Young: This is an interview with David Espo. It’s March 25th, in Washington, D.C. Before the recorders were turned on, we talked a bit about history, about the sort of ground rules and purposes of the project, and I asked Mr. Espo to start out by identifying his experiences with covering or observing Ted Kennedy over the years, understanding that you were also covering the 1980 Presidential run that he made.

Espo: Right.

Young: So, it’s all yours.

Espo: Well, I had not covered Senator Kennedy at all until his campaign, and I hadn’t expected even to cover his campaign. I remember getting a phone call at night from my editor, asking me if I’d be available to go on a trip in the fall of 1979.

Young: Was that the Globe?

Espo: No, I was with Associated Press.

Young: Oh, you were with AP.

Espo: Yes, I was at AP then, as I still am. All I remember about it is that he went up to Wesleyan University in Connecticut for an event. I had seen him in the Senate, but I’d had no contact. I don’t believe I’d ever talked to him. I got on the plane and flew out to Wesleyan.

Young: You were in Washington with AP. What was your beat, Washington in general?

Espo: I moved here early in President [Jimmy] Carter’s administration, and I had been assigned to the Congress early in 1979, at the time that he started to run for President. So really, except to know the story of his brothers and of his larger family, I had never met or talked with Senator Kennedy when I went out to National Airport and got on his airplane in the fall of 1979. I think it’s fair to say, I remember being nervous. He was Senator Kennedy, number one, and a plane full of young, quite good reporters, who obviously knew him and had covered him for a little while. I felt like I had a lot to try to figure out.

I really don’t have any other memories of that first trip, but it soon turned out I was going to be the AP’s reporter on his campaign, and so I spent the fall of 1979 through the national
convention in New York in the summer of 1980, on most of the trips. I covered most of his speeches, most of his campaign appearances, in Iowa and New Hampshire and many other states.

I have one very vivid memory: After the primaries ended, but before the convention, Senator Kennedy decided to fly out to California to speak to a group of union officials, and chartered a 727 or 747, whatever it was. The day consisted of flying from Dulles Airport to California and back. We left at about sunup and we arrived as the sun was going down. He had made maybe a half-hour or 45-minutespeech, ostensibly to try to keep his candidacy alive, even though the primaries and caucuses had ended and it was clear President Carter was going to be re-nominated. The plane had maybe 10 people on itother than the Senator and his own traveling party. Most news organizations by then had sort of—

**Young:** Dropped him.

**Espo:** Dropped him, or figured, *Okay, we don’t really need to cover this the way we have been.*

**Young:** Did you talk with him on the plane? Did he come back?

**Espo:** I don’t recall that on that day I did, but there were times when he would come back. Most of the strongest memories I have are of the—It’s funny how you have these memories. They are memories of things that in retrospect appeared to be quite dramatic, like his speech at the national convention in 1980. I was standing on the floor among some delegates, and I was trying to ask Paul Tully a question. Paul was very intense. The late Paul Tully was a very intense, brilliant Democratic campaign person. The Senator was about to speak, and he said, “I can’t talk right now."

So I was standing there with some of the delegates, listening to the speech, and as it unfolded I was having a very hard time keeping my emotions in check, and thinking, *I can’t lose it here, because I have to be nonpartisan and unbiased,* and yet there was this enormous wave of emotion that swept over the hall. Even the Carter people, who obviously outnumbered the Kennedy people, appreciated what his family had meant for the Democratic Party, and I even saw one or two of the Secret Service agentwho had tears in their eyes. I don’t remember their names.

It was just a very emotional moment. And of course, historically, it was the end of any chance he had of ever becoming President. But many of the memories that I have are just snippets of things that happened, and many of them are quite embarrassing for him, because any candidate who does run for President is going to make mistakes, and their staff is going to make mistakes. They’re tired, they blurt things out they don’t intend, and when you have a group of young reporters—we were all probably in our late twenties or early thirties, very ambitious—assigned to cover the campaign of the guy that everybody figured might be the next President, and then about 15 minutes later it turned out he couldn’t win anything. So we had many hours of regaling ourselves with the—

**Young:** Kennedy stories?

**Espo:** Kennedy stories, right. I’m sure you’ve heard this before.
**Young:** No, I haven’t. This is why Paul said I should talk to you, or you should talk to history about this.

**Espo:** It was this funny experience because, on the one hand, you’re completely aware that this is history. His brother had been President, and another brother was conceivably on his way to becoming President. He never spoke, that I ever heard, except in very guarded terms about his brothers in public. He always used to say—I remember when he was campaigning in New Hampshire in the primary. He favored gun control for obvious reasons, but in a state like New Hampshire you have a lot of people who hunt, and so he had to figure out a way to try to reassure those people that he wouldn’t be a threat. The way he did this—and he did it at every stop. I remember once when he gave a speech, he gave his remarks and forgot to include this part of it, and came back to the podium and said—the way he constructed this was to say, “My family has been touched by violence, but I would never do anything to take away your rights.” In public, that was as close as I recall him coming to acknowledging what everybody knew when they came to see him.

