Knott: We usually begin interviews by talking a little bit about the ground rules. In about three months or so, Senator Culver, you should be receiving a transcript of this session and you are free to make any changes that you wish. You may delete certain material, if you have second thoughts about it, or you may add material, if you’d like, but you control the transcript. Once you clear it, it returns to the Miller Center to the Kennedy Project, and the entire materials will be released about six years from now. They will be housed at the Miller Center at the University of Virginia and also at the Edward M. Kennedy Center for the Study of the United States Senate in Boston.

Culver: Site to be determined.

Knott: Site to be determined, correct. But what you say in this room today will stay in this room. And your cleared transcript, after you’ve made any changes that you like, is the official record of what happened today. Okay?

Culver: Fine.

Knott: Why don’t we go around the table and have everybody introduce themselves so that the transcriber has a sense of whose voice is who. My name is Stephen Knott and I’m an Associate Professor at the Miller Center of Public Affairs.

Martin: My name is Paul Martin. I’m currently in the Politics Department at the University of Virginia, but next year I’ll be joining Stephen at the Miller Center.

Lindskog: I’m Gregg Lindskog and I’m a doctoral candidate at the University of Virginia.

Knott: Gregg is the guy who prepared your briefing book, and he’s the world’s foremost expert on John Culver.

Culver: [laughs] You have my sympathies.

Knott: Well, Senator, we thought perhaps the best way to start, and we know you’ve answered this question before in another oral history interview at the Kennedy Library, but could you just tell us how you first met Senator Edward Kennedy?
Culver: We met in the fall of 1950, when we both entered Harvard and were on the freshman football team. That was our first occasion to meet.

Knott: You had come from a fairly conservative Republican family as a child, is that correct.

Culver: Yes. My father, William Culver, was a [Robert] Taft delegate with the Iowa delegation to the Republican National Convention in 1952. My grandfather, Chester Culver, was head of the Employers Association of Detroit, Michigan, for many years including the period of the sit-down labor strikes in the city’s industrial history, and he was a very strong conservative. I was asked August 10th, 1954, upon my graduation the previous June from Harvard, to drive Herbert Hoover to his 80th birthday celebration at his birthplace in West Branch, Iowa. That was the first in a series of annual birthday celebrations for Hoover and prior to the construction of the now Hoover Library there. A neighbor in Cedar Rapids, Harrison Spangler, a former head of the Republican Party, called my father and asked if I would drive them to the Hoover Library. So my family background was Republican.

Knott: Do you have any particular recollections of that drive with President Hoover?

Culver: The only thing I recall was Hoover saying that he thought the establishment of the State of Israel was the result of U.S. [United States] political and media pressures, and would be a source of strife and war for as far as the eye can see.

Knott: You said you met Edward Kennedy on the football field at Harvard. Any initial impressions that you can recall?

Culver: Not particularly. However, I do remember one occasion when his father came to watch practice wearing a beret, and he was pointed out to me, as Ambassador [Joseph P. Sr.] Kennedy. I was not familiar with his public career at that time. I did get to know him years later, but that was my first impression.

Knott: What kind of a football player was Ted Kennedy?

Culver: He was very tenacious and tough. He really, as evidenced in his professional career, worked harder than anybody else. He didn’t have the most athletic gifts, was not very fast, but was very good defensively and he worked hard on his weaknesses. For example he worked with another player after practice, and with no pads, to improve his tackling, which none of the rest of us did.

Knott: Was there an instant rapport between the two of you, or did it sort of take a little time?

Culver: We didn’t live in the same dorm. Everybody that freshman year lived in these dormitories, and your life was pretty well limited to the dorm you were in and the people in your immediate area. We all ate together at the Union, but I was not really particularly close to him then, but I liked him. In the Spring he had that incident and left school. So that first year at Harvard I didn’t have all that much contact with him.
Knott: When would you say your relationship sort of cemented?

Culver: I remember that in 1952, I took a trip to Europe with another student, and Ted and I met up in Paris when he was in the military. We spent a day or two together then. He got the weekend off and we arranged to get together. Then the summer of ’53 he came back to summer school, and I was in summer school also in that summer of ’53.

Knott: That’s correct.

Culver: I did go to Hyannis in the spring of ’51. Ted invited a group of us down, and that’s when the Ambassador was there and he had a steak fry for us. Jack Kennedy drove up in a car and we saw him go in the house. We were out on the lawn in front of the house. He opened the window and yelled, “Culver’s a bum.” I’d never met Jack Kennedy in my life, but he had asked somebody on the staff, “Who’s out there with Teddy playing football?” So then he came out and played with us. With his back, he couldn’t do anything but play quarterback for both sides, and that was the first time I met him. Then it was a month or so later, that the incident in freshman year happened.

I don’t know when I heard about that because everybody was taking exams and then leaving. Then the next time I saw him would have been the summer of ’52, when we got together in Paris. Then we were both going to summer school in ’53. And that summer I went down to Hyannisport with him and we went sailing in the Nantucket Regatta. The description of that trip is in that other oral history.

Knott: Just to back up bit, had you gone to Harvard for the purpose of majoring in government? Was this something that you wanted a career in?

Culver: I’d been elected to Boy’s State in high school and I enjoyed that. I was elected Secretary of State by eight votes. Part of the program was to go down and spend the day with your counterpart in the state capitol in Des Moines. Ironically, that’s the office my son now occupies [laughs], same office. When I went there in the summer of 1949, the occupant was a Republican named Melvin Synhorst. He’d been elected for the first time in ’48, I believe, and when I left office in 1981, he was still Secretary of State [laughs]. I had some interest in that office when my son decided to run.

When I went to Harvard I was interested in politics a little bit, and also maybe some foreign service. I majored in government. In my senior year, I wrote my honor’s thesis on reapportionment of the Iowa Legislature. I wanted to know more about the state politically.

Lindskog: How much of your friendship had to do with mutual interests in politics, especially for you, a growing mutual interest? Did you talk about politics a lot?

Culver: Yes, but probably talked more about football. But I do remember, when Jack Kennedy ran in the fall of ’52 against [Henry Cabot Jr.] Lodge for the U.S. Senate, I followed the race. When I graduated in June, Ted and I got in the car and drove down to Washington.
Jack and Jackie had been married in ’53, and we stayed with them at their house in Georgetown. We went to the Army-[Joseph R.] McCarthy hearings in the Senate and talked to Bobby [Robert Kennedy], who was on the committee staff. While I was studying at Cambridge University in England in ’54-’55, Ted came to visit me. When I was in the Marine Corps in ’56, I watched the Convention. There was excitement about Jack Kennedy’s performance as a Vice Presidential prospect.

Moving away from my Republican background was an evolutionary development. Studying government and politics, I found myself more and more philosophically comfortable with the history, the personalities, and the programs of the Democratic Party.

