



EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH TRINA VARGO

November 7, 2008
Arlington, Virginia

Interviewer

Janet Heining, chair
James Sterling Young

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TRANSCRIPT

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Heininger: This is an interview with Trina Vargo, on November 7, 2008, in Arlington, Virginia. Well, why don't we start at the beginning? When did you first meet Ted Kennedy?

Vargo: I didn't meet him until I was employed, because I started out as a junior staffer, just out of graduate school. I'm from Pennsylvania. I went to the University of Pittsburgh for undergraduate, and then to McGill in Montreal for my masters in political science/international relations. I just interviewed off the street, no connections. I know many people think you have to know somebody. I didn't know anybody and I wasn't from Massachusetts, so it was just a cold interview process. I met him when I was working for him, so that would have been in 1987 because I worked for him from 1987 to 1998.

My first six months I was an assistant to two domestic affairs legislative assistants, and then a position opened up in foreign policy doing entry level work, writing letters to constituents. Greg Craig, who was then the head of foreign policy, asked me if I would move over to his shop, because my background was foreign policy, so I did that. I wasn't there very long when I started to handle issues and substance, and then it changed over the years. In the beginning it was Greg Craig, Nancy Soderberg and me doing the foreign policy, and then at some point Greg left and it was Nancy Soderberg and me and a guy named Gare Smith.

Nancy left first when [Michael] Dukakis ran for President, and then she came back and left again with the [William] Clinton campaign and to the White House, and then it was just Gare and me. When we lost the Senate majority, there was only going to be one foreign policy person. Gare had made it clear he was going to look for something else, so they took that opportunity to make me the one person doing all the foreign policy. It's always nicer to be in the majority, because there were more people doing the work.

I did it until 1998 when I left to create an organization called the US-Ireland Alliance, a nonprofit that's all about US-Ireland relations. He (Senator Kennedy) actually inspired it. When we would have meetings with the Irish he would always say, "Those Irish never get their act together like Jewish Americans do and Greek Americans do." He was talking about the need for an organization, and after hearing him talk about this for a long time, I finally said, "I know what you mean, and I'm going to go start that."

The funny thing was, I'd been working on it and he knew, but I didn't really make a decision to jump until we visited Northern Ireland in early 1998, and I said I would leave around April or May. Luckily, George Mitchell got the Good Friday Agreement signed in April. People thought I

knew something four months ahead of everybody else, but actually I didn't; it was just amazing timing. So even what I'm doing now, and have been doing for eleven years, has come from working with him.

So I worked for him until '98, and I'm still in constant contact. I'm in touch—nearly daily—with the person I recommended, Sharon Waxman, who took my position. Because I do Ireland 24/7, it's easy for him to call on me on the details of what's going on and what I'm hearing on the ground, so they don't have to follow it quite as much.

Young: Did you start out doing Ireland?

Vargo: No. It was dumped on me, which was actually a great thing, by Nancy Soderberg. Nancy had been handling Ireland, and she frankly just got sick and tired of it, from all I could tell. I was the junior person on the team, and she said, "Here, you're doing Ireland now." That was before any hint of a peace process, so it was probably around '89, '90, '91, somewhere in there.

Heininger: Greg had left at that point.

Vargo: Greg had probably just left, yes. All of a sudden a team of three people went to two people and you have a lot more work. There wasn't a whole lot going on at the time on the issue.

For us it increased when Bill Clinton was running for President, I distinctly remember, because I was helping the Clinton campaign team. Nancy was there and Tony Lake was there. Since Dukakis, I've done the memos into the campaigns about what's going on in the Irish issue. I can distinctly remember that they were answering the Irish American community about why Bill Clinton would be good for Northern Ireland, and they promised a couple of things, which I actually argued against promising. This would have come down to Nancy and me just having a difference of opinion about what's political, or what you would and wouldn't do. Clinton promised that he would give Gerry Adams a visa, and that he would name a special envoy for Ireland. I didn't have an issue with promising the special envoy.

Young: That was during the campaign?

Vargo: That was during the campaign. I didn't mind about the envoy, but I objected to promising to give Gerry Adams a visa. At that moment in time, none of this was going on (our role in the peace process), the thought that there might be something underway, and I didn't believe that the Clinton campaign had any intention of honoring that commitment. It was because some Irish Americans in New York and Boston wanted that commitment made. I told Nancy that I wouldn't promise that. Nancy didn't have a problem telling them what they wanted to hear. I wouldn't promise what I didn't intend to do.

Then when Clinton was elected, immediately those activists demanded a visa for Gerry Adams. And because the Administration wasn't ever, at that stage, going to give a visa to Adams—remember, there was no basis for one—they used this loophole to get themselves off the hook. In their letter, where they initially said they would give Adams a visa, they had said something like that they would give him a visa because he was an elected member of the Parliament. He had lost his seat, so they said, "Oh, we only said we'd give it to elected officials and he's not an elected

official any more.” In fact they were lucky that they had that out, because they didn’t intend to give it to him. That would have been right after Clinton came in—’93?

Heininger: Early ’93.

Vargo: Then I was contacted by Niall O’Dowd, who first came to me through a mutual acquaintance. He is a publisher of an Irish American newspaper. He approached me around May of ’93. Jean Kennedy Smith had just become Ambassador to Ireland. O’Dowd had a group of about three people with him who believed that giving a visa to Gerry Adams could make a difference. He came to me because he knew that it would take Kennedy to make this happen because Kennedy had always been opposed to the IRA [Irish Republican Army] and he would first have to be convinced if there was to be any hope with the President.

That’s one of those things that many people don’t know or understand. In the tabloids in Britain they’d often suggest Kennedy was an IRA supporter, when in fact he was opposed to the IRA. People who cared about this knew that you had to get Kennedy onboard; it was an absolute must to make it happen. There were lots of people who were always supporters of the IRA, even in Congress, and they were always prepared to give Gerry Adams a visa, even without an end to violence in sight. So it required Kennedy, who had been opposed to the IRA, to get the Clinton Administration to do this.

They were coming to me because—I don’t know if by statute or just by practice—they couldn’t speak to the White House. Nancy Soderberg wouldn’t talk to O’Dowd at that stage. But they also knew that they needed a go-between, and that was me, on a daily basis, because if it ever came down to a difference of opinion—and this happened sometimes in the process—if it came down to O’Dowd, a pro-Sinn Fein Irish American, saying the White House promised this, and then Nancy said otherwise, nobody was ever going to believe O’Dowd; they were only going to believe the White House. It suited everybody if I was in the middle and Kennedy was in the middle, him in the big picture, me in the day-to-day, because if anybody tried to be cute, and not live up to the commitment, then I could say, “No, that’s not what was agreed.” I would also be able to mediate between both sides by making it clear to each party what the other side could or could not accept. There was a lot of constant negotiation involved.

One example that comes to mind is: After the visa was obtained, Kennedy sent me to New York to meet Gerry Adams because the White House wouldn’t meet him and Kennedy wouldn’t meet him. There was no cease-fire. After Adams visited, the Brits, who were very unhappy that Adams got the visa, spun a story that the whole thing was a big failure because Gerry Adams had promised that when he came to New York he would renounce violence, I think that was it, and that he didn’t, and it was therefore a failure. Well, I knew for a fact that he didn’t promise that and the White House didn’t require it. So it made sense to have somebody in the middle to keep all sides honest.

Young: But the White House had earlier, had it not, gone along for the visa? Did he have to renounce violence?

Vargo: No. They had gone along with the visa without the renunciation of violence. They, we all, would have liked that of course. We all wanted the ceasefire to happen, but it took from

February, when Adams came, until August, for there to be a ceasefire. So Clinton didn't meet him and Tony Lake didn't meet him and Nancy didn't meet him, and I went to New York to deliver the message from Kennedy that there is no free lunch, that Kennedy urged Clinton to give him the visa, because he believed that the IRA was truly ready to end the violence.

It was the end of January, beginning of February, 1994. Adams was at the Waldorf-Astoria. He was coming to give a talk to a foreign policy organization. It was the first time he was coming to the U.S., on this 48-hour visa. I was to go to a suite to meet Adams to have this conversation. Somebody messed up. I opened the door of the suite and it was all press, and some of them knew me. I returned to my room. Then O'Dowd called me and said there was a mix-up in the rooms and that Adams and he would come to my room.

So we met in my room in the Waldorf-Astoria. I was sitting on the bed, Adams is in the only proper chair in the room, and O'Dowd sat on the vanity stool. I told him that Kennedy does not support the IRA; he doesn't support violence; he's doing this because he believes it can help bring an end to it all, and that that's the only reason you're here. And we understand that your mission, when you're talking to these groups in New York and everywhere else, is to set the stage for that.

We took a lot of grief over the visa. Kennedy took a lot of hits, John Hume did, even *I* did, from people who said we were naïve. The State Department wasn't really—Warren Christopher had to be convinced. Janet Reno was on the fence a lot. I remember our trying to get Janet Reno onboard. The Brits didn't want it and they lobbied heavily that it not happen, and we were constantly attacked as if we supported the IRA by getting Gerry Adams a visa.

The one thing I would disagree with—people constantly talk about this issue of taking political risks, that this was a big “risk” for peace. I'd be curious to know what Kennedy thinks, but I didn't see it as a “risk.” Violence had been going on. What was the worst that could happen? We could give him a visa and nothing would have come of it. You wanted something to come of it but nothing was going to get worse, in my opinion, because we got him a visa. It's a little bit of hyperbole when people talk about “risks” for peace. It wasn't really a risk. Politically we would have looked bad, and Clinton would have looked bad. But people were dying in Northern Ireland, we had to go for it.

Clinton had already backtracked on—was it Haiti? There were a couple of issues where he was seen to cut and run. I'm convinced that, had Northern Ireland not worked early on, Clinton would have taken a walk from it, and I think what really drew him in permanently was when he went to Northern Ireland on that visit, which must have been around November, '95. He did the first visit to Northern Ireland with Mrs. [Hillary] Clinton, and they lit the Belfast Christmas tree and all of that, and then he got truly engaged after he received a huge welcome on the island.

Prior to deciding to support the visa, Kennedy spent a lot of time on this. After O'Dowd's initial approach, we were constantly, quietly, watching for signs from the IRA. There were brief cease-fires and other messages and signs. There was a big hiccup in about October of '93, because there was an IRA member who was killed when a bomb he was planting went off prematurely. I think his name was [Thomas] Begley. Adams was one of the people who carried the coffin, and

we weren't really happy to see this sort of overt display by the IRA at that time. It was a problem.

In December 1993, Albert Reynolds and John Major issued their Downing Street (aka Joint) Declaration. Then Kennedy went to visit his sister for the Christmas/New Year's Eve time period. Jean was already pushing to get Adams a visa. I remember, because it was when I was at my mother's home for Christmas, Jean called me to say, "Teddy should really come out for this before he even leaves the U.S." Carey Parker and I talked about it and talked to the Senator and we agreed that it was way too soon, that EMK should just go over there and hear what people have to say. Jean arranged for him to meet with Albert Reynolds. John Hume was not around at the time, he was traveling. We had to follow up with Hume in January. But he met with Reynolds, the historian Tim Pat Coogan, and a maybe others I can't recall right now, and he came back clearly thinking we should do this. That was early January.

The thing that held him up for a little bit was that he wanted to know what John Hume's opinion was. He saw Hume when [Thomas P.] Tip O'Neill died in early January. The funeral was in Boston and Hume came over for it, so they talked then. I gathered he was a bit ambivalent about putting Gerry Adams in this position—elevating him so to speak—would this really work? Hume seemed torn about how good of an idea it was, but he certainly gave Kennedy a yellow light, if not the green light, to go ahead and do this.

