



## EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

### INTERVIEW WITH ANTONIA HERNANDEZ

March 22, 2007  
New York, New York

#### **Interviewer**

Stephen F. Knott

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TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH ANTONIA HERNANDEZ

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**Knott:** Thank you for agreeing to do this. I think maybe the best place to start is, you were with Senator Kennedy from 1979 to 1981 officially. Is that accurate?

**Hernandez:** Officially, yes.

**Knott:** We have it recorded, and if there's anything wrong here, we'd love to have the record corrected, that you were staff counsel to the Senate Judiciary Committee.

**Hernandez:** Correct.

**Knott:** Could you tell us a little bit about what you did in that capacity?

**Hernandez:** When I was hired, it was right after the Senator took over as chair of the Judiciary Committee from [James] Eastland. He brought in some fascinating and really interesting people to staff the Judiciary Committee. Before he took over the chairmanship, there was an immigration subcommittee. He dissolved that and brought it into the full committee. I was hired to do primarily immigration, but I also did some issues involving civil rights and judicial nominations. I believe I was the first Latina/Latino ever hired to be counsel to the Judiciary Committee. So I served as his liaison for that community.

**Knott:** One question we've always tried to figure out and never quite got a good answer on is why Senator Kennedy left or gave up the chairmanship of the Judiciary Committee over the long haul, in other words.

**Hernandez:** Because of his passion for labor and education, and they were dual passions. When he was Chair of the Judiciary Committee, he was still involved with the Labor Committee. So it was sort of a conflict between two passions. His feeling was that he could do so much more in the labor area—workers, protection of workers—and that's what he picked, labor and education. At least that's my understanding.

**Knott:** That's all we can ask for. You fairly quickly got involved in the 1980 campaign, is that correct?

**Hernandez:** Well, it's interesting because getting involved is assuming that I had a choice. What happened is, of course, the excitement at that time of him running for President, and you were literally picked. You were picked to either stay in the Senate or go to the campaign, and I was picked to go to the campaign. With its ups and downs, it was one of the most interesting of life experiences for me. I was not politically involved, in the partisan political sense. I was a legal services public interest lawyer, doing legal services in Los Angeles. I voted, but I was not involved in the Democratic Party or in partisan politics. When I went to the Senate, it was to do the type of law on an issue that I deeply cared about. And then to be plugged into the center of a national political campaign—you talk about learning on the run, this was learning on the treadmill.

**Knott:** Can you tell us some of the things that you learned or had to learn quickly?

**Hernandez:** First, just getting to know the people for whom politics was their life and their everyday existence, and learning that whole world. Being exposed nationally. Initially, I became the Southwest coordinator of the campaign. I was sent to Louisiana, and I'll tell you a funny story. First, going back to being told or selected to go to the campaign, I was as happy as can be because it was a new experience. You didn't get paid. So those who stayed in the Judiciary Committee were lucky because they got their pay. We didn't get paid, and by April the campaign was starting to struggle.

I got sent to Louisiana. Mind you, I'd never been to that part of the world. I am to go to Shreveport to be the "hostess with the mostest" at the state convention, where Jimmy Carter's people have it sewn up and have taken the delegation. And I'm supposed to go to this particular hotel to ask for a specific person. They gave me the key to a room for which I'm to be the hostess. A lot of people came in because there's free food and booze, right? I learned real fast that the reason people would come up to the hospitality suite was for the liquor, not the candidate. One fellow got real drunk and fell asleep. I didn't know what to do with him. This was the room where I was supposed to sleep. It was interesting, all right, being a campaign coordinator.

The first time I went to bayou country, I got to know the unions. I was told that I was supposed to connect with the longshoremen's union in New Orleans. They were Kennedy supporters. So I took off for the union hall. When I got there, it was immediately apparent that they were Carter people and I was not totally welcome. It didn't take too long to figure out why. I was at the white longshoremen's union hall, not the black longshoremen's union hall. No one had told me that there were two unions. This was my first time in the South. It was quite educational.

In that campaign, I didn't know from day to day whether I was going to stay in a working person's home or a mansion. From there I got sent to Texas. When I got to Houston, I was picked up at the airport in the evening by some very nice Kennedy supporters and driven a long way to their home. They provided a room and wonderful hospitality. I was real tired. So I went to sleep. When I awoke in the morning everyone was gone. They went to work and left me to sleep late. The problem was that I was alone and didn't know where I was. I hardly knew whose house it was, and I didn't have the slightest idea how to get to town to tackle my campaign assignments. What an adventure!

Then we went to Mexico. That also was interesting. I was off to Mexico with the Senator to be his Spanish-speaking liaison. It didn't occur to me to bring my passport. The Mexican authorities only let me into the country because I was traveling with the Senator. Then I came back and I got sent to Arizona; their primary is later.