**Knott:** What did your father think of your political conversion?

**Culver:** Unfortunately he got cancer when I was in law school. He knew of my friendship with Ted. When he was dying in the summer of 1960, Jack Kennedy came to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in August. I remember talking to my father. He suffered a great deal and he was only 57 years old. I spent time with him and we talked about the election. He died September 1st, 1960. He told me that he wasn’t at all sure that if he had an opportunity to vote, he wouldn’t vote for John Kennedy. It was quite remarkable for him because he was a very strong conservative Republican.

We also talked about the fellow that I ran against for Congress four years later and defeated, Republican [James] Bromwell. He had been in office two terms when I ran against him, so he was running for the first time in 1960. He was from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, our hometown, and I asked my dad about him. He said, “Well, if he doesn’t take care of the public business any better than he takes care of his private law business, he’s not going to be very successful.” He apparently had retained him as a lawyer and wasn’t at all satisfied with his performance.

**Knott:** You mentioned Senator Edward Kennedy’s visit to you in England when you were at Cambridge. What did the two of you do during that visit? Any particular recollections that stand out?

**Culver:** Yes. I was asked to make a toast this past summer on the 50th reunion of that Cambridge class. My toast referenced Kennedy’s visit and it’s a true story. I remember in those days they locked the gates at Cambridge and Oxford at eleven o’clock or midnight, and you had to pay a small fine if you were late, or climb in over the walls. The walls had spikes and broken glass on top, so you had to find a place where you knew you could make it over, and it was quite routine. But I remember when Ted Kennedy came, he had skis and bags. He’d just come from skiing in Austria or Switzerland or some place. And we’re climbing in over these icy walls to get into Emanuel College, into my rooms. I was fortunate enough to have the Lionel de Jersey Harvard Scholarship—they select one student every graduating class at Harvard to live in John Harvard’s rooms.

In those days you could have a college servant serve dinner in your room for a special occasion. There was no heat in the room except a small coal fire. My suite had three rooms. Coal ration once a week, and no other heat, and no indoor plumbing at all. The bathrooms were 50 yards away. We had a table set up in front of the fireplace for the two of us.
My rooms were on the second floor. You had to go up one flight of stairs to get there. There was no door on the ground level entrance, so this wind would just come sailing up the stairs. It was a bitter cold night and no heat anywhere, and every now and then the college servant would appear with another course, kind of obviously shaking a little himself. Finally, Kennedy got curious, and he gets up and walks over and opens the door of my suite and looks out, and here, huddled on the small landing is this servant with his trays of food that he’d hauled over from the kitchen. This poor devil was shaking like a leaf from the cold. Kennedy’s never let me forget it. I said at the reunion that it was then that he found his commitment to the downtrodden and the poor [laughs], and has fought for them ever since.

**Lindskog:** Was it obvious even then that Senator Kennedy was going to pursue a career in politics?

**Culver:** I think it probably was. I don’t remember any specific confirmation of that. He majored in government. We had the same tutor at Harvard, Fred Holborn, who’s now at SAIS [School of Advanced International Studies], and he was inspiring. Holborn went to work for Jack Kennedy in the Senate after the ’58 election, and later in the White House. He stayed there briefly with Lyndon Johnson.

**Knott:** You said you had talked about running yourself, going back to Iowa and running for Congress?

**Culver:** Yes. I don’t know how early on in our time together in college that had materialized, but certainly by my senior year, I was thinking about that. Either foreign service or politics.

**Knott:** You came from two very different backgrounds, your background and Edward Kennedy’s background. Was he interested in learning about Iowa and the kind of life that you had, which was so different from the life that he would have had growing up in New York and Massachusetts, and do you recall a certain curiosity about your state or your background and your family life?

**Culver:** I don’t remember much along those lines. I know I wanted to have a roommate from the East, just to have the experience. I did have a private school roommate for four years, who tragically died in a Marine Corps training accident. He was an aviator. But I don’t remember anything along those lines with Ted.

**Martin:** James McGregor Burns wrote in one of his books that he thought that sports for the Kennedy family was a training ground for politics, and I was curious, with you being on the football team with Edward Kennedy, if you saw any connections that might have helped him in politics. Were there conversations about politics after practice?

**Culver:** I do share McGregor Burns’ thought. You never finish second or whatever. I think they admired athletic achievement. They were very competitive athletically within the family, and excelling at athletic efforts of various kinds. Jack, because of his back problems, it was in

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1 Editor’s note: Holborn died 6/3/05 at age 76
swimming that he could really do well. Bobby was small but tough, very gritty and determined and courageous.

Ted really had the physical size to be a more serious football player, but certainly in touch football we played with Bobby and Dave Hackett, and you couldn’t get more ferociously competitive games. You’d always end up falling into the rose bushes and scratching your body and spraining an ankle or getting a black eye. It was always just no holds barred. Bobby used to pride himself out there at Hickory Hill. I remember Bobby getting Johnny Unitas and a couple of these great football players in a touch football game. And Bobby would more often than not beat them, just because for these guys it’s a day at the beach and they are fooling around, but he wasn’t going to fool around a bit.

I know we’re not talking about Bobby, but when Ted came back to Harvard he wasn’t eligible to play the first year on the football team. That would have been my senior year, the fall of ’53. But in those days the houses all had tackle football teams, and various houses—there must have been ten or eleven, I don’t remember the exact number—had tackle football teams that were intramural teams. But the Yale weekend—the winner of the Harvard intramural would play the Yale intramural winner. So this is in’53 and Bobby, of course, is down in Washington working on, I suppose, the McCarthy hearings and so forth. He flies up and he has a limousine; it drives him out to the game and Ted—I think it was Ted—got him a football suit. He’d graduated from Harvard five years before, or whatever it was, and he had been in Winthrop House, the same house that Ted and I were in. This Winthrop team was playing and Ted was playing on it and they were going to play the Yale intramural team.

So Bobby changes in the backseat of the limousine, right outside the football field, and goes out and lines up with Ted and the Winthrop House team. The housemaster expressed puzzlement as to who that kid was. [laughs] He didn’t recognize that kid. It was Bobby. And after the game, all muddy and everything—he played this whole game just for a lark and the fun of it. He gets back in the limousine and takes off the muddy football uniform, puts on his suit, and goes back to Washington. You ought to ask Ted about that. How did he get the suit?

Knott: Yes, we will.

Lindskog: I was just going to ask, you both served in the U.S. military and you had said that Ted had already enlisted by the time you had found out about that incident.

Culver: I think so.

Lindskog: Have you ever had subsequent conversations about your decision, for example? Did you talk with him prior to enlisting in the Marines?

Culver: No, I don’t think so. We all had a military obligation and I’d received a deferment the year I was in England. As soon as that was over I knew I had to fulfill the military obligation. I talked to my dad about it. I remember my father said, “Well, I don’t care what service you decide, but I’ll tell you one thing, you’re going to be an officer. I don’t want you standing in the rear ranks complaining about the officers. You’ve had every opportunity to be a leader and you
should be a leader.”

Knott: Why did you want to go in the Marines?

Culver: I thought it was the best service. At that time, the Marine Corps, and I think today, too, was highly respected. If you’re going to do it, you might as well do it. I found it to be a wonderful experience.

