Maine Senators and the Power of Television

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> *The American people are sick and tired of being afraid to speak their minds lest they be politically smeared as "Communists" or "Fascists" by their opponents. Freedom of speech is not what it used to be in America. It has been so abused by some that it is not exercised by others (*Senator Margaret Chase Smith [R] Maine, June 1, 1950).

It is a shame there is no video of Sen. Margaret Chase Smith delivering her famous rebuke to Sen. Joe McCarthy in 1950. Alas, C-Span didn't exist back then to allow us to experience the historic "Declaration of Conscience" as it happened. It would probably prove useful and instructive in the political wars of 2009.

Today, it is accepted that candidates, incumbents or newcomers, cannot be successful without taking advantage of both paid television and 'free,' or daily news coverage on TV, even in a state such as Maine with a small population. Sen. George Mitchell applied this rule when he ran for his first full term in 1982 following his temporary appointment in 1980. He told me, recently, that "Senators get around. I went to every community in Maine, I spoke at every high school in Maine. I traveled the state every week, 52 weeks a year. But at the same time I recognized that I could see only a tiny fraction of the people personally, so I think you have to have television to get your message across, to make clear that you're working at it and available to the people, and also to lead and educate people, and sometimes change their mind on policy issues."

Sen. Smith spent very little on her campaigns after winning her first U.S. Senate race in 1948. As Dr. Gregory Gallant, director of the Margaret Chase Smith Library in Skowhegan puts it, "Her strategy was constant: stay on the job

in Washington, make connections with her constituents and get them to the polls." This strategy worked until 1972, when the political world was a very different place than it was when her career began. She held off a primary challenge from businessman Robert A.G. Monks and told her supporters and volunteers in a letter that "The victory was particularly gratifying in our proving that in Maine it isn't necessary to spend vast sums of money with paid workers, saturation television and radio and direct mailing in order to win."

Smith may have been correct that "saturation television" wasn't necessary for a well known incumbent. But she refused to run any TV ads against Democrat Bill Hathaway, when even a minimal effort might have reminded voters of her track record. Greg Gallant says she did not regret the decision to stay off the air in '72. "She felt that her comfortable margin of victory over Monks made her supporters complacent… She really felt her volunteers would be there to get the vote out. In the end, she failed to carry her hometown of Skowhegan."

Edmund Muskie

The first of Maine's extraordinary Senators of the last 60 years to take advantage of the power of television was Edmund Muskie, long before he went to Washington. Muskie was running for governor in 1954, at a time when Democrats in Maine were a political afterthought. Television was brand new in Maine. WCSH-TV (Channel 6), the NBC affiliate in Portland had gone on the air in December, 1953. Six months later, on the Sunday following the primary in June, Muskie and other Democratic candidates appeared on a live, paid political broadcast. Muskie aide Don Nicoll recalled that first campaign commercial on Maine TV:

"We purchased a half hour of time and brought the candidates in and had a panel discussion moderated by Frank Coffin with all of the candidates. Then at the close of the program, their wives came on the set and mingled for the closing shots. Black and white, no taping, no retakes, and it presented Democrats not as

these fearsome people you didn't know, but attractive young people trying to bring two party government to the state. That struck a responsive chord."

In an interview in the 1980's, Ed Muskie told me that the program gave him a boost, even though viewership was probably rather small. "We had the first live TV at that time. So a lot of people saw a live Democrat for the first time ever. And we didn't look too bad to them I guess." Muskie also said he had hoped to debate incumbent Burton Cross on TV. "He probably could have whipped my pants off. On state issues I wasn't that knowledgeable, even though I served three terms in the legislature. But he chose not to. The theory was he would give me visibility and that wouldn't be good. So he decided not to accept my challenge to debate. As a result, I got more publicity than if he accepted."

