



EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

**INTERVIEW WITH CAREY PARKER**

October 6, 2008  
Washington, D.C.

**Interviewer**  
James Sterling Young

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TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH CAREY PARKER

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**Young:** This is a second interview with Carey Parker, in Washington, D.C. We've been talking a lot, and Carey has been giving a wonderful oral history interview, but I forgot to turn on the tape. *[laughter]* You might want to talk about tax reform, one of the issues that Senator Kennedy got considerably involved in at a fairly early stage in his career.

**Parker:** That was one of the first issues, besides health care, that I worked on in 1969 when I came to work for the Senator. One of the things that caught Senator Kennedy's attention at the time was some material that had been prepared, collected, and presented by Stanley Surrey, who had been Assistant Secretary of the Treasury for Tax Policy during the [John F.] Kennedy and [Lyndon] Johnson administrations. He'd been a professor at Harvard, and he had put together a very interesting summary of the tax laws. He explained how a great deal of the tax breaks and tax incentives functioned very much like spending programs of the Federal Government. He coined the phrase "tax expenditures" to make clear that Congress was simply spending through the Tax Code instead of spending through the regular appropriations process.

Congress didn't think of tax expenditures in that way. It thought of them simply as tax reductions that were steered to various people, sometimes to special-interest groups. More often, the intention was to grant broad tax relief to large segments of the population. In fact Stanley Surrey, developing some extraordinarily interesting tables, was able to demonstrate that many of the provisions in the Internal Revenue Code allowed billions of dollars to be spent each year through the Tax Code for issues such as health care, education, and employment that were relevant to much of the work that Senator Kennedy was doing in the appropriations process. When we saw the degree to which tax expenditures were involved in some of the areas we were interested in, we felt that Congress needed to pay more attention to how those tax expenditures were being used, just as we worked to ensure that the priorities were right in terms of the spending through appropriations.

Surrey also contributed a very interesting fact, revealing that in 1967, 150 Americans earned more than \$200,000, but paid no federal income tax at all. That was a rather astounding event in terms of the way Congress looked at the Internal Revenue Code. All of a sudden it became clear that people were abusing the code to avoid paying any income tax, let alone a fair share. That was something every member of Congress understood.

In 1969 Kennedy became very involved in an effort to end that abuse by enacting a minimum tax, which basically meant that all of the tax deductions or tax incentives that people were using to reduce their taxes could no longer be used to reduce them to the point where they weren't paying any taxes at all. The minimum tax was designed to force wealthy persons who were avoiding taxes to pay their taxes. That idea caught on. Senator Kennedy worked fairly closely with the members of the Finance Committee on the issue.

It stunned Congress that no matter how carefully they had tried to manage the Internal Revenue Code, this issue had clearly gotten away from them. No one thought that a person who earned that much money should not have to pay some income tax. So a minimum tax was included in the tax code in 1969, and it has been reshaped and continued over the years. It's now called "the alternative minimum tax." It's controversial because Congress has not adjusted the level of taxation often enough. Therefore, more and more middle-class taxpayers are being stuck with an additional tax burden that Congress never intended. The revenue figures are very large, but that's a separate issue.

It is one of the basic tax reforms that Congress has enacted over the years, at least since I've been here. It was interesting that Senator Kennedy was one of the first to champion it, because the subject was not within his committee jurisdiction. After that initial experience, he began to think, over the next few years, that he needed to spend more time working on tax legislation so that the priorities that he felt should have strong support were being applied to the tax laws as well. He felt that tax expenditures should get as much scrutiny as direct expenditures through appropriations.

To make a long story short, the next major tax-reform legislation was on the agenda for 1976. Senator Kennedy was on good terms with Russell Long. They didn't see eye to eye on many issues, but Long was willing to accommodate Senator Kennedy's interest, and in some ways he welcomed it. It wound up that Senator Kennedy spent hours nearly every day on the Senate floor while the bill was being debated for several weeks in the summer of 1976. There is a story that Senator Kennedy tells. He says, "Most people think my back has troubled me because of the airplane crash in 1964. That's not what it was. It was from standing on the Senate floor for two months in 1976 talking about tax reform."

It was possible for the Senator to do that because he was not, at that point, a chairman of a committee, which would bring many additional responsibilities. He felt that he had enough time not only to be active in what he was doing both on the Senate Labor Committee and on the Senate Judiciary Committee, but also to be deeply involved in major issues that were being brought to the Senate floor by other committees—in this case, the tax reform legislation. Such issues were often highly technical, and the floor debates usually involved members of the Finance Committee. They were not subjects that other Senators spent a great deal of time debating in the Senate.

I think Senator Kennedy changed that. Since then, there has been much more scrutiny of tax legislation, particularly the degree to which tax incentives are used in ways that we think don't reflect the proper priorities. Congress should be addressing such questions just as vigorously as it works on priorities involving direct spending in the federal budget. Kennedy has often been

active on budget amendments. We've also tried to keep our oar in the water on the Tax Code in order to ensure that the way money is spent through the Tax Code is appropriate.

**Young:** What was the economic situation, the context for this tax-reform effort? Had inflation begun? Was there a big budget-balancing movement afoot? What was driving it, besides the recognition that the administration of the Tax Code was broken?

**Parker:** I think it was largely a result of these disclosures at the end of the 1960s that the Tax Code needed much more oversight by Congress. There was always the talk, "We need tax breaks in order to stimulate the economy." I don't think it was an economic issue that was driving this. I think it was the new direction that resulted from the work of Stanley Surrey and others who were emphasizing the need for greater scrutiny of the dark recesses of the Internal Revenue Code. It finally culminated in a decision by the Democratic Congress in the mid-1970s to have a thorough reform of the Internal Revenue Code.

