



EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN MCCAIN

October 16, 2009
Washington, D.C.

Interviewer
Janet Heininger

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TRANSCRIPT

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Heininger: This is an interview with Senator John McCain on October 16, 2009. I normally say let's start at the very beginning and tell me when you first met [Edward M.] Kennedy, but I'm going to ask a different question. It's been reported that both you and Kennedy were called the "old bulls of the Senate." Why?

McCain: *[laughter]* Oh, I think because we engaged in the institution in a way that we could achieve results that were in keeping with our ambitions and goals for the country. His obviously was in a liberal side of the political spectrum, and me on the conservative side, but both of us realized very well that sometimes—most of the time—if you want to achieve a result, you have to make concessions that don't betray your principles but achieve a result.

I want to emphasize that point, because people think well, you make a concession and you give up your principles. I never knew Ted Kennedy to make a single concession—and I saw him make many—that betrayed his principles or the fundamental goal that he was seeking. Ted Kennedy studied the institution, knew the institution, but most importantly, Ted Kennedy was a person who believed strongly in his ideology but at the same time was goal-oriented. He was able to do that in a fashion that compiled a record of accomplishment that has probably not been equaled in number in modern times.

Heininger: Reportedly, you didn't like him initially. Why?

McCain: I thought that Ted Kennedy was a person whose ideology was incompatible with mine. I thought that he had some characteristics that I'd been accused of having. *[laughter]*

Heininger: Oh, really?

McCain: Of being a bit of a bully and perhaps too passionate in expression of his views on the issue. There were several occasions when the old bulls clashed on the floor of the Senate, in generally entertaining fashion.

Heininger: Yes. So when did your views about him change?

McCain: As I served in the Senate I began to have greater and greater respect for the way that he was able to be an effective legislator. We are sent here, I don't think to espouse our views,

although that's certainly part of our job, but the main reason why our constituents send us here is to get things done for them and the country. And by the way, I think it's also an important aspect of Ted Kennedy that I totally subscribe to. Our title is U.S. Senator, and then the state follows. It doesn't say Arizona Senator, U.S., it says the reverse, and Ted Kennedy was a U.S. Senator. We have a lot of Senators whose state should be ahead of their name, because they focus all their attention on their state rather than on the larger issues that I think is the proper role for being a United States Senator. Ted Kennedy was a United States Senator, whether I happened to like some of his views about the future of the country or not.

My views began to change probably as my respect for his legislative skills and accomplishments—as I observed them up close. Second of all, we were on the Armed Services Committee together, and on some issues we disagreed, but on a number of issues, we worked together. Ted also had a very strong commitment to the men and women in the military, and those were a lot of the issues; the personnel, the health care, equipment, a number of the kind of nuts and bolts issues of the Armed Services Committee we worked together on, and then we began to work on larger issues. So it was mainly the Armed Services Committee where we attended hearings together that our relationship began to grow.

Heininger: And you both were on the Seapower Subcommittee.

McCain: Yes.

Heininger: Which may seem a little odd for a landlocked Senator from a landlocked state and another Senator from an East Coast state, but you're both sailors.

McCain: Yes, and both loved the sea. Of course, being a maritime power in the world was something that Ted had a great appreciation for. A lot of people think about Senator Kennedy mostly on domestic issues, but he also had a great vision about America's greatness; obviously, his two brothers had the same. He was more active on the Armed Services Committee, as we know, than was apparent to people on the outside.

Heininger: Your respect grew, but when did your liking for him? Because they're different.

McCain: That's right. You know, a thing about life that I've learned is that it's easy to like someone, but if you're really going to like them, you've got to respect them first. So my respect for Ted grew over the earlier years of our relationship, in the '80s and into the '90s, and then, as we dealt together on issues, I found him to be literally larger than life, with a sense of humor that I have found is vital in life, particularly when you are trying to achieve things. Ted—more than a thousand times I've seen him lighten up a conversation and achieve a setting where people are at ease and communicate with one another.

