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EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

FINAL EDITED TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS OLIPHANT

November 15, 2006
Charlottesville, Virginia

Interviewers:

University of Virginia

Stephen Knott, chair
Darby Morrisroe

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Knott: We'll begin with the ground rules. Anything you say today stays in this room until you get a copy of the transcript several months down the road. At that time, you're free to add anything you'd like or retract anything you'd like. You can put any restrictions you want on this transcript. We're hoping that people feel free to speak to history. And especially when you're dealing with a sitting political figure, I think this is especially important.

Oliphant: How sensitive has it been so far?

Knott: It's been mixed.

Oliphant: Really, still?

Knott: Yes. I get the sense at times that some people still hold back. They're not comfortable. But you control your transcript, and we want you to know that.

Morrisroe: And portions thereof. So if there are certain things about which you want to speak candidly but you don't want made public—one or two paragraphs or some portion of it—you can simply close a portion of it.

Oliphant: I was trying to think about it while I was driving. I knew my way around here, at least, so I wasn't just looking at road signs. My basic attitude is, who cares? I don't know. Let's see how personal you get.

Knott: Perhaps the best place to start, if you could just tell us a little bit about yourself: how you started your career in journalism, when you began to cover the Kennedys, and so forth.

Oliphant: My intern- and baby-ship in the racket was beginning in the spring of 1966. By that fall, after my first summer, I was sneaking out of college to work nights at the paper.

Knott: Where were you going to school?

Oliphant: At Harvard. And then was full time by 1968.

Morrisroe: At the [*Boston*] *Globe?*

Oliphant: Yes.

Morrisroe: And what were you covering? What were you working on between the ’66 to ’68 period?

Oliphant: I was a young general-assignment reporter into the beginning of 1968, and then all hell broke loose.

Knott: Now, did you cover Bobby’s [Kennedy] campaign at all?

Oliphant: Just on the fringes. We had a little group that did canvassing in New Hampshire in 1968, and that was how I got started. So my reward for that was the Indiana primary, and it was a good one, it turned out.

Knott: Sure, absolutely.

Oliphant: And so I was hooked by the summer, and then I had street duty at the convention in ’68.

Knott: Do you recall Ted Kennedy at all?

Oliphant: My scars healed.

Knott: Are you serious?

Oliphant: Yes. I went through the plate-glass window at the Haymarket Lounge at Balboa and Michigan, right where the whole world was watching.

Knott: The cops threw you through?

Oliphant: Well, it was just—

Knott: The crowd.

Oliphant: Yes. Mostly because of the police, and several people went through the window. But there was a little politics involving him in the background and a still-undetermined number of hours when he—

Knott: When he wavered there, yes.

Oliphant: So my knowledge there is derivative rather than direct.

Knott: Could you tell us what this derivative knowledge was?

Oliphant: Well, as it turned out, I had one of the assignments that actually meant the most at that convention. Being inside the hall was less important in a way, but I was familiar with the back-and-forth there that third night, I guess it was—probably in the aftermath of the lack of success

on the peace plank. I've talked to him about it over the years, and "waver" was the best verb then and since, though at the time, he cut it off definitively. He made a famous crack to, I think it was David Burke, after he made the judgment, and just said, "Some day, I'm going to be out in Oregon, and I'll have just lost the primary, and I'm going to make you remember this moment." Astonishingly prophetic.

Knott: Yes, absolutely.

Oliphant: But it started and ended so fast. I have since seen some of the tapes from—I didn't see any television that whole week. They were all live. And it was blown up much more than it really was. It didn't last very long.

Morrisroe: What were your initial impressions of Senator Kennedy? I mean, when did you first have occasion to either meet him or be in the room with him?

Oliphant: It was when I was doing spot duty as a reporter. Especially working weekends and nights, you get the occasional arrival, or there would be some event of local significance in Boston. I was 21 at the time, so it was hard to maintain your cool in a presence like that, even as young as he was, and even harder with his brother. And there were three or four occasions in '68, in Indiana especially.

Knott: Can you compare them?

Oliphant: That included the night he [Martin Luther King Jr.] was murdered.

Knott: So you were there when he delivered that speech?

Oliphant: Yes, at the playground. The guy who would become Edward Kennedy's premier advance man through the years, Jimmy King, handled the event entirely spontaneously. Find a place; get a crowd. It was to make a statement.

Knott: The Indianapolis police didn't want him to go in there, as I understand it.

Oliphant: That's right. I remember it vividly. But he was determined to say something and determined not to do it in front of microphones at a hotel downtown, so Jimmy found this playground, and it was illuminated only by the lights from the TV.

Knott: And many of the people in the crowd were not aware that Martin Luther King had been killed.

Oliphant: That's correct. The thing that I remember the most is the sound after he said that Dr. King had been murdered. There are very few times that I've ever actually heard a mass intake of breath, and then there was rumbling and a little concern about the mood before he started to talk. There weren't even notes. He quoted [Prince] Escalus.

Knott: Can you compare Edward Kennedy and Robert Kennedy for us?

Oliphant: With Bob Kennedy, you had quiet intensity. It could be icy sometimes. I was just a

baby reporter, and there was nothing more terrifying than to ask him a dumb, two-dimensional question.

Knott: I'm very used to that.

Oliphant: Because you would get this stare that just was withering, and he wouldn't say anything. You know, "How are you doing in Clinton County?" east of Indianapolis or something. And the minute the words came out of your mouth, you knew you'd made a fool of yourself. He didn't, at that point in his life, suffer fools. The intensity was quiet. I don't think, in the brief encounters that I had, I ever heard his voice raised.

And Edward Kennedy is Falstaff, and loud and physical, and his hands are on you almost from the first time you meet him. Just utterly different personalities.

Knott: Jack Kennedy was quoted once as saying that he thought that Teddy was the best politician in the family.

Oliphant: Well, he's a natural politician. Look, it's a people business. It really helps if you like people, and that's his first instinct. As I say, he's very close to you; he's very physical; it's a two-hand shake; and he always remembers names.

The pol side of him is extraordinarily meticulous. Somebody's always writing down something; somebody always gets back to you. In Massachusetts I think it's still true, because of the distrust in the state party the Kennedys were famous for. I'm pretty sure it's still true. They had their own person in every one of the however many cities and towns there are in Massachusetts—350, something like that. And I think it's still the case. So in addition to being a natural communicator and somebody who was always approachable by people, and who in turn approached them, the other side of his political life was this meticulous approach to organization, and so the President was right.

I remember going in with a colleague into Bob Kennedy's Senate office just when things were starting to happen, but I don't think New Hampshire had voted yet. It was off the record, and the books were all out on his desk: election law, Democratic Party manuals, and all the rest of it. Ted Kennedy was much more organized.

Morrisroe: Do you recall beyond his affability and his proximity to reporters and the press, how his relationship was with the press?

Oliphant: Like a stiff arm from a football player. There was a veneer. I've always called it a "veneer of inarticulateness." And I say "veneer" because every once in a while, when he switched on, the syntax was dead on. But it was the illusion of intimacy, and I'm sure well aware that being around him was a thrill for a lot of people the first time, the first five times, maybe the first ten times. But often the conversation could be extraordinarily superficial. The joke, which I guess started this, is if you were going to interview him, you'd have a little bag with you, and you'd give it to him and say, "I just brought some extra verbs in case you want to speak in a sentence or two." Often he could babble for minutes and minutes and be utterly unintelligible.

Morrisroe: So you think this was a deliberate strategy on his part since he had the capacity to be

articulate?

Oliphant: Yes. Well, "strategy" is going way too far here, but his instinct was to keep you like this [*gestures*]. I mean, a perfectly acceptable press conference figure. God knows, when he was switched on, one of the great speakers of all time. By the mid and late '60s, he had lost whatever chance there was to live a normal life with a normal kind of banter and intimacy that there is between public figure and reporter. So for the longest time, the guard stays up and only comes down very gradually as he gets to know you.

Morrisroe: Were there any reporters at that time, the time you're starting, late '60s, with whom he dropped the wall?

Oliphant: Oh, yes, I could see it. Naturally, coming from the major institution in his home state, there were a couple of people who were on extremely intimate terms with him. So I got to see it gradually. I mean, it's not like he lived in a fortress. Chain Bridge Road was open regularly, often when you least expected it, at first, going with one or two older colleagues and one or two people from other papers. No broadcasting people that I remember in any intimate sense. This isn't unique about Kennedy, but it's just because of everything that had happened, it took a very long time.

Knott: Could you talk a little bit about the Kennedys' relationship, and especially Edward Kennedy's relationship, with the *Boston Globe* and the accusation that some folks make that it was a little too cozy.

Oliphant: Well, it's funny. A lot of it stems from the period when the President was still alive and the Senate campaign was being planned. Of course all my knowledge about that is derivative, but the revisiting of the Harvard episode was something you see more and more in the media today, much to my chagrin anyway, and that's the negotiated access. In other words, if I'm not mistaken, the play of the story about Harvard was part of the negotiation in the interview, right?

Knott: Right.

Oliphant: But interestingly, the Taylor family and my mentor, Tom Winship, didn't have a particularly close relationship with him. It was [Robert] Healy. Have you talked to Bob?

Knott: We have, yes.

Oliphant: God bless him. He was just up from Florida a week or so ago. It was really Healy. Neither the Taylors nor Tom or Tom's father was particularly close to any of them. Everything is a two-sided coin. The basic story about the Harvard disclosure was true, but when I started—I came in at the tail end of the Judge [Frank] Morrissey thing, and there was no quarter there either.

Knott: That's true.

Oliphant: Particularly because poor Kennedy didn't have a leg to stand on in the story anyway. It always amazed me how he did not take a grudge from that, and it was the first clue to me how

much younger he was, and that he came of age in a different time. Deep down he would rather take guff from somebody and have a vigorous discussion than deal with some sycophant. And that was *really* true of his brother.

Knott: Did you ever feel that he was trying to play you or use you?

Oliphant: No. I mean, the best analogy I've ever been able to come up with about how it works with him and how it worked with him is that it was always more like a President. He had more assistants—a lot of it was formal: legislation, speeches, press conferences. Other than that, the long stretches of time, absolutely not, just like a President, since in the modern period very few Presidents have people in privately or for conversation or something like that. Kennedy was no different, though his colleagues were. I mean, the system was already well under way.

We had an organization, a little informal group; it was political writers, people like [Jules] Witcover, and I was a junior member by 1970. It was called Political Writers for a Democratic Society. And about every month or two, there was a little dinner with a public figure, all off the record, and the whole idea was to test things. It wasn't intimate conversation so much as it was challenging, particularly in a pre-Presidential period, with people who were going to run for President. Almost like shouting matches in a barroom rather than interviews, and Kennedy never came to a single one.

Knott: Despite being invited?