After Ed Muskie moved to the U.S. Senate, television helped to make him the front runner for the 1972 Democratic presidential nomination. He made a strong impression on American voters as the vice-presidential nominee in 1968. News coverage showed a confident campaigner, tall, strong and solid, a man savvy enough to let hecklers have their say first so he could deliver his stump speech and win over an agitated crowd. Muskie and Hubert Humphrey did not win that election in 1968, though Muskie remained convinced decades later that momentum was moving their way, and another week might have enabled the Democratic ticket to come out on top.

In the mid-term elections of 1970, President Richard Nixon had been campaigning for Republican congressional candidates, hammering away at an anti-violence, anti-drug, anti-youth message. On election eve that November, Nixon appeared shrill to many voters. By contrast, the Democratic senator from Maine spoke to a national audience from Cape Elizabeth and calmly but forcefully made the case against the Republicans.

> In these elections of 1970, something has gone wrong. There has been name calling and deception of almost unprecedented volume. This attack is not simply the overzealousness of a few local

> leaders. It has been led, inspired and guided from the highest offices in the land.
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> They imply that Democratic candidates for high office... men who have courageously pursued their convictions in the service of the republic in war and peace-- that these men actually favor violence and champion the wrongdoers. That is a lie, and the American people know it is a lie.
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> How dare they tell us that this party is less devoted or less courageous in maintaining American principles or values than they are themselves? This is nonsense, and we all know it is nonsense. And what contempt they must have for the decency and sense of the American people to talk to them that way.

In that election, Republicans had a net gain of one seat in the Senate but lost a net of 12 in the House. Ed Muskie became someone feared by President Nixon. But what television could give, it could also take away.

When Muskie entered the presidential primaries in 1972, the Nixon campaign pulled all sorts of stunts and dirty tricks designed to embarrass or discredit Muskie. When Manchester Union Leader publisher William Loeb attacked Muskie's wife Jane in print, Sen. Muskie felt he had to strike back. Cameras caught the candidate choked with emotion as he stood in the snow outside the Union Leader building. People believed they saw this strong man weeping, which raised doubts about his emotional control. In one sense, this is another example of Ed Muskie being ahead of his time. By the time Ronald Reagan was president, shedding a tear or two, especially if one was defending one's spouse, would be seen as a character asset, not a flaw.

Following the 1972 primaries, Muskie settled in to his work in the Senate, but he remained a national figure. That created something of a challenge for Maine TV reporters covering him. My WCSH colleague Don Carrigan recalls Sen. Muskie was gracious, but could be intimidating to a young reporter. He says Muskie was generally available for interviews when he was home in Maine, but that didn't happen as often as it did for some other members of the delegation.

The technology of the time also complicated matters. Unlike today, when journalists can roll hours of videotape or digital capture if they wish, we were working with 16mm film. A standard magazine held about 13 minutes of film, which had to be used judiciously, because film stock and processing were not inexpensive. Ed Muskie tended to be a slow, deliberative speaker, and he wanted to give complete answers without being interrupted. That meant a reporter had to focus a question as sharply as possible so as not to waste film on material that wouldn't make it into a story.

Carrigan recalls a momentous occasion that warranted the use of more film than usual, the day Sen. Muskie was tapped by President Jimmy Carter to become U.S. Secretary of State. The NEWS CENTER crew covering the news conference shot two magazines of film—but left one of them behind at the State House. The story that made air that night was a lot shorter than it was intended to be.

William Cohen

Bill Cohen began his political career on the Bangor School Committee and City Council (at the same time!) and quickly climbed the political ladder. He clearly liked to be engaged with the media, and was excellent at delivering sound bites for TV. Cohen made his national reputation while serving in Congress from Maine's second district. His role on the House Judiciary Committee during the Watergate hearings ensured that Cohen would have plenty of time in the media spotlight.

Cohen would regularly fly home to the district and meet with reporters at the conference room at Bangor International Airport. There, he would tackle any and all subjects tossed his way. Around the time that he voted to impeach President Nixon, sessions could be intense, but despite the pressures on him, which included death threats, Rep. Cohen never backed away from explaining himself to Maine voters through the news media.