You sort of go from state to state, and I developed wonderful friendships that, to this day, I still maintain. It was interesting, because in Houston and in Texas, I went in to work in the Latino/Hispanic community. There was a father-son team. They were very politically active, and basically controlled the Latino political apparatus. The daddy was with Ted, the son was with Carter. And it was the most interesting dynamics of seeing politics at a very raw, very local level. And the passion. I remember when Teddy went to San Antonio and then went somewhere else. I mean, the crowds, it was like the crowds were with him but the leadership of the Democratic Party was already sewn in for Jimmy Carter. And then, of course, the convention in August in New York, and that speech that he gave. My husband and I were on the convention floor. He was so good, so committed to his principles. It was a highlight, makes everything that we had endured in the campaign so worth it.

**Knott:** Powerful speech.

**Hernandez:** Powerful. But you know, I worked with Bobby Shrum, and of course with Paul.

**Knott:** Paul Kirk?

**Hernandez:** Oh yes, and in fact to this day we're still very close. Stephen Breyer was the chief counsel to the Judiciary Committee. Just fascinating people. Ron Brown, who was his personal staff. Kenny Feinberg, who was there, and David Boies. It was David Boies who hired me.

**Knott:** Oh really?

**Hernandez:** As I told you, I was a legal aid lawyer in LA [Los Angeles]. My girlfriend Gloria Molina, who is now an LA county supervisor, was politically active, and she worked on the Carter campaign. So when Carter won in '76 she went to work, at the low level, at White House personnel. There were very few Latinos in Washington at that time. This is 1976. So she kept calling and saying, "Come on, come to D.C. [District of Columbia] and work for so and so." I had no interest. So one day she calls me and says, "I've got the job you're going to be interested in, because Ted Kennedy is looking to take over Judiciary"—this is '78—"and he's looking for staff." And I said, "I'm not interested."

Then she called and said, "One of his counsel, Jay [Jason] Steptoe, is coming to LA. Why don't you meet with him in [Alan] Cranston's office?" I said, "But I'm not interested," and she says, "Just meet with him." So I met with him and they scheduled me to go to Washington to interview with the Senator. I didn't want to go, but she said, "Go. You're going to meet the Senator." And I thought, *Well, what the hell. I'm going to meet the Senator. I don't have to take the job. They haven't offered it to me, right?*

So the week before I was to leave for Washington, they canceled the appointment and said, “You don’t have to come to Washington. David Boies is going to be speaking to the Ninth Circuit Judicial Conference in Palm Springs.” My husband was saying, “Honey, this is a unique opportunity.” So I actually bought a traditional kind of suit, because I was a legal aid lawyer. I was supposed to meet David Boies at the coffee shop of the hotel. I asked, “How will I know him?” He said, “He’ll know you, and you’ll know what he looks like.”

I walked into the coffee shop and there’s David Boies. He looked at me, I looked at him. We talked for about an hour. He never asked me about my qualifications. All we talked about was what I did, the cases I had, how I dealt with that. We went back and forth, and he said, “Okay, walk to my room. I’ve got to pick up my speech. I’ve got to go give my speech to the judges.” So we walked over, picked up his speech, he gave his speech, I said goodbye and came back. The following Tuesday I had a job offer. I had a job and my husband had a wonderful job.

**Knott:** So you were torn.

**Hernandez:** Yes. I didn’t want to go. I said no way, and my husband said, “Honey, you don’t know how privileged you are. You don’t know how many people are dying to have this opportunity.” We had just been married and had just bought a house, but we said okay. So he left his job at the federal public defender’s office. And literally, I left my job on a Friday, we flew the red-eye, I started my work on Monday, and it was my time to meet the Senator. I had never met him. He said, “So you’re Antoni-er?” [*pronounced phonetically*] I said yes. God, you think my accent’s bad. He said, “I’ve never hired anyone sight-unseen.” And I’m thinking, *Oh, Jesus Christ*. But since then, we have had the most fabulous relationship.

**Knott:** You have?

**Hernandez:** Yes.

**Knott:** So it’s continued long after your service.

**Hernandez:** To this day. I serve on the Harvard Kennedy Institute of Politics Advisory Committee and I serve on the Profile in Courage Award Committee.

**Knott:** Oh, you do?

**Hernandez:** Yes, so I see him at least twice, three times a year. I got to know Caroline [Kennedy Schlossberg], I got to know John [Kennedy], Jr., through that. I had gotten to know [John] Culver really well. I continue to see Paul all the time. And a lot of the oldies but goodies that served. Jim Flug, who served while I was there, came back and now just left.

