

Robert Mitchell
January 31, 1989

Mark Greenberg
Interviewer

MG This is January 31, 1989. Interview conducted by Mark Greenberg for the Green Mountain Chronicle Series with Robert Mitchell, Publisher of the Rutland Herald and we are in Rutland at the Rutland Herald. Mr. Mitchell, let's start by talking about Governor Aiken. That is the main reason for my being here. You and he were friends is that right?

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MG Did that indicate something about him as a new politician, where he came to the Governorship from?

RM Well there was a certain, he, I don't know if you ever heard anything about Jean Douglas', the young Middlebury graduate who came into his office in his second, second term or either that or toward the end of the first term and the atmosphere changed. I had had always had total

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access to the Governor's office at any time and once she took over the situation changed entirely. So there was a, there was a certain amount of strain there and a lot of gossip about the relations between the Governor and Jean. And, at that time, we used to do a program every session called the Mock Session. It was sort of a little bit like the Goodine Club type of thing and we did it in the House of Representatives. And the, two of the people on the Press Corps who were particularly upset about Jean and her relations with the Governor did this skit which was really in pretty poor taste. And it, I think that it had something to do with their discontinuing Mock Session not too long after that. Jean went to Washington with George. At the time there were a number of his close associates, or Vermont's _____ with him about his relations with her and I never knew whether there was anything going on, but everybody thought so. But those who tried to talk to him and remonstrate with him about it never got anywhere. And Ernest Gibson, his closest friend, never would say anything. He knew better than to say anything about it. And when we were rehearsing this program for the Mock Session, Ernest was in the crows nest where the Press Corps was located at that time in the State House and he egged us on. But he wouldn't say anything to George. (LAUGH)

MG What I was wondering about was really whether the inconsistencies or the errors in the budget and the way in which he said that he handled your suggestions or your corrections indicated any kind of newness to the, to politics or to professional politics on Aiken's part?

RM Well I think he under estimated, what he, the reason he got into trouble with the budget was because it had always been done by the Commissioner of Finance. And George decided after he took over as Governor that the office of Commissioner of Finance was superfluous. It was a political sinecure that was given to the, say the Chairman of the Campaign if there were, some, that type of thing. So he just dispensed with it and he left the, left the preparation of the budget to the Deputy Commissioner who just wasn't qualified to do it. And he just made a mistake. And not respecting, and the way he handled it, I blamed Jean for. I blamed her particularly for barring me from the Governor's office. Maybe I, maybe I was wrong about that, but we never got along.

MG Can you give me a fun now sketch of the Governor's background of his, how he got, became involved in state politics?

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RM Well his, his father was a, was a progressive, a bull moose, Teddy Roosevelt supporter like, like Ernest Gibson's father. And they were, I only met George Aiken's father once. He was up in Montpelier for either one, one of both of the inaugurations. And I think that's where, where George got started along more liberal lines than the, the regular Republican old guard politics of that period. Of course Ernest was more of a Teddy Roosevelt style progressive, the interventionist style, whereas I always saw George as being more the _____, isolationist, pacifist style and I, I think that aspect of his philosophy had a lot to do with the way he felt about the war in Vietnam. Yea.

MG Yea that is really what I want to get into.

RM Yes, yea.

MG Well maybe we should talk about that now.

RM Right. That, of course he was opposed to _____. He was, he might if he had been a private citizen, he might have been an American _____. And of course there were people around him in that 1940 senatorial campaign, Charles Dana Bennett was one of his leading campaign supporters was an American who very rabid America Firster. And I think George, it fitted in with George, George's feelings about getting involved in war in Europe and getting involved in any war. That, there's no reason why this country had to become involved in war either, certainly prior at least to Pearl Harbor.

MG He had been however a supporter of the Vietnam War in its early years, is this, is that correct?

RM Well he, of course Mansfield and I think there were five senators who went to Vietnam in '65 and that's the first record that, that I've found looking at my files about his expressing some, some doubts you know about our involvement and what we were, what it was leading to. They, of course Mansfield was the principal spokesman about that trip they took. This was an editorial comment that we had back after that, that tour in '65. This was in January, 1966. It says, "If negotiations can be arranged and a cease fire takes place with both sides staying put, something like what took place in Korea, except that it would be more difficult, the Senators point out that the stabilized situation be one in which a majority of the people about 60% would be in the area controlled by South Vietnam. Less populated countryside would be _____ in the hands of the Viet Cong." But

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the final paragraph says, "American people are out-noticed that we face a tough situation that may well get tougher and isn't going to be cleared up in a hurry." We didn't have any, of course this, the speech that he made in October '66, he doesn't really come right out and say what he, what they, what they later said he said.

MG Yea. Let's look at that in two ways. One is the way the record shows it and the other would be your recollection of that.

RM Well I, I sort of thought of it as being the way it was represented rather than what he actually said. But of course, there's a, Aiken was very diplomatic in the way he expressed himself. He was being, he didn't condemn the war outright. He was being very cautious I think about, he didn't want to be classified as, as an army/war rebel rouser and he certainly didn't want to be a war supporter. He was in the middle of the road where he was a lot of the time on so many things particularly in his later, later career. Um, he says at the final paragraph, it starts, this is a whole page of comment along that line. Then at the end it says, "This unilateral declaration of military victory would herald the resumption of political welfare as the dominant theme in Vietnam." And this, this sounds as though he had, he was advocating this much than he actually does in the way this is worded.

MG And what is it you're reading from now?

RM This is his speech that, where they said he advocated declaring we, we'd won the war and got out. And, but it actually, what that one paragraph says, "Faced with different alternatives, the United States would, could well declare unilaterally at this stage of the Vietnam War is over that we have "won" in the sense that our armed forces are in control of most of the field and no potential enemy is in a position to establish its authority over South Vietnam." Then he goes on and says, "This unilateral declaration knows there a victory would herald a resumption of political warfare as a dominant theme in Vietnam." George always pronounced it Veet-nam.

MG So that was really stated in more hypothetical terms than _____?

RM That's right, yea, he's reviewing the alternatives and this is one of the alternatives. And, of course and then, later he goes on and warns about more, more specifically about what they're, what we're getting into. This is later in '67 after the release of a report by the Senate

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RM Yes. Incidentally, he didn't tell Johnson that he was going to make this speech.

MG What's that mean?

RM And, well he'd been on such close terms with Johnson. Johnson had really relied on Aiken as a, as an independent Republican Senator for, for, of course having been in the Senate as long as Johnson had been, he was well acquainted with Aiken and he apparently trusted his judgment. And, but relations changed after Aiken made that speech, that things never were the same between Johnson and Aiken after that.

MG So Aiken wasn't one to just drop political bombshells for the, I don't know for the fun of it or because that was the style?

RM No. No.

MG This is an unusual thing for him to do?

RM Yes, yes.

MG What was his political style?

RM Very much understated. I, I was, I was looking for something in his Senate diary the other night and this was when, late and just before he retired he made a speech up in St. Johnsbury. Howard Coffin covered it for us and, and he intimated in the story that George was in his dotage you know the, that he was rambling on his, his, he couldn't put a sentence together straight and so on. And I wrote an editorial saying that that's the way he always was. (LAUGH) And he wrote about that in his diary. And they laughed, he and Lola both laughed about it. And it really was true. An awful, in a lot of his speeches, he, he gave that impression of not knowing what he was going to say next.

MG Was that cultivated image or was that just how he was?

RM Well he wasn't, wasn't naturally a fluent talker really.

MG Can you tell me a little bit about him as a person, his background? I know that he raised, that he was tree farmer right in Putney, had a nursery and.

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