



EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH THAD COCHRAN

September 19, 2006
Washington, D.C.

Interviewers

Janet Heininger
Stephen Knott

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TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH THAD COCHRAN

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Cochran: I haven't served on the Labor Committee.

Knott: Is that right? Okay. We're sorry about that. That was our mistake.

Cochran: But I was on the Judiciary Committee for two years, an interesting time.

You all may be surprised: when did I first meet Senator Kennedy? 1962.

Knott: Really?

Cochran: That surprises you.

Knott: That is surprising, yes.

Heininger: How did you meet him?

Cochran: At his house in Hyannis Port. I bet that goes beyond your research.

Heininger: Yes.

Knott: Well, thanks for agreeing to do this, Senator. We really appreciate it. What we hope is that people will approach this differently from a journalistic encounter. That's not what we're about. We're hoping that you will feel free to speak to history. And you will control this transcript of your interview today. In other words, you'll get a copy of it several months from now. You can make any changes you want to it at that point. If there's something you've forgotten that you'd like to add to it, feel free. If you have second thoughts about something you said, you can retract it, and we honor that. That's the hallmark of what we're about. Again, the goal is for you to tell your story about your relationship with Senator Kennedy, just keeping in mind that somebody might be reading this 100 years from now trying to get a sense of what he was like and what the Senate was like. That's what we're here for.

Heininger: And he will not be seeing it either.

So now you've already given us a taste of your relationship with him. You said you met him first in 1962 in Hyannis Port?

Cochran: Yes.

Heininger: How did you do that?

Cochran: I was teaching at the Officer Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island. I'd served in the Navy after I graduated from the University of Mississippi, and I was an officer assigned to a ship in Boston, as a matter of fact. I'd come to enjoy New England, and so when I got out of the Navy two years later, I entered law school at the University of Mississippi, but I stayed active in the Reserves in the U.S. Navy. The Navy put out a directive, or a publication, asking for volunteers to come for the summer to add to the teaching complement at the Navy Officers Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island. I thought, Well, that will probably be a better summer job—and it was just for the summer—than I could find clerking for a law firm, and I'd be back in New England, and it does have a ring to it, "summering in Newport." So I applied and I was selected to be a summer instructor.

I went up there and one of my friends from the university called me in Newport. She and a couple of her classmates at the University of Mississippi had decided to go up to Cape Cod and try to get a summer job and spend the summer up there. One decided she'd rather go to New York instead and went to New York, but this one friend called and said, "You can't believe where I'm working." I said, "Where?" She said, "For Ted and Joan Kennedy." And I said, "Oh, really." [*chuckles*] "What are you doing?" She said, "Well, I'm the cook." I said, "Are you kidding?" So here's this 20-year-old college coed from the University of Mississippi whom I had known since she was in junior high school, just a friend. She said, "You've got to come up here. The Toonerville Trolley is running around on the grounds, and Bobby Kennedy is running around everywhere, and Ted and Joan are fun." I said, "Well, fine, maybe I can. I'll call you if it looks like I have a weekend free."

So, soon enough a weekend opportunity appeared in my schedule, and I called her. She gave me directions, gave me the name of the security guard who was in charge of the compound so I'd have clearance to come into the area. One of her best friends was the chauffeur. I've forgotten his name, but he was driving for almost all the family. Of course there were several houses. The senior Kennedys had the big house, and Ted and Joan had a house on the hill, but right across the street from President [John F.] Kennedy and Jackie's [Jacqueline Kennedy] house—they were there infrequently at that time.

But the point of the story is, I go up there and I end up meeting Joan first of all. I wasn't expecting to see Senator Kennedy because he was a candidate for the Senate. He was actively campaigning, but he showed up during the course of the weekend. We stood around the kitchen and he asked me about law school, and he said, "It's hard as hell, isn't it?" I said, "Yes, it is hard," but I had a good first year; I'd made all As just about, but I didn't want to tell him that I had a very good first year; I led my class in grade point average. Anyway, so we talked. He had his finance guy there, whose name I've forgotten. They were talking about fundraising off to the side.

So I just mainly spent the time sightseeing during that weekend, walking down to the pier with her, encountering some of the Bobby Kennedy children. One of them, I remember, asked me, “You’re from Mississippi? Do you know Jake Gibbs?” who was an all-American quarterback for the Ole Miss Football team at the time, University of Mississippi. I said, “Yes, I do.” He was so impressed, so excited, that I knew Jake Gibbs. Of course Jake Gibbs ended up being a pretty good catcher on the New York Yankees team, and he was just a superstar athlete all the way around. Apparently he was kind of a hero figure to one of Bobby’s sons at that point. And I’ve met most of them since then, and I bring that up to see if any of them have a recollection of talking to this Mississippi Naval officer about Jake Gibbs, and none of them have remembered. Anyway, that’s the first time I met him.

Heininger: Did Senator Kennedy remember that he had met you then?

Cochran: Yes, he remembered. The only thing he’s confused about, he thought that there was a different cook than the one who really was there. The next summer there was this drum majorette from Missouri, who was also a student at the University of Mississippi, who was a Miss America contestant, I think. He thinks I was up there to see her. He didn’t really erase the one who was my friend, but it just didn’t stick in his head when I reminded him when we had first met, and it was after I had been elected to the Senate that I told him about it.

