EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL DUKAKIS

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Boston, Massachusetts

Interviewer

Janet Heininger

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Heininger: This is an interview with Governor Michael Dukakis, on November 9, 2009, in Boston. When did you first meet [Edward M.] Kennedy, and what were your first impressions of him? Actually, there’s probably a more important question, which is about the Kennedy family. You’ve had a relationship with them for a long time, all the way back to Jack [John F. Kennedy]? 

Dukakis: Yes, although the only time I remember ever meeting Jack Kennedy personally was when I was at Harvard Law School and I was a member of the Law School Democrats. He was a member of the Harvard Corporation—He wasn’t on the executive committee; he was a member of the Harvard Corporation—and he had been on campus. It was 1958. He had run for the Vice-Presidential nomination and had come close, but lost to [Estes] Kefauver. He was on campus and came over.

He got up and said, “Look, I’m not going to make a speech. You have me for an hour; ask me any question you want.” I remember him saying, “Joe Clark and I are the only two Democrats in the Harvard Corporation, and we stand in a corner and talk to each other at these meetings.” [laughing] Clark was the former mayor of Philadelphia and United States Senator from Pennsylvania. I remember that it was an absolutely brilliant performance. Even then I’d seen a fair number of politicians in action, and I hadn’t seen anybody quite as sharp, as interesting, as funny. He was a little bit nervous; he kept putting his hands in his pockets, taking them out of his pockets, but I was impressed.

In 1960, after I graduated from law school and my buddy Paul Brountas and I took the bar exam, we got into Brountas’s Volkswagen and headed across the country to go to Los Angeles, to be at the national convention. I had just been elected chairman of my Democratic organization in the town of Brookline—We had run a kind of reform slate and won, and since I was the guy who was behind all of it, and was still in my last year of law school, I had become chairman of the Democratic organization, but I wasn’t a delegate or anything. We just wanted to go out there and watch Kennedy be nominated, and we did. When he came over, the night right after his nomination, to say thank you to the delegates, before his speech the next day, we were in the hall. I’ve never forgotten that. But that was about as close as I got to Jack Kennedy.

Heininger: Yes, but he clearly has had an influence on you—
Dukakis: Oh, yes, yes.

Heininger: Because the posters in there are of Jack.

Dukakis: He had very much the same impact on my generation that [Barack] Obama has had on his, in very much the same way. It’s very interesting. Remember, he too was an aberration; he was a Roman Catholic.

Heininger: Yes.

Dukakis: There were many folks who didn’t think a Roman Catholic—We think now and say, “Isn’t that ridiculous?” Now it’s a question of an African American. Believe me, at the time—Al Smith had been defeated largely because of his Catholicism; he was a great guy—And here was this guy coming along. He had a meeting with the Baptist ministers for three hours in Houston on that. Although the Dukakises certainly weren’t financially and socially where the Kennedys were, there was an immigrant tradition; there was the fact that this guy was a real pioneer in his own way. Frankly, when I was elected to the legislature in 1962 it was inconceivable that a Greek American could be elected Governor in the state, not because people didn’t like us, but we were just not part of a major ethnic group.

Heininger: It was a very different immigrant population.

Dukakis: Yes, and the country was still racist; there was a lot of anti-Semitism. People of color couldn’t live in my town, in Brookline, right next door to Boston, unless their parents were janitors, and then they lived in the basement. That’s the world I grew up in. And here was this guy—young, smart, literate, funny—who was proud of public service, who never apologized for public service, who said to us, “Hey, politics is an honorable profession and you have a responsibility to take it seriously.” Did he say it to me personally? No, except in that meeting at Harvard Law School. There’s no question that he was an enormous inspiration to those of us who were beginning to come of age, politically, in the late ’50s and early ’60s, so I ran for the legislature in 1962, when Ted ran for the Senate.

Frankly, at the Democratic Convention, where I was a delegate, I voted for [Edward J.] McCormack [Jr.].

Heininger: I know.

Dukakis: I didn’t know Ted that well. He seemed to me to be a young guy; we were contemporaries.

Heininger: He was very young.

Dukakis: He was going for the United States Senate. My attitude was that maybe he ought to start a little lower on the totem pole—How about the state legislature first?—so I was with McCormack, who had been a very good attorney general, and I thought a pretty impressive guy. But Ted got elected.
I remember him inviting the Democratic legislators to his place on Beacon Hill. I remember seeing him and Joan [Bennett Kennedy] walking around Beacon Hill from time to time. I’m sure I was in touch with the Kennedy district office on immigration issues, and I’m sure we connected from time to time, but remember, I was just one of, at that time, 240 members of the House of Representatives, and he was the United States Senator. Of course we both were running for statewide office, but it wasn’t until I became Governor that I began to work closely with him.

**Heininger**: Back to his election in ’62. You backed McCormack.

**Dukakis**: Right.

**Heininger**: Did you expect McCormack to win?

**Dukakis**: I didn’t know at the time. I thought everybody thought the way I thought: We loved the Kennedy family, but this kid was 30, 31 years old, and here was McCormack, who had served his time and had done a very impressive job as attorney general. I was impressed with that. I thought, *He’s done a great job; the other guy really hasn’t been part of this at all.*

**Heininger**: He had no track record at that point.

**Dukakis**: Yes. And I was surprised at the margin of victory.

**Heininger**: Were you surprised at the response when, in the debate, McCormack said, “If your name was Edward Moore”—

**Dukakis**: “Edward Moore,” yes, yes.

**Heininger**: Were you surprised at the response to that?

**Dukakis**: Afterward? A little bit, yes. But I loved the story he used to tell about meeting the guy out in front of the GE [General Electric] plant the day after the debate. The guy said, “Kid, you haven’t missed a thing,” after McCormack had said, “You haven’t worked a day in your life.” But I don’t think any of us had any notion just how he would evolve and develop into what he became.

**Heininger**: He was so young then. He was the baby. He wasn’t supposed to be anything.

**Dukakis**: Right, right. If somebody had said at the time, “This guy is going to become one of the great, great United States Senators in history,” I don’t think even his most enthusiastic supporters would have thought that.