One of his favorite tactics—his hideaway. His hideaway wasn't a hideaway, it was a museum, and it had pictures of his brother, the table is a rudder of a boat, pictures of his dad, his family, all that kind of stuff. So one of the things that I saw Ted do on numerous occasions, he started out doing it to me and then I watched him do it with others, is say, "Now here's a picture of Bobby [Kennedy] when we were doing thus and such, and here's a picture of Jack [John F. Kennedy]. He was in his naval uniform, and then here's—" It was a little tour that he would give in not a large space but packed with memorabilia and pieces of American history.

He would put people at ease, and when things would get tense he had a great ability to change the subject and then come back to the subject when things had calmed down. He was just a master at it, that's all. I've seen him do that with people with very polarized views. He just had that talent, and for some reason, I don't know exactly why, and I didn't see him with other people and it's hard to do it in writing, but he would always say to me, "Oh, John, oh, John." It was never "John," it was, "Oh, John." *[laughter]* I don't know why, but I will never forget it. I would be passing along, he'd say, "Oh, John." And then he'd come over and say, "I saw you on such and such on Sunday, why, you sure gave us hell," joking about something that happened or some event.

One time during the immigration issue there was a picture in the newspapers of Teddy and Lindsey Graham, someplace in South Carolina, and Lindsey Graham said, this isn't an exact quote, but something like, "The worst thing that can happen to me is have my picture taken with Ted Kennedy."

Heininger: There are a lot of people who felt like that.

McCain: So we're on the Senate floor and Ted comes on and he has this clipping from the newspaper that has the picture of Lindsey and Ted, and the quote from Lindsey, and he said, "Hey, did you see this?" And Lindsey is there and of course Lindsey gets a little embarrassed, as you can imagine, and so Ted writes, "Whose side is he on?" and gives it to Lindsey. I got a copy of it too, but that was just the way that he was. A lot of people might take offense at a comment like that, but Ted just laughed it off and joked about it. Frankly, it was about three more times more embarrassing to Lindsey than if Ted had been mad about it. So it was just his way, and his booming laughter was—the nicest thing about his laughter is that it was genuine.

Heininger: You were fond of him, weren't you?

McCain: Oh, yes, enormously. I loved being around him. On the floor a lot, in slack times and stuff, we'd chat and talk and I'd go over and sit down with him. There's a line about the pleasure of his company.

Heininger: Well, you started to work together, and one of the early things that you worked with him on, aside from the Armed Services Committee, was the Patients' Bill of Rights. Why was it so difficult to get it through?

McCain: Special interests. One of the reasons why Ted was so successful is because of his stature. He was able to overcome a lot of special interests. It was clearly the HMOs [Health Maintenance Organizations] and the industry and their lobbyists and their money. That was one of the episodes, that and our efforts at tobacco reform, that convinced me how badly we needed campaign finance reform. The soft money that came in during that debate was unbelievable. So it certainly wasn't the American people that prevailed in that debate, and it wasn't that complex an issue.

Heininger: No, it's not. What was it like, you and John Edwards and Kennedy all working together? That's quite a constellation of powerful personalities. Did it work well?

McCain: Oh, yes, it worked very well, us working together, but I think we underestimated the cloud of the special interests. Colleagues who had come up from both sides of the aisle who had said, “I’m with you, you can count on me,” a few days later said, “Well, I’ve got some real questions about this provision,” or “I have some concerns.”

Heininger: It’s surprising, because it is, on the face of it, such a simple issue, that patients should have rights, and that’s not even getting to health care reform, going on in debate now, much bigger.

McCain: Yes. And it gives you some pause about the influence of special interests on much more complex issues.

Heininger: Which you engaged in with him as well.

McCain: Yes.

Heininger: So tell me about the immigration battle. Or let me phrase it another way—

McCain: Sure.

Female voice: You’ve got a 10:36 live interview.

McCain: OK. Listen; let me do this interview. It’s going to take about ten to fifteen minutes, and then we’ll go back, if that’s OK.

Heininger: That’s fine.

[BREAK]

Heininger: This is a resumption of the interview with Senator John McCain. I’m going to ask you—lots has been written about immigration, so we’ll get to that at this time.

