



## EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

### INTERVIEW WITH JAMES RALPH SASSER

May 25, 2006  
Washington, D.C.

#### **Interviewers**

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TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH JAMES RALPH SASSER

May 25, 2006

**Knott:** Senator Kennedy approached us about two years ago, expressing an interest in creating something called the Center for the Study of the United States Senate, which will be located up in Boston. He asked us to handle the oral history part of it.

**Sasser:** Us is—?

**Knott:** The University of Virginia, Miller Center of Public Affairs. We do oral histories primarily on the American Presidency, but we've segued now into the Legislative Branch, and Senator Kennedy is our first subject. So the interview that you're doing today is an oral history for the Kennedy Oral History Project. You will control the transcript of this interview.

About three months from now you'll get a transcript. You can make any changes to it at that time that you wish, so we hope that people will be candid. This is not something that's going to end up in the *Washington Post*. This is long-term, this is for history. The Senator will not see this transcript. This is your chance to tell us about your reflections and observations of him as a Senator, but also a little more than that, just how in some ways the U.S. Senate works or doesn't work. Jan's done a lot of the research for this interview, so I think you should kick it off.

**Heininger:** When did you first meet Senator Kennedy?

**Sasser:** I first met Senator Kennedy I guess in 1970, when Senator Albert Gore, Sr. was running for reelection in Tennessee. I was participating in that campaign and Senator Kennedy had a fundraiser for him at his home in Virginia. So I came from Tennessee with a group for the fundraiser at Senator Kennedy's home, and that's the first time I met him.

**Heininger:** What were your initial impressions of him? That was pretty early on.

**Sasser:** I don't really recall, except I was obviously impressed with him. I was young, hadn't been out of law school very long, and here was a United States Senator named Kennedy. I had worked in his brother John's campaign in 1960. So I was quite impressed with the reputation and with his presence. I didn't have any conversation with him that I can recall other than maybe shaking his hand or something like that, because there were, I'd say, 100 people there at least.

**Heininger:** You've had a long-standing relationship with him. Have your views of him changed at all? How do you think of him at this point, and how did that change from when you initially saw him and he was one of the Kennedys, and you had worked for his brother?

**Sasser:** I view him now as a very warm, human, and compassionate individual with a streak—sort of an Irish mischief in him, who really enjoys people, enjoys having a good time, and has an excellent sense of humor but also is a very, very, very hard worker. I was astonished when I came to the Senate, quite frankly, and came to know him intimately, about how hard he worked there at the job of being an effective United States Senator—the hours he would spend in preparation, the passion he felt about the issues. He never seemed to grow tired or cynical or apathetic about the issues that he felt strongly about.

**Heininger:** Did you see any changes in him over time? After the 1980 Presidential run, did you see a change in him? Because you saw him both before and after.

**Sasser:** I guess I knew him better after the Presidential run in 1980. I got to the Senate in January of 1977, and I can't remember having any close contacts with him during that period of time. I was a junior Senator. I was preoccupied with getting reelected, preoccupied with learning how the Senate operated, trying to establish a place in the Senate for myself. He and I did not serve on any of the same committees, so as a result, I don't recall a lot of contact with him prior to 1980. I do recall that I was drawn to him politically and philosophically, and when he ran in 1980, I was I guess the only political figure in my state who had a political structure, any type of organization.

He and I still laugh about this, him somewhat ruefully, but when he flew into Nashville on his first foray to Tennessee, I was invited down there to meet him. In lining up, the people there at the airplane steps as he got off, somehow I got shunted down to the very end of the line behind former defeated U.S. Senator Ross Bass, who I don't think Kennedy even knew much about, and a few other political has-beens. When he got off the airplane, he was really, I thought, extremely uptight, and when he was coming down the line, when he got to me, he couldn't even remember my name. We've laughed about that over the years and I think that still stings him a little bit that that occurred. I think after the 1980 thing he became much more relaxed and a much more easygoing, approachable person.

The 1980 thing is understandable. I mean, he had had two of his brothers assassinated and he was just walking out there into the open, and any crackpot in the world could have come up there and done him fatal damage. I think he was uptight about the campaign as well.