Immediately, we put together a letter to President Clinton. It was on a weekend, that's why we initially had only four signatures: Kennedy, John Kerry, [Daniel Patrick] Moynihan and [Christopher] Dodd. We wanted to get the letter to the White House, which argued for the visa. We were pushed, actually, because even though Kennedy came back wanting to do it, an organization in New York had sent an invitation to Gerry Adams to give a talk, and it was going to force the Administration to make a decision. It was slightly sooner than we would have wanted, but we just dealt with it.

So we sent the letter to the White House and then over the next three weeks we kept getting more Congressmen and Senators to sign on. In the end I think there were over 50 members of Congress that encouraged Clinton to give Adams a 48-hour visa, believing it could help in the quest for peace." January, '94 was a really intense period of time. Once EMK decided he wanted to get Adams the visa, we had to make that happen. I would do things like call Mark Gearan in the White House, I think [George] Stephanopoulos was in the mix, Jack Quinn was in there, and it was my job to figure out everybody that could possibly get the President to agree to this, and try to push, push, push them. I was in the middle of Nancy Soderberg and Niall O'Dowd and managing what was being promised back and forth.

So it was constantly pushed, and Kennedy would come in when it was big enough for Kennedy, like talking to [Albert, Jr.] Gore, Christopher, or Bill Clinton. If Clinton was coming up to the Hill for something on healthcare, or if Kennedy had a meeting with him at the White House, we were just constantly bringing it up at all these different levels.

Then Adams had to go in for an interview to see if he would get the visa, and I remember he had to choose between whether to go to our embassy in Dublin or the consulate in Belfast. At first he was going to go to Dublin, and then he decided that he wasn't going to go to Dublin because it

would be unsafe for him to travel. So he went to Belfast. The Consul General's name was [Valentino] Val Martinez, and I knew he was opposed to giving Gerry Adams a visa. I believed he would write his report in a way that he doesn't give Adams a visa. Someone in the State Department who was friendly said to me, "It will take a while for his report to come back because he handwrites all of his stuff, he doesn't type it." So I went back to Adams via Niall and told him to, "Write up your own version of what happened in that meeting and get it out." He got it out publicly and I got it to the White House so they would have that to compare with what Martinez had to say. In the end they said, "Look, we think there's enough here to give him a visa." If they had had only what Martinez said, they would have probably had to deny him.

Young: Was Martinez—did he ask the sixty-four dollar question about renouncing?

Vargo: I can't remember. I'm sure he must have. He must have, and Adams didn't give a good enough answer on that—it would be worth getting that. Whatever his report was, I think his response to the State Department was that there was—in a nutshell—nothing new in what Gerry Adams had to say. But because Adams publicly explained what he said, the White House thought it was enough that they could go with.

Young: One of the striking things about all this is that it was the issue of a visa that brought everything to a head, which I don't think anybody would have predicted.

Vargo: Right, because it was such a nothing issue, in a sense.

Young: But it did bring in the hands of the executives.

Vargo: It did.

Young: Basically, the State Department, which was opposed.

Vargo: Exactly.

Young: Is it fair to say that one of the things that happened was the Clinton White House pulled it away from the State?

Vargo: Absolutely, there's no question, from the minute they went in, actually, because Nancy Soderberg was there and Tony Lake was there. It was in the White House. The State Department resisted at all times, although there were certainly friendly forces in the State Department. State doesn't want any issue going over to the White House. In a sense, they were out of the loop. Like when I was negotiating just my part of it, back and forth, I only ever dealt with Nancy Soderberg, Jane Holl, Tony Lake. Never did I talk to the State Department, because they just weren't in the loop. At some level, everybody was trying to get Warren Christopher onboard.

There was a dinner Nancy called me about because she was really worried. I think it was the night before they granted the visa. Clinton was sitting between Warren Christopher and House Speaker Tom Foley, who opposed giving the visa, and she was afraid Clinton was going to hear, in stereo, why he should not give the visa to Gerry Adams. We held our breath. It was on a weekend night, I believe.

And I don't think Janet Reno was very keen, because the Brits were working with them (Justice) in the same way the British were working with the State Department. Historically, Northern Ireland was just left to the Brits because they were our friends on so many different issues. State and Justice didn't really want to get them upset over Northern Ireland. The Sinn Fein was not talking to them. Because they knew they wouldn't listen with an open mind about what was possible, so nobody bothered talking to them. So their call that this was a bad idea, that it wasn't going to happen, or it was never going to end—they didn't know as much as we did, and so they were just marginalized. It was strictly in the White House.

Heininger: Let's back up a little bit. Kennedy historically had been anti-IRA, but pro-a democratic process and wanting the violence to end.

Vargo: Right.

Heininger: What was it that got him to the point, and what were the changes on the ground that were going on that got people to believe that there might be an opening here?

Vargo: Well, for one thing, nobody had ever come to us and said, "They're ready to end it." People will say there were different reasons that the IRA was ready to end it, but the reality was—and they probably wouldn't admit to this—they were tired of it. Gerry Adams and those guys were middle-aged. They hadn't "won" anything, and they were just going to keep going at this for the next hundred years, with the Brits resisting them and them fighting back. It wasn't working. The whole violence strategy wasn't working and there was no evidence that it would.

For us, it was just the very fact that somebody was coming to us who clearly had a line into them. We knew that John Hume was talking to them, and you really had a sense that they were tired and they wanted it. Nobody ever came to us before and said, "You could end this if you just did this or this or that." It was always, "This will end when the Brits leave Northern Ireland."

A lot of it was based on the information that we were getting, and there were minor things along the way. When Major and Reynolds came up with their agreement in December, that was another little step. Did we have any real proof that this effort was going to succeed? No. What they were able to "deliver" to us was reasonably questionable. But it was very clear that they were coming to us because they wanted something to happen.

Heininger: Were you getting the sense that the Brits were ready to engage in a peace process that truly could bring about peace?

Vargo: It's interesting because when Adams wanted the visa, they fought tooth and nail to make sure he didn't get it. At that stage they had been talking to the IRA themselves, but Major also had a very thin majority in the House of Commons, which tied his hands as far as what he could do. For the entire time it was Jonathan Powell that I dealt with in the British Embassy. He later became Tony Blair's chief of staff. Powell's job was to stop this from happening. We actually made a lunch bet—he was convinced up until the last moment that Adams was not going to get the visa, and I was convinced that he was. He did pay off his bet and bought me lunch.

I always had a sense that Jonathan personally—only he could answer this for sure—but I had the sense that his heart wasn't really in fighting the visa. He did it and it was his job, and he fought

hard. There were page-one stories in the *New York Times* about how the British did not want this visa given. He put everything into it, but I don't know that he *personally* believed that it was a bad idea, if that makes any sense?

Young: But the visa, my gosh, this was a State Department question, and it was a concern of the—

Heininger: They're the ones who decide on visas.

Vargo: Yes.

Young: It's so ironic that the ones who wanted to get a breakthrough created an issue over the visa, which would put it directly in the precinct.

Vargo: Right. But there was this thought that if you got the White House onboard, the State Department would do what the President wants to do, which was just the way it went in the end.

Heininger: What persuaded Kennedy that there might be a shift?

Vargo: It was all those little things happening. Tim's delegation came to us and said the IRA wanted to bring an end to this. We were told they want to stop and they needed cover. Basically the visa, and a lot of the peace process, was about helping people save face when they're backing down. At the end of the day, the IRA gave up their armed struggle. They don't like you to say that, and they probably wouldn't say that, but that's what happened. They decided to stop. It wasn't working and they were going to go in a different direction. It was the very fact that these people came, and they kept coming back at us. I think EMK was convinced because, number one, he *wanted* to be convinced—we all wanted to see peace in Northern Ireland—and this hadn't happened before. No one had ever come and said, "They will end this, and here's the way, Senator Kennedy, you can help end it."

Heininger: Who were the intermediaries between the IRA and Kennedy, who Kennedy trusted enough to believe what they were telling him?

Vargo: That didn't exist. Gerry Adams talked to Niall O'Dowd and Niall O'Dowd talked to me, and I would talk to the Senator and the White House.

Heininger: And that was literally all?

Vargo: That was it.

Heininger: That was it?

Vargo: Jean was for it, of course, and we were also in constant contact with her and she herself with State and the White House.

Heininger: Why was Niall O'Dowd so important?

Vargo: You have to understand that, historically, because Kennedy was always against the IRA, that American IRA supporters really didn't like Kennedy. Nancy Soderberg would tell you she didn't want anything to do with O'Dowd. He ran this paper in New York and he was a big Sinn Fein supporter, and she had come across him when she handled Ireland. I used to go with Kennedy to Boston where we would go do an event and EMK would be picketed by the IRA supporters like Noraid [Irish Northern Aid] and the like, as being too pro-Brit, because he was in the John Hume camp and he was against the violence. So it's not that Kennedy cared about O'Dowd or even knew who he was at that point, it's just that O'Dowd was representing Adams, and Kennedy was basically hearing from Adams. It was O'Dowd but it could have been anybody Adams picked. It was Adams' saying, "I want this, I'm ready to end this," that was a really big deal. That never happened before.

Heininger: And you believed at the time that he really was speaking for Adams?

Vargo: Yes, there was no doubt about that. And by the way, Adams would have made it very clear if somebody wasn't speaking for him. The day Adams got the visa he called and left a message on my answering machine thanking me for helping get him the visa. I didn't doubt that O'Dowd was representing Adams; I don't think anybody did. He was close to him. People knew that he was close to him. His newspaper was very pro-Sinn Fein, so I didn't have a doubt that he—I didn't think he was freelancing.



The Department of Foreign Affairs held back initially, and I think they thought Albert Reynolds was out there far in front of where they wanted him to be at that stage, and so they were hanging back. Dermot Gallagher was the Ambassador at the time and he wanted to be kept informed, but I always had the sense he wanted sufficient distance so that if it all went south he could say he had nothing to do with it. I knew that Reynolds was out in front of DFA here, and it suited the Department of Foreign Affairs because they're conservative by nature, which was the same issue with the State Department. Who wanted to take that chance? Why risk it? It's easier to just keep the status quo. Reynolds was definitely out in front of his own crowd. But he also had help on his side, because he had Dick Spring in there, who was his Foreign Minister. And just like Kennedy would provide the cover for Adams with Clinton, having Dick Spring backing up Albert Reynolds gave Reynolds the kind of political cover he needed.

The interesting thing about Kennedy, historically, and what people should know—The thing that I really admired is he did a lot more than people realize. If you had the paper, all the memos that I'd given him, you'd see how much he did on a daily basis. I gave him about three memos a day on the issue. He wanted to be constantly informed of the minutiae.

The thing that is most amazing is that he never sought credit for it. Conor O'Clery was a writer for the *Irish Times*. He wrote a book called *The Greening of the White House*—it had a different title in America—I don't know if it was '95 or '96. He wrote this book because he was the *Irish*

Times correspondent in the U.S. covering the process. Largely, his sources were O'Dowd and Soderberg. We made a decision not to be overly helpful. He'd come to us, he had wanted interviews, etc. Kennedy had given a speech in Britain about the special relationship, and I had lots of information I got from the Library of Congress that would be useful to him. We gave him that, and I remember having one conversation with him, but that was it.

I said to Kennedy at the time—and he was in complete agreement, “You know, we’re in the middle of this peace process. If you talk and just seem to be patting yourself on the back, it only pisses off the unionists. You can get the credit now, or you can just let other people take the credit, because you have a bigger objective at the end of this all, to make it happen, to achieve peace.” He completely agreed, without a moment’s hesitation. A lot of politicians would be, “Well, I should get my—” Nothing like that. He wanted the peace process to succeed, and if it meant him not out there every ten minutes saying, “Look at what I did,” then he was happy with that. It’s not that he never gave an interview, it’s just that he wasn’t going to compromise the process for publicity.