**Knott:** Was Carey Parker there when you were?

**Hernandez:** Carey was there. Patti Saris, who is now on the Federal District Court. Elaine Shocas, Jay Steptoe, Susan McDermott, that whole clan. Susan, the one who ran—

**Knott:** Estrich?

**Hernandez:** Yes, Estrich, who is now at USC [University of Southern California]. Those were my colleagues. Those were the people I worked with.

**Knott:** That's quite a group of people.

**Hernandez:** It was a dynamic group of people.

**Knott:** He's noted for pulling together a pretty good staff.

**Hernandez:** And actually, yesterday I was having a conversation with somebody and the issue came up about the Senator. Someone said, "I've always liked him, but I don't know how bright he is." I said, "You know what? He is one of the most underestimated persons I know. You couldn't be a Senator for over 40 years—" I also said, "Well, he's bright enough to hire the best and the brightest, and you have to be pretty bright to do that." I think they underestimate his intellectual depth.

**Knott:** Why do you think that is?

**Hernandez:** I think it's because you have to take the Senator in his totality, his life. The youngest of all—the baby, the issue of the drinking, the issue of the family. In many ways, he's sort of—this is my own personal opinion. He has, I think, taken that as his shield. And I think since the loss of his campaign, he's become an absolute statesman.

**Knott:** Since 1980.

**Hernandez:** Absolute statesman, and a consistent voice no matter what. He's also exceedingly practical. He has a really good sense of what can be accomplished. You know when [Ronald] Reagan came in, look at Stephen Breyer. He got nominated and passed through because of the deals he made. I mean, he's great at the deal-making. He knows the institution. He has, actually, a quite likeable personality. Look at the relationship between him and Orrin Hatch, and you can duplicate that over and over. He comes across as human and vulnerable. I think that those are great human qualities that he's been able to put to the best use.

**Knott:** Can I take you back to the '80 campaign again? There was some criticism of him at the time, that he was dragging the thing out, that it was clear that he had lost and that he took it to the bitter end, and therefore hurt the Democratic Party. Do you have any reflections on that?

**Hernandez:** I think to some degree that might be true, but that's not why Jimmy Carter lost. He lost because of the conflict there that took place right before he left. I will tell you, and once again it comes from a novice, the Carter people were SOBs [sons of bitches].

**Knott:** Really?

**Hernandez:** Yes.

**Knott:** They played hardball.

**Hernandez:** And unnecessarily so. Since then, I've kind of been around. You don't have to go for the kill, particularly when it's an inner-family fight.

**Knott:** Can you give me an example of where you think they went for the kill, or where they overdid it?

**Hernandez:** It was the personal. They wanted to squash. It was sort of like, I'm in an inner-family squabble, but at the end of the day we're going to have to be together. It was for the kill, which left a lot of bitter feelings that were reflected in the Democratic convention. It was hard to heal, and it's not the first time. It happens in Republican politics, it happens with the Democrats. I think, hopefully, the lesson to be learned within the Democratic Party, particularly as we enter this Presidential election year, is that at the end of the day, the winner is going to have to go to all of the losers and bring them back together. I think that a lot of people forgot that. In that sense, I had no bone to pick. I thought, *Okay, this is my candidate and I believe in him*. But Jimmy Carter is a decent man.

**Knott:** So you voted for Carter that fall.

**Hernandez:** You know what I did. But for the first time in my life, I held my nose, because of the bitter feelings, the going for the kill. Yes, I was attached to the Senator. But in my family, you're born a Democrat, you die a Democrat. It's not as if we can leave the party, but it wasn't with joy. It was okay, you've got to bite the bullet, you've got to hold your nose, and this is the way it goes. I think to some degree you sense that because a lot of the progressive wing of the party wasn't very enthusiastic for Jimmy Carter. And if he had had that little tiny extra level of support, history would be different. He didn't lose by a big margin.

**Knott:** That's interesting. I know Carter had boasted about how he was going to whip Ted Kennedy's ass, and things like that.

**Hernandez:** And it went down, that attitude.

**Knott:** That attitude seeped down.

**Hernandez:** Deep down. And it was, go for the kill, humiliate, embarrass. People have long memories.

**Knott:** Was this a positive experience for you?

**Hernandez:** Oh totally, totally.

**Knott:** You learned a lot?

**Hernandez:** I learned a lot. I developed phenomenal networks, and more than anything, as I told you, because there was no money towards the end of the campaign and literally, like that movie, I depended on the kindness of strangers. The depth of support. I remember when Paul—you know when we started the campaign, and it was in the old Cadillac dealership on M Street, across the street from the steakhouse. I remember Paul saying, “Here.” And it was a bunch of cards of all of his contacts in Texas. And I was supposed to organize them and I was supposed to make it all happen.

