EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH BARBARA LAHAGE

May 8, 2008
Hull, Massachusetts

Interviewer

Janet Heininger

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TRANSCRIPT

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Heininger: This is an interview with Barbara Lahage, on Thursday, May 8th, in Hull, Massachusetts. Let's start at the beginning. Tell me how you first met Edward Kennedy.

Lahage: I was working for Senator Benjamin Smith. That was my first job, and it started in '61.

Heininger: How did you get the job?

Lahage: In the summer of 1960 I had been an intern for the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor - Congress of Industrial Organizations], and when I graduated, they asked me to come to work for six or seven weeks to temporarily replace someone who was out ill, and they said, "You can look around and take a job while you do this." I had written a letter to Ben Smith, who was the Democratic Senator from Massachusetts, and hadn't gotten an answer. So when I arrived in Washington, I went up to the office, and as only a 21-year-old can say, I said, "I wrote the Senator, and I didn't get an answer." [*laughter*] You can imagine.

Heininger: Oh, yes.

Lahage: Anyway, the administrative assistant came out. He must have been in a good mood, and we chatted for a couple of hours, and then he took me to meet Ben Smith. I said, "I couldn't possibly begin working right away because I have a commitment." Anyhow, at the end of the six weeks, I came to work for Ben Smith. When I left, on the day of the interview, the secretary gave me the letter that was supposed to be mailed to me that day, which read "Thank you for writing, but we have no vacancies" letter. In spite of that I was hired. It's just one of those things—the timing or some whim. Of course it was wonderful, and they were very good to me. They, in effect, trained me, had me doing a little of everything in the office. As people would go on vacation, I would move from job to job in the office.

Heininger: This was in '62?

Lahage: Sixty-one and '62. As the Kennedy campaign started to rev up, of course Ben Smith was very supportive, and all of us were to be very supportive and helpful. In that campaign, I dealt with the campaign people on what we would call "case things." When people would have problems, I would tell them where should they go for assistance and how things should be done. When the Senate adjourned for the summer, Ben Smith sent me up to the campaign to work for the last month or so. When the campaign was over, Kennedy's office hired me, and I went back to Washington.

Heininger: Who was working in the office at that point? When he first came to the Senate, you had to have been one of the first people hired.

Lahage: Right.

Heininger: Who else did he have there?

Lahage: I think the staff was, I would say, about 12 or 14.

Heininger: Wow, that many?

Lahage: In the Kennedy Washington office. I could only come up with 12, but I'll go back to it. Three or four of those people had worked for Ben Smith: the administrative assistant, Joe McIntyre, who is dead. He stayed on and his secretary stayed on. The caseworker, Margaret Stalcup, stayed on, and she stayed on for a long time—I think maybe until '67 or '68. Joe McIntyre and Margaret Stalcup had—well, Joe McIntyre, for sure, had worked for David I. Walsh, who was an old-time politician from Clinton, Massachusetts. McIntyre had been around the Senate a very long time. Margaret Stalcup had worked in the Senate for a long time as a caseworker. Bill Evans and Diane Luce came down from the campaign. Diane worked for Bill, and Bill Evans was another administrative assistant, executive assistant, and he had done that sort of thing in the campaign, political things. Barbara Souliotis was the scheduler. Mary Jane Duris was Senator Kennedy's personal secretary.

In the legislative section, John Culver was the legislative assistant, and I think Terri Haddad came shortly after, during that first round of things. I don't think Milton Gwirtzman was on the staff then, but he was in and out of things. I think that was it initially. Jerry Marsh came within that first year. He also was a legislative assistant. He and Culver and the Senator all knew each other, from Harvard. Anne Strauss came in '63. I'd been to college with her, and I had run into her in the street, she was looking for a job, and I'm sure she told you the story about that. Anyway, I told Joe McIntyre, and she was hired. Sarah Milam came within, I think, that first year, but part-time, I think.

Mary Grimmel or someone else worked in the robo room, on the mail. I think that's it in the Washington office. No, there was a receptionist. Diane Stoddard was there for a very short time, and then Louise Stapleton became the receptionist. I think Mary Scarinci, who had worked for Ben Smith, was there part of the time, but she went back to the Boston office. I think that's it.

Heininger: A small staff.

Lahage: Yes.

Heininger: What were your first impressions of the Senator?

Lahage: Very good, because the atmosphere was very collegial. For one thing, there wasn't that much of an age difference. We were all pretty young, including Senator Kennedy. He was very open. There was easy access. He was inclusive in terms of social things. You had a feeling that we were a band of folks working together to do good things. If we leave out some of the old timers who had come with Ben Smith, those three people, for the rest of us, there was a very

strong personal commitment, I think, to Senator Kennedy and to the possibilities that we could do anything. I mention that because I think that's in stark contrast to the way a lot of things are now, in terms of people who work in politics. I don't think I'm alone in that feeling about the change. Of course it was exciting.