**Heininger**: I think you’re right.

**Dukakis**: But that’s what he became.

**Heininger**: So what changed?

**Dukakis**: Part of it was life experience, including some very difficult life experiences that he somehow recovered from, the Chappaquiddick thing and all of that. But there’s something else—
and nobody’s really written about this: How is it that the kids of Joe Kennedy turned out the way they did, philosophically?

**Heininger:** Right.

**Dukakis:** How did that happen? And the grandkids? Was it Rose [Fitzgerald Kennedy], the Fitzgerald side of the family? Were there things about Joe that many of us don’t know? Because he had a reputation—maybe it was unfair—of being a guy who, if not supportive of what was going on in Germany in the ’30s, certainly was not opposed to it, at least to the extent that he was prepared to advise the President of the United States.

**Heininger:** Absolutely. That was well known at the time.

**Dukakis:** Of course, we don’t know about Joe Jr. [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.], because he died in the war.

**Heininger:** He died too soon.

**Dukakis:** But how is it that the kids that came out of that family—

**Heininger:** All of them.

**Dukakis:** Every single one of them, women as well as men, turned out to be not only extraordinary but committed philosophically in ways that I don’t think could have been predicted. I don’t know the daughter side of the family as well, but out of all of them, Ted, in many ways, was the most deeply committed, philosophically to what I guess you’d call a liberal or progressive philosophy. You didn’t have to wait for four or five days for Ted to decide where he was on things. It was just this instinct. His speech on the Iraq War was one of the great, great speeches.

**Heininger:** He said a number of times that the most important vote he ever cast was the vote against the Iraq War.

**Dukakis:** Yes, but the speech—Read it; think about it. As a Governor, working with him, there wasn’t anything he wouldn’t do for this state. You didn’t have to explain anything; he’d work on it. When he endorsed me over [Edward J.] King in the primary in ’82—There was no reason he should have done that, but he did it, at a rather crucial time. That was probably the most intensive primary campaign we’ve ever had in this state; 300,000 more people voted than ever voted before. There were no neutrals by that time. He didn’t have to do that, and whatever you think of King, who was the incumbent Democratic Governor at the time. . . .

**Heininger:** Right.

**Dukakis:** When I signed that universal healthcare bill in 1988, he was so proud, not just of me, of us and what we had done. Here he had been working on this from the time he got to the Senate, and his state had finally stepped out and done it. Don’t get me into what happened to it under [William F.] Weld—He was furious with Weld and what happened—but he was just so proud of us for what we had done.
Was it an instinct? Where did it come from? I don’t know.

Heininger: You raise a very important question, one we’ve struggled with, too, with all the people we’ve interviewed. The causes I can figure are that, clearly, Joe instilled in these kids a desire for political advancement. They were groomed to go into politics.

Dukakis: I guess. Yes.

Heininger: That simply was passed down the line. But where they got the value commitment, which only seemed to intensify, particularly with each son—Ted’s views were not the same as Jack’s views; when you compare the long-term record, he’s—

Dukakis: And there was a huge transition for Bobby [Kennedy]. I interviewed Bobby when I was at the Washington Semester program at American University, in 1954. It was a semester you spent in Washington, at AU, and it was a terrific experience. It was the fall of ’54; [Joseph] McCarthy was being censured. We were all in the gallery when McCarthy was actually censured.

Heininger: Oh, my God.

Dukakis: And I watched the first Republican vote to censure. His name was Prescott Bush. Lord, what’s happened to that family? [laughing] Right?

Heininger: Time. [laughing]

Dukakis: I don’t know. It seems the reverse of what happened to Kennedy.

Heininger: Yes.

Dukakis: But Bobby at the time, again, was pretty nervous, impatient. The sense I had was that he had a few minutes for me. We had to do a mini thesis as part of this program, and mine was on Congressional committee staffing—Should the Congressional committees have professional staff?—and he was staff to the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, among other things. It wasn’t entirely clear whether Bobby was pro-McCarthy or anti-McCarthy or what, and Bobby turned into this incredible guy. He’d have been a great President. He’d have been elected.

Heininger: Yes. From what you saw when you interviewed him then, would you have predicted the way he turned out?

Dukakis: No, no. Anything but.

Heininger: Yes, I know.

Dukakis: So it wasn’t just Ted, although I think Ted in the end. . . . Was he the greatest Kennedy? I don’t know, but he certainly was remarkable.

The other thing was his sense of humor. He was a funny guy. He just loved life and he lived it. He had his ups and his downs, big ones, but he practiced the politics of joy in many, many ways. And he had great staff.
Heininger: That’s a phrase I haven’t heard anybody use; that’s actually perfect.

Dukakis: Yes.

Heininger: That’s a perfect way of describing him: “the politics of joy.”

Dukakis: Interestingly enough, coincidentally, we both were elected to our first significant office in the same year, 1962.

You know, there have been all kinds of articles—Maybe you guys are going to do it anyway. How is it that all of these kids, and the grandkids, have somehow inherited that same set of values?

Heininger: I see less of an issue with the grandkids, because once it’s there, it can be passed on and continued—

Dukakis: Through their parents, yes.

Heininger: Where I have a disconnect is how do you get from Joe to the kids, with it just getting deeper and stronger and stronger.

Dukakis: With Ted.

Heininger: And more committed. There’s the sense of noblesse oblige, but it was more than that.

Dukakis: They came from affluence, and Joe, Rose, both of them—somebody—instilled in them this values thing. I think you’re right about Joe, that politics was an important pursuit, but they really practiced it. You never had a sense with Ted that he was a Brahmin who was doing nice things for the unwashed. You never had that sense, and I think it’s why folks responded to him, no matter who they were: blue collar, working class, university Ph.D.s. There was a connection he had with people, all people.

Heininger: If you compare him to Jack—if anybody would have the Brahmin persona, it would have been much more Jack, who was 15 years older. It’s not surprising. Bobby? Not at all, but Bobby—

Dukakis: That’s a whole other story.

Heininger: Yes, different.

Dukakis: Again, maybe you guys ought to try to help explain this.

Heininger: We can’t.

