



EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH NANCY PELOSI

April 30, 2010
Washington, D.C.

Interviewer
James Sterling Young

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TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH NANCY PELOSI

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Young: This is an interview with Speaker Pelosi, April 30, 2010, in Washington. You were showing me a series of pictures of Speakers of the House.

Pelosi: Yes. The day that I was sworn in as Speaker of the House, I received this gift from Senator Kennedy. When people ask about him, one word that comes to mind is “thoughtful.” He was so thoughtful, always calling people to see how they were, to congratulate them, wish them well, or if they were sick or whatever. He sent me this remarkable gift, which is a picture of every person who has served as Speaker of the House. Of course my picture is much bigger, as the first woman to serve as Speaker of the House.

Along the way, he had sent me notes about how proud his mother would be of a woman advancing in this way. When I saw it I thought, *It’s so typically Ted Kennedy*. This takes a good deal of work. It’s a remarkable thing, so I’m very proud of it. Plus, I have a constant reminder of him, of his laughing about it, that incredible laugh. It reminds me, though, of the first time I ever saw him. I was with my parents, at the—can I just see this a second?

Young: Sure.

Pelosi: He also reminded me how many of the Speakers were from Massachusetts.

Young: He would, wouldn’t he?

Pelosi: California had none, Massachusetts has several. There were something like eight from Massachusetts, and I was only the first from California.

Can you imagine what he thought? I’m going to give her something she’ll never think of having, right? Isn’t that great? I couldn’t believe it when I got that, but he took great pride in the fact that there were so many from Massachusetts.

Young: I think he would have done it even if there weren’t.

Pelosi: Oh, I think so too, but then talking about his mother and his note. My mother would be so proud.

The first time I saw Ted Kennedy, the first time I met him, was at the Democratic National Convention in 1960, in Los Angeles. I had gone to the convention in California with my parents. My father had been the mayor of Baltimore, and he was a strong supporter of John F. Kennedy in the primaries and the rest. So we were at this event, which was not a big event, and we had a chance to see him and some of the Kennedy family members who were there as well. Senator Kennedy came and was fit and lovely and smiling and gracious. I was really impressed to meet him because I had seen a picture of him somewhere along the way, taking the big ski jump, and in my mind—I'm not sure if that was before or after, but it's all coming together. I asked Vicki [Reggie Kennedy] about that and she said it was the first time he had ever done that. I said that I had always wanted to ask him how he knew how to do that and she said, "He didn't, he just did it."

Young: He did it.

Pelosi: And so, again, I have all kinds of impressions in that year of his doing anything to win this state for the President. His coming to the convention and being so nice to everyone. That same warmth that he had is something that people loved him for throughout his whole life.

Young: When did you get to know him as a Senator?

Pelosi: Probably in the years when I was chair of the California Democratic Party.

Young: I see.

Pelosi: Senator Kennedy came to California on a number of occasions, of course for his own Presidential. I was chair, one way or another, from '77 to '83, northern chair or state chair. So he visited the state quite a bit. California was a very special place for Ted Kennedy. He had many friends there and was very successful there. That's really when I got to know him, from my own standing as a party leader in California to his as a Senator. And then, of course, not that long after that, I came to Congress and worked with him on many issues.

I remember going to the '80 convention. I was neutral because I was party chair. Jerry Brown was running, the President of the United States was running, but my children were all for Ted Kennedy. They were sitting in the Kennedy box and I was sitting with the Californians.

Young: Which gave quite an impression.

Pelosi: They didn't even care who I was for, they were for Ted Kennedy. Mind you, they were like 13, 14, 15 years old. They were young kids, but they were doing their volunteering for Ted Kennedy.

Young: You had a number of issues you worked on, or you were on the same side.

Pelosi: Yes.

Young: How closely you worked the Senate and the House on these issues, I don't know.

Pelosi: Well, Senator Kennedy worked closely with our chairman, their corresponding chairman over here, Congressman George Miller.

Young: Yes.

Pelosi: In our group, Congressman Miller, Chairman Miller, worked very close with Senator Kennedy. Congresswoman Anna Eshoo, who is from California, was an early Kennedy supporter, in his Presidential campaign, long before she came to Congress. She was a Kennedy devotee and just loved the Senator, and worked for him to support his candidacy. And then here we are, all serving together, but any number of people, of course the Massachusetts delegation as well.