The Senate, as you know, was very different then. It was still a Lyndon Johnson-type Senate of the '50s, with seniority dominant. You got things done through personal relationships. The Senator understood that—the Senator was about keeping a low profile, and that was transmitted implicitly to the staff. He developed strong personal relationships. For example, he had a good relationship with Senator [James] Eastland, and I understood the importance of that relationship because one of the things I was doing was immigration work. That was an important relationship. The Senate was much less ideological, it seems to me, so it was possible to do things on a bipartisan basis. There were moderate Republicans then, such as [Jacob] Javits and people like that, so it was possible to get some things done in a low-key, quiet way, by building individual relationships.

Because of the campaign slogan, "He can do more for Massachusetts," expectations were high. One brother was President, and another brother was Attorney General. So there was a contradiction between a low profile, getting to know the Senate as a new member, and the idea of getting things done. Because of that, a lot of the focus was on local issues, constituent services, getting down into the weeds of getting things done for Massachusetts and its constituents.

While I didn't do any major legislation in that early period, '62 to '64, I was involved, because of the immigration work, in some of the early immigration hearings, because that was one of the Senator's first subcommittees. I also did legislative mail—a ladies' job, of course—so I was aware of major legislative issues. The immigration stuff was an interesting area to work on. I've been thinking about it. Kennedy carried with him the tradition that came from his family, which we all know about, about immigration. With that came a keen awareness of what happened to immigrants in terms of discrimination and an understanding of the kinds of tools that can be used, tools that seem okay on the surface but that really are mechanisms to discriminate against classes, groups of people. The immigration law was terrible at that point. The law still operated on the national quota system, which was discriminatory, no doubt about that. It was a bad law that resulted in bad regulations. There was very little flexibility in that law, it was very rigid, so it caused unnecessary hardships. It was important to help individuals, but it also was important to identify patterns and to make recommendations about changes to improve regulations and the law. I know you have clearly gotten the idea from Kennedy about his commitment to equity and fair play, these ideas permeate a lot of things. I think that same sense carries into the civil rights area. The literacy test, for example, sounds fine, but what is it for? To keep people out.

I'm not sure that this was true of other Senate offices during that time, but I think Kennedy gave his staff responsibility and authority. I hate the phrase, but he empowered the staff. You felt that you could go off and do something, and you felt that you were expected to accomplish something, whatever it was, small or large, and that it was possible actually to do something. Believe me, you didn't always achieve what you thought you were going to achieve.

It also was a time, I think, of trying to integrate the work and the views of people like McIntyre and Margaret Stalcup and Peggy [Margaret Corcoran], into the more relaxed, open style of the staff, the people who came down with Kennedy.

Heininger: Did they fit? Were they comfortable with that kind of approach, the people who had come from Ben Smith? I mean, if they had been around the Senate for a long time, had they developed ways of doing things that were different from how Kennedy ran his office?

Lahage: I think so. It didn't seem to me to be a serious problem, because of what the two principals who came from Ben Smith's office did. Margaret had been a caseworker for I don't know how long, decades I think, and she knew how to do that. She might have been less likely to push the envelope. On the one hand, she was very effective because she had established relationships throughout the government. You know how that works: you develop those personal relationships, and after 20 years you're less likely to call up and say, "Yes, I know that's what the reg is, but could you make Jane a general?" or whatever. I don't think they expected that from her.

Joe McIntyre was a political pro in terms of the Senate, he understood who Bobby Baker was in terms of how you get useful personal relationships off the ground. He seemed to me to be a wise old fox, and I don't think the "new guys" bothered him. I think there were tensions between him and another person who was in a similar role. That's natural, but I think they worked that out.

I left in '64. I was trying to figure out what I was doing there, so I told Kennedy, probably in the winter, that I was going to graduate school and that I would leave in the fall of '64. But I had an accident in May of '64 and came back to Boston, and I didn't go back until '66.

Heininger: What was your official title at that point?

Lahage: I was "clerk," like everybody. On the Senate payroll, I would be listed as a clerk. I didn't have a title.

Heininger: How did they define your responsibilities?

Lahage: My responsibilities were divided into two areas in 1962. I was supposed to work in the legislative section, but in the beginning period, I was still doing the immigration work along with some legislative mail and some odd projects. back in the legislative part.

Heininger: What kind of jobs did women have in the Senate that you entered in '62?

Lahage: Women had independent, substantive responsibilities that in hindsight we would call "professional responsibilities," mainly through casework. When I was hired to work for Ben Smith, there had been a woman with a similar educational background to mine. She had just left, so I guess they had an idea that women could do things other than strictly secretarial work and casework. Also in Ben Smith's office was a woman who did legislative mail. I'm not sure whether that was a common thing. This woman had been in the Navy, in the Legislative Affairs office. Maybe that's why she was doing legislative mail. It seemed to me that there were traditional secretaries, there were caseworkers, and there were some women who did legislative mail. It was assumed that all women typed. Katie Gibbs had a six-week secretarial program.