**Young:** People were gaming the system, so to speak.

**Parker:** Yes, very much so. Most members of Congress could easily understand the outrages that were brought to light. The particular fact that Surrey cited—the wealthy citizens who paid no income tax at all—captured the imagination not only of Congress but also of the country. It forced Congress to roll up its sleeves and put together a new and better Internal Revenue Code.

**Young:** Was there a lot of press attention at this time?

**Parker:** Yes, quite a bit.

**Young:** Was that helping the reform effort?

**Parker:** The reform effort gained speed because the press was eager to talk about such abuses if they could be explained easily. The arcane language of the Tax Code is often more complicated than the average person can grasp by reading a newspaper article. But when people hear about millionaires who don't pay any income tax, they say, "The code is rotten. We want reform, Senator. That's your job." Congress couldn't continue to tolerate an Internal Revenue Code that seemed to cater so much to the wealthy and special interests.

In some ways, it was a bit of class warfare, but there was a sense that the Internal Revenue Code was out of whack and needed reform. That reform turned out to be very complicated. The Tax Reform Act was a comprehensive overhaul that Senator Long and the Senate Finance Committee put together. Certainly the House Ways and Means Committee had been equally intensive in its work on it. It was rather unusual for the Senate, in 1976, to make a huge effort. The Senate debating a tax-reform bill for two months during the year, you don't see that in recent years by a long shot.

**Young:** Yes. So this was a movement to reform something that had gotten out of hand and that was distorting certain legislative priorities or accomplishments that were being made.

**Parker:** Yes, that's right.

**Young:** The revenues were not supporting the basic commitments of the legislation.

**Parker:** There was a lot of concern, as people began to realize that the Tax Code simply hadn't had enough oversight over the years. A lot of the reform was simply correcting overlaps of obvious areas where there were conflicting provisions, things like that. So there was a lot of tedious work involved in the reform, but there were huge issues as well. Paul McDaniel came down to join our staff, and he briefed the Senator quite consistently. I was on the Senate floor, and Paul was on the floor as well, briefing the Senator and keeping track of what was going on. We couldn't have done it without McDaniel.

**Young:** Talk about how Kennedy learned to manage the reform and about the problems and positions he carried forward—that is, getting educated about the Tax Code in practice.

**Parker:** The Senator, about that time, realizing that he needed to know a lot more about taxation in general, began to bring experts down to discuss the issues with him. He did that quite frequently during those years. Throughout the '70s and '80s and on, he'd make time to spent on the subject. He'd invite three or four experts to come in, sometimes from Washington, sometimes from around the country. He'd sit down with one or two staff people who were working on the issue and with the outside experts who knew it very well, and he'd listen to them and absorb what they were telling him.

They certainly educated him on subjects such as the minimum tax and other aspects of tax reform. I think he began to see the information as very useful for various other issues he was working on as well. He'd frequently, on general economic issues, for example, invite Walter Heller to have dinner at his home, and we'd invite two or three other experts on the economy to join him, and they'd have a conversation about the general issues affecting the economy.

**Young:** Walter Heller had been President [John F.] Kennedy's chairman of—

**Parker:** Yes, the Council of Economic Advisors. During those early years, Senator Kennedy had inherited from both of his brothers a lot of the people who he brought to town. They were experts who were more than willing to talk to him. I might have mentioned this before. Most Senators read the articles that the experts write, but Kennedy staff members learned quickly that the experts answer his telephone calls. So he had the best teachers and the best professors on the telephone the instant he called. They'd drop everything and come to Washington for an evening at his house.

It turned out to be extremely informative for the Senator. It educated the staff, and it certainly educated the Senator. I think it gave him a sense that he was learning a great deal. As an issue developed, he knew all he needed to know to be effective in his work. It made a huge difference. Instead of simply reading complicated position papers, he'd have the expert who wrote the paper tell him, "Here's what I was trying to say, Senator." It was very enjoyable. Most of these professors loved to have the Senator, who is very gregarious, as their student, and they enjoyed the give and take of a conversation in the evening. We'd have a dinner for about an hour, and then we'd have coffee or dessert for a couple of hours after dinner, and everyone learned a great deal. It was an extraordinary educational experience, and it was also very convivial.

Health care, education, jobs, the economy, and civil rights are the Senator's bread-and-butter issues. He'd made a practice year after year, week in and week out, of arranging times for experts to come to his office for perhaps an hour. That was satisfactory but it wasn't nearly as effective as having two or three hours over dinner at his home, where you could go into all sorts of aspects of an issue and come away thinking, *Yes, I like to think I know the most important things about this issue, and I'm ready to use that information in the Senate.*

**Young:** Do you think he started this at about the time you came, this reaching out and bringing people in, or was he already doing it? I'm wondering how he came to this. Was it something his brothers had done?

**Parker:** He may have been doing it. I'm not sure. He certainly had a lot of advice available from his brothers. My impression is that one of the things that launched it, or at least moved it into a higher gear, was his getting involved in the tax laws. That was very complicated, and he couldn't just start from scratch if he were to become as well informed as he needed to be. After a few of those briefings, Senator Kennedy felt that he was as well-qualified to deal with the Tax Code as any member of the Finance Committee, and I think it gave him the confidence to offer amendments on the Senate floor.