I think I had bumped into him after I was elected to the House. I served six years in the House of Representatives before getting elected to the Senate, but I don’t think our paths crossed in any way when I was in the House. But when I came to the Senate, we’d see each other every day. I was on the Judiciary Committee. He had just assumed the chairmanship of the Judiciary Committee in 1969.

Heininger: What were your impressions of him that very first time you met him in Hyannis Port?

Cochran: Very casual, easy to be with, approachable, good sense of humor, big appetite. He liked chocolate-chip cookies, I know that. He stood there and ate a whole fistful of chocolate-chip cookies, which my friend would make on request. She was apparently good at that.

Heininger: Then when you came to the Senate in ’79, what impressions did you have of him? I mean, you watched him when you were in the House and you had known of him. What were your impressions when you first came to the Senate? What did you expect him to be like?

Cochran: I knew he was a very serious-minded Senator; worked very hard; took his job very seriously; very popular in Massachusetts; a competitive Presidential candidate if and when he decided to run; and very likeable, easy to be with, wonderful personality.

Heininger: Did you come with a sense of him as a raging liberal who was going to be a problem to deal with?

Cochran: *[laughs]* No. I knew he was liberal, but I never saw him raging, or at least I knew that he was play acting if he was doing it.

Heininger: So when you first came to the Senate then, what was your sense of him?

Cochran: Well, I immediately took him seriously in his leadership position. I had gotten to know Jim Eastland, who was the former chairman. He was from Mississippi. He was the person I succeeded in the Senate. He retired in '78, and that's when I was elected. I knew that he was fond of Ted Kennedy too, but they seldom voted alike, except to report out bills out of their committee. But judicial nominations and Supreme Court confirmations particularly—I'm thinking back to the Abe Fortas situation and other times—I don't know exactly how they got along politically, but they were friendly. Senator Eastland had a capacity to be friends with anybody and everybody. He was very approachable. He had a unique sense of humor. He didn't take himself very seriously. He took his responsibilities seriously. He was a good Senator from Mississippi. He got a lot of things done for our state, but they got along very well.

Heininger: What has your relationship been with Senator Kennedy since?

Cochran: Very friendly. I respect him for his devotion to his job. He's one of the most effective and active Senators. He's engaged in the process. He's busy. He has a great capacity for hard work. He's fun to be with.

Heininger: Do you have a relationship beyond the Senate with him?

Cochran: I do, as a matter of fact. He and Vicki [Reggie Kennedy] have invited me to their house for social events. As a matter of fact, I think I had them out to my house. I gave a Christmas party a few years ago, and a lot of my friends in the neighborhood were surprised when they looked up and in walked Ted Kennedy and his wife, Vicki, and we obviously were friends. They just had never thought about the fact that I would be friends with Ted Kennedy, but I feel very comfortable with him.

I've been out to his house when they were living right there on the river by Prince Bandar [bin Sultan] and played tennis with Eunice [Kennedy Shriver] and whoever else he would put together for a doubles match. I've never been out on the sailboat with him. I'd seen him in a sailboat that first summer, but I'm not a sailor. I've done a little of it, but I'm not good enough to go with him. You know, he took a sailboat and he went from Washington to Massachusetts, Newport, last summer. He stopped in Rhode Island to have dinner with Claiborne Pell, and he was telling him about his trip and how he and Vicki went by themselves and took this voyage, which is kind of scary when you think about it. I mean, that's serious business. So he's a very accomplished, talented sailor, confident. That's something that I guess most people don't know about. They don't talk about things like that.

Knott: How's his tennis game?

Cochran: Well, not very good, but at one time he was very competitive. He's a little slow around the court. I don't know that he plays any now, as a matter of fact.

Heininger: What did you think of the work that he did on the Judiciary Committee?

Cochran: Well, he changed the rules right away. Senator Eastland had a standing rule that was respected and enforced that no one nominated for a United States district judgeship would have a hearing in the Judiciary Committee unless the Senators from the state where that judge came from supported his confirmation, whether it's a Republican, Democrat, whatever. He thought that Senators had the power, really, of selection. And particularly those Senators of the party in power at the time had their requests and their suggestions to the President for who should be nominated, who should be taken seriously. And unless there was some glaring problem, the President should nominate that person. If they nominated somebody who was not supported by a Senator, then they wouldn't have a hearing. He wouldn't even convene a hearing, and he'd let the White House know, "You'd better send another name up here because this person isn't going anywhere."

Senator Kennedy changed that, but guess what? He said, no longer would it be a bar to a hearing. We may not report out the nomination once we hear the objections of a Senator, but there will be a hearing. So no nominee would be denied a hearing just because one of the Senators in the state objected to proceeding. That was a nuance, but it was an important change in the rules of the Senate Judiciary Committee. That one I remember very distinctly. There may have been others.

Of course he was a lot more active in terms of having hearings on legislation, reporting things out. Jimmy Carter was President, and Griffin Bell, I remember, appeared before our committee a time or two. I was always entertained by him and well informed by him. He was a bright guy. I really admired him too.

Knott: What was your take on the change that Senator Kennedy made? Were you in favor of it?

Cochran: It sounded reasonable to me, yes. I had no objection to it. I don't think I voted against it, and I don't know that we even voted on it. He just announced it, and it just became a part of the rules. It was one of things without objection. These are the rules; everybody had a copy of them before them; and he called attention to a few things, but that was one that I remember. It was treated in the press as if it were a big, major change, and I guess it was.

Knott: You were quoted somewhere in our briefing materials as saying that Senator Kennedy, as chair of that committee, was fair minded and not oppressive.