**Heininger:** How did you then become such a good friend of his?

**Sasser:** I really don't know how we became such good friends. Just over the years—one thing I do remember is I was on the Steering Committee. Senator [Robert] Byrd put me on the Senate Steering Committee, which determined what committee assignments the Senators received, and at that time we were trying to limit Senators to two major committees. So something came up in

the Steering Committee just prior to the 1982 elections when I was up for reelection. Maybe it was 1981.

Senator Kennedy and I inadvertently were put in competition for some open slots and it was not the same committee, but I can't remember how—you had to keep the ratio between Democrats and Republicans on committees. So I wanted on the Banking Committee and Senator Kennedy wanted on the Armed Services Committee, and we were running in the same cycle, both of us in '82. He needed to get on the Armed Services Committee to bolster his reelection credentials because there was a large defense base in Massachusetts, an industrial base there, and he needed to get on Armed Services to help himself. I wanted to get on the Banking Committee to help myself with the bankers in my state and to help with the fundraising.

It came down to either myself or Kennedy as to who would get the last remaining Class A committee assignment, and I just said, "Well, I'm going to defer to Senator Kennedy. He's a legend around here and he ought to have it." And that's the way I felt about it. Our friendship sort of stemmed from that. It seemed like that's when we became quite good political friends and social friends. I track it back to that to some extent. That's it.

**Heininger:** Now I know you've visited him in Hyannis Port.

**Sasser:** I did. How do you know that?

**Heininger:** I think Linda told me. Because you were such close friends, how did you see—was he any different outside the Senate from how he was inside the Senate?

**Sasser:** Not really. I think he was very much the way outside the Senate and socially as he was in the Senate, except, of course, if he was hosting a press conference or making a speech. We all have sort of a public persona we'll assume, but as far as informally in the Senate and working together, there wasn't a lot of difference. I think he's really a very approachable person. People are sort of put off by the fact sometimes that his name is Kennedy and he's a United States Senator and a legend in his own time. So they're a little, maybe overly, cautious in approaching him, but he's a very, very approachable person. At least that was my indication.

**Knott:** Did his marriage to Vicki [Reggie] Kennedy in 1992—did you notice any changes in him?

**Sasser:** Yes, I did, some substantial changes, and I think he would tell you that himself. I think that was probably the best thing that ever happened to him in his later life. I think it probably has extended his lifespan considerably and extended his political effectiveness. She, I think, has been an anchor that he didn't have before, and I think she has been perhaps a moderating influence in some areas, and given him the emotional support and made up for some of the terrific emotional losses that he has experienced over his lifetime. So yes, a pronounced change. He just seems more serene, more relaxed, more at ease with himself than he was prior to the marriage.

**Heininger:** Have you seen changes in how he's dealt with his children through the years?

**Sasser:** Not really. I haven't been around him that much with his children, although to some extent I have. He's always impressed me as being devoted to his children. I first noticed that when we were together at Hyannis Port and one of his children was there. He's always appeared to me to be not only devoted to his own children and very sympathetic to what they wish to do and very supportive, but he's been very supportive of his nephews and nieces, and goes overboard to look after them. He always takes their side of the issue, at least publicly, almost as if he sees himself as a patriarchal figure in the Kennedy family.

**Heininger:** Well, you know the history of the Kennedy clan. Do you think that's what has happened within the Kennedy clan?

**Sasser:** I had forgotten the history of the loyalty internally in the Kennedy family, but I suspect that you're on to something there. I think they argue among themselves and are sort of interdependent to a certain degree, and he is the base of support for the Kennedy family.

**Heininger:** You had hoped to succeed George Mitchell in 1994 as Majority Leader if the Democrats hadn't lost the Senate.

**Sasser:** And I hadn't lost my election.

**Heininger:** And you hadn't lost your election, which was a shock to many. Would he have supported you?

**Sasser:** Yes, I think so. In fact, I'm positive he would. I always counted his vote and Chris Dodd and all of the group from New England, with the exception of John Kerry, as supporting me. Maybe one reason—well, I won't say that. But I'm sure he would.