He studied the issue, and the Finance Committee Senators credited him with doing his homework. It was one of the things that persuaded Senate members that Senator Kennedy was able to do the job very effectively, that he wasn't just a political showhorse. He was a workhorse as well. That helped him earn the respect of the other Senators he was working with. I don't know for sure, but my impression is that the dinners moved into a much higher gear, because he began to do them more frequently. As I say, they went on for decades, until, I think, the mid-'90s. It has tapered off. I think he finally knows enough about the issues by now. *[laughs]*

**Young:** What doesn't he know? Something else comes to mind, thinking of Kennedy as a reformer of existing codes in the Senate, and that is the reform of the Criminal Code. Is this another example of an effort to reach outside and get involved because there's a need for it?

**Parker:** There is a lot to that. It was at about the same time. At the end of the 1970s, an effort began for comprehensive reform of the Federal Criminal Code. The subject of tax reform had given him a sense of, *Wait a minute, there's another code. It's not Internal Revenue. It's the Criminal Code. It could use the same sort of scrutiny. Plus, it's within our committee jurisdiction.* There were all sorts of problems in the Criminal Code, both in sentencing and in some of the substantive code provisions.

**Young:** That was a real can of worms, I think.

**Parker:** And it turned out to be one of his most extraordinary reforms. I mean, the Criminal Code reform, the sentencing-reform legislation—

**Young:** It took a long time to get it, didn't it?

**Parker:** Yes. It was complex, but at the same time, I think people understood how important it was. At the hearings that were held to document the problem, the Senator, again, was talking to experts, this time in criminal law—people like Jim Vorenberg at Harvard Law School, for

example. Our Judiciary staff was reaching out and coming up with a variety of ideas, and the Senator was eager to hold hearings.

The sentencing system was appalling, largely because of the degree to which, in different parts of the country—sometimes in the same state—federal judges were handing out vastly different sentences for essentially the same offense. It seemed very unfair that sentencing was such a roll of the dice for a defendant. Until then, there had not been much concern about the issue. There was a general sense that there were inequities in sentencing, but the Judiciary Committee laid out in detail how gross the disparities were, and the situation cried out for reform.

The question was, How do you achieve a reform so that judges can take into account the individual circumstances of the defendants and yet are not totally free to ignore basic principles of criminal justice? Defendants were sometimes socked with 10 times the penalty that other defendants were. Sometimes defendants who should have had some sort of restraint put on them were let off relatively free. We tried to marshal all of that evidence, and we began to think of what a comprehensive reform would look like. Our Judiciary Committee staff members, Ken Feinberg and Steve Breyer and others, were very active in developing that.

Sentencing reform, I think, has been a success in the federal criminal-justice system. It has its problems. It has been enforced for a quarter of a century now, and there are areas that need to be updated and modernized, but at the same time, there is a rather complicated system by which judges are required to assess penalties. There is an adequate amount of discretion, but there are limits to the discretion at the same time. Overall, there has been a sea change in federal criminal sentencing. By and large, sentences around the country are much fairer now. It's a reform that you don't hear much about, because it's a very complex issue, but Senator Kennedy felt that it was important for him to roll up his sleeves and be involved in it.

**Young:** What about the connection with the Department of Justice in these reform efforts? This was going on in [Gerald] Ford's time, right? When Ed Levi was Attorney General?

**Parker:** Yes. In fact, Ed Levi was one of the reasons it was able to happen, because he was an academic. He had been a professor at the University of Chicago Law School.

**Young:** Yes.

**Parker:** The Senator had a very good relationship with him, and Levi encouraged the Senator to be active on the issue. I probably should have mentioned earlier that it depended heavily on us being able to work with the lawyers in the Department of Justice, the Criminal Division, and with the Attorney General. They were very supportive of the reforms all the way along, and a great deal of the credit obviously goes to them for putting it together.

**Young:** And the same would have been true of tax reform?

**Parker:** Yes.

**Young:** Did you talk with people at the IRS [Internal Revenue Service]?

**Parker:** Not so much in terms of the existing IRS, but we had commissioners from Democratic administrations who knew all about it, so we felt very comfortable there. There was some Republican resistance. That wasn't the case in terms of the Criminal Code reform. I'm sure you've probably talked to Ken Feinberg and others.

**Young:** I've talked with Feinberg.

**Parker:** It's hard to think of two examples of the Senator rolling up his sleeves as extensively on complex subject matters as he did for Tax Code reform and Criminal Code reform. He has been more active over the years, obviously, on criminal-justice issues, because he's a member of the Judiciary Committee. On tax reform, he wasn't able to do as much as he might have liked, because once he became the chairman of the Judiciary Committee, in 1979, and then shifted to the chairmanship of the Labor Committee in 1981, he had many more responsibilities. He couldn't devote as much time to issues that were outside the committee jurisdictions. For example, after 1979, when he became the chairman of the Judiciary Committee, I don't think that he could have been as involved in tax reform nearly as much as he had been in 1976.

**Young:** One wonders how he keeps from getting spread too thin. He was big into health care at that time, and that is a very big and complicated issue. If you look at the issues he had his fingers in over that period, was it just his energy that kept him from getting spread too thin?

**Parker:** It was his energy, and it was his intellect as well. He has an extraordinary capacity to assimilate ideas. He loves to hear different views, and he can process them and decide how he wants to make them part of his agenda—the more the better. People who joined his staff were amazed at how the Senator was able to add yet another issue, no matter how full his plate was already. People used to joke that it was like Senator Kennedy had a big plateful of food, but he would go back for another, and he might weigh 300 pounds, but he was digesting it all.