Dukakis: It’s extraordinary, isn’t it?
Heininger: I find it absolutely extraordinary, because it is clear, from everyone we have talked to that this is not something that was—It simply was there and he acted on it from day one, whereas I think Jack evolved. If you look at his career in the early ’50s—

Dukakis: Right, right.

Heininger: It wasn’t there. By the time he became President, there was more of it. With Bobby there was more of it. From the transition of dealing with McCarthy in the ’50s to Bobby in ’68 there’s clearly a change, but with Ted it was there from the beginning. Something was different about him. Maybe it was being the baby of the family?

Dukakis: Maybe, but again, nobody could have predicted, in ’62, that he would become what he became—nobody—in the way he did it and the way he was.

Heininger: Did you like him?

Dukakis: Oh, yes. There were people a lot closer to him than I was, in a personal sense, but he was always sensitive, with those personal notes. And you knew they were coming from him; nobody else wrote them.

Heininger: We do know his mother taught him to write thank-you notes, as I keep drilling into my children. [laughing]

Dukakis: She taught him well—

Heininger: Yes.

Dukakis: Because he wrote a lot of them.

Heininger: He wrote a lot of them.

Dukakis: And he loved Kitty [Katherine D. Dukakis], when he’d see Kitty. He was a real mensch.

Heininger: Both of your families have struggled with issues of depression and addiction. Did you and Ted ever talk about those?

Dukakis: I’m sure he was concerned about Kitty. I’m sure he expressed his concern about her. He was always very supportive of putting resources into mental health, with the Community Mental Health Centers Act that we passed here and so forth. He was always very much committed to that. I don’t know that we ever talked a lot about the addiction thing. I created the Governor’s Alliance Against Drugs and Alcohol, and it was a big part of my administration. I’m sure he was helpful, but I don’t remember talking in any personal way about that. Possibly we did on the mental health side, but I don’t think we had any occasion of just the two of us talking together about this.

Heininger: You both struggled with many of the same things.
Dukakis: Yes, there’s no question that our experiences had a lot to do with our views, our commitment, our values, our sense of—How many thousands of people did he help with these kinds of individual problems, even as Kitty and I. . . . You know, every day somebody else comes along and is struggling with depression or this, that, and the other thing. Ted’s wife and mine did. He deserves a Congressional Medal of Honor for it, but that’s what we do and that’s what he did. It was part of the job. And I don’t mean in the sense of an obligation. One of the great things about public service is the fact that you’re in a position to help people, individual people, with problems and things, and he believed that. He not only had a great staff but they responded to these concerns, and he responded.

There’s a guy over here, Rich Katula, who has taught communications for years and was involved with some of our study abroad over in Greece; we worked together. He worked in the communications operation in the Pentagon in the late ’60s and early ’70s. He said Kennedy’s staff was just far superior to any other Congressional staff he ever worked with. He said they were in a class by themselves in terms of what they did and how they did it, and in particular, in dealing with these individual problems.

Where did he get that? It wasn’t an exercise. Like all of us, you learn from your constituents. You find out the things that are happening out there because they come to you. There was never any “Hey, I’m up here in the Senate; go see your Congressman.” He considered that service every bit as important about his job as anything else that he did, and he did it well.

Heininger: I think they all ostensibly care about constituent services. If they don’t, they don’t get reelected—

Dukakis: Right, right.

Heininger: But everything we have learned is that there was a human dimension to his dealing with constituent issues. They weren’t “constituents”; they were people.

Dukakis: Yes. And he often would be personally involved in a way that many of us aren’t. You say to yourself, Where did that come from? He was a child of privilege, but he felt it, and he acted on it.

Heininger: So tell me about the 1980 election.

Dukakis: It was a tough one for me, because I was close to [Jimmy] Carter. I liked him. I’m not sure that if Ted had asked me I would have said he ought to do it, because I have a strong feeling that if you have an incumbent of your own party who is pretty good and hasn’t engaged in criminal conduct, you have some responsibility to support him. On the other hand, it was Ted. And it was pretty tough trying to explain to the President of the United States why I couldn’t support him, not that endorsements make a hell of a lot of difference, frankly—it was just that Ted was running. I felt that he deserved my support, and our support. Of course, I was out of office at the time.

Heininger: Right.

Dukakis: I’d been defeated. But if he was running, we had a responsibility to support him.
Heininger: In ’82, when he endorsed you, did that endorsement come later than you’d expected?

Dukakis: No. In fact, it came at exactly the right time.

Heininger: It was fortuitous at the time. It wasn’t—

Dukakis: It was getting very intense and the numbers were tighten up somewhat, which was to be expected, but it was a very important endorsement and it came at the right time.

Heininger: Tell me about the ’88 election.

Dukakis: He never hesitated. Joe Biden, Al [Albert] Gore [Jr.], Paul Simon were all close to him, but he never hesitated. “I’m with you.” He was a gutsy guy. Look at the Obama thing. That’s a tough thing to do. He was close to the Clintons, worked closely with them; it was a very good relationship that they had. Then he decided. He liked Hillary [Clinton] a lot, worked with her. She was a colleague and a good one, but he went out and endorsed Obama for all of the right reasons. There was nothing against Hillary. What was to be gained by that?

Heininger: Nothing for him and a lot for the country.

Dukakis: He just had this instinct. You’d have to talk to somebody else who was inside his mind more than I was. How did he decide to do that?

Heininger: He said at the time that Caroline [Kennedy] came to him excited about Obama, because Obama was the first politician to excite her children—

Dukakis: Right.

Heininger: And that this triggered the thought, This is what Jack did for a whole generation, in the early ’60s.

Dukakis: Still . . . given the relationship.

Heininger: It surprised me a bit.

Dukakis: But he did it.

Heininger: How much effect do you think it had on the election?

Dukakis: I think it had a lot of effect on the election. He was the touchstone for many folks in the liberal and progressive community. Let me tell you, if he were in the Senate today, we’d have a [healthcare] bill out of the Senate, I have no doubt about it.

Heininger: God, I wish.

Dukakis: It still may happen, but if he were there. . . . And it probably would be a good compromise.

