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Interviewee: Peggy DeMichele

Interviewer: Gregory Olson

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Gregory Olson: Just a little bit of background as long as this is going to go to the Mansfield Center about how you came to work for Congressman Mansfield, if you don't mind elaborating a bit.

Peggy DeMichele: I had been working for [Jerry Joseph] O'Connell who had died in January in Montana. He never was a member of Congress. (unintelligible) they had to go through the legislature. Eventually they had to determine how they would fill the vacancy. This all took from January until June. The Democratic candidate for that office that had been picked by the party was defeated by a Republican. Mansfield, at that time, was in the state campaigning for Mr. Graybill. They called me in the morning after the election and asked what I was going to do. I said I was unemployed.

So he said that his secretary Marge was going to get married. He wondered if I could come and fill in during her time while she was on her honeymoon. That would give me a chance to look around because I didn't expect to see (unintelligible) Mansfield was elected. So it was a couple of days before she got married when I went in. They said she wasn't going to come back to work. She was going to (unintelligible) after her marriage. She used to be at the university there. She came with him when he was going too.

GO: [Charlie] Hood mentioned that in his dissertation. I remember reading it. That was the time, and I guess Charlie Hood mentioned in his dissertation the fact that Mansfield stepped out for Foreign Affairs Committee at that time. He took over the committee assignments that O'Connell had held and then stepped back in when the seat was filled.

PD: Yes he took over the interior and (unintelligible). I think the three of them, the one that O'Connell had been on. He had been chairman of Indian Affairs. Mansfield (unintelligible). Then when (unintelligible) came, he was assigned to those committees on the Republican side. Mansfield then went back to Foreign Affairs.

GO: Oh I see. Okay. In the 1950s, I guess my dissertation really starts with Mansfield's involvement with Indochina and most people talk about his relationship with Diem, who he met in 1953 through Justice Douglas. Did Mansfield ever talk about Diem with you?

PD: No because I didn't get involved with any of those foreign affairs things. I just handled all Montana work. The only thing I would be aware of was his report, which we took care of and typing up the speeches and things. I never did get involved with any foreign stuff.

GO: In terms of his speeches, did he write most of his own speeches or did staff help with that?

PD: Well there were some staff research and help. He put the final touch on everything. In a lot of them, he started himself. He was very good about writing a lot of that stuff. He used to write out notes from time to time on a sheet and it would be on his desk. Eventually you'd see those paragraphs appear into a speech.

GO: That's interesting. You mentioned when we just chatted the other day that Kennedy might have reacted differently in Vietnam and those escalation decisions might never had happened. I know Schwartz and his dissertation on Mansfield in one of his letters to the Senator Mansfield indicated that it was his belief that Kennedy would have changed the course in Vietnam after his expected re-election in 1964. Did the Senator ever talk about that with you?

PD: No but I did read- I think it was O'Connell who had a book. Of course (unintelligible) it would come to an end. (unintelligible) to get them to change (unintelligible).

GO: A lot of people were writing about Mansfield during the Johnson administration. Evans and Novak, I know, in their book about Johnson, write about the chilling of the relationship between Mansfield and Johnson over his disagreement on Vietnam. Did you ever get any indication that that was the case? It seemed they had a fairly strong friendship in the 1950s and that there was sort of a chill over that sort of disagreement.

PD: No, I just think that President Johnson was very unhappy that he didn't have Mansfield's support. Of course, I don't think that the friendship was (unintelligible). Mansfield would always recognize that (unintelligible).

GO: Yes, he wrote about that often. What stands out when you're reading his pronouncements about the decision, is ultimately the President's in that time. Other people writing about Johnson and Mansfield tend to refer to Johnson as Mansfield's mentor because when Mansfield was elected to the Senate in '52, Johnson got him the seat on the Foreign Relations Committee and made him his whip in '55 or '56. Then Johnson and Kennedy both pushed Mansfield to accept the leadership post in '61. Do you think that Mansfield kind of considered Johnson his mentor and felt obligation or friendship for that?

PD: The leaders do have (unintelligible) in the committees. The policy committee is the one that makes the final decision on those. The leader is the chairman of that committee in the room on what committees they are assigned. Of course, as far as the whip is concerned, they are elected by the majority of their party in a caucus. So I'm sure that maybe Johnson passed the word that that's who he wanted and they went along with that basis. Those votes generally are always in a caucus that nobody is present, that you don't know who voted for whom unless the members come out and say it. Most of the time, they were a secret ballot.

GO: I guess in reading a lot of material at the Mansfield Center, I certainly noticed that there was a lot of correspondence especially from Johnson to Mansfield in the fifties when Mansfield was his whip. It was very warm correspondence. Certainly there was less from Kennedy. Towards the end of his career when Senator Mansfield was asked to assess the Presidents he served under, he always said warm things about both Johnson and Kennedy. It seemed very clear to me that Kennedy was the President he served under and respected the most. Did you get that same kind of feeling about his relationship with Kennedy and its closeness?

PD: He admired him. Probably there had been more of a (unintelligible) between Kennedy and Mansfield, more so than Johnson. The personalities were different. I think that Mansfield respected all the Presidents and gave all of them credit where credit was due. He criticized when he thought he should.

GO: Yes he did. He often said things like, he always looks if he were in that position if he could do it any better. He puts himself in the other man's shoes. It was a comment he made a number of times too. I think I kind of mentioned this when I talked the other day too, but did Mansfield talk much about or did he agonize over his inability to change the course of Vietnam? Did this cause him a great deal of pain because that couldn't happen? Did he talk about that at all?