**Heininger:** Why you over Tom Daschle, who was extensively more liberal?

**Sasser:** I think just over the years, loyalty and friendship. As you know, so much of what goes on in the Senate is really made up of personal relationships. I think the personal relationship would have been strong enough to get him to vote for me. Also, I think he would have understood that if I had been Majority Leader or the Leader that he would have been a very influential voice as far as I was concerned. Now I must say to you that there were some members of my staff who were keeping track of the votes who to this day don't believe he was going to vote for me, but I do.

**Heininger:** That's really interesting, because I've talked to his staff and I said what are the things that we really need to know about? What are the things that we should talk about with their relationship? They said, "Well you know, legislatively—but they're *very* close friends and he would have supported Sasser for Majority Leader in 1994."

**Sasser:** Yes, I was confident he would. In fact, I counted his vote, and as I reflect back on it, I think Ted told me he was going to vote for me.

**Heininger:** Do you think you would have won?

**Sasser:** Yes. Chris Dodd came within one vote, and I had two votes that Chris didn't have, and one was the Senator from Alabama. I can't remember who the other was. Who was the old Senator from Alabama?

**Knott:** [Howell] Heflin.

**Sasser:** Howell Heflin was going to vote for me and Dick Shelby was going to vote for me. I think if I had been elected Democratic leader, I am immodest enough to think I might have kept Shelby from going over to the other side. In any case, I had the votes, and I think Tom knew that.

**Heininger:** Where do you see the two of you on the Democratic spectrum of politics? Do you see yourself at different places in there?

**Sasser:** Between myself and Senator Kennedy? Not really. We agree on a lot of issues, particularly on economic issues, and the over-concentration of—I mean, I think we see things alike on the question of economic equity, economic justice, et cetera. We'd both be characterized, I guess, as pro labor. If we departed anywhere it might be on some social issues. Considering where I came from, down in Tennessee, I had to part company with him on a few social issues simply to satisfy my constituency. There's not a lot of daylight between our views on most things.

**Heininger:** I want to talk about Contra aid, something I vividly remember. You had so many battles on the floor about it and you worked very closely with him on it. Do you remember what first got you interested in that whole situation in Nicaragua?

**Sasser:** I know precisely what it was. I was Chairman of the Military Construction Appropriations Subcommittee and what was occurring was the [Ronald] Reagan administration was taking money out of the military construction appropriation account and putting it into funding the Contras and funding operations in Nicaragua in violation of law. In other words, they were funneling this money out of the military construction appropriation bill without any authority from Congress. They weren't asking for it to be reprogrammed or anything like that. They were just taking it and concealing it and so Mike [Robert M.] Walker, who was my clerk on the Military Construction Appropriations Subcommittee, alerted me to it and so we got into it.

We went down to Nicaragua and found they'd built this enormous airbase down there capable of taking the largest aircraft in the inventory, a C5A, and they were denying it was there and all sorts of foolishness, and you could just see it right in front of your eyes. So that's what got me into it, and then once I started looking into it, I felt that they were on the wrong track with this Contra thing, and they were simply funding what I perceived to be right-wingers or reactionaries down there in Central America who were not the solution; they were part of the problem.

In my view we shouldn't have been down there. Something was being done by the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and the Reagan administration mostly covertly with no Congressional oversight of it, and some of it in violation of law. I just felt that we needed to expose it.

**Heininger:** Who did you get together with to fight Contra aid?

**Sasser:** I don't recall precisely. Senator Dodd always had a great interest in that down there. He was Chairman, I think, of maybe the Subcommittee of Foreign Affairs. Senator Kennedy. At that time, Senator Terry Sanford of North Carolina. Those were some who come to mind instantly, but there were others, and I think Senator Byrd himself was very much opposed to this Contra aid thing for a lot of reasons. He saw it as contravention of law, he saw it as something that impinged on Congressional prerogatives, and I think he thought it was incorrect from a policy perspective. It turned out it was, and as soon as we got some of those people out of the Reagan administration—who was it that came in very quickly and put the quietus on Contra aid?