Heininger: Of course it would be.
Dukakis: And it probably wouldn’t involve a pure public option.

Heininger: Of course not.

Dukakis: But because Ted Kennedy was deeply and actively involved in it, the liberal community would accept it. That’s the one thing that you don’t see there right now. I think we’re going to get a bill, but I don’t think—In fact Tom Harkin said, “I wish Ted were here.” Max Baucus said the same thing, that his not being there was a huge loss. Now, could he have gotten any Republicans? I don’t know. I don’t know what’s happening with those folks. Ted always made a practice of finding a Republican cosponsor for everything he did, whether it was [Orrin] Hatch on children’s health—

Heininger: Nancy Kassebaum.

Dukakis: Kassebaum on the portability stuff, and so forth. He always did that. In fact, Trent Lott was furious with Hatch for hooking up with Kennedy, because he was strongly opposed to the children’s health bill. But he always did that. Much of that had to do with personal relationships. Hatch thinks the world of him, and has said so repeatedly. People liked him; the opposition liked him. Could he have won over some of those folks? Maybe, maybe. I don’t know how many. Republicans—there’s an ideological edge to these guys that I don’t quite recall. They’re not like the Republicans I used to work with, who were thoughtful, moderate, socially very conscious, weren’t scared of the government doing certain things, recognized that government has a major role to play in many things. Apart from the ladies from Maine, could he have persuaded any other members? [laughing] Maybe, maybe, but we miss him badly on this thing.

On the other hand, he’s the guy—and I remember him saying this—who said the biggest political mistake he ever made was not to sit down with [Richard M.] Nixon right away, when Nixon proposed his universal health plan in 1971; that it was a mistake to go for a pure public plan. This wasn’t a public option. The Kennedy bill would have been universal Medicare. When he finally decided, in ’73, that they’d better sit down and work something out—They had begun discussions on it and then Watergate hit—he said it was the worst mistake he ever made in the Senate.

Heininger: And labor tied his hands.

Dukakis: They did, but he then basically said to them, “Hey look, guys.”

Heininger: He did, he did.

Dukakis: But I remember him saying that just as [William J.] Clinton was elected, and we were revving up for another debate. There was a big meeting up here on this as Clinton was beginning. I think it was at the New England Medical Center, and a whole bunch of us were there. He got tied up in Washington, so we had to do an interactive video, but he was there and you could ask him questions by video. Somebody said, “You were for single payer, and you were for this and you were for that. What are you for?” This was as Clinton was in the process of putting this together. He said, “You know, Russell Long used to tell this story—” Have you ever heard this?

Heininger: Not this one.
Dukakis: He said Long used to tell a story about three young men who were applying for a job to teach social studies in a little southwestern Louisiana high school. The three of them were sitting out on the front porch of the school department offices, and the school board was waiting for them. The first guy went in—You’ve never heard this story?

Heininger: No.

Dukakis: This is right out of Kennedy’s mouth.

Heininger: No, I haven’t. I’m amazed, too.

Dukakis: Anyway, the first guy went in and they said to him, “Do you teach that the world is round or that it’s flat?” The guy said, “I teach that it’s round,” and they said, “Well, sorry, we can’t accept you.” He went out and told the other two guys what happened to him. The second guy went in and they asked him the same question. The second guy figured, Well, I guess the answer they want is “flat.” “Well, we can’t accept you,” so he went out and told the other two guys. Then the third guy went in. He came out in five minutes with a big grin on his face. He got the job. The guys said, “What did you tell them?” He said, “I’ll teach it either way.” [laughing]

Ted said, “I’ll take it either way, just as long as every American has decent and affordable healthcare.” You’ve never heard that story?

Heininger: Actually, yes, I have heard it.

Dukakis: But maybe not from Kennedy.

Heininger: No, not from Kennedy.

Dukakis: I’ll never forget that. I’ve told it a million times since.

Heininger: In many ways, it’s emblematic of the change that he went through, particularly in looking at healthcare, having gone through the attempt with Nixon and starting with the pure—


Heininger: Yes, and then going through it with Carter and it languishing forever.

Dukakis: Yes.

Heininger: He clearly got to a point that if it’s half a loaf, fine, I’ll take half a loaf.

Dukakis: Yes. Many people said to me, “If we don’t get the public option. . . .” I said, “Let me tell you about Ted Kennedy. Do you have a lot of respect for Ted Kennedy when it comes to healthcare? Yes? Let me tell you a story about Kennedy,” and I’d tell them this story. “I’ll take it either way.” I said, “If he were here today, folks, yes, he’d be pushing hard for the public option, but if Olympia Snowe came along and said, ‘Hey, let’s give it four or five years and then we can trigger it,’ he’d be seriously talking to her about that kind of thing.” Folks don’t remember what
was happening in the early ’70s with this thing and his subsequent concern. The goal is decent, affordable healthcare for everybody, and he was less hung up on how you get there.

In fact, the bill I signed here, the state version, was the Nixon bill, basically. It was what Hawaii did in ’75. We did it, only more so, in ’88, and he was tickled to death. He worked with us. At one point we had a problem with the hospitals. There had been cuts in Medicare. Medicare is a federal program; we have nothing to do with that at the state level. They said, “If you don’t put $50 million into it, to make up for the federal cuts, we will oppose the bill.” We were that close to success. I was furious with them. They had 5,000 hospital employees coming to the State House, arguing that we were going to kill the hospitals. By the way, it was $50 million on an overall hospital budget, at the time, of $4 billion. This was a deal breaker.

Heininger: Yes, they always are that little.

Dukakis: This was nonsense. But he was working with us every step of the way on this thing and thrilled when it happened, just so proud.

Heininger: Why does [Mitt] Romney get more of the credit?

Dukakis: Who, Romney? For the current bill?

Heininger: Yes.

Dukakis: Because you know what happened? I had left and there was a three-year phase-in. As soon as Weld arrived, he set out to kill it.

Heininger: I know, but it’s interesting, because people forget that it first was passed under you.

Dukakis: Yes and it was a much better bill than this one, I’ll tell you. Look, Romney doesn’t deserve any credit, except for getting the process going. But do you know what happened with Romney on this one? Do you know the real story?

