



EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH ADAM CLYMER

July 12, 2006
Washington, D.C.

Interviewers

Stephen F. Knott
Paul Martin

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TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH ADAM CLYMER

July 12, 2006

Knott: Thank you again, Mr. Clymer. If you could just tell us why it is you decided to write this book on Senator Kennedy.

Clymer: Well, I came back from New York for the [*New York*] *Times* in 1991. I'd been there for eight years. I'd done mostly editing jobs, and I came back to be the chief Congressional correspondent. I'd always thought about doing a book, and I was looking around for something to do that would tie in with Congress. My mother had written 57 books. She was a children's book author and she kept asking me, "Why don't you write a book some day?"

I contributed to a couple of things, but had never really written one. I was here in early 1991, and it was clear that Kennedy was a very important figure in Congress in getting laws passed. And it was also clear that this really wasn't generally understood. It may have been understood in the Senate, but it certainly wasn't the public perception of Kennedy. My agent, David Black, talked about ideas for books. I had one other one, and he was enthusiastic about this one. I'm not sure which of us pushed it harder. But in the spring of 1991, I figured I'd try to do this, and do a book that reflected not the part of Kennedy that everybody knew about—alcohol problems and the number of women he'd been associated with—but his role in Congress, his role as a political figure. And so I decided to do it. I sent them a letter saying I've decided to do this and wanted their cooperation, and they had meetings and more meetings, and they decided to cooperate.

Knott: They being—

Clymer: The Kennedy staff. (Actually, I sent it to Kennedy, but the staff was deeply involved.) I remember one person I interviewed early on, told me he'd been chided by somebody he knew on the staff for agreeing to talk to me before they decided whether they were going to cooperate. He said, "Look, I've known him a long time. Of course I'd talk to him." So that's how I got into it. I forget how long it took to get a contract, probably a couple of years. My agent, David Black, probably gave me the toughest editing I've ever had in my life in terms of editing the proposal, trying to make it something that would sell, and it didn't initially get a whole lot of response. I think we got two offers out of maybe 20 mainstream publishers I sent it to. But that's how I got into it.

Knott: This may be a stupid question, but if you hadn't gotten this cooperation, you would not have gone ahead with the project? Or would you—

Clymer: I intended to go ahead. Now, whether it would have proved too frustrating—I mean Kennedy has been known to put roadblocks in the way of people trying to write about him. And sure, some people would have talked to me, but some wouldn't. I don't know. I mean, I would have tried. I sent them a letter saying I was doing this, not saying, "I'd like to do this if you'll help."

Knott: I see.

Clymer: And that was certainly my intention at the time. It might or might not have been possible to do it without help.

Knott: Did you get the cooperation that you hoped for once you started with the project?

Clymer: Yes. I say in the introduction to the book that Kennedy gave me a lot of his time. Most important of all I think is that when people asked him should I talk to this guy, he said yes. I mean, there was one subject which he wouldn't talk about with me, which was Chappaquiddick. And—

Knott: Was that made clear to you from the start?

Clymer: No. I think his original reaction was well, about the personal things, we'll see. That was the only—there were some things he didn't remember very well. But that was the only thing that he rejected talking about. I would send him a letter listing four or five things I wanted to talk about, a paragraph or two about each of them. And any time from four to ten weeks later or so, they'd set up an appointment. He'd had time either to review his own notes or to have his staff collect materials for him to review. Every now and then they'd call me about what they were trying to find for him. The institutional memory in that office is Carey Parker's, who's been with Kennedy since I think 1970, about that. But every once in a while, after I'd been doing this for a couple of years, somebody would call me about something that had happened prior to that, trying to—"Carey's recollection didn't deal with '67, but yours might," or something.

Martin: What was the timeframe for this research? When did you start?

Clymer: Spring of 1991.

Martin: OK.

Clymer: And I finished the book in June or July of 1999. There was never a point where I had all the research and just wrote. Even when I was writing at the end I would sometimes stop and call somebody up. I'd finished it and turned the last of it in, I think in June, and then John Kennedy Jr. died, and my editor called and said, "I think you need to get something in on this." I said, "Yes, you're right. But let's wait until after the funeral."

Knott: How many meetings did you have with the Senator himself, would you say?

Clymer: Well, I think there were 21 formal interviews, and then I would deal with him while covering things in the Senate. I don't know how many—and often, I was dealing with him about a particular piece of legislation, but when I came home that night, I'd type up some notes, because they might turn out to be relevant to the book. I'm not sure how many that totals.

Knott: Was it usually just one-on-one, or would he have a staffer in there sometimes?

Clymer: He'd usually have somebody from his staff there. They didn't say anything. But he listened—the usual purpose was I think, he'd say, "Get Adam something." We'd be talking and he would say, "Well, there was a speech about such and such. Melody [Miller], get it for Adam," that sort of thing. It was often the press secretary. It was sometimes Melody Miller—you know who she is. I don't think Carey was ever there.

There were a couple of occasions when we were alone. The most interesting aspect of that part of it was I remember doing an interview out in his house in Virginia, where I was dealing with Robert Kennedy's decision to run for President, and Ted's involvement with that. And I asked him—you've got the transcripts. I asked him something like, "Everything that's public says that you didn't want him to run. You said he'd be accused of splitting the party, and he could have the nomination the next time. Somehow that doesn't seem to me to be all of it."

He said, "Well, I said both of those things, and they were real, and it was also so soon after Dallas." Then his voice trailed off. And when we left, Melody Miller said, "I've never heard him say anything like that to anybody before." And I mean, it was a logical thing. I had guessed it, but I wasn't writing about what I guessed.

Knott: Yes. How did he treat you during this nine-year period? Did you ever have the feeling that he was working you at all?

