is a sovereign nation and as such must exercise its own responsibility and do what it thinks is in its own best interest. And sometimes, as in the case of Iranian oil, they placed our interests above their interests, because they lost that 13% which was a big chunk of what they import.

Q: Is this the first convention you've missed?

A: No, I've missed a lot of them. I never liked conventions. When I went, I was in a position where I almost
had to go, but I'm delighted to be here while that's going on over there.

Q: You don't listen to it on the radio, FEN?

A: I listen to the news once in a while over FEN, but if I don't hear it I don't miss anything. If I do hear it, I don't learn too much.

Q: Any predictions for the rest?

A: It's going to be a tough operation. But the Democrats are going to have to get their act together because they'll need it. If they do get their act together, then I think it will be a horse race.

Q: Don't you find it difficult to accept the possibility of Reagan being president?

A: No. I'm philosophical when it comes to politics. People have to decide and their choice counts. We've survived so far and we'll survive in the future as well.

Q: You are still the supporter of a single six-year term?
A: Yes. It's the only answer. It's too hard on presidents, but one six-year term relieves them of party responsibilities. It relieves them of playing politics and allows them to use their own best judgment in behalf of the country. PERIOD. Not the party.

And I think we also ought to have a national convention, a national primary day, then have a national election, do away with the conventions. I think we ought to extend the terms of House members to either three or five years, and I think that we would have more stability, greater assurance about the welfare of our country, do away with these long interminable state primaries, and we can learn a lesson from the Japanese in reducing the campaign period to a period of a month or less. Everybody would benefit on that basis.

George Aiken and I tried twice to introduce resolutions seeking to amend the Constitution to a one six-year term. We couldn't even get a hearing from the Senate Judiciary Committee, but I think that events are inexorably moving in that direction.

Q: When you are out here for such a long period, what do you miss most about the United States?

A: Montana.
Q: What do you miss most about Montana?

A: The beauty of the state, the room, the people. They're a special breed. Not many states left like Montana.

Q: You became Senate majority leader as successor to Johnson?

A: I was his deputy majority leader for four years. Then I was majority leader for 16 years. Twenty-four years in the Senate.

Q: What do you think you'll do when you go back and retire this time?

A: It's my understanding that the custom is to hand in--all ambassadors, political and career--hand in their resignations at the end of every presidential term. Then we'll see what happens after that. I promised Carter I would stay at least through his first term, but when I retire I hope to teach some classes at the university in the spring and fall, University of Montana that is, where I'm still on the faculty, 37 years on a leave of absence status, good insurance, and spend the winters in Florida.
Q: Have you been to Korea since you came as ambassador?

A: Twice. Went to PRC twice. Undertook a mission for Carter to Australia and New Zealand, Singapore and the Philippines last November-December.

Q: Are you, as the Asahi commentator wrote, "President Carter's eyes and ears in the Far East"?

A: I'm President Carter's personal representative as ambassador to Japan.

Q: Okay. Again many thanks.

A: Okay. Good luck in Korea. You ought to find that trial very interesting if you can understand what's going on.

Q: Well, I'll have one of my staffers next to me to explain what's going on. I certainly hold out no hope for Mr. Kim.

A: Well, it's a difficult problem. Its repercussions... do go far beyond Korea.

Q: I'm sure many people have impressed on the generals, but I'm not sure they listen to anybody over there, and I don't see...