Heininger: No.

Dukakis: Well, the huge sticking point on this bill was whether noninsuring employers would have to contribute something. Romney said “no free riders” when it came to individuals, right? Yes. But what about these businesses that weren’t insuring? You know the way the system works: If you insure, about a $1,500 per year of the premium represents free care in the emergency room for the employees of your competitor down the street who doesn’t insure.

Heininger: Right.

Dukakis: It’s outrageous. The speaker of the house at the time said, “I’m not going to support this unless there is some required contribution from noninsuring employers.” Finally they negotiated it out at $295 per employee per year. That compares with $6,000 for an insurance policy. At the eleventh hour, without telling Ted, who showed up for the Faneuil Hall press event, or the speaker or the senate president, Romney vetoed it.
**Heininger**: No, I had not heard that.

**Dukakis**: Yes, but that’s Romney. *[laughing]*

**Heininger**: I had not heard that.

**Dukakis**: He vetoed it. Now he was hugely overridden—There were Republicans who voted to override him—but can you imagine? They work it, they work it, they work it. Finally, they come to an agreement on this very modest contribution from noninsuring employers, but by that time he was running for President and, of course, the mantra among right-wing Republicans is that you never require employers to do anything, so he vetoed the damn thing. I don’t think the Senator or the speaker would have shown up if they had known. He vetoed it—but that’s Mitt.

If you want a contrast between Profiles in Courage and the alternative, just look at Kennedy and Romney. I was a big fan of Romney’s father. I thought George Romney was one of the best. In fact I courted my wife in a little yellow Rambler convertible.

**Heininger**: Oh, did you?

**Dukakis**: Yes, because he was the only guy in Detroit at the time who was serious about making a small, fuel-efficient car.

**Heininger**: Little cars. I remember the little Ramblers.

**Dukakis**: I had a little yellow Rambler convertible.

**Heininger**: Little things.

**Dukakis**: Indeed. I thought he was a damn good Governor, a good Secretary of Housing and Urban Development.

**Heininger**: But he came out of a different generation of Republicans.

**Dukakis**: I guess, but whatever happened to his kid? I thought we were going to get a junior George Romney and we got anything but. But that’s the truth: at the eleventh hour, he vetoed this key provision of the bill, without bothering to tell anybody.

**Heininger**: Why was Ted’s 1994 race with Romney so tight?

**Dukakis**: Well, it was ’94. He and the President were unable to get a healthcare bill through. There was a sense that he had lost something off his fastball, that maybe it was time that somebody else come along. He had been there for a long time. When did he and Vicki [Reggie Kennedy] marry?

**Heininger**: Ninety-two, but it was not long enough before that to change the views.

**Dukakis**: I don’t know.

**Heininger**: Was it spillover from Willy Smith in Palm Beach?
Dukakis: Maybe there was some of that.

Heininger: Clearly, the mood in the electorate in Massachusetts had shifted.

Dukakis: It wasn’t great. He was maybe stuck in a rut a bit, I don’t know, and Romney, at the time, seemed like a very fresh face. He had the Romney name; his father had been a progressive Republican; and all of that. He was pro choice, which he’s since reneged on, like a million other things on which he’s reneged. For a while there, it looked as if Ted was in real trouble.

Heininger: He was in real trouble, up until very close to the end—

Dukakis: Yes.

Heininger: Very close to the end. Was he not running a good campaign?

Dukakis: I don’t know if it was a great campaign. He tells that story about how he came to the Faneuil Hall debate and was pretty nervous, and then he saw these folks out there, hundreds and thousands, cheering him on. I think he was just in a bit of a rut for some reason. That was the last time he was ever in a rut, I’ll tell you. Winning that election absolutely had a huge impact on him, in a very positive way, and from that point on, he never looked back. He was out there all the time doing his thing, as only he could do it. But he was in office for a long time. I’ve often said that if you’re going to be a chief executive, eight years is probably the maximum. Now I had twelve, but there was a break of four, and even then. . . . Mario Cuomo, a great guy, was beaten by a nonentity. Why? People get tired of you. It’s just one of those things; it happens.

Heininger: Nobody ever thought they’d get tired of the Kennedy family.

Dukakis: No, no, but there was some of that out there at the time.

Heininger: And there was also his speech at Harvard, saying he recognized he had made mistakes in his private life and needed to make changes. What changes do you think came when he married Vicki?

Dukakis: For one thing, it seemed to me it was a great match, in a way that, for whatever reason, Joan and he were not. There seemed to be a kind of happiness and fulfillment about him that had eluded him for a long time, in terms of his personal life. Again, I’m not the first person to tell you that his relationship with his kids and his nephews and great-nephews was extraordinary. They seemed to be a very good pair: with each other, for each other. Once he got by the Romney thing, it was probably a combination of whatever that did in terms of his political psyche for him and Vicki. Not that he wasn’t a happy guy, but there seemed to be something that settled in there in terms of his own personal fulfillment. Whatever it was, she really had a lot to do with it.

Heininger: Could you see it in him?

Dukakis: Yes, yes.

Heininger: There’s really something to be said for going home at night to a happy house.
**Dukakis**: I’ll say.

**Heininger**: And he didn’t have that for a long time. Then all of a sudden he had young children in the house again.

**Dukakis**: For whom he was a great stepfather.

**Heininger**: Yes.

**Dukakis**: But it’s hard. I’ve been married to the same woman for 46 years, and I couldn’t wait to get home at night, so what can I tell you? It isn’t that Kitty didn’t have her struggles or I wasn’t deeply involved in all of that, but I couldn’t wait to get home at night, believe me. We had two rules from the time we got married: Have dinner at home at 6:00 at night, without exception; and no politics on Sunday, with three exceptions: the Saint Patrick’s Day Parade, Greek Independence Day, and Combined Jewish Philanthropies’ Super Sunday, and on those weeks I took Saturday off. But that was just—

**Heininger**: Did you really make it home for dinner?

**Dukakis**: Yes, yes. I was scheduled. Nothing interfered with that. Fortunately Massachusetts is a small state, so I could.