Clymer: Once he had made an investment in the book in terms of time and influence on his friends and things, he wanted it to come out, and he wanted, I'm sure, to be portrayed as an important, effective Senator. And in fact, I think when I wrote him the letter saying I wanted to do it, I said, "I think you've been a major player in the Senate for many years and that people don't know this." That appealed to him. Was he playing me? Well, he was—I don't know.

Knott: Did he invite you up to Hyannis Port?

Clymer: Did he invite me to Hyannis Port? Not exactly. I think I was at Hyannis Port twice, working on the book. Once, I guess the fall of '91. I had just started working on the book. I'd maybe done one interview with him. I'm not sure. But he'd agreed to help. I was in Falmouth, Massachusetts, where my sister-in-law lives, visiting her for Thanksgiving. And either I told his press secretary, Paul [Donovan], or he'd asked me what I was doing—at any rate, Kennedy invited us to a cocktail party at his place the night after Thanksgiving.

I think I'd been there once in my life before, and I hadn't driven in the dark on Cape Cod. We ended up arriving very early. We were the first people there. And he and Vicki were absolutely

charming. I guess it helps to have help—when guests arrive early for a party, it can be a pain in the neck if you were doing everything yourselves, and they weren't. But they were charming. They were glad to be able to spend a little time, and show us around. "This is where my brothers slept. This is where we saw the movies," all of this stuff. During the course of the evening, I knew perhaps half to two-thirds of the people who were there—political Massachusetts or Washington political people. I didn't know them all, but I knew enough. But Ann [Clymer] hardly knew anyone.

Knott: Your wife?

Clymer: Yes. And Kennedy made a point all through the evening of bringing people over and introducing them, sort of establishing a connection, Ann does this, so and so does that. I think what that illustrated was not trying to play me, but just exceptionally good manners. I don't think I'm that good a host. I try, but on the other hand, I don't have help either. But that's an element, the manners part of it—I mean, I didn't have any preconception of that, but I didn't know anything about it.

One of the things you ask in your notes—things that surprised you. The other time I was at Hyannis while I was working on the book was my initiative. I said, "Sailing is obviously something that matters a lot to you. I want to go sailing with you sometime." And he sort of generally agreed. I said, "I'm going to be in the area on one of my trips up to Boston to go through the *Globe* files. Can I come see you to go out sailing on the beginning or the end of this?" So he said fine, and the weather wasn't very nice. Kara [Kennedy], his daughter, said, "I'm not going out in this." Ted said, "Well you don't mind, do you Adam?" I said, "Fine."

I got seasick, at which point he regaled me with some of the stories of some celebrities who'd gotten seasick sailing with him. I mean, he's a bad-weather sailor. People I've talked to about his sailing said, "He's not very good in light winds." I was there for lunch, and then I drove back to Boston.

Knott: You did mention the question of other surprises. Could you talk a little bit about that? Are there other things during the course of your research and writing where your reaction was *Gee, this is something I really hadn't expected*, or—?

Clymer: Well, I don't think there was anything that was contrary to my expectation. There were things I hadn't thought about like that. I guess the other thing that I hadn't ever thought about which was particularly interesting was his commitment to his religion. I mean, this is a very serious Catholic. Doesn't wear it on his sleeve, he doesn't talk about it, but he goes to Mass a lot, and a friend of mine from the *Times* told me about being seated at a table with him at a luncheon at some point, and they were both divorced Catholics, she was and he was. They were chatting about that, and he talked about the fact that he could sometimes get away with going to Mass, and taking Mass, but he was so recognizable that the priest was always making a decision. And she said she had the advantage that nobody really knew who she was. If she wanted to go and take Mass she could. So that was important. There were lots of things that I didn't know the extent of, but had some sense of.

Knott: Did you ever ask him—you say he’s a serious Catholic—about his position on abortion and some of these social issues where he clearly differs with the church?

Clymer: No. I took him at his word, and when he said publicly—heck, most American Catholics don’t agree with their church on abortion or birth control. Why should he be different? Including all the regular communicants I know.

The other thing that came as a sort of surprise was his interest and involvement in foreign affairs. His four trips to the Soviet Union, his trips to China, South Africa, and Chile. His interest in Chile. There is always a strong human rights element. This was a side of him I hadn’t really known anything about, and it was certainly not part of his public persona.

Martin: OK, just steer a little bit in a slightly different direction. I’m curious when you were writing the book—you were also actively a journalist at the time—I’m wondering how that relationship shifts between reporter-politician to writer-subject.

Clymer: Well, there were some things he told me where it was agreed that this would only be for the book, but not many. And look, it greatly enhanced my understanding of one of the major players in the Senate. I wrote better about Congress from what I knew about him, and moreover, I got to know some of the people on his staff and him quite well, and got to know new things about what was going on in the Senate from them that I wouldn’t have known otherwise. I think it was an asset for the *Times*.

Knott: Did you ever get any push back from other Senate offices that might have known you were writing a book on Kennedy?

Clymer: No.

Knott: Was it publicly known that you were writing a book on Kennedy?

Clymer: Yes, I think so. There were enough Senators I talked to, who made it clear I was talking for the book that they were not— First of all, Kennedy certainly at that point—I’m a little less sure now with all of the fire-breathing former members of the House there, but Kennedy enjoyed enormous respect among Republicans, most Republicans as well as most Democrats at the time. They didn’t necessarily agree with him, but they regarded him as somebody who took the Senate seriously and whose word could be counted on, and his relations with other Senators were much better than the typical Senators. He was concerned. Bob Smith of New Hampshire, who was certainly somebody of no ideological affinity whatever, once told me—I think I was interviewing him on another subject, and he said, “I’ve heard you’re writing a book about Kennedy. Let me tell you a story.” And Smith’s wife had— *[Interruption]* Can you excuse me?

Knott: Absolutely.

[BREAK]

Clymer: OK. Well thank you so much. That was Robert Morgan, the Senator who got defeated over the Panama Canal issue. Interviewed him about a month ago, and he was calling to tell me he'd found something out that he wants to send me.