Newsman Don Carrigan says if by chance you missed Cohen at his regular airport availabilities, you could often find him around 6:45 pm at Miller's Restaurant, where he would take his parents for dinner. Cohen gladly conducted interviews there. On one occasion, Cohen stopped in the middle of an answer to tell Don that it appeared he was on fire. Indeed, Don was standing too close to a hot light, and his polyester jacket began to smolder and smoke--this is why no one who was actually there misses the 1970's!

When Bill Cohen moved up to the Senate, he remained accessible to reporters, but tended not to be home as frequently. It's fair to chalk that up to the DC workload, but also to the fact that Representatives have to run for re-election every two years, and need to remind voters of what they are up to. Bill Cohen's Senate staff was excellent at working reporters, selling story ideas, and keeping them updated on what the Senator was focusing on. That tradition continues today with Sen. Susan Collins's eager staff.

George Mitchell

George Mitchell was another man who recognized the value to reaching voters through television. Mitchell, of course, came to his Senate seat by appointment after Sen. Muskie became Secretary of State in 1980. It's a seat he might not have been able to win on his own, given his defeat at the hands of Jim Longley in the governor's race of 1974. But with his appointment to the vacant seat, Mitchell had more than two years to demonstrate to Mainers that he was up to the job.

Television was vital in helping him make that case. Conventional wisdom said that Rep. David Emery, the Republican from Maine's first district, had the experience, name recognition and the electoral upper hand over Mitchell. But in addition to his TV commercials and face to face campaigning, Mitchell stacked up very well against Emery in a series of debates. Mitchell recalls "Early on he proposed six debates, which was quite unusual at that time, and I didn't think of it myself, but when he proposed it, I accepted. It turned out that they helped me

a lot, the televised debates. I think they went pretty well my way, and I think a lot of people saw that I was familiar with the issues and perhaps could deal with them effectively, so I think the number of debates helped me very much."

There was also the matter of image. Dave Emery was and is an intelligent, hardworking guy. But to many observers, Mitchell simply looked and sounded more "senatorial."

Mitchell was generally happy to talk with reporters. Having apparently learned a lesson of political history from the famous Kennedy-Nixon debates of 1960, Mitchell, upon arrival at the airport and being greeted by a camera crew, would excuse himself to the rest room and emerge with TV makeup on. Mitchell's staff made sure to let newsrooms know when he was in town and available to talk. He was a frequent guest on live newscasts, particularly on the weekend. This was a godsend for producers looking to fill a broadcast on what could be very slow news days. We used to joke in our newsroom that Mitchell should probably be given his own key to the WCSH building, since he seemed to appear so often on the Saturday or Sunday noon newscast.

Mitchell was game for something less serious too, including appearing in a lighthearted story by the late reporter Bob Elliot, in which Bob pretended to run against Mitchell for the Senate. Mitchell's love of sports made him perhaps the most enthusiastic "Celebrity Sportscaster" we ever had back when we would do that occasional segment.

Technology had changed since the Muskie days. In addition to shooting on the more flexible videotape format, we also began making use of wireless microphones that could be attached to a tie or lapel. This was especially useful when shooting a campaign profile story. The candidate could wear the microphone while greeting voters, and we could hear the give and take while not having to get too close, or trip anybody up with wires.

Bill Cohen seemed to love the new tool, being sure to lean in so the 'voice of the voter' could be heard clearly. George Mitchell on the other hand, was

wary. I remember meeting up with the Senator at a doughnut shop during his re-election campaign in 1988. Mitchell agreed to wear the wireless microphone as he chatted and shook hands. But before he spoke to each person, he informed them that he was wearing a live mic, so no one would say anything they didn't want broadcast on television.