Another example of his extraordinary range of ability is the way he does his so-called bag each night—the briefcase he takes home every evening to prepare him for the next day's work in the Senate. He needs to concentrate sometimes on 50 different issues, and he'll do that in a couple of hours after dinner at home. He'll go through the memos that are put in his bag by 10 or 12 staff people—memos about what's coming up the next day, next week, or next month. "Do we choose option A, B, or C on this particular issue?" He can digest those in a way that makes sense. Staff members come back and say, "This is the way the Senator wants to go on this issue," and then the staff starts moving in that direction. That, I think, in some ways has been one of his greatest strengths, the ability to embrace a wider array of specific items on an agenda than any other Senator.

**Young:** But it's not random. It's not just anything that comes through the transom.

**Parker:** No, there's a definite process.

**Young:** Would he, for example, at the beginning of a session or toward the close of a session, think about the agenda for the next session of Congress or for the beginning of a calendar year?

**Parker:** Yes. We always do that for each year.



**Young:** Is that something he does mainly with you?

**Parker:** No, we do it with the senior staff. I work with other staff members on it.

One of the images that people use to describe the Senator is that he's the hub of a wheel, and the staff members are at the rim, and they each have a spoke directly to the Senator. One of the reasons why Senator Kennedy is able to attract such an outstanding staff is that people understand that if you join Senator Kennedy's office, you won't be working through Carey Parker or whoever. You'll talk directly to the Senator. When we're in the office and we're discussing an issue and he wants to talk about something in health reform, for example, he'll pick up the phone and say, "Get Larry Horowitz over here, and let's talk about this." I'll be part of those meetings.

Even junior staff members get involved. The Senator wants whoever knows the most about the issue to be in the room when he has to make a significant decision on an issue. The staff loves that. Sometimes you'll come into a room the size of the one we're in now, here in the Senator's main office in the Russell Building. There's room for about 15 staff people if you bring in a couple of chairs. There'd be that many people in here, and they'd all have a word or two to say in a 20-minute meeting. The Senator is able to digest that, condense it, and say, "Here's where we go."

It didn't happen all that often, but it illustrates the Senator's ability to keep a lot of balls in the air at the same time. When I first took the job, one of the staffers who talked to me about it, Dun Gifford, said, "You'll find that Senator Kennedy prizes the ability to keep 100 balloons in the air at the same time, and part of your job is to make sure that none of them hit the ground and pop. So you're running around tapping other balloons up in the air as you're working on an issue." There's a lot of truth to that. But I think that's, in some ways, the way the Senate functions.

The Senate, by reputation and intent, is supposed to be, as [Thomas] Jefferson and others called it, "The saucer where the hot brew of the House is cooled." The Senate takes the time to look at a lot of different aspects of an issue. The fact that all 100 Senators can offer an amendment to a bill if they wish makes it important that you eliminate as many problems as possible in any legislation that comes before the Senate. The committees do a good job of that in general, but it takes a long time to process a bill through the Senate. You can expedite the legislation, and it can move much more quickly through the House. But in the Senate, part of the reason it takes a long time is that there's a lot of attention to detail, and the extra time gives the Senators an opportunity to influence those details.

A lot of work gets done in our staff meetings. The Senator will say, "There's a vote on the Senate floor at 1:00, and I want to go see Senators A, B, C, and D about issues on each of their bills." He'll go over to the Senate floor with little cards with key points written on them about the issues. The staff prepares those cards as a result of the meetings. The Senator then makes the points to his colleagues, and they take him seriously. More often than not, he gets at least a semi-favorable response. Sometimes they just say, "Of course I'll do it, Senator." It's a way he has an impact that is not seen by the public, but it's a way that some of the lesser, though still important, provisions of legislation get written. Kennedy will have a good idea, and he'll pass it on to the

Senator who is working the issue in the committee. That Senator will look at it and then call him back an hour later and say, “I’ve checked it out. It looks like a go. We can do it.”

The Senator loves the heterogeneity of the variations. He’s at his best when he’s handling six or seven different issues and he’s going around talking to each Senator. He loves the collegial way of working with other Senators and convincing them. A lot of times they say, “Ted, how do you have the time to spend on this issue and this bill? Still, I think you have a good point there. We’ll take care of that.” It often comes down to something like that. He finds it productive, so he likes to do it. His stamina and focus are amazing.

**Young:** Besides the hard work, how does he read people? I mean, beyond the specialized atmosphere of the Senate and colleagues, is he a good judge of character, a good judge of people? How does he work the human chemistry of it?

**Parker:** He knows how to make real contact with a colleague. Other Senators love to work with Senator Kennedy. We’ve learned that year after year. On any issue, even when you’d never think that a conservative Senator would work with Senator Kennedy, he could go up to Jesse Helms and say, “Let’s work on X issue.” And Senator Helms, who we would know was sympathetic to that position, because we’d done a little homework, would say fine.

**Young:** That didn’t happen often, though.

**Parker:** Not often, no.

**Young:** But it would happen.

**Parker:** Yes. You hear it said that people want to work with Senator Kennedy. When the opportunity comes up, he welcomes the chance to do it, and more often than not, other Senators are ready to work with him. Even in the more intense partisan atmosphere that has existed in recent years in the Senate, there are always issues that are not front-page material, and that allow even an ultraconservative Senator to pair with an ultraliberal Senator. Once they do, then it’s a message to their colleagues, “Look, if Jesse Helms and Ted Kennedy can work together on this legislation, then let’s pass it. We can do it.”

The Senator finds something to like about every other Senator. He doesn’t have any enemies in the Senate. He says, “It’s something that you learn very quickly in a family of 11, when you’re the youngest child: you just have to get along with other people.” His personality is especially winning, and he has a sense of humor that other Senators like as well. He likes to laugh with them, and they like a laugh and a slap on the back too. The politician in them trumps the partisanship, and they enjoy the give and take with him. So he finds it easy to work with his colleagues.