Knott: Well, good.

Clymer: So I'm sorry, where were we?

Knott: You were telling us about Senator Smith from New Hampshire.

Clymer: Oh yes. Simply said, Smith's wife had been in an automobile accident. [*Adam Clymer's wife enters*] Ann, let me introduce these people. They're from the Miller Center, from the University of Virginia. Martin. Stephen Knott. And I forgot your name. Nadia. You're not going to hear anything you haven't heard before, but stick around.

A. Clymer: Okay.

Clymer: At any rate, Senator Smith said the first colleague he'd heard from, offering concern and was there anything he could do, was Kennedy, within a half an hour or so of his [Smith's] hearing of the accident. One of the things Kennedy could do very effectively for colleagues with any sort of a medical problem, was to say, "Do you need any help getting whoever is best in this field?" People have done that. Because of his connection with the health industry—fortunately, neither of us has ever needed it. But on a couple of occasions, I've had friends who have serious obscure health problems. And I've called his health committee aides, and they get somebody from NIH [National Institutes of Health] to talk to him about it, or recommend something. And in theory, one shouldn't be asking people you cover for favors, but that one never bothered me.

Knott: Right. Were there any Senators who did not like him, or vice versa?

Clymer: I think the only Senator I feel confident that he doesn't like, or didn't like, was Jesse Helms. He managed—obviously he liked some better than others. My sense is that he made a point in the sense of trying to get things done, trying to find something to like about almost anybody. At the time I was writing the book, it was plain that John McCain didn't like him, but I don't think that's true any more. Otherwise I'm not sure. It wasn't ever clear to me from people I needed to talk to—I don't know that [Robert] Dole liked him, but respected him. And that told me you can take Kennedy's word to the bank. It's hard to tell what criticisms people are making on the floor or in press conferences are routine and partisan, a necessity, and how much of it they believe. McCain's the only one I ever felt clearly that he disliked Kennedy.

Knott: Perhaps you could help me answer a question I've had some trouble with, which is his rhetoric on the floor is often pretty tough, and some might even say over the top. Yet his reputation is as an effective Senator. Where does that fit in? Is that partisan brand strategy, or is this just occasions where he gets very—?

Clymer: No. It means that what people say on the floor doesn't matter to getting business done. I mean, there isn't debate in the Senate, there are serial monologues. Oh sure, once in a while somebody gets under somebody's skin for what they say, but deals and accommodations are not reached on the floor very often, they're reached elsewhere and votes aren't changed by speeches. So—

Knott: So it doesn't hurt him?

Clymer: Oh, I don't know that it never has, but not particularly. It's something people know he does. Maybe some of them are annoyed by it occasionally, but it isn't that he's bringing rhetoric to the table. He's bringing votes and knowledge and experience, and they either deal with him or they don't. Arguably the most damaging piece of rhetorical excess was the first [Robert] Bork speech. He made Bork sound like a Nazi. And while you could arguably defend every accusation, and say well, Bork has offered opinions that would lead to this, Bork wasn't a Nazi. It certainly wasn't the first fight over a Supreme Court justice, but I think defeating Bork led to this sort of constant intense horribly partisan way of examining judicial nominees. I think Kennedy bears a lot of responsibility for that, which I think I said in the book.

Martin: Let me go back to the question about who you were interviewing, other Senators. Was there much in the way of consensus or disagreement in terms of their assessment of Kennedy's importance or his legislative ability?

Clymer: Well, in the fact that most Senators would regard speaking highly of someone else's importance as perhaps derogating their own, relatively, no. No, I don't think—or many of them would spin their discussion about how “I work with him” and “he helped me,” or something like that. But that was sort of normal political ego. I haven't reread those transcripts since I sent them up to Harvard, but I think if you read them from Senators, you'd find a pretty consistent line there.

Knott: Is it your take that the [Orrin] Hatch-Kennedy relationship is for real? Some people say well, Hatch tends to hype it. It's not quite as close as—

Clymer: I think it's stronger on Hatch's side than Kennedy's. Hatch does try to hype it, and I don't think it's as close as it was, because they aren't chairman and ranking member of the same committee anymore. I think it's been a while since they've worked on anything much together. I think in a way—I don't mean that Kennedy disliked him, but they weren't pals the way he was with Chris Dodd, say. And certainly not—Hatch doesn't drink.

But a great Chris Dodd line of no particular relevance—I remember standing in the corridor of the second floor, and the Senators came in to vote or something. Somebody asked Dodd how it was he'd taken a position different on some bill from his “mentor,” Kennedy. And he said, “Mentor, mentor, what's that, some new brand of Scotch?” And this is after Chris had gotten married and calmed down.

Knott: We've heard a lot about Kennedy's staff, how good they are. This is the word. Ever get any sense that there's some resentment, either amongst the other Senators, or some of the Senators' staff towards Kennedy's staff?

Clymer: I haven't. Doesn't mean there isn't, but one of the more amusing yarns one of his aides told me once was that he heard other staffs gripe, not about Kennedy's staff but about how Kennedy would go to their boss. Kennedy's staff and Senator X's staff would be negotiating about something, and Kennedy's staff would say we've gotten as far as we can with these guys, you've got to see their boss. And Kennedy would go do it, and cut a deal, and Senator X's staff would be miffed that they'd been cut out. But no, I'm not really familiar with people there right now other than Carey, who isn't there much anymore, and Mike Myers.

I knew Danica Petroschius when she was on Education. I haven't really seen her since she got her current job. Now I talk occasionally with the press people, but I'm more likely, if I need to do something dealing with Kennedy, to call Stephanie Cutter. As I think I said in the introduction to the book, there really is no such thing as a former Kennedy staffer any more than there's an ex-Marine. They all get a lifetime commitment to the reserves.

Knott: Yes. Is that unusual from what you see in the Senate?