And then when I went to Texas, and it was, to me, the breadth and the depth from the commonest of poor persons to the wealthiest. In Arizona, the same thing. I remember I was there for weeks, working in Arizona, and I stayed at one of those motels by the freeway, right outside Phoenix, courtesy of someone who owned the motel. But everywhere, the depth of commitment to the family, to the ideal of what they stood for. It’s those types of friendships and loyalties that are really hard to come by nowadays.

**Knott:** Sure. Was the intensity for Senator Kennedy particularly pronounced in the Hispanic community?

**Hernandez:** Oh, yes. And it was interesting because there was Senator Kennedy and of course... In Texas, in people’s homes I remember, you had the picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe and a picture of John Kennedy. That was it. I remember on that trip, when we went to Mexico and we visited the cathedral. And the strong feelings that people had for the Kennedy family when President Kennedy and Jackie [Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis] went to the various... It was interesting to see how a family, how a person touched the lives of other people. It was sort of like [William] Clinton in the nineties. I mean, Clinton feels everybody’s pain, and the attachment to people. But Kennedy was at a different—it was like there was that connection to people he never knew or met, and it was like he was the aspiration of a better day. That’s what it would encompass.

**Knott:** So it was even deeper than the kind of affection that was felt for Clinton?

**Hernandez:** Oh, yes. It was that this person embodied my hopes, my aspirations, and understood those hopes and aspirations. I used to see it, I’ll tell you. The crowds were phenomenal. Even many people who voted for Carter because of the party loyalties. It was like, “We’re with you but.” To tell you the truth, you can’t blame it all on Carter. The machine wasn’t as smooth and as slick as it should have been.

**Knott:** We’ve heard this, yes.

**Hernandez:** It was just that the Senator couldn’t carry it. The underlying machine wasn’t an efficient machine.

**Knott:** We’ve heard these stories, that it was not particularly well run. It must have been awkward because his brother-in-law was in charge of the campaign.

**Hernandez:** But I don't think the issue was that it wasn't well run. I guess you could interpret it that way. You had Morris Dees come in—and I got to know all these people. Morris Dees came in as the Treasurer. You had Paul. It was that there was a very short period of time, and the lack of time and the inability to create a structure with all these strong, driven egos. It's like you have all the elements of a mean, efficient machine, but it doesn't happen overnight. The Carter people—and that's why incumbency is so important. You have the place, you have a hierarchy, you have a role. You go into this amorphous but structured setting. When you put it in like that. And you're bringing Morris with his ideas and whatever, and so and so here, and then the clamoring of oodles of people who want to work on the campaign, and no structure to filter.

In a way, I think that's what did it. Too much of a lot of great talent but not a structure to maximize the talent to the best of everybody's abilities. A lot of money coming in at first, but even the structure on how to manipulate and foot it, there wasn't the time. So it was from within.

**Knott:** You mentioned you were responsible, in part, for Texas. That had to be a tough sell, I mean, outside of perhaps the Hispanic and the minority community.

**Hernandez:** Yes.

**Knott:** I would imagine you encountered some pretty serious hostility.

**Hernandez:** Yes, actually, what happened was, I was at the national level, in charge, while we were looking for a Southwest coordinator. I left when they started sending me to the states, and they brought in Fernando Chavez, the son of Cesar Chavez, so we worked together. And it was the same thing. There was a lot of jockeying because the Latino community, the African American community, was going to be the base. But once again, there weren't enough of us internally, and with the resources and a lack of leadership that understood that base, to really make it work. It was the women, the this, the that. And there was Kathleen [Kennedy] wanting to have teas like President Kennedy had had teas. I tell you, it was the most chaotic, exhilarating experience, 12, 14 hours a day. It wasn't for the faint of heart and it wasn't for the person who didn't have a lot of energy. You had to be on overdrive.

**Knott:** Were you constantly making pleas to the office in Washington—we really need more resources here or we need more—?

**Hernandez:** Actually, by the time they started—because most of my time was at the national office. In a way, I look back and it's kind of youthful ignorance and faithful ignorance and loyal ignorance. I remember Louisiana. There were three of us who were sent to Louisiana, three of us: Joanne Regan, Jim, and I. We didn't have a place. We worked out of a rental station wagon. We never knew where we were going to stay. But it was like troopers, just whatever the day brings you. And we were told, you ain't going to get very much. So we weren't expecting. We were just out there every day doing it, and we amazed ourselves. I mean, we talk about it, Joanne and Jim and I.