**Heininger:** [John] Poindexter or [Colin] Powell.

**Sasser:** No, Poindexter was part of the problem and Powell was just—

**Knott:** [Frank] Carlucci?

**Heininger:** After [Donald] Regan left.

**Knott:** Howard Baker comes in as Chief of Staff, but Carlucci replaces both.

**Sasser:** Somehow Jim Baker comes to my mind.

**Knott:** He's over at Treasury at this time.

**Sasser:** I remember that we got it stopped. I can't remember precisely who in the administration. When Poindexter left, who replaced him as head of the NSA [National Security Agency]?

**Heininger:** Colin Powell.

**Knott:** No. Frank Carlucci.

**Heininger:** Carlucci? Because I remember the first day that—

**Sasser:** When Poindexter left, and Oliver North and all that crowd left, then I think we got it stopped. Maybe it was Carlucci who came in. I don't recall precisely.

**Heininger:** How much did the situation in El Salvador affect your views on Nicaragua?

**Sasser:** I'm not sure. It's been a long time ago now. I just felt that our policy down there was incorrect and that some of these regimes that were coming up, which we thought were such a danger because they appeared to have Marxist orientations or other leftist tendencies—I felt that this is really a reaction to economic and social conditions there that had been in place for a long time. Rather than us trying to stomp out these regimes and re-impose another, a right wing, reactionary regime controlled by the military there, that in some way we need to work with these new regimes and see if there isn't some way we could guide them, make allies of them, and work

together to try to bring up the economic and social conditions there and some of the terrible atrocities that had been committed that had caused these left wing or Marxist regimes to come about.

**Heininger:** Do you remember a shift in attitudes when Daniel Ortega went to Moscow?

**Sasser:** Yes. It was a great embarrassment to all of us because we had gone down there and talked to Danny Ortega. He was making some of the right noises and then the next thing we knew, he was on a plane to Moscow. That sort of undercut us and it was an embarrassment.

**Heininger:** The House was ahead of the Senate because at that point the House was a Democratic House.

**Sasser:** The House was ahead because of Jim Wright. Jim Wright felt very strongly about that situation down there, and I think probably because of his geography from Texas, et cetera, he kept a very close watch on it. He was ahead of the Senate and a prime mover in trying to stop the Contra aid.

**Heininger:** What was Kennedy's role in this? You had the appropriations base because it was your subcommittee that money was being funneled from. You had an ally in the ranking minority in Senator Byrd. Where was Kennedy?

**Sasser:** We were in the majority then, weren't we?

**Heininger:** Not until after the elections in '86. A lot of this was '84, '85, when the Republicans were in the majority. Then the Senate didn't flip again until—

**Sasser:** What was Kennedy's role in all this?

**Heininger:** Yes. Was he working on the legislation? Was he behind the scenes? Was he in the media?

**Sasser:** He was part of the group. He was very much opposed to the Contra aid. He was out front and spoke on it. I think Senator Byrd was encouraging me to take the lead on it because I appeared to be a more moderate voice and probably would not get the same kind of reaction from conservatives as Senator Kennedy would get. So Byrd encouraged me, and as a matter of fact, I was selected to make the response to President Reagan when he made the speech to the nation about the Contra situation, and Byrd selected me to do that.

**Heininger:** Do you think it did matter that you were the one who was chosen in terms of garnering the votes? As the vote count shifted, you got more and more votes.

**Sasser:** At the risk of sounding immodest, I think so, because it gave cover to some of the southern Senators or border state Democrats, that they couldn't be accused of following the lead of the northern liberals. So yes, I think we got a few more votes out of it as a result of that.



**Heininger:** Who was on the other side in the Democratic Party at that point that you felt you were not able to pick up?