When you graduated from college, that's what you signed up for. We tried to get typing classes at Mount Holyoke, not as a curriculum thing but just to learn how to type, and we were told, "This isn't a trade school." So that was a bit of a disconnect.

I went for an interview in the Senate personnel office when I first went down there, and I said, "No, I can't type. I can't take shorthand." "Well, we have an opening for a file clerk, but you have no experience with that." It was hard, but the assumption was that you could type. I couldn't type.

Heininger: Did you learn to type?

Lahage: I learned how to type my own stuff, and I learned to how to take dictation into the typewriter if the person dictated slowly, because I could look at the keys. So I learned how to type, but I wasn't great at it.

Heininger: Did you deliberately not learn to type well?

Lahage: It could have been a little passive-aggressive. I didn't realize this until I was thinking about this interview, but that internship at the AFL-CIO was a powerful influence in my life. When I was there, the assumption wasn't that I was going to do secretarial work. They took me around, they gave me projects to do I didn't mind typing my own things, but it didn't occur to me that anybody would say, "You have to go learn to type." I signed up for the Katie Gibbs course, but fortunately or unfortunately, I didn't take it. I have a good friend who was an intern when I was, and she was with [Leverett] Saltonstall, and she was hired by Saltonstall when we graduated, on the condition that she take shorthand courses.

Heininger: You had graduated from one of the best colleges in the country. You had a fine education.

Lahage: And I had done stuff at the AFL-CIO.

Heininger: Your work experience at that point was that horizons didn't have to be limited for women. They didn't have to be limited to secretarial work. The Senate must have come as a bit of a shock.

Lahage: There was a lot of pulling and tugging, but it was a transition time. I remember, in the Kennedy office, one legislative assistant saying to me, "So and so and I don't type our own letters. We shouldn't expect you to." The other legislative assistant said to me, "If you learn how to type, you can come back to the legislative section to work." So it wasn't clear.

Heininger: Well, the men didn't know what to do.

Lahage: Right. I'm pretty sure that Anne was the second college graduate to be hired. I said to Joe McIntyre, "I have a friend. We were at Mount Holyoke. She majored in economics. She speaks French and German fluently. She types a billion words a minute, and she taught herself shorthand." As soon as he heard typing and shorthand, he said, "Have her come in for an interview."

Heininger: It sounds like the office was a mix of the old-style Senate, in which there simply weren't women in professional positions. I mean, the Senate was, in many ways, a very southern institution, certainly southern dominated, with all the chairmen being predominantly southern. Yet you came in not just with a college degree, but with a college degree from Mount Holyoke, with experience, at a time in which the world was beginning to change for a member who was young and who had a slightly different approach to the Senate. It's not surprising that you would have thought, *Maybe there are other things I could be doing in the Senate as well.*

Lahage: That was hard, because you're at the hub of all this exciting stuff going on. It's interesting to me that an old-liner like Joe McIntyre hired me and didn't seem to have any particular problem.

Heininger: Did he know what he was getting?

Lahage: I don't know. That's hard to know. Senator Kennedy, I think, was much more amenable to having women do professional work. I'm not saying that early on one would get paid for that or have the title or whatever, but he didn't seem to be put off or concerned by any of that. In fact it seemed to me that there was an assumption, on a task or project basis, that there was nothing unusual about that, more so than with some of the senior staff guys. I don't know why that is, and I don't want to play that psychological game, but I think that's true. Senator Kennedy didn't seem resistant to it, and he treated me—and later on, other women with similar backgrounds—as a person who had brains, who could do substance, who could write, etc.

When you ask, would you have a title and would you get paid? the answer is not necessarily. It's also true, when I came back in '66, when I was full-time again, when I was working on legislative stuff, that there was a definite ceiling. I mean, women didn't get to be the lead on any major legislation at all. Local legislation, maybe, but not if it became a major issue. The argument was made that, well, you had to be a lawyer. But that's just not true. Law school teaches you how to think in a certain way and how to get to the essence of something and how to ask the three key questions in life, but you don't have to go to law school to know how to do that.

Partly it goes to your point about the kind of institution the Senate was. It was hard for men to envision a woman doing the strategic legislative planning and negotiating the nitty-gritty. I think that men didn't see women that way. When you think about the substantive work and independent work that women did, that work reflects, I think, men's perception of women. I mean, we write letters. It might be a policy letter, but it's a letter, and there's nothing wrong with that. It's interesting to answer, well, not all of the mail. I mean, you do that. You organize things. You organize information, you distill it, you summarize it, you do fact books, and you do issue books, unending numbers of issue books and fact books. You collect information, you digest it, and you present it. Those are lady skills. There's nothing wrong with them. They're good skills, but I think it fits into the way people perceive us. And casework too, where you help people. You're very organized. Nevertheless, you do some interesting work.