Oliphant: No. Well, it was like, "Forget about it; don't even try." I mean, he had his open moments. It gradually dawned on me as I got a little older and got used to it. As I said, the house would open up under the weirdest—I remember the night [Robert] Byrd beat him.

Knott: For the Whip position?

Oliphant: Yes. He just said to two or three of us who were working on it in the office that night, "Come on out." We went out for an extremely wet evening, and he was almost relieved more than anything else, I think.

Knott: Why do you think he ran for that position, Tom, in the first place?

Oliphant: Don't forget, there was an expected aspect to the hierarchy, still, in those days that one came into the Senate, one served for a while, and one naturally aspired to be part of the leadership. I think he ran for it the first time without ever thinking, *Why? What do I want to do?* And before you know it, you're scheduling votes, or helping guys get dinner or something, or being held in for late votes and can't get to the airport or something. It's not even a ministerial function in some ways, and the substantive part of it is rather limited.

That covers the period after '68, when I'm starting to get used to Washington. I don't think I ever saw him when he held the office where I remember thinking to myself, *Boy, he really enjoys doing this*. And then when he was in a more vulnerable position and Byrd challenged him, it was his first direct experience with the guys who had pledged their support to his face and then voted against him when the door closes.

Morrisroe: That's a useful lesson to learn.

Oliphant: I forget what the number is—I'm sure you've run into it—but he had something like seven or eight more pledges than he received as votes. All I remember about that night, which as I said was very wet, was not how angry he was at that, but how funny he thought it was. The irony of it appealed to him more than the perfidy involved.

Morrisroe: At what point did you come down to Washington?

Oliphant: Well, it was in stages, really. I was starting to commute after the conventions in 1968, did some traveling, and then started going back and forth when [Richard] Nixon took office. Some time in that first year I moved, actually moved.

Morrisroe: And did the *Globe* have a large bureau?

Oliphant: At that point, it was still quite small. Have you talked to Jimmy Doyle?

Knott: No.

Oliphant: You should.

Knott: I have to admit, that's a name I—

Oliphant: Oh, very important, because that's all wonderful insight into the first years in the Senate.

Morrisroe: Was he bureau chief with the *Globe?*

Oliphant: Well, there were two or three people. Anarchy was the preferred method of organization. I think technically there was a title, not that it ever mattered. And then a diplomatic guy, a great guy that we picked up additionally at the UN [United Nations] after the *Herald Tribune* folded, and then he came in. But I think it was the fourth person in the office.

Morrisroe: Did everybody cover Kennedy in that office?

Oliphant: Yes.

Morrisroe: Were you topically divided? How does that work?

Oliphant: Politics was hierarchical, in a sense, and in a way, seniority based. The thing was just beginning to specialize, and there were one or two people on the Hill and a couple of people downtown. But the way it really worked in practice was that everybody—

Morrisroe: Covered.

Oliphant: Yes, depending on what it was.

Morrisroe: You come from Boston down to the Washington press corps. How does the view of Senator Kennedy, if it does, differ among those outside of Massachusetts?

Oliphant: I never really had the Boston view. I was in college, and I was already running away to join the circus, mentally. In 1968, which is my first full-time year, just because young people were sort of chic there for a while, I could talk to Jerry Rubin and Tom Hayden in Chicago a hell of a lot easier than some 50-year-old guy who had been to 20 political conventions could, and so it just kept going. So I never really had the Massachusetts view.

Knott: Where are you from, Tom, originally?

Oliphant: The Lower East Side of New York, but I went to high school in Southern California. Whatever the synonym for royalty is, I never really had that view. He was a national figure to me, not a particularly local one. In fact, I had to learn how meticulously attentive he was to local matters. Again, what people rarely saw was the work that went into the regional and local things. This is probably what President Kennedy was referring to. He just instinctively—that was the foundation, particularly because when he'd arrived in '62, it really was apprenticeship for a couple of years.

Knott: You mentioned the Majority Whip race and then the Majority Whip defeat at the hands of Byrd. How much of a factor was Chappaquiddick in that defeat?

Oliphant: Well, he was a little wounded, and so Byrd could see the opportunity. But much more importantly, he could see that Kennedy didn't like the job and that the things that people actually voted on—which is, "If I'm stuck here, can you get me a hotel room? Can you hold the roll call for three more hours because I'm at a fund-raiser on the other side of town?"—that that was what people voted for, not your command of whatever the issue of the day was. Byrd was more than willing to be that figure.

And so if it's called an "internal vote" in the Senate, my impression of it at the time and the more I've learned about it as the years have passed, is that that's exactly what this was, and that Kennedy had gradually understood that success in a Senator's career has got absolutely nothing to do with holding down jobs like that. So he did it almost as a routine step onto a ladder before he realized that not only did he not like it, but he had no particular aptitude for what the job entailed. My impression, still, of that very long, wet night at Chain Bridge Road after it happened was that he was far more relieved than he was angry.

Morrisroe: Interesting. In this same period, did his relationship with the press change in the wake of Chappaquiddick, and if so, how?

Oliphant: Well, even before it, there was the stiff arm. The hard parts of his life, to me, after all these years, are still almost unimaginable. So as a young person, I was always amazed at the extent he opened the window at all—given the fact that journalism, including political journalism, was much more, I don't want to say "two-dimensional" in a pejorative sense, because in a way, it was more informative: what the guy said, what the guy did, what the bill contained, et cetera, instead of all this spinning garbage you have to wade through today—that the thing that's so rewarding about Kennedy is that the substantive side of it is so substantive. The opportunity for conversation, it's more to understand him more than it is to write. The outlet then, as I say, was for substantive activity primarily. The personal hadn't quite become totally political yet.

But when you compare him to the figures of the time—and the other Senator from Massachusetts was Ed Brooke, who was just very easy to get to know and to talk with, talk to, have a conversation with—and as I got to know more and more public figures, it was hard not to be struck by how easy it was to have normal adult relationships. With Kennedy, it's just always a little bit more complicated.

Morrisroe: Interesting.

Knott: How would you explain to somebody who might be reading this interview 50 years from now, or 100 years from now, how Senator Kennedy politically survived Chappaquiddick? It probably would have destroyed other politicians.

Oliphant: Maybe. The thing that I've always said that I felt at the time covering it—I was on rewrite that weekend.

Knott: The moon-landing weekend.

Oliphant: Yes. Extra people were pulled in. It was a Saturday, and so everything was just coming in over the transom. A week or so later, as he was getting ready to make the speech, I thought that his own description of his own conduct was so damning and so thorough that it almost cut off the discussion. In other words, if you list the adjectives that he lists—"not understandable," "terrible," "unforgivable," "inexcusable"; there's this long list of adjectives—no one's ever topped it. It's funny, the story hasn't changed either, interestingly enough, and I think that's basically what happened. What is forgotten is the harshness of his own judgment of himself. As I say, I don't think anybody talking about that accident in public has ever exceeded the ferocity of those adjectives that Kennedy himself applied to himself.

So one reason that he survived—"prevailed" actually is the correct word—is that there was a feeling that he'd not confessed, but that he had been harsher on himself than most people wanted to be if they were grounded in the facts of what happened. Also there was a long time to get ready for 1970, and the Republicans, bless their heart, obliged with a really ugly primary. They had a right-winger, I don't remember his name—anyway, an early example of a hard-right politician—and then a Yankee.

Knott: Spaulding.

Oliphant: [Josiah A.] Cy Spaulding. And Cy won it, and it was a cakewalk after that. He was a gentleman. That was his own image of himself. He really was. The guy he ran against had wanted to use this, but it became clear, I think, in the primary that he could characterize Chappaquiddick differently, but he didn't have anything; the story didn't move. People forget, I think, how much Kennedy said in that initial period, in those first few weeks, not that he'd confessed, but that there had been a degree of candor and self-judgment that was enough. And this idea that somebody else might not have survived it, I don't know. It's conjectural.

Knott: Sure. Were you assigned to cover any aspect of that story?

Oliphant: I had a piece of the speech—not the case in the court, as such—one weekend in Wilkes-Barre at the time of the funeral.

Everyone knew her. Again, this is lost to history. The idea that there was something between them is so obscene. Mary Jo Kopechne was, God, I want to say "altar girl." Is there such a thing in that church?

Knott: I'm not sure.

Oliphant: No, they wouldn't let that happen, would they? But I mean, an intensely—

Morrisroe: Convent student.

Oliphant: Well, borderline. The boiler room in 1968, it wasn't like a frat house.

Knott: It was a real working—

Oliphant: In a boiler room, you're on the phone 19 hours a day. She was about as straight an arrow as you could imagine. Sadly, the public-at-large never got to know her, but that part of the conjecture is really ridiculous. She was very quiet, unassuming. I guess we all know girls who went to Catholic school, right? And she was central casting.

Knott: You mentioned Ed Brooke a few minutes ago. How was that relationship? He was a potential star. I think he was the only African American member of the Senate at that time.

Oliphant: Yes, and at the time he was.

Knott: You had two stars from Massachusetts. Was there ever any friction there?

Oliphant: There were three stages to all of this. [Leverett] Saltonstall was more mentor than competitor. My mentor, Tom Winship, the editor of the *Globe*, was extremely close to Saltonstall, and I think had worked for him, briefly, in the early '50s or something like that, and Kennedy was very conscious of Saltonstall's stature—very deferential and all like that. Brooke, of course, came along four years—he was the successor. Also remember that when Nixon was elected, Brooke was of his party. Brooke never competed with Kennedy. He was comfortable, and as the years passed, [Paul] Tsongas was not comfortable, and [John] Kerry had more trouble adjusting to the Senate and being a real politician than to serving with Kennedy.

Brooke had his own areas. Housing and other aspects of poverty really attracted his attention. The Brooke amendment is still on the books, I think, and Medicaid, in some ways, occurred or grew because of his work. Moderate Republicanism was alive in those days, and he had an office full of extremely talented people, many of whom went on to distinguished public-service careers. I think, also, there was no question that as the '70s began, Kennedy's position in the Senate—he liked the work. Again, the natural politician in him made him a more widely liked figure. Brooke is a very pleasant man, but not a naturally outgoing one.

Knott: What was Kennedy's relationship like with some of the old bulls in the Senate, who I think were still around in the late '60s and early '70s?

Oliphant: Oh, were they ever.

Knott: Some of the Southerners especially.

Oliphant: Well, the classic one is [James] Eastland. It's a shame Dick Drayne died 20 years ago, because the interview of him would have been perfect. Eastland was the key one, because a lot of your business as a Senator, you had to go through Eastland—U.S. attorneys and judges, above all.