Cochran: That's my recollection. He was very fair. We had a lot of things coming up in the committee that had to do with civil rights, and the Martin Luther King birthday, I think, came up that year. There were several things on the agenda.

I remember remarking to one of my friends that I wasn't so sure I was on the right committee, being from Mississippi, where there were racial tensions and a history of difficulties accommodating to civil-rights legislation. Neither Senator [John] Stennis nor Senator Eastland had ever supported civil-rights legislation, and here I was, a Republican on the committee, and we were voting to approve things that Senator Stennis wasn't going to vote for when it got to the

floor—if it got to the vote on the floor. I’m sitting there worried—here I am, I’m going to get everybody confused, occasionally voting for some of these initiatives that Senator Kennedy was pushing. Don’t get me wrong, I didn’t have a high ADA [Americans for Democratic Action] rating. I had a conservative voting record, but on the Voting Rights Act, for example, and some of the other things, I was more in tune with the majority in the Senate than I was with the opponents of some of those changes. I thought it was time that we did make changes, particularly in the area of voting rights, political activity and expression.

In Mississippi, there had been a long period of time when blacks couldn’t register to vote, and of course we had segregation in most of the school systems in Mississippi, and these were issues that were very contentious. People felt so passionately about them on both sides that it was politically very dangerous to get yourself crossed up with some of those issues. Nonetheless, there I was on the Judiciary Committee, where most of these things were being discussed in public hearings. I remember telling one of my friends that one day I would start to just get down on my knees and crawl out the back door. *[laughs]* It was just like, *Oh my, why am I here? Why did I come to this?* Of course, then all the TV cameras are there, and everybody’s listening to every word, nuance, and everything. I was thinking, *What in the world am I doing this for?* And I thought, *Well, at my first opportunity, I’m going to get off this committee.* Of course the first opportunity was after that Congress was over.

Two years later the Republicans had a huge, big victory. President [Ronald] Reagan was elected. The Senate, all of a sudden, became Republican. We were in the majority, and not only were there new opportunities for committee assignments, I went on the Appropriations Committee instead of the Judiciary Committee, and I was so senior that instantly, the first day, I was a subcommittee chairman. It turned out to be the Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee, which was very good politically for me in Mississippi with Mississippi State University, in an agriculture state. It had jurisdiction over the feeding programs like the food-stamp program, the women-and-infants, children’s-feeding programs. Other programs were being administered by the Department of Agriculture.

So I could be in a place where I could make people happy and proud of the fact that their Senator is on this committee that is helping them with some of these problems that we have in our state, rather than being on the Judiciary Committee where you get in a fist fight every day with half the people in your state if you’re aggressive and want to get publicly involved in those issues. So I took a lower profile on some of the contentious issues I had to deal with in the Judiciary Committee and a higher profile when things that made people happy, healthier, and better off financially than they had been in the past.

Heininger: Did you see any change in Senator Kennedy after the 1980 election and his failed attempt to run against Jimmy Carter?

Cochran: No, I really didn’t. I wasn’t observing him closely, however, but I don’t recall any unusual things that year. He ran an aggressive campaign. I don’t remember all the details of it. I was surprised that Jimmy Carter was nominated. I didn’t think he could be nominated by the Democrats. Then when he was, I thought, *Well, isn’t that interesting?* No, that was before. I’m sorry, I’m getting ahead. Reagan beat him. He was the incumbent and Reagan beat him, but I

was surprised he got elected in the first place. I was not surprised that Reagan was able to defeat him. His winning from the Deep South was just unusual.

Heininger: You've observed Senator Kennedy in times when the Democrats have been in the majority and at times when Democrats have been in the minority. Where do you think he's most effective, when they're in the majority or the minority?

Cochran: Well, he was more aggressive, I think, and outspoken and maybe even sometimes shrill when they were in the minority, and particularly attacking Republican administrations for perceived or real failures. He could be very combative and very outspoken, but I think he's effective in communicating points of view on issues. People take notice when he talks. He's got a powerful personality and the power of persuasion, and he has a following who appreciates that very much.

Heininger: What about within the Senate?

Cochran: I think he's well liked by most Senators. There are probably some who don't really know him very well personally and haven't maybe had an opportunity to get to know him personally, but I think, generally speaking, he's a popular member of the Senate.

Heininger: What was it like to deal with him when you were a chair at the Republican conference?

Cochran: I've never had any difficulties dealing with him. Nothing has ever been said or done that was personal in any way. He's always talked about his views on the issues on the floor with respect, matters that I've been interested in or involved in, but I don't ever recall being angry with him or upset about anything he's said or done. I've just never taken it personally. It's not something that he's directing at me; it's about a proposal, a bill, or an amendment.

Heininger: Would other Republicans take things personally?

Cochran: Some probably have. I don't know of any. I don't recall any specific instances.

Knott: You mentioned his occasional shrill and bombastic language. I've often tried to figure out if that's a tactic that he uses or if sometimes he just gets carried away with the emotion of the moment.

Cochran: I think both. I think it probably fits. Sometimes it's one and sometimes it's the other. But I think he does use his big voice and the power that he has. He's personally a powerful man physically and has a big voice. He can get somebody's attention very quickly using that. He uses that to a good advantage, I think.

Knott: Yet at the same time, he also seems to have an ability to reach across the aisle, if need be, to move a particular piece of legislation.

