Knott: Well, thanks again for coming back, Tom.

Oliphant: The papers at UMass [University of Massachusetts], that thing must be voluminous.

Knott: Oh, yes.

Oliphant: Did you guys get the oral diaries?

Knott: He has given us some access to those, yes, for specific issues. When we are going to do an interview with him on [Robert] Bork or whatever, he’ll pass along the relevant material.

Oliphant: Good. It’s funny; Bork he had to do behind the scenes. He did the bombastic blast on the day of the appointment, but as always, that usually masked what was really going on. And he and his people were right smack in the middle of all the strategizing that produced the record and the hearings that resulted in the vote. The funny thing is, he had done it. People like Jim Flug and Carey Parker were veterans of [Clement] Haynsworth and [G. Harrold] Carswell, which is another one that occurred. I mean, Birch Bayh was point for Haynsworth and Carswell, but Kennedy was the guy behind the scenes.

Knott: Absolutely.

Oliphant: One thing I’ve always wanted to find out, and I’ve never really nailed it down, is on Bork, whether the staff work and the private conversations with [Joseph] Biden resulted in the critical question to the whole hearings, that sank the nomination, which was, what are your views on Griswold v. Connecticut? When he, in effect, dissented and denied—said that, in his belief system, there was no constitutional right to privacy, that was the end there.

Knott: That’s right.

Oliphant: The rest was just a question of what the margin would be. But it was a planned question.
Knott: Right. I wish I had talked to you before we—we already did a Bork interview with him. We didn’t ask him that question.

Oliphant: When Biden asked it—if memory serves me, I’m pretty sure it was Biden—that was the moment. At the end of that answer, the whole thing was over. They did one on—it was Carswell, I guess—it was in doubt into the final weekend. One of the last votes to go against Carswell was Margaret Chase Smith, who was still in the Senate. I can’t remember whether it was Carey or Jim or whoever, but they were working right through the weekend, and they came to me on the Friday, OK? The story they were offering was that because of the vacancy, because of the way the Court was, the District Justice for the [United States Court of Appeals for the] First Circuit would be whoever filled that opening, which meant New England. So that meant that Carswell would be the Circuit Justice for the First Circuit, meaning New England [laughs]. And they wanted her to read that in her Sunday paper.

Knott: That’s great.

Oliphant: That’s how diligent they were.

Knott: That is great, yes. Well, thank you again. I think we made it up to 1980 last time.

Oliphant: Yes. We were right about at the Georgetown speech.

Knott: Yes, exactly. You have a good memory. Actually I have your interview in front of me here. I think we had already asked you this question, but I want to make sure that we cover it again. I’m trying to figure out why it was that he stayed in so long, in the face of repeated appeals from [Jimmy] Carter folks, and just from Democrats, to get out.

Oliphant: It hadn’t really started then, though it was beginning a little bit behind the scenes. Jody Powell and Hamilton [Jordan] and Greg Schneider would call me from time to time just to make sure I understood, and then that Kennedy understood, that the welcome mat was open and it was—try to nudge a process of checking him out.

I think the real answer here is in two parts. First of all, he needed a clean event to end it personally, psychologically, however you want to put it, which is where this cockamamie idea came from, that if there’s a debate before a critical primary where he’s unsuccessful, then that does it. It hadn’t quite evolved at the time of Georgetown, or right after the Iowa caucuses, but that was part of it. The other was that he began to realize what he hadn’t realized the previous summer and early fall, and that was why he was running previously. It was a function, on the one hand, of ambition that had always been there, and on the other hand, of Carter’s difficulties governing the country. His initial concept of the campaign, really, involved decision making about whether to run, not how to run.

But in the aftermath—by then you’d had the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; also [Paul] Volker’s initial policies were beginning to bite; the interest rates were spiking; obviously the first quarter was going to be recession. The impact of all of this on people was becoming a little more apparent, and a lot more apparent to Kennedy. So he had something to be for and to advocate and all the rest of it. And I think the two strains came together in the Georgetown speech, the content of which no one remembers. People remember the spirit behind it.
I mean, he was not staying in the race to advocate wage and price controls. But on the other hand, he had a construct that was more traditionally Democratic in its response to what was obviously, by this time, a recession, a quick recession, snap recession, whatever they call it, accompanied by exorbitantly high interest rates. Ironically, as I say, what people tend to remember about the Georgetown speech was almost the rededication of him to staying in the race, and they forget that along the way he found some reasons to that had not been apparent in September, October, and November.

Knott: Were you at the convention in New York? He gives that beautiful speech, probably the best speech of the campaign, I would think. Could you talk about that night and the emotion?

Oliphant: There were really three or four things going on at the same time—typical Kennedy. I always thought one of the most poorly kept secrets in that period was that around the time people were getting ready to go to New York, when the Billy Carter business was going on, Carter’s hard delegate count margin slipped beneath 100.

Knott: I didn’t realize it was—

Oliphant: If he hadn’t had a relatively decent, high-profile press conference, it could have—It was that close. Guys who would later become rather prominent in Democratic Party nomination politics, especially Tom Donilon and Tad Devine, who were keeping the hard count—as I say, the margin got a little shaky there. It shored up, but even when they went to New York for the binding-rule business, Carter was not entirely certain that he had working command of the floor. So there was a little—it was a 50-to-1 shot, but there was something in the air.

Of course, despite all the things that Carter had won, the delegations, even if they were bound to vote for him, contained a lot of people whose hearts were really with Kennedy. So that was part of the atmosphere. Also, the first vote would be on this question of whether delegates were literally bound legally to vote. That was really going to be the critical vote on the first day of the convention, and that would determine everything else.

Knott: I see.

Oliphant: Then at the same time, there was negotiating going on, still, about the content of the platform, which actually mattered in those days, as well as when he would speak and for how long.

Knott: Yes, right.

Oliphant: And if I’m not mistaken, the way it stood when people began to drift into New York toward the end of the previous week, it was going to be 15 minutes, not connected to any of the platform drama, but connected to the procedural vote. In other words, the Carter people didn’t want him when [Walter] Mondale was doing his acceptance speech. And they wanted—Tuesday was where things were. And Kennedy’s reaction on the thing was to go ahead and agree to the 15 minutes, knowing full well that it didn’t matter whether you followed it or not. So there were a lot of things. Also, to be free of the official candidacy. So the idea was that no matter what time of day or night it was, in the immediate aftermath of the procedural vote, if Carter prevailed,
Kennedy would officially get out of the race minutes later, so that when he spoke, it would not be as a candidate. So that was the setting.

Knott: I’m sorry, Tom, just enlighten me. The importance of that being that he could just say what he—

Oliphant: Well, there would be nothing else. There’s not any question of, if you give a great speech, can they—

Knott: Gotcha.

Oliphant: Not that you can stampede modern conventions anyway, but in 1980 there were still enough memories of, honest-to-God, deliberative conventions, that concerns like that still were in play. So the atmosphere was fluid, even though there wasn’t any question about the result. At this point Paul Kirk and Carl Wagner were the operating generals—Wagner in the trailers, Paul overall. So that was how it was set up.

Now, when the convention began, the debate was held on the binding rule. Carter prevailed, and Kennedy, through a spokesman—it was Dick Drayne—as they had planned, in that news cycle for Tuesday morning, Carter winning the procedural vote and Kennedy ending his candidacy officially. I think Dick appeared in the press room at Kennedy’s headquarters, which was in the Waldorf, within minutes of the end of the roll call. And so, technically speaking, that was it. Then he left Tuesday night.

