EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH CAREY PARKER

November 17, 2008
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Interviewer
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TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH CAREY PARKER

November 17, 2008

Young: This is an interview with Carey Parker, on November 17, in Washington, D.C. We left off last time with the intention of discussing the second half of [William J.] Clinton's first term—that is, with the defeat of the Democratic Party by large margins in both the House and Senate. We mentioned Senator Kennedy's own handy victory after a few bumps in his reelection campaign.

Parker: The election was a stunning change in the Senate. I think that Senator Kennedy, after the election of Bill Clinton, had been looking forward to a new period that could have been comparable to the Great Society. We hadn't had a President we could work with for a long time. It had been difficult with President [Jimmy] Carter. Until President Clinton came in, in 1993, the Democrats in the Senate hadn't had, at least since 1968, a Democratic President who they felt could lead the charge on issues that liberal Democrats in the Democratic caucus wanted to pursue the most.

Since 1968 it basically had been a finger-in-the-dike type of Senate for Democrats, where a lot of the accomplishments were about preventing retreats rather than about making advances. There were some major legislative developments, but the 1992 election was seen as a new day, and there were great hopes for it. They quickly began to fade during the first two years of the Clinton administration, but we still had no sense in 1994 that we would lose the majority. We thought we might lose a few seats. It was a gut blow to a lot of Democratic Senators that the groundwork they'd been laying and hoping to work on with President Clinton, particularly on an issue like health care reform, for example, all of a sudden was taking a back seat. Instead, the basic issue became, how do we stop this Republican juggernaut?

Starting in 1995, Senator Kennedy's basic position in Congress was, "Let's see if we can get some worthwhile things done." He felt that it should be possible to work with some Republican Senators across the aisle on some issues, but there was huge concern among the Democrats that the election was a major setback. The question was, how could Democrats reorganize and move forward again?

There were some divisions in the Democratic Party between liberals and moderates. President Clinton had his Third Way approach. The idea was to build a new structure in which we could advance some progressive issues but in a way that would appeal to a significant number of Republicans. It became much more difficult, obviously, with the Republicans in the majority in the Senate because they had the initiative on most of the legislation. Kennedy was no longer chairman of the Senate Health, Education, and Labor Committee. Other Senate Democrats who

had been committee chairs were now ranking members, just as Senator Kennedy was on his committee. The Republicans were in charge and calling the shots.

Unfortunately, members were rather pessimistic as they tried to recover from the blow of the election and as they tried to figure out a new direction for the party. Senator Kennedy was one of the more effective leaders in the Senate in developing ways that we could be true to our agenda but also bridge some of our differences with Republican Senators. He had very good relations with many Republicans, particularly with Senators [Orrin] Hatch and [Nancy] Kassebaum.

He was able, through the rest of the Clinton administration, to work reasonably closely with enough Republican Senators that, even in the minority, he still was able to have productive sessions of Congress, partly because some of the things we strongly opposed didn't get through, partly because we were able to adapt to changing circumstances. There was not much chance of enacting, for example, health care reform in the comprehensive way that Senator Kennedy had long championed. But at the same time, there were such obvious needs, and though the solutions we had proposed were no longer realistically achievable, the problems persisted. If anything, they became more serious.

There was much more emphasis, for example, on how to deal with employees who had lost their jobs and therefore their health insurance. There were serious questions about whether the unemployment-compensation laws were adequate. I should add that there was concern about the Republican approach to low-income families. The Democrats felt that the worst was happening, that all of the issues that Kennedy had championed for low-income families—and in some cases, civil rights as well—were suffering.

Young: The House, with the Contract for America, was definitely against all of this.

Parker: Yes, they were.

Young: And they were driving hard. Last time, you mentioned the increasing difficulty of finding people on the other side of the aisle who were willing to work with Kennedy, because of the increasingly polarizing effect of the Republican majority and the Contract with America and the people who believed in that. So it was not only that the majority was lost; there were further difficulties also, weren't there?

Parker: Yes, no question. Republican Senators were much less willing, on the whole, to be identified with supporting an agenda that seemed to be derived basically from Senator Kennedy's approach. That was the challenge he faced. Once the passions of the election and the pessimistic reaction on the Democratic side began to fade, then it became possible to accomplish things, because the tax-cut, budget-cut, steamroller attitude of the Republican Party simply was not acceptable to the country either, and probably not even to half of the Republicans. This was the challenge that Senator Kennedy faced.

On health care, for example, we still felt that the solution was a national health-insurance program—comprehensive care for everyone on the model of Medicare. But that wasn't viable in the new atmosphere. The challenge was, "Let's at least find out what we can do for people who most need health insurance coverage the most." This was one of the things that led to Senator Kennedy's work with Senator Kassebaum, who was the Kansas colleague of Republican leader

Bob Dole. She was willing to go along with Senator Kennedy on some of these issues, for example. There were also Republicans who were willing to do something on children's health insurance. The challenge was to come up with new ideas that would in fact solve at least some significant parts of the problem.

You can get more details about the specifics from our health staff, but I think there was a sense, because of the attitudes toward low-income families, that Medicaid was basically health insurance for the poor, and that Medicare and Medicaid had been enacted simultaneously in 1965, under the [Lyndon] Johnson administration, to deal with senior citizens and people in poverty. But in addition to people in poverty in the '90s, with the problems facing the economy and people losing their jobs, families who were near low-income thresholds, but who were not necessarily in poverty, still had health care bills that they couldn't afford to pay.

The solution was, "Let's take a significant step forward by expanding health coverage for people close to poverty by adopting a new program." You couldn't expand Medicaid simply by raising the threshold for cutting off funds to above the poverty level. But you could instead offer a different type of insurance program that involved much more cooperation with the states. The states would be involved, and the Federal Government would provide substantial support to states that were willing to expand coverage beyond the poverty level to people who were somewhat higher on the income scale. That evolved into what became the Children's Health Insurance Program.

Young: Both of those came to fruition, didn't they, in 1996 and '97?

Parker: Yes.

Young: But in the immediate aftermath of the election of the new Senate and new Congress that would arrive in 1995, when Senator Kassebaum replaced Kennedy as the head of the committee, didn't they start working on portability—that is, people out of jobs keeping their insurance?