Young: It gives Clinton all the credit.

Vargo: It gives Clinton all the credit. And Clinton deserves the credit as it was his decision to make in the end. But Clinton had to be persuaded. We had to work on Clinton, despite the fact that he had promised it when he was running and then he denied once or twice. Mayor [David] Dinkins got involved because Dinkins wanted it, and Clinton said no. I think it was twice he denied it. Clinton needed the cover of Kennedy. If Ted Kennedy wasn’t for that visa, it was not going to happen. I think most people involved would agree with that.

Clinton wasn’t an expert with history in the issue. He knew a little bit about Northern Ireland. He cared about it in the campaign the way politicians do but he wasn’t knee-deep in it. It’s the kind of thing that if you didn’t know it really well, you wouldn’t want to trust your own gut on it, just trust Gerry Adams on it. You always had members of Congress who were for it, but they were just known to be supportive of the IRA. For Clinton to do it, he really had to have Ted Kennedy bless it, because if it all went south he could at least say, “Ted Kennedy thought it was okay.” But Clinton definitely was the only person who could make the decision and he deserves full credit for taking it on.

Heininger: Think of the big picture going on in ’93. You get Clinton coming into office and there are the beginnings of two very critical peace processes going on at the same time that involved talking with terrorists.

Vargo: Yes.

Heininger: Because you’ve got the Israeli-Palestinian process going on at the same time. Both of these groups were anathema to the U.S. Government because they were terrorists and they killed people.

Vargo: Yes. It’s all about talking to the terrorists.

Heininger: It’s all about talking to terrorists.

Vargo: I remember at the time—we did the research, and we were trying to convince Clinton to do this. One of the things we did in giving the White House the argument of why they could do it was we said, “Look at who has been met before.” I had looked into El Salvador, and the Middle East—I think George Bush, Sr. had shaken hands with [Hafez al] Assad, Sr., who had 20,000 of his own people killed. [Nelson] Mandela was met when the ANC [African National Congress] would have been viewed as terrorists. Clinton had already been talking to [Yasser] Arafat, “There is precedent,” is what we were saying, and this was just for a visa, no one was asking Clinton to meet him.

Kennedy didn’t meet Adams until the ceasefire was declared, and we went to Boston, and it must have been October of ’94.

Heininger: Yes.

Vargo: We were waiting for Adams in a holding room in Logan Airport. That’s where he met him, and he went out on the tarmac to meet him. I don’t know why that was the case but that’s where he met him, and there was a press conference out there. Before we went out—I had it in my head about Arafat, and the whole handshake with Rabin. I was on the White House lawn for that handshake, and there was all this choreography going on because Arafat loved to hug everybody, and you didn’t want that picture.

I had in my head that Sinn Fein was really—they’re the best at manipulating the press and getting the picture that they want, and I had it in my head that Gerry Adams might want to hug Ted Kennedy. It was just me and Kennedy and Vicki [Reggie Kennedy] and I said, “Whatever you do, don’t let Gerry Adams hug you.” He just looked at me and grinned, and Vicki laughed and joked, “Trina, he’s Irish. They barely hug their wives, he’s not going to hug Gerry Adams.” And he didn’t. In fairness, Adams did not try to hug him.

But Adams is really good like this. I remember things like when he would come in to the office to meet Kennedy. Kennedy would always be in his office and Adams would come to the front reception room, and I’d have to walk down the hall to greet him. I was always very conscious that the press were in the hall and the cameras were rolling. You can never prove what is in somebody else’s mind, but my sense about what Adams was always good at doing—when I’d be walking him down the hall, he’d be engaging me in a way that would be intended to cause me to smile and look like we were great pals. I’d always have it in the back of my mind that there’s somebody out there watching this in Northern Ireland whose loved one was killed by the IRA. I respected what he was doing now but I was never an “admirer” and it’s difficult to have to constantly be trying not to do anything that wrongly conveys that. Impossible nearly.

I didn’t want to look like I was Gerry Adams’ best friend. There are a lot of people enamored with him. He had that whole sort of Che Guevara Republican chic thing going on with some people. I was never one of those people. I saw women swooning around him at the time he came over. I didn’t get it, but I was conscious that he was trying to look like he was really friends with these people, and so I was worried when he was going to meet Kennedy, that he would try that.

Heininger: It’s cover, it’s playing for cover.

Vargo: Yes, it is.

Heininger: Which, if you are in the position that you were in, you always have to be concerned about what they're going to be doing.

Vargo: Yes, but they're very good. Sinn Fein is the best at PR; they're the best, ten steps ahead of everybody else. That was the first time Kennedy saw him. That was October. Clinton probably didn't see him until that next St. Patrick's Day. The Clintons started holding White House parties and Kennedy was there for those. It was a great one, the first party after the ceasefire. And then the ceasefire broke down and Moynihan sent Kennedy some one-line note that said something like, "Have we been had?" Because Moynihan would have been really reluctant to sign Kennedy's letter in the first place and support the visa.

Tom Foley was not going to support the visa. We tried to get Foley onboard and Foley actually said—Foley's guy told me that Foley wasn't going to support it but he wasn't going to try to block it, but he did in fact go to [Samuel] Sandy Berger, I think it was, and urged that the visa not be granted. So the Brits had gotten Foley on their side to try to block it, and he did try to block it.

For Moynihan to do it—Moynihan felt that the Irish Government and the Department of Foreign Affairs often let people like him and EMK get out in front of them and take the heat for them. On things like big human rights cases like the Birmingham Six and the Guildford Four, it was fine for the U.S. Congress to go out there and say these guys were innocent, and other issues, while they hung back a bit. There was some conversation where Moynihan was ticked off. He felt that the Irish always pushed us out there to do their dirty work, and then only if it was a success—

Heininger: Why not, if we're willing to put into it?

Vargo: Exactly.

Heininger: Of course.

Vargo: He did sign the letter supporting the visa. But as soon as the peace process broke down, it was kind of like, "I told you so," when he sent this note to Kennedy. It was one sentence: "Have we been had?" or something like that. It was hard when the ceasefire broke down because we'd put everything into this, we trusted that it was going to happen, and to have the ceasefire fall apart was a huge blow to everybody.

Heininger: Was it surprising how many times ceasefires, the first time they go on defect, and a process—

Vargo: Yes, they do.

Heininger: It's always up and down.

Vargo: They do, they do.

Young: Every step forward seemed to be—

Heininger: It was always two forward but one back.

Vargo: So we shouldn't have been that surprised by it, but when you become so invested in it you feel the failure acutely.

Heininger: How important was Nancy Soderberg to the process?

Vargo: Nancy was important because she was in the White House. If it had been somebody else in the White House who just didn't care about Ireland, you wouldn't have had somebody to go to. She and I had worked together for years. She had dumped the issue on me in the first place, back when she was in Kennedy's office. I had worked with her on my own time throughout the campaign, doing the memos to the candidate on Irish issues. So she and I had been in constant contact, and having her in the White House was important. She knew the issue, she knew the players. She didn't trust O'Dowd but she wasn't unfamiliar with everything. She knew it well, and so she was important.

Heininger: Let's skip forward ten years, when Jim Steinberg is there and Jim Steinberg took over the portfolio.

Vargo: Another former Kennedy person. We're everywhere—like ants!

Heininger: Yes, everywhere.

Vargo: Jim was great and Tony Lake was great. By the time Steinberg had come in, the worst was over. The hard part was in the beginning. It was '93, '94, and '95 that was the worst time. We had to go out on a limb in the first place to get the visa, we had to get the first ceasefire, and then we had to get the ceasefire back again. I'm trying to think which year Jim actually took it over. By then, he's in the middle of dealing mainly with Senator Mitchell and trying to get everybody to sign up to a peace agreement. I remember the night just before the April signing of the Belfast Agreement. Everybody was on the phone around the clock. I'd be getting phone calls at 10:00 at night: "You need the Senator to call Gerry Adams," "You need this one to call [David] Trimble," and "President Clinton has to call this one," because we were just trying to push it over the line. So Jim would have been there at an instrumental time in terms of getting the Good Friday Agreement signed. But in terms of all the political heat we were going to take, it was really '93 through '95, '96.

Heininger: It would have been a lot tougher if Nancy hadn't been there.

Vargo: Oh, absolutely. She was the person I had to talk to there. If I talked to some stranger who didn't know the issue, didn't care about the issue, didn't know me, didn't know Kennedy, didn't have a connection to the issue, I think—yes. Jane Holl, who worked on the issue at the NSC, was also instrumental.

Heininger: Do you think it would have happened if you had been dealing with someone who had come in with a different background?

Vargo: It's hard to say. In all of this, I'm a big believer that, except for maybe Kennedy and Clinton, none of us were indispensable. You could say that about every single person in the process. What if Adams didn't do X? Or if I didn't do Y? Or Jean didn't do Z? Nancy here, Tony there? I think it was this amazing perfect storm, where all these people are in the right place at

the right time. And more importantly, the IRA was ready to end it. If they weren't ready to end it, it didn't matter that I was there and Nancy was there and Jean Kennedy Smith was there. Everything happened to come together at the same time.

Heininger: The constellation, the stars were lined up.

Vargo: Which is why—well, what if John Hume had told Kennedy, “No, don't give it to him?” It's endless. What if I hadn't told Adams to issue a separate statement that overrode what Val Martinez was going to put out there? Would the White House have just rejected the visa? Every single person in the process did something at some time about which you could say, “What if they hadn't done that?”

Heininger: At the bottom, what really mattered was that the IRA were ready to end it.

Vargo: Yes. And maybe—the thing that you don't know about it is what if it had been President [George W.] Bush by the time this had happened? It's hard to believe it would have happened. The issue would have stayed in the State Department and the State Department wouldn't have entertained this, and it would have never gotten off the ground. So it mattered that Clinton was there and that Tony was there and Nancy was there and the Kennedys were there—everybody. It really was a lot of people being in the right place at the right time.

Jean Kennedy Smith, that's a good Ambassador to have in Dublin. She can call up the White House—I doubt Ray Seitz, when he was our Ambassador in the UK, had the same level of access to the President. He was not happy that JKS trumped him. He was so certain, so against. There were some people who, whenever the ceasefire broke down, loved to say, “I told you so. You see, you were wrong.”

Some people never got over not being on the right side of the decision. A lot of them did. There was a guy in the White House at the time, someone I worked with on the Pan Am 103 issue. He handled terrorism, and he was really upset with me for what I was doing to get Adams the visa, and he was constantly saying, “You're making a big mistake. You don't know what you're doing,” on and on. He actually called me after it was all over and he said, “You know what? You were right.” One or two people did that. There are some people—it's as if they would rather have had everything break down so as to have been correct in their analysis. But yes, it was a constellation of a lot of people being in the right place at the right time.

Young: You haven't said anything about Joe Cahill.

Vargo: It's interesting, the Joe Cahill thing, because I was in Ireland at the time. What happened was the Joe Cahill visa—

Heininger: This came right after?

Vargo: Yes. It was just before the ceasefire. Here's what I can remember about Joe Cahill.

Young: This was after the Gerry—

Vargo: Visa, yes.

Young: And now there comes another one.

Vargo: Yes.

Heininger: But this was a real problematic one.

Vargo: Yes, and that one Nancy handled herself—I was in Ireland at the time and this came up suddenly. Jean had weighed in, saying, “This guy needs it,” and I was away. I think she just went straight to Nancy. I remember getting emails and hearing about it as it was happening, but I was over there. I remember being in the airport in Heathrow, and somebody was calling me about this Joe Cahill visa. But to be honest and to be fair, I wasn’t in the middle of that one. I knew it was a big issue, because he was meant to be a big-time bad guy.