Clymer: Yes, it isn't unique, but it's more intense. One or two people who have left the staff because Kennedy was unhappy with them are not in touch, but not many.

Martin: When you were interviewing people for the book, were there particular people who you thought were real goldmines for your research?

Clymer: Dave Burke, [Bancroft] Nick Littlefield, Ranny Cooper. Carey. Carey's a difficult—I'll tell you a Carey Parker story. I think the first thing I interviewed—oh, Larry Horowitz also. Carey had just joined Kennedy's staff when the 18-year-old vote issue came along. Carey wrote a memo arguing that the Congress could do it by statute. This was circulated and Kennedy pushed it out. And Carey talked to me about it, gave me a whole bunch of photocopies of stories about the bill as it went along, including a lot from the *New York Times*. But the one he didn't give me, when it was sort of notable, he didn't give me the one from the day the Senate passed it. I thought this was odd, so I went and got that one on my own. And it had Carey Parker's name in it. If you've interviewed him, you'll actually understand that.

Knott: We haven't interviewed him yet, but we've sort of consulted with him.

Clymer: It's one of those offices where essentially nobody's name is supposed to get in the paper but the boss's. It's not unique in that respect, but press secretary, OK, he can get his name in the paper. Not other people. Let's come back to your question about valuable people. Joan Kennedy was valuable.

Knott: She was?

Clymer: Yes. Well, they had a deal. One of the many deals they had was that before she talked to the press or anyone, it would have to be cleared with his office. So I would write her a letter, like the ones that I wrote Kennedy, saying this is what I'd like to talk to you about. Then she'd send it down to his office, and they'd say OK. Sometimes we pushed it a bit, and discussed things that occurred to us in the course of discussing those things. But she was very good. George McGovern was very good, has a historian's memory. So many people I talked to, it was sort of targeted about a particular event. Most of them were pretty good. But I wouldn't— for people who talked about a lot of things, I think those that I mentioned were the best.

Knott: Did you talk to this guy, I think it's Rick Burke, the guy who wrote the—

Clymer: No. This is the guy who shot a hole in his car, and then reported to the police he'd been part of an assassination attempt. I didn't consider him reliable. No, I didn't have any reason to think I'd believe him, so I didn't try.

Knott: I've never read the book, but I think he alleges drug use on the part of Senator Kennedy during the '80s. What's your take on that?

Clymer: I have no reason to believe it. I mean I always thought his drug of choice was alcohol. Can I prove that he never snorted cocaine? No, but I don't have any reason to think he did.

Knott: You don't deal with life or Chappaquiddick in your book, but you do deal with it.

Clymer: You know, that's interesting you say that. One of the criticisms in one of the reviews was that I spent fewer pages on it than I spent on the Bork hearing. Well, if Kennedy or other people had talked to me, I probably would have had more, but I think what happened is pretty darn clear. I don't think you needed— maybe I would have done better to write about some other sections at less length. It was a pretty long book. I got the inquest records; I tried to interview people about it. Not only Kennedy, but I knew a couple of the women who were there. They wouldn't discuss it with me.

Knott: Nobody, did anybody at that party talk to you about it?

Clymer: No. I mean for the most part, it's the inquest records and some newspaper quotes. But—

Knott: Any of the other personals—the Palm Beach thing happened, I think, shortly after you began your project.

Clymer: Yes. Well, I talked to him. Again, I think it's pretty clear. I didn't—there was no point in my examining the context of Willie Smith's activities. I mean, whether he raped her or not. Kennedy, as he conceded, showed pretty dumb judgment in going off to Au Bar. One of the things about Kennedy in the '80s is that this is a guy who in some respect was really quite lonely. You could see shortly after his marriage to Vicki how happy he was, not merely with her, but to have kids around the house again. He likes kids. If you see him at a confirmation hearing, a

judicial nominee, they'll bring their kids to the hearings usually. And he's talking to the kids before they do anything about talking to the nominee.

This is a guy who drank too much. When he was sad, he drank. There was a recollection of Steve Smith, to whom he'd been very close. It was the first time he and Jean [Kennedy Smith] had been at least in Palm Beach since Steve Smith died. First of all, my primary focus wasn't the personal stuff. As I said to various people who said, "Why isn't it?" I said, "Look, let's assume I could find the names of another dozen women he slept with who haven't been made public. What would that add to anyone's real understanding?" I mean, people know he's slept around. What they don't know is the legislative, political part of him. And that's what interests me. I mean, there are a few names in the book. I'm sure they're—I'd felt like researching that, and I think I could have found more, but who cares?

Martin: When we do our interviews with different Senators and different folks, there's sometimes 30 years that they're in office with Kennedy, and we have to pick particular issues that we are hoping will illuminate how lawmaking works in the Senate or those sorts of relationships. Were there particular issues that you thought in terms of dealing with Kennedy and writing about him that epitomized his role in the Senate?

Clymer: Well, I think you talked to Jack Danforth about the 1991 Civil Rights bill.

Knott: We did.

Clymer: That's one. Persistence. For Kennedy in 1991, he took a backseat to Danforth, and knew he was doing that. Every time Danforth did something, Kennedy would have a one-paragraph approving comment. The ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] legislation again, that's another instance of where some other people got a lot of the credit. But he was central. It's the persistence. It's so important in how he's gotten things done, and his willingness to concede center stage to a Bob Dole or Danforth or somebody like that. Dole on one of the Civil Rights acts in the '80s, I forget which one. And the ADA, Americans with Disabilities Act. And his ability to use his staff to get stuff done, the talent of his staff.

Howard Baker was a great fan of Robert Kennedy. Not politically, but he liked him and admired him. He didn't really warm to Ted as much, but the two of them—Baker's first year in the Senate, I think, or certainly his first one or two years, the two of them stopped Baker's father-in-law [Everett Dirksen] from monkeying with the Supreme Court's redistricting decisions. There it wasn't so much Baker and Kennedy, but what's his name—[Lamar] Alexander, now Senator Alexander, and Jim Flug. Yes, all right, their bosses agreed, they'd figure out how to get it done. And other pieces of legislation.