**Knott:** Jim is who?

**Hernandez:** I'm trying to remember his name. It will come to me, but it was Joanne Regan, myself, and Jim. We did it, and we weren't expecting. We got a rental station wagon, we went to the—oh, this is a funny story, and this is an oral history. We were told that the longshoremen were going to be our supporters, and to go to the longshoreman's office. So we ignoramuses go to the longshoremen, only we went to the white longshoremen, and they were not supporting Teddy. It was the black longshoremen who were supporting Teddy. *[laughter]* We found out very quickly, they were not in tune with the Senator.

There are stories like that all around. In bayou country, they had never seen a Latina. But I looked like them. I sort of talked like them. I ate a lot of chili, so gumbo was natural to me. It was okay. I remember being in bayou country when they had that annual—I think it was early April, where they dress up the boats. Anyway, whatever it was, it was wonderful. I learned zydeco, and it was fabulous.

**Knott:** An incredible learning experience.

**Hernandez:** Unbelievable, and the people were just unbelievable. So yes, I learned a lot. In Texas it was tough, you're right. Houston, tough place. I mean really tough place. Even Texan Democrats are a different breed, just a different world. Arizona, though, was a lot like California. My time in California in May was unbelievable and, in fact—oh God, I can't think of his name. He's my age. He just passed away, a lawyer. John Frank. We remained friends to the end. He established a policy school in University of Arizona and I was the first speaker for the policy school, and opening that whole thing. So those friendships just went on and developed and evolved. And when it was over, it was over. It was so sad.

**Knott:** I can imagine it was sad. Were you there in Madison Square Garden the night he gave the speech?

**Hernandez:** No, because we all had to go to the convention, and then figure out where the hell we were going to stay, because we had to work the convention.

**Knott:** It was a very powerful speech. Could you feel the emotion on the floor?

**Hernandez:** Oh hell, yes, and all the theatrics. And the wanting and not wanting to shake their hand, and the bickering with his people in going through the whole different—and whether he was going to get a major or not, whether they were going to make peace or not. All the inner workings.

**Knott:** Any solicitations from the Carter campaign to help them in the fall?

**Hernandez:** No. Actually, I think very few people, if you look at the Carter reelection, unlike others after the Democrats, there were very few crossovers. I can't think of, at the top level, any crossovers. No.

**Knott:** Did you go back to the Judiciary Committee?

**Hernandez:** I went back to the Judiciary Committee, of course, and then, come November, I think it was November 4th, I remember we went to bed at 2:00. At that time, [Gaylord] Nelson was still winning, Culver was still winning, so I still had a job. I woke up at 7:00. They had lost and I lost my job.

**Knott:** My gosh, what a way to—

**Hernandez:** No job. So that was it.

**Knott:** So no chance of moving into the minority staff?

**Hernandez:** Well, no, because there weren't that many positions, and remember, we were the big Judiciary Committee. I remember, I think it was the day after or two days after the election, Kennedy called us all into the big judiciary hearing room. He came in and he said, "Whatever you want, I will do, to put you where you want to be."

**Knott:** Wow, that's great.

**Hernandez:** Yes, it was. So we said, all right.

**Knott:** Did you take him up on that?

**Hernandez:** No. In fact, I went counter to what he said, because the day after the election—I was already being recruited to run the D.C. office of MALDEF [Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund]. I had said no, and literally the day after the election, the person who at that time headed MALDEF called and said, "Now are you interested?" I said, "Well, I'm still stunned, so I don't know if I'm interested."

The Senator—and I don't know if he remembers that he gave me this advice then—and I love it because he always said Antoni-er—he said, "Antoni-er, you're one of the very few Hispanics"—at that time, 1980—"that have made it. The world is yours. You'll always have an opportunity to go back to public interest and legal services. Explore other possibilities." Two days later, I flew to San Francisco and accepted the job to run the D.C. office of MALDEF. And that's where I was for 23 years.

**Knott:** I just quickly moved through your time on the Judiciary Committee. Are there any particular confirmation battles or any issues that stand out in your mind in terms of Senator Kennedy's involvement?

**Hernandez:** Actually, what we're most proud of is that at that time, Jerry Tinker, who passed away, and I were basically responsible for immigration and refugees. We were the two. I remember it was—we passed the Refugee Act of 1980. I worked very closely with the House Judiciary Committee, with Jim Klein and the others, on passing this piece of legislation, which is still on the books. I remember that the bill was before the floor. It was the Senator, my colleague, and I, and we were the only three. After he came back and the bill passed and they were all

happy and whatever. He came back and said, “Look what you can do with two people.” That was the ultimate compliment. That was very important.

I also participated in the confirmation of three judges who are still on the Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. Because they were from California, I was able to participate. It was Harry Pregerson, whom I adore, [Arthur] Alarcon, and [Warren] Ferguson. But those were the three. I participated in that.