McCain: Oh, yes. That was a classic example of Ted Kennedy, because he had to take positions that in no way impacted the whole principle and effort for immigration reform, but at the same time he realized that in order to get a sufficient number of votes, he had to make a concession. I guess one of the biggest areas, the best example of that, is the issue of a legal temporary worker program. Now, the unions have always been opposed to legal temporary worker programs, and we all know the reasons behind that, and I respect those views. Ted had that position as well, but he knew in order to get a sufficient number of Republicans that he had to support that for the greater good. The greater good here is so important. Ted was very aware people die in the desert every day, people are exploited, young women are mistreated and have no recourse. The problems with illegal immigration in this country are so huge, and everything about his humanitarian spirit was appealed to, and that’s why he made it such a high priority and the

reason why we kept going back at it. So Ted not only took a position, but cast votes against his stand on a specific aspect of the legislation.

Every morning we would get together at 8:30 in the President's room off the floor of the Senate. That happens to be the place where Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, a very historic room and a beautiful room, and he and I would talk first for a little while and then we'd bring in the other Senators, including Senator [Barack] Obama, not frequently, but he would sometimes come, and we would plot out the strategy for the day.

We would sometimes have very spirited discussions about what we should do and how we should handle a certain amendment. But most importantly, Ted would say to Democrats and I would say to Republicans, "You've got to vote against this amendment, even though if it was stand-alone, you would vote for it." Because there were efforts from both left and right—admittedly, stronger from the right, but also from the left—to destroy this legislation. He would do it with humor. Sometimes he would speak as sternly to a Senator as I have ever seen one Senator talk to another Senator in front of a group of Senators. We almost made it. I think that we were on the verge of it and we went into a ten- or twelve-day recess, and unfortunately we lost a lot of the momentum. But I've never been prouder of an effort that he made on that issue.

Heininger: Well, there are very few immigration bills that haven't taken time to get through. It's almost as if it has to come up, go down, come up, go down, before somehow the constellation is there.

McCain: Yes. One of the efforts that I made back in the '90s was on the tobacco legislation.

Heininger: Talk about something that's been around for a long time.

McCain: Yes. And most recently, the FDA [Food and Drug Administration] now has control over tobacco products. So you eventually win over time and you've got to fight. That's another thing about Ted; I've never known him to give up. I have so many anecdotes about him, but one of my favorites was when we were doing a bill and Trent [Chester] Lott was the Majority Leader, and Ted had an amendment that he wanted to be done, an issue to be taken up. I don't remember what it was, but there was a delay and Lott was using all the parliamentary procedures to prevent Ted's issue to be brought up. So Lott told the guy in the chair to adjourn for the weekend, I think it was, and Ted—

Heininger: Adjourn, not recess.

McCain: Yes. Ted: "How long?" He's standing in the well, "How long, how long, how long will we wait to give the American people what they deserve?" Everybody was just—it had nothing to do with the rules of the Senate, had nothing to do with his right to speak. I mean, it was just—and everybody was on the floor because a vote had just taken place. [laughter] And when we came back from recess, guess what? We took up Ted's issue. It was tremendous, it was good. He never needed the microphone.

Heininger: It's hard to understand it, unless you've actually seen him do that. You look at him and just go, *Wow*.

McCain: And yet you see, and the gavel goes down, we adjourn, and Lott goes over and they put their arm around each other and laugh. He had this unique ability to totally separate the issue and the passion associated with it from the personal side. Bob Dole said, after Ted passed, that he could give the most partisan speech he'd ever heard on the floor, and then come into the cloakroom and convince you that he wasn't talking about you. *[laughter]*

Heininger: I can see it. I can still see him doing that.

McCain: Because he wasn't—you know? He was espousing the causes and the philosophy that he believed in.

Heininger: That's an unusual characteristic up here.

McCain: Oh, it's totally unusual. So often now it spills over into personal animosity. Oh, yes, it's unique.

Heininger: To talk about something on a local matter, what did you learn about him from the tussle over the—what was it, \$150 million for Boston's Big Dig?