**Young:** There are so many examples of his personal touch with people.

**Parker:** Yes. I think it’s his personality.

**Young:** Roses to Senator [Robert] Byrd and the pictures and the caring when somebody is sick or hurt.

**Parker:** He spends a lot of time making friendly phone calls and writing friendly notes.

**Young:** That comes out fairly strongly in other people's testimony, and it has to be part of his humanity in his dealings with the Senate. He has that as well as the politics.

**Parker:** It's true of his constituents as well. Where he finds the time to do all of this is hard to say. He certainly finds time to call other Senators when there's either a happy or sad moment for their families, and they love it. Literally thousands of constituents have received phone calls from Senator Kennedy on various issues—ordinary people who, for one reason or another, have been in the newspaper for some major achievement or for a tragedy in their family. He'll pick up the phone and say, "I saw what happened, and I just wanted to tell you that I'm thinking about you and praying for you," or, "Congratulations on what you've accomplished." For years, he's written thank-you notes to people who have in any way assisted him, no matter what they've done, even the smallest thing. If he goes to an event and someone works to make sure that he can get in and out as quickly as he needs to, he'll write a note to the local manager of the hotel or whatever helped him do it.

**Young:** Well, he did that when he visited the University of Virginia.

**Parker:** I'm sure he did.

**Young:** He gave a talk. Everybody got a little picture and a note. The last thing he did before he left was to be photographed with the security guards of the university. [*laughs*]

**Parker:** It's an amazing trait. He loves doing it, and he makes time to do it. Think of all the time he spends with his family members—you've probably heard him talk about the family history trips.

**Young:** Yes.

**Parker:** Particularly after Robert Kennedy's death, but to some extent after President Kennedy's assassination as well, he was a second father to all of the 11 RFK [Robert Francis Kennedy] children, and also to Caroline [Kennedy Schlossberg] and John [Kennedy], Jr. He'd spend a lot of time talking with them. It's amazing. You'd think that it would take three people to do all that. He's developed that talent. No one who sees him in action like that can come away anything but amazed.

**Young:** You joined him in 1969.

**Parker:** Yes, at the beginning of February of '69.

**Young:** His brother Robert had been killed in June.

**Parker:** June of '68.

**Young:** In July of 1969, I guess it was, the accident at Chappaquiddick occurred. This was a very bad and very difficult time in his life. Somebody has said, "It put him into his black period." And yet, from what you've been talking about, his involvement in health care was coming soon,

as well as tax reform. He was throwing himself into them. Help people understand how these events affected his work and his attitude. Was he down? He didn't know what reception he would get in the Senate after Chappaquiddick. I guess he didn't know what reception he'd get from the public when he ran for reelection in 1970. Give us a picture of how this man moved through those very bad times as a Senator.

**Parker:** I didn't see him until he returned to the Senate two weeks after the accident. He was in Massachusetts and I was here in Washington. Jim Flug spent some time up there. Jim, Dave Burke, and others could tell you about that initial period. I spent much of that time in the office collecting the press reports and editorials from around the country, what they were saying about the accident, and sending those to the staff to consider in Massachusetts, so that they would have everybody's perspective. Of course, I was also trying to keep up with the Senate issues here. Fortunately, during the two weeks he was away from the Senate, there was time for him to recover from the immediate trauma and his own injuries, and resolve the law-enforcement charge against him. Once that was settled, I'm sure he felt that a huge burden had been lifted from his shoulders.

I don't know for sure, but I suspect that Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield had been talking to him. And had lifted his spirits so that he began to feel that he would have support in the Senate. It wasn't as though he ever seriously thought, *I can't go back to the Senate. How can I still be a Senator? Do I have to resign?* I don't think that entered his mind in any significant way. At least I'm not aware that it did. Certainly there was no outcry for that, at least compared to what there perhaps would have been today. At that period, in the 1960s, a politician's private life was still relatively private. There wasn't an overwhelming atmosphere of criticism of Senator Kennedy.

As a precaution, in his TV address about the accident to the people of Massachusetts a week later, he did include a passage asking the people of the state to let him know whether he should resign from the Senate, and their response to Kennedy was extremely positive. He probably wouldn't have included the passage if he'd had any doubt about the people's reaction.

If he could overcome whatever personal feelings he had about the accident, I think he saw returning to work in the Senate as rejuvenating. He could restore his vitality and put the tragedy behind him. As much regret as he had for what happened, he would still be able to say, "I'm going to try again to be the very best Senator I can possibly be." He arrived back in the Senate with much of his same spirit, at least outwardly. Inwardly, I couldn't talk about that, but he actually was the same caring, committed Senator Kennedy that people had come to appreciate and respect before the accident.

I think that Senator Kennedy also had something of a reputation in the Senate of being a Senator's Senator. People felt that the Senate, for Ted Kennedy, was not just a way station on the way to the White House, and that unlike his brothers, he genuinely enjoyed being a Senator.

**Young:** Senator Ted.

**Parker:** Yes, Senator Ted Kennedy. I think that helped him with his colleagues when he came back in '69. They had grown to like and respect him, and they appreciated that he wanted to be

one of them. They liked his gregarious personality, they liked his jokes and his backslapping, and I think they gave him a boost. Senator Mansfield sent a powerful signal to everybody on the day Senator Kennedy returned to the Senate. When Senator Mansfield told him, “Welcome back to the Senate, Ted, where you belong,” Senator Mansfield intended to do that. He cared very much about Senator Kennedy.