**Knott:** Were those contentious fights?

**Hernandez:** You know what? Not the way we know them today. Alarcon, no; but Harry Pregerson was a labor, union, progressive guy, who has lived up to his reputation even more to the left. He’s the only “lefty” left. Went through the hearings, put them through. You always go through all those issues. There were some other confirmations at that time.

Also, I did a lot of work on civil rights issues, particularly civil rights issues as they impacted the Latino community. So I had my hands on a lot of those areas. But the main thing about immigration, and I worked a lot, was the beginning of the skeleton of the Immigration and Refugee Act that was eventually passed in 19—I think it was ’86. It took all those years.

**Knott:** Simpson-Mazzoli?

**Hernandez:** The Simpson-Mazzoli Act. There was Simpson-Mazzoli one, Simpson-Mazzoli two, Simpson-Mazzoli three. Alan Simpson and I actually became very good friends because Alan started as a junior Senator when I started on the Judiciary Committee. One thing about Kennedy, going back to the Judiciary Committee, when he dissolved it—I don’t know how they work now; I know it’s very contentious—but when we were there, we were counsel to the Judiciary Committee, which means we were counsel to *all* of the Judiciary Committee. I got to know Alan, [Charles] Mathias, [Charles] Grassley. We serviced them just like we serviced the majority, Mr. [Strom] Thurmond, Orrin Hatch. I got to know them because we serviced them. We have a different perspective of the world, but it wasn’t personal. It wasn’t hostile. And the staff worked together on different issues. It was a much more collegial, open environment. The philosophical political differences were there, but they weren’t personal.

**Knott:** What happened?

**Hernandez:** I don’t know. It happened after I left. I have no idea, but I’m telling you. People want to make the past a lot more beautiful than it was, but it was harmonious.

**Knott:** Civil.

**Hernandez:** It was civil, that’s the word. It was civil and collegial. It was not personal. Even though we had differences, our role was to find the common threads, not what divided us, but where were the common threads to get things done? Where could we give? Where could we get in order to advance the thing? I’m afraid that it’s not the same today.

**Knott:** So you wouldn't want to go back there today?

**Hernandez:** Oh no, I don't think so. I'm sure everybody says that. One, I wasn't of the political world. I went to work for a person who shared my ideals. I didn't go there because I was going to go to another person or another office, no. It was to this person, and my goal was to go back home, which I did.

**Knott:** In your capacity working, you directed the Washington office of MALDEF? Do I have that correct?

**Hernandez:** Yes, and then I opposed him and I gave him a hell of a hard time.

**Knott:** You did?

**Hernandez:** Oh, yes.

**Knott:** Tell us about that.

**Hernandez:** On immigration.

**Knott:** How did he react to that?

**Hernandez:** One time he called me up. At first he was angry and then we just laughed. I told you he's a very practical man, right? He was about to give in on immigration. So I conspired with the then owners or the managers of what is now Univision to put out an editorial ad saying, "Kennedy, don't do it." He received thousands among thousands of bags of mail. So I get a call, "Antonia, [squawks]!" [*laughs*]

**Knott:** How did you deal with that?

**Hernandez:** I said, "Yes, I did it because you were straying." We have that type of relationship. "You wouldn't listen to me, you were straying. You have to do what you have to do and I have to do what I have to do."

**Knott:** Well, you actually kind of assumed a question I was about to ask, which is that we've heard from some people involved in outside activist groups that he's occasionally a little too quick to cut a deal, too quick to reach across the aisle perhaps. I was wondering if you could comment on that. Does that strike you as fair or unfair?

**Hernandez:** I think it's a little unfair, and I think a lot of times, because I have been both on the inside and on the outside, lobbying the inside. I think a lot of times—and this is criticism of my outside world that I used to be in—what makes us really good is that we are principled and we have a point of view, and we're going to just drive that point of view. People forget that the art of politics is give and take. It's sausage-making, and you've got to make sausage, and that's not a pretty sight. Somebody's got to give and somebody's got to take, and sometimes they forget.

Now, was he being too practical with the Reagan and [George H. W.] Bush one administration and [George W.] Bush two? I don't know, but think about it. What was possible? He was criticized for the No Child Left Behind Act. Well, under the circumstances that he was dealing with, could he have gotten more?

On immigration, because I criticized, I don't know. [Nancy] Pelosi today introduced the immigration bill. I'm getting the calls that Kennedy's too practical, he's going to give in, right? I sometimes don't agree with what his position is on what he's giving in, but he is in a political world of give and take. You give more than you take when the environment is hostile, and you take more than you give when the environment is not as hostile. I think that people sometimes don't understand that.

