
SIDNEY SHAINWALD
PUBLIC INTEREST LECTURE

New York Law School
March 14, 2016

THE HONORABLE GEORGE J. MITCHELL
FORMER SENATE MAJORITY LEADER AND
U.S. SPECIAL ENVOY FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

EXCERPTS FROM *THE NEGOTIATOR*
BY GEORGE J. MITCHELL

Although he's regularly asked to do so, God does not take sides in American politics.

My parents knew little of history or political science, but they understood the meaning of America because they valued freedom and opportunity. They conveyed their values to their children by example more than words. Though it was not often expressed aloud, their message was clear. Their values were simple, universal in reach and enduring in strength: faith, family, work, country.

Those who know me know that my mother, my father and Edmund Muskie were three of the most influential persons in my life. Few know who the fourth person was.....Elvira Whitten, who taught English at Waterville High School. My early failure to comprehend and thank her for her role in my life is consistent with our society's failure to properly recognize and value the contributions made daily by thousands of Elvira Whittens. All across America, extraordinary and devoted men and women teach, and also shape and inspire our children. We should do much more to raise their status and compensation. We all benefit if in our society as many young Americans as possible reach their full potential.

I believe that our country is truly exceptional. It is a place of opportunity and, contrary to many assertions, the American Dream is not dead. I grew up in my parents home and witnessed their lives of struggle, all of it lived on the abyss of failure. My mother worked for fifty years on the night shift in textile mills while raising five children. My father was a janitor in a local school. My mother could not read or write. My father had little education. They died penniless. In their minds, though, by their standards, they were very successful, because their dream was for their children to get an education and live better lives. Because of them, and because of the openness of American society each of us did. That said, I think that a young boy today, born into the same circumstances that I was born and raised in, has less chance for upward mobility than I had. It's a failure of our society. In this we have regressed.

EXCERPTS FROM *THE NEGOTIATOR*
BY GEORGE J. MITCHELL (CONTINUED)

Another practice I adopted was to have my staff select each day several of the most negative letters I'd received from Maine. I read each letter carefully, then from my office in the evening I telephoned each of the letter writers. Almost everyone I reached was surprised and many doubted that it really was their senator calling. Once I was able to convince them that the call was genuine, I told them that I had read their letter, that while we disagreed I welcomed their views and appreciated that they had taken the time to write me.

As Chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, one of my earliest and best decisions was to appoint Nancy Pelosi of San Francisco as chair of our fundraising efforts, a task at which she excelled.

As Reagan gingerly sipped from the steaming mug he explained that for years he'd sipped on very hot water before major appearances because it relaxed his throat and lowered his voice a couple of octaves. "Frank Sinatra told me about it. He swore that it helped him get through many long performances." I've been drinking hot water before every major speech...if it's good enough for Frank Sinatra and Ronald Reagan, then I'm sure it'll be good for me.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, when I served in the Senate I was being prepared for the Northern Ireland peace talks. There I spent hundreds of hours listening. By doing so I earned the confidence of the delegates to the talks; I learned what their concerns were; I ultimately figured out where the common ground was. The result was a peace agreement that ended a brutal long-standing conflict.

By far the greatest risk I took in the negotiations themselves was when I established the firm and final deadline of midnight on April 10, 1998. That was regarded by some as a desperate and dangerous move. Some British civil servants opposed the deadline; they had been engaged in trying to manage the Troubles for many years, and they feared that abrupt end to the process would trigger an immediate return to violence more savage than ever. I shared their concern. But, I argued, without a final deadline the process was ultimately more likely to fail, producing the very result they feared.

EXCERPTS FROM *THE NEGOTIATOR*
BY GEORGE J. MITCHELL (CONTINUED)

It is often the case that a person speaks and then thinks about his or her next statement rather than intently listening to what others are saying; that is especially true of public figures who meet, usually briefly, large numbers of people. By the time you get to shake a person's hand, your eyes and mind often are on the next person in line. Too many persons in positions of authority become accustomed to deference, develop excessive self-confidence, and are incapable of showing respect to others, especially with whom they disagree. These attitudes demean the position and lessen the person's ability to perform his or her duties.

Learn to listen. That is the most important lesson of my political life...the only certainty I have is that I learned little while I was talking. Learning has come from listening, from reading, from observing, from doing. I also lost a lot of time because much of what I listened to was not worth the effort.

On Israel and the Palestinians: Israel has a state; a very successful state. It is impressive and moving. But the people of Israel do not have reasonable and sustainable security. The Palestinians, on the other hand, don't have a state. And they ought to have one. Our American Declaration of Independence is quite clear on the right of people to govern themselves. But the Palestinians are not going to get a state until the people of Israel have security. Israel can't get that until the Palestinians have a state...I think ultimately, on that basis, there will be an agreement. Both societies are divided. But it is in both societies' interest to have an agreement. And so I believe that will happen.

On the dysfunction in American politics today: Often when I am asked about it, I think of Winston Churchill. It's a common question (here in the U.S.); it's an even more common question outside of this country, where many non-Americans who admire our country are baffled by what they see as a dysfunctional political process. In answer, I quote Winston Churchill, who said that Democracy is the worst possible form of government, except for everything else that human beings have ever tried.

The Sidney Shainwald Public Interest Lecture

185 West Broadway
New York, NY 10013-2921

T 212.431.2800

F 212.791.2150

E alumni@nyls.edu

www.nyls.edu/alumni

NEW YORK
LAW SCHOOL