Heininger: If you’re talking dirty hands.

Vargo: Dirty hands, yes.

Heininger: His hands were much dirtier than Gerry Adams’, weren’t they?

Vargo: Well, nobody ever really knows.

Heininger: The perception at the time.

Vargo: The perception, absolutely, yes. I don’t know specifically, with certainty, what Adams did or didn’t do, or ordered, or knew about....

Heininger: He also would deny it though.

Vargo: Yes, or he would say something was “alleged.”

Young: Adams needed—

Vargo: He needed one of the hard men to say, “We’re going to be for this,” to those in the U.S. who were hard to convince, because Gerry was seen within the movement as being sort of the soft, political guy.

Young: And apparently Albert Reynolds felt that very strongly.

Vargo: He did, and they pushed really hard, and it happened really quickly. There was resistance to it. Probably in Justice there would have been resistance to it, and at that stage the Brits were probably still opposing, but I know that I was in Ireland and in Heathrow then.

Young: Did you ever have direct links or contact with Alec Reid?

Vargo: No. but I knew what Alec Reid was up to. I dealt a lot with Sean O’Huiginn, who is very senior in the Department of Foreign Affairs and probably the smartest diplomat in the Department of Foreign Affairs. Brilliant. In fact, he drove the Brits crazy because he was always outmaneuvering them. And Martin Mansergh, who is now a [Teachta Dala, member of the Dail] TD, but he was then sort of the right hand, starting back in Charlie Haughey’s time, again

another really brilliant guy, Mansergh. I dealt a lot with the two of them, and I dealt with O'Dowd a lot, a little bit with the Irish Ambassador here, Dermot Gallagher, but not hugely.

Young: This was after Sean Donlon's time?

Vargo: Yes, Donlon was before my time.

Heininger: Did you deal much with the U.S. DCM [Deputy Chief of Mission] in Ireland at that time?

Vargo: Yes, Dennis Sandberg. It's always hard with political ambassadors. They know a little bit and they can get really excited about something, but you always need that person there who knows what the boundaries are. Dennis probably had a really difficult time. At the end of the day, Jean's gut was for the right thing and it all worked out, but at the time she was doing all these things, it was against the grain of everybody. She really worked for the State Department, and she wasn't making them happy, and there was constant friction between people in the State Department who disagreed with her view and were really annoyed that her view was being listened to.

Dennis Sandberg had to take all this flak from everybody. He's got her telling him what she wants and what she has to see happen, and he's got the people in the State Department, where his career is. Jean will come and go, but he's still got to live in this world. I think he may have retired after he left Dublin. But, you know, he had to manage all of those people. I dealt a lot with Dennis and with Amy Seigenthaler [Pierce] in Jean's office.



Young: Jean had gone up there earlier.

Vargo: Yes, she had gone up there earlier and she'd gone to a trial and it got her into trouble. I think it was because she hadn't sought permission and she was going into another country. It was hard because Jean was just passionate about what she was passionate about. In the end, though, what I would say was that Jean called it early and she was right about the visa, and she had the guts to get out there and stick her neck out when it would have been really easy to just not step up. So you know, fair play to her in history.

Young: She was reprimanded?

Vargo: Yes, she was reprimanded. That was a bit unfair, actually. Jean could be very tough, but some people were just unhappy with the way the decision was going, and a lot of that was really unfair to Jean.

Heininger: Did you expect her, when she became Ambassador, to be as out front as she turned out to be?

Vargo: Well, her personality. The Kennedys are—you know.

Heininger: They're out front.

Vargo: Yes, the Kennedys are out there.

Young: There are no shrinking violets there.

Vargo: No, they're not shrinking violets. The thing that has to affect you is that when you have four members of your family die very young, you don't always think you necessarily have tomorrow. One of the things that I learned—I was with Kennedy for eleven years—you didn't go back to him and say, "This can't be done," or, "We can do that next year." He just doesn't operate like that. It's, "Yes, we can do this and we can do this now and it's your job to figure out how we get that done." There's sort of an ingrained sense that putting off to tomorrow is not something they do that often.

Heininger: That's a good point.

Vargo: Ambassador Smith was not a shrinking violet. You could only be surprised to the extent that she had no background in all this. She started from scratch. I had to go with her to all of her State Department briefings and prepare her for her Senate confirmation hearing. I was in her back pocket during the period between her being nominated, before she went over there. That's the first I'd met her, because I didn't know her before she was nominated for this position. She didn't have any background. She'd met John Hume, she'd been to Northern Ireland, but she had run Very Special Arts, and she might have done a program in Ireland, but there was no expertise.

Young: She had a lot of personal acquaintances.

Vargo: She had a lot of personal acquaintances, yes, but she had to cram the way everybody does who is going to be an Ambassador somewhere. So no, I wasn't totally surprised. I think it's just their personalities.

Young: Your observation about Kennedy, you know, "Let's get it done now and not put it off to tomorrow," and yet, when you look over the whole of his history in Irish affairs, he comes out as a person of enormous patience, from the time he first met John Hume and was very impressed with him. And that was way back.

Vargo: Yes, I think the key is that he knows the moment when he sees it, and when it's not there, you don't try to push something that you know is not ripe yet. He's good at knowing it's the time to do something. And he was always good at reaching out to the other side, figure out what we could get today and then come back for the rest. He's had really smart timing about

knowing what was possible and when it was possible, and knowing when something wasn't possible and to take what you could get at that moment. So there was a sense of urgency if delay served no purpose. If it served a purpose, he could wait. And in terms of reaching out he made a big effort with the Unionists once they started coming over.

Heininger: That's the mark of the most successful politicians.

Vargo: Absolutely.

Heininger: Timing is all.

Vargo: Yes.

Young: It's also: Don't let the best become the enemy of the good.

Vargo: Absolutely, yes.

Young: That's a very striking phrase.

Vargo: Yes, and he knows that, and he's very good at that. That's why he's so successful.

Heininger: Good is not best enough.

Vargo: Yes, exactly.

Young: You mentioned Carey Parker a lot.

Vargo: Huge importance.

Young: Talk about why that is.

Vargo: To me, Carey *is* the Senator. He is his alter ego. They think the same, they are the same, obviously—healthcare, Supreme Court nominations. You have to have somebody who can help on the big picture, who thinks like you do, and that was Carey. I can't say enough good things about Carey. He's incredibly smart, incredibly even-tempered. I could go in his office really outraged and say something like, "We can't do this!" I never heard Carey Parker raise his voice, which is astounding given the pressure he had to be under. Really smart, really wise, just always thinking far ahead.

He'd been there in all the years that I wasn't there, so that was really helpful. He knew the history. He would tell me, [William] Clark was in the NSC [National Security Council] when it was [Ronald] Reagan and what had gone on. Carey was really good because he'd been there since the early '70s, and I didn't come in until '87. There were things that had happened. The Anglo-Irish Agreement in '84 with Margaret Thatcher and [Garret] FitzGerald. So he'd been there and had the historical memory of things, like when John Hume would have first come to the Hill and testified, or what people did after Bloody Sunday, and all those kinds of things. He'd have been with him. It's always really important because he provides consistency while the rest

of us came and went, even though 11 years was a really long time for me to be there. He was really important for Kennedy for consistency.

Young: He knew Kennedy's mind.

Vargo: Oh, absolutely, like nobody else did. Usually Carey and I were in agreement. I only remember one occasion where we actually went in to the Senator because we couldn't agree. It was on Libya and Pan Am 103. But everything went through Carey and that continued after I left. And I remain in touch with Kennedy and Carey and Sharon. Kennedy again played a really important role after the Northern Ireland bank robbery and the killing of Robert McCartney. I didn't think he should meet Gerry Adams, and I let him know that. Sharon, who took my job, and Carey, agreed, and we put it to Kennedy that we didn't think he should see Adams. He didn't, and I would say that it made a really big difference in how fast then the IRA decommissioned.

Heininger: If you wanted to get Kennedy to do something, did you always feel that you had to get Carey onboard first?

Vargo: I would say that it would be to your benefit to have Carey on. As I said, I can literally remember one time—because sometimes I would go to Carey with something and he would say, “No, not a good idea,” and in the end I would just opt not to pick that particular fight. You pick those battles. It's amazing, over 11 years there might have been small differences, but the biggest thing I can remember—and I think this is generational. Carey had more respect for the office of the Presidency than somebody who came of age post-Nixon. There's a generational issue there, I think. Kennedy himself has a huge amount of respect for the office. It's not that I don't respect the office, but I would have less of an issue challenging. When we were trying to get sanctions against Libya, for the Pan Am 103 bombing, there was an Iran sanctions bill that the Jewish lobby—AIPAC [American Israel Public Affairs Committee]—really wanted passed, and they didn't like the fact that we had tacked Libya sanctions onto the bill. First I got a call from an Assistant Secretary asking us not to, and I'd get calls from AIPAC. It would keep going up the chain, and at one stage it went as high as the Secretary of State and Al Gore, both calling Kennedy, saying, “Don't do it.”

That is where Kennedy said, “Okay, so what are we going to do if the President calls?” He stuck with what I advised the whole way through, to stick with the sanctions. Carey said, “If the President asks you to back down, you have to back down.” I said, “You just have to say, ‘Sorry, Mr. President, but I can't be with you on this one.’” In the end the President didn't call him, so my position prevailed, but I don't know what would have happened if he had. But I can distinctly remember that Carey and I disagreed, and I don't know which way Kennedy would have gone in the end. It didn't come to that.

But I would say it would have been really important to have Carey onboard 99 percent of the time. But if you really felt strongly, I felt strongly about the Libya sanctions at the time, you were never blocked from the Senator. We had to have this debate in front of him so he could make the decision. I would have only felt that way if that was necessary. It's the only issue I can think of.

Young: He himself was very much taken, wasn't he, with Ireland?

Vargo: Yes. I don't know why or where it comes from, but Carey cared about Ireland. All levels of detail. You know, Kennedy is famous for things like thank-you notes to people, or sending gifts. Carey has that same kind of a mind. Sometimes Carey would do things and you would think, *This does not merit Carey Parker's time*. It could be getting me one of those photos (pointing to photos signed by Kennedy on office wall) —he paid more attention to detail. He and Kennedy are both the same that way. I still get thank-you notes from Kennedy even though I told him that it's not necessary, not a good use of his time.

Carey was like that, and Carey cared about Ireland. I remember we were laughing because somebody had a baby or a grandchild, and he had these little baby pants in his office that said "Irish Mist" across them, and he would send them out to people. They were a laugh. Yet, Carey would have been more cautious. While I wasn't enthralled by Gerry Adams, Cary even less so. He would have been much more conscious of the British Government reaction. He'd have the whole history of Joe Kennedy in his mind. The family had a lot of contacts in England, too. Carey would just have been more sensitive to the magnitude of what we were actually about to do, more than I may have fully appreciated. I knew what we were doing, but Carey would have been more historically steeped in it all. He was always more cautious, but he cared about Ireland. He still does.

Heininger: In terms of process, because he was the Legislative Director, did you always have to take things to him?

Vargo: Normally the process would be—I didn't have to take memos to him. I would be taking Kennedy three memos a day: *Here's what's happening. This person called this person and then I called this*—the day-to-day. I'd just go about my business, but I bothered Carey when I knew—

Heininger: Decisions were needed.

Vargo: When a decision needed to be made that reasonable people could disagree about. I could put a memo in to Kennedy that said, "We just signed you on to this resolution supporting the peace process." I didn't have to ask Carey if that was okay. I didn't even have to ask Kennedy ahead of time, "Is it okay if we sign you on to this?" There were certain things that I knew what his position was and I didn't have to ask either him or Carey. But if you have half a brain, you sometimes have to say to yourself, *Ooh, if I do this, this could be in the New York Times tomorrow, or, That requires him to actually agree and sign off on in advance*.