Parker: That was the other big problem: people losing their jobs and therefore losing their health insurance.

Young: That turned into the Kennedy-Kassebaum bill.

Parker: Yes.

Young: Did they agree to work toward that immediately?

Parker: No, not immediately. I don't remember exactly when it began to materialize, but I think it took about a year for people to become adjusted to the new mentality and for the initial tidal wave of the Republican takeover to recede. They began to realize, *Look, we have to stand for reelection in 1996 and again in 1998. We can't simply go forward and ignore these big problems, but we don't have to buy Ted Kennedy's solutions to them.*

It became pretty clear toward the end of 1995, however, that the Contract with America would not produce the same kind of stampede to the polls in '96 that had done so much damage in '94, that it was more of a slogan than a solution, and that there were too many parts of their program

that Democrats either couldn't swallow at all or that left too many people out. A lot of members were looking at what was going on in the states, and they were asking, "Will this be good for me and for my people, or is it good only for the ideology of the new conservative revolution?"

Young: Dole wasn't too happy, was he, with the [Newton] Gingrich revolution? He wasn't a product of that era or of that kind of thinking, was he?

Parker: No.

Young: And he had his eye on the Presidency.

Parker: Senators who were involved in these issues long before Gingrich became Speaker of the House enjoyed their new power, but they weren't necessarily sold on the contract as being anything more than a political tool for winning an election, as opposed to a governing tool that would satisfy constituents.

Young: That's an important point.

Parker: That was why it took a while for the dust to settle after the election and for people to realize, *This is not the solution that everybody has been waiting for.* In fact the contract turned out to be more of a slogan for the campaign and for the newly emerging right wing of the Republican Party than a set of guidelines that would be productive for governing in Congress. It did not demonstrate that the new Republican majority had the ability and wisdom to deal with the large issues facing the country. People didn't want party labels as much as they wanted solutions to problems. That was clear, and that's the one thing that Kennedy, probably as much as anyone, had been championing in the Senate.

For example, we had a liberal agenda, but it was grounded in the fact that we thought these programs would be effective. There was no question that Medicare had been extremely effective for senior citizens and that Medicaid was reasonably effective for low-income families. The problem was that it ran counter to the ideology of the [Ronald] Reagan era, and that ideology was a force that the Republicans tried to impose on the country after the 1994 election.

Even President Clinton, in defining his Third Way, was concerned—Democrats were widely concerned when he made his famous statement that "The era of big government is over." I think Clinton wanted to signal that he would not simply go back to the Great Society-type, government-run programs. But it was also seen as an attack on the foundation of the liberal Democratic majority in both the House and Senate leading up to the 1994 elections.

Young: Did you and the Senator feel that this Third Way was a retreat from the traditional principles?

Parker: The feeling was that it was realistic and progressive—not an implication that what we'd done on Social Security and Medicare was wrong. These were the two things that stuck in the Republicans' craw as symbols of what they felt was Democratic excess. They came in with programs to undermine Social Security, and the immediate reactions were almost nuclear around the country: "You're going to do something to destroy Social Security? You're going to privatize Medicare? You can't be serious."

Their argument was that they had a mandate to transform Social Security into something that fit with their ideology. There would be private pension plans, basically, long-term pension security that would take the place of Social Security and do a better job of it. I don't think anyone believed that, unless they were part of the Republican team. The first large group of people who didn't believe it was made up of tens of millions of senior citizens, who gagged over it. The immediate reaction was so strong that although the battle continued, there was never a significant threat to Social Security.

A lot of Democrats were concerned with the various Republican moves that occurred in '95 and '96, and on through the end of the Clinton administration. We saw them again in the two [George H.W. and George W.] Bush administrations. There was still a substantial wing of the Republican Party that felt we should have something other than a government-run Social Security plan for senior citizens. About six months into the new administration, people began to talk of Social Security as the third rail of American politics: "You touch it, you're dead," was basically the idea.

Young: You would think that the lesson might have been learned with Reagan, because he tried something too.

Parker: Yes, but Reagan, in so many ways, had an avuncular way of dealing with Congress. It wasn't, "Roll up your sleeves and smash them in the nose." It was an attitude you could deal with. It wasn't as though we were on the threshold of undermining Social Security, but it was the new impetus for that movement. It became an aggressive form of Reaganism that we felt had been picked up by the Contract with America and was being sold to the right wing as the new governing philosophy of the country. "You put us in charge, and here's what we're going to do. Support us and we'll go do it."

But they hit a brick wall with Social Security, and to some extent with Medicare as well. They didn't focus as much on Medicare to start with, but the same principle applied. Senior citizens have been immensely satisfied with both Medicare and Social Security, and Senator Kennedy basically responded to that by asking, "Why not have a health system that can provide coverage to everyone in the same way it covers every senior citizen?"

It still, to us, makes a lot of sense, even to this day. But because the opposing forces were in the ascendancy—certainly during the Reagan years and even more intensely after the Gingrich revolution—there seemed to be no significant chance of enacting something like that. Kennedy occasionally floated the idea of lowering the age limit for Medicare eligibility from 65 to 55, so that more people could buy in. But again, that touched a raw nerve in the Republican right, and they refused to consider it.

When Clinton came in with his Third Way approach, it was a signal to Democrats like Senator Kennedy that he was still basically on our side but that we needed a different approach that would combine private- and public-sector support in a single program. That was the compromise they reached on children's health insurance.

In terms of the extension of employment benefits, the notion of portability was seen as a reasonable way to help people who had lost their health insurance because they were

unemployed or because they had changed jobs and their new employer didn't offer insurance. That turned into a reasonable compromise that at least granted a period of 18 months during which you could continue your health insurance coverage while you adjusted. There was a major battle over it, but when we got the bipartisan support for it, people recognized that it was unfair to do nothing, particularly with the economy on the edge of a downturn, and possibly heading toward a recession. We couldn't simply walk away from people who lose their health insurance.

It was one thing for Republicans to say, "We won't offer new health insurance to anyone who doesn't have it," but there was a feeling even among moderate Republicans in Congress that it's different if you've taken the trouble to buy your own health insurance plan, which you've been counting on, and circumstances suddenly change. The employer letting you go was the primary driving force, but they also recognized that we were moving into a different era in the economy in which people were no longer taking a single job for life.