Of course, all throughout this period, he and mostly [Robert] Shrum had been in that suite. It was an amazing atmosphere. Those of us who actually were credentialed to him—there were only about a dozen—were camped out in the hallway, on the floor, where he and Shrum were working. Kennedy tended not to come out. Shrum, on the other hand, would come out regularly, the mad hatter in various forms of undress. Occasionally Ted Sorensen and [Arthur] Schlesinger popped in. There were some other people contributing language, but Tuesday was—

Knott: You said he would pop out occasionally into this area where you guys were. What was his mood? Anything that stands out? Relief that it’s over?

Oliphant: Kennedy, like his brothers, is extremely adept at what I’ve always called the gentle stiff arm. In other words, he’s rarely mad in public or semipublic settings. It almost never happens. He has a genial bonhomie about him that actually is keeping you from getting too close, and so there’s banter. The longer you hang around him, the better you know him, the more you get so you can interpret movements of his shoulders more than you can look down at your notebook and interpret the words from the things that have just come out of his mouth. Often they’re pure gibberish. I’ll tell you, what was apparent through the weekend and through Monday and into Tuesday was how hard he was working.

Knott: Really? Working the crowd delegates?

Oliphant: No. Again, all that stuff was over. He was half-heartedly paying attention to the platform discussions, which were still going on. For the historical record, Carter didn’t care. He just didn’t care. He was willing to agree to anything, just about. The MX Missile, or whatever it
was called then, the next-generation ICBM [Intercontinental Ballistic Missile], Carter could not handle a plank that would—

**Knott:** Got you, yes.

**Oliphant:** And he could not handle a plank that called for even a wage and price freeze, much less price controls and all that. Kennedy was willing, in the end, to give them up, but Carter took everything else. So they were negotiating, but with Kennedy’s only occasional participation, because it was so obvious what Carter’s position was, which was that he’d agree to almost anything to end it.

Kennedy, I think, for his part, agreed to a kind of pro forma defeat on these questions—in other words, that he would not call for roll calls, like on wage and price controls. I remember when they finally got around to doing the platform, which I guess was Wednesday. Tip [Thomas P. O’Neill] had the gavel, of course, and they were going to do voice votes. And on wage and price freeze and controls, I mean, the yes was thunderous, including from all the Carter delegates nominally. The noes were much less loud, and the speaker just simply said, “The noes have it,” which they didn’t, but it had all been agreed.

But Kennedy wasn’t meeting. As I say, Sunday, Monday, it was obvious that he was spending hours and hours. We knew there was a teleprompter in the suite, that both the rewriting and the rehearsing were almost continuous, both for the finality that it would bring and also to set the stage in case there was another.

**Knott:** So he knew this was one of the most important speeches of his life?

**Oliphant:** Oh yes, and that it was the whole ballgame. In the banter, when he’d stick his head out—A lot of it was, aren’t you bored with it by now? How many times can you do this?—and all. But it went on. You’d drift on and off the floor because there were other things going on. There was no entourage. It was very quiet. The Waldorf, there’s almost a semicorridor where the elevators are and then hallways. You couldn’t get within 50 yards of the suite door, but it was obvious there weren’t scores of people going in and out and all the rest of it. It was very intense.

**Knott:** Whatever coaching or feedback he’s getting is coming from people like Shrum and Sorensen?

**Oliphant:** As I said, Carey was in quite a bit because he was working on—We used to have a joke that, as a collaborative team, Carey was prose and Shrum was poetry, or Carey was nouns and Shrum was adverbs or something. But there wasn’t much else. This is before the era of speech coaches and all the rest of it.

Even having a teleprompter—and was there videotape? No. I mean, ’76 was the first year the networks used videotape instead of film. I saw the teleprompter machine several times. They were working out the mechanics on the floor too. I forget where Carey was going to be, but Shrum was to be on the stairs immediately below the podium, following along a reading copy in case there was any problem with the teleprompter. And he would have signals so that he could get to Kennedy and say the page number, and whether it was the top, middle, or bottom of the
page he had in his backup copy. Carey was somewhere with a specific task like that too. So it was more elaborate than preparations for debates are, really.

Knott: This is interesting. We have not heard this. This is good to know. I mean, his delivery was so terrific. When he reached that end there, sometimes he has a tendency to get a little loud. It was very controlled.

Oliphant: I don’t know if we got into this when we were talking before, but a lot of what made Kennedy an odd duck as a Presidential candidate was the volume of his voice. Often in speaking situations, even in fairly large halls, it was just too damn loud.

Knott: I’m sorry, you did get into this.

Oliphant: In fact, I wrote a piece at one point during the spring just about how many evenings he’d ruined simply because of the decibel level. Got on the plane the next day and came back with a—but modulating his tone as well as rhythm. Every aspect of this thing was worked, reworked, and rehearsed repeatedly. After it was all over, my understanding had always been that Kennedy had not been particularly happy with the draft and that he became committed to it as he rehearsed it.

When Shrum has time, particularly, there is a rhythm to his speech. There’s not only structure—Like with a musical score, there are periods within it when you have crescendos and decrescendos. You have a final burst and all the rest. Like the decision to point ahead at the end was very intentional, so that it wasn’t the end of the campaign; it was looking ahead.

Knott: The hope still lives.

Oliphant: Yes. And then how they apportioned space in the middle of it. My understanding had been that he became wedded to this as he rehearsed it, but that when he read it initially, he wasn’t totally committed to it. As I say, there was stuff coming in there over the transom, at least from Sorensen, [Richard] Goodwin, and Schlesinger.

Knott: So it was modified.

Oliphant: Oh no, there was tweaking going on all the time, and Shrum will tell you in more detail, I’m sure. But it was obvious to us in the corridor. I mean, you could see people with papers would come. Carey was always a clue because of the presence of his scissors. Carey was a very old-school cut-and-paste guy when it came to assembling things. Shrum couldn’t type, and he usually wrote things in longhand. They had a secretary, Patty McHugh, who later was Ron Brown’s secretary in the Commerce Department, Al Gore’s personal secretary for a while while he was Vice President, but a very classic—

Knott: Tightlipped.

Oliphant: Yes. But you knew there was revising, because you’d see Carey come and it would be—have you interviewed Carey yet?

Knott: We’ve consulted with him, yes.
Oliphant: Well, he’s the classic, intentionally disheveled Ivy League philosophy professor. And sometimes you could see the scissors sticking out his pocket, and that’s how he would do inserts.

Knott: That’s great.

Oliphant: Shrum would mess up a two-car motorcade when it came to organization, and it was longhand most of the time. So just from hanging out in the corridor, the production process—it was obvious that the thing was being revised and reworked over and over again.

I think the other thing that helped him was that he’d gotten out of the race, so everything was anticlimactic except the behind-the-scene stories of how he got out of the race. There was nothing about the platform, or the renomination of Mondale, or anything like that that had any news value whatsoever. All of this, by getting rid of the candidacy officially in the flow of things at the convention, the only attention was going to be on that moment.

My experience with Kennedy has been that he screws up when the stakes aren’t very high, but he’s a pretty reliable workhorse when the stakes are high.

Knott: When the heat’s on. Interesting.

Oliphant: In fact, if I look back over the whole career, I don’t think I can recall seeing him screw up when the stakes were high.

Knott: One of the things I wanted to talk to you about.

Oliphant: He’s a meticulous preparer. You keep thinking of the images: the weight; the appearance; the way he speaks extemporaneously; maybe throw in a little drinking and all the rest of it. What it masks is the attention to detail that characterizes his work.

Knott: That rings true from our brief experiences with him as well.

Oliphant: Something that has been a hallmark of his entire Senate career. Before he gets going on something—the meetings, the arguments, the planning that goes into something. I kidded him—I remember saying to him once, “You do these things as if you were a Republican.” So to my eyes, it wasn’t all that unusual. It was about what I expected when I got to New York, to see this level of preparation.

Knott: Were his brothers like that, do you know?