Kennedy could do an imitation of Eastland that was just dead on. Eastland could appear to be grouchy behind the cigar smoke and the glass that always had a few fingers of scotch in it. And he'd kind of look up at him as he'd come in, "Kennedy, what you want now?" And he could imitate him, away from Eastland, very well. [Samuel] Ervin liked him very much and sought him out. With the others, because of segregation, however, he was quite comfortable being distant. He didn't have much experience with [Richard] Russell, and that was before my time, but he worked with Eastland. In fact, a lot of the precursors of the Republican cosponsors and the reaching across the aisle and all the other standard biographical facts of his political career, you can see the beginnings of it. And how he understood that Eastland was a way station you just had to pass through if you were going to be at all successful with getting things done. Particularly when it moved, it started to involve legislation. The civil rights bills had passed, but the system still operated. I think he liked Eastland. I really do.

At the end, when he was quitting, he had Kennedy down to Ole Miss. Bob Kennedy had been there since [the enrollment of James] Meredith, but I don't think Edward Kennedy had been, and it was one of the funniest trips I ever took. Eastland was genuinely honored. Ole Miss had not begun its revival yet. It was still stuck with that horrible reputation. I don't know whether they were naming something after Eastland or something, but it was in—'78, I think, was his last year, and that was when the trip was.

Not only did they have all of the courthouse, meaning white-type, Democrats there, but a lot of the black figures as well. There was a reception after Kennedy spoke, and Eastland was just having a ball, a little drunk, and one person who was there was one of my heroes from my earlier civil rights period and college down there, Aaron Henry. Aaron was at a reception, I guess, at the Chancellor's office after the speech—black, of course—and he was so overcome at this moment of Kennedy returning, coming to Ole Miss for Eastland and all the rest, and Aaron was so overcome. We were in a small group, and he just all of a sudden, impulsively put his arms around Eastland and kissed him on the cheek. And he's still trying to accommodate, as best he could, the late 20th century, and I'll never forget the look on his face. Not distaste, but it was the shock and surprise.

Morrisroe: On Eastland's face?

Oliphant: Yes.

Knott: Is there a photograph of that?

Oliphant: God, Eastland would have—

Morrisroe: He's probably located all of them if there were.

Oliphant: For that they would have set the Klan on whoever had, but it did happen. So Kennedy could be like that with figures, at least, whose position he respected. He was also extremely deferential and, I think, learned a great deal about the Senate from [Michael] Mansfield.

With us, Mansfield could be a laconic—for a young person, especially—a hard-to-figure person. But his chief aide was a Massachusetts guy named Charlie Ferris. That was where Kennedy learned a great deal of what he—He's institutional memory now, but when he was finding his way, and he could be extremely deferential. So he was not a generation-conscious politician, not at all.

Knott: Where do you think that comes from? Bobby sort of chafed in the brief period he was in the Senate.

Oliphant: Well, yes.

Knott: Does that come from being the youngest child?

Oliphant: No. I think it's fish and water; impossible to explain but important to understand. His brother, I'm sure—I didn't witness it directly—but quite comfortable running the Justice Department and giving orders and running things and all the rest of it, and quite at a loss in a purely political atmosphere where personal relationships are everything.

A natural politician in a legislative body is a wonderful thing to watch. It is how things happen in our society. As I say, it is a people business, and it really does help if you like people, and so I think it was easy. I think it was fish to water. I've heard stories about the immigration bill. I know it intimately because I watched him up close 20 years later and then 20 years after that. A lot of attention is paid to that first one in '65, right?

Knott: Right.

Oliphant: Because it was the first floor-managing experience, and the stakes obviously were high. But on the other hand, the narrative is almost anticlimactic because he had easy charge of the process from the beginning. He didn't have mentors, and as I say, it was obvious to me that he had learned a great deal from Mansfield.

Morrisroe: Were there any in the Senate, that you recall, with whom he had especially difficult relations?

Oliphant: In the '60s and early '70s, no.

Morrisroe: That's quite surprising, given the generational, the changes going on in the Senate.

Oliphant: Yes. And remember, the thing that was especially rubbing on people was the war. Rather than be a generational figure, chafing at authority or whatever, it was almost as if he was taking a long view of his career. Vietnam did rub many people the wrong way. I don't think he had any relationship with [John] Stennis—that I ever saw anyway. Eastland, he had to do business with. I'm sure Vietnam rubbed some people the wrong way. But [Henry] Jackson liked him, including after hours. They got along very well despite the war. The war was where he

could come out—Civil rights had essentially happened. The war presented the opportunity to be younger and more emotional and more passionate because that's the kind of issue it was.

Knott: Did he ever talk to you about the criticism that was leveled against his brother, the President, regarding the war?

Oliphant: For me, this all began with the Pentagon Papers. I had written about them about four months before everything went crazy with [Daniel] Ellsberg.

Knott: You had written about—you knew about the existence?

Oliphant: Yes. I'd done a very long piece that there had been this study that Les [Leslie] Gelb had run. The basic idea of the story was that everybody who had worked on it and started out a hawk had become a dove—Mort Halperin, Gelb himself, Tony Lake, several others—and that there had been efforts to get it out of the Pentagon, without any success. [J. William] Fulbright had actually tried that. That's another person to whom Kennedy showed great deference. Wayne Morris was another one. A couple of those guys are still in the Senate who ran against his brother—[Stuart] Symington.

The first time he ever called me in, after that piece ran, Dick Drayne called me and asked if I'd come up, and he was very curious about it. Then when everything went nuts, my deal with Dan was that we would get the portion of the Pentagon Papers dealing with the Kennedy administration's decision to send the advisors in in 1961. The timing of all of this was that it would trigger the minute, the second—the *Times* and the *Post* were under injunction the first week, and our publication meant that the dam had burst and that there was nothing—any illusion Nixon had about keeping this thing under wraps by a court injunction was broken when we became the third paper to publish.

That was the period when I first started to talk to him with some intimacy about issues and himself. It was a very electric period. There was some criminal exposure actually. I mean, you could tell from his public activity how intensely he thought about the war, but talking to him about it away from business was when I first began to understand the intensity of his feelings.

Knott: He went to Vietnam, I think, maybe twice during that era.

Oliphant: Yes.

Knott: Did those trips affect him at all, do you know?

Oliphant: Well, he came in and he had a wonderful avenue, and it turned out to be a unique one, of all things. I mean, he had an aide. Dale [de Haan] is dead, isn't he?

Knott: No. He was just here a few weeks ago.

Oliphant: Thank God. How's he feeling?

Knott: He seems fine. Darby and I did the interview.

Oliphant: Well, he went on to be an absolutely heroic figure at the United Nations. In those days, he handled the Refugee Subcommittee. That was Kennedy's way in, and it turned out to be a great opportunity to offer a fresh perspective on the impact of the war, because I think by 1970 it was some ridiculously high figure; one in four people in Vietnam were refugees. The consequences, particularly of the bombings, South as well as North, was to force movement of very large populations.

Dale was born to do this kind of work, and he had this amazing mixture of almost academic-like precision and knowledge combined with passion, even though he's such a soft-spoken person. And so those trips really enhanced his stature on that aspect of the war. But nothing showed how he really felt more than when he dashed to the floor after Hamburger Hill. That was the person I eventually came to know very well. The absolute futility, it was such a wonderful metaphor for Vietnam: all of this effort and all of these lives spent on this piece of real estate that we abandoned the second we had secured it. Not only was it a perfect metaphor, but the idea was that he got it, and then he had this impulse, and boom, he was on the floor five minutes later.

So while refugees was planned, I still think Hamburger Hill is the—I was on the Mall with young John Kerry, and he did it again then. He just impulsively showed up early in the evening, when they thought they were going to get raided and arrested en masse. So while his approach to every issue, like politics itself, was very meticulous and planned and ordered, the most fun you'd have with Kennedy was when he acted impulsively. The speech about Hamburger Hill was one, putting himself really down on the Mall so that if FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigations] agents or whoever might have been sent to arrest all those guys, they would have had to go through him.

Knott: Did he ever deal with this question, that you recall, of his brother's initial responsibility for increasing the American involvement in Vietnam?

Oliphant: Well, yes. There are two parts to this, because the other part is his absolute certainty, and his ability to talk about it at considerable depth, that his brother had also made the decision to get the hell out of there. After the fact, they go together—in my memory a couple of times—that he had absolutely no difficulty defending the propriety of the decision to send advisors.

It was 16,000 people, enough to have people with individual units of the Vietnamese Armed Forces but absolutely no independent combat-type activity at all. And of course the other context was the gradual conversion of President Kennedy to revulsion at the [Ngo Dinh] Diem regime, however unpleasantly that ended. So you talked about the early '60s with Kennedy in context, that as a Cold War decision there was nothing about the advisors' decision that led inexorably to the insertion of combat units after the attack at Plaku. By itself it made some sense. But as I say, he's beginning, God, about the time the Kennedy Library started opening for business and you began to see some of these oral histories and the subject of what President Kennedy had decided began to be current—[Robert] McNamara has always been—

As I say, when he gets exercised, the syntax becomes perfect. People used to come to me to interpret how he—or nonsentences or whatever, and I've gotten so I can. My wife, who covered him with me in 1980, has always said that the two of us could go for a half an hour

without saying a word and yet have had a conversation that we each understood. I mean, gradually you learn to interpret anybody's communication if you talk to them enough. On the subject of his brother, he is very specific and detailed about the decision, prior to his brother getting murdered, that we were going to get out. He's a little uncomfortable with the idea that it would have been after the '64 election rather than before it. So, yes, he was always able to discuss Vietnam in context.

Knott: Let me take you back to the Senate itself. Did you ever sense that there was ever any resentment on the part of some of the other Senators?

Oliphant: All the time. You just get used to it. One of these days, a real celebrity is going to come into American politics in one of those places—the Senate or the House or whatever. If my buddy Al Franken runs against Norm Coleman next year—and it's going to be so refreshing because, I mean, people are changing careers all the time now, so why shouldn't a comedian in midlife become a United States—is there something mysterious about the function? I recognize the importance of credentials here but nowhere else.

Oh, yes, all the time, and the ease with which—You can see it on people's faces when they—he's like a magnet, and all the notebooks and the reporters and the cameras would gravitate to his side of the hearing room and all the rest of it. It was a constant. I think one reason why he was both so deferential to older politicians and so intent on trying to behave in a friendly, comrade way with others was because he was aware that he attracted so much of that attention.

Morrisroe: Can you talk a little bit about the challenges he faced and the circumstances, being a relatively junior Senator and yet being essentially a national political figure, both for him and also as somebody from the *Boston Globe* sharing coverage of this with the national press corps? It's somewhat unique.

Oliphant: Of course it was around that time that the distinction between national and regional was starting to blur.

Morrisroe: OK. Can you tell us a little bit about that? That's an important juncture.