I think Ted’s experience was every bit as important to him, though, and valuable to him. I really do. I remember later talking about experiences he had. Going through boot camp or whatever the equivalent is in the Army, he didn’t receive any favoritism. And he ran into some tough characters. I think it was a formidable and formative experience in his life. Now, when he went to Paris, he was an MP [military police]. I think that year was a very meaningful experience for him.

Lindskog: Did you notice the big change in him when he returned to Harvard?

Culver: Yes. Even though he always enjoyed having a good time, he was really quite serious about his studies. I think the influences—his father looking at those report cards, and he had Joe [Kennedy, Jr.] as an example and Jack as an example, and Jack talked to him. I remember Jack saying to him, “You should never be without a book. You should always be reading something, all the time.” He was serious about doing well academically. I think undoubtedly when he came back, he was even more focused.

Lindskog: You took several classes with him. Do you remember faculty responding to him differently because this is the third Kennedy coming through?

Culver: No, I don’t. I remember this Henry Lamar, the coach, was our freshman football coach. He’d been there forever and he knew all the boys, and he might have made reference to his brother. I don’t think I was ever in a classroom with him.

Lindskog: Did you stay in touch with him while you were in the Marine Corps, or did that sort of lapse?

Knott: Nobody at that age wrote anybody. I was in California and the Philippines, Virginia. I did get invited to be an usher in his wedding, and that was in the fall of ’58?

Knott: November ’58, right.

Culver: I was in California at the time and wanted to be an usher in the wedding, but I couldn’t get away. But I remember getting cufflinks from him, which, unfortunately, I don’t have today. They were engraved with each of the ushers’ initials on one side and his initials on the other and a chain between them, so that you had the cufflink showing on both sides.

I went back to law school in ’59, and therefore in ’60, I was not involved in the campaign—and it was in January of ’61, I think, that he looked me up. I was the first married proctor of Harvard
freshmen, in a dorm. We lived in the basement of a dormitory.

Ted came and looked me up there, and we talked and he asked if I would be at all interested in helping him. He had come back at that time from the campaign, and he had decided that he was going to explore running for some office statewide in Mass. It wasn’t really, I don’t think, definite at all that it would necessarily be the U.S. Senate. It could have been a lesser statewide office, that’s my early recollection, but it wasn’t long after that that it was pretty clear that it would be the U.S. Senate and I volunteered. I served as a volunteer from that point until his election in November ’62. I spent a lot of time with him and with the campaign, and traveling with him around the state.

I had an office at 122 Bowdoin Street, which was John Kennedy’s residence, legal address, and voting address. We had these two offices and I would take the subway down after class. I was 29 by that time, after school in England and military service, so I was kind of eager to get out of law school [laughs]. I was ready to do a real job and I sometimes look back and wonder how I ever graduated from law school because I was taking a lot of hard courses in the third year; I really had to scramble to do all the work as well as the campaign.

I had an office on Bowdoin St., and often, when he was not available to meet with someone, I would meet with them. I remember one day I was in the office and the secretary came in and asked if I would meet Rocky Marciano, the heavyweight champion of the world. I was so excited to meet Rocky Marciano because I was a fight fan. I had a simple desk and two chairs. Rocky Marciano came in and sat down and he had his manager with him, who was right out of Damon Runyon. He had a diamond stickpin, a horse blanket sport coat, silver-haired and red-faced. He had to stand up because there weren’t any more chairs. I apologized and he said it’s okay, and so Rocky Marciano sat there. Rocky didn’t say anything. I shook hands with him and the manager said, “The champ wants to help Ted Kennedy in the campaign.” And I said, “Well, gosh, that’s wonderful, Champ.” I mean, in my naïveté, I thought that’s just great. “What do you want to do?”

He just shrugged his shoulders and said, “I don’t care.” So I looked at the calendar and I said, “Well, Champ, next July 4th there’s a parade in Brockton. You’re from Brockton, aren’t you?” And he said, “Yeah, Brockton.” I said, “Well, how about riding in a car with Ted Kennedy in Brockton on the 4th?” He reached in his pocket and he pulled out a huge roll of dollars and started to count them off and looked at me. And it registered with me that we now were moving to a new level of discussion [laughs], the naïve kid from Iowa, and I said, “Well, Champ, we’ll get back to you on this. We really appreciate your interest and your support, but we’ll get back to you.” He said, “Okay,” and they walked out and that was end of Rocky Marciano’s campaign involvement.

He later died in a plane crash outside Davenport, Iowa. He reportedly had a phobia about money, like W.C. Fields. He’d put $5,000 in banks all over the country and Canada, making it hard for the estate to find the money.

**Martin:** Senator Kennedy was described as excelling in public speaking during his college years. Were you ever present when he was giving a speech on campus?
Culver: No. The one thing about him that I would mention that is really significant, Ted always had a real magnetic personality and he was always fun to be around. I remember in Winthrop House in the dining room, when he came back in ’53, which, again, would have been my senior year, there was a table up front that he often sat at with seven or eight people. He was always the center of fun. I think that’s a quality that he’s always continued to have. Ted was very extroverted and fun loving, warm and friendly. People greatly enjoyed his company.

I don’t think as undergraduates we took an active interest in the political clubs or related to them at that time. We were interested in sports.

Knott: John Kennedy was quoted once as saying that Edward Kennedy was the best politician in the family. Would you comment on that assessment a little bit?

Culver: Yes. I think the warmth, openess, and fun contributed to President Kennedy’s special affection for Ted. Ted, being the ninth child, was always looking for attention. He would be the clown at the family gatherings; even today I just find it amazing how much he enjoys a birthday party. His own children, his own grandchildren, his birthday party. Those things mean so much to him. I think that’s wonderful.

He’s always the life of the party in the best way. I mean, getting the party going and getting everybody to have fun and relax and enjoy it. Jack also really loved to have Ted tell him stories about what he was doing, who he was dating, etc.

Knott: Could you give us more of a sense of what you did in 1962, what your role was in the ’62 Senate campaign?

Culver: I traveled with him. Got some law school classmates together to work on issues and background books for the various towns in the state, as well as occasional speech writing. I commented on his appearances before and after, ideas and suggestions on what to say, and occasionally what not to say. I am reminded of the exchange I had with Ambassador Kennedy at Hyannis about having someone with Ted that he trusts, and that loyalty and judgment were more important than brains. Ambassador Kennedy said, “Brains are a dime a dozen. I can always buy those. What you can’t buy is judgment and loyalty. And how important it is that Ted, at his age, have someone that he was comfortable with in that regard.” He further said, “But this is a great opportunity for you too!”

Milton Gwirtzman, a Harvard classmate, and I went down to Hyannis, usually on a Friday, to work with Ted on issues and/or debate preparation. Milton had been working with Senator Ben Smith in Washington, as an assistant.