McCain: Oh, I learned that you can't beat him. We had hearings, we would have rollout statistics, we would talk about cost overruns, but the machine never missed a beat. But again, that was one of those things where Ted never questioned my motives or anything else. We just knew that that was part of my philosophy about government, so it never, obviously like any other disagreement—we had never impaired our relationship. It also was ample testimony to his influence. I think there would have been a lot more glitches without Ted. It might have been completed, I don't know, because once you get so far into a project, you just can't cut it off. You don't stop digging tunnels once they're begun.

Heininger: They might fill in. Well, tell me more about him on the Armed Services Committee, which we have not talked to many people about.

McCain: Ted was very devoted to the personnel, because Ted was a personal individual. He was a human, person to person. He would stop the Capitol Hill policemen and say, "Hey, how are you doing?" He loved people. He was the ultimate gregarious kind, liking people, he really did. He just liked people. Well, that kind of spilled over into this strong sense of obligation he had to the men and women in the military.

Ted served; he was in the Army. He understood that life in the military is not easy, so he really did focus a lot of his attention on personnel issues, making sure that they got the pay raises, making sure that they had the right equipment, making sure that the system worked, the logistics of contracting, of getting them what they needed to be able to become what they've become, the greatest and most professional military in history. There was a time where that wasn't the case, particularly in the post-Vietnam decade, at least. So he had a lot to do with the rebuilding of the military after the Vietnam War.

And look, I'm sure that Ted, from time to time, given what happened with the boat people and the kind of regime that took over Vietnam for a long period of time, had second thoughts about his opposition to the Vietnam war, although I'm certain he never changed. Don't get me wrong. I

mean, he never thought he was wrong, but he felt that because of the loss of the war that he had a special obligation to help in the rebuilding of our military. Ted also understood the threats that we face on a national security basis. He also had a leaning toward, obviously, maintaining our maritime supremacy, particularly in the era of the Cold War, when the Russians were building up their navy.

I think on the strategic side he became very engaged in this back in the days when there was great national debate about a nuclear freeze, Pershing and cruise missiles to Europe. So many of these issues that have faded in the mist of history, but in its day, they were very big issues, and he was heavily engaged on the strategic side of the debate during the '80s and '90s.

Heininger: Was he as well-prepared and knowledgeable about that as he was about the other things we know about, like health care?

McCain: He was extremely well prepared for several reasons. One, experience—he was around here for a long time. Two—passion for issues. Three—he always was surrounded by people of the highest caliber. The highest-caliber staff I have ever seen work for any Senator in the United States Senate was in the Kennedy office, and he inspired in them a degree of devotion and affection that I have not seen for any other Senator. And his ability to build coalitions to get his issues addressed.

There are a thousand issues that are out there. Somehow some rise to the top, for reasons that they obviously are compelling—the buildup in Afghanistan. But there are other issues that are brought to the fore by powerful and influential members of the Senate. That's what Ted would do. But his people around him, well, look, they've proliferated in all levels of government and public service. It's hard to go anywhere, in any agency of government, or a think tank—without running into somebody who was on Ted Kennedy's staff.

Heininger: And the amazing thing to us is that they would drop everything if he called.

McCain: So he had a reservoir of intellect. Even if they weren't actually physically on his staff, they still knew they worked for him.

Heininger: As many of them have said to us, “always on staff, regardless of payroll.”

McCain: Yes. In fact, it's what a friend of mine said about me the other day. “It was Hotel California. You can check in but you can never check out.”

Heininger: That's true. Well, you two were on opposite sides when it came to the Iraq war, but where were you both on the issue of torture?

McCain: We were together on that, obviously, and he was very active in the Armed Services Committee, but most importantly in the floor debate, when we got an amendment on the appropriations bill that prohibited torture and cruel and inhuman treatment. He was very active and very helpful.

Heininger: Did you have any disagreements about the particulars or specifics? You just both, in your instinct, feel it's wrong.

McCain: Not on that amendment. I think it was a seminal event when we passed that amendment that prohibited cruel and inhumane treatment, and we had to abide by the Geneva Conventions. Later on we had some differences that weren't—what we should do about the military commissions and stuff like that, but overall, we were on the same track. We may have had a difference on the military commission stuff, but on the fundamental principle of torture—

Heininger: You came at it from the same vantage point.

McCain: Absolutely.

Heininger: What about detainee rights?