Oliphant: By the end of the late '60s, it was very easy—The first time the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* came knocking, I discovered how easy it was to say, "Go away," that I do not, just personally, want to be part of an army of faceless people whose identities really don't mean anything, because you're lost in this giant organization. I would much rather stay, and of course, in the *Globe*'s case, it had to do with the fact that this was an institution that had editorialized against the Tonkin Gulf Resolution and been there way ahead of everyone else in terms of civil rights, and it was already a magnet for young people who used writing as a substitute for political action on their own parts. It's also true that the hierarchical aspects of national media life and Washington media life were beginning to break down. The regional influences were becoming stronger. The *Globe* is one example. Los Angeles is another, as the [Otis] Chandler hold—So it was a very different atmosphere as the 1970s went on. As I say, I always saw Kennedy as a national figure. I just never went through that transitional—because I never really lived up there.

Morrisroe: And how about for him? How was he handling the early national exposure? He

didn't have a honeymoon, apprenticeship period, really, with the press.

Oliphant: Right. Sixty-two to the murder was a very short time. It's really '63.

Morrisroe: Right.

Oliphant: Just a few weeks in '62. And then further confused by that long spell in the hospital in '64.

Knott: The plane crash.

Oliphant: Yes. So, in effect, when immigration was handed to him, it was a pretty big deal, given that he hadn't been there very long. But you have to realize that he really was almost a rookie in '65. After '68, as I say, he was in the shadow, and I was always conscious of the existence of the shadow. Right up until Los Angeles in 1968, he was junior to his brother.

Knott: Even though, technically, he was senior in the Senate.

Oliphant: Yes. No question about it.

Knott: He didn't chafe?

Oliphant: No, no. He was younger. This is a time when all these elements of hierarchy were under attack and breaking down, but they were also still around. I never thought of Kennedy as a culturally groundbreaking person, even though politically he is. He was personally deferential and respectful of the system as it existed. It was Bob Kennedy who went to Mississippi and Appalachia in 1966, and there was never any question of him running anything like that. So now we're in '69, and except for the immigration bill, he's still a rookie. It's not like a lot has happened. He gets on the leadership ladder without, as I've always heard the story, ever having a minutely detailed life plan. It was more that it was a natural thing to do after, technically, six years in the Senate.

But by 1969 there's Nixon. There is the war. He'd always plead with people to please remember what an intense period that was because of the war. And then all these other responsibilities, both family and political, on his shoulders, plus he'd lost two brothers. So, on the one hand, he's junior, and even then I can still see him at the Judiciary Committee and whatever the hell the Labor Committee was called in those days, and he's still over there as opposed to over there. He's still low on the seniority, and yet he's in the middle. He has an almost Presidential-like office. By 1970 he has his own foreign policy. He's a shadow Attorney General in some respects.

In the authorizing end of the legislative game, he is involved in just about every domestic endeavor, with the exception of Social Security and Medicare, and Medicare increasingly so. So it's a jumble of things. He's a national figure, and yet he's not a power in the Senate, technically. He's outside-in when it comes to influence—the labor movement. He's already had iconic status in those areas, even as a junior Senator—in Massachusetts, technically, a senior Senator, but I mean junior in terms of the overall institution. And then he'd bust through the door with one issue, and that changes everything, and that's health care. Is it 1970 when he introduces it, or is

that ’71?

Knott: You’ve got me. I should know.

Oliphant: It’s the page Bob Kennedy wasn’t able to turn to before he was shot. You can see him—we’re getting to that—the famous exchange with the student at the University of Kansas when he talks about health care, and some snotty kid says, “Who’s going to pay for this?” And Kennedy looks at him and says, “You are.” But it hadn’t been completely flushed out. He saw this as a fraternal obligation, as well as he saw it as the next page on completing the social contract. Of course when he introduced the proposal, it changed everything, and not as the senior or the chairman or anything like that. It had been off the table for almost a generation in American politics since [Harry] Truman stopped, and then there it was. That illustrates his ability to come in and take over a subject without having the power trappings, necessarily, that are traditional.

Knott: Again tell us, how does he take this issue over?

Oliphant: It’s not unlike the situation in the country that his brother confronted. There had just been these little feints in this direction in the 1950s: federal assistance for housing, hospital construction, and so called “Hill-Burton Grants,” some beginnings along the lines of financing, experimental clinics in poor neighborhoods, and whatever, but essentially nothing. And by the time he ran for President, it had been a dozen years since Truman. It had basically been dropped after 1948; nothing had really happened. And then he puts Medicare on the table in 1960. It was called Medical Care for the Aged, in 1960, through Social Security, before the word “Medicare” came along, and it was an electric issue. And so it happens, and Medicaid is appended to it, but there is still this huge missing piece, and everybody talks about it. If you’re lucky enough to work in the right place, you’re OK. Even by the time Senator Kennedy made the proposal, I think Social Security was indexed. So the poverty rates among older people were plummeting, but this piece remained.

He was not the chairman of anything, but by making the proposal, he changed the conversation in the country, and everybody sat up and took notice. I don’t know that it was necessary to teach him. It certainly taught the rest of us what his potential was to change the terms of a national conversation and how you could do it from a legislative perch, that you didn't have to be President.

Morrisroe: Right. Did he make use in this enterprise to bring it to national attention from the Senate? Did he make extensive use of the national media to get the message out?

Oliphant: In a Kennedy operation, there is this kind of expert and that kind of expert and political writers, medical writers. In that period just before and just after he did that, it was like a constant stream plugging into every conceivable aspect of the health care system—the political end of it—that there was. Meticulous preparation.

Morrisroe: And is this a press operation in his office doing this?

Oliphant: Part of it is press; part of it is directly to the institutions that were going to be involved. The American Medical Association, at that time, was still a reactionary organization,

not what it is today, largely because of what he did.

Morrisroe: So do you think it's a fair characterization that he was among the first Senators to use the going-public strategy, going directly to the public through national media?

Oliphant: One of the other reasons that this career is going to be studied for a couple of hundred years is that there are not too many examples of legislative initiative, particularly in the modern period, when the powers of the Presidency at least control the discussion and the pulpit and all that kind of stuff. So here is something that 35 years later still hasn't happened, and yet this is the beginning of what makes it a central political concern in people's lives. Of course things have been done incrementally and all the rest of it, but it was a terribly big moment, and he wooed everybody. There's no place he wouldn't go. The places that I've been with him talking this up over the years amazed me. I mean, just watching the AMA [American Medical Association] gradually cave in, because they had opposed Medicare.

Knott: I have a question for you that takes you back more to the Presidential politics arena, and that's 1972, when [George] McGovern secures the nomination and basically begs Ted Kennedy to run with him.

Oliphant: Sort of. Well, part of it was Kennedy's fault.

Knott: Yes. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Oliphant: We were in New York. The breakthrough had already occurred. I mean, the other side was not going to give up easily or graciously that McGovern was going to be the nominee. He'd broken through. In many respects, the exclamation point for McGovern's success was New York. April? It was a couple of months after the New Hampshire, all the things that propelled McGovern forward. Marty Nolan and I—you talked to Marty, of course?

Knott: Yes, we have.

Oliphant: That's fun.

Knott: It was a lot of fun.

Oliphant: I bet that's a nice, clean transcript.

Knott: It was such a fun interview; it really was.

Oliphant: There are a couple of great lines. I don't even know what Kennedy was doing in New York, but this question emerged almost immediately after it became apparent that [Hubert] Humphrey really couldn't stop him and nobody could. [Edmund] Muskie had folded by then. It was after Florida anyway. The famous line of Kennedy's, which opened the door, which meant it was conscious, which meant he knew exactly—I can't remember where we were. The line was, "If it would make a difference, that might make a difference." And of course, if you think of that, it's so un-Kennedy. There was no mistaking the syntax; there's no partial quote; there's a verb in the sentence; there's no shrugging or loud voice.

Morrisroe: You don't have to be called in to interpret.

Oliphant: That's right. That is clear. It's hedged, but it's clear, and it's such a wonderful precursor for the next one seven years later before he takes on [Jimmy] Carter, "I expect him to run for reelection; I expect him to be renominated and reelected; and I intend to support him." And that was how Kennedy dodged questions about 1980, until he had changed his mind. This one was conscious and, of course, what was so dangerous about it was that it carried with it an understanding that, even then, McGovern's situation might be hopeless as far as the general election was concerned. Because in saying "if it might make a difference," you're almost setting up the situation, and you've decided that it wouldn't make any difference.

Morrisroe: Right.

Oliphant: McGovern just lunged at it as if it were a life preserver. Again, part of this was New York. For some reason I have a memory of Chicago also, but I'm going to stick to New York. McGovern had Marty come up to talk it up further and say flattering things and basically, "You can have the nomination if you want it" and that sort of thing. Then a little while went by and nothing seemed to happen, so we wrote a story together that nothing had happened, just sort of speculating that Kennedy wouldn't talk about it, but perhaps he'd made the judgment that McGovern's cause was hopeless. We wouldn't get involved.

We were somewhere, anyway, where everybody was, in a hotel lobby, and the elevator opens and there's Kennedy. We're just standing there and he gets this big grin on his face and says, "Ah, the *Boston Globe.* Always there when you don't need them." Seventy-two, again, I think it was more flirtation. The evidence at the time was that it was not much more. It's just that quote, "If it would make a difference, that might make a difference." I just offer it for its evidence of calculation. That was not a cavalier sentence.

Knott: We've heard differences of opinion on this question of whether he vetoed Boston Mayor Kevin White's potential Vice Presidential selection. What's your take on that?

Oliphant: I'm having dinner with Father [Robert] Drinan tonight. So that's another participant. [John Kenneth] Galbraith would never really give a straight answer, and I wasn't standing that far away from him when he did that harrumphing into the delegation microphone that made it sound like dissent. So I can't really say whether it was manufactured or not. No one knows still, but the only thing that makes sense is that Kennedy was involved in torpedoing him. The story doesn't make any sense unless he was.

Kevin White as VP [Vice President] is an interesting idea—nothing inherently wrong with it, nothing, et cetera. There is absolutely no question that it was going to happen. The young guy—he's now an old guy—Ira Jackson had written a speech. I have seen it. He's at the Kennedy School. In fact, I just saw him up there last week just before—he came back after the campaign. Somewhere between Drinan and Galbraith, they got the signal to make a little trouble.

Knott: Well, I'm determined to get to the bottom of this before—

Oliphant: First Marty and then I spent the better part of the next 25, 30 years trying. Now, Kennedy has stuff. I mean, this is why those daily recollections are so important. The truth

always eventually emerges.