Martin: Sure, I agree, I agree. It's just one of those things that we deal with on a regular basis, how to whittle down to capture as best as we can something that would be good for the historical record.

Knott: He's been quoted recently as saying his most important vote in 44 years in the Senate was the Iraq war vote of '03 or whatever. I don't know if he'll continue to say that over time.

Clymer: Well, maybe as a vote.

Knott: Yes.

Clymer: But he's won a lot. He didn't win that one. I don't know if this yarn was in the book or not. Early in [Trent] Lott's tenure as Majority Leader, there was some bill that got fairly screwed up at the end because the House stuck something in conference, and one of Lott's aides' wife or spouse was working for a company, helped get it in. It became a huge embarrassment to Lott, and they agreed that it needed to come out. They didn't know how. Kennedy knew the parliamentary device, and Lott said, "How can I have people vote a different way than they've already voted?" Kennedy said, "We'll just make sure that nobody asks for a roll call. You do it by voice vote, and you tell your guy in the chair to call it." I think that story's in the book, but I'm not sure. Lott, his first couple of years, kept going around and saying, "Ted Kennedy doesn't run the Senate." Those of us who were covering it wondered why he was protesting so much.

Knott: You deal with this in the book, but if you don't mind talking a little bit about it, I'd be grateful. This whole question of why he ran for that whip position back in '68, '69. Did you talk a little bit about that? It seems like such an odd career move for him.

Clymer: Well, it was something to do. Something other—the Senate is an institution where you wait patiently, and generally he's pretty good at that, but that's certainly not the Kennedy political temperament, to wait for your turn. As Eddie McCormack would have pointed out to you quite clearly if he were alive, it was Eddie's turn to run for the Senate in 1962. I think he thought he could make something of the job that can't possibly be made, and it is not a policy job.

Policy is in the hands of committee chairmen. The leader himself has a little influence on it. [Mike] Mansfield encouraged him to run, 'cause Mansfield was thoroughly fed up with Russell Long, who didn't do anything. He [Kennedy] tried making a policy thing out of it for a few months, and along came Chappaquiddick and he was shell-shocked with that, and didn't do the job, and [Robert] Byrd beat him easily. Byrd, who was thoroughly offended by Kennedy's jumping the queue. Byrd once quoted to me Kennedy saying Byrd's defeating him was one of the best things that ever happened to him, because that wasn't the kind of thing he was good at.

Knott: Do you agree with those who say that once Kennedy got the Presidential bug out of his system in 1980 he's been a far more effective Senator?

Clymer: Oh sure.

Knott: No question about that?

Clymer: No. No question at all. I guess he was a better than average Senator before, but not by leaps and bounds. He'd gotten some things done legislatively, but not wildly so. He'd been chairman of Judiciary for two years, had started work on the crime legislation that eventually got passed. He'd done the immigration bill in '64, but that was a lay-down hand. And I don't know

exactly when he got rid of the bug. My favorite yarn on that account is a story [Walter] Mondale told me. Mondale told me he'd seen [George] McGovern some time in the early '90s and said, "By the way, George, how long does it take to get over being beaten for President, to move on to other things?" McGovern said, "Fritz, I'll call you when I know." I guess it was 20 years after McGovern's. There are remissions, but I don't know that there are any recorded cures.

Kennedy's remission has been pretty complete. He certainly thought about running in '84 and chose not to around Thanksgiving of '82. And he toyed with— and that's really all it is— toyed with the idea of a run in '88, at the beginning of '85. But his heart was never in that, and didn't last very long. Part of the reason is, by throwing himself into the Senate without this—first of all, in '81 and '82, he had the example of Senators who run for President and then lost the next time they ran. So he was concentrating very hard on making sure that didn't happen.

He wasn't preoccupied with a Presidential run. He had people work to make it possible if he decided to do it, but he was doing things in the Senate, and he was fighting the [Ronald] Reagan administration and dealing with Hatch and doing civil rights stuff. It was also a sense of how good he could be at *that*, which was a consolation for not being able to be President. If he outlasts Byrd and the Democrats are in the majority, he'll be the President pro-tem, and I think he will undoubtedly joke about checking the health of the President, the Vice President, and the Speaker. For all I know, they'll have an inaugural party when he gets to be President pro-tem, but—

[Meowing cat in background]

Knott: What's your cat's name?

Clymer: Bibi. The original fraidy cat. If you get up, he'll run away. Tolerant of guests who sit for a while.

Knott: You were around Kennedy and the Kennedy crowd during the '94 race with [Mitt] Romney. Were they genuinely scared, did they honestly think they were in trouble? We've had some mixed opinions on that, whether that was for real.

Clymer: I think they were honestly scared. I think he was honestly scared. Can I prove it? No. But that's what I think. God knows, I was up there several times. And every time I'd be there, there would be more and more of those so-called former Kennedy staffers there, helping. They obviously took a leave or vacation or whatever, because they were worried. The best person to ask that of would be Dave Burke, because he spent a lot of—Kennedy got him to ride in the car with him. I think Burke could give you—have you talked to Dave Burke yet?

Knott: Yes—we haven't done a formal interview with him—we've had a number of consultations with him. He's been very helpful.

Clymer: He's very good. He's willing to acknowledge flaws in Kennedy, but not too many of the staff people are. Has great admiration for him, thinks he's a great Senator. Can see some flaws when I talk to him.

Knott: Do you mind talking again—probably most of this is covered in your book, but the relationship between Senator Kennedy and President [William] Clinton, especially during the impeachment crisis?