When these statistics began to accumulate, people made the case to Congress that losing your health insurance is almost like losing your job. The way the economy worked in the 1980s and '90s was demonstrating to people on both sides of the aisle that the old notions of a lifetime job and employer benefits no longer applied. If you're no longer part of the population who take lifetime jobs but who instead have two—or sometimes four, five, or six jobs over a productive career—you shouldn't have to weigh the fact when you're changing jobs that you can't afford to take a better job or move up the ladder because your new firm won't give you health insurance.

That attitude began to gain greater prominence in Congress, and Senators Kennedy and Kassebaum were able to tap into that. Of course it made a huge difference that Senator Kassebaum was there and was interested in it. She was never a right-wing Republican. She also had clout with Senator Dole, which made a difference too. Those were Senator Kennedy's two big achievements during those years: the children's health insurance, and the carryover of health insurance benefits for those who lose jobs or change jobs. The carryover was also a huge labor issue in a way that often health care reforms were not.

The labor movement was also going through a major transition during that period. In general, they were more concerned about jobs than about health care. But the notion of how you handle people who are unemployed or who are losing their jobs, and who are also losing their health insurance hit home with them, and they were effective at tapping this new aspect of the issue. It wasn't clearly a labor-versus-management issue, but they were looking out for their people who had good health-insurance programs with their initial firms because those were unionized firms.

But with labor losing a lot of its clout during that period and with fewer firms having unionized workforces, it became more likely, if you were with a firm that had a comprehensive health-insurance plan in the private-sector courtesy of your employer, that you had that plan because the labor unions had lobbied effectively for it through collective bargaining with the employer, that had made a big difference all those years in the health insurance market, obviously. The problem became much more painful as the unionization—

Young: The union membership, or the new recruiting to the unions, was dropping off.

Parker: That's right. Of course, as a member of the Labor Committee all these years, Senator Kennedy has been a champion of the right to organize. As you can tell, it's still an issue that's front and center with the [Barack] Obama administration.

Part of the right-wing ideology was to encourage employers to more effectively resist union organizing in their firms. That materialized into a major issue partly during the Reagan years but also during the 1990s. It has been very difficult to find a solution to that, because part of the problem was that under the labor laws, the intention was to let employees have a secret vote as to whether they wanted to join a union. Employers, it turned out, were very adept at tilting those secret votes—threatening employees, for example—and it often became very overt.

Our Labor Committee staffers could give you details on these issues we were involved in, but our effort became rather intense in terms of reforming the labor laws to prohibit the sort of tactics that employers were typically using to stack the vote on whether to ban a union. Employers were able, for example, to fire an employee if he was caught trying to organize a union on the workforce premises. Ending that tactic was a huge issue that Kennedy was championing as part of labor law reform.

Young: Finding things to do—I mean policy progress, aggressive legislation, finding out what could be done under adverse political circumstances—was one thing Kennedy was up to. But connected with that, wasn't there also an attempt to stiffen the spines of the doubting Democrats and of the doubting President? I remember seeing Clinton in—maybe it was a press conference, after the '94 election. He was asked, "How do you read the election?" and he said, "I don't know what it means." A moment of confusion.

There was also a feeling within the Democratic Party on the Hill—maybe it was centered in the House, not the Senate; I don't know—that *This is a defeat of what we stand for, and we have to change our ways. This represents a turn to the right. There seems to be a mandate for the Contract with America.* Wasn't this a feeling in the Democratic Party? And didn't Kennedy have to say, "That's not what it means, and here's what we can do"?

Parker: He certainly was beating the drum in the political speeches he gave, standing up for Democratic principles. At the same time, though, I think there was sufficient concern that he couldn't just denounce what the Republicans were doing and go back to the same standard—that is, basically to his previous progressive speeches and approaches. In these changing times, that wouldn't be a realistic way to make progress on meeting people's needs, which has always been Senator Kennedy's primary concern.

The rhetoric was one thing. He loves to go before liberal, Democratic crowds and give them the red meat they want. That's where his heart is, but besides that, he didn't feel that he needed to stiffen people's spines in a practical sense. I don't think he felt that their spines needed stiffening in order to stand up and oppose certain outrageous Republican proposals, such as taxes on Social Security and Medicare. He felt that it was more important to stick to liberal goals, and to come up with incremental steps to reach them, which was basically what we saw as Clinton's Third Way. "We're on the right path. We can't take the giant steps we were proposing before."

A lot of Democrats were ready to believe that. I don't think it required a lot of spine stiffening. They knew that Kennedy would be the last to say, "We have to rethink our principles." He still believes—and certainly all of us who work for him believe—that they're the right principles. It's how you apply them. There was a question that came to the floor very quickly: "Does the best have to be the enemy of the good all the time?" I think that's where the fight began, over the question, "Is this a big enough step to make us adopt a program that has public- and private-sector involvement to cover everyone's health insurance, to try to cover a larger number of children, or to allow employees more time to continue their private health-insurance coverage?"

There was no chance that we could solve any of those problems by using a government-sponsored health care program, but at the same time, there was a very good chance that significant incremental steps made sense, since the need was so great. Democrats in both the House and Senate saw the advantage of this approach fairly quickly—"We'll show that you can adopt reforms that involve a greater amount of government regulation. It's not a government takeover, and it's a way to move forward toward our goals."

This is what Senator Kennedy basically believed, going back to the '70s: that regulation is necessary where the private market can't work. That basically means that the government must have a somewhat larger role in deciding how the private health-insurance industry makes health insurance available, that competition is not a satisfactory solution to the health care crisis. The challenge was to come up with reasonable steps that would preserve enough of the Democratic principles yet appeal to enough Republicans.

Basically the stance of at least half the Republicans—because we had pretty large majorities for these incremental steps when we were proposing them—was that they were willing to agree that you can't have runaway free markets, as we felt we basically had in the health insurance field. The deal that was made for passing Medicare and Medicaid, which sailed through in 1965, was, "We have to deal with the health problems of senior citizens, and the poor, and a government-sponsored plan is the best way to do it. We'll leave the rest to the private sector." By the 1980s and 1990s, however, leaving the rest to the private sector had left the vast middle class in the country in the same position that senior citizens and the poor had been in before Medicare and Medicaid were enacted. They had too serious a problem to ignore, and it wasn't good enough to say, "The private sector can handle it," because it was clear that the private sector couldn't do it.