Cochran: That's right, yes. I just don't have in mind a long list of examples, but there clearly have been times when he's joined forces—well, here recently with John McCain on an issue or two that they've worked together on. So he's happy and comfortable working with people on the Republican side of the aisle.

Knott: Any particular pieces of legislation that the two of you have worked together on that stand out in your mind?

Cochran: I'm on a committee that he's, I'm sure, responsible for my being on that selects the *Profiles in Courage* winner every year, and the committee meets at the Kennedy Library in Boston. Olympia Snowe and I are both on that committee, and Caroline [Kennedy Schlossberg] is actually the chairman or the chairperson, and Ted's on the committee and some of his pals from Boston.

Knott: How did that happen?

Cochran: I think he decided I'd be a good member, [laughs] and so he asked me if I would serve. I've enjoyed that. Most of the people on that committee are liberal Democrats, but I get along with them fine too.

Heininger: You've been honored for the work that you have done on the PBS [Public Broadcasting Service] Ready to Learn service, and that you worked on with him in 1992. Tell us about that.

Cochran: Right.

Heininger: You have an interest in public educational television from your family.

Cochran: My father was active in that back in our state. He was appointed by our Governor, John Bell Williams, to head up the state agency, and one of the responsibilities was to establish a statewide network of television and radio broadcast capacity. We became the first state in the union to have statewide coverage of public television and radio system, and it was during my father's term when that happened, and he had to testify before the legislature. Some of the people in the Mississippi legislature were arguing against him saying that they were promoting integration with programs like *Sesame Street*, you know. [chuckles] They said subversive things were being put out over the airwaves. I can recall my father being exasperated having to go before a committee of the legislature to ask for funding, and having to defend the Educational Television Authority about programming decisions. And he'd get beat up by some of the right-wing extremists.

Back in those days, there weren't any real Republicans in Mississippi. We were all Democrats. My first vote was for John Kennedy for President, for example. I was in the Navy at the time of that election. But the point of the story is, it wasn't a partisan kind of thing, but my dad was actively involved. A couple of people in the legislature ended up going to jail because they got caught getting kickbacks from companies that got to build a television tower in some place. One very prominent member of the state senate was convicted and sent to prison. Anyway, my father

had some very tough challenges, and I ended up being very proud of the fact that he helped establish public television in Mississippi. So it's a natural fit for me to be supportive of public television on the national level because they provide funds and enable us in Mississippi to improve our programming and the capacity to have good quality programs. Our state needed that kind of thing to help with our educational programs.

My dad, at the time, was county superintendent of the largest public-school district in Mississippi, Hinds County Schools, which is the area outside of the city of Jackson but within the county. He did a great job. My mother was also a mathematics consultant for the curriculum that was being broadcast for school children and people who wanted vocational training and assistance with deficiencies in mathematics. And she would write a lot of the curriculum, not because my dad was head of it. She was doing this because she was head of the Mississippi Mathematics Teachers Association, so she was not appointed by my father. She was just a member of a group who were called on to help with the designing of those programs. So my family was very deeply involved in it, and I came by it naturally.

Heininger: So whose idea was it to develop the PBS Ready to Learn service?

Cochran: I think somebody came to see me and asked if I would help promote it, somebody who was connected with public television. I know I've worked with Sharon Rockefeller very closely. She's out here at WETA [Washington Educational Television Association]. She's chairman of the board or something, but because it is conspicuous and they do a lot of programming and do original things that are used nationwide in the system, somebody from out there might have asked me to co-sponsor or support or whatever. I didn't think it all up by myself. *[laughs]*

Heininger: Did you go to Kennedy on it, or did he come to you?

Cochran: I think they asked him if he would support it too. He was on the Labor and Education Authorizing Committee, and I think it had to go through there before it could get funded. I think it had to be authorized. So that's how I got involved in it. I was the Republican co-sponsor, to show bipartisan support. It probably influenced a few Republicans to support it, to get it done.

Heininger: You also worked him on the STOP [Stroke Treatment and Ongoing Prevention] Stroke Act?

Cochran: I don't recall the specifics, but I think it authorized money for research and dealing with the challenges of strokes and other illnesses caused by smoking.

Heininger: What about the National Writing Project?

Cochran: I remember that very well. The group who were running the program in Mississippi was based at Mississippi State University. One of the professors in this program headed what they called the Writing and Thinking Institute. This professor's father was A. D. Seale, who was a prominent member of the faculty and later the administration at Mississippi State and had been a real good friend of mine. Politically he had helped me. When I got to be on the Agriculture

Committee, I attracted a lot of new friends right away, and he was one of them. He helped in my campaign for the Senate, as a matter of fact.

The point of the story, this woman, who was his daughter, told me about this program and how effective it was in improving teacher morale and skill levels in teaching fundamental courses from grammar school through high school and that they had been selected to be a pilot program in Mississippi by this group in California. It was based in California, and they wanted to expand it further. There were only a few states where these programs were available and being used for teacher training and morale boosters for teachers at the elementary and secondary level. She said, "They want to know if you can help them get some federal dollars to increase their budget and outreach." I found out a little bit more about it, and if they were for it, I was for it.

So I agreed to sponsor a request and ask for more money. I think I was on the Appropriations Subcommittee that would have jurisdiction over the Labor and Education HHS [Health and Human Services] Subcommittee. Anyway, I was able to get the money added on the Senate side. I had somebody working with me on the House side too, George Miller, a Democrat from California, because these were his constituents, out in his district, where this group was based, this national writing program headquarters.