I remember Bobby coming up before the famous [Edward] McCormack debate. Bobby had just been in Indonesia. I remember we were sitting in the backyard at Ted’s home on Squaw Island and Bobby jokingly said, “Ask him how big the archipelago is in Indonesia. What’s your policy on Papua New Guinea? Ask him that.”
The one thing that I mentioned in my Kennedy Library oral history that I remember very well was that on Saturday we’d go out on the boat, on the Honey Fitz, with the Ambassador and the President and Bobby, Ted, and myself. I would just try to make myself as inconspicuous as possible and hide in the woodwork. They would talk about the campaign and how Ted is doing, even though the official line of the White House was that people in Massachusetts must decide, but obviously the whole family was understandably concerned.

Early on, some White House advisors were very much against Ted running because they were interested, of course, primarily in Jack being reelected. That was a very interesting time. Other than that, I don’t think the President was involved.

I remember Ted Sorensen came up and briefed us on the missile crisis, in Senator Kennedy’s house, near Beacon Hill.

**Knott:** Charles Square?

**Culver:** Yes, I think that’s right. It was the day after [Nikita] Khrushchev had made the pullback.

**Martin:** Do you remember whether there were particular issues that were the focus of the campaign?

**Culver:** Not particularly. My sense is that probably Medicare and national health were issues. I know Ted had made trips to Latin America and Africa. Then there was the Berlin crisis in Germany with the autobahn, and Soviet problems here and there. So the whole anti-communism thing was probably part and parcel of campaigns of that period. Maybe education. I think probably some of the precursors to the Great Society, the New Frontier, were some of the elemental building blocks that later were expanded into the Great Society legislative programs.

**Martin:** Were there any issues that he steered clear of, that he didn’t feel comfortable talking about?

**Culver:** No, but immigration was another issue. In those days the ethnic issue was very strong. He took trips to Ireland and to Italy. He served on public interest charities, cancer, those other nonpolitical things. I don’t remember a lot more other than health, education, and probably there was something about fisheries or shoes or textiles.

Jack Kennedy had organized something for New England when he was in the Senate.

**Martin:** Secretaries, Kennedy secretaries?

**Culver:** No. He’d organized in the northeast a program for New England, sort of a regional priorities of public policy issues and needs, such as transportation, textiles, shoes, and other areas. So we must have piggybacked some of those issues.

**Knott:** Senator, before we started the tape, you talked about organizing the academics in

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Massachusetts. Could I ask you to repeat that story, since we didn’t get it?

Culver: Yes. One of the assignments I got somewhere along the line in the course of the campaign, probably in the primary, was to organize academics. McCormack enjoyed widespread support among academics in Massachusetts, particularly at Harvard and Harvard Law School.

Ted was tagged early on as someone who really had no business, based on his record, running for the Senate. And that was a theme in McCormack’s campaign—that Ted never held a job.

I might mention, as an aside here, I remember one time we were at a plant gate. McCormack had made much of the fact that Ted had never held a job, that he didn’t know anything about working people. So we were at the plant gate with Ted, and this workman comes by with a lunch bucket and he yells, “Hey, Teddy, I hear you never had a job in your life.” Ted laughed and said, “Yeah, that’s right.” The plant worker said, “Let me tell you something. You never missed a thing.” [laughs] That’s what the guy said. So anyway, academics were all on top of him for never having—

McCormack had a pretty impressive record. Very Boston, City Council, head of the City Council, I think. Elected Attorney General twice. Naval Academy. And a very liberal record on civil rights, civil liberties. He was hammering Ted on that. I was given the task of organizing a TV program of Academics for Kennedy. I tell you, that was like looking for the Hope diamond. I finally asked my favorite Harvard Law professor, Charlie Harr, and I asked Sam Beer, who headed the ADA [Americans for Democratic Action]; James McGregor Burns, who I knew had been sympathetic to Ted; and John Plank, and Robert Wood from MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology]. Robert Wood later was at HUD [Department of Housing and Urban Development] with Charlie Harr once the President was elected.

That exhausted the list of academics that I could find, by making every effort. We had a coffee table set up, and the whole theme of this half-hour program was why academics, plural, are for Kennedy. It didn’t really emphasize the fact that the only ones for him were the five in the room [laughs], and so we had this conversation. Each of them, in turn, would say why they saw his candidacy to be attractive or positive. I’ve often wished that somebody like Mark Dewolfe Howe and some of those critics who were really very cruel to him had lived to see his accomplishments.

Knott: Why do you think there was that sort of distance, or even animosity in some cases, among academics in Massachusetts? Any thoughts on that?

Culver: Well, on the facts, it wasn’t hard to understand. If you had an opponent that really had very strong credentials, in their eyes—McCormack—on the issues they were concerned most about at that time, and then you had someone that really was taking the place of a seat-warmer, and not even constitutional age when he announced, it was just too presumptuous. The only qualification he had was a brother as President. What does that entitle you to? What are your qualifications? What have you done in terms of life’s achievement?

Knott: Senator Kennedy’s slogan was, he can do more for Massachusetts than—Some people
thought the implication was because his brother was in the White House.

**Culver:** Clearly, that was the implication. [*laughs*] He couldn’t spell it any more clearly without real embarrassment.

**Lindskog:** So he did not emphasize that theme in speeches? It was simply enough to—

**Culver:** Yes, billboards. And I think President Kennedy used some kind of a slogan, did he not? Something along those lines?

**Lindskog:** He did. How confident were you about victory in the campaign of ’62? Did you assume you were going to win? Or did you really fear McCormack in the primary?

**Culver:** I really thought we were going to win. At that time, the affection for the Kennedy family was so strong. Plus, the sophistication of the organization, and the loyalty and efficiency of it. And the resources. I mean, the media buys and all that.

The interesting thing in that famous south Boston debate, when McCormack pointed at Ted at one point and said, “If your name were Edward Moore, your candidacy would be a joke, Teddy.” I was there and I just shuddered. McCormack is a tough debater, and he was smart and hard-hitting. You really wondered what the consequence of that attack was going to be. I remember, much to my surprise at the time, our switchboard just blew up. The reaction was so overwhelmingly critical of McCormack, along the lines that when you run for Senate you should be a gentleman.

It’s just extraordinary when you think back, the transformation in American politics in terms of what is acceptable and what is not. And remember, in those days you couldn’t say Coca-Cola is better than Pepsi-Cola if Pepsi-Cola wasn’t there to defend itself. It just wouldn’t work, and you didn’t dare try it. And of course today, compared to a modern political debate for the U.S. Senate and U.S. Congress, anywhere in the country, that was patty cake. At the time, the reaction was really strong in contrast with today.

**Knott:** Do you recall Edward Kennedy’s reaction to McCormack’s attack?

**Culver:** I think it was tough. He stayed poised and he stayed on the script. He stayed on the debate plan, and made his comments, made a closing statement, but I’m sure it was hard. I think he made some comment by way of response, but it was not direct. I guess he acted more like a gentleman, above it. In those days, I remember when I first ran for Congress in ’64, one of the rules of thumb was if your opponent made a negative, critical, and perhaps unfair attack, the best advice was to stay above it, and that the public would reject and repudiate someone who threw a low blow or did something like that. Now, of course, you have to hit back within the news cycle, and maybe hit first. That was a different time.