Young: Right.

Parker: Enough Republicans, with a fairly light touch of regulation—it wasn't as though the regulation was in your face—recognized that we could put together programs that basically would preserve the private-sector nature of health insurance but that had enough of a government role to ensure that the coverage was realistic and would meet people's needs.

Young: It appears that Clinton must have been at least a little nervous about this. Clinton made an effort to meet halfway and make some rapprochement with Gingrich. What Gingrich represented posed a risk in terms of moving forward on some of the progressive legislation. Kennedy made a point of giving Clinton some talking points, such as "no cuts in Medicare," or "no cuts in education or the minimum wage," and so forth. He talked to Clinton, I think in December, and maybe at other times as well. Were you in that meeting?

Parker: No. But Kennedy clearly felt that Clinton needed to hear people like Kennedy say that to him. It was absolutely what Kennedy believed. I don't think he was concerned that Clinton would jump onboard the Gingrich ship. The question was, how far do we have to move to compromise?

In our dealings with President Clinton, we found him very responsive. The Senator always felt that Clinton leaned over backward to listen to him, and the Senator had a close working relationship with him. It wasn't just Senator Kennedy who was telling him this. There was a huge outcry from most Democrats. This was basically the convalescence and recovery of the Democratic Party. Arthur Schlesinger has his theory of 30-year cycles, and this was the bottom of the Democratic downturn after '68.

Young: Yes. There was no foresight about Bush Two, but okay. I think there were different degrees of enthusiasm within the Clinton advisors for some of the things that Kennedy wanted to make happen. I think Clinton was hearing it a lot, but you're saying that you didn't feel that when it got to rock bottom, it was—

Parker: I think his feeling was that President Clinton was very smart to start with, and he had a very acute political antenna. He was looking in good faith for ways to do as much as he could, but the Senator understood that Clinton would not jump on board the Kennedy ship. At the same time, we could show him that the Kennedy ship could navigate quite well if we had the strong support of the President behind us.

Young: Yes, you had the Clinton flag up there. You didn't have the Kennedy flag.

Parker: We've endured administrations where we've had Democratic control of Congress and a Republican President, versus Republican control of Congress and a Democratic President. If the Senator had to choose, I think he'd probably say it's better for the country to have a Democratic President, because he can deal more effectively with a Republican Congress than a Democratic Congress can deal with a Republican President, or at least with an aggressive Republican President.

Those were tough years. Part of it was the surprise of '94, but the Democrats recovered. There were improvements because we were able to reach compromises. It wasn't flying well in the country that the ideologues in the Republican Party were driving the agenda and preventing things from going through. The Republicans were, I think, overconfident of the degree to which their revolution had taken effect.

A discussion began about blue states and red states. Looking at those election maps, as members of Congress always do, and worrying about what events would mean for them in their states, I think the Democrats became more comfortable that they had a good chance of being reelected by sticking to our principles. They didn't believe that their principles were no longer applicable. Somewhat surprisingly, you're seeing the same reanalysis, reexamination, and befuddlement in the Republican Party today, after the recent election. I don't think the intensity of the Democrats' defeat was as great then, but the surprise was much greater.

Young: The surprise was greater then, whereas now it was almost predictable.

Parker: Yes, I think everybody saw it coming. Ninety-four wasn't a time when we had these sorts of challenges, along with an incumbent in the White House who was so unpopular.

Young: There was no detection of what would happen in the '94 election. Why was it such a surprise? I wonder if it was the polling, or if people weren't paying attention to what was going on out in the country, or if it was the Republicans' Contract with America.

Parker: I think it was the Republicans' ability to organize. That seemed to be, in hindsight, where the Democrats were most inept. In some ways 2008 is the reverse of 1994. The amazing thing was the degree to which Obama's campaign was able to organize district by district—almost block by block sometimes—to turn out the vote and to get as much as they possibly could. Of course he had a large head start based on the issues and the President's lack of popularity.

The Republican surprise this time, I think, was that they felt reasonably comfortable with their blue-state, red-state lineup. Nationally they were almost resigned to losing the election. They got a new head of steam with Sarah Palin for a little bit, but it didn't seem to change things overall. I don't think they recognized the degree to which Obama's campaign was succeeding—his way of organizing, of getting our people to the polls, and of paying for the election by raising large amounts through small dollar contributions over the Internet—That was a surprise even to Democrats. I'm sure it was stunning to the Republicans. They had no idea that they could be so vastly outspent race by race.

Young: Up to this time, it was the Republicans and the [Karl] Rove strategy that seemed to be effective at getting people to vote. Maybe Obama learned something from that.

Parker: Some people say he adapted Rove's tactics as well as his Internet use. It seems that the Internet was an extremely effective tool for reaching out to lots of voters, particularly young voters and minority voters. Some of the more recent figures seem to show that it wasn't that great a turnout, but in terms of reaching the people who did turn out, it seemed to be effective. The issue is still up for grabs, but everybody thinks that elections are suddenly transformed. You'll have to be able to make effective use of this new Internet-driven campaign strategy to succeed in future elections.

Young: It will never go back now.

Parker: In addition to whatever else you do. In '94 and '95, Democrats were blaming themselves, wondering why we hadn't organized more effectively. It wasn't just the fundraising. There seemed to be something missing, and we didn't realize it, obviously, until it was too late. It all led to a relatively transient phenomenon of Democrats being depressed. Do we have to give up some of these issues?

To some extent you're right that Senator Kennedy may have stiffened backbones by continuing, in major speeches to party groups, to champion our principles—particularly on jobs, education, and health care, which have been his basic issues—emphasizing that, "We will reach these goals. We may have to tap here and there sometimes," as he said. In challenging Carter in '76, he said, "We're sailing against the wind now, but our goal is still the same, and we will reach that

destination." A lot of other Democrats felt that way as well. They felt that they'd been blindsided by Republican political muscle in '94.

Young: Would it be wrong to think that Kennedy was probably the only one with the national standing and the history to effectively do that at that moment?