Years later, a wireless microphone captured an unforgettable moment with Mitchell. We were walking in Belfast, Northern Ireland in 1997, gathering material for a series of reports on Mitchell's work overseeing the multi-party peace talks. NEWS CENTER photographer Scott Wernig had run up ahead to get a shot of Mitchell and I walking and talking, so Scott and his camera apparently weren't noticed by a gentleman who spotted Mitchell and came up to shake his hand. The man said "I wish you well-- you're a very brave man and I hope you keep at it. I'm glad you can walk the streets of Belfast." That sound helped make the story. It confirmed for me, and for our viewers, how highly regarded Mitchell had become, after being greeted with suspicion upon his arrival in Northern Ireland a year before.

George Mitchell and William Cohen made a formidable pair in the Senate—a Democrat and a Republican from a small state that had become known for sending intelligent, practical leaders to the Senate. Both were named to the select committee investigating one of the great constitutional crises of our time, the Iran-Contra affair in 1987.

It was Mitchell who delivered the most memorable remarks by any member of the panel when he challenged Lt. Col. Oliver North. The former National Security Council member had boasted that his lies to Congress about selling arms to Iran and diverting profits to Contra rebels in Nicaragua were an act of patriotism. North was generating a lot of public support with his testimony. Former federal judge and U.S. Attorney George Mitchell delivered a firm rebuke to the Marine officer when he reminded the nation that "Although He is regularly asked to do so, God does not take sides in American politics,"

and said "It is possible for an American to disagree with you on aid to the Contras, and still love God, and still love this country, just as much as you do."

Later Mitchell recalled to me with typical understatement that "The hearings were turning into a disaster, and many of my colleagues spoke to me on the Senate floor as we would break the hearings and come to a vote, and urge me to say something to, in effect, set the record straight. I did so in a way many of them found positive." That performance couldn't have hurt when George Mitchell was elected Senate Majority leader in 1988, the top Democrat in the country during the presidency of George H.W. Bush.

Mitchell continued to make himself available to reporters from Maine, despite his increasing workload and national responsibilities. He would even make it a point to single us out in a shouting crowd of national media, such as the day outside the old Senate chamber at the U.S. Capitol where his colleagues chose him as leader.

National reporters learned what those of us in Maine already knew—you couldn't outflank George Mitchell. Unlike some politicians who like to make themselves look good by leaking nuggets of news, Mitchell's judicial temperament could withstand any entreaties by reporters to "throw them a bone." No matter how many ways one asked a question, Mitchell was not going to divulge anything he wasn't prepared to. I suspect this was more than just his natural inclination, but also an emulation of the thoughtful, deliberative style of his mentor Ed Muskie.

It was old fashioned reporting combined with technology that spoiled George Mitchell's surprise announcement that he would retire from the Senate. Mitchell had won reelection in 1988 with 81 percent of the vote, so chances are he could have held that seat for as long as he wanted. But on March 4, 1994, our newsroom received a tip that Mitchell would not seek another term. Getting official confirmation from his office proved impossible. But we learned that Mitchell had purchased five minutes of airtime on WCSH-TV that evening, and

that the taped message would be sent to the station by satellite feed at 1:00 pm. Armed with the knowledge that Mitchell planned to retire, we went on the air with a special report as a news producer watched the satellite feed come in. Over our earpieces, the producer confirmed the story by repeating to us what Mitchell was saying: "This is the right time for me to consider other challenges and to give someone else the chance to serve, so I will not be a candidate for re-election..."

Breaking that national news story early didn't diminish the impact of Mitchell's announcement, nor did it signal the end of George Mitchell's time in public service or the public eye. Whether he is working to secure peace in Northern Ireland or the Middle East, or investigating the use of banned substances in Major League Baseball, Mitchell continues to make news. So do the current occupants of Maine's U.S. Senate seats. They are, shall we say, still works in progress, so I can't really say as much about them as the people I'm no longer covering on a regular basis.