Heininger: It didn't have a representational element to it, where you were acting on the Senator's behalf within the Senate.

Lahage: No. In very few cases, if there were an individual issue that was unusual, you might do something at the level of the Senate committee staff, but as you say, generally no, you didn't go to the floor to represent the Senator on a major issue. While I was there, I'm sure there weren't any women who did that on a regular basis. I think, in some ways, Nance [Lyons] might have done a little bit of that, but on local issues. When Anne Strauss was made the staff director of the National Science Foundation Subcommittee, I think that was the first time that a woman was put in a position that clearly and unequivocally was a Senate professional staff position.

Heininger: It also took her a decade.

Lahage: Yes, it was the mid '70s, and that was the first time. As I say, you got to do interesting stuff and play around the edges, and maybe by then salaries had caught up, but I don't know about that.

Heininger: Did you have to do a lot of filing?

Lahage: No.

Heininger: You got out of the filing.

Lahage: Yes.

Heininger: But there were people who did it?

Lahage: I'm not sure I was in a situation where there was much filing to be done. There weren't file clerks, no, but I had interns. I'm pretty sure that's who did the filing, but that was because I was doing the legislative mail and working for [James] Flug, so I had to have some interns to help.

Heininger: But you didn't start out doing the legislative mail.

Lahage: No. I did when I came back in '66.

Heininger: And the legislative mail, in the early years, was that still considered the domain of men?

Lahage: To some extent. When I came to work for Flug maybe in the spring of '67, the two legislative assistants, he and Dun Gifford—well, I can't speak for Dun, but in the beginning, it took Flug maybe a month or so to realize that it was okay for me to write the robos, that I knew how to do that and I could get it done. They really didn't want to mess with the mail anyway. I had good interns to help with the mail. Over the years, the interns have been very successful, of course, because they were able people.

Heininger: So your interns were only women?

Lahage: I'm trying to think. The first couple were women. In '68, we hired a lot of interns in the office. The assumption was that as staff started to move out into the campaign, more and more of the nitty-gritty work would be taken up by interns. So we hired seniors, third-year law students.

Heininger: It took Anne Strauss quite a while to be allowed to do the mail, though.

Lahage: As an individual job, because even while I was doing that, I had to be there for Flug.

Heininger: What kind of responsibilities did you have working for him?

Lahage: Little things, little projects that he did not want to do, secretarial work for him. He wanted someone, when he would do a memo, to type the memo or speech, but he was off on his own.

I saw Jim Flug a few years ago, when he was back with the Judiciary Committee, and he was introducing me and some other people to some of his staff, young women who were at Harvard Law School. He went to introduce me, and he looked at me and he didn't want to call me a secretary, not just because I couldn't type, but because he didn't know how to describe what I did. So he gave a long explanation of, "Barbara can find anybody in the world." We didn't have cell phones and e-mail in those days, but Flug always had to be in touch, right? And these women looked at him like, oh? He told a long, complicated story about how I could find anybody in the world on the phone.

Heininger: It sounds like you had somewhat of an anomalous position.

Lahage: I did. I was working on a master's degree then. I got it while I was working for Jim, and constitutional law was an area of concentration for me, and he often was in touch with a lawyer who had worked on an important Supreme Court case. Anyway, for some obscure reason, I filed this guy's phone number under the name of the Supreme Court case. Jim couldn't find it, and he got so upset when I told him how obvious it was that that was where it was. They didn't know exactly what to do with you, but they trusted you to do thoughtful things. You could do research, organizing, and you could do some writing, but as I say, even then I think they saw women in a limited role in the Senate.

Heininger: It must have been very frustrating.

Lahage: Well, that's why I left twice.

Heininger: Because your skills were not being fully utilized.

Lahage: I finally realized that this was insane. I saw myself teaching at the college level. I had this vision of Friday afternoon teas. [*laughter*] I thought, *Just go do it; just make the break.* But I learned so much, and I think I made some contribution, not on this grand policy scale but—

Heininger: Did you have a sense of what your Mount Holyoke classmates were doing at that time?

Lahage: Two dear friends came to Washington at the same time I did; one went to work for Senator Saltonstall. She was going through the same stuff, the same kind of work. Another woman, who was my roommate at the time, went to work for Congressman [Hastings] Keith. There was a woman in the Congressman's office who had worked on some local legislative stuff. She got to do more substantive things right off the bat, in addition to doing all the nitty-gritty

stuff like the mail. One woman went to law school. Several went to graduate school directly from there, and several got married.