PD: Oh yes. He was very upset about Vietnam. He was very sad about how the youth felt about it. He always would willingly talk to any students if they questioned him about Vietnam. He always tried to point out the reasons why he had been opposed to it, you know. (unintelligible) he was very upset.

GO: Did he think that the Korean War was a mistake once it was started?

PD: Well, it wasn't as strong, but he was very unhappy that we had to go to war there too. He was opposed to war if we could reach a settlement otherwise. There were two different reasons for the wars. Vietnam was the worst one. (unintelligible) we were interfering with the country.

GO: A lot of people wrote about, and I guess Mansfield even did when he was first appointed to the leadership post, how he really didn't want to be majority leader. He was perfectly happy to be a senator from Montana either to do what he was elected to do. Did he ever talk about his reluctance or unhappiness in being leader at least in the first years?

PD: He wasn't aiming for it ever. He never went out to seek any higher office. He just didn't want anything. He was very happy with being a Senator. Then once he became leader, I think he worked at it very hard to be a good one. He wouldn't have been in that many years if he hadn't.

GO: Most of his peers said very, very wonderful things about him in that position. In '62 and '63, at one time, Senator Morse once and Senator Dodd once attacked Mansfield's leadership

style. They'd been used to the Johnson leadership style. Did that kind of thing bother him? Did he ever talk about—

PD: He felt badly about it because he tried to feel that the Senator had done so much right to carry on. He recognized that (unintelligible) had to take into consideration that he wasn't one to press for votes that had been done by Johnson. Johnson wanted to know what the vote was going to be before it was ever taken.

GO: It often did.

PD: Of course he used his power for (unintelligible). Mansfield wasn't that kind. He wanted to let everyone else decide how they want to do it. As much as he wanted something to pass, he would hope that he could convince them, but he didn't pressure them.

GO: Did you think that Senator Mansfield came to enjoy the leadership position after he had been in it for a few years? Or was it something he did sort of as an obligation?

PD: Oh, I think there were parts of it he enjoyed. It was a lot of strain and hard work. I think he would be entirely relieved to be out from under it.

GO: I can believe that. Anyway, those are really the specific questions I had that are somewhat central to what I'm writing about. Is there anything that you'd like to say that you'd like me to consider?

PD: Actually I managed to (unintelligible) didn't get involved in (unintelligible). I felt that I had seen where leaders in the past like Lucas and (unintelligible) who had gotten so involved in the leadership that their staffs had kind of forgotten about their state. I felt that staffs must never forget about their state because they might not have gone down in defeat. When he became leader that was the one thing that I felt was important. We watched everything in Montana carefully and not let anything get by that should be called to his attention, not that he couldn't track that himself. All the Montana problems were taken care of.

GO: In looking at his constituent mail, the one thing I noticed was that before he became leader, he seemed to reply to just about all letters. Once he became leader, he maybe didn't have as much time. He certainly replied to everybody from Montana. Most of those letters on Vietnam, there is a reply from Mansfield that was just kind of like he did it.

PD: (unintelligible) had to be taken care of. He saw everyone that came from Montana. They were all put on his desk before they were ever given to staff to handle. If he didn't sign letters, we signed it with our names or our initials on the top of the letter.

GO: I noticed a lot of that when he was campaigning in Montana. He would often do that.

PD: In case we erred, we'd always be able to come back. He watched the Montana things too. Men working that hard can only do so many things. We had to make sure that it was all taken care of properly. That's what our main objective was.

GO: Did Maureen keep the scrapbooks up that he has or did the staff help with that? Those scrapbooks are certainly thorough.

PD: The scrapbooks—when he was in Congress, we did. The staff did. I think—I haven't seen them myself. She has the scrapbooks from Japan.

GO: Yes, apparently she has. I didn't get to those.

PD: That was taken care of by her. The ones that we had during the House and Senate years, we got all the papers and they were cut. We had somebody do that.

GO: You were real good about getting the Montana in the papers, even the weeklies.

PD: He had quite a few.

GO: It was very helpful and I think Charlie Hood used them even more than I did. One of the things I regretted was I ran out of time. I just basically used them the times they seemed most important. I knew there was a lot of richness there that I was going to miss. (unintelligible).

PD: The scrapbooks give a lot of stories that didn't get seen (unintelligible). He'd want to look them over first.

GO: Yes. It saved me a lot of time in terms of secondary sources because whatever the—

PD: (unintelligible) we should have had an index. (unintelligible).

GO: You don't. In 1945, you couldn't guess how long it would go on and how important it would become.

PD: We were novices. I also thought that (unintelligible) to instruct the newcomers when they come about what to think about in their files and what to think about in the future. A lot of offices never have thought about having to go through the (unintelligible). I do know that the O'Connell files, we sent them to his family. I did try to (unintelligible) his daughter to try and get some. I think finally they may have turned them over to the University of Bozeman because that was closer to Libby. I'm not sure if they are there or not. (unintelligible).

GO: As I told you when we talked before, I was very impressed with how easy it was to find material in those files.

PD: I'm glad to hear that.

GO: I can't imagine that there won't be other people there. I think that part of the reason that Mansfield has been ignored is that Missoula's isolated. People haven't really gone there. If I had gone to Washington, it would have been my bad luck. Other people would have poured over those papers before I had the chance.

PD: They'll get used. That will be good. We hoped that it would help somebody anyway. I'll be anxious to take a look at it when you get through.

GO: Thank you. I think I'll do some re-writing and I think I'll probably incorporate some of the things you told me after I send the dissertation next Wednesday. I suppose that in a matter of months, manage to be bound. I will give a copy to the Mansfield Center. They will have one. Thank you so much for your cooperation.

PD: Thank you. Good luck Greg.

[End of Interview]