Oliphant: His older brother was. It was a very meticulous Presidential campaign, and it was a very meticulous administration. For example, this examination and reexamination and et cetera, the staffing process during the Cuban missile crisis—in a process like that, that’s not seat-of-the-pants, that’s the setting in which the idea of the blockade emerged. Otherwise it never would have; no one would have ever thought of it. Bob Kennedy was a little bit more improvisational.

Knott: Spontaneous, yes.

Oliphant: And it had often more to do with feelings than with content.
But Kennedy, ideologically, is an extremely eclectic politician; catholic with a small c; very, almost, experimental when it comes to means, anything that works. He is not a knee-jerk liberal in all respects. There are aspects of his political philosophy that are anything but—and believing, as they all do, that politics is the grace that enables things to happen, that also inculcates a willingness to bend and even to have your positions change. Only somebody like that could have tried to referee this impossible effort to rewrite the criminal code. Because maybe you had to take things in the bill that the liberals were going to hate. I mean, in the Presidential campaign, he got guff all the time from audiences because of compromises he had made with [James] Eastland and [Strom] Thurmond and people like that.

He’s a fanatical believer in a strong, vibrant Presidency because of the weakness of the office. A true believer in all the new theories and everything that had so influenced his brother, even to the point—people forget this—that within five years, Kennedy was an original sponsor, not a cosponsor, of what became known as Gramm-Rudman [Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act of 1985].

Knott: I had forgotten that.

Oliphant: Because, thinking through it—I still to this day don’t know if I agree with him—I just found the thought process so fascinating that he thought not only that it was the only way to get a handle on the mess, but also that it was the only way to decrease the military budget. That’s a weird way of setting the scene for this speech, but it’s a way of also describing what a difficult intellectual task it is. You really are a liberal, you really are “people versus powerful,” to use the Gore construction that Shrum came up with, but you’re very willing to consider all kinds of means to these ends.

Look at the different versions of the health insurance proposal since the first one in 1970. One of my favorite lines of his, when he gets going about the health care issue over the years, he says—thinking in geography—“I’ve taught it flat, I’ve taught it round, I’ve taught it everything in between.” Universal coverage under conditions that are affordable is the only principle. If single-payer would have gotten him there in 1970, fine. Today there have been so many things that show that there are private and public/private ways of adding to the pool of the insured that the proposal today is actually a grab bag [laughs]. One of the things that makes him so interesting, like his older brother, is that he’s experimental and willing to consider all manner of things, and he loves to have the argument going in front of him.

So it made me curious how he was going to define what the campaign had been and how it ended and then how it would point ahead. Of course, I was surprised that it was a tone poem more than it was a presentation. It was a statement of values far more than it was a prescription or an agenda or anything like that. And it was obvious from the start that he was inserting intense emotion, not at one or two places but almost every other paragraph.

Knott: Could you feel that emotion in the hall?

Oliphant: Actually, I stood just—It was so different then. Once you were in the building, you could basically go anywhere with a certain pass. The restrictions were so different from what they are today. I was with the woman I would marry within a year, who covered Kennedy for
CBS, Susan Spencer. Whatever the first opening in the stands was, next to the podium, we were not in the press section. It was determined ahead of time, “No way. You can’t have the experience of the speech if you’re in the press section,” even though that would have been on the podium virtually next to him—that’s where the press section was—but down on the floor, whatever the first opening in the stands was, to his right. I knew what he had done within a minute.

Knott: You knew he had done it.

Oliphant: I knew what he’d done within a minute, and all you had to do is watch the people. I had to file, but I had, like, two hours, OK? So I determined that I wouldn’t listen to the words, I would watch the crowd. And it was obvious in a minute.

Knott: He had them in the palm of his hand?

Oliphant: Well, but that there was stimulus and response, that it was two-way communication. I always say, in the conventions, there are moments—still, by the way—when you can literally feel the almost visceral reaction to something that excites such a large group of people. And that’s all it was with this thing for 45 minutes. It was the experience of it; it wasn’t the content of it. In fact, when I went back to write the story, it was hard, because the two-dimensional aspects of print journalism didn’t touch this thing with a ten-foot pole. I mean, yes, he was still for wage and price controls. That didn’t matter. It was more of whose side are you on? What are you about? How hard are you going to fight?—that kind of thing.

Knott: There’s this whole episode of Carter supposedly chasing him around the stage to shake his hand. He actually did shake his hand.

Oliphant: That’s two nights later. Let me do my best to—

Knott: Please.

Oliphant: He knew, also, when he finished. I think he knew while he was giving the speech also. Looking over at him while it was going on, he was very attentive to the teleprompter as he delivered it. He had disciplined himself from the practice. I mean, there’s a temptation not to look at it when you really reach a crowd like this. I was struck at how intent his gaze was on the teleprompter all the way through it, so that he was working and he was not experiencing much himself. “Dreams shall never die,” and you can tell that he knew instantly, and it wouldn’t stop. It just wouldn’t stop. I’m trying to think, in my lifetime—his brother’s speech in Atlantic City.

Knott: Bobby in ’64?

Oliphant: The Romeo and Juliet. I’m trying to think. In terms of just how traumatic, there were a couple of the moments in ’68.

Knott: I’ve had some Republicans tell me [Ronald] Reagan in ’76, when he made that impromptu concession speech about “There’s no substitute for victory.” Did you witness that?
Oliphant: Yes, in Kansas City. One speech, before I started—I was still in college, but I had to go to see it, so I went up to San Francisco. My memory of [Barry] Goldwater is that he got him in the viscera that night, and it was a roar. But those are the only moments I can think of that come even close to this. And this one, more like the experience of his brother, which wasn’t loud—that was more, if an ovation can be called sorrowful. It just went on and on until, I forget who the chair was, Hale Boggs or whoever the hell it was, cut it off. But this was noise, this wasn’t sorrowful. Susan and I thought that he knew. In fact, one of us had said to the other, “I hope he realizes that—it’s been a rough-enough year without—”

Now, that left Thursday night, and as I say, it had been scripted. I didn’t realize it at the time, but a petty feud was really what screwed the podium up, and it had nothing to do with Kennedy and Carter, I’m now convinced. And here’s what happened, as near as I can piece it together. The Carter people, primarily Hamilton Jordan at this point, were above all anxious to avoid avoidable distractions. That meant, among other things, to keep Kennedy at the Waldorf as long as possible so that it wouldn’t interrupt him, which didn’t bother Kennedy at all. At this point, after nobody was—there’s almost whatever works for you. They were also beginning to talk about commitments from him for the fall and stuff like that. They moved on.

Kennedy, in one major respect—He is a real pro in the sense that, regardless of the emotion Tuesday night, there was business Wednesday, and he did his business. I mean, he’s got as huge an ego as most of these guys, but he has more discipline than people realize. There was work to do and he was doing it, and he wasn’t giving the Carter people any guff about any of the arrangements for the windup of the convention.

Now, on the Carter side, as I said, they didn’t want distractions. Kennedy didn’t want anything except, at least for Shrum—I don’t know if anybody else raised it—he said, “You have to think about the moment you get on the stage, because it will be chaos. You have to have your mind set for what you’re going to do.” Now, Kennedy didn’t know what Carter wanted. This is the pre-hug era. You don’t hug guys; it’s 1980. But Shrum at least—I don’t know if anybody else did—but I know Shrum had told him that he had to be prepared for Carter trying to raise his hand, and he had to think that through, and it had to be clear in his mind before he went on the rostrum because there would be too much chaos. And Kennedy was fine with it. He had no—there was no—whatever.