Young: If we can skip over a lot of history, unless you want to dwell on it, to the most recent event, to the culmination of health care reform. I think one of several things that history and historians, and people who start studying this very important event in reform, will want to know is how it came about. He has called it, of course, the cause of his life.

Pelosi: The cause of his life.

Young: But he wasn't around to see it fulfilled. At the end he wasn't there, not physically, and so I wonder if you could say something about how his absence was felt during the last 18 months, two years.

Pelosi: Well, he was really not absent that long, because even though he was not always physically present, his views and his attitudes were well known. His lifetime dedication to advancing this cause put it on a track. One year ago in early March, now 14 months or so ago, President [Barack] Obama, at the beginning of his administration, had a summit on health care at the White House. The House, Senate, Democrats, Republicans, all the stakeholders, whether it's pediatric health, seniors, insurance companies, pharmaceutical companies, every laborer, every stakeholder you can think of was present at that meeting. The surprise guest was Senator Kennedy. Now, this is about six months before he passed away, so it wasn't certain that he would be there, but there he appeared. Of course, he was met with uproarious cheers, and he said, "I've come to sign up as a foot soldier in the fight for health care reform." Of course, he was never a foot soldier, maybe way back when, but he certainly was a strong leader in all of this.

He had worked very hard with his committee to put forth a bill that came out of committee in the summer. So his imprint was very strongly felt on the legislation, and the course of the action that he set the Senate on was important. They had two committees, his being the HELP Committee, which is Health, Education, Labor and Pensions. We had some objections to the Senate bill, but the best part of the Senate bill was what Senator Kennedy did, Chairman Kennedy did. The letter that he wrote to the President, some of which the President read at the joint session here, I think had a lasting impact on the President in terms of a full commitment, an unwavering commitment to comprehensive health care reform, not taking a little piece of it or anything.

So I think that the product that we have now is one that we're all proud of, that we think is in the spirit of Senator Kennedy. It accomplishes what he set out to do, some pieces of which we had done along the way—children's health and those kinds of things—but not fully, and now we did

it more completely. So I never think of it as Senator Kennedy not being here. He got it off to the right start, his leadership from the start, his inspiration all along, and continuing after he died. His confidence that the President would see it through and, of course, Vicki carrying on the work, so his presence was very much felt.

Young: She did some lobbying even.

Pelosi: She did indeed.

Young: Right up until the end.

Pelosi: Very effectively. From our standpoint over here, we saw her strength as really important. We did not want to squander it, though, just used it where we thought it was necessary, because everyone would want to speak to Vicki of course. She's lovely.

Young: There was a time when it looked, from the outside—I guess it was the month he actually died, in August—when the tea parties were going strong, the town meetings, the news was all bad, and what made the news was this, it's just not going to happen.

Pelosi: He never accepted that.

Young: He never accepted that, but what might he have done, do you think, in the final crunch to help bring it back together?

Pelosi: Well, it did come back together.

Young: It did.

Pelosi: It came back together. Again, he built a strong foundation that could withstand that. We think that, in the House, we saved the bill and all this because our members had hundreds and hundreds of town meetings and they fought back. They knew what we believed in; no, they knew what they believed in, and fought back the attacks on the health care bill. So from the standpoint of that bill, I think that the House members saved it then. And then another setback, people thought, was the loss of the seat in Massachusetts. We never accepted that. We said, "So? That's one path, there's another path and we're just going to clear the way to go in." He was never one to take a setback as a defeat, and we certainly weren't going to do that. Too many of us had worked too many decades to get to the place that we were when the President signed the bill. For us to just say OK, it's hard now so we can't do it. It was always hard.

As far as Senator Kennedy is concerned, I think it's really important for people to know that—first, I believe that he does know that it passed. I'm a believer, so I think he does know. I think that we always felt his strength, his commitment, his understanding that it had to be everything, it had to be comprehensive, it couldn't be incremental. That's the message he gave the President, and I think that was really important. If there was one critical factor it would have been that he wrote to the President that he had confidence that he would get the job done, and the President was unwavering. I think that Senator Kennedy was an important part of that.