The only thing that makes sense to me is that there was a signal flashed, especially to Galbraith. I mean, I can't even understand Drinan being impulsively against or whatever for war reasons more than anything else. So that's the only way it makes sense, but no one ever admitted, despite—We did everything: booze, drugs, women, pleading, in the interest of history, every conceivable grounds you could think of for telling the truth, and people have still dodged that one. Kennedy does not show you his political side in public—only very rarely, and that's why it's still such an interesting story. Also because there are so few instances of him behaving simply like a human politician blocking a guy who had the potential of blocking him. It happens every day in that game, and he's not above politics at all. But this one, that's why I've always assumed that Kennedy was involved in it, because if he wasn't, we'd have known that for sure by now.

Knott: And then there are these same rumors floating around Sargent Shriver, and McGovern's selection of Shriver, and then Kennedy's perhaps tepid support for his own brother-in-law's campaign in '76.

Oliphant: Not there. My understanding always was that he even helped to make sure that Sarge took it, because there the narrative is of refusals to go on the ticket, all right?

Knott: Yes.

Oliphant: After those awful days in South Dakota and back here, I was the person covering McGovern then, and the daily story was, "Who said no?" I think, as it finally happened, the principal qualification for Sarge at that point was that he would say yes. Kennedy's point by then, about him making a difference or not, certainly applied, because that was when the candidacy just blew up, though he did come out. He sat with me for three days on McGovern's plane, and the general, he did his duty.

Knott: He gave that great speech at the '72 convention at 3:00 in the morning.

Oliphant: Yes, he did. Kennedy's a bridge figure between old-time speaking and new-time speaking—new-time meaning cooler and for television. And this voice, it was still thunderous and loud. You could tell it was part just having fun and part maybe sticking the needle, but he took about five seconds to say McGovern's name, "George McGoverrrrrrrrrrrrrn." It's hard to reconstruct the atmosphere, but it was fun then, and he thought it was fun.

The extra seat on the plane was next to me. We rode for four days, and he did everything they asked afterward. But I still believe he had something to do with Kevin White.

Knott: In the mid 1970s, Kevin White's Boston is ripped apart by busing.

Oliphant: I've thought about that one a lot in the car.

Knott: OK, we'll pick that one up.

Oliphant: I think I know why he stayed out of it. We've talked about it a little bit, but I don't

know the whole story. And he was the judge who replaced Morrissey.

Knott: Oh, that's right.

Oliphant: So it starts off just being not just complicated, but Byzantine in a way. It's like a classic Massachusetts story.

Knott: Well, I grew up there, and I was there at the time.

Oliphant: I had an interesting view of it all, because Nixon had resigned. It was the summer of '74, and the big shots in Boston decided that all hell would probably break loose, and so they created, for the year, this special little desk to run the coverage, and I was one of the two people who ran it day in and day out. So it was an incredible window on this madness. I had done voter registration work in the South when I was in college, but nothing prepared me for this. And in the middle of it you had upheaval politics going on. It was an incredible year.

Knott: And the *Globe* became a target of sorts as well.

Oliphant: I got shot at. But there was this decision that we were going to be encyclopedic. It certainly paid off as far as Columbia University was concerned.

Knott: What do you mean by that?

Oliphant: The Pulitzer Prize, that we always joked, it was because we got shot at. That tends to be how decisions—

Morrisroe: Near-death experiences bump you up the list.

Oliphant: Getting it, it is the most ridiculously political situation. It's no great joy when you get it and no big deal when you don't. It's hopelessly political. I guess the gold medal is different, but I did have, for me, an interesting perch. It was the only time I was ever an editor, and one year was plenty.

Kennedy was—this is an example. Your first impulse is, "Where the hell is he?" And then you realize that he's always three jumps ahead of you. "Of course he's not here." He puts it that his presence could only have been inflammatory.

Knott: Why is that, Tom? Why don't you explain that a little more?

Oliphant: Well, the forces that were unleashed there had been almost Virginia-vintage massive resistance up there. The record in the case is voluminous. It's the most open-and-shut verdict in a civil rights case, still, to this day, I have ever seen. It's where it's so de facto, it's de jure.

And yet because the remedy Judge [Wendell] Garrity chose was integration as opposed to desegregation—because of a state law, not the U.S. Constitution—this idea of them ramming it down our throats was really at the core of a lot of the resentment before you got to the racist part of the resistance. A lot of the passion that was aroused by the cross-town nature of the plan was legitimate. The order putting the remedy into effect could be criticized. What I'm getting at is

that there was such a huge feeling in the town that ordinary people were being made to bear the burden that the big shots had created with all these years of resistance, that the remedy lacked sophistication and sensitivity. No doubt, however, about the passions that had been flamed.

In Kennedy's case, his presence on the scene, either cheerleading or talking or appearing and all the rest, it would only have made it worse. One of the things that is—I've only seen it a few times in my life: him, his brother Robert Kennedy, and Bill Clinton—and that's this ability to talk to working people across racial lines. A Kennedy is supposed to be popular in South Boston as well as Roxbury, or Watts, as well as wherever.

Now, behind the scenes he could not have been more diligent. The [Gerald] Ford administration had a very vigorous Justice Department. They needed some help on the Hill. There was deflection of things in Congress that could have exacerbated the situation, and Kennedy helped there behind the scenes greatly. But to show up, to become part of the melodrama, would only have made it worse, in his judgment anyway, and I never saw anything then or since to refute it. There was one incident.

Knott: Right.

Oliphant: Quincy.

Knott: Well, there was Quincy, and there was also down on Government Center, right outside City Hall.

Oliphant: That's right. People spat at him. But remember, "You're with us or you're against us," and it illustrated the polarizing nature. I don't know why there were cameras on him. I don't think there were in Quincy. I don't remember there being pictures of it. It was an encounter, I think, more than anything that was staged. I mean, he was very careful not to get involved in any staged events in Boston those first couple of months. They just illustrated his point. A further reminder to me that where politics are concerned, the good part of politics that is a part of leadership, that I always assume guys like him were about four jumps ahead of me. And this is a wonderful example of him having thought something through and resisting all the impulsive acts. The last thing anybody up there needed was people hectoring them. Thank God it didn't become more violent than it did, but it came very close a couple of times. There were some really ugly things. I know it grated on him, but he didn't make it worse, and that was the most he could do. The trouble is, there was nobody, except for the judge, who stood against the chaos and the disorder.

Knott: So Kevin White did not step up to the plate?

Oliphant: Well, behind the scenes, as I say, it was very interesting running the coverage. Then while we were doing it, we were assembling notes for, God, about a 150,000-word retrospective on the year, which includes what I still think is a definitive account of Kennedy's behavior in public and behind the scenes. Again, behind the scenes, there were all kinds of efforts to get people together in private to thrash some of this out, particularly in the period before the following orders for the second year were issued by the court. You saw the effort.

We had a window on this process. We talked to the judge, even, several times. But it

never came to anything. Nobody wanted to, and certainly not the mayor, and there wasn't much of a Federal Government presence either, but I'm not sure it would have mattered. In Kennedy's case, I know why we didn't see him, and I've never learned anything to refute his reasoning.

Knott: In 1976 Jimmy Carter appears on the scene.

Oliphant: Actually it's '74.

Knott: It was '74, it's true.

Oliphant: And I wrote the story—I'm the guilty party—beginning a whole new chapter. We've joked about it many times since that I'm his nonbiographer. I'm the one who always steps forward when he doesn't run, for Vice President in '72 and then this.

I began—just before the school year started—to get a sense that 1976, because it was the first after Watergate, was going to be a marathon Presidential campaign year. It was going to last a long time, which meant it was going to start early. We were all noticing the precampaign activity through the late summer and fall of 1974, and not just Kennedy; [Walter] Mondale was one of the people who, in that period, discovered famously that he didn't have the "fire in the belly." That was his phrase.

But I began to hear stuff that he was getting close to making a decision about it, that he was going to face it early. And then all of a sudden that on a Monday, I think, he was going to come up to the Parker House to announce his decision. The first thing was that was a clue: if you're going to do it in Boston, you're not running. Painfully over a weekend we got various people who'd heard to confirm it, and we actually wrote it on the day of the announcement, as I recall. To everyone involved then, and him subsequently, the year made no sense. Too soon. At this point Chappaquiddick was five years past. Character was going to be an element.

One of the great things to do with Kennedy, always, was to talk to him before Presidential campaigns got going, because his insights on the condition of the country, where things seem to be heading—the way the conversation would end—If you asked him, "Who are you for?" or "Who's going to win the nomination?" or something like that, he just wouldn't go there. But if you asked it more generally, his track record in assessing the condition of the country and the state of our politics has always been uncannily right on. And he had this sense that the post-Watergate election would involve this thing that was increasingly being called "character"—I don't think the word had even been used very much before 1976—and that it was going to be a settle-down kind of election rather than a stir-up kind of election, and it didn't fit for him. Also, and probably more important than that, is his son.

Knott: Yes, Teddy Junior.

Oliphant: I mean, that was an extremely serious situation, and often with recurrences. It was '73 when it happened, and the success of the surgery probably obscured the fact that he was not out of the woods. So in that scramble, God, the whole world came up to Boston for the event. I remember, even in writing the story, being utterly unsurprised by it. I think I would have been surprised if I had heard he was going to run. Of course that started the pattern: you take yourself out early, and you get in late.

Knott: Does the bad luck with Carter start during this early phase at all?

Oliphant: No, not at all, certainly not on Kennedy's part. He was a little mystified at where Carter came from. I mean, culturally it's a great story. He was with Tip [Thomas P.] O'Neill on the day in 1975 when Carter announced, and he had the announcement in Georgia and then came up to Washington to make the rounds, where absolutely nobody knew him. He walks in to then Majority Leader Tip O'Neill's office, and it's just like the stump speech. It was, "Hi, I'm Jimmy Carter, and I'm running for President. I was just Governor of Georgia." That was about it. Tip looks up from his desk through a cloud of cigar smoke, gets up, and says, "Jim, good luck to ya." And that was it. But he was Jim. That's Boston, right?

Knott: Yes.

Oliphant: But absolutely nothing to get in the way of it and, much to Mo [Morris] Udall's chagrin, never lifted a finger. Kennedy stayed neutral. It was the people who didn't win the nomination who tended to be unhappy or even mildly upset, and he and Udall were fairly close.

Presumably Carter appreciated it, which is why Kennedy was always a little mystified. Carter had a nasty side, still does, and it would just come out all of a sudden. You'd be just having the most pleasant conversation, and all of a sudden the claws would just be in you. He was talking about his—It was with a small group of reporters, I think, before the convention in New York, and it was almost bragging on his achievement, and one of the things he said was, "I didn't have to kiss Kennedy's ass to get this nomination."

Knott: That's right.

Oliphant: The idea saying, "I'm free of promises." That was the point he was trying to make, but it came out kind of viciously, sort of like Carter could be, and Kennedy thought it was funny. They take names over there, but he thought it was funny and could not have been more helpful in the general.

Knott: Well, I think I want to save 1980 for after lunch.