And they didn’t have any demands in terms of arrival at the hall or timing or anything like that. It was whatever you want. And the proof of that is that Hamilton said—I think he was mostly talking with Paul Kirk at this point—that Carter would make the acceptance speech, and that given the demonstration and all the rest of it and the fact that they controlled the city through [Edward] Koch, there was no need to leave the Waldorf, which is right at 49th Street—it’s just over to 7th and down to the Garden—until the moment Carter finished speaking. With a motorcade and everything like that, it would be five, ten minutes, tops.

So it would be a perfect arrival. The typical pols would have been introduced on the podium. [Robert] Strauss, I think, was going to handle the microphone when Carter was done. There were only three or four of us journalists: my wife-to-be; me; maybe one of the wire’s guys, Dave Espo, or Dean Reynolds, who is now at ABC [American Broadcasting Company] but was UPI [United Press International] that year; Drummond Ayres, maybe, from the Times. It couldn’t
have been more than four or five of us, because we were going to go, needless to say, not in a press bus but in a van. There were no SUVs [sport utility vehicle] then. But Kennedy would have a car with staff, we’d be behind him, and that would be it—and a cop car in front and back.

So Carter begins his acceptance speech. We are not in the suite, but I was very careful to piece this together afterward. Kennedy’s in the shower. And then Carter makes a Freudian mistake at the very beginning: [Hubert] Humphrey.

Knott: He meant Horatio Hornblower.

Oliphant: Yes, which is what they called him.

Knott: The disparaging comment among the Carter folks.

Oliphant: Yes, that was the line that they used in their conversation, and it just came pouring out. The way it was told to me, Kennedy stuck his head out of the can—he had only a towel on—with one of these, “What did he say?” and then went back to getting dressed. And the acceptance speech was droning on. We were just outside the door, had monitors. The speech ends. Kennedy is ready; he’s dressed. Shrum, Rick Burke, Carey. Maybe not even Carey. Larry Horowitz, maybe? No, that’s after the election. No more than a couple of people with him, all right? Eddie Martin, that’s possible.

Anyway, so it ends. Door open, bursts out, his Secret Service has the elevator. We go right down to the basement, the parking garage. We’re in the three cars. There’s a Secret Service. They had a war wagon, Kennedy’s car, and a thing for us. That’s all there was. War wagon for the ages. We are moving out of the garage within two minutes of the end of Carter’s speech, across 49th Street, turn left on 7th, red light, and somebody says there’s no intersection control, and there wasn’t. Koch had called it off. He was still mad.

Knott: Mad about?

Oliphant: The New York primary. Kennedy had just killed him.

Knott: Holy Moses!

Oliphant: But there was no intersection. I mean, they had complete—it was a motorcade, and you still had the Secret Service, but the thing wasn’t moving. And of course there were no—you didn’t even have those Watchmans yet. Those were still four years away. So you could tell on the radio, the demonstration was still going on, so it was sort of OK. But instead of it taking five minutes, it took 15 minutes. Once they were inside the perimeter around the Garden, it totally changed, because that was Secret Service controlled, and we were delivered right to the entrance that led right to the floor.

But the reason it took so long to get there was that there was no control of the intersections, and that’s Koch. Of course, you could also argue that Carter people should have had an advance man to make absolutely certain everything was smooth, but that’s why he was late. And the result was, we ran through maybe one of the corridors parallel to where the speaker’s restroom was—with Kennedy, he was running. Then, all of a sudden, we were in the...
arena. The first thing I noticed was that the stage was completely full of every nobody in America, all dutifully announced to the crowd by Strauss. And then, of course, people realized that Kennedy was there, and there was another one of these roars. But there were 50 people on the stage, at least. Carter couldn’t find him. Have you looked at the tape?

Knott: I’ve seen it, yes.

Oliphant: I mean, you can see him looking and all the rest of it, but the one thing the TV doesn’t do justice to is the view at ground level, where you can’t see around people and all the rest.

Knott: Carter’s not particularly tall either.

Oliphant: Right. It’s not like Kennedy was hiding. And of course everybody on that stage wanted to shake hands with him, and then there’s Carter. So it was a photographic disaster. The only thing I can think of that assigns responsibility for what happens is Koch and the intersection. Because then Strauss could have controlled who he introduced, and he could have put Kennedy on the stage at exactly whatever the moment was the Carter people had planned. And then Carter would have raised his hand, and that would have been it.

Knott: Well, it’s a great story. We’ve never heard this before.

Oliphant: It always mattered to me. It’s like 1972: it always mattered to me whether Kennedy screwed Kevin White.

Knott: Yes.

Oliphant: Not because it was a good idea or a bad idea, but in trying to understand him and the mixture of feelings and ambitions and all the rest of it that’s inside of his head, it’s pretty material if, in a moment like that, he was discouraging the emergence of even a potential rival.

Knott: Sure it is.

Oliphant: And I think that’s why he’s always tried to shield that one as much as he could.

Knott: We’ve gotten a lot of different versions of what went on there.

Oliphant: I know what a green light looks like, and I know what a red light looks like, and that wasn’t a green light. In fact, since we talked, I did talk about it some more with one of the agents on the floor, God rest his soul, Father [Robert] Drinan. And via [John K.] Galbraith, he said the word was to slow it down. But it’s just that there are no footprints there, and there are no fingerprints. Similarly, if there really had been pique or pettiness on the Senator’s part, it would be material to know that. That’s why the episode is worth dissecting.

Ironically, the—whatever you want to call it—happened afterward. We stayed with it, those of us who—There was no need to hang around the Garden in our case, so we went with him, I think, to Teterboro. I can’t remember where he took off from to go home. There had to have been a good-guy aide like Eddie Martin or so with him, because somebody had a bottle in one of those cars. When we got to wherever the heck we were going—and I think it was
Teterboro—it was, “Why don’t we get some paper cups and have a few?” He just said, “I am getting out of here. I don’t want to.” It was one of those—He’s very rarely short.

**Knott:** But he was this time?

**Oliphant:** But he was really, that was it. He had had it. And so a little grumpily we were left in the whatever you call the departure hanger, having a few before we came back to the city to call it in. That’s what happened. And then we were in his living room in McLean the next morning talking about the future.

**Knott:** Really? The next morning?

**Oliphant:** The next morning. First shuttle and those with strong-enough constitutions who could make it by, I think the call was 9:00—He would run for reelection and no question that ’84 was being left wide open. It was the next morning, like eight hours after this madness. It’s classic Kennedy.

**Knott:** It is, isn’t it? This may strike you as an odd question, but there were these rumors during the fall campaign in ’80, Carter versus Reagan. There’s this whole briefing-book thing where Reagan’s folks get ahold of Carter’s briefing materials, and the rumors were that that somehow came through a Kennedy source.

**Oliphant:** They had no access. I do know this: there was nobody Kennedy-related who had anything to do with Carter’s preparation. Nobody. The White House circle did not expand for the general. In fact, he’d have shared it with reporters before he would have given it to Reagan. He had this thought in his head that Carter didn’t have a chance anyway.

**Knott:** He did? Was that out of respect for Reagan or out of a certain disregard for Carter?

**Oliphant:** Kennedy, he’s a good pol. He is one of the best analysts of political situations you’ll ever encounter. One of the things I always used him for on a background basis was intimate knowledge of states—and he’s also got a pretty good reliable feel for things. Given the condition of the economy in the summer and fall, there wasn’t enough of a snapback. He just didn’t see how it was possible. And he was surprised that it stayed tight as a drum right up to the debate in Cleveland.

**Knott:** Right. Did he go out on the stump for Carter that fall?

**Oliphant:** I made three or four trips with him during the general. I broke away from Carter, Reagan, and Mondale duty. And he said no to nothing. The one principle that was laid down was that whatever the competition with Carter had done to Carter’s standing for the general, no one would be able to claim at the end of the election that Kennedy had not done everything he was asked to do. And I don’t know of him saying no to anything. Wisconsin I remember. On the East Coast, was it Pennsylvania? And there was something on the West Coast. Texas, I know, a couple of wild things in South Texas.