Young: Yes. Much has been said about, or has been written on the public option, and I know that I was asked, because I keep up with the press. Did he say anything to you about the public option? Did he tell you that in [Richard M.] Nixon's time they came within at least seeing distance of a health care reform, universal health care? Would Senator Kennedy have counseled people to drop or keep the public option? I don't know that the public option issue was all that central, but it certainly occupied a lot of time. Do you think he would have accepted the final result?

Pelosi: No, absolutely. Let me say this. Senator Kennedy had a public option in his bill, in the HELP bill, but it was not as strong as what we had, as we were proposing here. It was a less strong bill. But it's important to note that there's a lesson—one of the lessons we all learned from Senator Kennedy is to be operational. What I say to the people is, "What is the purpose of the public option?" To keep the insurance companies honest and to increase the competition. If that is not something that is accepted in terms of a public option, how else do we get that done? We're not wedded to a means, we're wedded to a result. Senator Kennedy was a very operational leader. He knew when he saw success and didn't have it defined by certain terminology, but really by the result and the impact on the lives of the American people, and this legislation accomplishes that.

Young: So it was the goal that was important, what you needed to get, rather than the means.

Pelosi: A term of art. People get wedded in a debate to language, and you say, "OK, look, for what purpose?" As long as that purpose is being served. Now, it may not be served as strongly at this moment, but we believe it takes us to where we need to go. He always knew to be as bold as we could be, and to know when victory was there and not smother that victory because of a technicality or a term of art, rather than a result for the American people.

Young: That's a sign of his whole career, don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

Pelosi: It's that course, that's the message—

Young: But most people have not always seen that.

Pelosi: No, but that's how he functioned, and he had so many decades in the Congress of the United States, in the United States Senate, that he had relationships and friendships. I think he saw where he had opportunity and where there was none, and what you could accomplish now. He wasn't an incrementalist, he wouldn't settle for a crumb. Just so the issue was well served and advanced didn't mean you didn't get 100 percent. If you didn't get 100 percent, you can't walk away, but you don't give up 90 percent and say "I declare a victory" at 10 percent. So he knew how to calibrate all of that, and it really was a lesson to everyone else because we all come here with the idea that we want to fight for the best possible solution. Sometimes the best possible solution is to find out what you can get the votes for, in the boldest possible way, rather than 100 percent, which you can't get the votes for. He had such a sense of humor about it all. He could laugh.

I think of him in many ways. Personally, I loved him; officially, I respected his work; and politically, on the campaign trail, he was always a joy to have there. We would all compete, when we would introduce him, to see who could introduce him in a way that he hadn't heard

before. He laughed. He knew what was going on, but there was always a special occasion when he visited us in California.

Young: He enjoyed the work in the Senate, didn't he?

Pelosi: Oh, my gosh, he thrived on it. It was his arena.

Young: People on the outside say, how could anybody possibly stand it, where we hear all this fighting, this polarization? But actually it seems to me that the Senate was in his blood.

Pelosi: Well, I think that it became that way. I mean clearly, he wanted to be President, but that didn't turn out. In the Senate, of course, you're dealing with far fewer people, you're talking about 100. Over here, we have 435, more than four times as many. And then if you add to that the fact that he was there for decades, he knew everybody pretty well. So while you may have major disagreements on issues, you had your personal respect for people and respect for their commitment to their point of view. We all don't think alike, and everybody brings their representation of their area to the Congress. I think that he, again, demonstrated how important it is to be respectful of other views, to try to incorporate them into what you're doing, but never surrender the cause. His 1980 speech at the convention was a magnificent statement of his determination, his values, and his love of our country.

Young: With a few exceptions, all of the major initiatives that he started in the Senate were always started with somebody from across the aisle, maybe more than one, from across the aisle.

Pelosi: Right.

Young: There were some exceptions, but in terms of strictly Democratic Party wise, and I think this was pragmatic, looking to the votes, but it also demonstrated that he had considerable respect on the other side of the aisle as well. He could find common ground between the two. That ability to find common ground across the aisle seems to have gone up in flames for a moment during this recent health care.

Pelosi: Well, they didn't believe in health care. In other words, that's the disappointing part. If Senator—we always used to call him Senator, not the Senator. Senator projected his good intentions on other people and frequently that was justified. In the case of health care reform, there was no reciprocity, there was no commonality of values and interest in passing health care reform if it involved regulating the insurance industry, and that's the only way you can do it. The Republicans stood strongly with the insurance companies and we stood strongly with the patients, and they would not cross that line.