All speeches went through Carey, because Carey is a masterful editor. He could take every speech and make it better, usually by making it simpler. The problem with people like me, is the [Legislative Assistant] L.A.'s are too steeped in the detail, so you have a tendency to over-explain everything. Carey could just cut through all of the chaff and get to the wheat of an issue.

Anything that mattered, I didn't put in without—if I put a memo in, Carey would read it before the Senator did anyhow, because I would put a copy in his box and a copy in the Senator's box, and he might come back to me and say, "Wait. I disagree and I want you to put X in." That was pretty rare, because it would have been something I didn't realize he was going to disagree with. There weren't very many memos where I would say, "I think this and Carey thinks the opposite."

Carey and I would have usually—you know, I'd walk into his office and we'd talk about it if it was important, before I even wrote the memo. There wasn't anything that mattered that didn't go through Carey.

To me, he's like the Senator. I always thought that if Carey ever quit, I'd quit the next day, because he kept it all together in a way that I don't know who else could—and he worked most Saturdays. When I was in on Saturdays, Carey was working a full day like it was a regular day. Carey worked really, really hard, late into the night. I almost never left when Carey wasn't still there.

Young: You referred earlier to Ireland being dumped on you. What was going on that was dumped on you?

Vargo: We went from three people to two people (foreign policy LAs) at one stage, so everybody gets more work, and if you could, you'd get rid of things that aren't that interesting. I think most of the South Africa stuff with [Nelson] Mandela happened before my time, but Nancy would have had, for example, the Middle East. I'd have to look back historically at what was going on at any given time, but she could have been really interested in the Middle East, and following up on South Africa. He was long involved with Chile and the man who was killed, again before my time.

Heininger: [Orlando] Letelier.

Vargo: Yes, Letelier, so there was that going on. Then, he'd still be dealing with immigration issues, and famine in Africa. There would have been a lot more sexy issues to deal with than Ireland. Nancy would have been senior to me and would have said, "I'm going to do the Middle East, and Ireland—there's nothing happening there. Here, you do it."

Young: So there wasn't any Kennedy agenda?

Vargo: At that stage, no.

Heininger: What was Gare doing?

Vargo: Gare never had anything to do with Ireland. When he came in, he just took different countries. We always joked that I did beaches and Gare did conflicts, because I'd get divided islands like Cyprus and Northern Ireland, and Gare always wanted—Wherever there was danger, Gare would want—the Khmer Rouge, the Polisario—the Moroccans threatened to kill him one time. If there was danger, Gare liked that. I once jokingly asked him if he'd mind if I took out a life insurance policy on him.

Young: Ireland made it look safe.

Heininger: It wasn't Gare's idea of danger.

Vargo: I had minor danger. I had gone to Belfast, pre-ceasefire, to have meetings, and I was aware that people would come pick me up at the hotel, I wouldn't take a cab anywhere, and I wouldn't know where I was going. They would pick me up and take me somewhere. To meet

Gerry Adams, for example, I had to go to the Felons Club, in West Belfast. Somebody picked me up at my hotel and took me there. The British security forces were following Adams everywhere and when I came out of the building, the army made a point of having the tank out front to say, “We know that you’re in there and you’re having that meeting.” There were all these head games going on between them and Adams and Sinn Fein.

I stayed at the Europa, and the Europa was the most bombed hotel in Europe. The whole front area that should have been glass was just boarded up because it had been blown out. I remember in the middle of the night I heard something go off, and it woke me and I thought, *It’s a bomb*, and then I thought, *Oh, you’re just imagining things*. I went back to sleep and it turned out the next morning on the news, it was a half block away from me. There was an army post and they had set a bomb off.

I was mindful at the time. I really thought it would not suit either side, even the Loyalists, to kill Kennedy’s person. It just didn’t make any sense. I actually thought I was perfectly safe. Now, you can always be in the wrong place at the wrong time in those places, but it wouldn’t have benefited them, even the Loyalists, to harm me.

When Kennedy went in ’98, he’d never been to Northern Ireland before. There was concern about the Loyalists because it was dicey. Would anybody want to get him? He gave one major public speech at the Guildhall in Derry, so people knew about that in advance.

Young: That was Hume’s hometown.

Vargo: That was Hume’s hometown, and we flew up from Dublin on a small Navy plane, and it was awful because there was a storm and lightening, and Jean was nervous on that flight. It was Chris Doherty, who was the Senator’s advance man, Jean, me, and Vicki on that flight, and maybe Kathy McKiernan, who was the press advisor. Kathy came as well, which is kind of unusual on a trip, to take a press person with you. It’s sort of an extravagance but it had to be done because there were so many press demands, and it was a good thing we took her. I can’t remember if she was up there ahead of us or on our flight. I think she went ahead.

I had been demanding a couple of things. There was the whole issue of the bulletproof vests. Kennedy hated wearing them and they weigh like 40 pounds. First, he was doing this speech in the Guildhall and I wanted the magnetometers. They didn’t usually use them in Northern Ireland, but it would have been an easy place to get him. I had negotiations with the Brits and the police and they said, “Oh no, we don’t use these here, even for—” I think it was Blair or Mo Mowlam at the time. I said, “We’re going to use them for Ted Kennedy.” Whatever the expense was, they flew these things in.

It turned out—I didn’t know this until after the event was over, because I had gone in a back door with Kennedy and he was practicing his speech on the teleprompter. Chris was out there where they brought everybody in, and apparently the magnetometers were broken and they had to use the handheld wands—he only told us after the fact, because I would have had a heart attack—and everybody that came in would *beep, beep, beep*, because so many people in Northern Ireland were allowed to carry handguns because of threats to their lives. They let them

all in and somebody told me it was our fault because, “You didn’t have on your invitation that you couldn’t bring a handgun.” The whole audience was armed, as it turns out.

Heininger: Oh, my God.

Vargo: Now, these were invitation-only, but there were a couple hundred people. You don’t know who’s going to slip in. I’m glad I didn’t know. He told us after the fact. Chris thought this was hysterical because I was beside myself, as you would be when Kennedy is with you, and given the family history, you don’t want anything to happen when you’re responsible for him.

But he wouldn’t put the jacket on. We went out to walk in John Hume’s neighborhood, in the Bogside, and he wore the jacket for a really short period of time. It was too heavy and he couldn’t take it and he tossed it off and he just risked it—although that community wouldn’t have been a threat to him. Kennedy’s visit was very balanced. We went to the Loyalist/Unionist neighborhood as well; we went to Carrickfergus, which is where Andrew Jackson was from, which is a Unionist area. We made sure he had a schedule that was balanced.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Young: Was Hume still with the SDLP [Social Democratic and Labour Party]?

Vargo: Yes. He had been in the SDLP, in fact, he would have been the leader. No, in ’98, when we went over—

Young: No, he had left.

Vargo: I was thinking back to when we had started. In ’98, when we went over, he might have still been a member of the Parliament. He was probably still a member but Seamus Mallon had taken over and he wasn’t part of the day-to-day. But it was a great trip and Kennedy had never been to Northern Ireland before, so that was exciting. He’d worked on this issue for all these years and had never been to the place, and most of the time it wouldn’t have been safe for him to go, but it was an important time.

Mo Mowlam, while we were there, went into Maze prison and met with the Loyalists, and there was a lot of upset about that. We loved Mo Mowlam. We went to her place in Hillsborough, and she was great. She was probably the first Secretary of State for Northern Ireland we really liked. The guys before were always very pompous, central casting Foreign Office-types, and they

always rubbed Kennedy the wrong way. One former ambassador, Sir Patrick Mayhew, Kennedy just did not like him at all. He would always come in saying it had to be this way or that way, and Kennedy would be practically rolling his eyes in front of the guy, his disdain was obvious.

Kennedy had this habit, whenever he was getting really annoyed with somebody in a meeting, he'd start scratching his ankle really hard. I knew when he didn't like a person or a meeting when he just started scratching. His ankle would be up on his knee and he'd be scratching, and you knew. Mayhew came in and he'd always be scratching that ankle. He just didn't like him at all.

Heininger: Would you see it in his face when he was scratching his ankle? Was that his way of keeping it out of his face?

Vargo: No, you wouldn't see it; I think that was his way of keeping it out of his face. It would be interesting to see if other people picked up on that or felt it. I rarely saw him attack people. He was always really nice in a meeting to everybody, so I don't think a lot of people could read him. I could just tell when he was annoyed, his body language. And he'd often do good cop–bad cop, where he didn't mind if I jumped in to be the heavy in the meeting, because it left him free not to be the heavy. He was very good at how he played his meetings.

I do remember one funny meeting. Dick Holbrooke became Assistant Secretary of State for Europe. The State Department had been totally out of the issue, had nothing to do with it, but Holbrooke wanted to be in it. He called me up and said, "I want to come in and talk to the Senator about Ireland. We can play tennis, I'll go out to his house." I thought, *That's a bit presumptuous*, so I put a note in to Kennedy and said, "He wants to come out and play tennis." Kennedy said, "No, he doesn't have to come out and play tennis. He can come into the office and have a meeting."

So we had this meeting and Holbrooke was trying to impress Kennedy and it was amusing to me because Holbrooke didn't know what he was talking about on Northern Ireland. He was literally making stuff up. You know how it is when you're the staffer and you have to know all the details that your boss doesn't have to know.... I remember sitting there, thinking, *That's total bull*, and he kept doing it and I thought, *Is Kennedy on to him?*

This kept going on for a while and then finally, Holbrooke said to Kennedy, "I was just to the westernmost point of Ireland, Malin Head," and Kennedy immediately looked at me as if to ask, "Is that right?" I then knew he was on to him. I just shook my head no and Kennedy said, "It's *not* the westernmost point in Ireland." Holbrooke said, "Yes, it is." I knew Kennedy. He looked at me. He didn't really know what it was. I jumped in then and I said, "You know, I really don't think it is. I think it's Dingle," because I thought Dingle was further west. I wasn't a hundred percent sure, but I said, "I think it's Dingle," and then Kennedy said confidently, "Yes, it's Dingle!" Holbrooke looked at me and said, "You're just backing up your boss." Then Kennedy said—it was good-natured but a challenge— "Let's get out the maps!" I thought, *Oh, Jesus, if I'm wrong on this, I'm fried*. Honest to God, Kennedy went into Carey Parker's office, because Carey had the maps. We got the maps out and, thank God, Dingle was further west.

Kennedy was so pleased with all this. After Holbrooke left, Kennedy got the map—this is the kind of stuff he does—he gets that map and he signs it, and he wrote on it something like, “To Dick, It’s a good thing that you’re better at geopolitics than you are at geography.” And he sent it over to the State Department. It was the funniest, most memorable—I knew, because he shot me that look. You could tell it was because he thought Holbrooke was having him on, but he didn’t really know what to jump in on. It was the funniest thing.

He has a great sense of humor. Once, we went to the National Archives for an event a long time ago, when I first started, and I was probably just not doing my job well enough, because he had a bad back and I made him walk up all the steps of the National Archives and he was grumbling to me, walking up the steps, “Trina, the elevator.” I said I didn’t see one. The truth is I didn’t see one but I probably wasn’t looking hard enough. I didn’t really think that his back was that bad. So we go in and there’s Armand Hammer sitting in a wheelchair, and Kennedy looked at me and said, “Do you think Armand Hammer came up the steps?” He constantly could zing you, he was just funny like that.

Another funny thing is, over the length of his career, he made an assumption that every single person—I felt, anyhow, and other people might disagree with me—that we were all sort of interchangeable in that everybody was meant to know every single thing about his life. I can remember being out at his house sometimes after we’d played tennis and he’d point out the rhododendrons or whatever, and he’d say, “We need to get those fixed.” I didn’t know a bad rhododendron from a good rhododendron, and I didn’t know who to even call, but he just thought I’d of course know that too.