Clymer: Well, one of the things to remember is that Kennedy has been an important Senator—his party was in the majority and there was a Democratic President for only four years out of his career, and the first two were when [Jimmy] Carter was President, and they were not exactly sympatico then. The new President [Clinton] comes in, who is trying to do his most important cause, national health insurance. And he was as supportive as he could be. That quote I have from Clinton about Kennedy's advice to him—he'd been in some scrapes himself, God knows. The only thing to do is to keep on doing your job. He was very supportive and very helpful.

Knott: Do you know if Vicki was at all involved in this, as somebody who's—we've heard this said that sort of behind the scenes she was offering advice to Clinton folks perhaps through her husband.

Clymer: I wonder why she would be particularly useful.

Knott: Right.

Clymer: Kennedy as a supporter both—Kennedy had known Hillary [Clinton] long before she came to Washington too, from the Children's Defense Fund and some other things that she'd been involved in. One of all the things Kennedy always did on election night—and probably still does—is call Democrats all over the place, and he was one of the people who called Bill Clinton when he lost for re-election as Governor. He said, "Don't worry about it, you'll have another chance."

Byrd told me one night, when Byrd won—and Byrd's victories are such foregone conclusions that most people don't bother to call. He remembers Kennedy calling him on occasions. That's good manners or brilliant political instinct or whatever, but he's done it, he's done it with a lot of them. I find it sort of amusing to read, occasionally, people complaining that Kennedy gives away too much on this or that and the other. Well, he gives away too much if all you want is a partisan issue, but if you want to get a law passed—I don't know what he would say if you gave him sodium pentothal and asked, "Are we better off as a country for having this flawed prescription drug bill, or would we better off if it hadn't happened?"

Knott: Right.

Clymer: My guess is that if you could give him a healthy dose of truth serum, he'd say, "I guess we're all better off." Whereas, as a partisan issue, they're not better off. He battles over money for No Child Left Behind, but he works with Margaret Spellings to get waivers and to make the law work as best as it can. That's one of the ones where people say they were giving in because they weren't going to provide the money. I'm not as close to what's going on now as I was when I was working there.

Martin: Can you talk a little bit about being a reporter for the *New York Times* covering Congress? I'm curious to many degrees about what your editors were looking for in a good Congress story or policy story.

Clymer: Well, when I came back down here in '91—I had covered Congress for the *Times* when I first went to work there in '77 and '78. While covering politics, I did some Congressional stuff through '83, and then I went up to New York. I came back; I had the title of Assistant Washington Editor for Congressional Coverage, which I guess was just to keep me exempt from paying newspaper guild dues, but essentially I told them.

There were very rare occasions when they wanted us to do stuff that I didn't want to do. They looked to me to define what we ought to be doing about what was happening on Congress. You know, for my money, it's the greatest beat in town, if you don't mind coming home late for dinner. It's the most accessible beat. You can talk to the people you're writing about, hang around by the elevators, they come in to vote. Walk up to them at the beginning or end of the committee meeting.

No part of the executive branch is that accessible. The judicial branch is hopeless. The *New York Times* has a brilliant Supreme Court correspondent, and she occasionally talks to a justice. She doesn't formally interview them, she sees them in the corridors or in the lunchroom, and it's the rarest of occasions, not for any use in the paper or whatever where she talks to them about substance.

Congress you can talk to. They'll try to spin you, fine. I'm a sporting man, let them try. And it's unpredictable, it's fun, it's raucous sometimes. The other thing that made me enjoy it in those years particularly was the *Times* had loosened up a bit about sourcing everything. And they came to accept the idea that I was as expert on Congress as any professor I might call to quote. Frankly, some of that, at least in early days, and for other reporters right now is—you need to get a source on interpretation. You call professors until you find one who agrees with you, and then you cite him.

Knott: We love that.

Clymer: But I think in the present atmosphere it would be harder than it was then to write what you know without citing a source. But if you read all the stories I ever wrote about the [Newt] Gingrich ethics investigation, there's hardly any sourcing in any of them. I just said what was happening, I was never wrong. I had one or two people who told me things, but the circle of people who knew anything was so small that any description might have contributed to naming, and at one point I had to name a source when I—I wrote about this Florida couple who picked up a scanner sort of radio, a cell phone conversation between Newt and a bunch of his cohorts about how they were going to get around some deal he'd made with the Ethics Committee. They brought the tape to someone who gave it to me. I described him as a Democratic Congressman hostile to Gingrich. Now if you sit down and think about that, that probably covered 190 of them. And I think a lot of people suspected who my source was. But you know, I never said and never needed to. I told the editors of the *Times*. I think that's something that's been lost in the last

couple of years of uproar over sources. Some reporters you should trust, but I know why it hasn't been that way. We've had, at the *New York Times* in particular, one or two you can't.

Martin: You said that you serve basically as your own editor, but—

Clymer: Well, I didn't edit the copy. But I was largely the assignment editor for the Hill.

Martin: Let me rephrase the question then. In your role as writer and editor, what kind of stories did you want to see the *Post*—I'm sorry, the *Times* write?

Clymer: I wanted the *Post* to miss them. [laughter] Well, I think I wanted us to work very hard at dealing with the substance of legislation, and less so with the politics of it. I wanted the stories to say what the bills were supposed to do, and what people said they would or wouldn't accomplish. I think the best example of that is I was the lead correspondent along with Robin Toner and Robert Pear on Clinton's health care proposals.

We tried scrupulously not to write about daily developments in terms of what they meant for Clinton. We didn't say Clinton suffered a defeat yesterday, we said what happened. We often managed to keep the word Clinton off the front-page part of the story, because we thought that the state of American health care was more important than Bill Clinton. So I was quite proud of the way we accomplished that. I was never a terribly enthusiastic writer of profiles. I mean, I'd do it. I was happy always to have other people on the Hill who enjoyed doing them more than I did. I did a few. I did a long one on [Daniel] Rostenkowski, a long one on Dole, and a long one on Kennedy. I think that's useful to help people get a feel for what you're writing about. But I paid a lot of attention to substance of legislation.