Olympia Snowe

After more than 30 years in the House and Senate, Republican Olympia Snowe has earned the respect of her colleagues as a workhorse, and a person of strong principle who seeks to accomplish things for the public good rather than personal aggrandizement. Snowe shares a trait with predecessors such as Muskie and Mitchell, in that she gives very detailed answers to reporter questions that seldom lend themselves to the quick, punchy sound bite. And she will avoid giving substantive answers about some subjects, such as the misconduct of colleagues.

Sen. Snowe is always very composed in public, even when it is apparent that something has gotten under her skin. But there can be anger behind the scenes, which I witnessed in her office in Portland in 2005. She allowed us to have a camera rolling when she received the phone call on which facilities in Maine would be targeted in the latest round of the Base Realignment and Closure Commission. Snowe was stunned when she was told that the Defense

Finance Accounting Center in Limestone would be closed. This facility was created after an earlier BRAC round had closed Loring AFB, and the plan to turn around close DFAS seemed to Sen. Snowe evidence of a bias against military facilities in the Northeast. The anger fueled action. Snowe and the rest of the delegation helped to convince the commission to reverse that call

Snowe's position as one of a vanishing breed of moderate Republicans makes her remarkably influential, and someone that reporters always seek out. When she speaks, people listen. That was evident in October 2009 when Snowe stepped into the national spotlight as the lone Republican on the Senate Finance Committee to vote to send a health care reform bill to the Senate floor. But Snowe also maintained her position to influence the debate by preserving her options, reminding colleagues and the nation that her committee vote was no guarantee of support of any final legislation. Her decision that day had national news programs clamoring for live interviews. But Snowe and her staff made sure that the Maine media, and by extension, her constituents, were taken care of first with a satellite interview at the top of our 5:00 PM newscast.

Incidentally, Snowe became well known enough from coverage of the health care reform story that she was parodied in a sketch on NBC's "Saturday Night Live," a reasonable measure of one's stature these days.

Susan Collins

Republican Susan Collins is Maine's junior senator, but more than a decade as a staffer for Sen. Bill Cohen gave her a leg up on the typical freshman on Capitol Hill. Her initial bid for elective office came in 1994, when she finished a distant third in the race for governor behind Independent Angus King and Democrat Joe Brennan. In campaign appearances on television that year, Collins often looked and sounded nervous or tentative. She clearly improved her performance enough to win the Senate seat vacated by Bill Cohen in 1996 with a very respectable six point margin of victory.

After winning the Senate seat, Collins quickly gained attention on national broadcasts such as NBC Nightly News by taking on issues that most anyone could relate to, such as sweepstakes fraud. Later, she earned notice for her work on some of the biggest issues of the day, most notably homeland security following 9-11, and oversight of FEMA in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Like Snowe, Collins was quickly recognized as someone to be courted by both Republicans and Democrats as a swing vote, and to be sought out by reporters at home and in the nation's capitol. They both shared time in the national spotlight during the impeachment trial of President Bill Clinton in 1999, with both Snowe and Collins ultimately voting to acquit the Democratic president.

Collins's genial personality doesn't mean she can't play hardball, as she did in her 2008 re-election campaign when there was much attention on an issue many considered of little relevance, her perfect record of never missing a vote in the Senate. Her campaign ads highlighted the relatively few House votes missed by her opponent, Democratic Rep. Tom Allen. Allen took the bait, and when he cried foul, he wound up giving the issue much more air time and daily news coverage than it otherwise would have received.

Collins brings a strong, Aroostook County-bred work ethic and a firm grasp of the issues to the table. Staffers who commonly receive 3:00 AM e-mails can attest to that.

Maine's current U.S. Senators frequently point to the example set so many years ago by Margaret Chase Smith. Her "Declaration of Conscience" delivered in her first term in the Senate, was an act of political courage. They hope to live up to the standard of a public servant who—whether cameras were there to record it for posterity or not--spoke her mind when so many others were afraid to speak.