Over the years, we've gotten more and more money as time has gone on. It's a big, nationwide program now, but still these teachers come up to Washington every year and have a little pep rally and thank me and George Miller, and they've added a few other Senators and Congressmen as time has gone on to their list of supporters. Pete Domenici, I think, joined in one year and decided he thought it was a good idea too, and a few others. But it's been a very important program. I'm proud to have had something to do with it.

Heininger: Did you have any discussions with Senator Kennedy about it?

Cochran: I don't remember any.

Heininger: Has he supported it too?

Cochran: Yes, he supported it. He'll support good-sounding things like that without your asking him. So I don't waste a lot of my requests on things that I know he's going to support. *[laughs]*

Heininger: You've watched him for a long time in the Senate. Talk to us about the Supreme Court nominations. What's your assessment of his effectiveness on Supreme Court nominations and how he's conducted himself?

Cochran: Well, I'm probably not a good one to ask about that because I've been disappointed in the partisanship that has deteriorated to the point of pure partisanship in court selections, in my opinion, in the last few years, and he's a part of that. I'm not fussing at him or complaining about it. It's just something that has evolved, but all the Democrats seem to line up in unison to badger and embarrass and beat up Republican nominees for the Supreme Court in particular. But it's extended to other courts, the court of appeals. They all lined up and went after Charles Pickering from my state unfairly, unjustly, without any real reason why he shouldn't be confirmed to serve

on the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals. He had run against me when I ran for the Senate, Pickering had. I defeated him in the Republican primary in 1978. So we haven't been political allies, but I could see through a lot of the things.

I have a close personal friendship with Pat Leahy and Joe Biden, and I could probably name a few others. I've really been aggravated with them all for that reason, and I hope that we'll see some modification of behavior patterns in the Judiciary Committee. Occasionally they'll help me with somebody. I'm going to be presenting a candidate for a district court judgeship this afternoon in the committee, and yesterday Pat came up, put his arm around me, and said, "I know you're for this fellow, [Leslie] Southwick, who is going to be before the committee, and I want you to know you can count on me." "Well, I'm glad to hear that." There's nothing wrong with him. I mean, he's a totally wonderful person in every way. He'll be a wonderful district judge.

I'm not saying that they make a habit of it, but they've picked out some really fine, outstanding people to go after here recently, and there are probably going to be others down the line that they'll do that. Ted's part of that, and I think all the Democrats do it. I think that's unfortunate.

Knott: Are they responding to interest group pressure? Is that your assessment?

Cochran: I think that has something to do with it, but I'm not going to suggest what the motives are or why they're doing it, but it's just a fact. It's pure partisan politics, and it's brutal, mean-spirited, and I don't like it.

Heininger: What do you attribute the change to?

Cochran: I don't know. I guess one reason is we're so closely divided now. You know, just a few states can swing control of the Senate from one party to the next, and we have been such a closely divided Senate now for the last ten years or so. Everybody understands the power that comes with being in the majority, and I'm sure both parties have taken advantage of the situation and have maybe been unfair in the treatment of members of the minority party, denying them privileges and keeping their amendments from being brought up or trying to manage the schedule to the benefit of one side or the other.

Serving in the Senate has gotten to be almost a contact sport, and that's regrettable, in my view. I would like for it to be more like it was when I first came to the Senate. There was partisanship, right enough, and if you were in the majority, you got to be chairman of all the subcommittees, and none of the Republicans, in my first two years, were chairmen of anything, but that's fine. That's the way the House is operated. I'd seen that in the House, and that's okay. Everybody understands it. But since it's become so competitive—and the House has too—things are more sharply divided along partisan lines than they ever have been in my memory, and I think the process has suffered. The legislative work product has deteriorated to the point that legislation tends to serve the political interests of one party or the other, and that's not the way it should be.

The Senate, especially, is constructed and exists to ensure calm, careful, thorough deliberation, and more often than not, we've abandoned that in favor of the sharp, political confrontations you

see that end up on television and get people's names in the paper, dominate the headlines, and create an impression out in the countryside that all they're doing in Washington now is just fighting among themselves. The confidence in the quality of government has deteriorated because of that, and that's very unfortunate.

Heininger: What role do you see Kennedy having played in that?

Cochran: Well, he's like everybody else. He's been both a victim of it, but he's also been part of the problem.

Heininger: Can you pinpoint it in time as to when you felt this shift take place?

Cochran: I think it was maybe toward the end of the Reagan administration. It may have started during that administration. There was a big deal made about how close he and Tip [Thomas] O'Neill were personally, that they would swap a joke here and there when they would have meetings at the White House. But underneath, there was resentment, I think, and I think the tone began to change, not because of President Reagan personally, but I think the Democrats became so frustrated with him. You know, how can he be so successful? It was just an anomaly. Here he is, no background except making speeches and rallying a crowd and charming people and being likeable to large numbers of people, and wouldn't you know? How can he get all these things done? Anyway, I think it may have started because he was so successful it was frustrating for the other side.

They started trying to undermine him, and of course, eventually, I think, when Bill Clinton took over, that gave everybody an opportunity to get back whatever they had lost in terms of political power or comfort level. The battle within the Congress then became so keen over control and who could control the Congress. It was just teetering back and forth, and then the impeachment came along and that, I think, rubbed salt in wounds and was just a bad experience for everybody. It appeared to be a partisan experience, Republicans embarrassing and trying to throw a President out of office when they didn't have to impeach him for it but they did.