That's really not to say that there weren't other issues where you might be able to find common ground. It's just on this issue, and there's a reason we haven't gotten it in 100 years. Teddy Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, Richard Nixon—as you've said, in the Nixon years—the Clintons [William and Hillary]. There's a reason it hasn't happened, it's because there have been obstructions for this very same reason all along. This time, we were able to do it. It took a lot of determination from a lot of people who have been working on the issue for years. And a lot of realization that we're not going to have single payer.

I've been for single payer for 30 years, but once you realize that's not going to happen— And 30 years ago, it was easier to do because we weren't so far down the path of some other ways to go in terms of health insurance. So, we weren't having single payer and we may not have a public option, which became a thing. Again, many people committed to this over a long period of time, working with Senator Kennedy and also respecting the fact that he knew what would work. So, toward the end, even though his physical presence was not with us, his ideas were, because what you want it to do is work, you don't want it to be an ideological document. I say to people, "Let's just be agnostic about it. Put it on the table." You don't call it a public option, but it's called an exchange; that may work for us, and what is the standard. I think what happened was consistent with what he believed, and he believed that that would work. And some of the people that we worked with, as you indicated, were people who were very familiar with what the Senator would have wanted in the legislation. Mark Childress, of course, was there, and Mike [Myers].

Larry Horowitz was no longer there, but he was a person who had a clear idea of what was on the course. But we only altered two—because, remember, we all had been working on it for a long time. That 1980 convention, when the Senator was challenging President [Jimmy] Carter, and the midterm convention before that were about two things. It was about jobs and it was about health care, and Senator didn't think that enough was being done. But the big debate at the convention was about health care, at the midterm in Memphis, Tennessee. It was interesting, because Senator Kennedy spoke and oh, my God, he was so fabulous, and Joseph Califano represented the Carter administration. These two giants, they know their stuff, they're articulate, they're fearless. And then there was this very young Governor, just elected Governor, who came in to be the moderator, and I thought, *Oh, my gosh, who would want to moderate this?* And he came in, as comfortable as he could be, William Jefferson Clinton. That was 1980. Isn't that something?

Young: Yes.

Pelosi: He was fabulous.

Young: That was a platform fight?

Pelosi: It was a fight in 1978, in Memphis, Tennessee.

Young: That's the midterm.

Pelosi: Yes, it was. President Carter was elected in '76. In '78, Senator Kennedy was preparing to run against the President, and in the midterm he challenged on those scores, and then in '80, of course, the convention was in New York with him. He made the run and you know the outcome of that.

The Senator was not a lone rider. Many people supported his ideas and he supported the ideas of many people, which were that we would have affordable, quality health care in our country and that we would accomplish this. Again, although he did not live to see the signing, he certainly launched the effort—how can I say this in the nicest possible way? He challenged, in a positive way, our new President to stick with it. There's a more courteous way to say that. He had

confidence that our new President would do this, and conveyed that confidence to him in his last correspondence to him, which was read after the Senator died.

Young: And then toward the end, President Obama himself sort of rolled up his sleeves, it looks like.

Pelosi: Just toward the end, yes, he did.

Young: Toward the end.

Pelosi: And I think that the Senator's letter and Vicki's presence were all positive in keeping us on track. He was really a special force in our country, probably as Democratic as any Senator could be in terms of his allegiance to party principles of fairness and opportunity and equality, recognizing that everybody did not share his view or his means to those ends, as to what the role of government would be in it, and yet respectful and open to the views of other people. Some of that came with a mellowing over time. Not taking the spirit, diminishing the spirit, but nonetheless, taking relationships and the rest to a place.

I remember one of the last things that he said to me in person, not over the phone but in person, was, "I think we can get something with the Republicans." [Laughs] It was like he was at the signing of the bill. The Edward M. Kennedy, the volunteerism legislation.