At one stage we had this meeting with an Irish delegation and he was trying to recall something and he said, “You know, Trina, that place we went to in Los Angeles.” He was talking about a small business incubator. He told them I would get back to them on this stuff. I’d never been to L.A. with him, and I didn’t know what he was talking about. It turns out he actually—this is the kind of memory the guy had...he was thinking of being on a trip to L.A. in something like 1968 or 1969, and I had to say, “I was six years old then. I wasn’t with you.” Then he would say, “Well let’s see how good the files are.” And I had to get the Kennedy Library files and figure out where he’d been and what he’d seen, so we could follow up on the meeting. It must be really hard when you have people who come and go, that many people over an entire career, and some people are with you for this part of it and some people are with you for that part of it.

The other thing about him, which is the reason he keeps people, the reason that people are so loyal and people stayed a long time, is that he’s the best boss. I have to say that, because he delegated a lot. We only brought him in when something needed his attention. So if it was Northern Ireland, I’d talk to everybody right up to—obviously I couldn’t call the President, so he’d have to call the President. Whatever it was, he delegated a lot. He always would introduce you by saying, “This is Trina. She works *with* me.” He’d never say people worked *for* him. He was never “the Boss” in a dictatorial sort of way. He treated everybody like you were part of a team and he was one of the team. But we all knew who made the call at the end of the day.

He was good as a politician because a lot of people—the natural tendency for a lot of politicians is they want to be the smartest person in the room about whatever the issue is. Stephen Breyer worked for Kennedy. Look at the list of the people who worked for him. I think he always

wanted smart people around him, so the final product would be the entire group's combined effort. If you're always the smartest one in the room, it's never going to be any better than what you alone can give to something. He was really good at that.

And he's generous. I wrote an opinion piece last year and he put it in the *Congressional Record* and he sent it to me. I just got some note from Vicki within the last couple of months saying, "The Senator wanted you to know that what's happened on Northern Ireland wouldn't have happened without you." He's incredibly generous like that. It was 11 years ago that I left the office, and he still—this year he's probably sent me three or four things. That's his personality. I can't imagine going to work for another Senator, or doing that again, because he's just unique in the way he makes people feel about what it is he's trying to accomplish. And he did that on Ireland. He'd send people things, and he'd send people notes, and he would put their speeches in the *Congressional Record*. He's always a cheerleader for something good to happen.

Young: Do you think there are certain issues that he's persisted at and invested a lot in over the years? Healthcare and jobs he's still working on. Was Ireland always one of those special projects?

Vargo: I remember distinctly, when we lost the majority and we had to go from Gare and me to just me doing foreign policy, I was of course complaining to the chief of staff and I said, "This is way too much work for one person to do," and he said, "We can do a lot less now on Ireland," and I thought, *Good luck with that*.

The reality was, Kennedy was never going to do *less* on Ireland, and not a single thing decreased for me in terms of Ireland. Given everything going on in the world, I spent a disproportionate amount of time on Ireland, which was great, and it was a time when it was needed. There was no other issue that I ever did that was remotely close in terms of time spent. We spent a lot of time on Pan Am 103, but it was over a very specific period of time, on some specific issues, and he cared a lot about it. I think he picked issues where he thought he could make a difference and he wanted to make a difference. He didn't try to do too much. He did it on South Africa; he did it with famine in Ethiopia.

Young: Chile.

Vargo: Chile. I think he picked a couple of things, and Ireland was always one, but he picked a couple of things.

Heininger: Human rights.

Vargo: Yes, human rights. Instead of trying to do every single issue. When something would come up, say, on most-favored-nation status for China, I'd call Moynihan's person, because Moynihan was the person on China and Tibet. The Hill staff do this all the time. Who is the person whose boss knows this issue? Everybody would always call me to see what Kennedy was doing on Ireland. And he would pick those three or four things, but overwhelmingly, the issue was Ireland. You could argue that he spent too much time on it.

Now Ireland is going through withdrawal symptoms. They got so spoiled in the Clinton Administration, with all the parties, and they would all come into the White House and there

would be all these meetings. They've been nervous this entire campaign, whether it was [Barack] Obama or [John] McCain, because they know that as Northern Ireland gets sorted, and there's really only one or two more issues to get sorted, it obviously has to slide a bit off of the U.S. agenda, because there are much bigger things to do, and this is a success but as a political issue its day has passed.

When I started my organization, Kennedy was always saying to me—It's so hard to think about this now, because at the time—you know how you say something at the time because it's meaningless to you? But he would say, "What are they going to do when I'm not around anymore?" on taking care of the Irish issues." At the time he said that, you think like you do about your parents, that they're going to be around for forever. But I think the Irish were very conscious of the fact that when anything has come up that's mattered in the relationship, they'd go to Ted Kennedy and Ted Kennedy would take care of it.

I remember a seemingly very small issue around '92, '93 during the Clinton Administration, there was a finance bill that never mentioned Ireland by name, but would have inadvertently had the effect of double taxing American corporations in Ireland, and it could have stopped the Celtic Tiger before it got off the ground. The Irish Ambassador of the day—Gallagher—couldn't even get into Moynihan to have a meeting to say, "We really need you to strike this provision." He asked us and Kennedy went to Moynihan, and from a couple of phone calls, this thing that people will probably never know in history—there might not have been the Celtic Tiger had we passed that finance bill. It was just because you could call Ted Kennedy and he could sort it out in ten minutes.

He always thinks generations ahead.

Young: This was maybe one of the reasons he was interested in establishing a U.S.–Ireland institution.

Vargo: He just kept constantly saying, in my presence, "They don't do this. This isn't being done." He would have been conscious also that Irish America at that stage, and even some of it today, was all about things that he wouldn't really be about, like supporting the IRA and things that weren't really the Kennedy position. Those most vocal are often the fringe elements of any ethnic constituency. It happened in more than one meeting, because what made me think about creating the organization was his saying, "Jews are so much better at this, the Greeks are so much better at this, and the Irish don't really have something like this." Once again, he was seeing far ahead, ten or fifteen years.

Heininger: They've always had him.

Vargo: They've had him, exactly, and he knew that, and they were a bit lazy because they knew they just had to call Ted Kennedy. The Irish Prime Minister [Brian Cowen] just called for a review of the U.S.–Ireland relationship a couple of months ago. I find the timing interesting. I don't know if it was related, but right around the time Kennedy became ill, the Irish Government, the Prime Minister, called for a review of the relationship. I just had a meeting with the Ambassador a couple of weeks ago, and I've just written an op-ed that will probably be in the *Irish Times* this week, about the future of the relationship. One of the things that has to be in the

back of their minds, though they never said this, is, “Wow, we’ve really relied on Ted Kennedy for everything of great importance that’s mattered to us.” He just fixes it. Now, you will have Chris Dodd and others, when Kennedy retires, but they would be very conscious of the fact that any big thing that mattered to Ireland wouldn’t have happened for them without Kennedy.

Heininger: They’re going to have an Obama Administration.

Vargo: In my own personal time, I’ve been advising the Obama campaign on Irish issues. Samantha Power is in there, and she was actually born in Ireland. I know Samantha. She’s picked some of our Mitchell Scholars, and even though it’s not her issue—she is more genocide and human rights—what matters is that there’s a handful of people like her you can go to. Tony Lake has been very involved in the Obama campaign, and Tony had the whole experience of doing the Northern Ireland peace process from the NSC. There’s a guy named Denis McDonough. His last name is Irish. He’s been with Obama for a long time. I’m not sure what his job will be, but he’ll be a person that would take an interest and you could go to. And Greg Craig is there. And Jim Steinberg. So if anything happens, I know that there are people I could go to if it mattered. But everyone has to be honest about what merits their time given all that is going on in the world.

The Irish have to recognize what matters and what doesn’t, and that will be interesting. It’s like any other group or person, you get used to a certain level of attention, and then it’s like, “You’re not paying enough attention to me any more,” and it’s hard to get past the fact that we don’t need to pay that much attention to NI anymore, and that’s a good thing. The Irish economy is having the same problems as the rest of the world, but comparatively speaking, it’s now one of the wealthiest countries in the world, and they don’t need U.S. aid like they’re a third world country. That’s all gone, which means fewer and fewer Irish people now immigrate here.

Young: There’s some reverse immigration, isn’t there?

Vargo: There has been. Now there’s another hiccup—the current world economic crisis—but until recently, a lot of people were going back. They weren’t moving here. With Northern Ireland nearly sorted—there’s one last thing: policing and justice has to be devolved in Northern Ireland. Basically, the one thing they’re not left in charge of yet is policing and justice. That’s still in the hands of the Brits, and that has to be handed off to them. Right now, the DUP [Democratic Unionist Party of Ireland] is resisting Sinn Féin’s demands. Sinn Féin is right on this. It is time for this to happen, but it will be the last big thing that the U.S. really needs to be hugely involved in.

The hard thing for the Irish is they had an excuse to see Ted Kennedy before. The honest diplomats will tell you this privately. If there’s a problem in Northern Ireland or if there’s an immigration problem, or if you want money for the International Fund for Ireland, it gave them a reason to call me, or Sharon now, and say, “We want to bring the Minister in to talk to Kennedy about X.” Their big fear is, “We don’t have any issues to talk to you about any more, so why will you care about us?” They would be conscious of the fact that the issues of the past are leaving the stage, and they’ve relied on Kennedy all this time. They’re only now starting to figure it out. When I started the organization ten years ago, it was because I saw this coming, and the Irish Government right now is only starting to grapple with it. He’s done everything for them:

immigration, Northern Ireland peace process, business taxation. You name it on Ireland and he was the go-to guy.

Heininger: Increasing the entry of Irish nurses into the U.S. too.

Vargo: Oh, did he do that too?

Heininger: Yes.

Vargo: You see?

Heininger: Some time in the '70s.

Vargo: Everything, and the Irish would know that. There wouldn't have been anybody in history more instrumental for them than Ted Kennedy.

Heininger: What other issues did you cover for him?

Vargo: Except for Ireland and maybe Pan Am 103 and a few things, it was a job where each day was different. When China came up for most favored nation status, you had to deal with that. And then something would come up with Russia. I spent a lot of time in my early years, when I was junior staffer, helping with getting Jews out of the Soviet Union. He would go over and he'd take this book, and I had to compile the cases of all these families—Refuseniks—who he wanted to get out. One time we were trying to help Jews get out of Syria. Massachusetts citizens out of China after Tiananmen Square. One time there were kids in Massachusetts who wanted to build a school in Pakistan, and we helped with that. It could be anything.

I dealt with the Canadians a lot. The other thing Kennedy would do is if there was something that mattered to you, he'd let you do it. I studied at McGill, I went to graduate school in Canada, so I cared about the relationship, and so he'd let me do things with Canada.

And the Berlin Wall had come down and it was the Gorbachev era. Back in 1962-'63, in Guyana, South America, there was a situation where there was a man named Cheddi Jagan. You have to check the history on this. Arthur Schlesinger would have known this. Cheddi Jagan was a guy who was either going to come to power or was in power in Guyana, and it was when we were afraid of Communism/domino effects/Vietnam and all of that. The Brits were in charge of Guyana and for whatever reason they didn't want Jagan to be in power, so somehow they rigged it or they gerrymandered—the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] was supposedly involved—to get this other guy into power—I think it was Burnham but I'd have to check—who turned out to be more of a Communist than Jagan would have been.

Cheddi Jagan, as an old man, came to me in Kennedy's office. Greg Craig put him on to me, because Greg didn't have time to deal with this. It must have been around '88, '89. Jagan came in and he told me this whole story. I talked to Schlesinger. I looked up the history and it turned out that everything he said was right. There still hadn't been free and fair elections in his country and he just wanted free and fair elections.