You knew that you were covering history. He was not just another guy running against another President who is clearly having trouble getting reelected. Number one, he was a Kennedy. Number two, he had this enormous expectation about him. He got Presidential-level security from the very beginning, which meant back in 1980 that everywhere he went he would have Secret Service protection, limousines, automatic weapons at the ready, that no other candidate ever got, unless they became the nominee of the party or they were already President or Vice President.

**Young:** Yes.

**Espo:** So you ended up with this traveling group.

**Young:** Was he comfortable with that?

**Espo:** Was he? Oh, I think he was. I mean, I think he constantly had on his mind what had happened. One day he had a parade in Chicago, on St. Patrick’s Day, and he sort of flinched when a firecracker went off. And then I have a very clear memory: He was in New Jersey in the springtime, and we were in a motorcade. I forget where we were, but we were driving down the road and there was the limousine where he was riding, and then there was the Secret Service van that had the weapons, and then I was in the next car. All of a sudden you could see the limousine accelerate rapidly. A puff of exhaust smoke came out of the back of the car, and all of a sudden the automatic weapons came out of the window, and I’m sitting there in the front seat of the car right behind it. Turned out that a police officer had been on the roof of a building on the motorcade route, unbeknownst to the Secret Service, and had been spotted. So they started taking evasive actions. That was a moment where it really comes home to you that, *Okay.* That was harmless, as it turned out. The Secret Service—I remember talking afterwards to some of them and they said, “Yes, that was a check.”

**Young:** Yes.
Espo: So on the one hand you had this sense of history, you had the Presidential-level security, you had a traveling party that was constantly aware of that. And yet, he quickly lost the caucuses in Iowa, which in retrospect fatally wounded his chances of becoming President.

Young: Can you talk a little bit about the scene in Iowa, and how the campaign was going there?

Espo: The scene in Iowa—What I remember most clearly about Iowa was that he would get enormous crowds. Huge crowds would come out. He would give his speech and then he would stop afterwards and have a reception line where he would stop and shake everybody’s hand. Most days, or all days I guess, he wore a back brace, and he would stand with his backup against a chair or something else so that he could take some of the strain off his back. He would stand for however long it took, and shake everybody’s hand.

He lost Iowa two-to-one to President Carter. In retrospect, it turned out, people wanted to come out and hear him and shake his hand and say they had met him, the President’s brother, but they had no interest in voting for him. It took a while, obviously, to figure this out, because as a young reporter, when you’re in the middle of a campaign like this and he is getting these enormous crowds—And it’s hard, especially back then. Thirty years ago it was very hard to poll a caucus state, because the caucuses were not that set as an institution.

Young: Talking about how the campaign was run, wasn’t it the best example of a well-run campaign, was it? He had Iowa locals that he brought in. Didn’t he bring in [Gerard] Gerry Doherty, or some people from Boston?

Espo: He brought in a number of people from Boston, but I think his real problem—I don’t know if he could ever have won Iowa, because one of the things that had made—The thing that allowed President Carter to stabilize over the early part of that campaign was that the hostages had been taken at the embassy in Tehran, and there was a national outpouring to rally around the President at a time of crisis. We had Americans held hostage in an embassy, by people who were widely viewed as crazy, religious fanatics. That turned everybody’s focus, for a brief while, away from the economy, which was in horrible shape with very high inflation, very high interest rates, and the reason that President Carter ended up losing the election in the long run. But you had this brief period, five or six months, where the hostages being taken worked to his political advantage and against Senator Kennedy’s political interests.

I don’t know that it matters what he could have done in Iowa. I don’t know that he was ever going to win those caucuses, and I don’t know if he was ever going to win the New Hampshire primary, which came eight days later. Once those two events happened, it was basically over, even though he clearly, by May and June, had regained his competitiveness, in terms of winning primaries, with President Carter.

Young: The question is, why didn’t he quit when it became clear that he wasn’t going to have enough delegates? Do you have any insight on that?

Espo: I’m not sure I know why he didn’t quit, except that you got a sense that he was going to demonstrate that he wasn’t going to quit. In the years since, particularly after you read his autobiography, you get a sense for the way his father instilled in the Senator and his siblings, You don’t ever quit. My guess is that part of the reason he kept going, that he stayed in after Iowa and
after New Hampshire, was to overcome the image that had been created of him after Chappaquiddick, as a playboy who had no substance. He had a name, and beyond that, nothing.