I spoke to him a few times after that, by phone, where he would call and say, "We're going to get a bill?" I'd say, "We're going to get a bill." He'd say, "When are we going to get it?" I'd say, "We're going to get it when we do." And he'd laugh and he was like, "We're going to get it. She said we're going to get it. We're going to get a bill." [Laughs] But that laugh that would follow was always something. He would always call and confirm, it's going to happen. And then I would send messages to him: tell him it's going to happen. This was when he was, in the summer, mostly at Cape Cod, at Hyannis Port.

Young: What do you think students who are thinking of a public service career in the future ought to make of this time and his work in the Senate and, in fact, the work you are still doing in the House of Representatives? Right now it seems to me that we're living in a period of great cynicism that the government can't get things done. I don't fully understand it, but it's very negative attitudes. I know he was very concerned about motivating people to do public service, on learning how it was done and getting experience.

Pelosi: Well, first I would say that it was clear to him and to many of us that public service is a noble calling. That it is something that you cannot be deterred from because people might not think it's something *they* want to do. It's about what *you* want to do. More than 200 years ago when our country was founded, the competition was as keen as it is today. You just didn't see it in real time, 24-7. So, by the time people got the word on things, it wasn't as, shall we say, messy looking as it may appear to be today. It was only, frankly, in the first administration of George Washington that there really wasn't too much competition, because everybody thought that George Washington would maybe be President for a long time. It was in the second term when he said that was his last term that people started to really compete and talk about what would come next. And then, as you know, the issue of states rights, federalism, all those issues caused canings and fist-fights and name-calling and all kinds of things.

President [James] Polk had been the Speaker of the House before he became the President of the United States. During his administration at one time, the then Speaker said, “I’m not recognizing anybody,” because the House was so disorderly. So, recognize that people are representatives. They come to represent their districts. Their job description and their title are one and the same, so you have to hope to influence the decision. Unless you’re the President or the King, you don’t dominate. And even the President can’t have his way if he doesn’t have the majority of the votes in the Congress.

So anyway, to your point, young people should recognize that it’s a noble calling, recognize that they have a responsibility to the community, to build a future that’s worthy of what our founders did. They sacrificed everything. It’s worthy of what our troops do. They sacrifice everything. And it’s worthy of what our children aspire to. It can get sticky, but you cannot let that deter you if you have that passion, because that ardor is needed, that infusion of young people and their enthusiasm is necessary and urgent, and the future belongs to them. They have a responsibility to shape it. It’s not lucrative, it’s not the best paying job, so if that’s what they’re interested in, if that really matters, don’t come here. I’m not complaining about it, I’m just saying that it’s not a place where you go to do that, to build a fortune, but it is something where you can build a future for our country that is our responsibility to our founders.

Look at what happened in Massachusetts. Senator Kennedy’s seat now is in Republican hands. Oh, my gosh, everybody was saying, “How can we pass health care?” All we saw it as was just another opportunity. Not 60 votes, 51; what do we get with 51? You never, never turn back. As we said at the time, and I think we’ve been in the spirit of the Senator, we can’t—I told the reporters, our attitude about this, those of us who worked on it a long time, is the following. We’ll go through the gate. If the gate’s locked, we’ll climb over the fence. If the fence is too high, we’ll pole-vault in. If that doesn’t work, we’ll parachute in, but we’re going in. We’re going in. And once everybody understood that, we got in. By the way, we just pushed the door open. *[Laughs]* All 200 and some of my members just pushed the door in.

Young: That was a great experience for the country.

Pelosi: Wasn’t it something?

Young: I think we’ll come to realize that even more as time goes on.

Pelosi: And as far as the Senator’s role, his definition of it as the cause of his life, that’s one thing personal, as the great unfinished business of our country, a revolution, absolutely so. And what he said, it wasn’t about the provisions of the bill, it was about the character of our country. So he was not only the legislative leader but the spiritual leader of this as well, and we couldn’t fall short of his standard.

We all loved him very much. And it’s just a matter of great personal sadness that he’s not here. Not that I don’t think he saw the results from heaven, but we just miss him. We miss that laugh. He had a sense of humor about it all, you know, and even when you’re in the intensity of it, he would break out with that laughter, relieve the tension, which of course was so magnificent, what a blessing to us all.

Young: Thank you very much.

Pelosi: Nice to meet you. Good luck to you in what you're doing.

Young: Thank you. You'll get a transcript of this.

Pelosi: I hope it served your purpose.

Young: Oh, it does.