Parker: I don't know whether I'd go that far. In terms of a national voice, that may have been true. There clearly were a number of other liberal Democrats who were more than happy to rally to the cause. It was a foregone conclusion that they'd always be with us, but in terms of rallying Democrats across the country, there was a feeling that this was an opportunity to show that we could bounce back. The Senator accepted numerous invitations to speak in different parts of the country, at state party conferences and other important forums.

That's when this cowboy-up philosophy that the Boston Red Sox used came up: when you're knocked off your horse, you get right back up and get back in the saddle again. He used to joke about riding that bronco in Montana in the 1960 campaign. "Politics is a contact sport," he loved to say. "Sometimes you have to take a punch, but we're going to come back strong."

He did more than rally his colleagues, who didn't actually need much rallying. They needed to see that people like Kennedy would not simply stand their old ground and say nothing, but would instead say, "We'll find a new way forward that will bring us closer to our goals. We won't give up or give in. Eventually we'll find solutions to these problems, and if we have to compromise now in order to do it, so be it. The compromise, I feel, will be well worth the effort if it makes a difference for the average citizens we represent. It's better than what we've done in the minority in the Senate so far, just standing and resisting everything the Republicans do."

As I say, during the course of '95, there was a period of readjustment and revival of Democratic feelings. He argued, "This is what the Senate is supposed to do. You're supposed to get up there and hash out these issues."

Young: But historically it is interesting that it was Kennedy who gave that Press Club speech and other speeches about standing on your principles. It was not the President who gave that speech. I think it says something about what I was addressing earlier, that Kennedy was already and had long been a national figure. He's almost a national Senator. There were few other Senators who had the national stature to do that. Am I thinking wrong about this?

Parker: No, I think there's a lot to that. He needed to send the message that Democrats weren't nursing their wounds or were somehow discouraged. "We're full of fight. We've been knocked down, but we'll get back up, and we'll keep moving. We may not score a touchdown on every play, but we'll keep getting first downs and getting closer to our goals." It was that kind of attitude, and I think the country recognized it. He wasn't abandoning his principles—far from it. But he was adjusting his strategy for achieving them.

It was instinctive for Senator Kennedy to do something like that, because that's the way he is. He loves standing up before party officials, people who share his philosophy, and drawing them out and showing them that he still holds his banners high. It probably had a significant effect on other members of the Senate. They didn't expect him to do anything else, but I think it encouraged them that not only was he still doing what they knew he did best and loved to do, but

he was also leading a charge inside the Senate to find ways, certainly on the issues that he was most involved in, to take significant steps forward.

His approach was, "We won't treat this period as just an interregnum in which we wait until we regain the majority. We can show the country that our principles and our ideals are still the direction we need to move in. The challenge is to find steps that take us in that direction. We won't simply hold our ground and keep fighting back against the Republicans. We'll force them to go on the defense with some of our ideas." That was the philosophy he was applying in the Senate.

Young: The philosophy was not new, and it wasn't just for the moment. It was, as you say, characteristic. Was he always a national voice from the time he entered the Senate—because he was a Kennedy and because of his brothers—or was he recognized and looked to as a national voice, not just as a liberal, only at a later point? I've been reading the newspaper accounts, which are very laudatory, of Kennedy becoming a leader even in the minority, and how effective he became even on Republican turf. It's as though at least the Washington press and others are rediscovering Kennedy.

Parker: My sense is that if you had to pick a moment, it would be when he announced in 1985 that he would not be a candidate for President in 1988. He had become a respected leader in the Senate by then, and his colleagues recognized his national appeal and his leadership qualities, but until then, most of the Senators felt that he was getting ready to run for the White House. People went along with him at that time because they thought he might become President and they wanted to be on his good side. After '85 they went along with him because he was doing the things that needed to be done, and they admired him. He took a step up in their eyes.

After 1968 he came out of the shadows of his brothers and basically was the next JFK [John Fitzgerald Kennedy] or the next RFK [Robert Francis Kennedy]. He was the heir apparent and was therefore thrust into deciding whether he wanted to be a Presidential candidate. From 1968 on, he was always automatically assumed to be. But when he came back from his trip to South Africa in 1984, he was appalled that the South African Government had snubbed him, because they thought he was there only because he intended to run running for President in 1988.

Young: You mentioned that. So after the election of '94—in '95, '96—he was becoming very visible, and he was taking a leadership role in the country at a bad time for his party.

Parker: Right. He had that role in the last half of the Reagan administration basically. With George H.W. Bush, Bush 41, there were other Democrats. The question was, who would be the next Presidential candidate? He didn't have any significant relationship with President Clinton before Clinton became the Presidential nominee in 1992. When Clinton came to the White House, Kennedy had already established himself as a man of the Senate, not as a future Presidential candidate. President Clinton respected Senator Kennedy as a leader of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party and as a leader of the Senate Democrats he had to deal with, no matter who was the Party's majority leader or minority leader.

Kennedy's personality helped a lot too, because he has always had good relations with Presidents, even with those he profoundly disagrees with, like Reagan. It worked out well with

Reagan. He is still occasionally in touch, for example, with Nancy Reagan. He likes the personalities. Partly it's a philosophy that's often ascribed to Tip [Thomas P.] O'Neill, that you argue until sundown, and then you go out and have a drink together and enjoy the evening with your opponents.

That attitude began to fade with the intense partisanship in the Senate that was galvanized by the Gingrich revolution, but in some ways it became even more effective for Kennedy because he was very good at dealing with colleagues on both sides of the aisle. Campaigns can be rough, but once the campaigns are over, he doesn't feel that opponents are enemies. One of the Irish proverbs he likes very much is, "There are no such thing as strangers. Strangers are just friends you haven't met."

Young: Very good. [*laughter*]

Parker: But those were trying years, more trying when there was a Republican majority in the Senate than when there was only a Republican President. Clinton was a big help to Senator Kennedy on lots of things, both personal and private. We talked about some of the personal things, and some of them had huge consequences.

I shudder to think what might have happened in Irish/U.S./Northern Ireland relations if Jean [Kennedy Smith], his sister, hadn't been appointed Ambassador to Ireland by President Clinton. That was earlier in the administration, before the Third Way directions had been worked out. Clinton had done some favors like that for Senator Kennedy, and I think he went out of his way to be accommodating on this. He obviously checked with his people, and most of them in the administration didn't care who was Ambassador to Ireland. They found out that Kennedy wanted it a lot, so there wasn't strong opposition to her.