Martin: Were there things that you wanted to write about but figured the average person reading the *Times*, or the average public, didn't understand about Congress and just couldn't?

Clymer: No. First of all, you just try to make it comprehensible. And no, at the *Times* you figure you've got a somewhat higher than average readership. And no, if something was important up there; you tried to make it accessible.

Knott: I'm going to ask you a question that's way out of context here. We're in the middle actually of doing some interviews with the Senator about both the [Richard] Nixon impeachment and the Clinton impeachment. Near Nixon impeachment. And there's a passage in your book where you—right after the Saturday Night Massacre, you refer to Kennedy sort of gearing up his staff, researching how the Senate would conduct a trial if the House voted to impeach Nixon. Turn this information over to the Rules Committee, the next several in the House, and so forth. We've asked a couple of people on Kennedy's staff, and I think including James Flug, and he has no recollection of early preparatory measures. Can you add anything to this?

Clymer: Let me find the book.

Knott: All right. Thank you. It's the bottom of page 201.

Clymer: Oh, that's simple. Source was Kennedy.

Knott: Oh, OK. Yes, he doesn't remember.

Clymer: April 12, '96 interview. Carey would have been there. Flug would have been there.

Knott: At the time that—

Clymer: Burke. Would Burke have still been there? Maybe not.

Knott: OK, that's fine. Do you have any sense of what—?

Clymer: And look. I don't know how you—here's the place it would be, in his journal for that day. If you had any—

Knott: He's given us some access. His journal for that day, April 12, '96, or—

Clymer: No.

Knott: No, the actual time.

Clymer: The Sunday after the Saturday Night Massacre.

Knott: Right, OK. OK, good.

Clymer: Every now and then when I was interviewing him, there would be such a richness of detail about an event, and I knew that he had consulted the journal.

Knott: What's your take on what keeps this guy going? Forty-four years in the Senate, countless personal tragedies. A lot of people would have thrown it in years ago, it seems to me. I certainly would have. That part, what makes him tick, what keeps him going forward?

Clymer: I think the only time he did think of throwing it in was after Robert's death. I think he thought of throwing it in again after Chappaquiddick, but I'm not sure of that. Hold on a second. *[Looks through his book.]*

Dun Gifford, who was an aide in the late '60s, who is persona non grata with the Kennedy people, when I didn't know that and I asked Melody or somebody who would know, I found him. And she said, "I don't know." I don't know the details of why—I've heard rumors of why, but I don't know. At any rate, Gifford told me about talking with Kennedy about one of the points, he was thinking of quitting the Senate after Bobby's death, going into the yacht business. One of them would work here in the States, and the other would have an office in France, and they would kid each other over who would have that. There was a little talk about maybe buying a newspaper.

I don't think there's really been anything else he thought he could do. Once you've invested a long time into a place, you get to be more and more powerful. What was he going to do with any point in the last 20 years? Sail more, paint more? He lives for the place, and he's good at it. And he knows he's good at it. You know, there are always unmet—always things we haven't done yet, to make the society better. I think he very much learned that, the lessons from his parents, childhood, you have advantages; it's up to you to give things back. That verse in Luke—when he was a kid he would do a version of it—he would cite it. Those early chapters from his mother's teaching. I think that's all real. So what else would you do?

Knott: Yes.

Clymer: I suspect that there's going to be a really intense argument in about five years between him and Vicki.

Knott: Oh, I see.

Clymer: About whether he's going to run for another term after this one.

Knott: Yes. You think Vicki would be opposed?

Clymer: Yes. I think she would just as soon he hadn't run this time. I don't know. I sort of hear that through the grapevine. He always contends that most of the people who ask him if he's going to run again are his nieces and nephews. I think that's unfair to his nieces.

Martin: This is more of a speculative question. There are other Senators who have been around as long as Kennedy, and I frankly think about Senator [Daniel] Inouye as an example of someone who had a very different career path than Kennedy in terms of how much legislation and how much power he has in the Senate. There are some people who argue that Kennedy's just this powerful because he's been there that long. And you can find some other folks who've never really risen to that level. Any idea what differentiates people like Kennedy and Inouye?

Clymer: Well, first of all I wouldn't say that Inouye isn't powerful. If you're an appropriator, you're not really much involved in anything else. But he manages to keep Hawaii safe for favored shipping lines and things like that that seem to matter to his constituents. It's a combination of having interests and energy, which he has.

Let me think about who else is still around. You wouldn't necessarily say that Byrd wasn't a powerful Senator. Byrd was Majority Leader for a long time. The Chairman of Appropriations, he still matters there, and that comes with seniority. But Kennedy has this broader bunch of things he's interested in, which tend to all spill out in the sense that poor people or blacks or gays or other folks don't get to share in the American dream as well as rich folks like him. He thinks there's something wrong with that.

If you've got that sort of a drive, then that and seniority gives you a lot to do. It's not a family of shrinking violets. Joe [Kennedy] took what he wanted. He was going to run; if he couldn't be President himself, he was going to make Joe [Kennedy] Jr. President. Failing that, he made Jack

[Kennedy] President, or so he thought. And then the next one, then Jack got killed so Bob tried, and then Ted tried.

One of the curious things about him, and one of the things that showed in the '94 race—at that point Ted was 62. He hadn't lost weight for the election the way he usually did. His back was giving him hell, and he looked old. And he looked particularly old because the country had no experience of old Kennedys. They hadn't seen Joe; they really hadn't seen Rose [Kennedy]. But Robert and Jack had died in their 40s. And so you know, that was one of the things that contributed to his being vulnerable in '94, I guess. But to answer your question, so what else would he do? He's got this range of interests, he's got this experience, he's got, I presume, still a superior staff. He can get things done. A little less these days, but who knows, the Democrats might get the Senate back sometime while he's here.