**Knott:** Hispanic vote?
Oliphant: Oh, yes. I mean, Kennedy, you had him for turnout in southern Brownsville. The final tip-off, though, was, I remember I was with him, wherever the hell he was, in the period right after Cleveland, when privately there was no doubt in his mind that Reagan had done better than Carter by a country mile in the debate. But going into the final weekend, he got one last call from the Carter people to go to Massachusetts, and that’s what he did for sure. They’re working to shore up something like that and—

Knott: You’ve got problems.

Oliphant: He had to—I’m just not going to remember where it was.

Knott: That’s fine.

Oliphant: It could have been anywhere in the country, but it happened more than once, so maybe it doesn’t matter. He had to get audiences to applaud for Carter. I mean, there would be the reception for him. He had a lot of great stuff about Reagan: “Don’t be deceived, this is a real Barry Goldwater.”

Knott: “Barry Goldwater with a smile.”

Oliphant: That’s right, et cetera. I can’t remember whether this was in the convention speech or not. They all blend together after a while. But he had had a young researcher—Again, this is typical Kennedy—look up stuff wherever the hell the [Richard] Nixon Library materials were at that point. He had things like a telegram from Reagan and his wife to Nixon in 1960 urging him to pick Goldwater as his running mate, not [Henry Cabot] Lodge. Just little reminders, if you need any. He wasn’t going by the seat of his pants or anything. Typical preparation. But they had a whole bunch of good Reagan stuff, a lot of it fresh.

But in the speeches, when he’d get around to Carter, he could sense that people weren’t responding. And a couple of times he would say, “Come on. Now, the next time I say Carter, I want you to be louder than you were the first time,” which is, again, playful, the way he often is with audiences. But he had to push it. The last call he got from the White House, going into the last week, was to go to Massachusetts.

Knott: And of course Reagan ends up carrying Massachusetts.

Oliphant: Yes, he did, and Rhode Island.


Knott: Can you talk a little bit about Kennedy’s attitude toward Reagan? Do you have anything to share on that front? We’re told there was a sort of respect.

Oliphant: It was more than that. Carter had—the poor guy. He still has the resentments to this day. Now that he’s not President anymore, you feel less encumbered about arguing with him, but I mean, try to make the point that if he had done the equivalent of the [Paul] Volker nomination a
year and a half before then, he might have been reelected. This race wasn’t decided by the tussle in the primaries. Carter won’t be budged. But Kennedy isn’t like that.

For Carter, the hostage crisis really screwed up that last year in a lot of respects. But there was one thing, because Congress had voted, that Carter had never gotten around to doing, and that was the gold medal for Bob. It’s so damn simple. You don’t do any of the work yourself anyway. It’s two hours, at most, out of the President’s schedule, and he’d never done it. I know that that stuck even before they were running against each other.

**Knott:** That particular issue had been brewing.

**Oliphant:** Yes, that’s personal. And Reagan scheduled it almost immediately, and it was a great event too.

**Knott:** You were there, Tom?

**Oliphant:** Yes. It’s just Reagan in the Rose Garden at his absolute best: charmed the pants off Ethel Kennedy. When Reagan is really good, he can seem really big. And he spoke about Bob Kennedy in the grandest terms that had nothing to do with his party or even his ideology. It was about people who identify with people, the impact on desegregating the South, which by then Reagan was for, I guess [laughs]. But he was magnificent, and everybody—and above all, Ethel Kennedy—was totally caught up in the spirit of the event. You do something like that and, again, apart from the fact that it’s personal, it’s also political, and Kennedy doesn’t forget things like that—much more so, or as much as it was with Tip. They weren’t friends, but they were pals.

The thing about it that I thought was most revealing was when Kennedy was approached by the Soviets about START [Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty] talks. They didn’t trust Reagan, and they wanted a channel, and this was all secret then, and I only knew about it under conditions that I couldn’t write about it, but they wanted to make sure I came along for the ride so that when the time came, I wouldn’t be doing it off the top of my head. One of the things about the whole yarn that I loved is how it didn’t bother Reagan at all. I think, in the beginning, it bothered Dick Allen, for obvious reasons.

The first couple of times, the Soviets shared the complete verbatim record of all levels—No matter what it was, cruise missiles, intermediate, whatever it was. I think when Reagan realized that Kennedy hadn’t leaked a syllable of it, that for two, three, four years, everything about the arms talks stayed private—and Kennedy played this role, almost like his verifier—it didn’t bother Reagan at all once he realized that Kennedy’s discretion was something he could trust.

**Knott:** Well, this is interesting to hear, because for some reason this story has reemerged, and it’s being implied in these right-wing blogs that Kennedy was essentially acting as a traitor, almost, with these back-door dealings during the Reagan years.

**Oliphant:** Reagan knew all about it. He would come back, and Kennedy or Larry Horowitz would go to—They had a revolving door on that office, but sometimes he met with Reagan personally. They would go there for more than a perfunctory visit before they’d do anything else.
None of his pals in the Senate knew that he knew every detail about the talks. Furthermore, Reagan had implicit knowledge of this at every step.

One of the things that fascinates me, in retrospect, if you look at the record of Kennedy’s advocacy of the nuclear freeze by, say, early ’82, you can’t find anything in his rhetoric about the freeze that in any way, shape, or form indicates that he knew everything that was going on in the arms talks, which always impressed me.

**Knott:** Absolutely.

**Oliphant:** On this level of politics, I’m always impressed with people who know how to keep their mouths shut when it’s really called for, and in this case it was.

Whether the Russians were right in requesting this, who the hell knows? It’s a little insulting, if you think about it. But on the other hand, Reagan was an unusual American to be elected President, given his views. It at least shouldn’t shock anyone that the Russians or the Soviets would have this desire. It’s just interesting to me. And I don’t think Kennedy would have done it if Reagan had said, “This will make it impossible for me to negotiate a treaty,” or whatever.

This was a back channel that went two ways. Reagan and whoever happened to be his National Security Advisor got a lot of information about the Soviet negotiating position they never would have gotten under other circumstances. And after two or three or four tries, they had to know that Kennedy was true to his word, because he never leaked a syllable of information about any of this.

**Knott:** Interesting. Well, good, I’m glad this came up.

**Oliphant:** Obviously the situation changed in the atmosphere leading up to Reykjavik, because then everything became public. It’s like the Vietnam peace talks in Paris: once the cover was blown, they put out the negotiating record post-1960, and at that point it was end game and there weren’t any more back channels. And certainly Reagan’s position on the talks changed. That’s why there were agreements in ’87 and ’88.

The right wing was mad at Reagan. In fact, I think some of this stuff on the computer now is trying to account for the fact that Reagan was going for deals that conservatives denounced at the time. His Vice President, running for President in ’88, was saying negative things about the INF [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces] Treaty on the campaign trail. Well, Reagan changed, and at that point, back channels didn’t matter. I remember going to the Soviet Union with Kennedy after it was over. Reagan was gone.

**Knott:** After the Soviet Union is collapsed?

**Oliphant:** No, not quite. The wall is down. The Baltics are still a crisis. We were in the Kremlin with [Mikhail] Gorbachev, and there were a couple of Russian guys who had been part of this through the ’80s, and they came up to him. I don’t think he realized who they were, maybe didn’t remember their names or something, but one of them said to him, “I just want to thank you for all you did to give us confidence that we could negotiate with the Americans while Reagan was
President.” And as I say, that’s first-term, early second-term stuff. After Reykjavik, there was no need.