Oliphant: I'm just trying to think. Didn't have to kiss Kennedy's ass to get this nomination. And then he was running, and so he had a technical reason to stay, but he made several trips, particularly for labor and black community, get-out-the-vote stuff. I can't think of anything he didn't do. There was nothing in the relationship by the time the election was held that in any way gave a hint of what was coming.

[BREAK]

Knott: Well, I think the best place to start would be to jump right in to the 1980 campaign.

Oliphant: I had left off at the end of the general in '76. There was absolutely no hint, except for

that one revealingly nasty crack by Carter. Kennedy, on substance, believed that Carter was committed to proposing fighting for—whatever you want to call it—some kind of a national health program, because in the year since Kennedy had made the proposal, Nixon had all but embraced it. People forget, but Nixon felt the need to address it in '73 after he was reelected, and the proposal he offered was more governmental than Clinton's proposal in '93 was. It was a mandate on employers. So they thought they had a deal, and it only got warmer.

Kennedy told me then and ever since that the '78 elections were the first serious precipitating event, because the assessment after those midterms in the Carter White House was a need to go right, that it was enough of a warning, and that the casualty of that adjustment was a national health proposal. Kennedy takes those kinds of things personally. Criticize him any way you want, except his word is everything. Kennedy thought the abandonment was casual, even. It did not have anything to do with the first wave of the energy-price explosion or with any of the versions of Carter's proposals. He had supported Carter in the Senate on energy, up to and including the issue of decontrol.

Kennedy was also ahead of Carter on some other, more free-market aspects of domestic-policy thinking, and it was Kennedy's idea to start with trucks. So, long before Fred Kahn was doing this, Kennedy was in the middle of it and wanted to go to airlines, et cetera, which put him really in sync with a huge chunk of the policy side of the Carter White House that really liked deregulation. But pulling back on a national health proposal was how it got started. It was so much fun to go to Nashville.

Knott: For that midterm?

Oliphant: That was the next to the last of the stupid, midterm party conferences. There would be one more in Philadelphia, I think, after 1980, and then, thank God, they stopped—enough already. But the timing was perfect because it was an occasion to articulate the disappointment and the refusal to take it, insistence on pressing ahead, which made it a great challenge for basically Carey Parker's—there were typewriters then, I think—and that was to express the anger, et cetera, without using any words that could be interpreted as 1980. So by concentrating on the issue, the speech was probably more stirring than it otherwise would have been, because if it were headed toward the election, then all the hedging and all the whatever would have come into play. This was the cleanest, most passionate summary of his beliefs on health insurance that he'd given in a long time. As I say, because they were careful to separate '78 from '80, it could be a more stirring occasion, and it was.

Carter was especially angry because Kennedy didn't give him any way to slough off what Kennedy had said to 1980 ambitions. In other words, he couldn't say, "That's Presidential politics talking." I mean, here was Kennedy giving it to him right between the eyes, on the substance of the issue, and keeping his skirts clean about a Presidential campaign. I thought, at the end of the speech, when it was over, that this meant that he wouldn't run.

Knott: That he would not run.

Oliphant: That's right, that he'd keep pressing it. Stuart Eizenstat, who was in charge of domestic policy in the Carter White House—we had this conversation several times—Stuart's

point was that eventually we will get around to what he called "completing the social contract," completing the unfinished elements of [Franklin D.] Roosevelt and [Lyndon] Johnson and John Kennedy. To make sure, particularly, that we in the press understood, that was when Kennedy sat down and tried to coin, in 1980, a sentence that he could utter whenever either the words "President" or "1980" came into question. And that became what we used. It's called, in shorthand, "expect, expect, and intend," and that worked for six months.

We went to California shortly after that speech for national health insurance. I mean, every once in a while he'd take the idea on the road, and it was always fun to go with him then, because as you know, the proposal was starting to evolve. In 1970 it was classic, single-payer, national health insurance, Medicare for everybody. By '78 it was becoming more of a hybrid, and it would evolve much further than that as time went on and the health delivery system changed. That's in the period when the AMA had begun to realize that it had to change. So we were in California and Illinois, at least those two.

We talked on the plane ride to California about 1980, and all attempts to probe beyond "expect, expect, and intend" were deflected and turned aside, which meant that I got a personal exposure to how, if you just talk to him about national health insurance—or there were some aspects of nuclear-weapons policy just on the eve of the MX [Missile-experimental] issue—if you talked substance, you could get a sense of just how far away from Carter's policy he was. It's just that as long as the conversation was unsullied by Presidential campaign distractions, because that was when it got ugly. But that got it through the holidays. Then Iran started to go downhill.

Knott: Right.

Oliphant: And the second energy wave came.

Knott: Right. The gas lines during the summer of '79.

Oliphant: It was a stable situation, pre-Ayatollah [Khomeini]. There was estrangement by then because the Carter people, all they could really say was, "Well, we did give it up, and we are pressing ahead on decontrol on the oil-price front." Kennedy didn't want to do it without either windfall-profits tax or some kind of rebate for low-income people or both. And Carter didn't even want to do that, for budget reasons. But still, the Iranian revolution is what really got this going, because it was, what, the third huge spike in six years?

Knott: Why do you think Kennedy had such a tough time when Roger Mudd hit him with that question about, "Why do you want to be President?"

Oliphant: Back up about four months.

Knott: Please.

Oliphant: It's over the Christmas holidays, and is that when the Shah [Mohammed Reza Pahlavi] falls? Carter has that dinner in Tehran in December, and how long does it take for the Shah to be gone, a month or so after that, or two or three? Sometime in the spring he's gone?

Knott: That's my recollection.

Oliphant: Yes, me too. Well, I never said anything or wrote anything, but I swear to you, it just felt different in Kennedy's world by the spring. They didn't agree at this point on very much of anything in foreign or domestic policy. I thought something was going on. Now, as it turns out, there was. Kennedy didn't get to start it; it was within the staff. But Carey, at least, Tom Southwick, at that level: "If he were to run, what would we have to have ready?" Even in 1979, assembling a Presidential campaign enterprise is, you don't just go like that [*claps hands*]. Without anyone finding out, they were talking regularly about how. The standard thing now is you organize the first two weeks of a campaign; you make sure you've identified all the slots that will be filled; you have a budget; things like that—easier said than done. And it started in the spring, around the time the second spike in oil prices was occurring.

Morrisroe: Was he doing it under the radar?

Oliphant: Totally. When I was writing, he was still a candidate, but about a couple of months before the convention in '80, I was writing about the campaign at some length. I did a series about it or something. But anyway that was when I found out about the spring of '79 activity, while it was going on. It's typical.

Morrisroe: That's a pretty impressive feat to—

Oliphant: Well, but in the Kennedy world, unlike other worlds, they do this pretty well, because it is so well understood that if you step one millimeter over the line, somebody's going to get a gun and shoot you, and there's no appeal. Life is clarified that way. I have generally found Kennedy's people to be the most discreet and difficult to break up I've ever encountered. The famous line, which I think is a Kenny O'Donnell line, is that the Kennedy people wouldn't tell you if your pants were on fire or your coat was on fire, or something like that. That's the line, and it is true, by and large; it really is true. In the summer, when inflation was going nuts, was when Carter retreated to Camp David, before the so called "malaise" speech that doesn't mention the word "malaise." That's what we call it.

I took another trip with Kennedy in that period. It was a quickie, overnight in Chicago or something like that. And we talked off the record on the plane, just about where things are. He thought the energy proposal was OK. What he couldn't understand was why you would fire your whole Cabinet. He thought it was a mistake. I observed to him something like, "Since the Nashville speech, you really haven't jumped on him all that much, and this doesn't seem to me to be personal between you two. What's your sense about how this is going to go forward?" And then he said to me, "I don't have to say anything. This situation is so bad, it's just unfolding in its own momentum."

And that's when I tipped over and just said to myself, "OK, he's going to run for President," because that was indiscreet. I don't care if we were talking off the record, I get it; something's going to happen, and it was several weeks later. There was a slight alteration in "expect, expect, and intend." All it was, "But I'm worried about the future." Really subtle. Now, that was the narrative. I wanted to fill that in before—

Knott: Sure.

Oliphant: —Roger comes. There is two more months of activity all over the country preceding the formal announcement. He's got a little press corps—the networks, me, *Time* and *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, and, I think, the *Los Angeles Times*—on a plane that was the literal size of the *Caroline*. So he meandered around the country for two months with it quite clear what was coming. It's just that it hadn't formally happened yet, a period when you can see what the problem would be, and mainly that in public you couldn't see any difference between him and Carter. You couldn't see any purpose to it. There wasn't his ten-point plan versus Carter's ten-point plan. There were nuances. They kept talking about the importance of leadership. Most of us couldn't get stories in the paper because the stuff was so bland, the "Why are you doing this?" but there was two months of it.

He did a few specific things: moved a little to the right on economics, came out in favor of the accelerated-depreciation schedules that [Ronald] Reagan wouldn't support for another year, for business and real estate. But it was, God, remarkably content free. The rejection of Carter that appeared to be going on in the country was entirely personal—and leadership and feeding off the inflation and the economic conditions in the country—but not producing a deep ideological fissure reflected in differing platforms. To show you how bland, we all coined a new word that we had to look up in the dictionary in this: soporific. Do you know soporific? It's a good one. It became a game to think up new adjectives to describe what he sounded like in September and October of 1978.

There was one night, however, somewhere before going back to Washington—it was some Democratic Party event in western Massachusetts—and every once in a while, the famous, well-oiled Kennedy machine would cough up a transcript of a speech before it was delivered. On this particular night, he got personal. He said what Carter had done wrong, and he got a little specific himself in terms of policy ideas that opened up what we call "nice, clear, clean, visible daylight" with Carter, and the language about his record was pretty tough. I tell the story because we all got primed for, finally, a good, hard news story from this.

So we exercised, and the son-of-a-bitch didn't deliver the speech. He got up there and went back to his bromides. He thought better of it, in other words, at the last minute, but he had released the text. So there we were, caught. We had a little gag every night, once we started traveling, a make-believe television correspondent from a local television station, action news somewhere, named Waldo McFee, and that was me. Because of what he did—I think it was in Worcester—I called him a "textual deviant," which he thought was hilarious, because the idea that we had all had our evenings ruined because of writing up this exciting, hard-hitting speech that he then doesn't deliver, and we don't know what to do when we call our offices. Do we print stories saying, "He wrote but he didn't say it" or whatever? But it's an illustration of how vapid this beginning actually was.

Morrisroe: At the time or in hindsight, do you think that was a deliberate attempt to test the waters with the press? I mean, his releasing the speech but not delivering it.

Oliphant: Yes. It's an example of trying to get a sense of how this would play.

Morrisroe: And how did it play among your group?