**Young:** Yes. He especially went out of his way, I think, to make him feel welcome, and this was his place, the famous quotation.

**Parker:** That made a world of difference, and very quickly the Senator immersed himself again in the issues. He felt this is the way to regain his status. Whatever emotional burden there was for him, it was eased immensely not just by Mansfield but also by the reception of the other Senators who welcomed him back, certainly by all of his Democratic colleagues and by many of the Republicans as well. They were glad he had survived the accident. They obviously felt very sorry for him, and they were relieved he was back.

**Young:** He could have easily lost his life.

**Parker:** All of us on the staff at the time said, “It’s a miracle that he didn’t drown up there.” It was obviously a terrible accident. When people saw photos of what happened, they could easily see themselves driving off that road. It wasn’t as though it was hard to imagine.

**Young:** What you’re saying, I think, is very important, about his throwing himself back into his work, doing good work in the Senate, showing that he would try to do his best and would continue to do his best. There has been some commentary about him, in books and articles from this period, that he was almost a pathetic figure and that he didn’t have anything to do. I think it’s a myth that he was asking Senators if could he do something and that he was down.

**Parker:** I saw none of that.

**Young:** It’s important for the oral history to get this straight. No one has said this in the oral history, but it is in some of the print, by people who claim to have known him or to have been with him at the time. The picture you are painting certainly is not of that.

**Parker:** No, and I didn’t see any of that.

**Young:** And you would have.

**Parker:** It’s hard to say, because I certainly didn’t see him in his most intimate moments with his family or his closest friends, but I think I would have heard about it if he had been reaching out like that to other Senators.

**Young:** Well, this was in the Senate, so I think you would have heard.

**Parker:** Also, there were only a few weeks before the end of the Senate session in 1969 and the adjournment for the holidays. At the beginning of a new session in 1970, when everything starts again, there’s a rebirth of the Senate. He had an opportunity to set his sails again when he came back for the new session in 1970. A lot of his future course was shaped by that primary election

in Texas, which immediately made clear to him, *I'm going to be Mr. Health Care in the Senate. I'll be chairman of the Health Subcommittee.* That was clearly a big boost in terms of his morale, and it was totally unexpected. No one thought that Senator Yarborough would lose in the primary. From then on, Senator Kennedy knew that health care would be his principal issue as the new Chairman of the Subcommittee. I don't know whether you've talked to Lee Goldman.

**Young:** Yes. Lee had been with Yarborough.

**Parker:** Right, and he agreed to stay on. He brought Senator Kennedy up to speed quickly as subcommittee chairman, and he did a good job. From then on, one move led to the next. Senator Kennedy's great goal in health care was still a long way off, but there were many other achievements in health care right on the horizon.

**Young:** You were pretty closely involved, at least at the outset, in the NHI [national health insurance] initiative, weren't you?

**Parker:** Yes.

**Young:** I think you may have mentioned Walter Reuther last time.

**Parker:** Yes, Walter Reuther's death—it was a huge setback for comprehensive health reform.

**Young:** Do you think that Senator Kennedy, sooner or later, would have thrown himself into this even if Yarborough hadn't been defeated?

**Parker:** It's not so clear. It seemed to me that if he'd been a Senator working on jobs, education, and health care as his principal issues, he might well have spent more time on education or employment. But I tend to think that no matter what, he would have gone into health care, because he clearly was very interested in the subject in '69, when there was certainly no thought that Yarborough would be defeated or that Kennedy would have the opportunity to become Chairman of the Health Subcommittee.

If you look at health care, it leaps out at you that the government decided in 1965 that it was important to guarantee health care to elderly and low-income Americans, and so we had to have Medicare and Medicaid. Senator Kennedy felt deeply, the more he looked into it, that we simply couldn't ignore that millions of other citizens had many of the same needs for better health care but couldn't afford private health insurance. If they're seriously ill or insured, they get emergency treatment, but that's far from enough. Decent health care ought to be available to all citizens. As Senator Kennedy often said, it's a disgrace that the United States is the only major industrial nation in the world that doesn't guarantee health care to all its people.

**Young:** His brother, President Kennedy, had proposed Medicare.

**Parker:** Yes, and it basically had gone nowhere.

**Young:** It lost by one vote, I think.

**Parker:** There had been an intense fight over it in Congress, and it wouldn't have passed but for the Johnson landslide in 1964.

**Young:** That is true. Was it your impression that this was one of his brother's issues that the Senator then picked up, or was it an independent drive?

**Parker:** I think it was more independent. There's a school of thought, going all the way back to [Franklin] Roosevelt's decision on Social Security in the 1930s, that if Roosevelt had decided the time was right for financial security for the elderly, then why not medical security as well? It seems somewhat unrealistic, but at the time, there were people in Roosevelt's administration for whom it was a serious issue, as I understand it. I'm not an expert on the history, but at one point this was an issue that was taken to the President. There were many people who thought that we should add health care to security for the elderly.

**Young:** Social insurance.

**Parker:** Social insurance, right, that would include health coverage as well. But they decided it was too politically difficult to ask Congress to do it in the 1930s.

**Young:** Historians say that FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] said it would endanger the whole of Social Security to do it.

**Parker:** That's right, yes.

**Young:** Teddy Roosevelt had been the first to propose a national system, NHI.

**Parker:** It certainly had been considered.

**Young:** [Harry] Truman picked it up.

**Parker:** Many other major nations were doing it, because they realized it was the only way to make health care available to all their people. The Republican argument always was, "Those other countries are not as wealthy as we are. Their people don't have as many opportunities and or as much access to health care as Americans have. We're not in the same situation they are. We don't need it here." So it was more an ideological battle.