I told Kennedy what had happened, and that his brother's Administration apparently was on the wrong side on this thing, as it turns out, as we could have only known with hindsight, and EMK decided that he would fight for free and fair elections in Guyana. He ended up letting me run with it—dealing with the NDI [National Democratic Institute], I brought Jimmy Carter in on it, and Jimmy Carter eventually went and observed the elections, and Cheddi Jagan won an election as an old man and came back into something he was kept out of in the early 1960s. And that was because this guy walked in off the street one day and Kennedy agreed.

I also had this minor obsession. When I was in graduate school I had to do a report on the UN [United Nations]. There was an annual U.S. State Department report—the State Department kept track of who voted “with” us. If you were India, for example, we would say, you voted with us here; you voted against us there. Then they would give you this percentage score and say, “India, you disagreed with us 15 percent of the time.” And so somebody like Republican Senator Mitch McConnell, anybody who didn't want to give foreign aid to a country would pull this book out and say, “Can't give you money. You never support us.”

The way they did the calculations mathematically was flawed, and the way they used the report was wrong. If there was a vote in the UN about, say, *Should we paint that wall blue?* if I voted one way and you voted another way, even though the vote is on something that doesn't actually matter to me, the report would suggest you were voting “against” me. Kennedy agreed, Senator Moynihan supported us, and we ended up getting legislation passed, and we changed the way the report was done. So it could be really small things that may appear inconsequential.

If the staff had something that they really wanted to do, he would let you do it. When we were in the minority and I was the only foreign policy person, you mainly crisis-manage. If something came up in a country, or if there is a war in a country, you just have to get in there and do what you have to do to respond, and so I had a lot less time to specialize. For me, Ireland and Pan Am 103 were the most time consuming, and then it was whatever else we had to deal with, whatever was going on.

Young: How come Kennedy had a foreign affairs—

Vargo: Team at all?

Young: He wasn't on the Foreign Relations Committee.

Vargo: A lot of people on the Foreign Relations Committee wished he didn't. [*laughing*] I'd say interest and expectation. People would come from abroad and they'd want to see the President and they'd want to see Ted Kennedy. It was the Kennedy family history, people wanting Ted Kennedy. He was a Kennedy and he could get things done.

Young: And his two brothers.

Vargo: And his two brothers, yes. There's an argument to be made that he didn't have to have anybody doing foreign policy. He could have one person who kind of managed it, but I mean to take initiatives. He was constantly taking initiatives: South Africa, Chile, Northern Ireland. He got out there in front. I'm sure Committee staff sometimes were not really happy with us, because I'm sure they're sitting there thinking, *Kennedy's not even on this committee and he's*

out there in front of us on this, that, and the other thing, but I would say it was an expectation of people wanting it from him and him having a personal interest in foreign policy and wanting to do it.

Young: An interest in refugees.

Vargo: Refugees, he was interested, but that was never my area. That was Michael Myers, Jerry Tinker. There was a handful of people. That was in a whole different office, under Immigration and Judiciary. Sometimes these things would overlap with foreign policy, but a lot of the refugee stuff was in the Immigration Subcommittee, and there he had a real committee reason to be doing it, unlike the other things that we were all doing in foreign policy.

Young: I'm hoping that the oral history will help bring out the scope and extent and nature of his involvement on the international scene.

Vargo: So many things. Huge.

Young: It's not part of the standard picture.

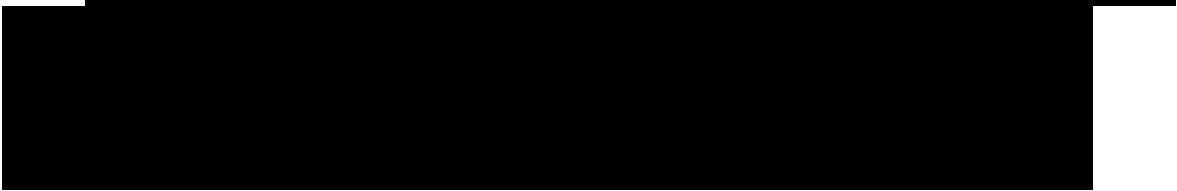
Vargo: No, because he is best known for his domestic agenda, but if he was going to go to Russia, I remember him having meetings with Secretary of State [George] Shultz, because they could use him in a way that he allowed himself to be used. The Russians would see Kennedy and he could be helpful. There was a lot of stuff like that, where, again, he wasn't trumpeting it, he wasn't seeking attention, he was off doing his thing, but he could be of help to any administration on issues, and a lot of it you just wouldn't even know about or hear about.

Young: Then China in 1977. I remember Deng Xiaoping.

Vargo: Over his career, he was everywhere at some given time. It's really incredible when you think about it, and it doesn't get paid much attention because he's thought about as healthcare, Supreme Court Justice nominations, minimum wage and all of those kinds of things. They do think of him with Northern Ireland. Probably more than anything else, people would associate him with Northern Ireland. And people who knew would have associated him with things like South Africa and Chile, but most people don't know the breadth of the things he would do on a day-to-day basis.

Young: [Desmond] Tutu once remarked about how important Kennedy was at that time, in 1985, because the administration was not about to intervene on behalf of anything in South Africa, except to keep the corporate relationships and the investments. Tutu said, "We were very alone at that time and he was the voice of America for us."

Vargo: Gare was doing things with the Polisario and Morocco, and we were doing things in Tibet.



[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

With Obama, I've just never seen him so excited about something. I'm just happy that that's like a bookend, from his brothers to Obama, considering he didn't get to the Presidency himself. It's an amazing historical thing to have happened and for him to have been a part of.

[TWO PAGES OF TEXT REDACTED]

Young: You were with him, on the staff at least, for about a decade, is that right?

Vargo: Eleven years, yes.

Young: You started with Reagan, then the first Bush, then Clinton.

Vargo: Yes.

Young: In '88 also, he had already ruled out any more Presidential runs.

Vargo: Yes.

Young: That was already finished, so there was no more talk about the possibility.

Vargo: Yes.

Young: Did he change over that period of time? He was also just coming into—the Democrats had gained the majority. It's ten years of a pretty critical time.

Vargo: The hard thing is, I can't compare him to the guy who wanted to be President, because I was only with the guy who had given up on being President. Maybe other people—and I wouldn't be the expert on this and I would take other people's views over mine, but there was nothing he ever did or said around me that made me think he was despondent about not being President. This was what his role was going to be now and he was going to get as much done in the Senate as he could. Historically, you'd have to argue that he accomplished much more than both of his brothers. Maybe you couldn't say that about JFK [John F. Kennedy]. Maybe that's a bit of a stretch, but in terms of actual volume of what he got done—

Young: Legislatively?

Vargo: When you look at Kennedy, he lived all of his time; he's done all this, he's slogged away in the Senate. I think it will take historians much later in time—[Adam] Clymer wrote the one book that's put a lot of that out, but it will take a really long time to appreciate his full impact on the country. So I never saw him say anything or behave in a way that made me think, *Look how wistful he looks about not having been President*. He was going to do what he was going to do. He got on with it.

Young: That wouldn't have been in his nature anyway, I don't think.

Vargo: No, because he doesn't show anything like that. He's Irish.

Heininger: Did he change after Vicki?

Vargo: Absolutely, and for the better.

Young: This is another thing.

Vargo: Vicki is a positive force. I don't know, because I was never present for any of it, but all the stories about him, the drinking, the carousing or whatever. I heard stories. You'd hear vague things about it even in my time, but I never witnessed anything. But I think she calmed him down, relaxed him, gave him something else. Whatever it was, there was definitely a sense that she was good for him. You see it now, the way she's fighting for him now. She lightened him up.

So I can't say anything negative about Vicki's presence in his life. It was just a huge positive. I think the first time he may have taken her out publicly was to a dinner at the Irish Ambassador's residence. Jean had been made Ambassador, and it was the first time I ever met Vicki. I knew he was seeing this woman. Women had come and gone, obviously, but nobody was ever brought to anything. All of us went to lots of receptions and things with him after work. I'd go to the Irish Embassy and it would be me and him. Whatever I'd do after work was me and him.

He had never brought a "date" to anything I'd ever done with him until—and I actually remember this car ride. He and I were riding to the residence and he was really agitated in the car, in a way he rarely is. In my 11 years with him, I'd say Kennedy raised his voice to me a handful of times, and I could usually attribute it to something bad going on in his life, like if his back is bad or when Michael [Kennedy] died, or something personal happened. I could tell when he was ripping into me for no good reason, and I knew to think, *Okay, what else is going on?* If it didn't make sense for the substance. If you deserve to be ripped into because you didn't do your job, fine, but sometimes it made no sense, and you'd have to figure out, *What's this really about?*

We were driving to this dinner and he was in the front seat and I was in the back seat, and I had never seen him so agitated. He was yelling at Nick Littlefield on the phone. I can remember this distinctly, because I had never heard him talk like this. Maybe he'd done this but it was never in front of me. Rarely was he a screamer or a yeller. I'm sure he has been at times but not around me a lot. He was ripping Nick Littlefield apart like you wouldn't believe. He would say, "God damn it, Nick, you've just destroyed a relationship I built with Bob Byrd over 20 years." Whatever the issue was, he was killing him.

And then he couldn't get his necktie fixed right and he demanded, "Trina, fix this tie!" while he's calling Nick back again to give it to him again. I'm up reaching over the front, trying to fix his tie from behind while he's screaming at Nick. We get out of the car and we're outside the residence. We hadn't gone in yet and we had to wait there, and then Vicki arrives. I think it was the first time I ever saw her, the first time he brought her to anything with me anyhow. He immediately was the calmest, nicest person and I realized that he might have been nervous about her. It's his first time out with her at a public function, where she is with him, and it's serious because he doesn't do this all the time. This is completely me projecting. You'd have to ask Vicki this, or you'd have to ask him this, but he was incredibly agitated and he became incredibly calm, in a way that made me think he was nervous about her in the first place and it was making him behave this way. Then the minute he saw her, everything was okay. Only the two of them could tell you if I recall that correctly.

Heininger: That's actually a very lovely story.

Vargo: It is a really lovely story, but you'd have to ask him and her if it was real. I can still remember that moment. It was the first time I ever saw her, and he changed immediately when she walked into the space.

Young: If you think about it, except for the dates and the pals, he was alone during much of the '80s. He didn't have anybody to calm him.

Vargo: Not that I could tell.

Young: He was the hostess, the host, the manager. Nobody to share with.

Vargo: Exactly.

Young: She's a partner.

Vargo: Exactly. I think she was only a positive force for him.

Young: In '94 he had a rough time in his election.

Vargo: Palm Beach?

Young: Ninety-one was Palm Beach.

Heininger: Ninety-four was his Senate race.

Young: Against [Mitt] Romney.

Vargo: But that was the post-Palm Beach race, right?

Heininger: Yes.

Vargo: When was the trial over for Palm Beach?

Heininger: Early '92.

Vargo: I just remember the tough race being in relationship to Palm Beach.

Heininger: Well, it carried over.

Vargo: Yes, and it wasn't until he debated Romney that he was able to pull ahead, because I remember thinking, *I'm not going to have a job in November*. That was a really tense time.

It was probably the worst period of time, and Vicki came after that.

Young: And he lost some weight and there was a turn.

Vargo: There was a turn. She was a huge difference in his life. For me as a staff person, he was fine before, in terms of him doing his job. I remember one story in *GQ* really annoyed me. A story was written about him drinking. There was a story about him meeting with an African leader. The story was like: this African leader gave Kennedy a gift, and Kennedy was drunk, and it was 10:00 in the morning and he threw the gift on his desk—all this stuff. I was in this meeting and I didn't even recognize it as a meeting that I was in when I read the story because it was so false, and then we found out that somebody in the meeting was a lobbyist who hated Kennedy and made up the whole story. I remember being really annoyed and going to Ranny Cooper and saying, "I want to write to *GQ*. I'm going to do a letter to the editor. I was there, and this is complete fiction."