McCain: Ted was more aligned with the try them in Federal Court than Lindsey Graham and I, but we just had a different view. When we were in the majority we were able to prevail with the Military Commissions Act, but since then they have been revisited. In fact, on the last authorization bill, we had nothing to do with it. It's such a complicated and difficult issue, particularly when you get down to people that you know if you release them, they're going to do bad things, but yet you don't have sufficient evidence to give them a trial in a Federal Court for the reasons—in the kind of court system that we have, for reasons ranging from classified information to admissible evidence. So that debate is going to be going on for years and years, as long as we're battling the kind of stateless terrorist organizations that we are facing.

Heininger: What about trying to deal with the Abu Ghraib situation?

McCain: He and I were in complete agreement that we just—the damage that that did to America's image in the world is almost incalculable. It gave great ammunition to our—it was a great recruiting tool for radical extremists.

Heininger: What effect do you think his absence and his death are having on the health care reform process?

McCain: Oh, I think it's clear it's far different. Look, I understand that elections have consequences and I understand that the Democrats have 60 votes and they can basically ram through whatever the 60 of them agree to, but I had already had conversations with Ted on this issue, and the fact is that he would have done as he always does, gotten those people up in the hideaway and said, "OK, what do you want? Let's see what we can do." Ted didn't always get a coalition of Republicans. He at times was able to carry his issue without it, and he may have been able to this time, but I know he would have made a good faith effort to get a certain number of Republicans truly engaged.

And look, I'm not complaining, but the reality is there have been no Republicans in negotiations to bring forth a bill. I mean that's just the reality, and again, I'm not complaining, but I know Ted Kennedy would have made a sincere effort, and because of his past relationships with a lot of Republicans, including a guy like Chuck Grassley and others, I think there is the possibility and even likelihood that there would have been something that would have gotten a much higher degree of bipartisanship than what this is. This will probably get the two Senators from Maine and they'll call it bipartisan, but we all know it's not.

Heininger: Did the two of you ever talk about your Presidential campaigns?

McCain: Oh, yes, a lot.

Heininger: What was it like talking to him about it?

McCain: He said he was proud of me. You noticed during the Presidential campaign Ted never said anything about me.

Heininger: No, he didn't. That's because he liked you too, as much as you liked him.

McCain: We'd talk about it. Because we're both political junkies, we'd talk about some of the minutia, and also we'd talk about the fact that after the stock market crashed, it was very unlikely, but we also talked about when he came out and endorsed Barack Obama. My view was that that was a seminal event for the Obama campaign in securing the nomination.

Heininger: Did that surprise you?

McCain: It did, because I never saw a lot of personal relationship between the two of them. In fact, I saw some friction during the immigration thing. But I also think that Ted did it because he thought it was in the best interest of the country, I really do. I think he did it for a pure idea, in his view, who was best qualified to lead the country, and I think he made the decision that Barack Obama had these unique qualities that could really be, in his view, necessary for the best way to ensure the future of the nation.

Heininger: Had you expected him to support Hillary Clinton?

McCain: On the surface, yes, because he had a much better working relationship with Senator Clinton than he did with Senator Obama.

Female voice: We are running out of time.

McCain: Yes, OK—can we do about ten more minutes?

Female voice: About five.

McCain: And if you want, we'll do this again.

Heininger: OK.

McCain: It's a labor of love.

Heininger: I knew it would be. Did you ever talk to Hillary about it, once you came back?

McCain: No, I never did. I didn't see the point. I'm sure that it wounded Hillary.

Heininger: I'm sure it did too. It was very interesting, because Ted stood up and said, and the image that he gave was, "My niece came to me and she had never seen her daughter so excited

about a political candidate.” And I thought, *Yes? That’s a big influence, but there’s a lot more going on than that.*

McCain: But I think Ted was doing what we do in politics, bringing it down to the level that people understand. That’s why we talk about individual situations when we discuss issues; that this young woman, the niece, represented the excitement that was going throughout America, particularly amongst young people. I saw it all the time.

Heininger: Galvanizing young people is something that doesn’t happen a whole lot in politics.

McCain: Exactly. I saw it myself, graphically.