Young: That was very early.

Parker: Yes. That came in the spring and summer.

Young: Very early. Did she want the post?

Parker: Oh, yes.

Young: Did he think beyond helping her get it? Wasn't he thinking about how she could be useful?

Parker: Definitely. I think he felt that she was going to Dublin at a difficult time. By that time, the Senator had spent almost a quarter of a century on Northern Ireland as an issue, and it was still a bloodbath over there. It may be an accident of history, but it turns out that people from the Irish Government—and maybe they told you this as well—think she may have been the best Ambassador they've ever had over there, in part because she had enough intuitive sense, maybe from what she'd learned from the JFK White House days, to understand what was happening with Gerry Adams when he said that he couldn't get a visa from the State Department to visit the U.S. "They think I'm just a terrorist," he said. "But I'm a leader of my people as well, and I'd like to put down the gun and reach across to the other side." If there had been a different Ambassador, it's hard to know what would have happened.

Young: That wouldn't have happened.

Parker: In the end they might have found the path to peace, but that visa certainly made a huge difference in launching a significant part of the peace process, which led to the 1994 Good Friday Agreement. It came very quickly after Adams got his visa. The State Department was adamant against it. I think that Bill Clinton, to his credit, heard the State Department say, "You'll antagonize the British if you do that, Mr. President." But John Hume had convinced Jean and Jean had convinced Senator Kennedy that denying the visa would ruin a unique opportunity for peace, and the Senator convinced Clinton to overrule the State Department. Of course, Clinton was well aware how disappointed the Senator would be if the visa was denied.

Young: That is so Clinton. [*laughs*] But again, he became committed to it.

Parker: Yes, the Senator obviously cared deeply about it. That's the thing. When he gets involved in an issue—and it can be the most far-out issue you've ever heard of—once he decides he wants to do something about it—this has been so characteristic of him—he can keep, people say, 100 balls in the air at the same time, and he can focus intently on one when he needs to. He knows he can get results because of who he is and who takes his calls.

He usually depends on his staff very heavily to figure things out. "This is the goal line we want to cross. Now you tell me the plays we need to run in order to get to the goal line as fast as possible." More often than not, particularly if it doesn't make headlines, he's likely to throw a touchdown pass in about a week, something like that. It is remarkable how people almost always respond favorably. He knows how to use his political support and the respect that people have for him.

I think people understand that when Kennedy calls even the head of the FDA [Food and Drug Administration] or whoever about a particular issue, he's not doing it because a lobby is pressing him. He's doing it because he has looked at the issue closely and believes he's doing the right thing. Sometimes he gets the feeling that he's more on top of the issue than the Cabinet deputy or whomever he is talking to about it. They say, "I'll check that out, Senator, and get back to you."

Obviously the word then circulates in whatever agency he has just called that, "Ted Kennedy would like to do this. Is there any reason why we can't do it?" That seems to be the attitude. Sometimes they dig in their heels, but I'd say the chances are about four out of five that if you give me a list of 200 issues that Senator Kennedy, in the course of two sessions of Congress, would like to accomplish with the administration—by making phone calls to various people, sometimes to the White House, sometimes to the Cabinet Secretary, sometimes to the Deputy Secretary or the Assistant Secretary—about, I'd say, 75 percent of those happen reasonably quickly, because they're not highly controversial.

He knows, however, that the changes he's seeking will make a big difference to a particular family or to a particular town in Massachusetts or to an Indian group that he knows from his brother Robert Kennedy's campaign. He does it in a way that no one gets a special favor. You may get better funding for a program, and to the extent they become earmarks, they're widely criticized, but I don't think you can go into even these special funding requests that Senator Kennedy makes and find problems, where he's doing something that shouldn't be done. They are

pretty thoroughly vetted by the staff. They identify and work out the issues, and if it's a good idea on the merits, he'll go forward with it.

Young: And so much of this never appears in the form of legislation or anything of the sort. This is true on the international scene as well as at home. It's very important to capture that for the oral history because it's not in the legislative record in any way. Also, on an issue that might pertain to legislation—not just getting a visa for somebody, for example—it strikes me that when he calls, he knows what he's talking about.

Parker: Yes, very much so.

Young: That gives the ground for the person he's contacting to be serious about it. If Kennedy didn't know what he was talking about, he'd be saying, in effect, "I'm asking you to do this only because of who I am, not because there is a case to be made here."

Parker: In a nutshell, that's the advantage he has.

Young: Yes. He has both the name and—

Parker: A strong argument.

Young: And he doesn't waste his use of the name.

Parker: I don't know how his colleagues react, but often when he has an issue he thinks another Senator can be helpful on, he'll go to the colleague on the Senate floor during a vote and give him a card with five or six points on it, so that the other Senator can see in advance the five reasons why Kennedy wants something done. The other Senator takes it back to his staff and asks, "Let's go through these. Here are points one, two, three, four, and five. What's your reaction to that?" That's the way he gets results.

Young: It's efficient.

Parker: It's also very effective. But if you had to single out one reason why he is an effective Senator, it's because he can keep so many balls in the air at the same time. One of the slogans, in a way, in the office was, "He can keep 100 balls in the air." He has a knack for seeing which one is about to hit the ground and burst, and he can reach out and flick that one back up in the air to give it a little more time. The breadth of his intellect is rather extraordinary. He knows and understands and remembers countless facts too.

Some days in the Senate, he'll go over to the Senate floor with 8 or 10 cards. Basically he's supposed to talk to 8 or 10 different Senators about various issues, particularly when the Senate is about to take up an appropriations bill, or a particular bill that he's had a big interest in, or if he wants things done on two or three bills. He has a lot on his plate. He'll have had a staff meeting. He'll have talked about the issues before he goes over to the Senate floor. He'll go over them quickly on the floor with the one or two staff people who are principally involved in each issue.

He has it all on the cards to give the other Senators, but he doesn't have to look at his cards in order to talk to those Senators. He knows the issue and he can talk with them about it. I think it surprises a lot of Senators, the degree to which he is familiar with some rather esoteric details of the particular legislation that they're working on. It gives him a leg up in terms of getting something included in a piece of legislation. There are a thousand examples of that over the years. They may be part of his oral history project somewhere, but I think they're more likely buried in his papers.