**Sasser:** I really don't recall.

**Heininger:** Do you remember where Sam Nunn was?

**Sasser:** I just don't remember. Sam may have voted with us, but I don't think he or David Boren or some of them did it with any great degree of enthusiasm. I'm just guessing here, but Nunn himself may have been concerned about the unauthorized use of military funds in violation of Congressional intent. You had situations like National Guard units going down to Central America and leaving their equipment there for use by the Contras. I can't believe that Nunn would have countenanced that or been very enthusiastic about it, but frankly, I don't remember Sam in that situation. I'm pretty sure he was not an active and vocal opponent. Maybe he was quietly in opposition, but I don't remember.

**Heininger:** Did you travel to the area?

**Sasser:** Yes. I was down there two or three times.

**Heininger:** Did you go with Senator Kennedy at any point?

**Sasser:** No. A couple times I went by myself, and on another occasion, I think Senator Dodd, Senator Sanford, and maybe John McCain and I went together.

**Heininger:** How active was Mike Walker of your staff in terms of dealing with Kennedy's staff?

**Sasser:** I can't answer that question either. I mean, we're talking about something that happened 20 years ago. I just don't recall.

**Heininger:** We've had a lot of Senators talk about Kennedy's staff. Do you have a sense about how his staff operated?

**Sasser:** Yes. I always thought that Kennedy had a very able staff. They were very bright and well educated, and they were extremely loyal to him. They had their own philosophical viewpoints, and some of those viewpoints were pretty liberal, and they may have been driving some of Senator Kennedy's views or some of his policy positions, but I really had a high regard for Kennedy's staff. I thought they were some of the best in the Senate, at least the ones that I saw, and those would be legislative directors or people who would handle his foreign affairs, armed services staff people, that sort of thing.

**Heininger:** Did you have any sense about whether your staff, in particular Mike, had a different relationship with Kennedy's staff than you had with Kennedy himself?

**Sasser:** Not that I'm aware of. My relation with Kennedy as time went on became more of a social relationship and a friendship. Although we were together on many, many, many issues, that was not really the basis of our relationship.

**Heininger:** When you became Chairman of the Budget Committee—

**Sasser:** In 1989.

**Heininger:** Before that, [Phillip] Gramm-[Warren]Rudman had come into effect. Where had Kennedy been in terms of Gramm-Rudman and the buildup of the deficits?

**Sasser:** As I recall it, he was opposed to Gramm-Rudman, and frankly, I was unenthusiastic about Gramm-Rudman myself. I thought it was just sort of putting an arbitrary ceiling on things and this was just one way that some of the conservatives could cut back on social spending and that sort of thing. So I think we were probably in agreement on that, and the fact that Phil Gramm was one of the authors of it bolstered our view on that.

**Heininger:** But there was a Warren Rudman piece.

**Sasser:** Well, Rudman was there, but Phil Gramm was sort of the poison pill in the deal.  
[laughter]

**Knott:** Kennedy had a reputation, perhaps unfair, as a tax and spend liberal. What would you say to that? Did you have differences with him in terms of spending?

**Sasser:** No, not really. I think we agreed a lot on spending. I believed in social spending and I believed—I think as Kennedy did—that we were spending too much on the military over the years. I think we were really probably more in agreement on that than anything else. So there is no disagreement there. I even thought that we ought to put the Social Security system on a pay-as-you-go because I resented the fact that we use the payroll tax to raise funds and bump it over the general revenue, and I thought we should raise the income taxes and cut the payroll tax. Of course that would have been political suicide, but that's the way I viewed it.

**Heininger:** By the time you get to the late '80s, as you're getting ready to move on to the Budget Committee, you've got a new administration. President [George H.W.] Bush comes in, and in his first budget, I've got a couple quotes for you, press quotes. You described his first full budget in 1990, "As cold as leftovers and warmed-over Reagan." Senator Kennedy described it as, "A Rip Van Winkle budget that has not yet awakened to the changes in the world or the major challenges at home."

**Sasser:** [laughs] Well, you know, there's always sort of a competition to see who could defame the President's budget the most. I mean, the budgets really become phony under Reagan, just very phony, and to Bush's credit and to Dick Darman's credit, they were trying to swing it back around and make the budgets more realistic, but they still had part of the rosy scenario in there. We disagreed with their policy decisions on allocations of funding. It was always something.