**Heininger**: Yes.

**Dukakis**: And I would go out at night often, but I had dinner at home.

**Heininger**: Do you realize how rare that is in Washington?

**Dukakis**: All I can tell you is, if you want to do it, you can do it.

**Heininger**: I agree with you.

**Dukakis**: If you want to do it, you can do it.

**Heininger**: If you want to have dinner with your kids, you can have dinner with your kids.

**Dukakis**: I used to say that if you can’t run a state with a busy, six-day week, then you’re a lousy manager. I would phase down the week at about 4:00 on Saturday afternoon. I’d be working Saturdays, doing all kinds of stuff, moving around the state and so forth, but at 4:00 or 5:00 Saturday afternoon, that was it until Monday morning.

**Heininger**: You would really make it home for dinner?

**Dukakis**: Yes.

**Heininger**: Wow, I’m impressed.

**Dukakis**: It was very important, not just for my wife and my kids, but for me, to get the hell out of the State House for a while. And then, with your kids, it’s a barrel full of laughs at 6:00 at
night. Somebody’s doing something funny or saying something funny or whatever, and I’d read them a story or two and somebody would pick me up. My scheduler would say, “Look, when are you going to put dessert out? He’ll be there, but he has dinner with his family.” People were very respectful of that. They knew it, understood it, appreciated it. And Sunday was family day. People would have to schedule around it. I’d do anything, anywhere, at any time, but not on Sunday, with those three exceptions.

Heininger: I’m impressed.

Dukakis: Nothing to be impressed about. Part of it was my dad; we always had dinner at 6:00 at night.

Heininger: There are very few people, particularly in Washington, who make that decision, to have dinner with their family every night. It was interesting listening to Obama say, “Now I get to finally have dinner every night with my wife and my kids.”

Dukakis: Remember, I lived ten minutes from the State House, which was another great advantage. When there was all this talk about the interim Senate seat, Kitty was very enthusiastic. I said, “Have you thought about what it’s going to be like when your husband is in Washington from Monday to Thursday? Are you coming down there with me, or what? How are we going to do this?” We never had that experience. It was always that I was ten minutes from the State House, so it made it a little easier. It’s a state where you can make your speech and come home and sleep in your own bed at night.

Heininger: Tougher to do in Montana or California.

Dukakis: I’ll say, although if you fly around in California you can do it. I remember during the Presidential campaign going out and speaking to the bricklayers in South Bend, Indiana, leaving Logan at 5:00 and being home by midnight. It’s like going to Worcester and back, just on a plane. [laughing] Anyway, I’ve been kind of fanatic about that side of life, but there’s no question that when he married Vicki—once he got by the Romney thing—he seemed to be a much more fulfilled guy in a personal sense.

Heininger: You borrowed staff back and forth. How did that work?

Dukakis: He was looking for good people and I was looking for good people. They’re the ones who make you. My friend Gordon Chase, with whom I taught at the Kennedy School, is one of the best managers I ever knew. He used to say there are only three things that are important when it comes to getting things done in the public sector: people, people, and people. [laughing] No, really. You hope you can inspire folks, but he had the best staff in Washington. And if I may say, I had the best group of people who ever worked for a Governor at the State House. There was a fair amount of movement back and forth, and a lot of work back and forth. In that sense, I think we both understood the importance of this. You can’t do the work that you want to do and do the kinds of things you want to do unless you have great people.

Heininger: Did you do that with John Kerry’s staff at all?
Dukakis: Yes, though Kerry has more turnover and there’s less of the longer-term tenure there, and I don’t know why that is. John has some good people working for him. He didn’t have quite the same thing that Ted had. But when John got down there—Remember, he was my Lieutenant Governor, and a damn good one by the way—certainly there was plenty of contact, plenty of work done, between our staffs.

Heininger: What was Ted like when he campaigned for you in ’88?

Dukakis: Once he said yes, there wasn’t anything he wouldn’t do, whether it was for me, or for Kerry, or for Obama. Look at what he was like for Obama.

Heininger: He was out there.

Dukakis: Out there. Unquestioningly, unequivocally out there. “I’m with you,” bang!

Heininger: What did he like about the campaign trail?

Dukakis: He loved getting out there. He was great on the stump; people loved him. It was the politics of joy.

Heininger: It’s exhausting.

Dukakis: Yes, but you know—

Heininger: It must have been incredibly energizing for him. It must be, for politicians to—They must really draw energy off of crowds like that.

Dukakis: It’s not so much the crowds. It’s not just the crowds; it’s everything you do. We had probably the best welfare-to-work program in the country during the ’80s, when I was Governor; we called it the ET program, Employment and Training. I would do a press conference every two or three weeks, with another group of mostly women, who had left welfare and were now working because of this program.

I’d generally meet with them, just me and these folks, not with the press around. I’d ask them to tell me about themselves, where they were working, what was good about the welfare-to-work program, what were the things they thought we could do better, and so forth. Then we’d go out and do a press event. It always got front-page coverage. Here were women who had been on public assistance who were working, earning, and we had their employers there, usually saying, “These are some of the best people ever to work with me.” I’d come home all hopped up about this and Kitty would say, “What is it?” “Geez, I just had another—You have no idea. Let me tell you about these women, and what they’re doing.”

Then a whole bunch of them came to me—By that time there were hundreds, thousands—and they said, “We want to create a support group.” These were people who had been on welfare in some cases for more than ten years. They came to me, now employed, supporting themselves and their kids, and they said, “We want to create a support group, as volunteers, because we think we could be helpful with some of the folks coming along.” Do you know how inspiring this is, and energizing? That’s why you’re in public life, to have that kind of an opportunity.
It’s like with the schools. All these critics of the schools—Jonathan Alter at *Newsweek* is a good guy, but he’s decided that the litmus test for political courage is whether or not you’re for charter schools.