Oliphant: Obviously the warped self-interest of the press was a poor guide because we wanted the conflict. I remember saying to him one night, "I don't care what your energy policy is, Senator, as long as it's different from Carter's." That's something else he loved. It was hard to feel for what this—It hadn't been done, except it had been done four years before. The Reagan model was very much in everyone's mind.

Knott: I'm sorry, the Reagan model was very much—

Oliphant: Against Ford, challenging him, but Ford wasn't elected. Reagan had a lot of trouble with content and decorum issues, even for a principled conservative. It's just not easy. It's the Cold War, among other things. Here we're post-Watergate. We're getting it two cycles in a row, somebody challenging a sitting President inside his own party. But the die was cast; he was raising money. Did I tell you about the old Ford dealership on the West End of Washington that they took over and started building partitions in for the offices?

The only other thing in the political background that's worth mentioning, because it became a factor, Kennedy, when he did the first getting away from his old formulation about expecting Carter to run and support him, he did do some talking about the political situation that Carter found himself in and how a lot of Democrats in the Senate Cloakroom were urging him to do this, which created, about the pressure, "Like who?" I loved this aspect of the campaign because it reminded me so much of the leadership fight with Byrd ten years before. The protocol is, you're told under conditions of privacy, but here's Kennedy now sticking his neck out, and none of these Democrats are popping up to support him. As it turned out, there were five members of the House in the end. That was it. It's a great trivia answer. Anyway, there was so little content to the '79 version of the campaign that a political story like who the heck these people were could get so much attention.

One of the things that I always admired about Kennedy is, despite the obvious pressures from that day to this—I know who some of them are now—but Kennedy himself has never broken any of those confidences—very remarkable. A lot of people would have been tempted, because he was caught out there. It would have been a lot easier to say, "John Glenn was one of them" or "Birch Bayh," Evan Bayh's father, but he never ratted anybody out then or since. That's a very important prelude to the eve of the announcement. In my case, there were two things I did: I took a trip with [Walter] Fritz Mondale. There were no other reporters traveling on Air Force Two that final weekend.

Morrisroe: So that's surprising or no?

Oliphant: Well, it was a lull before a storm. Who knows? As it turned out, when I got to Andrews to meet up with—all of whom were friends—there weren't any other reporters. I don't think there was any California in this, but anyway—about two-and-a-half days, maybe.

The deal was, at the end of it, I'd have a long interview with the Vice President. So on the last day, just before we flew home to Washington, Mondale and I had a long talk. It's funny. It was almost as if he knew how I had reacted to what I'd been seeing the last two months, because his theme throughout the interview was, "Why is he doing this?" I mean, you mention the MX Missile or say theoretically, "Well, there's no difference on that that we can't work out. The

question is how you size the warhead or some technical thing. We can get to it. We can do that in a second." Or, "We may have to do health insurance incrementally, but the administration will be making a proposal on the budget next year," that kind of thing, and including the phrase, "I just don't get why he's doing this." And this is as a friend; they were sort of pals.

Then I got home, and Roger Mudd was that night. Have you talked to Eddie Martin and Southwick about the actual taping?

Knott: We've talked to Eddie Martin.

Oliphant: The greatest man who ever lived. Now that's a Kennedy guy.

Knott: Very nice, yes. He was a great guy.

Oliphant: Right? He'd just as soon kill you as look at you. And your pants could be on fire and you would die of third-degree burns, and yet he's got a heart of gold.

Knott: Yes, he does. It's clear.

Oliphant: Ethical to a fault.

Knott: Were you at the Kennedy Library event where Carter came to dedicate the library?

Oliphant: Yes. The kiss.

Knott: That's right, there was the kiss with Jackie [Kennedy], and there was Joe's [Kennedy II] fiery speech.

Oliphant: The speech was off-putting for all concerned. That was Joe's teenage period, where he substituted decibel level for intellectual content. This didn't divide Carter people from Kennedy people—the kiss did.

Knott: Yes. This was Jimmy Carter planting a kiss on Jackie Kennedy's cheek.

Oliphant: And she looking as if—

Knott: She recoiled.

Oliphant: It's funny how the metaphors pop up later rather than contemporaneously. You rarely get them right on the spot. This one was on the spot. I mean, it's not the photographer's fault, and she knows better. God knows, at that point, probably the most photographed woman since Marilyn Monroe. So, therefore, the fact that she looked—that it was in horrible taste was a legitimate thing to say. On that Sunday was when Roger's thing was broadcast. Also, the night of—trivia question—a very important television night in American history—?

Morrisroe: The Beatles.

Oliphant: No, The Beatles had broken up seven years before.

Morrisroe: Sorry, my mistake.

Oliphant: This was the television premiere of the movie *Jaws*.

Knott: That's what I thought.

Oliphant: Which, as a ratings night, dwarfed CBS reports, not even to be mentioned in the same sentence in terms of who was watching and all the rest of it, but I was and so were a lot of people. So you've talked to Eddie about the filming?

Knott: Well, we did. I'm trying to recall. This was almost two years ago that we did the interview. The story I've heard from Eddie, and I think others, is that Kennedy was not expecting that question at that time, that this was supposed to be, "Let's follow the Senator through the Berkshires on vacation with his family."

Oliphant: On the Cape too.

Knott: And then back to the Cape, right.

Oliphant: That works as a talking point after the fact of the broadcast and all the rest of it. I don't know that anything has ever disproved it. On the Kennedy end of it, a staff guy like Eddie or Southwick, but Eddie in particular—In fact Eddie said this to me later—it didn't work out so well between Tom and that campaign—Eddie's point was, if you were a staff guy, and Kennedy sounded anything like what he did in the first filming—

Knott: You stop it?

Oliphant: —you fall into the camera; you trip; you start coughing; you take your clothes off; you tackle the light stand. It's not that any of these techniques had never been invented before; that's how you get out of trouble. If you look at the difference between the two filmings, it really is night and day. If all that had happened was the second one, we wouldn't be having this conversation at all, because they're totally different. What the Kennedy people say is technically true but not accurate. The idea that at a moment's notice you're not prepared at that point, it's not credible. I like Eddie's point better, that Pierre Salinger would have pulled the plug on the lights and done anything.

Morrisroe: You're both somebody who covers Kennedy but is also a member of the national press corps. We talked a little bit about Kennedy's relationship with the press in general in an earlier period. By this point in the '80 election or at this point in his career—it doesn't have to directly relate to these specific events—how is his relationship with the national press corps, and how do they view him?

Oliphant: Well, two months into the campaign, which is really what it was at that point, he'd been traveling for two months with—he had a press corps. There were about 10 of us, 12 of us: the three networks, major newspapers—the *Globe*, the *L.A.* [Los Angeles] *Times*, the *Washington Post*, wire services—so about 15 people, what they'd call in the White House today an "expanded pool." It was a very tight-knit group of people who became extremely close, and all of us still are, 26 years later, including with him.

There was a little attitude in the back of the plane where we were, and in the front of the plane where he was. In the back, leaving aside the question of how accurate the descriptions of the 1960 press corps were, as a matter of our choice, we did not prefer to behave that way. That's a nice way of putting it. But it didn't mean that we went after Kennedy with attitude. We were going to cover him like he was running for sheriff or city council or something, and it was a matter of some pride. It had only been 20 years before that John Kennedy had run; and 20 years later, it was a bit of an issue. There wasn't a person who flew with him who wasn't determined that it not be an issue with us.

On his end, my theory has always been, if Kennedy has his preference, he would rather get guff from somebody, serious guff, not frivolous guff. He'd rather have a good argument. He'd rather you write something tough about him. He had, by 1980, evolved into a thoroughly modern politician. However, the skin is still thin. You can't be in the racket unless you were something between an egomaniac and a narcissist, but that's part of the game. The truth is, he loved the back-and-forth, and he loved serious criticism. In his office, some of the wildest meetings that I never got to see were the annual meetings with the inside and outside closest pals, where they talked about the agenda for the year ahead and what should be emphasized. These things were shouting matches. He'd yell; they'd yell; great arguments.

I mean, I've had a million conversations with him like that since, and there is nothing more fun, because as it turns out, the guy is very smart. He gives as good as he gets. He had to watch himself flying with us, of course, because we were all correspondents, not columnists or anything like that. But his attitude was not antithetical to our attitude. Of course the only other complicating factor before 1980 could begin was security.

Knott: I was going to ask you about that.

Oliphant: Now, here in this setting, I've never talked about anybody, but I don't think it matters, because the setting is serious. I'd never talk on television or something like that. There's just too many crazy people. But there were a couple of incidents in the warm-up period. There was a guy with a knife in his Senate office, a couple of other less bothersome things. So it's on everybody's mind and unspoken at the same time, and he had a couple of absolutely world-class detail chiefs and an inspector behind them supervising the whole thing. Behind the scenes, there was a great deal of effort expended to diffuse any tension and to not create a situation where it was the Secret Service. Carter wanted to do it, just as Kennedy could think of no reason not to accept it.

Morrisroe: Right.

Oliphant: That there not be Secret Service over here, everybody else over here, in a fully antagonistic relationship. It had to be smoother than that, and the reason is, it's extremely rare to have the Secret Service involved in primary campaigns.

Morrisroe: Right. There was, interestingly, at the White House Counsel conference this weekend—One of Carter's deputy counsels was the one who had to make the call, because by law, until you're declared, you can't have Secret Service. The deputy counsel said, "I was not going to be the person to deny Senator Kennedy, prior to announcement, full service. If I break the law, so be it."

Oliphant: Right. And he was very self-conscious about asking for it because he didn't want to have the imperial almost-Presidency, and there were many trappings of it, about which we'll get specific in a second. But this doesn't normally happen in the primaries. It's more intimate. It does get in the way of it. A sitting President has to be very careful with his scheduling in advance so that you don't see the hoard of the press on the one hand. On the other hand, the guy at least looks like he's meeting people and is out of Washington or something like that.

So that was the other thing. Not being in television, it was the first time I had ever worked a lot with the Secret Service. As I said, there were at least two inspectors supervising three-or-so detail chiefs, and many of those people are still my friends. Because, again, the last time they had protected a Kennedy, he'd been killed, and it had only been 15 to 17 years beforehand—16, 17 years—and so you don't want to forget that atmosphere when it started. But as I say, Eddie Martin, in particular, could not believe that nobody knocked down those lights or made a fuss or blew up the first taping.

Knott: How much of a factor was Joan Kennedy in terms of him coming to a decision about whether to run?

Oliphant: There was a dry run on Chappaquiddick. In the form of a decision, the *Globe* was going to do it 10 years later. There were going to be others. Now, at this point you're earlier in '79, and you're still at "expect, expect, and intend." You're nowhere near a campaign, but July is coming up.