I remember Bush had this slogan about a thousand points of light. I said something one time about this budget and a thousand points of light but the batteries are not included. [laughter] I saw him over at the White House two or three days later and he was still steaming, Bush was. He said, “Well, what have you said about me today that’s bad?” Bush was, I think, a much more mature politician than his son is.

**Heininger:** But you had a problem, and that’s that you had a President who came in with this first budget as you said, and he also came in and pledged he wouldn’t raise taxes. “No new taxes, no new taxes.” At the same time, the ostensible peace dividend is coming into play. Now what do you think should be done with the peace dividend and what did Kennedy think should be done with the peace dividend? And it was your committee at that point.

**Sasser:** I certainly wanted to maximize the so-called peace dividend. I wanted to allocate part of it to deficit reduction and allocate part of it to what we thought were long neglected social and infrastructure programs. I don’t know that there was any difference between Kennedy and myself on that. We both, I think, wanted a very substantial peace dividend, so I think we were together on that.

**Heininger:** What role did you play and what role did Kennedy play in all those negotiations that led up to the tax summit where Bush had to retract on “No new taxes”?

**Sasser:** I don’t recall Senator Kennedy being involved intimately in that. The real players were myself and George Mitchell. A lot of work was put in to bringing Leon Panetta and Tom Foley along on it. Mitchell and I determined early on, and it became clear there were going to have to be additional revenues. To his credit, Dick Darman—OMB [Office of Management and Budget] director—sort of let it be known that he knew there would have to be additional revenues too.

Mitchell and I were determined that they weren’t going to blame these additional revenues or additional new taxes on the Democrats. The Republican plan was to raise the taxes and blame it on us. Well, Foley and Leon Panetta, particularly Leon, just wanted to get the budget deficit down and he didn’t seem to care who took the blame for it, how you did it. It’s a long story, but we did finally get Bush to go along, and he took the heat for raising the taxes. He didn’t mean to, he didn’t want to, but he had to.

**Heininger:** Was it beneficial to have Kennedy on the one hand thundering, as he tended to do, on the issue as a public point that helped you in the negotiations, or was this really so—

**Sasser:** This was sort of outside of Senator Kennedy’s purview in a way. He has many great strengths, but I don’t know that talking about the budget deficit would have been one of his strengths. I don’t know if he would have had the kind of credibility there with the body politic. He’d been painted for years, and millions of dollars had been invested in portraying him as a tax and spend liberal, so I don’t know that he would have had the credibility on these fiscal matters that others would have had. So he didn’t play a large role in that, except this: He was always very helpful and always there with his vote when the going got tough and we needed help. Some of the other guys who had more moderate reputations politically weren’t always there, or if they were, you had to drag them kicking and screaming to get their vote for reducing budget deficits.

**Heininger:** So even with the tax and spend liberal reputation, he was actually, from your perspective particularly at that time period, fiscally responsible?

**Sasser:** Oh, yes. Ted Kennedy is fiscally responsible. He doesn't believe in unregulated deficit spending. I'm sure he's horrified, and I know he is, by what this Republican President or Republican Congress have done over the last six years. To my mind, it's totally irresponsible and it's going to take us years to dig out from under it if we can. Reagan did it, and it took us almost a decade to dig out from under that. The economy is stronger now at least temporarily, and so maybe we can dig out of it quicker, but we've got other problems now. There's terrible balance of payment problems, et cetera, et cetera.

**Heininger:** Did you see a real variance between, a divergence between, Kennedy's reputation as this tax and spend liberal and how he actually conducts himself?

**Sasser:** Absolutely. The fact is that this accusation of tax and spend liberal, that's just a political slogan. Senator Kennedy is fiscally a very responsible legislator. He does believe in spending money. He does believe in enhancing spending for social programs, education, et cetera, but he also believes in paying for that. Some of our colleagues with a more conservative reputation, they thought that well, you shouldn't spend, it's wasted money in deficit and that you didn't pay attention to the deficit if you spend on social and educational things, but as far as spending on military hardware, that made no difference. That's just—it didn't raise the deficit. So anyway, my point is that Ted Kennedy is a fiscally responsible legislator and this tax and spend liberal stuff is just a political canard.