Again, the clue it provides about Reagan is that he was not a petty partisan, and he was capable of being President, of thinking big, and of understanding how something that the first time you hear about it, you think it’s wacko, but willing to give it a try and then to keep giving it a try when it was obvious that Kennedy wasn’t using his information to undercut.

Knott: That’s an incredible story.

Oliphant: The lesson in it for people on the left too, that there is something in this case, negotiating drawdowns in the number of warheads and everything, that transcends this week’s political interest of the left. It’s bigger than you are. It’s a very good illustration of Kennedy’s approach to power, to negotiating, to compromise, to making things happen. He is a Democrat, and he’s a very liberal one, but that doesn’t really define him completely.

Knott: Have you ever thought about writing about this particular episode?

Oliphant: I don’t know. It’s still—

Knott: Is it pretty well out there? Again, this story has resurfaced. It’s portrayed—

Oliphant: My first instinct is not to concern myself too much with what this particular sliver of the world thinks. The first round of diplomatic histories of the Reagan period, to my brain, suck because they get hung up on this question of did Reagan win or not win the Cold War, which is about the silliest—That’s not worthy of—certainly not in a place like this or something. So I don’t know the condition of the public record at this point. You’d have to look and see what it was. But to have that opportunity and never to use it once politically is a pretty remarkable window on his discipline and ability to keep a higher purpose in mind. God knows he and people like Eddie Markey were—The nuclear-freeze movement doesn’t happen without them.

The other thing about Reagan—I keep trying to think of specific examples where they actually interacted to produce things in the ’80s—Kennedy, as his private diary makes clear, was a very important behind-the-scenes player in the evolution of the tax reform of 1986. He was not that prominent in public because he thought his association with the cause over the years would make it harder to attract—because this one was hard getting Republican votes as well. It was difficult on a bipartisan basis, and I think the record shows now that Kennedy and the Reagan White House were dealing pretty intimately at critical stages of this one.

On the tax cuts in 1981—Bob Kennedy’s gold medal notwithstanding—there were a couple of attempts inside his office to initiate discussions, just internally, about whether the tide was just so strong that, for his own future’s sake, Kennedy dare not stand against this tide and might want to think about, for example, doing what a number of Democrats did that year, in ’81—to their regret later, like John Glenn—and that was to vote for final passage. No matter what you did when it was before the Senate or proposing amendments and all the rest of it, a lot of Democrats took that dodge.
And Kennedy, he told me, walked in on one such staff meeting that Larry was—He thought that that was what you do to protect the boss and all the rest of it. He said something like, “Look, you guys, this meeting can go on as long as you want it to, but I’m voting against this.” And I think some of them may have been shocked that he was such a willing and eager cosponsor with [William Philip] Gramm and Warren Rudman when they got started. Or that long before Bill Clinton came along, Kennedy, in the spirit of the Kennedy around in the ’60s, was an early Democratic voice for open markets, and he tended to resist the most knee jerk of the protectionist responses that it elicited in that period. I think those are the highlights.

Knott: There was that fundraising event at Senator Kennedy’s house, for the Kennedy Library, with President and Mrs. Reagan.

Oliphant: Oh, that was another one. Again, that’s personal. You never forget something like that. It was like an evening from heaven. It wasn’t Camelot, but it was extremely elegant. Reagan could be very classy, playing the part of being—He didn’t know [Johann Sebastian] Bach from the Beatles, but he could appear in the setting, put on the suit or the tux or whatever was called for, and be the classiest guy you ever saw. The library was in trouble then. This is when the finances were not on firm ground. This was a big deal.

Knott: That’s right. I was working at the library at the time.

Oliphant: Really? So you knew the stakes were high.

Knott: Absolutely.

Oliphant: Reagan knew that, and that’s why he came.

Knott: A beautiful speech he gave.

Oliphant: Well, that’s why he came. Now, as I say, for the speech in New York—I wish I could remember the kid’s name—he went on to, I think, become a lawyer or something—but this kid who found all this Reagan stuff in the Nixon collection showing that the guy was worse than Attila the Hun in the ’50s. I mean, this idea that he was—anyway, the gold medal episode and the library fund-raiser are examples of things that—It didn’t happen very often, but Reagan could call and ask for something, and odds were he was going to get it, and vice versa. He’d take care that he didn’t appoint an idiot like the U.S. Attorney in Massachusetts.

Knott: Tom, could you talk a little bit about the Senator’s—as ’84 and ’88 approach, the question of whether he’s going to run again or not?

Oliphant: The ’84 one was a story I broke when it happened. On the one hand, you could see it coming in terms of going the other way, and then you could see the lurch back in the latter part of ’82. The great mistake in 1980 was spending all this time fretting about whether to run, and not why or how. There was virtually no prep, except for these secret sessions a few of the staff had about what would you do in the first two weeks, or something logistically. And this time it would be totally different.
The first clue to me was that it was apparent that, the primaries notwithstanding, Kennedy, through Shrum, who had stayed on to go full time in the office, had made peace with [Patrick] Caddell. That takes work [laughs]. The Biden episode hadn’t happened yet. Caddell was still—I hesitate to use a word like mainstream, but he was center stage at any rate. It was quite apparent that Kennedy was talking to Caddell. And then you began to see the other signs of the meticulous preparation of a national effort. Interestingly, one way you could pick it up was in the South.

Someone else who stayed, who would eventually become a huge name in Democratic Party politics, was Bill Carrick, who had been the southern full-time staff member in 1980, came out of South Carolina, the orbit of [Richard] Riley’s Governorship. Marcia Hale and Bill Carrick. And Carrick was still—The people working for Kennedy full time, as opposed to those with Carter, the babies went on to become famous, like Donilon and Tad Devine, but the Kennedy thing was like watching an all-star team.

Two future chairmen of the Democratic Party—Paul Kirk and Ron Brown—just on his staff. He had just placed his chief counsel from the Senate Judiciary Committee on the Circuit Court of Appeals in Boston, Steve Breyer; Susan Estrich, who would run a campaign; Paul Tully, God rest his soul, probably as fine an organizer from the ’70s and ’80s as the Democratic—these are all on the full-time staff. It’s the damnedest thing you ever saw. And they are all planning this thing. In the South, they were going to do it through Wallace. They had the conversations.

Knott: Through Wallace?

Oliphant: George Wallace, who was in the process of converting back to the original George Wallace.

Knott: The populist George Wallace.

Oliphant: Yes, right. Race stuff was off the radar screen for Wallace now. He was mellowing, and before he got sick and senile, he wanted to make a difference in the end. He hadn’t quite had the meeting in the black church yet, but he was moving toward that. And they picked up on it before anybody else did in the Democratic Party, and they had had extensive conversations—he was all ready to be for Kennedy [laughs].

You could go on and on. It was the most beautifully planned Presidential campaign. It was the mirror image of 1980. It was better than his brother in 1960, because I think it thought ahead more carefully—substantively a correction but not a revolution. It focused on the excesses of the period. There would still have been liberals snapping at Kennedy’s heels in a campaign. The divorce announcement had happened within a day of Reagan’s inauguration.

Knott: That’s right.

Oliphant: That’s how I knew he was getting ready to run for President: everything out of the way at the beginning of the cycle so that it’s part of the landscape by the time you run. It would have a warm-up in ’82 in Massachusetts. There wasn’t going to be an opponent of any consequence. And yet that’s where Caddell figured—and then also they went to this guy who
mostly did commercial advertising, and he would have one or two commercial clients, political clients. He had John Glenn—I can’t remember his name. It’s not like a household word, but it was then. Anyway, a master, video as well as content, and he did the ads.

