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## **Pete Domenici, this is your life**

**By Kris Kitto** - 09/19/11 07:03 PM ET

THE HILL

How do you condense 36 years of public service into an hourlong documentary? “Domenici,” a new film on former Sen. Pete Domenici (R-N.M.), flies high and at light speed to cover a political career that included the mastery of such diverse issues as the federal budget, nuclear nonproliferation and mental health parity.

Though he describes himself merely as “a senator from a small state who served a long time,” the movie captures the depth and breadth of the career of a man who was urged into political life after friends told him in a coffee-shop conversation to either run for office or stop complaining.

The documentary, which debuted in Washington on Thursday at an event for the Bipartisan Policy Center, where Domenici is now a senior fellow, opens in Moscow. Two Cold War-era scientists sit on a park bench, discussing Domenici’s role in helping figure out how to secure fissile material and keep the professionals who created the nuclear weapons from shopping their skills around the world.

Chris Schueler, the film’s director and producer and a fellow New Mexican, said he was interested in highlighting not only the successes Domenici achieved while in elected office, but the context in which he achieved them. To illustrate this, Schueler inserted several montages capturing significant events of the four decades over which Domenici served. Before viewers learn about Domenici’s interest in nuclear nonproliferation, for example, they see footage of President Reagan’s famous 1987 speech in Berlin demanding that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev “tear down this wall!”

Schueler and his team also chose “leadership” as a narrative to weave through each of the smaller stories that take viewers through the senator’s career.

“My interest was in making this something that people could use,” Schueler said. “What I [wanted] to do [was] make it more about how he did what we did.”

To that end, every school district in New Mexico will receive a copy of the movie, he said, and it will also be available through the Domenici Institute at New Mexico State University.

The institute corralled the private funding for the documentary, but Schueler and his staff worked directly with Domenici to craft the vision for the project.

Domenici said the idea of filming a documentary was his. Rather than write a book about his experiences, he said, he preferred to record his thoughts and reflections on video.

After now having seen the film start to finish, Domenici said he's "of two minds" when watching himself on the big screen.

"On the one hand, it's very nice," he said. But, he added, "You never think that something in the past is exactly as it should be. There's a little bit of second-guessing that comes to your mind quickly."

One issue area sure to cause second-guessing, not only to Domenici but to many of the film's viewers, is the lengthy section that addresses his leadership on the federal budget as the Senate's Budget Committee chairman. The film touts one of the senator's career-long goals — to balance the federal budget. But these days, Domenici finds himself co-chairing a debt-reduction task force with Clinton administration Office of Management and Budget Director Alice Rivlin.

Although Schueler said he thinks the budget-negotiation lessons captured in the movie provide "a road map in how to get things done," both he and the senator said the documentary's release in the midst of debt-ceiling fights and supercommittee formations was coincidental.

"We didn't do it to satisfy any national needs or timeliness of anything else," Domenici said. "I don't believe [the film] will be notorious enough to have an impact on the people who are working on this budget problem."

The film includes appearances from a long list of Domenici's peers, among them former Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole (R-Kan.) describing the perseverance Domenici needed in budget negotiations; former President Clinton pointing out the senator's role in making the world safe from nuclear proliferation; and former Sen. Chris Dodd (D-Conn.) discussing Domenici's passion for getting better insurance coverage for mental illness. Others in the film include Rivlin, former Sen. Howard Baker (D-Tenn.), Domenici's wife, Nancy, and several of his staff members and constituents. Veteran news anchor Sam Donaldson narrates the film.

Schueler said he had between 40 and 50 hours of interviews to work from for the film.

He and his team are going to put together two additional half-hour segments — an extension that pleased Domenici, who said he felt remiss that his work on gas deregulation, his relationship with the American Indian community and other aspects of his career didn't make it into the hourlong feature.