**Heininger:** That surprised me.

**Dukakis:** Charters are not going to revolutionize American education. Some of them are good; some are not so good. For reasons I don’t understand—The new Secretary of Education strikes me as being a good guy, but shortly after releasing a study saying that the charters, on balance, weren’t any better than the public schools, he then said whether you get some of this Race to the Top money will depend on whether you lift any caps on charters. I happen to be in a state that has the best public schools in America—number one for the last three years in the National Education Assessment, and up there with the best international students on science and math. That should not be surprising, given the population we have, but it’s certainly significant, don’t you think?

**Heininger:** Yes.

**Dukakis:** Now maybe this guy Alter, and others like him, have spent time in the public schools lately, but I would be astonished if they have. What is this nonsense about “the crumbling public schools”? Are they kidding? When Kitty and I got out of Brookline High School, in the early ’50s, do you know what the high school dropout rate was in the United States?

**Heininger:** No. High.

**Dukakis:** More than 50 percent of the kids in the United States never finished high school, 70 percent of the minority kids. In fact, the high school completion rate for African Americans in 1940, in the United States of America, was 12 percent, and a lot of them were going to lousy, segregated schools. Are you kidding me? We didn’t start talking about the dropout rate until it went down to 25 percent. [*laughing*] That’s not an argument against continuing to work on the achievement gap—but the schools today are light years better than they were 30, 40, 50 years ago. Trust me; we were there.

**Heininger:** There’s also been a sea change, as you say, in public attitudes about the importance of completing high school.

**Dukakis:** Not only completing high school, but going on.

**Heininger:** And going on. But we have to start at the basics, and getting people through high school has been a major change. The issue of the dropout rate didn’t become an issue until it had dropped.

**Dukakis:** I spent a lot of time in schools with teachers, listening, observing, talking to folks. These are energizing experiences that you have. That’s why you’re in public life to begin with. The whole health thing—When we began implementing my universal healthcare bill, we started to meet folks who, for the first time, had the security of knowing that they and their kids could be taken care of without having to beg and be put through the third degree at the hospital: “Where’s your insurance?” “That will be ten bucks a week for the rest of your life,” and these types of
things. I’m sure he drew great strength from this individual stuff. I don’t remember ever going home at night as Governor without feeling in some way that we’d helped somebody that day. I’m serious. I think it had a lot to do with the fact that Ted was a guy who was so fully engaged and enthusiastic about what he was doing.

**Heininger:** Were you surprised that he worked with [George W.] Bush on No Child Left Behind?

**Dukakis:** No, no. In fact, there were 60 or 70 Republicans in the House who voted against it because they said, “This is not a Republican bill; this is a Kennedy bill.” In fact, No Child Left Behind did stuff that they wouldn’t give Clinton on a voluntary basis, for God’s sake. Remember? Just voluntary exams and this type of thing. One of the interesting questions is, How is it that a guy who called himself a conservative was responsible, as President, for the most intrusive federal education legislation in history? [laughing] To his credit, I think it’s because George Bush, another son of privilege, felt very strongly that education was the ticket to success in this country.

**Heininger:** There also is a history of reform in the Texas schools as well.

**Dukakis:** And he was involved with that, yes. More power to him, but I certainly wasn’t surprised that Kennedy reached out to him.

**Heininger:** It surprised many people in the Senate and in the House.

**Dukakis:** He was always looking for Republicans to work with.

**Heininger:** Yes, but this was when Bush came in, and with all the bad blood over the election, this is what he came in with as a signature piece.

**Dukakis:** Yes, but that never stopped Ted. It was all about educating kids.

**Heininger:** How well has it worked in Massachusetts?

**Dukakis:** What, No Child Left Behind?

**Heininger:** Yes.

**Dukakis:** We were ahead of it.

**Heininger:** I know.

**Dukakis:** We had the whole exam thing, the MCAS [Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System], and all, well before No Child Left Behind.

**Heininger:** There is a difference in approach with No Child Left Behind, from what Massachusetts had been doing, what Clinton was doing. From what I have seen and all the people that I’ve talked to about it, in the educational systems now there is a punitive response: if you don’t reach, versus the Clinton approach, which was incentives to reach.
Dukakis: We went a little beyond just incentives. The State Department of Education can in fact take over and move in. I’m not sure they’ve ever actually done this.

Heininger: I don’t think so.

Dukakis: But there’s been some hard stuff in terms of school improvement programs and that kind of thing, fortunately, in this state. Generally speaking, even in our older, poorer urban communities, and in some rural communities, there’s a very strong commitment. In fact, great things have been happening in many of those school systems, with a very strong state role as well, no question about it.

I signed the first broad education reform bill in ’85; another one came along in ’93 that instituted the whole MCAS thing. I’m not sure I’m for testing every year. My bill was fourth, seventh, and tenth grades, which is probably enough. How much testing do you do and how much teaching to the test do you do? But No Child Left Behind did not have an impact on this state the way it did on many other states, just because we already were out in front of most states.

Heininger: It had a huge impact on other states.

Dukakis: Yes, but we already had the framework in place. Now, unfortunately, this economic crunch has hurt, but we’re way ahead in terms of the extended school day. I’m a huge fan of the all-day school. I don’t understand why we bifurcate the school day. We dismiss kids at 2:00 and then scramble around looking for afterschool care, and the kids who really need it the most don’t go to afterschool. Why not let the kids arrive at 8:30 and send them home at 5:00—That’s about the time their parents are working—and give them a good, full, rich school day? We’re way out in front on this. We have a number of schools in the state already that, with state assistance, are doing this, and the results have been, not surprisingly, pretty impressive.

Heininger: How far implemented is full-day kindergarten in Massachusetts?

Dukakis: We’re practically there. It’s a big thing with the Governor, which is fine, but a school day that matches the workday makes a lot of sense. We’ve had considerable success already, especially in schools that were not achieving the results we had hoped for. There’s a lot to be said for these kids, particularly in those schools, having a full day at school and a good day at school. This is not just babysitting; it’s not afterschool in school. This is a full academic day.

By the way, Ted was very supportive of it, and included it as part of his reauthorization. He was a big fan. You didn’t have to spend three months persuading him. We have a group up here called Mass 20/20, with an advisory board I sit on. We went down to explain it to him and the next day—bang—we had a new section of the No Child reauthorization. You didn’t have to walk him through this.