Heininger: Well, Sandra Day O'Connor said that when she graduated from law school, she couldn't get hired.

Lahage: She was offered a job as a legal secretary. You have to put all of this in the context of the times. I think this had to come from Kennedy. I don't think there was resistance from him to women doing substantive things. I don't think he gave it a lot of thought one way or the other. Frankly, why would he? I think it was unique to that office that you had a chance to do some independent, substantive things. It was a transitional time. A lot of people I graduated with went on to graduate school right away.

Heininger: From what you know, did they find the horizons as restrictive?

Lahage: The ones that I'm thinking of went into jobs like teaching.

Heininger: At the college level?

Lahage: Yes. I don't think I know anyone who came to Washington—I mean, there were people, but people who I knew well—and worked in a large agency, which I'm sure was a completely different experience.

Heininger: I don't think it was easy for women in any place at that point. I mean, historically, clerks were men, until they developed the typewriter. Then women filled those positions and became secretaries. The labor-saving device basically freed up men to do more substantive things.

Lahage: I have to say, when I left in 1970 and went to Clark University, I had a secretary, and she was a *real* secretary. She knew how to type and take shorthand and file and organize. It was wonderful, and I felt guilty and I thought, *No wonder*. It's hard.

Heininger: The next major change historically came with the computer.

Lahage: Yes, and now it's completely different, right?

Heininger: Because once computers came, the functions that secretaries traditionally have filled in most places—the typing and the shorthand and the dictation and the filing and the scheduling—all those could be done by the person who was handling his own computer.

Lahage: Sure. I noticed that in the last years when I was working. I mean, even I can do credible work on a computer. It is quite different.

Heininger: But you had the sense from your experience at the AFL-CIO that there were substantive things that women could do. It's just that in the Senate, by the nature of the beast that it was, roles for women were fairly restrictive, at least in the '60s.

Lahage: Yes. There was one woman in particular who worked in the research department of the AFL-CIO. She was an economist, a young woman, not more than 30, probably younger, who certainly did policy stuff and substantive stuff. I remember her because she was in the legislative department a lot at meetings. There were a couple of women in the legislative department who had worked forever in the labor movement, whose roles might have been a little bit more like the old-timer roles in the Senate, but they had a credibility and an independence that was interesting. The chief lobbyist for David Dubinsky at the ILGWU [International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union] was Evelyn Dubrow, who was certainly an independent lady. They felt, "Here's what you do. Here's how you deal with things. Here's how you do a voting record."

Jack Beidler, who was my immediate boss and who became a mentor, said, "You have to learn about the procedures in the Senate and the House." He used to, in the afternoon, quiz me about sections, and I thought, *Oh, please. This is vexing.* They also had never had an intern from Mount Holyoke, nor any intern who wasn't paid, which was an unusual situation for them. They felt that it was their job to have it be an educational experience. These women independently were doing interesting things, and I assumed that that's what you did: If you learned about something, then you did it.

Heininger: How frustrated were you?

Lahage: It would take a long time. That was the weird thing. I thought, *Well, you have to think about what you want to be doing*, and I thought that I wanted to teach. By '70 I was ready to move on. In '66 I hadn't been around long enough to think I ought to be John Culver. I didn't have any illusions about that. So in terms of what was available to do, it wasn't that frustrating. I did think, *If you're not going to go to law school, what are you doing here?* In '70 I felt that there was a ceiling, and the route even to get there wasn't worth it. But on a day-to-day basis, I did get to do some interesting stuff.

Heininger: Did you interact with people in other Senate offices?

Lahage: Yes.

Heininger: But not on work-related things.

Lahage: On work-related things, I did, yes. I don't know that I can give you examples specifically of this, but I believe, maybe because the nature of the office was that so much was going on and people were doing so much generally, that we all got to do some pretty interesting and independent things that involved working with other offices. I have the sense that things might have been more structured in other offices. I'm trying to think of whether I dealt with other women in other offices. I'm sure I must have, but generally it was with men, I think.

Heininger: Did you want one of the legislative assistant positions?

Lahage: Yes, because I saw the legislative assistants in two tiers rather than in one tier. For example, there were the two principal legislative assistants: Dun Gifford and Jim Flug. I didn't see myself as either of them particularly. In '68 there was a Presidential fellow who was a political scientist with a PhD. He was a wonderful, very smart young man. Right away he got to do legislative stuff. There was another young man who was a law school graduate, bright and all

of that, and he and I had worked on a project in the '64 campaign. He also got to do some legislative stuff right away, and I thought, *Wait a second. That I can do. These things I can do.* The interesting thing was that both of them treated me as if I could do those things, therefore I think that many of the constraints must have been generational. So I thought, *Why aren't I doing that kind of thing all the time?*

Heininger: Any time you get into a situation where certain roles are defined, it becomes very difficult to break out of that role, whatever role you're slotted into at the beginning. Unless there is a very strong sense of upward mobility, it's very difficult to move beyond that. By the time you left in 1970, did you have a sense that there was more upward mobility in other Senate offices, that if there were women coming in as fellows or law school graduates, that they would then be able to do legislative work?