**Lindskog:** You told the story about the factory worker. I was wondering if you had other reminiscences about the masses reacting to another Kennedy statewide campaign. Was he perceived as superstar, perhaps, being the brother of the President?
Culver: The glamour, you mean?

Lindskog: Yes.

Culver: In the statewide race? This race, you mean?

Lindskog: This race, yes.

Culver: Yes, there was certainly that. But I mentioned in the oral history at the Presidential Library three things that I thought were really interesting. One was how hard he worked. You just couldn’t work any harder than he did. I mean, it was really inspiring, even for a contemporary, to see how dedicated he was and how hard he worked. I think he got that from his brother. Even with the health limitations, Jack really worked awfully hard at it all the time. And just as in football, Ted went above and beyond.

The second thing. I remember going to—I think it was in Brookline or Newton—a very liberal Democratic Party meeting. It was early in the campaign. Ted was subjected to a barrage of very tough, hostile questions from those who at least felt themselves to be a sophisticated and enlightened audience. They were very demanding, and it was brutal. I remember getting back in the car with him, and I was still kind of rocked by it because it contrasted with the normal reception he got.

We got back in the car and we went to the next stop. I don’t remember exactly what it was, but it seems to me it was a large Italian gathering of some kind. Ted got up and I think he gave the best talk I’d heard him give up to that point. Just a half-hour later. I learned a lesson from that. Again, it was football. You’re knocked down, you get up, and you don’t let that last play upset you and throw you off. You’ve got to put it away and be ready for the next play. This is the new group. Do your best. It was really interesting. Again, I think of it as particularly impressive because here we are contemporaries.

And the third thing was that he had a remarkable sophistication. I noted a number of times when others would ride with us in the car, or we’d be in a meeting, and I would be privy to people complaining to him about someone else working in the campaign. Ted just never would say anything. He might occasionally, if I was alone with him later, say something. I always was impressed by that, because he just wouldn’t lend himself to gossip about the individuals in the campaign. He would make his own private judgment as to how valuable this person is or isn’t, and how well they’re doing their job for him. He might know something that this other critic doesn’t know. But the maturity of that, because all political campaigns are fraught with all kinds of backbiting and fighting; it’s endemic to the nature of the beast. He was mature that way, I thought. Sometimes, as well as I knew him, I thought, where’d you learn that, where’d you get that kind of perspective on something like this?

Knott: I wonder if you might comment on some of the other individuals who were active in that campaign. You’ve mentioned Steve Smith earlier in your remarks. Any observations or recollections of Steve Smith at that time?
Culver: Other than he worked very hard and he was very valuable because he could, in effect, represent Ted and represent the family. He obviously was in charge of resources and management of media buys and everything else. By that time he had had some good experience himself, in Jack’s campaign. Ted liked him and they worked well together, so he was really indispensable. And he was good to work with. He was always very good to me.

Eddie Martin was a real find. He was street-smart as far as the press and Boston. Just wonderful. He was tops. And, of course, Barbara Souliotis was just a young girl then. She was wonderful then and she’s unbelievable now. She was probably 17 or 18 years old when she first started working for Ted. Now, of course, she’s so indispensable to him, and so able and knowledgeable politically.

Knott: Did you have a lot of interaction with Gerard Doherty, by any chance?

Culver: Yes, quite a bit. He was the guy that understood the State House and all the pols that Ted had to get introduced to. He would know who the good and the bad guys were, and could be very valuable. He would set up small meetings, as I recall, of a group of Democratic legislators that Ted would get together with, and he knew all the politics of those relationships.

Knott: You mentioned Senator Kennedy’s father earlier, and of course, he had a reputation for being a pretty tough guy. And in some quarters, the view was that this was a man who kind of pulled the strings behind the scenes. I wonder if you would comment on that reputation.

Culver: I know that would probably be the reputation. I didn’t see that in Ted’s campaign. I remember the story about the Ambassador going over with Bobby the budget for the campaign in 1952. Bobby was the campaign manager for Jack in his first Senate campaign. Ambassador Kennedy said, “Well, Bobby, I see you crossed out all these billboard buys. Why’d you do that?” And Bobby said, “Well, Dad, I think it’s too much. They’re starting to accuse us of buying this election.” And Ambassador Kennedy reportedly said, “Bobby, put ’em back in. They’re going to accuse us of buying this election whether we buy it or not. Let’s buy it and make sure.” [laughs] And the billboards went up. But I didn’t see that in Ted’s campaign.

By that time, the Ambassador was older, but he followed it very closely. I’m sure Steve reported to him, kept him advised, and if there was any situation where he could be helpful, I’m sure he would be asked and would make a call or do something, because he obviously was deeply interested and committed to Ted’s success.

We also had somebody else sent up, I think from the Kennedy office in New York, to watch the materials or supplies, who was a real good guy. He’d buy all the materials, and check whether it was being distributed throughout the state properly—was it being pilfered? I can’t recall his name right now; I’d know it in a minute. He was someone who worked directly, I think, with Ambassador Kennedy in the office there, and he knew him to be a good office manager type, and he managed this aspect of our office.

Knott: Did you get to know Rose Kennedy at all?
Culver: Only on the occasion of the few times that I had dinner with Ambassador and Mrs. Kennedy, the President and his wife, and Ted. Usually on a Saturday night after the Honey Fitz cruise. Ted might, on occasion, ask me if I would join them for dinner, and several times, I did. And that was a special occasion. And a couple other times I saw her and said hello, but I didn’t spend a lot of time with her.

Knott: Was Joan Kennedy involved in the campaign?

Culver: Yes, she was, and was very helpful. In those days, all the Kennedy women were. The sisters occasionally did the thing that Jack first started with the teas in Boston in ’52, with his mother. Rose Kennedy spoke for Teddy, I remember, too. Joan did a lot, consistent with taking care of the kids, and I’m sure she was an asset. In ’64, of course, she had a much bigger role after Ted’s plane accident.

Martin: Do you remember talking about campaign strategies with Senator Kennedy?

Culver: I suppose we did.

Martin: Do you remember what was the overall strategy of the campaign, particularly how to take on someone like McCormack, who had much more political experience?

Culver: I guess the general feeling was that the Kennedys had tried-and-tested ways to run a campaign, and were extremely attractive and respected as a family in Massachusetts. They had a lot of success with it, in addition to hard work and resources. We also had inherited the large number of Kennedy secretaries in all these towns. I remember when I first got involved in 1961, Edward King, and his son, Jimmy (who later became quite well known as an advance man for a number of subsequent Presidential campaigns), were going around the state reactivating all the JFK [John Fitzgerald Kennedy] secretaries and giving them a little medallion coin from the inauguration. That whole exercise was to create the interest in Ted, if and when Ted decided to go.

Knott: Maybe we should take just a very short break and then we can come back and talk a little bit about your role in Senator Kennedy’s office in ’63 and your own entry into politics in ’64. Is that acceptable to you?

Culver: Sure.