The House impeached him, and so here we were in the Senate; we had to deal with it; we couldn't ignore it. So the Supreme Court Chief Justice came and presided over a Court, and the Senate had to develop some rules and procedures. My colleague from Mississippi, Trent Lott, was of course the Republican leader, and he did a really fine job of managing and keeping order and calm and keeping the proceedings within the bounds of comity and fairness so that at least there was the appearance of careful consideration in the Senate of the issues.

Knott: Did you ever feel, at any point during that time, that some of your Republican colleagues had gone too far?

Cochran: Yes, I did. I did indeed. There have always been a few hotheads on each side of the aisle who would get carried away with themselves from time to time and be perceived as extremists on the right and the left, some Republicans and some Democrats, but most everybody was acting as thoughtful, responsible members of the Senate at least.

Knott: Can I take you out of sync here? You mentioned earlier that you had voted for John F. Kennedy in 1960 and that everybody you knew in Mississippi were Democrats, or something to that effect.

Cochran: Right.

Knott: What were the forces at work that caused you to switch your allegiance from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party?

Cochran: Well, I think it was the emergence of a group of people in our state in the late '60s. Some of them had gotten involved with the Republican Party because of Barry Goldwater in '64, but I voted for Lyndon Johnson, I guess, in '64. But then the Vietnam thing came along, and it started getting worse and worse. I didn't get called back in the Navy to serve in Vietnam, but I was teaching one summer in Newport when the Gulf of Tonkin incident occurred. Just trying to figure that one out and reading about what had happened and looking at a couple of television things of the bombing of the port at—where was it, Haiphong, something like that? I thought, I cannot believe this. What the heck is President Johnson thinking? What is he doing? How are we going to back away from that now, responding to this attack against a merchant ship, as I recall?

Anyway, I began worrying about it. I think, in one of my classes, I even asked the students, the officer candidates about to be officers in the U.S. Navy, would they like to go over to Vietnam and fight over this? Would they like to escalate this another notch? Is there something in our national interest? Of course they were scared to death of it. They didn't want to say anything, but I think I expressed my view kind of gratuitously, and then later I worried that I was going to get reported for being a belligerent, anti-American Naval officer. I really became angry and frustrated and upset with the way this thing was going, and it just got worse, as everybody knows.

So I guess it was at the next time we had elections—it was '68, I guess—I was minding my own business in Mississippi, and somebody called from here in Washington. One of my old Navy friends who had been an instructor in Newport was here at the Willard Hotel with Lamar Alexander, who had just been asked to be director of a national group of young Republicans, Democrats, and Independents who would be called Citizens for [Richard] Nixon/[Spiro] Agnew. So this was after the convention. They had selected Nixon, and Johnson had been re-nominated [reference is to Hubert Humphrey], so here everything was kind of bumping around, so it must have been August or something like that—or July, I don't know. There was another guy, [P.N.] "Nick" Harkins, who was a friend of mine and later became a law partner at my law firm.

Anyway, they were sitting around, and what they were doing was trying to get people who had previously been active in politics or interested in politics, and not Republicans, to join this citizens' group to broaden the base of the campaign organization. I answered the phone and they said, "Thad, we want you and Raymond Brown to head up Mississippi Citizens for Nixon/Agnew," and I said, "What does that mean? What is this? What are you all drinking?" [laughs] Where are you?" [laughs] Raymond Brown was this all-American football hero at Ole Miss and had clerked for Justice Tom Clark from Texas after he graduated, and he was a bright guy. He was on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

They were looking for celebrity types, people whose names were known. Mine wasn't that well known, but at least those guys in that room, three or four of them—one from New York who had been at Newport; and one from Tennessee; and Nick Harkins; and another guy who was working for the Maritime Administration, he was a law student, classmate of mine—and they had just been asking, “Who do we know?” They said my name popped up, and two or three of them knew me so they said, “Gosh, that’s a mandate. Four of us in Washington know this guy. He must be well known.” And so that’s why they called me, they said.

So when I asked my senior partner what he thought about it, I said, “They’ve invited me to this national organizational meeting in Indianapolis. They want me to go up there with Raymond Brown.” I was busy. I was practicing law. I was trying lawsuits. I was becoming a superstar in the courtroom. These were my own thoughts of what my role in life was, to get rich and be a superstar trial lawyer. Anyway, it just was not what I was thinking I was going to do, to join a political team in a Presidential campaign, but he said, “I think you ought to go up there.” They said President Nixon would be there, and I’d get to meet the candidate and this and that, and [Charles] “Bud” Wilkinson was going to be the national chairman. He was the football coach from Oklahoma and a very popular guy. So he said, “Well, I think you ought to go, and we’ll pay your plane fare if you want the firm to pay your fare.” I said, “Well, if that’s legal, that’s fine.”

So I went, and sure enough, here was a big crowd of interesting-looking people, and the President and Mrs. [Patricia] Nixon—well, to-be-President and Mrs. Nixon—were there. Dick Lugar opened the meeting as mayor of Indianapolis, and I thought he was a nice guy. We heard about what their plans were. So anyway, Raymond and I volunteered to be co-chairs for the Mississippi Citizens for Nixon/Agnew.