Lahage: No. I don't know if I would have been aware of it, but I certainly didn't have that sense. As I said, I had a sense that Kennedy's office was more open in that regard, not in a structural sense, not in the money, not in going to the house for dinner to meet the policy expert on China, for example. That was for Dun and Jim, the first tier. Generally, in assuming that you did "professional" things, but not how it fit into the structure, per se.

Nance took some major steps in that regard that never occurred to me to take. I wouldn't have had the temperament to take them on. When she came back in '69 or '70, she put her foot down about, "The men don't type their own speeches. Why should I?" kind of thing. When she was given a project, Massachusetts legislation stuff, she assumed that she was going to take it from beginning to end, and she probably did, and I suspect she didn't meet any resistance from the Senator about that. Whether she met resistance from others, I don't know, because I was leaving when she was doing that. I think you'll see that she took that to another level.

Whereas another woman in the office and I, we would write a press release on some aeronautic routing, some plane cancellation of a route in Mass. or something. But we never assumed that if there were a major negotiation in the Senate or with a regulatory agency, that we would be the ones doing it. We saw ourselves as the backup, getting the background. It's probably our fault as much as anybody's. It took a long time for women to—and from the people I know, Nance took that to another level, and when Anne went in and got the NSF [National Science Foundation] Subcommittee, that was a major thing.

Heininger: But from what she said, it was offered to her. It was less her pressing for it than Ellis Mottur leaving.

Lahage: Right.

Heininger: And it was logical for her to be given it.

Lahage: Yes, some of this is temperament. We're getting off. This is not about Senator Kennedy.

Heininger: No, but it's important because it illuminates what the Senate was like in the early years, and this is, in part, what this project is about: what was the Senate like in the early years, and how is it different now, or in the mid to late '70s?

Lahage: Right. Some of this, of course, is temperament and individual expectations. If you look at the Massachusetts case stuff done during this time—not in the Margaret Stalcup years but later on, maybe the ’66 to ’70 period—three or four women did that—bright, well-educated, competent women, although Andy [Vitale] oversaw that because of the political aspects of it. I think they also did community project stuff. I mean, not just “Get my son promoted in the Army,” but things like money for a road in Hull. They did some of that. I’m not sure. I did some of those projects, getting money and appropriations, but I did the routine part of it, such as figuring out what was needed, writing the remarks for the day. And again, unending fact books.

I’m not sure that that operation existed to that extent in other Senate offices, having a room full of people doing it. I don’t know when the money and titles would have caught up, though, because people weren’t coming in that way. I think it’s a lot different if you’re hiring a graduate of Yale Law School to be a counsel on a committee from the beginning. That’s a lot different from saying, “Here’s a woman who is smart enough to do some—” That’s a different thing. What was the rest of the Senate like? You know that better than I.

Heininger: I think you’re describing something that was relatively common throughout the Senate. It was a relatively conservative institution that didn’t provide a lot of opportunities for women. It employed a lot of women but mostly in secretarial-type positions. I think you’re describing something that was very common in that period, that having gotten a good education from a fine school, you recognized that you weren’t getting the opportunities that men, who also got good educations from fine schools, somehow seemed to walk right into—ergo the women’s movement in the early ’70s. Times were changing. The Senate changed slower, but by the time you get to, I’d say, the late ’70s, there were a lot of women. Then by the mid ’80s, there were a lot of women in a lot of senior positions. So when the change came, I think it came relatively quickly. A lot of that is also about the extent of turnover among the Senators too.

Lahage: At least when I was there, the Senator’s office, being small, the kinds of things that staff, all staff, had to do in Kennedy’s office were broader or deeper than many other offices. Not the leadership offices or anything like that, but staffs were tiny in a lot of offices, a legislative assistant, an administrative assistant, and a couple of secretaries maybe, a receptionist, a caseworker maybe. Maybe that was it. Maybe guys did cases, I don’t know.

Heininger: There also was a huge proliferation of Senate staffers in the 1970s.

Lahage: Oh, was that the time?

Heininger: The numbers go like this, and it’s in part that the kinds of issues that the Senate is dealing with all of a sudden demand more extensive knowledge and more people to do the work. The workload grew, the number of staff grew, and the number of opportunities for women grew too.

Lahage: It was interesting to me, when I was at the legislative department of the AFL-CIO, a lot of what went on in that department was getting information for the members of Congress and the Senators, doing the research. Of course it had a point of view, but it also had to be credible.

Heininger: Right.