They’d experimented more with advertising that was designed to anticipate the personal attack, and that was this interesting way not of presenting Kennedy as a victim, but saying, “He is so important to the ordinary American’s life, because of what he stands for, that they’ll do anything to bring him down.” It was that kind of thing—very skillful, all tested in the reelection campaign in Massachusetts. There was national political work around the country on a par with this intriguing effort that was made in the South.

**Knott:** Very intriguing.

**Oliphant:** Well, he’d been a little bit consumed watching the aftermath of the ’80 census. “Sunbelt” was now a word—had been, really, since ’76. And that meant that any Democratic Presidential campaign, to be successful, had to be more than competitive. It had to have success in the South. And as I say, there was this all-star team doing it. I mean, I didn’t bother to give Massachusetts a second look after late ’81—it was obvious that all was fine.

But down the stretch—because among other things, [Michael] Dukakis was going to make a comeback in Massachusetts that year—it was a national landslide about to occur because of the economy, and some of it was in New England. I saw him once down the stretch in Massachusetts, and it didn’t look right to me, as if he was—I can sometimes tell when he’s preoccupied. You have to be careful, because I remember one time in the early ’70s, it was like that for a week or two. I couldn’t figure it out. I kept thinking politics, and it turned out that his oldest son had had the diagnosis. Something was a little off. But I had the sense up there that the decision was imminent that they wouldn’t do it.

And I got the first call within a day or two of Thanksgiving: “Don’t write any ’84 stories. Something’s wrong.” And gradually it became apparent that in the sailing and family stuff and whatever in Hyannis Port and across the water at Joan’s place on Squaw Island, the kids had been talking to him. Patrick, people forget, was maybe 15 by then, 14 or 15. He was still thin as a pencil, asthmatic, not the strapping fellow of today. He was sickly but beginning to assert himself as a person. And as it turned out, they all had given him guff about running.

**Knott:** Fears for his safety?

**Oliphant:** No. That’s always part of it, but they wanted him around. I wouldn’t even dream of imagining the impact on the three of them of the divorce. But their mother’s problems were already in the public domain by then, quite apart from the split. None of them, including Patrick, is as intensely public a person as Kennedy is. So it didn’t strike me as odd. But the idea that it had been withheld or that they hadn’t really had this talk yet, and that for a year and a half all this stuff had gone on—I don’t know where the records are. I’ve seen some of the stuff in the years since. It is amazing. It’s as well put together a Presidential campaign as any I have ever seen.

**Knott:** So they had learned from ’80?
Oliphant: Yes, and then gone light years beyond. As I say, not just figuring a way to compete in the South, but in a way making peace with the South. He didn’t go to Jerry Falwell’s joint until after he had decided not to run. That came in ’83, if memory—but he still did stuff like that. A lot of people forget that even the ’70s, after ’72, he had done an event with Wallace, right?

Knott: That’s right.

Oliphant: I think I remember going—yes. So, OK, Carrick is a genius and all that, but Kennedy’s not so bad himself: I mean, after all the magic of Bob Kennedy, the magic of ’68 was seeing the two sides of Gary, Indiana, both going for Bob Kennedy. This is the white—”We’re still white steelworkers,” plus the minority community that had already elected a mayor, and to see them both equally enthusiastic is still—I’ve never seen anything like that in politics, until Clinton came along.

The part about this episode that is still the hardest for me to understand is that he and the three children had not had this conversation before that holiday weekend. You’d think it would have been more of a—None of it was a surprise to them or to him. Our view tends to be through the public side of Kennedy’s life, and then the staff and all the rest of it, and it inadequately factors in the family. One purpose of research is to fill in those blanks, I think. My conviction has always been—The more I looked into it, the more I realized that the family was a part of this, and for obvious reasons I had never really seen or understood. But what little I learned about it elevated the family, in my mind, as a factor in all of this. And in retrospect, it makes all of the sense in the world. So it seemed a jolt at the time, and that’s probably misleading. It’s just the nature of the beast.

You don’t hear or see that much about what goes on inside the confines of a family. And, of course, in a unique one like this, that’s even more understandable. But it was unanimous, and it was vociferous, and it was absolutely implacable and unshakable. Kennedy appeared, to me anyway, to have no trouble accepting it. He’s a fantastic father and uncle, but reluctantly nonetheless, because he was ready to go.

Knott: He was ready to run?

Oliphant: He was mentally in the game, had thought about Reagan conceptually—pulling back from excess, righting the country’s course, not changing it radically. It was a very well thought-out thing. And of course it sank like a stone within 24 hours. Life with Kennedy, it’s like this roller coaster ride. By then I’m so used to it, it rolls off me, but when you look back, it is crazy.

It’s funny, to be able to write the story before his announcement—I guess it’s OK to talk about this now—the sources were people in the Mondale camp who knew Kennedy well, had heard about this, and they wanted to make sure it happened, of course. But it didn’t solve the problem. The thing wasn’t out of his system, which is why the same thing happened again in ’85. It’s just that this time, the discussions within the family and the political—and then the new wrinkle was—again, this is something that not just he but his whole family is famous for, and that’s a dispassionate analysis of a situation even if it has personal dimensions that are unpleasant. What was different about ’85 was an analysis that dealt with the question, could you?
Should you ever? That was not on the table in ’82, but it was in ’85. And then it involved cutting the cord.

**Knott:** Was that hard for him to do?

**Oliphant:** I spent a weekend with him beginning the day after his announcement. He had no entourage except a couple of staff members. I was the only writer. You could tell the guy was still keeping the option alive up until the plug got pulled, because—remember, this was the period of the farm disaster. Willie Nelson is starting Farm Aid. The prices had been depressed for four or five years at this point. Rural America is a basket case. He’s at least clued in via poverty and nutrition and things like that.

The trip was, like, a Thursday to Sunday, going back and forth across the border between Missouri and Iowa—Iowa a little bit more revealing. And he had a ball. He had to be on Nightline the Friday night we got to wherever the hell we were, in Missouri, and these were very rural counties. He toyed with [Ted] Koppel, and afterward he had a few pops and was laughing. I mean, you overdescribe it if you say liberated—but happy? Absolutely. And as time passed, more so.

Down the stretch in 1980, we used to have a conversation miles off the record, in which he would try to imagine life in the Senate again. And he’d speak almost wistfully about certain people that he really admired from the past in the Senate, whose careers he wished he’d be able to emulate, maybe, some day. The one that always stuck out in his mind was George Norris, interestingly enough. I remember coming back and he would say, “Well, isn’t that like some kind of a principled loser, somebody who’s remembered for being on the short end of 65-35 votes all the time? What about making things happen and getting things done?” And that’s where he left the door open a little bit. But his first inclination was to talk about people like Norris.

It very quickly became obvious to me, as 1986 began, that he had figured out a way to operate in a Republican Senate with a Republican President. The first example, which was totally behind the scenes, was the Tax Reform [Act] of [19]86. But then it got into everything: the [Daniel Patrick] Moynihan welfare thing in 1988. The response to the trade deficits—there was a piece of legislation making it easier to go to the International Trade Commission and get sanctions for people who are violating, which he helped shape in a way so that it stayed within what were then the gap rules.

But you could begin, in this period, to see him legislate. He figured out that you couldn’t go forward without a Republican cosponsor, and you had to be willing to make the accommodations necessary to get one and then to keep new assembled majorities. It would be like a joke. The poor fellow would be selected, he’d have no idea what he was in for, and then he’d get the treatment. And it didn’t matter how conservative they were. I mean, he was still living in McLean at the time. You’d get the invitation to come to dinner on Chain Bridge Road, and it didn’t matter how much of a right-winger you were. You were honored, and you told everybody in your family that you had been invited to Senator Kennedy’s house. The gag in the office was, they’d bring out his mother’s china [laughs]. Stories would be told, sometimes there’d even be entertainment, and there would be a Republican cosponsor for whatever the hell it was.
After ’86, the Democrats got the Senate back, but it didn’t stop. Whether it was in Judiciary, which really meant some right-wingers, or in what was then the Labor Committee, but gradually it came to mean Orrin Hatch. There was nothing that asked any of them to betray principles, just to hit them in some exposed weak spot. It would be children in the case of Hatch. Sometimes Kennedy had power just simply because he epitomized what could be a filibuster-proof minority and then a majority. He just used it for leverage, and suddenly things begin to get passed, a lot of things, long before Clinton.

