

Maureen and Mike

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Interviewee: Walter Mondale
Interviewer: Jim Caron
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Jim Caron: Good morning

Walter Mondale: Good Morning. [Interview takes place after Mondale left office. He was a senator from Minnesota from 1964-76 and vice president from 1977-81.]

JC: Early enough? These guys went out and had nachos last night.

WM: Yes, just what I needed. [Laughter]

JC: Minnesota boy. Did you want to have a sip of coffee before we start?

WM: No, that's all right. He'll bring it.

JC: We are doing a film, about an hour-long film biography of Mike Mansfield based on a live presentation that we did. It was originally designed—I went to Washington to research the project. I didn't really know what the focus was going to be and talked to John Melcher, who was out there, of course, but he said he thought the biggest tragedy about Mansfield was that nobody under 25 in state of Montana really knew who he was and that gave us the focus. So we're really design something for kids.

[Addressing a person in the room] We are clicking here, Geoff. What is going on?

JC: Anyway, that's been kind of the focus and since then there's been a lot of interest in PBS people about the project. I guess I would start with maybe something you said last night. We'll take off on that about Mansfield being a force during Watergate, during the Kennedy assassination. Any thoughts you might have on those two?

WM: Well, the question came up in the context of whether people should be limited to a single term, and I said well, Mansfield would be good example of what you would lose. Mike's ability to be a national leader stemmed from his ability to stay around a little bit longer, and yet known as such, and he gained such national respect for his integrity, stability, maturity, that during the horrors of the Kennedy assassination—well, it really shook the nation profoundly—he was able to stand up there and somehow bring us together. And during Watergate when we were, for all purposes, without an executive leader at the end, Mike once again senses—a sensible voice and experience and decency. I think [he] provided an alternative source of stability for our nation, which we badly needed. That was the point I was making.

JC: During your Senate years—incidentally, this doesn't have to be all tribute, or all—

WM: I understand. That would be a mistake too.

JC: And he wouldn't like that.

WM: No.

JC: During the senate career any...

WM: Well I'm trying... As you know he was the longest lasting leader in our nation's history. I think it was 12 or 14 years. That was one thing. Secondly, he went out with, as popular and with as much respect as when he started. He went through some of the most difficult times and kept his own integrity, spoke out on issues. Vietnam, I remember perhaps more than most, because he was such a vigorous opponent. He was positioned where he kept the respect of the South during the Civil Rights fights, even though he was on the side of civil rights. He helped hold that institution together. They all—basically they respected his fairness, but he was a northern Democrat, I would say. I don't know if the word liberal would fit quite, but he was a Kennedy-Johnson domestic liberal. The word integrity keeps coming back, and I don't say this to brag for him because he wouldn't want that, but just no one doubted his decency, and that's what I think was the key to his longevity, his effectiveness. And they tell me that he developed the same relationship with the Japanese leaders. I was with him a couple of times there when we visited Japanese leaders, and there's a respect, almost an awe sometimes, that one feels about Mansfield. I think once again it's the decency, and it's that more than just decency. He has a good mind; he reads, he's educated, he's informed, and of course when it comes to Asia, Japan and so on, he's a very good scholar.

JC: Do you have any personal anecdotes you might remember either about the Senate years or about the choice of Mike as ambassador or his ambassadorial career?

WM: Well, that was just sitting there to be done. I mean it was so obvious. He was giving up, he was ending his career as a senator. He never asked for anything, of course, but it was so obvious that Mansfield would be an enormous asset to us there that it was, bang, we did it, and it was my privilege to swear him in. The Senate met for the ceremony in now the Mansfield Room, and everyone was there, Republican and Democrat thrilled by the—and it was interesting that when Reagan got elected in 80, the first thing he did as a new president was to send up Mansfield's nomination as a symbol because he, too, saw what that meant on the Hill.

JC: I think that covers what we need.

WM: Yes, I don't know—well you know there's all kinds of minutiae of experiences we've had and so on but I don't think they are that important.

JC: Human interest is interesting too. We are interested in the remarks especially on the ambassador part of his career. (Unintelligible)

WM: I remember one time I was leading a fight against the aircraft carrier, and I was young inexperienced. I had never taken on a big fight, and I had all the whales in the Senate after me, and I was raising holy hell and making motions and had sparks going all over the place. They had a vote, and I got about 35 votes I think. Mansfield said, "Good job." He said, "A for trying, C-minus for rules." Because apparently about half my motions were totally ridiculous. [Laughter] It didn't bother me. Get a C-minus for the handling of the rules on this one.

JC: I love what you said last night about him walking in with 50 question for him.

WM: He used to terrorize the reporters. Cause he—

JC: We had an hour with him.

WM: Yes, same thing?

JC: We walked in with what, 40 or 50 questions? And I asked three. For some reason he was in a talkative mood.

WM: He wanted to talk. Yes, it is possible.

JC: I said, "About the boyhood..." And a half hour later I talked again.

WM: It's not as bad as Kissinger. [It's] said that he was writing his memoir. He has written his third volume and he is not out of high school yet. [Laughter]

JC: We really appreciate this.

WM: Glad to do it.

[End of Interview]