Lahage: It couldn't be just fluff. These people had credibility when they went to the Hill and were talking about the intricacies of legislation or what some amendment might bring. They were experts. They had a point of view, but they were experts. There was a sense, at least with the people there with whom I worked directly, that you didn't burn people. You didn't make it up, because you had to maintain your credibility, because the next week you'd have some other thing to go back to. That was fascinating to me.

I had assumed that the Senator's offices had the expertise. But certainly the people in the Kennedy office, even in the early days—well, they weren't experts, let's say, on the draft, but they knew who the experts on the draft were and how to pull them in and how to use that information and translate that for the Senator. I suppose that even in the '66 to '70 period, that might have been.

Heininger: No, but I don't think he got as many fellows and things in there. Kennedy has a long history of using fellows and interns, and of expanding the scope of what the staff would do, by drawing on more people beyond who was on the Senate payroll. He's well known for that. And the thing is, fellows and interns, even if you're not paying them, they're not free.

Lahage: No.

Heininger: You have to train them, and that requires your staff time.

Lahage: Right. That was fun, that first year when I was responsible for interns, because they sure were good. They've gone on to do good things too.

Heininger: What were the fact books?

Lahage: On the case side, if the Senator were going to Chicopee, you would write up everything of interest that was happening in Chicopee: what the problems were, what was being done to help them, things of interest, grant programs, actions the Senator was taking, how some national stuff would relate to them specifically—of course, who the players were. There's a wonderful part in a [David] Mamet play about a fact book, and I don't know if anybody who didn't work in politics could understand it. Something is omitted from the fact book, somebody's name, the wife of the mayor or something. It's hilarious. So it was all that, the local stuff for the trip. There also were issue fact books, but it was the same process: putting together relevant information, articles, statements from people, who the experts were, what the major issues were, that sort of thing.

In the '68 campaign, the person who was the fellow, and I, would identify the local issues in a primary state and then write up the related national legislation or whatever related to that. Even in '64, in that campaign, when the Senator was in the hospital, I worked with a student from Harvard on the Howard Whitmore fact book. I have no idea why they needed a Howard Whitmore—I mean, he was the opponent, so we did it—who he was and what positions he had taken and arguments against him. I don't remember in detail. We must have given it to somebody, surrogates probably, who were going around.

Heininger: Somebody used it.

Lahage: So "fact books" involve collecting information and synthesizing it and writing it up in a way that would be useful for the Senator.

Heininger: Were they long?

Lahage: They tended to be long. It depended on what it was for.

Heininger: Like for a local visit?

Lahage: Oh, no. I mean, each town might be—if it were Boston, it would be—

Heininger: Huge.

Lahage: That's a skill I've used all my life. In every other job, at some point or other, whenever something was going on, I would always do that—they usually call them "briefing books" now—so that the boss would have all of the information on whatever it was you were doing.

Heininger: It's interesting that you were doing them for local events. When he had, say, a speaking engagement in some town, that must have made him extremely well briefed.

Lahage: Oh, sure.

Heininger: Do you have a sense that these were being done in other Senate offices?

Lahage: I don't know. But when I went to Clark University to work for Glenn Ferguson, I did them for him. He didn't ask me, but I assumed that's what you did for the person who was—

Heininger: Did you get any response to them when you went to another job and then continued to do something similar?

Lahage: Oh, they loved them.

Heininger: I don't know that this is necessarily standard. I can't think of them having been done in [Robert] Byrd's office.

Lahage: Well, he probably knew everything.

Heininger: Right. And during this time that you're talking about with Kennedy, he was young. He certainly has retained a predilection for briefing books.

Heininger: I cannot imagine, in any area—administrative, regulatory, legislative, whatever—Kennedy not being briefed extensively, personally, and in writing.

Lahage: I can tell you—and there was some laughter about this—about the fact books for the trips, if somebody's name was omitted or something, you knew about that. Fortunately, as I'm sure has come through these interviews, Senator Kennedy has an amazing ability to laugh at himself and to see the humor in things, so that even at the most colossal mess-up, although he might be upset about it, he can be pretty funny about it. It tends to make you not forget the error, though. You tend to try not to do it twice.

Heininger: That's how you get people to not do it twice.

Lahage: Right. See, I can't imagine doing it any other way.

Heininger: It's a logical thing to do. Not all people have requirements to get information in the same way. He likes things in a written form—in a very logical, distilled, comprehensive, completely accurate form. My guess, not knowing, is that there were other Senators to whom that never would have occurred, because they don't think that way.

Lahage: Right.

Heininger: But I can easily see the utility, particularly for speaking engagements early in his career when he didn't necessarily know all these towns like the back of his hand, that it must have been an incredibly strong educational tool for him.

Lahage: I think it also relates to how he sees doing his business, though, and to what he thinks is the best way to relate to his constituents, to the political leadership, to the legislative branch. I think that's the way he approaches things.