**Heininger:** And one that has stuck.

**Sasser:** That has stuck, not just to him but it's something that's been around for a long time. It's an insult hurled at a lot of responsible legislators.

**Heininger:** Now you say he's a very responsible legislator. How did you see him accomplish the legislation that he was really invested in, that he really wanted to get through?

**Sasser:** Senator Kennedy is a very skillful and experienced legislator and politician. He is very capable of putting together coalitions of votes to pass legislation that he feels very committed to, and he does this with a lot of things. A lot of it is just personal attention to people and personal charm. He is not a mean-spirited person. In other words, every day is sort of a new day. He doesn't carry grudges over, and that's known by other people in the Senate. He's a man of goodwill as opposed to others who might be a little mean spirited, and others want to take revenge if they feel like you're not going along with them properly on something.

But Kennedy never felt that way. Those who supported him one day might be on the opposite side the next day, but that didn't seem to bother him, and I think that's a view of someone who really knows how to legislate. So he would put together these loose, shifting coalitions to pass legislation that he felt very strongly about it. For example, on some things, bringing on of all

people, Orrin Hatch. On certain things, if he really needed Orrin, he could capture him. You talk about two people who are diametrically opposed.

**Heininger:** Who were his friends in the Senate? Who have been his friends over the years? Who does he turn to for advice?

**Sasser:** I don't know that I've known him to ever turn to anybody in the Senate for personal advice. I think he's pretty self-contained and seems to know pretty well what he wants to do. I think most of his advice on legislation and politics and that sort of thing came from his staff. My guess is that having lived under a microscope as long as he has and the Kennedys have done, that they're very careful in what they say and who they talk to about seeking advice and that sort of thing, because otherwise, it gets in the press. So I'd say most of his advice came from his staff or maybe some academicians at Harvard or something like that.

**Knott:** Did you ever take any heat in Tennessee from your connections with Kennedy? He's often a whipping boy.

**Sasser:** Are you kidding?

**Knott:** So tell us about that. How would you deal with that?

**Sasser:** Well, in my last campaign a lot of money was spent in political ads tying me to Kennedy.

**Knott:** How would you respond?

**Sasser:** Generally ignore it. What are you going to say? If you start denying, you just get on the defensive. So you change the subject and move on to something else, with the view that Kennedy has been used as sort of a *bête noire* for so long in so many jurisdictions that hopefully it's kind of worn out its effectiveness.

**Knott:** Do you have any ideas as to why you think he's such a polarizing figure in certain parts of the country?

**Sasser:** I guess because he's viewed as a liberal. I think that somehow those on the right seem to—at least in my judgment—have more venomous views towards anyone that they perceive to be a liberal. I think that's where it comes from, and then you still run into people who just love to bring up the subject of Chappaquiddick and anything that they think is hurtful. Also, I think he is an effective figure. I mean, Kennedy is an attractive person and he is a charming person, and he comes across usually very well and very effectively. So one of the ways to combat that is simply to defame him and to put him into disrepute. So I think part of it is a defensive mechanism of the right.

**Lindskog:** Did you notice any changes in his effectiveness over time? Some people have suggested that he became a more effective legislator after his Presidential aspirations waned.

**Sasser:** Yes. As I said earlier, I think he became more relaxed and more natural after 1980. Also, prior to 1980 he was viewed by others who had a notion they ought to run for President as more of a rival, and after 1980, I think it was clear that all of his attentions were devoted to the Senate and that he had strong views on certain issues, and that he did become more effective, partially because just more of his energy and attention were devoted to the Senate, but also because he became more approachable.

**Heininger:** Who among the Republicans have you seen him develop friendships with?

**Sasser:** Let me think about that. John Warner was one. Maybe the former Senator from Maryland, [Charles] Mack Mathias, who has been gone for a while. I think he and Hatch are kind of friends, at least Hatch likes to think that. He and Howard Baker got along well. I'm sure there were others. Who is the former Senator from Pennsylvania who ran for Vice President? I still see him around sometimes. He was going to be Reagan's running mate.