I think, partly for ego, because he’s a human being, and partly to have a lasting impact, he decided early in the process for ’88, like about ’87 at this point, that he was going to pretty much set the ideological and programmatic agenda for the national party that year, and he did—the mandate for health insurance; the mandate on business, which is what Dukakis eventually proposed. Some people say the welfare reform of ’88 was more significant than the bill [Newton] Gingrich passed eight years later, and that most of the declines in the caseload and changes in the system were happening at the time that statute was enacted in 1996. But history will be the judge. The point is, by the time the Democrats gathered in Atlanta in 1988, Kennedy had engineered the agenda that they all ran on.

Knott: Did he have a good relationship with Dukakis?

Oliphant: No. He didn’t have much of a relationship. Mike is hard work. This is a non-Greek Greek—a Greek wonk. It’s like a contradiction in terms. But on the other hand, in his own way, a passionate liberal focused on effectiveness; a reformer in the old, beginning-of-the-20th-century sense of the word; and in Massachusetts, a hell of a record. Kennedy was not involved. Dukakis was cover in ’88.

Knott: Cover?

Oliphant: He didn’t have to get involved. I mean, it was a lot tougher for Kennedy in ’84, because the truth is, there were a couple of people secretly working at very high levels of Gary Hart’s Presidential campaign in 1984—Right up to their eyeballs involved.

Knott: With Kennedy?

Oliphant: No. Kennedy’s deal with these people—He’s a stern taskmaster, but he’s not a dictator. One of the reasons he keeps people’s loyalty is he understands they have the need to bust out every once in a while and all the rest of it. Just protect the old man. So you could go and work in the ’84 campaign in any capacity you wanted to, for anybody, as long as nobody knew it [laughs]. There were a couple of cases of people very high in his office who were on opposite sides of that fight when it developed between Hart and Mondale. Shrum, Paul Tully, Carrick, these are not minor figures by then. And that was a lot harder.

Mondale did everything but beg for help in Massachusetts and Rhode Island after Hart had broken through in New Hampshire. It was a very tough decision on Kennedy’s part to turn him down at those moments when Mondale’s life was on the line, because he would say at the time, “I could endorse Mondale, and it wouldn’t help him.” He had to stop the tidal wave from completely swamping him. He did it on his own. And eventually Kennedy came out to Minnesota and was one of the people who stopped all the activity at the end by saying, “It’s over.
We’re for Mondale,” and, of course, “No more contest,” and all the rest of it, which is probably the most he could have done. That was a lot tougher on Kennedy than 1988, because with Dukakis in the race, he could say he was committed, so nobody could bother him.

Knott: Right, OK.

Oliphant: The perfect cover. In truth he didn’t really do all that much, though by the fall, a lot of his people were—Kennedy is one of the easiest offices to raid for workers in campaigns the last month of an election season.

Knott: Sure. Did you ever get the sense on Kennedy’s part that there was any resentment toward Dukakis?

Oliphant: He had completely made his peace by then. The line that he uses in speaking—he’s at the Hospital Association of Missouri or something, and he’s introduced by the president of the Hospital Association, who acknowledges in the audience, there’s also the president of the Iowa Hospital Association, et cetera. And Kennedy will get to the microphone and say, “My God, what a rough thing to put me through. Everybody here is a president except me.” There are many other ways that he does it as well, and you wonder sometimes. But it gradually became apparent, to me anyway, that he had mastered legislation and advocacy of positions inside his party and was becoming very happy at the success he could have.

Knott: Truly comfortable with that?

Oliphant: Yes. Now, there would be moments. I think of Dukakis insisting on taking 10 days off in the Berkshires after the Democratic Convention. It’s like [John] Kerry windsurfing in Nantucket all those years later or not doing anything when this whisper campaign about going to the shrink after ’78 started—things that offend Kennedy’s sense of how you do politics. But that’s separate from resentments. And of course it all ultimately had its climax in what I still think is one of the most astonishingly selfless acts I have ever seen a politician commit, and that was to free up his two top aides, his chief of staff and his communications director, to go and work for John Kerry when it looked like Kerry would lose, didn’t have a chance. I have never seen a politician do that for another politician.

Knott: Interesting.

Oliphant: Mary Beth came right out of Kennedy’s hive.

Knott: Mary Beth Cahill?

Oliphant: Yes. And Stephanie Cutter is one of the best, and she was in charge of the whole communications operation for Kennedy at the time. And of course Shrum eventually became, first of all, almost like a son, and then, eventually, almost like a brother. He got Shrum to Kerry to save his ass in ’96 in the [William] Weld fight in Massachusetts. And Shrum was, of course, present from the word go with Kerry. But for a politician to give another one his chief of staff and his communications director, I think, tells me how Kennedy keeps his ego in check. Ten days out from the Iowa caucuses in 2004, Kennedy’s weekendlong trip through eastern, meaning
Catholic, Iowa is all you need to know about what he was willing to do to help a guy he didn’t know all that well.

There have been a couple of times when I have sensed a certain exasperation on Kennedy’s part with Kerry’s work habits, which are somewhat different from his. There were a couple of times when I have seen him tell Kerry things about Massachusetts that he quite obviously didn’t know, which to Kennedy’s way of thinking is an unforgivable sin. It’s unthinkable. But all that said and done, look at how clean his skirts are just in terms of what his behavior was. And those things he did in 2004 are so beyond what politicians do for each other.

There were a couple of other moments that I think are worth studying. As I say, one of these is the original cosponsorship of Gramm-Rudman, which I think is an interesting intellectual, ideological, and political moment in a career like Kennedy’s. The other one, when he still hadn’t made the final break in terms of running—again, it was one of those moments where you just got an insight into how thoroughly prepared he was. We went up for a couple of days to New York in late spring of ’85, maybe, and I think the nominal event on the public schedule was a commencement address at Hofstra, Garden City—one of the most important speeches I think Kennedy ever made, and it was assessing Reagan’s impact on the office. It is an absolute masterpiece, smooth as glass, intellectually coherent, making the argument that Reagan had restored the office. And again you get underneath it a clue as to the depth of Kennedy’s conviction in a strong Presidency, and also the extent to which he had thought about alternative scenarios to what had been his lot in life up to that point.

My favorite is what almost happened in ’76. It’s all in the Hofstra speech. He says, “Life is weird sometimes. And just think for a second, if the economy had come back a little more strongly in 1976 or maybe [Gerald] Ford hadn’t said what he said in San Francisco or something, he wins.” Well, the Iranian revolution, the double-digit inflation, and interest rates, and the gas lines, and all the rest of it happened on Ford’s watch. It’s wide open in 1980 for a Democrat to be what Reagan was. Now, I think you have to be at least Irish, if not a reader of [William Butler] Yeats, to understand Kennedy’s understanding of irony.

But it is all in that speech, and it is a work of art, and it articulates his views on the Presidency so perfectly. But for all of that, another believer in the office’s potential, President Kennedy, which was that you have got to know how to legislate. Otherwise it doesn’t matter. By the time Dukakis ran, Kennedy was in the process of perfecting his skills. And then they just came bursting out, even at the worst moment in his life, his private life anyway, when he screwed up in Palm Beach.

Knott: Thank you. I have to get you upstairs to see the Governor.