So we got back home and tried to get an organization developed and called people we knew around the state to see who was for Nixon, if anybody was. There weren’t many people for Nixon because George Wallace was running as an Independent, so he had most of the Mississippi electorate kind of sewed up. The Democrats had nominated Hubert Humphrey, who appealed to the civil-rights activists, and so he had all of them. Well, there wasn’t anybody left. Sure enough, that’s the way the election turned out. We campaigned and campaigned, and we tried to raise money and put ads in the paper and send out mailings and do the stuff you do in political campaigns. And we didn’t get any votes at all. I think Nixon got about 20 percent of the vote in Mississippi. Humphrey got about 30 percent, and Wallace got 60 percent, so Nixon got *less* than 20 percent of the vote.

Heininger: You were really seeking a middle ground in between.

Cochran: Yes, and there wasn’t any. What we found out in Mississippi, there was no middle ground. The center didn’t hold. “Remember when the Civil War broke out,” and some other things, that’s what they said. There was no center, and that’s the way Mississippi was in ’68. Anyway, I said, “Well, so much for being a politician. I’m on the wrong side with that.” So I voted for Nixon. That was my first vote ever cast for a Republican candidate.

So then I went back to practicing law and just working and enjoying it. I forgot about politics, and then our Congressman unexpectedly announced that he was not going to seek re-election. His wife had some malady, some illness, and the truth was, he was just tired of being up here and wanted to come home. It took everybody by surprise. I'm minding my own business again one day at the house and the phone rings, and it's the local Young Republican county chairman, Mike Allred, who called and said, "You know, you may laugh but I'm going to ask you a serious question. This is serious. Have you thought about running for Congress to take Charlie Griffin's place?" And I said, "Well," and I laughed because I said, "You know, I have thought about it. I was surprised to hear that he wasn't going to run, but I've thought about it, and I've decided that I'm not interested in running. I've got too much family obligation, financial opportunities, the law firm," etc.

I think Congressmen were making about \$35,000 a year or something like that. There was a rumor it might go up to \$40,000. I thought, Well, I have a wife and two young children, and there's no way in the world I can manage all that, and in Washington, traveling back and forth, etc. But it would be interesting. It's going to be wide open. It was an interesting political situation. Then he said, "Well, let me ask you this: have you thought about running as a Republican?" I laughed again and I said, "No, I surely haven't thought about that." I was just thinking about the context of running as a Democrat, and so I was still thinking of myself as a Democrat in '72.

He said, "Would you meet with the state finance chairman? We've been talking about who would be a good candidate for us to get behind and push, and we want to talk to you about it. We really think there's an opportunity here for you and for our party" and all this. I said, "Well, Mike, I'll be glad to meet and talk to you all, but look, don't be encouraged that I'm going to do it. But I'm happy to listen to whatever you say. I'd like to know what you all are doing, as a matter of curiosity, how you got off under this and who your prospects are and that kind of thing. I'd like to know that."

So I met with them, and they started talking about the fact that they would clear the field. There would not be a chance for anybody to win the nomination if I said I would run. I thought, Golly, you all are really serious and think a lot of your own power. I started thinking about it some more, and I asked my wife what she would think about being married to a United States Congressman, and she said, "I don't know, which one?" *[laughs]* And that is a true story. I said, "Hello. Me."

Anyway, a lot of people had that reaction: "What? Are you seriously thinking about this?" But everybody that I asked—I started just asking family and close friends, law partners; I just bounced it off of them—I said, "What's your reaction that the Republicans are going to talk to me about running for Congress?" I was just amazed at how excited most people got over the idea that I might run for Congress and run as a Republican. That's unique, and they wouldn't have thought it because they knew I was not a typical Republican. The whole thing worked out, and I did run, and I did win.

Knott: Were you helped by the fact that [George] McGovern was running as the Democratic nominee that year?

Cochran: Yes, indeed. There was no doubt about it. I was also helped by the fact that some of the African-American activists in the district were out to prove to the Democrats that they couldn't win elections without their support. Charles Evers was one of the most outspoken leaders and had that view. He was the mayor of Fayette, Mississippi, and that was in my Congressional district. He recruited a young minister from Vicksburg, which was the hometown of the Democratic nominee, to run as an Independent, and he ended up getting about 10,000 votes, just enough to deny the Democrat a majority. He had 46,000 or something like that, and I ended up with 48,000 or whatever. I've forgotten exactly what the numbers were. The Independent got the rest.

So the whole point was, I was elected, in part—I had to get what I got, and a lot of people who voted for me were Democrats, and some were African Americans who were friends and who thought I would be fair and be a new, fresh face in politics for our state and not be tied to any previous political decisions. I'd be free to vote like I thought I should in the interest of this district. It was about 38 percent black in population, maybe 40 percent, and not only did I win that, but then the challenge was to get re-elected after you've made everybody in the Democratic hierarchy mad. I knew they were going to come out with all guns blazing, and they did, but they couldn't get a candidate. They couldn't recruit a good candidate. They finally got a candidate but—

Knott: Seventy-four was a rough year for Republicans.

Cochran: It was and, of course, Republicans were getting beat right and left. So when we came back up here to organize after that election in '74, there weren't enough Republicans to count. But I was one of them who was here and who was back. Senator Lott, he and I both made it back okay. He was from a more-Republican area: fewer blacks and more supportive of traditional Republican issues.

We not only survived, but then I decided, *I'm kind of getting tired of being in the House. I'm going to run for the Senate.* And I made up my mind after that election because I saw how precarious your life can be as a Congressman, and I thought, *Why stay in the House without much power?* We were in the minority big time. I needed to run for the Senate at the earliest opportunity. As soon as one of our Senators retired or died or quit or whatever, I would be out of the blocks. And so that's what I decided to do right after that election. It took one other two-year term and then, sure enough, Jim Eastland decided to retire.