**Knott:** [Richard] Schweiker.

**Sasser:** I think he got along well with Schweiker. Who is the Chairman of the Health Education—the old Labor Committee now?

**Knott:** You got me.

**Heininger:** Me too.

**Sasser:** I don't remember, but those were some of them.

**Knott:** Alan Simpson?

**Sasser:** Yes, I think he and Simpson got along fine. I think he gets along with a lot of Republicans. I think it's only the more doctrinaire, tough right-wingers—they don't like him and so there's not much interaction there.

**Heininger:** What's his relationship been with Bill Frist, who replaced you?

**Sasser:** I think initially it was pretty good because Kennedy saw Frist as a neophyte who was sort of a blank piece of paper. Frist was on the Health and Education Committee, and I think Ted thought that he was going to use Frist, but I think he was disappointed because Frist would make the right noises but just when they got down to casting the vote or sponsoring the bill or something, Frist would always wiggle out. Initially it was good, but now I think he's sort of contemptuous of him.

**Heininger:** As someone who might have become Majority Leader, had you not lost—what's the leadership view of dealing with Kennedy? Is it your sense that he's difficult to deal with or someone who's a lone ranger or somebody who can be counted on in a crunch?

**Sasser:** I've seen him operate under just two leaders—Byrd and Mitchell—and each one had a different approach to him, but I think with both of them, Kennedy was a factor or a force that had to be considered. On almost all party issues, they could generally count on his support. They didn't have to bargain with him and that sort of thing, but I think they viewed him simply as a powerful Senator in his own right. They wanted to make sure if they had something tough coming along that they had him on board, just like they would go to maybe other committee chairmen to make sure that they had them on board, like Lloyd Bentsen when he was Chairman of the Finance Committee, et cetera.

I think in recent days there have been accusations that he's gotten off the reservation on some things. My sense is that what's occurred—I never discussed this with him—is we're all starting to feel our own mortality and it becomes more important to get something done than to make partisan points. So I think he finds himself sometimes now in sort of the horns of a dilemma. If he doesn't get it done now and make a compromise with the Republicans and maybe alienate some of his own leadership, it won't get done. I think the latest example of that is the immigration bill. He's not getting out on his own in the sense that he wants to—for self-aggrandizement. I think he's doing it because he wants to pass a piece of legislation that he thinks is effective and badly needed in the best interest of all.

**Heininger:** What do you think of how he handled the [Robert] Bork nomination?

**Sasser:** *[laughs]* I was not going to vote for Bork. Did Bork ever get out of committee?

**Knott:** Yes.

**Sasser:** I voted against Bork. I think that he did a good job of letting Bork hang himself, but I didn't follow the hearings that closely. I know he's been criticized for that from the right on some of the so-called “borking of Bork.” I think Bork borked himself. *[laughs]* I think Ted and others just were the catalysts to get him going.

**Knott:** We've taken over an hour, but maybe one more question?

**Heininger:** What are the things that people don't know about Ted Kennedy or a variance of Ted Kennedy that you think history may come to a different conclusion about? His legacy, but also the public image versus who he is.

**Sasser:** Well, there is quite a bit of difference between the public image and who he really is. The public image is sort of a glamorous, powerful legislator or Senator who comes from this powerful family with this aura of prestige and distinction, et cetera. That's sort of the public persona. I think that personally, he is just a very warm, considerate, very sensitive individual. He's very loyal to those he likes or who have helped him and there is in him a little streak of almost boyish mischief. He loves nothing better than a good joke or playing a joke on somebody or something like that. So that's the difference between the public persona and who he really is. He's really just a very nice guy.

**Heininger:** Do you like him?

**Sasser:** A lot.

**Heininger:** That's clear.

**Sasser:** [*laughs*] I like him a lot. He's a terrific guy.

**Knott:** Great, thank you so much.

**Heininger:** You've done a very nice job of giving us a lot of good information that is thoughtful and would be wonderful to add to the project. It would have been incomplete without your input.



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