Heininger: Was there anything that, as Governor, you asked him for, or your staff asked him for, that you didn’t get?

Dukakis: Never.

Heininger: Really?
Dukakis: Yes.

Heininger: That’s amazing.

Dukakis: Of course we didn’t go down with frivolous requests.

Heininger: Right.

Dukakis: This was serious stuff, and he had a lot of respect for the folks I had working with his staff. If he thought it would benefit this state in a serious way, he was with it, and he moved. As you probably know, I’m a big mass transit advocate, a big rail guy—and he was right there. Again, you didn’t have to explain it to him; he’d say, “Absolutely, yes, absolutely.” I don’t know how many times Ted has ridden the T [Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority subway], but he was there for it. [laughing]

Heininger: Do you think ever?

Dukakis: And on the national rail stuff, on the intercity rail, God, he was wonderful, just terrific, terrific. Where did that come from? I don’t know, it’s in his DNA [deoxyribonucleic acid], I guess.

Heininger: Were you surprised, after you lost in ’88, that he said, about the campaign, that it lacked a clear message?

Dukakis: No, because that was a lousy campaign. It had lacked a clear message. It lacked three things: a clear message; a carefully thought-out strategy for dealing with the [George H. W.] Bush attack campaign; and a serious grassroots effort, which had always gotten me elected, but I spent too much time listening to people who presumably knew more about getting elected to the Presidency than I did, and who argued it was all about money and media. Until Obama, we didn’t have a Democratic Presidential candidate who seriously organized at the grassroots level. This guy did; that’s one of the reasons he got elected, maybe the most important reason he got elected, in addition to his own personal qualities.

Heininger: So there was no fallout from him having criticized the campaign?

Dukakis: Oh, hell no. I was far more critical of the campaign than he was. He was relatively gentle on the subject. When a guy like Kennedy steps out and says, “I’m with you,” you owe him and thousands of other people the very best campaign you can put together, and it just wasn’t. The primary was terrific; it was a picture book primary.

Heininger: Yes. Were you surprised he supported John Kerry?

Dukakis: No, no. He didn’t hesitate on that, either, right?

Heininger: No, he didn’t.

Dukakis: And then you have the Obama thing.
Heininger: You’re going to miss him.

Dukakis: Oh, man, I tell you. Kitty was very much the same way. I’m not sure either one of us expected to be as devastated emotionally as we were when he died. We knew it was coming, but maybe the older you get, the more emotional you get. I still get choked up about him.

Heininger: What got me was the stricken look on Vicki’s face when she got out of the car at Arlington, because she had been so steady—

Dukakis: Strong.

Heininger: So strong up until then.

Dukakis: We all like to think we’re strong, but this hit us all like a ton of bricks.

Heininger: What’s going to happen here in Massachusetts?

Dukakis: I don’t know.

Heininger: Who’s going to go in for Paul Kirk?

Dukakis: I don’t know. We’ll see.

Heininger: It’s going to be a change.

Dukakis: Big shoes to fill. Huge shoes to fill.

Heininger: I’m not sure I see the next generation coming along able to fill them, and I’m not talking about politically.

Dukakis: Nobody can fill Ted Kennedy’s shoes. No, he really was one for the history books, but I hope and expect we’ll have somebody who will assert himself or herself and provide real leadership. That’s something this state has a responsibility to do. Even though all of us who ran for the Presidency didn’t make it, including Ted and myself, and Kerry and [Paul] Tsongas, it’s extraordinary that we had four people coming out of the state in a relatively short period of time, all of whom were serious candidates for the most important political office in the world. This state does have a special role to play in American politics.

Heininger: Were you all tarred with the “Massachusetts liberal” tag?

Dukakis: I don’t think so. I never bought that. Nixon went after Jack Kennedy because he was a liberal. We’ve been hearing this for a long time: “soft on communism” and “soft on defense.” It’s part of the party line on the other side. I just think we didn’t run a very—I didn’t run a very effective campaign; Kerry did not run a very effective campaign. Each of us could have won with a much better campaign, but we just didn’t do a very good job. And Ted’s campaign was, as we know, not a good one, for whatever reason. Getting elected to the highest office in the land is not easy, but I don’t think it was because we were “Massachusetts liberals.” I think it’s because we ran lousy campaigns. [laughing]
I thought Kerry was going to win, but again, you have to be down there at the grassroots, as Obama demonstrated very clearly, and you have to have a central idea. Look, this is not taking anything away from Bill Clinton, but ’92 was a better year for a Democrat than ’88. Why? Because we were in another recession again. Sometimes it’s where you are, and at what time. I don’t think any of our campaigns were really up to what they should have been as campaigns.

**Heininger:** How often does a politician ever admit that? [laughing]

**Dukakis:** Well if you get beaten, you’d better think about it. And you feel it. I can’t speak for Ted and John, but thousands of people pour themselves into your campaign, and you owe them the responsibility of running the very best campaign you can. If you do that and you still lose, okay it wasn’t there. But they’re with you; they put their faith in you; they in many cases spend thousands of hours working for you, and the loss is very disappointing. I thought I had let many people down, especially the thousands of young people working for me. Unfortunately, you don’t usually get more than one bite at the apple, unless you’re Richard Nixon, and look what happened to him.

**Heininger:** And look what happened to him.

**Dukakis:** But I’ll tell you, it was one of the greatest experiences of my life, to be associated with the Senator and to be able to work with him. He himself was a constant inspiration, all the time. I never remember him being down, ever, discouraged or asking “What am I doing here?” Never, ever. He was always up, always moving forward, always interested in the next challenge. It was interesting, what he said about his optimism, which he said was grounded in his faith. He was always up, full of energy, enthusiastic. I’m sure there were down times, but I never saw them. “The politics of joy”—He really practiced it, and boy, we’re going to miss him. I miss him already. And he was still relatively young for these days. Why does it happen? I don’t know.

**Heininger:** Life’s not fair.

**Dukakis:** But he lived a hell of a life, didn’t he? What else do you want to know?

**Heininger:** That’s it.

**Dukakis:** Okay. Well, thank you for doing this.

**Heininger:** Thank you very much.