[BREAK]

Knott: Let’s talk a little bit about the transition into the Senate and your recollections from that period and your role for that year, 1963. You were on the Senator’s staff; could you tell us how that came about?
Culver: Yes. He was elected November 1962. I remember calling, at his request, Bobby Baker about his swearing in and getting on the payroll down there because he automatically was seated, fulfilling the unexpired term of the President. I had originally thought about going back to Iowa after he was elected, to get started on my own political interests. However, he asked me if I would come and work with him the first year to help him get organized and set up. Of course, I very happily agreed to do that and thought it would be a wonderful experience. I saw a reference where Milton Gwirtzman was a legislative assistant. As far as I know, I was the legislative assistant and press secretary. I had two hats. I knew nothing about press. I knew nothing about legislation. [laughs] Nevertheless, he seemed to think I could handle that.

I remember that our staff was so small. He kept some of the older people from Ben Smith’s interim Senate staff, the administrative assistant at the time and some older secretaries who had experience, and then a few of us. I thought that we only had about eight people, but I saw where someone else, maybe McGregor Burns’ book, said 15 or so. But it was very small. I remember the press side really wasn’t that demanding a position because Ted had made the wise decision to be seen and not heard as a freshman, and contrary to the expectations, go in there and be a serious student and respectful of the elders and the system in a traditional way.

So my job was really to say no to all these national TV programs. He had been on Meet the Press, of course, and in the campaign I’d been involved with that preparation. I said no to everything and I got criticized by the reporters pretty hard because they were so eager to have him. However, we worked hard to service the Massachusetts press. There was a lot of attention on local issues and groups. I remember going around with him, initially to meet Senate leadership and this was in one of the books, and I think they got that story from me about Richard Russell.

President Kennedy said to Ted that one of the things he would suggest that Ted do when he’s first down there was to go around and pay his respects, because there was this feeling that Ted was just going to be a spy in the Senate cloakroom for the President. There was a belief, not just partisan but also among some of the Democratic Senate colleagues that here’s this person who’s 30 years old, who was only elected because he was the brother of the President.

He was walking into a very—not a hostile place, but certainly one that was withholding judgment on how well he’d be accepted. The President said, “You should go around and pay your respects to McCormack and [Michael] Mansfield and the leadership.” Then he said, “Also, you should go by and see Senator Richard Russell,” who, of course, was the leader of the Southern bloc, and a highly respected man, even though on segregation he was always a leader of that effort. “When you see Russell, you should just tell him, Teddy, that although the President told you that he rarely voted with Senator Russell, that there were very few men that he had a greater respect for as a Senator.”

I would sit in the outer office and when Ted would get done, we’d walk to the next one. We walked over to Richard Russell’s office and I’m waiting in the other room. When Ted came out, and we were walking down the hall, Ted started laughing. I said, “What are you laughing about?” He said, “Well, I told Senator Russell just what Jack told me to tell him, that he didn’t vote with him all that often, but he respected him. I didn’t really know what else to say, and
Russell wasn’t saying anything, so I said, “And I think we have one other thing in common, don’t we, Senator? That is that we both came to the Senate at 30 years of age.” Russell said, “Well, I think that’s not exactly correct, Senator. I came after two terms as Governor of Georgia.” [laughs]

Ted, to his credit, was walking down the hall laughing about what a brilliant putdown that was for him.

**Martin:** That’s great. Did you work exclusively in the [Washington] D.C. Senate office?

**Culver:** Yes. The one thing I do remember, we just had overwhelming volumes of mail. Here you had the brother of the President and the Attorney General, as well as America’s most prominent family, so we just got swamped with mail. My job was to try to draft roboform [robotically signed] letters. We had these archaic robo machines that made so much noise you’d think you were working in a steel mill factory. They would pump out these form letters that I would write for various issues.

I’ve often told people in my offices, over the years since, that they say all I did was legislative mail. I say there’s nothing more important. There’s no tougher or more responsible job for the member than to draft such letters in a way that is responsive and reflects his or her interest. That’s a real art form. We tried to do that on all the different major issues that were stimulating letters and comments, pro and con. So that was a huge part of my responsibility. I had one woman secretary.

Some time after the first of the year (’63), I asked Jerry Marsh, who was a Republican lawyer from Chicago and Harvard football player with Ted and me, if he would be at all interested in coming to Washington to work for Ted. I knew I was going to be going in a matter of months, and so Jerry agreed to come and work for Ted.

So when Jerry joined us, he and I were the legislative assistants. Milton did speech writing, and he had some valuable experience in terms of having been with Ben Smith. Jerry probably got into more of his legislative things than I did. Mine was more of helping get set up. I remember a couple of times I went down to the White House. I went back to Iowa September first, 1963, to try to run for Congress. I’d been away for 12 years by that point and the election was just 14 months later.

**Martin:** You said there was a lot of mail. If you had to guess, do you have any idea, like on a weekly basis, how much?

**Culver:** I just don’t. I wouldn’t know how to even guess, although somebody must have some more accurate sense of that. We kept the old AA [administrative assistant], who knew how a Senate office should function. We had the Boston office, which was really working hard on community and constituent service. Ted would go up there a lot.

**Martin:** Do you remember any times when you thought he was influenced by the mail, that you would talk to him about it?
Culver: No. We used to make totals of the correspondence “for and against” on the issues weekly. So he had some sense of that. I am sure he did not welcome situations where he was getting hammered in the press. But I don’t remember any particular incidents.

Knott: With a brother in the White House, did that help him? I mean, did he turn to the President often to help him with problems, even issues related to Massachusetts?

Culver: I think he may have called once or twice. I saw some reference in one of those books about how Jack said you’re on your own. I found that hard to believe because Jack couldn’t have been more interested or desirous of helping in every proper way. But he sure loved Ted and wanted him to succeed.

More often than not, it seems to me it would be something lower down the food chain, and he [Ted] would call over there—to Kenny O’Donnell or Larry O’Brien. And it was just the same as talking to the President because they would talk to the President and get back to him, or on their own authority say, “Yes, I’ll take care of it.”

Lindskog: Did you ever have early discussions about policies or issues that Senator Kennedy might eventually want to get into in terms of committee assignments or things that he was passionate about early on?

Culver: Education and labor and health were all things he cared about, and of course the Judiciary Committee, for civil rights and immigration policy. He had that infamous session with [James] Eastland where he went to pay his respects, and Eastland brought out the bourbon bottle and talked to him about, “You Kennedys will probably want to be on civil rights and civil liberties [laughs] and immigration.” And Ted said, “Okay, put me down there.” You know, “You Kennedys—” all in good humor and pulling his leg. Eastland was always very good to him in spite of their fundamental differences. And he liked him. I think he liked the due deference that Ted gave him.

Lindskog: Did the Senator point to any members initially that he wanted to maybe emulate a little bit?

Culver: Well, I’m sure Phil Hart ranked right up there. He had good relations with [Leverett] Saltonstall and Ed Brooke. But in terms of just sheer admiration and respect, Phil Hart would be the one that I would think of. Do any others particularly come to mind? He respected [Jacob] Javits and his intellectual ability. I’m sure he thought of him as an extremely able person.