The decision that Kennedy made that we, in retrospect, should have realized what it meant, the decision was to cooperate in these projects, not always with his personal time, but there's cooperation and then there's the stiff arm. For this, the door is open, and they wanted to see the coverage. They wanted to see what it produced. And here's what came out of it—this could be so deceptive—the stories were uniformly positive. Nobody had informational new ground to break. It seemed to go very well. Now, the trouble, the mistake probably, is imbuing the work of what is still your hometown newspaper with too much significance. Just because you skate past the *Boston Globe* doesn't mean the public is going to take—But that had happened too before all this got going. So there was the broadcast. Its impact was not immediate, not immediate at all, not even the next day. This was one that seeped into the country; it wasn't dramatic at all. And then we were gone to Boston and whatever.

The one thing they did for his announcement was, Southwick came around to a few of us to say that Kennedy wanted to call on you at the news event in Faneuil Hall. He said, "Hear me out. He wants to call on you. You can ask him anything you want, of course. This is not about what you choose to ask him." They can explain their own motivation, but it meant that I was determined to throw a fastball. I was not going to ask him what his favorite color was in front of 500 people and a live television audience.

I asked him—the premise was that a lot of the people in the Carter camp say, "You don't have any reason to do this, and there's not something that separates you from them. And therefore this is ambition on your part, not a response to conditions in the country." So just as an example, "Could you tell me where you differ from President Carter on the economy?" He proceeded to answer with babble, incomprehensive babble, proving the point. The first story I

wrote about it was, “A declared Presidential candidate pointed out the distinction between the trappings of this Presidential campaign and the content of it.”

Morrisroe: Were you surprised by that?

Oliphant: Yes.

Morrisroe: Given that you’ve remarked earlier that his level of preparation in almost every other circumstance is extensive, that he wouldn’t anticipate for months already these kinds of questions—

Oliphant: Now I’m beginning to be aware of the meetings that had gone on for, at that point, already four or five months. So you’d better believe I was surprised at the content of it. The only standard we have, at this point, is Reagan versus Ford, which was a fairly specific set of grievances and whatever, right?

Morrisroe: Right.

Oliphant: I mean, that one didn’t come out of nowhere. You bet it was surprising and shocking and all the rest of it. I had been around Kennedy at this point for 10 years, more than that, and I had come to have very high expectations on the little things logistically, and above all, on the big things where substance was involved. I didn’t think that he was, in any sense, all glitter or all sizzle and no hamburger. So, in a way, my surprise may have been even greater than others’ because I had very high expectations and very low tolerance at the beginning.

Of course that’s where Roger’s interview fits in, because it became a metaphor. The worst thing that can happen in a Presidential campaign is that something that’s a little off becomes like a metaphor. The interview was important because it was a metaphor, not because it was a lousy taping session at Cape Cod, but because in the context of a campaign that it wasn’t about nothing, but it was pretty content free. Anyone who studies the tapes and transcripts of that initial period will see that.

Plus, the guy couldn’t get five words out of his mouth without screwing up. He used the most hilarious malaprops as a Presidential candidate that I have ever seen. The replaying of tapes in the back of the—because by then videotape had replaced film in 1976. So we were almost in the 20th century now. Also the networks didn’t travel with a correspondent, a crew. They also had a producer, which meant you had relay equipment, playback machines, and so you could see these things almost in real time. Not only was Kennedy a horrible speaker off the cuff as a rookie Presidential campaigner, he was hilariously so. He was fall-down funny. We’d play them and then write about them, of course.

There are compendiums, but when he got to Iowa on the first day, a little agriculture, in addition to the famous story about 80 percent parity on wheat. He began shaking his fist, and at the top of his lungs, talking about a distressed situation that every “fam farmily knows about.” And the first time he said “fam farmily,” of course, it didn’t register in his brain, and for nine months, all the way to New York City at the end of this campaign, he could not get that phrase going without saying “fam farmily.” He gave an entire speech decrying the “rising prices in inflation.” And then would repeat the mistake so that, “Why aren’t they doing more about the

rising prices of inflation?" There was a succession of these, all the more dangerous with political writers on your tail because, among other things, we're sitting there waiting to cover mistakes, not to cover things that are going well. He demanded assistance for a railroad in South Carolina that had gone bankrupt 70 years previously. Over and over and over again.

Morrisroe: Apart from the malapropism, was it bad staffing, or he was just not—To what do you attribute this, psychological?

Oliphant: Yes. I had seen him a zillion times. I remember using a line on—Eddie traveled, and he was the body guy, in addition to being the senior political guy with him. I mean, I'd seen him a zillion times. He could mangle words, but I had always had a minority view about that, that it was intentional, it was to put people off, that when he needed to communicate, he was clear as a bell, that he was being reined in by himself, but that he wasn't communicating anything that was close to his heart, and he wasn't talking about ideas that he was really deeply committed to. The exception always will be when the speech got around to health care, and then you could tell that was what he really cared about. But it was a memorably miserable launch, and within a week, we were—and of course, for a beginning, the impact of that was greatly exacerbated by the final thing that occurred: the hostages. So the context was awful.

Knott: Were you ever asked by any of the Kennedy circle to go easy on Joan? Was she asked to be off limits?

Oliphant: This had been tested in various ways, particularly when we were on that little DC-3, or whatever the heck it was, in September and October before the formal announcement. Her health was quite good at that point. She, more than he, once this thing got going, came back to chat. A lot of us would see her coming and be very careful to hide the drink or whatever. She was very personable, very warm, very conversationally at ease.

We kind of evolved a little idea about ground rules so that basically, off the record, no political. If all we wanted to do was quiz about Chappaquiddick, that could have been clear from a couple of questions, at which point there would have been a partition on the front of the plane, and we would have never seen her again for nine months. To get to know each other better, and I already knew her fairly well, there had to be some way to converse without working, and it was a lot easier with her than with him at first. She was very curious about—she hadn't really had that much traveling experience in 1980. But there were two or three testing occasions. Now as I say, she was in good health in this period. She enjoyed herself immensely. She was a big hit, and beginning right away, there she was. In light of everything that's happened since then, it's hard to get this across, but she really was in good shape then.

It was a hopeful period, particularly because of her son. Patrick [Kennedy] was the worry then. He was just a little drink of water, very asthmatic, thin as a rail, not really healthy, but people just adored him because, as often happens with moderately asthmatic kids, they're just adorable, right? So the female reporters and everything were drawn to him instantly. This was a good period in her life, actually. If you wanted to get Freudian about it, it's pretty easy to figure out why: because he needed her.

And she spoke a little bit. Off camera she spoke a lot. I mean, she was very musical,

extremely well educated, delightful to talk to. Actually there was some tension in this thing in the beginning, the security reasons, because it was a Kennedy. Taking on a sitting President is not such a big deal, but the first two really were and the atmosphere could sometimes—it was tense. Among the things that loosened it up was her.

Knott: Interesting.

Oliphant: But the hostages were the real reality.

Knott: Yes. And then Afghanistan as well—Carter shifts into a Rose Garden strategy.

Oliphant: That's a month and a half later when he completely goes in the shell. But he had succeeded early on in, first of all, getting them off their pins a little bit off balance with this, "Where are all these people who are demanding that you run?" And it was really a debilitating kind of story because the trouble was, they were all hiding under this table, actually quivering, and yet they had been a factor in his decision. There was nothing Kennedy could do about it, short of breaking their confidence, which he didn't do, which is why I think one of the first reasons a lot of us who covered him that year admired him so much is because he was such a stand-up guy.

The sequence, you're right, is hostages to Afghanistan. Now you have to understand also what the impact of the hostages were on Kennedy. It was like somebody pulling a blackout curtain. He just dropped off the face of this Earth. He could get covered if he went to Iowa or if he went to California, but he couldn't get on the evening news. He couldn't get onto the front pages of my paper, anything like that; it was just impossible.

Knott: Ted Koppel is doing the hostages every night on *Nightline*.

Oliphant: Right. We have a new television program that is founded on how many days they've been held hostage. People on the staff began talking about seeing the Ayatollah in their dreams or whatever.

And so the first—for the country, the horror and revulsion and whatever at this act, and then the mobilizing anger, that yellow-ribbon problem in American theater politics. Then on top of that, the blackout that it put on Kennedy while the country is rallying around the President, if not necessarily President Carter. And then, meanwhile, to the extent there is the beginning of a Presidential campaign, it's like the guy came running out of his starting blocks and fell flat on his face. There were virtually no particularly positive reviews of the beginning. He's tripping over his tongue when he isn't retreating into banality. The only thing that was missing, and Kennedy supplied it, was a remark to make the hostage situation worse. San Francisco?

Knott: I don't know, Tom. I don't remember.

Oliphant: It's recorded, OK, all right? I will not be denied a meal the next time when I come to do more of it?

Knott: Absolutely not.

Oliphant: I don't know why I think it's San Francisco, because it was a late-night event. The thing you're always afraid of in a Presidential campaign, the thing you hate anyway, is when major stories break late in the evening. You have to tear into what you've written and filed earlier in the day. You then have to chase reaction and other developments after whatever has happened. It gets in the way of several nice, stiff shots of whisky and early to bed and all that. This was like that. And if memory serves, it's not that he said he was glad the hostages were taken. It's not that he said, "The fact that they were taken showed what a weak President Carter was." It's nothing like that at all.

He said something that no one would disagree with, that the Shah was an absolutely horrible person who stole his country blind, I think was the quote—and blah blah blah. Of course, what Kennedy didn't realize—and what the staff didn't realize right away when he said it—was that he was saying something that fed into this national anger and unity about the hostages and that, in fact, the only thing to say was nothing beyond demanding their release. So, just to make everything else worse, here is the climax, and it is a crack that is immediately played as exacerbating the situation. It took Kennedy—This is not the days of 24/7 news cycles, but taking from late at night until well into the next day to realize was enough to make sure that its damage was, if anything, made worse.

Knott: Absolutely, yes.

Oliphant: But that's the beginning, and I don't think there has been a Presidential campaign that survived all the way to the roll call of a national convention that began under such inauspicious circumstances.

Last thing, Waldo McFee survived all the way to New York, befuddled, trying to understand these things that Kennedy did, and that was what made it funny. I think you'd be hard pressed to find a single headline that indicated in what direction Kennedy wanted to take the country if he were elected President. I wanted to get this line in because I'd used it once many years ago: The problem with this thing was that all the effort went into deciding whether to run; none of it involved why or how.

Knott: Interesting.

Oliphant: However, the CBS correspondent covering Kennedy, I married her at the end. And Kennedy shows, of course, and as he raises his champagne *bottle*, by the way, not glass, he says, "This is the only good thing that came out of this goddamn campaign."

Knott: That's great.

Oliphant: He was not a sore loser either.

Knott: He was not.

Oliphant: No. In that period the whole thing was lost, and the amazing thing was that it kept going.

Morrisroe: Well, we'll have to have you back, given that we only made it 10 years or so.