**Young:** When the Senator took up the NHI idea, how did he assess the chances of getting the whole thing through? Was he an optimist about it? Did he think we were at a moment when it could be done, or was he just setting the bar very high in the hopes of getting *something* done? Was he thinking in those terms?

**Parker:** I think he genuinely believed, remembering the '60s, that "We did it for Medicare. The momentum might be enough to get this through. Let's go for it." With the election of President [Richard] Nixon, it was pretty clear that it would be difficult but not impossible. Then, as time went on, the Vietnam War became a serious problem in terms of taking on a major, new federal financial responsibility.

Nevertheless, the question was, how can we find the best way to do it? Possibly, we could expand Medicare to cover everybody, but there were other alternatives too. There have been a number of proposals over the years that have been suggested. Senator Kennedy was very hopeful about the prospects for action when President Carter was elected in 1976, and again when President Clinton was elected in 1992. But nothing panned out. We knew we couldn't do it without a Democratic President. It was very difficult through the Nixon years, then Ford, and then [Ronald] Reagan.

**Young:** You were involved, were you not, in the Kennedy-[Wilbur] Mills legislation?

**Parker:** Yes.

**Young:** Could you talk about how that seemed to be a somewhat improbable coalition?

**Parker:** In some ways, people thought it was a stunt. They didn't think there was a chance that it would go through. But Senator Kennedy felt that it was a major push forward for the initiative, and that it might ignite enough new interest in the issue that we could move it along. But the expectations, as I remember them, were not that Kennedy and Mills working together would make all the difference, but rather that this was an opportunity worth taking. "Let's make the most of it and see how far we can go." It seemed, though, that the air was going out of the balloon.

**Young:** The Finance Committee would have none of it.

**Parker:** Right. I think they were astounded that Wilbur Mills would snub all of the members of the Finance Committee and sign on with Senator Kennedy.

**Young:** At one point, Labor walked away from it, when the Senator made a compromise with the Nixon folks in order to get something going.

**Parker:** Yes. I think we had a number of problems in bringing all the players together around a single, coherent plan. Even with the Committee for National Health Insurance, and Labor too, it wasn't easy to come up with a plan that everybody would sign off on, in terms of everyone lining up their own side. If people had thought that there was an opportunity to advance it, I think we could have brought people into a room and reached a compromise. Kennedy is very effective at doing that. We haven't talked much about that.

**Young:** Do talk about it.

**Parker:** He doesn't have a rigid partisan position on most issues, and on most very important issues in particular. I think of the phrase, "You can't let the best be the enemy of the good." He recognizes that on a number of issues, if we can get something accomplished, that will be a huge step forward, even though it isn't what he would have written if he had enacted it.

In terms of respecting his colleagues, who often feel just as strongly about an issue, there are frequently issues on which there are major headwinds, and Senator Kennedy will find a Republican to work with. If we're starting at zero on an issue, and if the goal is 100 and we can get to 65 or 70 just by making these compromises, we'll do it. It's often a difficult sell,



particularly on longstanding issues where you've worked closely with interest groups and your supporters. But Senator Kennedy has a knack for bringing people together. Often, it will work out. If there's a reasonable chance of putting together a bipartisan compromise on legislation, he has a knack for figuring out what he can ask for and what he can get from the other side, as well as what he has to give from his side, so that enough people will say, "Yes, this is a good deal. It's worth going forward with it."

**Young:** And also to persuade his own side.

**Parker:** Yes, to go along.

**Young:** Because they're sometimes very difficult.

**Parker:** Yes, they're sometimes very frustrated.

**Young:** The Conference on Civil Rights said that Senator Kennedy was the only person who could tell his constituency, "We have to do this," and they would accept it. They wouldn't accept it from anybody else.

**Parker:** Yes. I think that's a trust he has acquired and increased over his years as a Senator.

**Young:** He's an authority.

**Parker:** He has enough trust from his constituency that when he says, "If we do this, we won't get everything we want, but we'll get a lot of what we don't have right now," they will say, "Okay, we'll keep fighting for the long term, but this stuff is okay for now, Senator." It's sometimes a difficult meeting behind closed doors. But he loves to get involved in that, because, to his credit, they see that he's doing it not for public-relations reasons or for partisan reasons, but rather to get something accomplished, recognizing that we won't get our way entirely. "What's the best way we can shape this legislation so that the compromise is as much as we can reasonably hope to get for now, recognizing the opposition?"

The opposition comes to it, in some ways, with the same mentality. Sometimes it's impossible, because a minority in the Senate can block something if they feel passionate enough about it. But on the issues that Kennedy is working on, particularly health care or education or jobs he often has the popular side of the issue with their constituents. Their basic philosophy may disagree with Senator Kennedy on how much of a role the government should play, but they say, "Here's Kennedy. We're comfortable blocking everything he wants to do, but are we going to block every last step he wants to take, or are we going to try to block only about half of them?"

His sense is that on any given issue, if you split the difference, you come out ahead. That's his basic rule of thumb. Often, it depends on how you split the difference. If you disagree on three issues, and one is three times more important than the other two combined, you can't say, "You give me one issue and I'll give you two issues." But he has a feel for that. Partly it's his experience in negotiating like that—he's a master negotiator.

Partly I think you have to credit the staff members who are working the issues and who are coming up with, "Here are the alternatives from A to Z. Here's where we give up everything, and

here's where we get everything, but these are the three or four issues where if we can reach an agreement, then everything else will fall into place because they're much less important." Part of the challenge with many of these bills is to find the issue that counts the most or that most people feel most strongly or passionate about on both sides and to see how you can bring them together on that. Once they've compromised on the major issue, then it's almost inevitable that compromise will be reached on the lesser issues.