Knott: Do you know if he had a good relationship with Vice President Johnson? Of course, there was this reputed tension between Bobby Kennedy and LBJ [Lyndon Baines Johnson]. I’m just wondering about Edward Kennedy.

Culver: Yes. My sense is that Ted missed most of that flak, even in 1968, at the time of the Convention. Ted, in the midst of that chaos, Ted was still acceptable to all factions. I mean, roughly speaking. He hadn’t been as outspoken on the war. He hadn’t been as polarizing.
So in relation to LBJ. I remember the first time I met LBJ. I went with Ted to a cocktail reception in the Capitol hosted by Democratic Administrative Assistants. I suppose it may have been in December of ’62. I saw Ted shake hands with Johnson.

Ted was talking to somebody and Johnson came over to me and said, “Why don’t you come over and see me some day? I’m over at the Capitol. I’d love to meet you and talk to you more.” I said, “Fine, Mr. Vice President.” Of course, I never did, but it was interesting. He wanted to learn more about Ted through me. He was interested in the people around Ted, what are they like, because he was such a consummate politician. And he had this tension going with other elements of the Kennedy family.

**Knott:** Did you get to know Johnson yourself during your term in the House?

**Culver:** This is interesting. Yes.

**Knott:** Would you mind talking about it? We’re jumping ahead a bit.

**Culver:** I have two instances that particularly come to mind with Johnson. One was when I was on the House Foreign Affairs Committee. It was in the summer of ’65 and my first year, and it was just at the time of the buildup in Vietnam. The bombing had been February and the troop buildup was starting in the summer, so they needed a supplemental and he invited all the House Foreign Affairs Committee members and the Foreign Relations Committee members and the appropriators from both House and Senate over to the White House.

He had all the main players in his administration—Mac [McGeorge] Bundy, Robert McNamara, and [David E.] Bell on the Budget and Dean Rusk. And all these players get up and they had maps and charts and pointers, and they all went through their thing. LBJ sat in the front in a chair, and we were all behind him. He kept interrupting them, and would say, “Tell ’em this,” “Now, tell ’em that,” “Tell ’em this,” “Tell ’em that.” It was, on the one hand, kind of embarrassing, but on the other hand, every time he did that and interposed himself, it improved the presentation, politically. He knew his audience.

When they’re through with their formal presentations, he said, “I’ll take questions.” And he stands up in front, I can remember, but there was a Republican appropriator from Michigan, [EA] Al Cederberg, who said, “Mr. President, I’ve got a question. Why is it that we give them all this money and they won’t ever do what we want them to do? I support this thing, but I don’t understand why we can’t get ’em to do what we want ’em to do if we give them all the money.”

And Johnson says, “Let me tell you something.” I wish I could do the accent, “My home county is Blanco County, Texas. And one day the boys came in to me and they said, ‘Lyndon, we got to get ourselves a new sheriff. Who the hell’re we going to get?’ And I told them, I said, ‘Boys, you go out and get yourself a good-looking fellow and make sure he’s honest, make sure he doesn’t think the girls are pretty, and bring him in here to me.’ So, they go out and they brought this boy in and he checked out in every particular, so I reached in my drawer and I pulled out this big silver badge and it said Sheriff, Blanco County, and I put it on his chest and he was the proudest
boy in Blanco County, Texas.”

And he said, “The first six months he was the best sheriff we ever had, but the seventh month he started to smoke. The eighth month he started to drink. The ninth month, every time you paid a fine in Blanco County, Texas, he thought it had to go in his bank account. And the eleventh month he thought everybody’s wife was his girlfriend. They came in and they said to me, after six months, ‘Lyndon, we got to get ourselves a new sheriff.’ Now, Cederberg, if Lyndon Johnson can’t keep a God-damned sheriff in Blanco County, Texas, how the Christ do you think I can keep a government in Vietnam?” Everybody laughed, and of course none of us listened, including him, to the moral of the story. But at the time, it was Lyndon at his best, I mean, in terms of selling the program of the day.

We had elected a whole landslide in ’64, and we’d won, what, 50 new seats?

Knott: That’s right.

Culver: About 50 freshmen, and in two groups, 25 each, LBJ invited us on two successive nights to come to the Cabinet room of the White House. The ostensible purpose was that we were to tell him what our problems were in our congressional districts, and he would then direct the White House to be helpful to us. So we were in the Cabinet room, and he’s sitting there with Carl Albert and John McCormack and Hale Boggs. He’s got a seating chart showing where all the freshmen are seated, because he doesn’t know anybody’s name. He started with, “The reason I’m here, I want to hear what your problems are so I can help you in the election.”

So he starts left to right around the room, “Congressman [Richard] McCarthy of Buffalo, right?” He says, “Yes, sir.” “What are your problems, McCarthy?” He said, “Well, sir, my problem is they think we’re not doing too good in Vietnam.” He said, “They don’t think we’re doing—you talking about the body counts?” And he just jumped on him, and said, “Tell ’em this,” “Tell ’em that,” “Tell ’em this,” “Tell ’em that.” And McCarthy goes, “Yes, sir; yes, sir.”

He turns to the next one, “What’s your problem?” “Well, too much Great Society program. Too many rubber stamps.” So he jumps on that guy, jumps on him. And, of course, it was pretty evident to me—I’m over there about number 18, and it was pretty evident to me that we weren’t down there to find out how he could help us. We were down there to see whether he was satisfied we were defending him. I found it kind of revolting. So it got around to me, and he said, “Congressman Culver, what are your problems?” I said, “Mr. President, I don’t really have any problems I need to bother you with, but I want to thank you for inviting us here today.” He said, “You don’t have any problems, Culver?” I said, “Not that I need to trouble you with, sir.” “Everybody here’s got problems but you, right, Culver?” I said, “Well, apparently.” So he goes on to the next one.

And we all get up to leave, and I’m walking out, and he said, “Congressman Culver.” I said, “Yes, sir, Mr. President.” He said, “Come here.” And he’s sitting with his rear end on the edge of the Cabinet table, and he said, “Would you consent to have your picture taken with me?” I said, “Yes, sir.” He said, “Well, let’s sit here and do it now.” He got the photographer. I was the only one out of 25. [laughs] I was also only one of about five that got reelected because we lost all the
seats, I mean really. Lee Hamilton and I were 2 of 19 in the rural Midwest to get reelected.

Anyway, I sat there, and I’ve got this picture at home in my rec room of him and me just staring at each other. And it’s autographed by him, “To Congressman John C. Culver, Best Wishes, Lyndon Johnson.”

Knott: You’ve spoken about this elsewhere, and if you prefer not to go into it again, that’s fine, but you did spend some time with Senator Kennedy in the immediate aftermath of his brother’s assassination. I was wondering if you would talk with us about that for the Edward Kennedy Oral History. Any distinct impressions from that sad time?