Kennedy always had this rule, which is a really good rule, which was: Never take a one-day story and make it a three-day story, which is a really hard thing to live by. He let a lot of things go. I think he'd be the first to say you should not overly defend him; he's done some things in his day. He'd laugh at the people who get really into the Kennedys in a weird way, like they're godlike. He would know that that's ridiculous. But he also let a lot of things go, when he would be accused of things that just never happened.

In all this time where there were all these stories in the press about him, I never saw that person. I know that I was out at his house playing tennis a lot of mornings at 6:30, and he was doing work and getting memos in "the bag" (the briefcase), that he's doing work at 10:00 at night. If you put me on a witness stand, I could not say that I personally witnessed the behavior that was written about. I did hear a few stories but never saw anything.

Young: Did you attend any of the issues dinners he would have at his house?

Vargo: We did an Ireland one with Jean, I think before Jean went out, or Jean might have already been in Ireland and she came back. We were having a dinner, it was maybe six of us, just to talk about what was going on, what was she doing, what he wanted to do. We had a brunch one time for Natan Sharansky and Ida Nudel, when the Refuseniks got out of the Soviet Union.

Most of my work with him would have been mainly through memos and going into his office and sitting down with him.

He would have some issues dinners usually when he was going on a trip. A lot of times he would have dinners around trips, and usually Nancy and Greg were going on a trip. In fact, when I was with him, he didn't go on trips for a very long time. I was told Vicki doesn't like to fly, and that became an issue after they got together. Somebody told me Vicki doesn't really like to fly. I don't know if that's true or not. She's flying all the time, so I don't know, but there was a long period when I was with him that there was no foreign travel.

For our trip to Ireland in '98, and there would have been a lot of briefings around that, but mainly on paper. He took it all home at night and read it and then if he had a problem with something—I remember sending a bunch of briefers to see him on, maybe it was the most favored nation status with China, and there was stuff on Russia. He was doing something with [Eduard] Shevardnadze and he was thinking about going to Georgia.

Larry Horowitz would drive us nuts—any foreign policy person—because he was always wanting him to go here and there. Larry would be out in the middle of nowhere, not working in the office, and he'd see Kennedy and say, "You need to go to Russia." Larry was always out there lobbing in grenades: "He's got to go to Russia. He's got to go to Georgia." Then I'm left cleaning up. All those trips that Larry would lob in, in my time, never came to fruition, they didn't happen, but I would have to do a ton of work before Kennedy would come to the conclusion that he wasn't going to do that trip to Russia or Georgia.

I tried to avoid top-secret briefings for him, and he never was really looking for them, because I always found that whatever I learned that was top secret, I could have read in the *New York Times*. It then has you second guessing, *Can I say that? Where did I hear that? Did I hear that in the New York Times or did I hear it in a briefing?* And because I never on my own had a briefing, maybe Lebanon was an exception, where they told me anything important that I didn't already know, it didn't make sense for him. Maybe he had classified briefings with other people on other issues like military/Armed Services, but with me, I can remember once or twice we would go over to the secure room up in the Capitol and get a classified briefing. They were a huge waste of time, in my opinion. We went to one on Lebanon.

Young: He had them also on certain domestic issues. He had them earlier, a lot of healthcare dinners.

[TWO PAGES OF TEXT REDACTED]

Heininger: Can you imagine him ever yelling at Carey?

Vargo: Never. I never saw it and can't imagine it ever happened. Carey's amazing because his personality is so Zen. And someone who stayed in the background. We'd do things at the Irish Embassy, or Gerry Adams would come in the first time for the meeting, and I would say, "Carey,

do you want to come in?” I don’t know what Carey’s motivation is, but there were plenty of meetings that any normal person would have loved to be in, even if it wasn’t your issue. Carey never did. I don’t know if it was his way of giving us our space or if he just didn’t have time for it, or interest.

I remember that dinner with Jean. I think Carey was at it, and it might be the only time I ever saw Carey going to anything after work. He’d never come to receptions. I remember on several occasions inviting Carey to things, just because it was historic, or I’d go over to the White House with Kennedy for St. Patrick’s Day for the party and I’d say, “Carey, aren’t you coming too?” He’d say, “No, no.” So I don’t know if it was his strategy of leaving things to staffers, or if he just was so not into the scene that he wanted nothing to do with it. He’s also sort of—the manner that he projects is so calm and Zen-like. I would be astounded if they ever were cross with each other.

Heininger: What about with Ranny?

Vargo: You know what? I don’t remember him yelling at her, but I bet they could have, because their personalities were such—Ranny was good for him. She was strong and she was very tough, and she had no problem telling him if she thought something was good or bad for him.

I remember one time—it was before he was married, of course. There were a lot of funny stories before he was married. I remember us being outside of the Senate Building and a woman came along who had on one of these sashes, like she was a beauty queen or something, and she wanted her picture taken with Kennedy, and she had a friend there. This is probably when he was in the press for whatever carrying on was going on. Trying to be the good staffer, I said, “I’ll take your picture.” I was trying to be the helpful person, and Kennedy said, “Oh, Trina, you have to get in the picture.” It took me like ten seconds to catch on. I said, “No, no, I’ll take it.” He said, “Trina, you *must* get in the picture.” Finally I realized he did not want to be photographed with this woman alone, so then I had to give the camera to the other woman and I had to get in the picture.

Later, we’re walking into the office and he said, “Geez, could you imagine Ranny, if I had—Ranny would say, ‘What’s that picture about?’” So you could tell that Ranny was like the mother. He was going to get in trouble with Ranny. There was this dynamic that was unusual, because he felt he didn’t want to be in trouble with Ranny. [REDACTED]

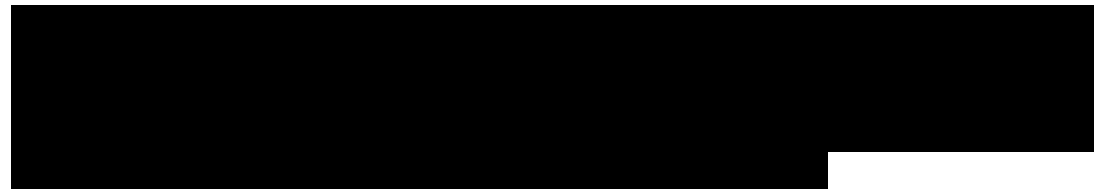
[REDACTED] Ranny kept him on his toes, and she probably had the more difficult task because it was all pre-Vicki, so she probably had the harder job. I don’t know how they were together alone but he didn’t want Ranny to be unhappy or to get in trouble with Ranny. I had to get in the picture with the beauty queen and I didn’t understand. It took me a while. *What is he talking about? Since when does he care if I’m in a picture?*

Heininger: Preferably with a sash across you, marked, “I am his staff member.”

Vargo: Exactly. When I was talking about his sense of humor, I was just thinking about something on the Northern Ireland. I will never forget this. The Olympics were going on in Lillehammer in February ’94. It was just after we got the (Adams) visa. I got this call at home at like 11:00 at night and it was Kennedy on the phone, and he said to me, “Do you have the TV on?” I was watching the Olympics and I thought, *Shit, war has broken out somewhere and I’m*

not watching CNN. I said yes. And he said, “Are you watching the Olympics?” He was serious. “Are you watching the Olympics?” I had no idea where this was going and I said yes. Nancy Kerrigan had just skated, and he said to me, “Did you see the score the British judges gave Nancy Kerrigan?” The British judge gave Kerrigan the lowest score of anybody else, and he was convinced that this guy was getting back at us for giving Gerry Adams a visa. He told me I should call the *Boston Globe* with that story.

He’d wind you up, and he still wouldn’t even laugh at the end of it all. I got off the phone thinking, *Is he serious?* He was watching in that kind of detail, what the British judge gave Nancy Kerrigan. She was an Irish American woman from Massachusetts, and they were going to get back at Ted Kennedy. He was very funny like that, but it scared the shit out of me when I got that call at 11:00 at night and I thought, *Oh no*.



Young: Do you have other things you’d like to say?

Vargo: I guess my big pitch is Northern Ireland wouldn’t have happened without him. Most people would tell you that. He really cared about it. It was a really serious emotional connection. He was always talking about Grandpa [John F.] Fitzgerald coming over, and the “Irish need not apply.” It was real. It wasn’t something he had to do for political reasons. And he still always took the right line, because the easy thing to do politically would have been to appease the IRA crowd, and he didn’t. They didn’t like him. There were no activists for the moderates.

So he always did the right thing for the right reasons. History now shows that he did the right thing, and he cared about it. I don’t think there’s anybody on the issue who would say that if Ted Kennedy had been against that visa, that any of it would have happened. As I said, a lot of it was a bunch of people being in the right place at the right time, but if Kennedy had told Clinton, “No, don’t do it,” it wouldn’t have happened. Does that mean the peace process wouldn’t have happened, or something else wouldn’t have happened? Who knows? He was extremely instrumental.

Heininger: You had fun working with him.

Vargo: I had a blast. It’s funny, when you get out of it, you do get to a point—Somebody was saying, would I go back into the next administration? I wouldn’t. There is a point where you start to think it’s a young person’s game, to some extent, because you work 24/7 and you don’t have a life outside of it. But the fun—for me it was because he treated me so well. He was always nice. He was always lifting you up, too. He delegated. He said to me one time, “The more you trust people, the more trustworthy they become.” I personally would have had a really difficult time, as famous as he was, having to trust a lot of people to get done what he wanted to get done.

He treated us so well, even long after we're gone. Just this week, he sent a letter to the Irish Ambassador on something that mattered to me. This week. I mean, look, the man is dying. He has every right to say, "I'm not doing these things any more."

It was a blast. He was fun. There was great camaraderie in the office—particularly in the early years. You're meeting Presidents and Prime Ministers, and you're a part of something that's so much bigger than you, that you could never have done yourself. And somebody's trusting you and giving you serious responsibilities when you're in your twenties and thirties. I wouldn't go back to doing that kind of thing again, but I wouldn't have traded it for anything in the world.

He was really good at—he did make you believe you could do anything. I wouldn't have gone in feeling that way. I'd say we all had a healthy amount of confidence to work for him, but I wouldn't have had the confidence in myself that he gives you. I remember the first time he said, "How should I vote?" on something. I remember thinking, *Why would you care what I think? I'm twenty-whatever years old.* He really trusted people.

When I first started in the office, I got a key to the office and it opened everything. It opened his office. There was no, *This door is locked*, you know? The ability to abuse his trust, for any number of people, was huge, but I think he was right, the more you trust people, the more trustworthy they become. I don't know if he thought these things through, if he consciously made these decisions about trusting, or if he just figured, *I believe I can trust her*, or not trust that person. And he had to do it to get everything done that he did. I wouldn't trade it for anything.

Even things like—when my dad died not long after Steve Smith died, I remember going home in November. It was Thanksgiving, and he was on the phone to me. By the time I got home, he was calling me to say how sorry he was. We were out for recess for six weeks, and he said, "If you want to stay on with your mother the whole six weeks, just don't come back until after recess." How many bosses do that? Meanwhile, my sister worked for a lawyer in Pennsylvania who is said to her at the funeral home, "Will you be back in three days?" You know? And Ted Kennedy saying to me, "Take as long as you want." So people worked really hard for him because you knew if push came to shove on something in your life, he was going to totally back you up. He's that good to people.

Heininger: Well, this was terrific. Thank you very much.