Martin: I think there was something in *Time*'s stories within the last year, making a case that Kennedy was operating in an old-fashioned way in the Senate. That the Senate had moved beyond his willingness to make deals, and it was mostly keying off of the No Child Left Behind bargain. And you sense that his old-school style—

Clymer: Well, there are fewer people willing to play nicely in the sandbox. On the other hand, the place has gotten so partisan and so bitter that he won't get anything done any other way. No party is going to get big enough control in the Senate to do whatever the heck it wants, even if it's a party that knows—sometimes questionably with his party—just what it is that it wants. It's a lot harder to do what he could do with a [John] Danforth or a [Alan] Simpson or a Dole when there aren't Danforths and Simpsons and Doles around. A really isolated, small bunch of Republicans who are prepared to work with him, so it's harder. No, I think I recall that piece. I think I was talking about it before, that argument, so what's the alternative? Just yap. That's not his.

Knott: Did you ever talk to him about while Bobby was a Senator, Jack was a Senator, their reputation as Senators was not particularly strong? They weren't seen as Senatorial types. Why do you think it is that he, Edward Kennedy, has found such a home to be such an effective—?

Clymer: One of the simplest answers is that he was the youngest of nine children. He was accustomed to waiting for his elders to finish. And the Senate, when he got there, was a place where freshmen were seen but not heard. He gave what was described as his maiden speech. Now, in fact he'd spoken a couple of times before that, after he'd been in the Senate more than a year. He gave it on the '64 Civil Rights Act. He got to the Senate in the beginning of '63, you know.

These days, they can barely wait to be sworn in. In fact, I think Paul Wellstone, when he came here, gave what he called a major speech the day before he got sworn in. It wasn't on the Senate floor, he couldn't do it there, but he gave it somewhere in town. So Ted was sort of adaptive and eager to learn. Jack just wasn't very much interested in it. Bobby actively disliked it. Jack could laugh off the stodginess of the place and just not show up, fine. Bob—I think I've got a good example in the book of their difference of approaches, when they were doing the '65 immigration bill. Bob can't put up with Senator [Ernest] Hollings playing to the home votes. Ted

knows that's part of the game. This habit I mentioned before of working to find something to like about people. I don't think anyone would ever characterize Bob that way.

Knott: Yes.

Clymer: No, it's simplistic, but I think youngest of nine children does tell you something about his aptitude for that place at that time. And once you've learned those plays, if you want—I haven't done it recently, as recently as a couple of years ago. If you watch the Senate on CSPAN [Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network] during a vote—camera's on the well, people are milling about, Kennedy often seems to have purposes. He would deliberately be seen. He'll check a 3X5 card and then he'd look around and he'll find somebody who's on a list to talk to about something. He's not just schmoozing, as most of them are.

People used to spend more time on the floor. They don't much anymore. They don't hang around the floor unless a vote's coming. So he uses that time the way he probably used his time on the floor 30 years ago, sitting and schmoozing with people, but with a purpose.

Knott: Did you hear from him after your book came out? Get any response from him?

Clymer: Well, let's see. First off—well, he bought a couple of hundred copies to give as Christmas presents and had me autograph them. [*Laughter*] So that was one favorable—

Martin: Here's a book about me.

Clymer: He told a friend of mine—this is the same friend whom he talked to several years before about going to Mass—she saw him at my retirement party that he came to, and asked him what the book had meant to him. He said, "Somebody finally validated what I've been doing all this time."

I'm sure he doesn't like everything in it, but he never complained about anything. At one point, I forget just where it came through. At one point, I sent him a set of bound galleys at the same time they went to reviewers, just to spare the guys at the *Globe* being pestered by his office. He had seen it before it was published, one way or another. So I sent him one. Somebody on his staff, thinking that the book wasn't really finished, wanted to give me some information about Joan's drinking that he thought I didn't have. That had to proceed from somebody's reading the book. Ted, Vicki—it was negative, so it wouldn't have been from one of the kids reading it.

I said I wasn't interested. I had said all that I thought needed to be said about that. It doesn't seem to me that that was his initiative, which made me suspect Vicki. Somebody told me—I have no idea if this is true—I never asked her, if Vicki thought there was too much about Joan in the book. Joan was married to him a lot longer than Vicki had been—and more notoriously. Kara, who wouldn't talk to me for the book, told me I got something wrong about her, but she wouldn't tell me what it was. Patrick [Kennedy] told someone that he wasn't going to read the book because it was too mean to his mother.

A lot of Kennedy's friends have told me how much they like the book—friends and relatives. And I suspect that if he hadn't, even if they did, they wouldn't have said so. No, I think he's pleased with it. Look at the collection of books about him. Other than Ted Lippmann's book around '70, and one of the others—

Knott: Burton Hersh?

Clymer: Yes. Those are the only favorable ones, and they were 29 years previous. Even if there are things he doesn't like, and I don't know what they are, he's had a lot written about them that most people wouldn't like over the years.

Knott: Great. Thank you very much.

Martin: Yes, this was very nice.

Clymer: Well, I hope it was helpful. Is there anything else I can think of?

Knott: If you don't mind, you may be hearing from—I don't know if you remember Jim Young, the professor. We came to visit you a couple of years ago. You met with us at the Miller Center.

Clymer: Sure.

Knott: He's about to begin a series of interviews with the Senator dealing with some of these personal matters and also Chappaquiddick. And I think he's going to talk to you for any suggestions you may have, any helpful advice. The Senator has said that he wants to do this.

Clymer: I don't think that Jim will get—I'd be surprised if—one of the reasons I wasn't terribly upset about his not talking to me about Chappaquiddick was the sense that he has talked about it enough over the years so that what he has said has become his firmly implanted memory. Can we go off the record at this point?

Knott: Yes.

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