**Knott:** And that's where you benefited from your experience on the Hill?

**Hernandez:** Yes.

**Knott:** You learned that politics is the art of the possible.

**Hernandez:** Exactly, and that's what it is and that's what I tell people. If it weren't the art of the possible, we wouldn't have a democracy, we wouldn't have this. If your position was the only position that gained, and there's 20 other positions, you never win, because all the other 19 would knock you down. So, what are you willing to give? You assume. One thing about the Senator—and I think that with honest, principled politicians, you always know the bottom from which he will not go. You always know the bottom is here, I want here, and in here is that shade. The politicians who get in trouble are the politicians who don't know their bottom. Nobody's going to confuse where *this* Senator stands on his philosophical views on a lot of things. They're very clear.

**Knott:** He's solid.

**Hernandez:** He's solid, he's consistent. He's for the worker. He's for a certain view of what this country should be. Where people criticize him is in this.

**Knott:** Is this something that you have to deal with personally within your own organization?

**Hernandez:** I left MALDEF three years ago. I am now in the foundation world. Of course I had to deal with that, and it's a good, inherent tension. The other lesson that I learned from the Senator, which I try very much to emulate, is I try to hire the best and the brightest, and people who are going to challenge me every day of my life, because that's what keeps me honest. There is an inherency in the political process to give.

**Knott:** To give?

**Hernandez:** Yes. You know the process inherently, it's in there. So you have to have people. And good politicians hire people who are going to tell them no, who are going to say uh-uh.

**Knott:** You can't go there.

**Hernandez:** You can't go there, and if you do, I told you so. Because that's what you need. And you need staff who are going to say here are your options, and here are the consequences, and here are the pluses and the minuses. So I think that in that regard the Senator has been extremely successful. He still attracts some of the best and brightest people on the Hill.

**Knott:** Can you think of any other lessons you may have learned from him, or any pearls of wisdom that you've carried with you since your time with him?

**Hernandez:** To compartmentalize and never personalize. And to always keep your blinders. Not to have preconceived notions. How can I explain this? I have a very strong philosophical base about life and the world, but I don't have preconceived notions as to who shares those views of my world about people, whether they be black, white, yellow, polka dot, because if you do that, you're foreclosing a lot of allies. That's one thing that the Senator reinforced in me, that good people come in every shape and size and fit, and that people who are not so good also come in every shape, size and fit. So keep your mind open to listen.

The other lesson, which I already had, is that the best way to counter an argument is to put yourself in the shoes of the other side, and to acknowledge the valid points of the other side, because that's going to make you a much better advocate. It's not good, bad, or ugly; very few things are. Different people look at the view of the world differently. Viva la difference.

**Knott:** Right. Were there certain Senators on the Judiciary Committee, at that time, that Senator Kennedy got along with particularly well?

**Hernandez:** Hatch.

**Knott:** Even then?

**Hernandez:** Oh yes, even then it was Hatch.

**Knott:** How do you explain that somewhat odd relationship?

**Hernandez:** On a personal level, Hatch is a very nice, decent, kind man. He's a real gentleman in the old school of a gentleman. I don't agree with most of what he stands for. Senator Thurmond was also a very decent person. And the Senator, at that time—of course now he's what? about 72—but at that time he was a young kid. He was very respectful of Thurmond. It was the cultural upbringing that you respect your elders, very respectful, where he didn't need to be. At that time, of course, he was with John Culver, because they went back to Harvard and the whole thing. The drinking buddies and social stuff.

It's interesting that you ask me this question. I used to hear the Senator grumble about certain Senators' positions, but I don't think I ever heard him say any bad thing personally about any particular Senator. He would grumble, "Where did he go? Did you talk to him?" You know the way he goes, but it was about the issue. He would say, "Where do you think he's coming from?"

What's behind that?" kind of thing. But I don't think I've ever heard him say anything personal. That's not his style.

**Knott:** Are there any issues during the time you were with MALDEF that you were particularly engaged with him or his staff?

**Hernandez:** The Voting Rights Act.

**Knott:** Nineteen ninety-two or '82?

**Hernandez:** Eighty-three. It was the Voting Rights Act of '82, the Civil Rights Act of '83, because remember. I was still in Washington. Post that, all of the immigration bills. I worked with the chief counsel or with the counsel in charge of that issue. Today, now since Jim left—and I just talked to Jim a month ago.

**Knott:** Jim Flug?

**Hernandez:** Yes. I don't know who the chief counsel is, but I usually have a good relationship with the chief counsels and get to know them. I usually know a couple of the staffers, but since I left MALDEF three years ago, the need to interact on issues has totally been diluted. So I don't get that much interaction with the staff.