On a typical afternoon, there may be five or 10 votes. It's rare to have 10 votes in a day. Sometimes, when there's a crush to pass an appropriations bill or when the end of a session is near, they'll have a "votarama," as they call it, where many issues have been debated for a week and haven't yet been voted on. They let Senators debate their amendments for two or three days, and then, before the final vote on the bill, each Senator offers his amendment again and gets one minute to explain it. One of the Senators opposing the amendment is chosen and given one minute to explain his opposition. Then a series of "stacked" votes takes place one after another on the amendments, followed by a final vote on the bill as amended. It's not uncommon for a votarama to include 25 amendments to be voted on.

In those situations, Senators are on the floor for two hours, sometimes three hours or more, and have ample time to talk to each other about whatever is on their minds. A lot of Senate business gets carried out in informal occasions like that, and Kennedy is a master at it.

Even without a votarama taking place, there are usually times during each day in a typical legislative session when a single vote is taking place, and Senators have to go to the Senate floor for it. A lot of back-slapping goes on, gregarious talking among colleagues, but sometimes Senator Kennedy will go there on a mission. He'll find five Democrats and three Republicans and talk to each one about a separate issue on a pending bill. It's remarkable to behold. That's one of the reasons why staff people like to go with him to the Senate floor, to see their project in the process of getting accomplished.

Young: Talk about his role in the Clinton impeachment and Senate trial. That was, I guess, the big event of Clinton's second term. I had an interview with the Senator on this, but the briefing book wasn't quite to his satisfaction, so it was scattered. I don't think a complete picture has been painted about where he was on this when it was building in the House, or about his very important role, as I understand it, in setting up the terms. It was a tricky thing, and I understand that he and Senator [Phil] Gramm made a deal.

Parker: The partisan lines were drawn very quickly as the process began. I think Senator Kennedy felt strongly from the beginning that it was an unjustified move by the Republican Congress. His hope was that they would be able to defeat it on the House floor. Once it became so highly partisan, however, it seemed clear that the House could pass the impeachment resolution, because it required only a majority vote, and Republicans had majority of seats in the House. Then they'd send the impeachment resolution to the Senate for the trial, and it would take a two-thirds vote in the Senate to remove him from office.

The Senator's feeling from the beginning was that the resolution would get through the House, but it would never pass the Senate. We wanted to be sure, however, that our Senate Democratic

colleagues agreed with us. Senator Kennedy talked to a number of outside legal experts, and everyone he talked to made it fairly clear that such a House action would be an abuse of the impeachment process, because Clinton's actions weren't high crimes or misdemeanors that justified this dramatic move under the terms of the Constitution. Once that idea settled in, it moved along in the House. I'm not aware that the Senator had a lot to do on this issue besides talk to his colleagues in the Senate.

Young: During the House proceedings.

Parker: Yes, during the House proceedings, Democratic Senators were asking each other, "Are there any members on our side who are likely to feel heavy pressure to vote for the impeachment resolution?"

Young: While it was bubbling in the House, didn't he suggest that Greg Craig be an additional attorney in dealing with the House?

Parker: Yes, Greg had been a member of our staff. The Clinton administration knew him also, but the Senator was strongly for him.

Young: He was effective at dealing with the politics of the situation, I think.

Parker: Yes, and Dale Bumpers was very effective too. He had an impressive team representing him, and both Greg and Dale were outstanding. The die was basically cast. Most of the Democrats, both in the House and in the Senate—certainly more than enough in the Senate to prevent the resolution from passing with a two-thirds vote—felt that this was an abuse of power. People looked at it on the merits and said, "Yes, what Clinton did was an embarrassment, but it wasn't an impeachable offense. Why are they doing this to the President?" It was such an excessive abuse of political power by the Republican majority that Kennedy was very comfortable opposing it, and he was critical at several points along the way.

Young: What was the view of why this was happening? Why this movement to get Clinton, if that's what it was? Many people have commented on the strong and very negative feelings toward Clinton and about the desire to bring him down. Some have said that it was evident from the beginning, and this impeachment was the voice it finally found.

Parker: It was the new and more extreme partisanship at its worst. The right wing was salivating over the possibility, and the GOP majority in the House, still reveling about its party's success in gaining control of Congress in 1994, was bent on tarring and feathering a Democratic President as much as possible.

The politics of it were pretty clear for most Democratic Senators. "Republicans are feeding some red meat to the right wing. That's all this is. They're taking it a step beyond what the Constitution permits. It certainly doesn't require this action." The attitude was, "We'll see what happens with the House. Perhaps they'll even summon the ability to reject impeachment." But with a Republican majority, it wasn't realistic that they would do so.

Before the House voted, the 1998 Congressional elections took place. Impeachment was an issue, and Republicans lost six seats in the House, probably because of it. But Republicans didn't

relent. They were bent on catering to the right wing, and brought the impeachment resolution to a vote a month later, in December. In a sense, House Democrats were pressured by the election. They realized the issue was partisan politics at its ugliest, but that it would not affect their next reelection. They thought, *I'm very comfortable voting no on the impeachment resolution in the House.*

The politics of it played out fairly quickly in terms of how it would affect the Senate. I don't think the White House, frankly, ever thought there was a serious risk that Clinton would be convicted by the Senate. They put a lot of effort into trying to line up moderate Republicans, but Republicans, at the same time, were basically willing to fight to the last man standing and to do all they could to embarrass him.

Young: Do all the damage they could.

Parker: The GOP argument that people thought was being made was, "Even if we don't get him out of there, we're at least stymieing any significant Clinton agenda for the rest of his term." The politics of it wouldn't cost them any votes with their constituency, and in some ways they felt that it might at least give them a leg up on some of the other issues they were working on. I think that was one of Kennedy's principal concerns: "While this cloud is hanging over the White House and Congress, what'll happen to the issues we care about?" Fortunately, it boiled down to almost a side issue, in the sense that it didn't have a profound impact. It was pretty clear that impeachment was a futile effort in terms of the results.

Young: What was Kennedy's view of the behavior of the special prosecutor? Ken Starr was pushing this very hard.

Parker: He thought it was abusive. The feeling from the start was that battle lines were being drawn. You were either all for it or all against it. There wasn't any group in the middle saying, "What do we do? How do we handle this?" The drive for impeachment went off the rails.