Heininger: Yes, I guess so, you would have.

McCain: Yes.

Heininger: Tell me about when you and Russ Feingold won the Profile in Courage Award.

McCain: It was one of the most memorable moments of my life, not only because I was so honored and humbled, but probably as important as that was to be around the Kennedy clan, the family, and see the patriarch and the interaction, the love and affection that exists amongst the Kennedy family. The whole episode was memorable.

One of the most memorable aspects of it was that I told Ted that I could only come to the luncheon the day of the award because it was my son Jimmy [McCain]’s tenth birthday, who is now 21 by the way, and we wanted to be in Phoenix for it. And he said, “It’s very important, the whole dinner the night before, we appreciate it, so much—” We went back and forth. So I said OK, and we got there in the afternoon with Jimmy, the afternoon of the awards ceremony the next day. Ted met us and we went from there to a Coast Guard cutter, which took us and Jimmy on a tour of the harbor in Boston. We got off and we went, where was it? We went over to the Kennedy Center. Jimmy was made most welcome. Everybody said hello to him, there was a birthday cake, everybody sang Happy Birthday. The next day there was another birthday cake and another rendition by everybody of Happy Birthday. Jimmy remembers that birthday probably more than any that he’s ever had. It was the classic Kennedy personal touch to a ten-year-old boy.

Again, the interaction amongst the whole family was just remarkable. It’s clear the role that Ted played in that family in the absence of his brothers was just something that was remarkable to behold. Look, I’m very aware that Ted Kennedy made a lot of mistakes in his life. I’m very aware that I’ve made a lot of mistakes in my life. But to see the genuine relationship that existed amongst the Kennedy family was something that I know can only be achieved by hard work and constant communication and attention and addressing issues for a long period of time.

Heininger: Did you see any changes in him after he met Vicki [Reggie Kennedy]?

McCain: Oh, sure. Yes, we all know that. I think the effect was obvious, that he’d found someone who he was genuinely in love with, and she in turn made him appreciate how important the role he played in America was, and therefore made him not a more serious Senator, because

he was always a serious Senator, don't get me wrong. She made him probably—the word isn't even “committed,” maybe “aware”—maybe she helped make him aware of the important role that he plays in America. He didn't, just because he met Vicki, all of a sudden become a powerful influence in the Senate. He always was.

Heininger: Right.

McCain: It's not as if she catapulted him to fame. He already was famous. What she did, I think, was help him channel his efforts in the most productive way. He was always productive. I think she made him *most* productive.

Heininger: You're pointing to an interesting nuance that I have not seen other people pointing to before, but I think you're right. He met her after the Willy Smith trial, and there is a shift in him, not just from a personal influence, but I think it goes back to what you had said at the beginning about he's a U.S. Senator and that comes before the state.

McCain: Massachusetts or Arizona.

Heininger: What was the memorial service like?

McCain: I don't cry often. The service was deeply moving. Ted [Kennedy] junior gave probably as compelling a speech as I have ever seen in my life, and I have seen historians and eloquence, but the story about the sled, I mean it was deeply, deeply moving. The night before I thought was wonderful, although several people went way too long and several people talked about themselves rather than Ted Kennedy, which is always the case at these things, but Ted junior's speech was just one of those moments in your life that you will never forget.

Heininger: Yes, we had tears.

McCain: It was as beautiful a speech as I've ever seen.

Heininger: And for someone who has stayed out of the public spotlight as well too.

McCain: Yes, amazing. I was stunned by it. The whole thing, being in Boston, being in the cathedral, being where the Kennedys—everything about the environment was deeply moving. I got there before the crowd of Senators who had flown up on planes, so it was neat just to stand there by myself and absorb the atmosphere before the ceremony took place.

Heininger: You're going to miss him, aren't you?

McCain: Oh, I miss him every day around here. I still expect to go around the corner here, because his office was just one floor up, and hear that voice, “Oh, John.” *[laughter]* “I saw you on Sunday and you really gave us hell, didn't you?” You know. “But do you really believe—” Fill in the blanks, you know. I've got to go. Listen, if you want to come back we'll do some more.

Heininger: This was wonderful. I knew it would be.