**Knott:** Okay. Any chance you got involved in the [Robert] Bork nomination?

**Hernandez:** Oh yes. Bork, I testified on [David] Souter.

**Knott:** [Clarence] Thomas?

**Hernandez:** Oh yes, because I knew Thomas. I got to know Clarence when he first started as Assistant Secretary of Education, and then moved to EEOC [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission]. In fact, he called me when he got nominated to the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals, and then of course nominated. And my organization testified against him. So yes, all those.

**Knott:** Was the Bork one a particularly intense effort?

**Hernandez:** It was intense in the sense that the lines had been drawn, and the fight became much bigger than Bork. With the others, it was still one-on-one. But Bork, as you know, crystallized the two sides, and that's why the stakes were very high.

**Knott:** What would you say to those who criticized Senator Kennedy and some of the opponents for borking Bork, that somehow the process became perhaps more politicized, less civil, like we were talking about earlier?

**Hernandez:** I would say that that criticism is not merited, and I can compare it to five months ago. When the government is in the control of one party, and there's no transparency, you've got to use whatever process you have to bring issues to the forefront. What is happening today,

March 22, 2007, because the Democrats have control of the Congress, and the hearings that are being held on a lot of activity, I personally have come to the conclusion that it's bad for our democracy to have one party control all for a long period of time.

**Knott:** Either party?

**Hernandez:** Either party. I think that if there's a lesson to be learned, it is that power corrupts and absolute power for a prolonged period of time absolutely corrupts. You lose your sense of accountability. You lose your sense of checks and balance, and the excesses continue because you think you're untouchable. The firing of the—these are Republican U.S. attorneys, mind you; they're not the bastions of liberalism.

**Knott:** Do you have any particular personal anecdote that really stands out for you in terms of your relationship with Senator Kennedy?

**Hernandez:** Yes.

**Knott:** Great. I love it when people say yes to that question.

**Hernandez:** We were going to Mexico, and you know that—

**Knott:** With the Senator?

**Hernandez:** Yes. Of course, trying for him to practice Spanish—as you know, he didn't do too well in Spanish at school, and he's horrible. That's not his forte, languages. I remember trying to give him lessons, and him getting so frustrated that he couldn't get just a couple of words out. And I remember that it got to the point where we just gave up. We were laughing, I mean hysterically laughing, at how he tortured the words. *[laughter]* I vividly remember, and he was trying so hard. We were just like, forget it.

That I remember, and he was a good trooper because when you're trying so hard and then you get pissed off because everybody's making fun of you, but you're still a good trooper. Here we're laughing with him and laughing at him, and he still retains that sense of humor. But that was my thing. I said, "Teddy, how can you talk to me about my accent? Look at yours." He laughed.

That's the other thing, he can tell stories. Oh, and this is another one. We were going to the meeting on the Profile in Courage award, and traditionally, we go to dinner together beforehand. One of his favorite spots in Boston is Anthony's on the pier.

**Knott:** Oh sure, yes. Anthony's Pier 4.

**Hernandez:** And you know they have the little room. There was John and Paul and Ted and [Theodore] Sorensen and [Charles] Daly; eight in the group. And we're all going to eat lobster. So there was a contest to see if I could out-eat Culver in the lobster department.

**Knott:** Not good. You did? Wow.

**Hernandez:** Ted couldn't believe it. At that time, I was skinnier than I am, because now I'm chunky. He couldn't believe it.

**Knott:** Wow, that's impressive.

**Hernandez:** But the thing is that it was the collegiality, the friendship of this group of people. Particularly the Kennedys have had such a—just such a life, the tragedies. And yet their ability to maintain, to me, is the most inspiration.

**Knott:** Sort of a positive outlook on life and a zest for life.

**Hernandez:** Positive, but also their sense of giving, their sense of contributing. All of them, most of them, could have picked an entirely different life. They didn't need to, but they chose that way. For that, I'm grateful. I'm very grateful because very few people get to be on the inside and see it from the inside, and it's very different. And I know that I've been blessed to be one of those people who have seen it from the inside.

**Knott:** That's great. He's still going at it; he just turned 75 years old.

**Hernandez:** I know, and he had a party in February. In fact, I couldn't come. That's the other thing. For special occasions, Vicki [Kennedy] and—they send out invitations to come to special events, like his birthday. Seventy-five? I thought it was 72. But he's still at it. His battle with losing weight, his battle with whatever, but he still keeps going.

**Knott:** He does. Well, thank you very much.

**Hernandez:** It's a pleasure. This has been fun.

**Knott:** I enjoyed it immensely.

**Hernandez:** I hadn't thought about some of this stuff in years.

**Knott:** We're very grateful.

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