Culver: Well, of course, it was just overwhelming. I related in that Presidential Oral History, when I heard about it I was in Iowa. I came back and I was with Ted in his house. He outwardly was holding up in a very manly fashion, and busy doing whatever he felt was appropriate to be doing. Then after that, after the funeral itself, I did go up to Hyannis during that Thanksgiving period. It’s all kind of a blur. I remember we played touch football and tried to keep conversation going, as you do with good friends who have experienced a terrible loss. I don’t have a lot more specifics. Of course, I had assumed that I would be running with President Kennedy on the ticket, too, in 1964. This was November, ’63, and I’d just gone back to Iowa in September, so I’d only been out there two months when that happened.

Knott: How much support did you get from the Kennedy family when you did run your own race? I know that Senator Edward Kennedy was injured and probably wasn’t able to be of much help.

Culver: Joan came out and spoke for me. Of course she was a very sympathetic and popular figure at the time. She campaigned with my wife at a fund-raiser.

Knott: That was a good year to be a Democrat, 1964.

Culver: It sure was.

Knott: How tight was your first race?

Culver: Tight. But I was one of—we elected five new Democratic Congressmen. I was the only one to survive the next election, so the 50 that came in were all washed out, essentially, in the ’66 reversal because of a lot of factors.

Knott: Was there a noticeable change going from the Senate side to the House side? Granted, you went from a staff position to an elected position, but were the two worlds very different?

Culver: I’m sure it was helpful having been on the staff, even for a brief time. It gave me a sense of what was involved. I met and had as a campaign manager a man named Dick Clark, who was my administrative assistant for 10 years. Then he ran for the Senate when I declined to run for the Senate in ’72, and he was elected in an upset. Then I was elected in ’74, so we had an interesting association together.
Lindskog: Elizabeth Drew, in her book, noted that Senator Kennedy used to rib you about that, Dick Clark winning that seat before you. Do you have any—

Culver: Yes, I remember when I was going to run in ’74. I think I got a telegram, “Let us know the name of your AA who’s running for the Senate this time, we’ll send him a check.” I don’t remember exactly. Oh, I took a lot of ribbing. I didn’t feel it was right for me in ’72. Once I decided not to run, the Republicans relaxed. Dick Clark was a perfect foil against Jack Miller. He had no record. He walked across the state and caught the public imagination. Miller was a little bit of an old-guard Republican, and not personally charismatic or a particularly appealing political figure.

Lindskog: You mentioned in the previous oral history for the John F. Kennedy Library, and a number of other biographers have mentioned, not only was Senator Kennedy a natural campaigner, but was a natural legislator. Did you get the impression that he was just a natural fit for this?

Culver: Yes. We talk about executive temperaments and legislative temperaments. He was a natural, a real natural for the legislative experience, and Jack wasn’t at all. Jack wasn’t comfortable or happy with it. He couldn’t wait to get out of there. He was certainly proud enough to be a Senator and proud enough to be a Congressman.

Bobby was the same way; whereas with Ted, his whole personality and temperament and instincts and political skill were totally compatible with the institution, and critical to a successful career in the institution. The persistence, the staying year after year with the major issues, and coming back, and coming back a different way, and creatively trying to identify cosponsors and coalitions. Both inside and outside the institution, having the patience and doggedness and faith that he could come up with some way to do this, skin this cat, and it may take a while. Tolerance for the others in terms of working with them. Patience. All those qualities that make a great legislator are so essential to his achievement and his success, comport with his basic disposition.

I remember a reference in a book to “the bag.” This bag he still takes home every night. It wears you out to look at it. I’ve been on airplanes with him and it’s no different than it was the first day I worked with him. [laughs] And he’s still at it.

Sometimes, if you are out in sailboat with him socially, with some friends, he will start talking about a public policy issue and a legislative debate from 10 years ago. He can recall all the political personalities, where they were and what the issues were, what the statistics were. It’s really extraordinary.

Martin: Do you think he showed that same capability when you first started with him back in 1962?

Culver: Well, only on the personality side. I mean, he’s always been a natural. People like Ted Kennedy. He’s a likeable person, and he’s very unassuming when he meets you, and he’s warm
and friendly. I think he’s a pleasant surprise to the members of the Senate who had heard about the Kennedy family, the wealth and privilege, to meet someone who’s as friendly and unassuming.

Ted has the charm and it’s sincere, and he treats fellow Senators with respect. He works, jokes, and laughs with them. I think, at the end of the day, Congress, not surprisingly, is a very human institution. All these people are very competitive, and right after they get there, they all look around and try to figure out where everybody else is coming from. What’s usually underestimated, I think, in the study of Congress, is the value and strength of personality. If people are well liked and respected, and handle themselves in a way that brings admiration and affection from others, their capacity to influence the course of events in that body is limitless.

In the House, you have to fight your way through all these members and all these committees and subcommittees. In the Senate, if you were well liked and respected and you picked your shots, didn’t try to show off and try to be an expert on everything, knew your subject, there was very little you could not accomplish. If somebody had all that plus a lot of other appeal, you could be powerful and successful. Ted has all these personal qualities of friendliness and warmth. He is just good company. And that goes far in breaking down misconceptions and prejudices.

**Knot:** Did you prefer your ten years in the House over your term in the Senate? Do you have a favorite?

**Culver:** I asked Jack Javits. He had a similar experience, been a House member and then a Senate member. He said, and I’ve never forgotten this, “Well, you know, on a personal basis, I think I enjoyed my time in the House more. On a professional basis, I enjoyed my time in the Senate more because I could accomplish so much more in public service as a Senator than I could as a House member. But in terms of just the interaction among the members, I found it socially more enjoyable in the House.” I thought that comported with my experience as well.

I think part of it is the Senators are so busy that even if they have the inclination, there’s not a lot of time for each other. Senators are so busy that they don’t really have much time for each other. In the House, you can’t take yourself too seriously. You’re running every two years and you’re answering those bells all the time to vote. But in the Senate it is easier to accomplish things, to be effective.

**Martin:** You found that even as a junior Senator?

**Culver:** Absolutely. I don’t think the seniority means that much anymore. In your first day in the Senate, you’ve got power and influence. Everybody else needs your vote. You can stop the Senate the first day you’re there any time you want to.

**Martin:** You wouldn’t be very popular.

**Culver:** No, but you can get their attention. There’s so much collegiality. There wasn’t the partisanship in the Senate, compared to the House, at least there wasn’t in my times. It seems to
be pretty polarized today. In the past, Senators would never go out and campaign against somebody on the same committee, or a chairman go against a vice chairman, or Majority Leader [William] Frist going out after Minority Leader [Tom] Daschle. It never happened.

Knott: Well, Senator, if it’s acceptable to you, we’d like to come back at some future date, and this would be way down the road, to focus on your time in the Senate, your interaction with Senator Kennedy during that period that you were in the United States Senate, and perhaps any other later events, if that’s okay with you.

Culver: All right.

Knott: And that may well be a year or two from now because this project is expected to go on for six years. We would send you briefing materials that would bring it up to date later.

Culver: I hope some of this is helpful.

Knott: It’s been very helpful.

Culver: Thank you. My pleasure. I respect what you’re doing. I think it’ll be very valuable.

Knott: Thank you.
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