**Young:** In a sense, this is realism, what I could call "practical liberalism." Are there issues of principle for which no compromise is acceptable to him?

**Parker:** I don't think so. I mean, it depends what you mean by—

**Young:** Non-negotiable. He won't even talk about it.

**Parker:** There are obviously a few issues that he won't consider some sort of a compromise on. Probably nine times out of 10, even on the issues you feel most passionately about, you can trim a little bit without doing hard-core damage to your principles. You'll get something that is advantageous to the principles or at least doesn't undermine them. In a difficult negotiation, he finds it fairly easy to weigh what this concession means versus that concession. The principles are flexible enough in their details that it's usually possible to come up with a compromise that preserves the essence of the principle and yet allows the conservative side, for example, to say, "We haven't violated our basic principles either, and this is something that both sides can agree on."

**Young:** Very early in the project, some of the people I was talking with—this is about Senator Kennedy in '62, in '64, when he was, in a sense, new to it all—mentioned that the Senator had said that he loved street politics. He loved going out to the factory gate, pressing the flesh, circulating. He'd be campaigning and he'd go out to the Cape, and Sam Beer and various people would be out there on the issues. It seemed that they were saying that he loved the politics at that time, but the issue stuff wasn't his thing. He would learn them and grasp them, but he wasn't into issues. Now, that was very early and these were observations of him on the campaign trail or in the Senate. Yet if you tuned in a few years later, you saw a politician and legislator who was very deeply involved in issues and who was interweaving the two. When and how did he come to be a worker on the issues? There are Senators who don't do much of that. They're in it for something else. You didn't know him back then in '62.

**Parker:** No, I didn't know him in those earlier years. My sense is that he loved the campaigning, the person-to-person contact, and working with constituents. It's easy to see why, because they loved him when he was out there. At the same time, he learned—very quickly, I suspect—that in order to please them and make them love him, he would have to do something for them. He would have to show that he was working for them in the Senate. I think he began to see which issues made a great deal of difference to the man in the street, to his constituents. He thought, *I can accomplish something for them, but in order to do that, I need to understand how these legislators work and what they think and what the issues are that they're concerned about.* I think he also began to feel that the more he knew about an issue, the better he could do, because most of his colleagues don't understand the issues as well as he does.

**Young:** Right.

**Parker:** I think it fed on itself, in a sense.

**Young:** It fed on itself and it's no longer, "I have to do it in order to adequately represent my constituents," but rather I have a feeling that he likes it. What you're describing, these issues dinners and collecting experts and learning and all of that, is that he loves the issues, and he loves to get deep into them.

**Parker:** I don't know whether it comes from his faith or something else, but he wants to help people. The Good Samaritan in him is—

**Young:** Oh, that's very clear. And he seems to love learning and listening to experts.

**Parker:** Because he finds it so satisfactory, yes. It was both very interesting and very productive. Once he realized, "If I do this, I get that—" I think the carrot was right there, and he found that he could digest it. The amazing thing to me is that he sees the broad spectrum of people who need help, and he feels, *If I can figure out what issue I need to work on to help them, I'll do it.* He loves to help people. He's always welcomed a chance to help somebody get an entry visa to the country—a refugee, for example. On his trips to China and the Soviet Union in the old days, he'd go with lists of people he wanted to bring out. The humanitarian side of Senator Kennedy is incredible.

**Young:** Very deep. It goes very far back. It starts with his trips to Vietnam and his concern with what was happening to the civilian populations there. His caring is on a large scale and on an individual scale, it seems to me. He's very caring.

**Parker:** It's extraordinary. You probably saw just a few days ago that the President of Chile went out of his way to make a trip to Cape Cod to give the Senator an award. The Senator was very active in our foreign policy toward Chile, because he cared so much about the repression that was taking place in Chile by the dictatorship. Apparently there was an Irishman, Bernardo O'Higgins, who the award, in a sense, was named for. In Chile, the award is called the Order of Merit, and it's the highest award given to a citizen of another country. But it was created also as a tribute to Bernardo O'Higgins, who had emigrated to Chile from Ireland, and who became very active in Chilean independence. The Senator loved that story.

**Young:** Oh, that's perfect.

**Parker:** It's exactly the sort of thing that he loves to dive into.

**Young:** I think our time is about up. There are two things that we didn't cover today. I would like to hear something about the 1977 trip to China that you brought up. I think that was an important experience, and he went with a list. Let's hear about his meeting Deng Xiaoping and how that worked.

**Parker:** It almost didn't happen. [*laughter*]

**Young:** Jean [Kennedy Smith] gave me Steve Smith's diary of that trip to read, as well as her own diary. I was asking her what it was like. I'd like to hear about that trip. You also mentioned some things about Kennedy and [Jimmy] Carter, which I think belong in the oral history record. And then there's the 1980 run for the Presidency, the campaign experience, and how that evolved and how it turned out.

**Parker:** Right.

**Young:** Maybe we can get into the Reagan era next time. We have not talked about civil rights issues, the civil rights extensions in the '70s. If you'd like to say a few words about that—language, minorities, and women—you can do that next time.

**Parker:** There are maybe some other issues on those Voting Rights Acts too. I'll think about that.

**Young:** Yes, there are.

**Parker:** These are good times to talk about such things. It's hard to tell when the Senator will be back, but things will step up a lot when he is.

**Young:** I'm sure they will. Thanks very much.

**Parker:** Thank you. I enjoyed it.