Young: It seems as though it was intended from the beginning.

Parker: Nobody could believe it. The only concern among Democrats, I would say, was that a dramatic piece of new evidence might be brought out that would change things, but that didn't seem to be happening. When the House-passed resolution arrived in the Senate, the only question was how the impeachment trial proceedings would be carried out by the Senators. A caucus of all Senators was held in the Old Senate Chamber, because of the historic nature of the issue. The debate was long and contentious, but the only major issue was the length of the trial and how many witnesses could be called.

Young: Were you there?

Parker: No, only Senators were there, and maybe a few members of the leadership staff. Kennedy had spent a fair amount of time with our Judiciary Committee staff, working out how the Senate should handle the trial and what the procedure should be. It became reasonably clear that the only way Democrats would be embarrassed was if they weren't able to agree on a realistic way to make the proceedings go as smoothly as possible.

Young: Unlike the House.

Parker: Right.

Young: To make it more smooth.

Parker: There was a lot of Democratic resistance to bringing in witnesses, that sort of thing, and some preliminary questions needed to be answered. In debating these issues, Kennedy was very vociferous in saying that we needed to figure out a way to conduct the trial in a way that a fair defense could be presented.

To his amazement, Republican Senator Phil Gramm volunteered a reasonable compromise, and Kennedy, at the critical moment, stood up and said, "I think Phil Gramm has a good suggestion. Why don't we do it this way?" It was a defining moment. Senators were practically at each others' throats in the chamber debate, from what people said, when all of a sudden here was Ted Kennedy reaching out with an olive branch, as was Phil Gramm from his side. He said, "You could hear the bitterness and the tensions begin to expire. People were holding their breaths that we would work this out."

Young; Well, the House managers were pressing, were they not, for something very protracted in the Senate?

Parker: They wanted to have a show, yes.

Young: They wanted to stretch it out. And wasn't Lindsey Graham one of the House managers?

Parker: Yes. It seems remarkable because he's relatively easy to work with in the Senate. That was most Senators' first introduction to him.

Young: He wasn't a Senator then.

Parker: Right. The insistence of the House managers for a lengthy trial polarized the Senate, but I don't think it had any long-term effects. People didn't carry any grudges. There was a feeling even among Senate Republicans that the House Republicans had gone too far in polarizing the issue. Even the Senate Republicans, it turned out, weren't willing to embroil the Senate in as furious a partisan debate as the House had held.

Young: Certainly the House Republicans were way ahead of where the general public was on this, just as they were with the Contract with America.

Parker: Yes, they thought they could sell it, and they couldn't. Whatever feelings they had against Clinton, it was an aberration to try to impeach him. Besides, by that time he was near the end of his second and final term as President.

People felt that House Republicans had overreached their power. Democrats were obviously feeding that argument. "What you have here is a runaway Republican House majority." That's why the Senate was created, as the place "to cool the hot passions of the House." "Our only

regret," Senators were saying, "is that the House didn't recognize that they've gone too far. They've saddled us with this problem, and now we have to deal responsibly with it."

A lot of Republicans basically felt, "Let's get the trial over with and let the chips fall where they may. Let's not get tangled up over the procedures or over how long the trial will last. We'll do this as though politics were stripped out of it. It'll be as though Clinton is the defendant in a case, and he will have his lawyers, and the House will have its lawyers, and you'll have a reasonable amount of time to present your argument and call your witnesses, but that's all. We won't let this embarrass the Senate." To us, the handwriting was on the wall. Conceivably, something new could have come out. That's what many were concerned about. Who knew what might happen? But at the same time, it seemed that the more we heard about the case, the more it seemed that the House had gone far beyond what the Constitution intended.

The issue, to some extent, began turning toward how badly this might hurt Republicans in the coming 2000 election. Some Democrats were almost eager to see it go through and to see the Republicans defeated even thought it was bad for the country and bad for our image in the world. It was appalling. People recognized that. "But given where we are, let's get through it in a rational way, and we'll see what happens." Nobody thought Republicans would have the votes to convict him and remove him from office.

Senator Kennedy, partly because of his longstanding role in the Judiciary Committee, was acting as a Judiciary Committee Senator and not as the chairman of the Labor Committee. He instinctively reacts strongly—whether it's Watergate, the firing of Archibald Cox, or the Clinton impeachment—to anything that seems to be a fundamental abuse of the rule of law. Our country is grounded in that principle, and if people at the highest level are willing to thumb their nose at it, then it's terrible for our country. He was able to be a voice of moderation—in part because of his understanding of the procedures. You probably should talk to his Judiciary staff. It all turned out well, and the Senate leaders were complimentary of Senator Kennedy for joining forces with Phil Gramm to find a way to end the logjam.

Young: Was that Trent Lott?

Parker: Yes. He was the Republican leader. In the end everything worked out.

Young: He was under a lot of pressure from the firebrands in the House.

Parker: Oh, yes, absolutely. Kennedy had a good relationship with Senator Lott, in spite of all of their hostility on various issues. I probably mentioned this before, but Henry Longfellow had a home in Massachusetts. That's now an historic site, but he had a home in Mississippi as well. When Kennedy heard that, he gave Trent Lott a photo of the Longfellow house in Mississippi, framed along with a photo of the Longfellow house in Massachusetts and inscribed, "We can work together, Trent. We have similar ancestry." [*laughter*] He loves things like that.

The Senate is more collegial than the House in that way. The House votes more as a bloc. With 435 members, they don't get to know each other as well, especially across party lines. Having only two Senators from each state was one of the shrewdest parts of the Constitution. Senators have more time to look at passionate issues and to make sure that the Congress is doing the right thing. The Senator's personality is such that he'd love to have 99 friends in the Senate, and I'd

say he has about 95. In any given Senate, there are about five Republican Senators who won't have anything to do with him, but there are probably 10 or 15 other Republican Senators asking, "Why did Senator Kennedy go to Senator A instead of to me to work on this issue? I'd like to work with him on something too."

Young: Our time is up. We have not said anything about the most recent years, Bush.

Parker: Yes, it's probably worth another time. I'll look to see if I have anything more on Clinton that might make sense.

Young: Okay.