Heininger: He wants to know everything about everyone and everything.

Lahage: That's what I meant about this assumption being built in from the beginning, about your ability to get information, to synthesize it, to communicate it, to use it for some other thing, to be grounded in information. That's what made it not as frustrating as some people might have found working in the Senate in those early days, because you were doing these things, and there was some context to what you were doing. You weren't writing the legislation, but not much major legislation was going on in the early days. I think that's what made it an interesting place to work.

Heininger: You went to Clark University, and you continued this practice, and you said that you assumed that that's how things were done and that the bosses were grateful, but did you have a sense that things had been done like that before? My point is that not everybody does things like that.

Lahage: I guess not.

Heininger: That's a very logical, systematic, organized, and comprehensive way of approaching things.

Lahage: It makes things easy.

Heininger: It does. I don't think that's the way everybody does things.

Lahage: It's fun and it's interesting to do. Then people like Jim, the legislative assistant, went over all that stuff. He would write up a cover memo that might raise some questions, and it was fascinating to watch the mind of a good thinker like that go through the issues and the legislative issues.

Heininger: Did you work on One Man, One Vote?

Lahage: That's when I started. That was my first day working for him, the day it was on the floor.

Heininger: What was your relationship with Jim like?

Lahage: It was a good relationship. He was easy to work for in some ways. When he was about to do something, you had to drop everything and do it, and that sometimes would be at the end of the day or whatever. In that sense it could be frustrating, but he's a nice person. There weren't many demands like that, so most of the time I was doing legislative mail. But when there was a need for typing or finding someone, I did it.

Heininger: When you wrote an answer to a piece of mail, did you have to clear the text or the substance of the letter with anybody, or could you send it out under your own authority?

Lahage: There were a few things that I would clear, especially in the beginning, a robo that I might have done. Flug would read it. Or if there was something I had a doubt about, I would have him read it, but generally I did it myself. In the beginning, Flug wanted to look not at everything, but at any robos in his area, or if it was a technical, complicated answer. But pretty soon he trusted me to do that. Of course not everything was big, long, and involved, as you know. If it were something that was never going to see the light of day, it was, like, "Thank you for your views. Here's Senator Kennedy's 15-point program." A lot of it was routine stuff when you got down to the basics, but you needed help with the sheer volume of mail, which is why those interns were invaluable. It couldn't have been done without them.

Heininger: Did Kennedy care about the mail?

Lahage: I don't know. I don't think so. There were times when you would give some mail to him after it was done, certainly if you knew it was a friend or whatever, but also if it was from an expert on something or other. You might just give it to the Senator before it went out or something like that. But generally, for the bulk of the mail, I don't think so. I remember a prominent scientist at Clark who was excited because he had a personal letter from Senator Kennedy about the space program, and I thought, *God bless you.* It was a very good letter, as a matter of fact. So you see, people always see themselves as the center.

Heininger: Did you get bored with the mail?

Lahage: Yes. [*chuckles*] It was fun to do a new thing on a major issue, but 99 percent of the mail, or at least 80 percent—I don't know what percent of the mail—is mass-mailing drives. You have a few from interesting people or from a new area or something, but just a tiny amount of that. Most of it, even though it's a huge volume, is just routine, and so of course it gets boring.

Heininger: Are most of those handled with the robo letters?

Lahage: The routine stuff? Oh, yes. But you could even personalize those robo letters.

Heininger: On the other letters that required answers, ones that maybe didn't rise to the level of needing a robo letter, did you develop a template, in essence, that you could use for people who would write in about the same issue?

Lahage: Yes. We also did a letter where you would individualize the first paragraph, and that solved 90 percent of the problems, sped up the process entirely. The last two paragraphs were standard. There were two versions, maybe three, of those last two paragraphs, and then the individualized first paragraph. Fortunately people like Mary Grimmel—and I think she had one other person as time went on—were down in that room. We would write the first paragraph in handwriting, and she would put it all together.

I would be interested to know—I don't know how you would do this exactly—the difference now with e-mail, if there is a difference. I mean, e-mail somehow seems to me to be so much easier. I wonder if it falls into different patterns.

Heininger: Was it considered a step up to be allowed to do the mail?

Lahage: I don't think so, not when I was there, because I also had to work for Flug. Anne was the first person who did only the mail, so that was seen as its own job.

Heininger: You were illuminating what the times were like.

Lahage: It was interesting. When I was teaching, I realized how difficult it is to inform people in a serious way about what it was like, especially in political science. There was a period when I started teaching, when so much was shifting to quantitative analysis, the people coming out of that background, they miss a lot. It must have been fascinating to work for Byrd. Talk about knowing how it works.

Heininger: It was, but again, it was a different time. This has been fascinating. This is a very valuable contribution to the oral history.

Lahage: I hope so.

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