Knott: Pardon my ignorance. Were you the first Republican Senator since Reconstruction?

Cochran: Yes. Senator Lott was elected ten years after I was. In '88 he ran.

Heininger: And then you got put on the Judiciary Committee?

Cochran: That's right, yes.

Heininger: Was that your penalty?

Cochran: Oh my. I think so. That was my purgatory. I had to work my way out of that.

Heininger: Tell us, as a last question, what do you think Kennedy's legacy will be?

Cochran: Well, I think the civil-rights legislation will be something he can rightfully claim to have had a lot to do with. The Voting Rights Act had been enacted when he was on the Judiciary Committee, and he had a lot to do with that legislation. He just became a symbol and a spokesman for the civil-rights movement in the Senate. He and Birch Bayh, and there were others who took on that role of a young, new generation of leadership in the country who were willing to take an active and unabashedly aggressive role to push through legislation like that. He will always be remembered for that, I think.

Knott: Has it ever been a liability for you in Mississippi to the extent that people may be aware that you sit on this *Profiles in Courage* board, that you have some relationship with Senator Kennedy?

Cochran: It isn't very well known, interestingly enough. People think it's a misprint or something. You know, they'll read it or they'll hear it and they'll think, *Well, I don't know what that is all about*, and they move right along.

Knott: So you've never had an opponent who has tried to dredge that?

Cochran: No, I never have. I've been waiting for things like that to happen my entire political career, waiting on a mean-spirited campaign to come along and somebody just to rip me from one end to the other, but it's just never happened. Nobody has been mean or aggressive or vicious against me. It's like Teflon. They say Reagan had Teflon, or somebody was a Teflon candidate. It all just sort of rinsed off. Nothing bad has stuck.

Heininger: It's hard to be that way against you, though. I'm just saying, that's what your reputation is.

Knott: So it must be particularly painful for you to see this kind of decline in civility in the Senate these days.

Cochran: Yes, it is. I don't like it a bit. When I was in the elected leadership of the Senate, some of my most unpleasant experiences centered around meetings we would have and the House leadership trying to develop common ground and strategies for initiatives that were being pushed. That was when Newt Gingrich had become the hotshot in the House, and I would sit there and listen to these ideas and these thoughts to shut down the Government, make them turn out the lights all down the Mall. Of course Jimmy Carter obliged and turned off the lights. Do you remember that? In his cardigan sweater, he sat in front of the fireplace, "Turn off the heat; turn off the lights; the country's gone to hell." I thought, *Who is thinking up all this stuff? Quit. We're creating our own problems here; we're self-destructing.*

Anyway, I got very angry and upset, and occasionally we'd start trying to suggest an alternative view that there were better ways of dealing with these problems than these sharp confrontations. But nobody was buying that. They wanted to show the difference between Republican views and the Democrat views. "We have to have sharp, clear distinctions, or we're not going to be able to win the majorities that we need to govern." And that was the goal, to get a majority of members elected to the House so that you'd be in the majority. Of course we were in the majority in the Senate, and it wasn't any great shakes. We weren't able to get much done.

But the Senate is different, and that's what Gingrich knew. The Senate couldn't lead because it has to have a consensus of at least 60 Senators to shut off debate, to do anything, and if you're going to impose your will, if you're going to get to a vote on final passage of anything, you've got to have these two-thirds votes for some things, or 60 votes, to invoke cloture. So he knew that even though the Senate could have 55 or 56 Republicans or whatever, nobody noticed any difference in the Senate, and that's the way the Senate was created. That's what it was for, to keep this kind of thing from happening. And so I tried to point that out, and everybody would just look off. "He doesn't get it. To hell with him. We'll just do it, do our own thing."

So you had Gingrich with his ten things listed and people over here, Phil Gramm, "We need ten things just like the House," and Bob Dole is sitting there saying, "Give me a break," and I'm trying to support him and tell him, "Be calm. Be calm. We're not going to adopt that stuff." And I was chairman of the conference, so when that was over, I was perceived as a do-nothing chairman of the Congress because I didn't throw in all of my support for the Gingrich program. So anyway, I decided, Well, I won't be chairman of the conference anymore. I'll just run for leader. To hell with that. I'm getting out of here—but I couldn't quit. So I just ran for leader instead of running for chairman.

Of course Trent runs for leader too, and he's with them all. He's been one of them all along over in the House. So he comes in with a lot of groundswell of activist sentiment supporting him, and Gingrich and all the House guys were over here telling all the Republicans in the Senate, "We need to have a team." So I didn't have a chance, but I wouldn't drop out because I had already decided to run for leader. So I got eight votes. *[laughter]* I got almost ten votes.

Heininger: Are you aware of Jack Danforth's recent book?

Cochran: No, I don't recall.

Heininger: He's got a brand-new book out that is actually, in some ways, a critique of his own party and his concern about the hijacking of the party by extremists. And that that's not where the Republican Party needs to be.

Cochran: Yes. That sounds like something I would agree with. I'll have to look for it. I have a great amount of respect for Jack Danforth, wonderful person.

Knott: Well, thank you very much, Senator.

Cochran: It's been a pleasure. I've enjoyed it too. Thank you for the opportunity to talk about my friend, Ted Kennedy.

Heininger: Thank you very much.

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