Partly, he didn’t want to quit, but he also saw this as a way to reestablish himself and show his determination. I do think there was a moment where he was going to quit, which was the night of the New York and Connecticut primaries. My memory is that that was in mid-to-late March. That was the early years of exit polling, and those of us who covered the campaign, feeding off the mood around the Senator, thought he was going to lose both of those primaries. It would be pretty hard to keep going if you couldn’t win New York and you’re a Democratic liberal running as a liberal, against a President whom you’re calling an apostate.

Then, lo and behold, the exit polls—I’ll never forget this. I was taking a nap in the late afternoon, as I tried to do on election day, primary nights, because I’m going to be up most of the night, and the phone rang and it was the same editor who had called me six months earlier and he said, “You ought to be prepared for writing that he’s going to win both states.” I said, “What are you talking about?” He said, “Well, the exit polls have him ahead.” I don’t remember the margin, but he did win both of those states. Then, clearly, he couldn’t get out. He would have broken faith with everybody.

**Young:** And then he went on. He barely won Pennsylvania.

**Espo:** That was a brutal campaign. I remember that was very close.

**Young:** Talk about that.

**Espo:** All I remember is that he—Again, you have these memories of moments that stick out for no particular reason except that you were there. I believe he had been campaigning on the West Coast. I can’t remember, frankly, if it was Oregon or maybe New Mexico, and he flew all night on Saturday night, to Philadelphia. We got to Philadelphia at about 5:30 or 6:30 in the morning, and then he had an event where he gave a morning speech. I don’t remember any of the details. I just know it was in a hotel in Center City. But I remember it being one of the most effective speeches that he had given, and I remember marveling, **This guy’s been up all night and he just rolls off the plane and does this incredible, incredible speech.** Pennsylvania was difficult because number one, Pennsylvania has a lot of blue collar, conservative, anti-abortion Democrats, and Catholics, and also because Mary Jo Kopechne was from northeastern Pennsylvania. That’s the woman who died in Chappaquiddick.

**Young:** Yes.

**Espo:** One of the most frightening days of the entire campaign that I recall is that he was in was Wilkes-Barre, which was the area Mary Jo Kopechne was from, and he was supposed to speak, and an unruly mob, which is the only way to describe it, was in the streets around where we were. The Secret Service had to figure out how to get him into the building and how to get him out of the building. I will never forget it. People were yelling and screaming and menacing, and there was one guy holding up a sign that said, “Senator Kennedy, can you do that trick in the Lehigh River?” That was a reference to Chappaquiddick. They wanted to know, if he had driven a car into the Lehigh River, could he have escaped? I thought that was a pretty remarkable thing
to say, or to have on a sign, even if you weren’t going to say it. But it was certainly an indication of one person’s contempt for Senator Kennedy, and of the passions in that part of the state.

Young: Did you see much outside of—earlier than Pennsylvania, or after? The early polls showed him way out in front of Carter during the time when he was deciding to run. Then they realized that Chappaquiddick figured a lot more importantly than they thought it would. They were misled by the earlier polls. Were there other evidences of the Chappaquiddick antagonism toward him that you saw elsewhere? Did you see demonstrations in Iowa?

Espo: I don’t recall, offhand. There was certainly nothing that rose to the level of that day, and I’ve never seen anything quite like it since, in any campaign that I’ve covered. It was so visceral, they were so angry, and they weren’t angry over a policy or a war or the economy. They were just angry.

Young: It was personal.

Espo: Right. It was completely personal, and I’m sure there wasn’t going to be any way to have a debate with those people, not that anybody wanted to. The Secret Service looked genuinely troubled by what was going on, and they went to some lengths to get him in and out of wherever he was. I don’t remember the details of the event, although I believe it was held—I’m not certain about that.

To answer your question, once in a while people would say something—If you talked to people in audiences at events, there would often be people who would mention it, they were troubled by it, but in my experience in interviewing people, it was always a thought that they had, a concern that they had. Whether or not it was going to be dispositive when they decided to vote, it was hard to tell. They at least—they went to hear him speak and they weren’t screaming obscenities at him in the street.

Young: Yes.

Espo: So yes, it was clearly an issue. You could tell it was something of an issue, although I couldn’t ever tell how much. I didn’t cover the run-up to his decision to run. I don’t know what they thought the impact of Chappaquiddick would be, and I don’t know what they persuaded themselves realistically might happen. Certainly it was an issue, but again, the second the hostages were taken, it was a transformative moment in the campaign.

And he made a mistake. He said something—I don’t recall what it was, but he said something about the Shah.

Young: The Shah—He said that he’s run one of the most violent regimes in history, or something like that.

Espo: I think you’re right. I think that he had spoken out in the past about the Shah’s regime. I remember my editors called me up and they said, “You’ve got to find it.” There wasn’t any Internet then.

Young: No.
Espo: I was working that day in the Capitol, in the Senate Press Gallery, and I went over to the Senate Library, which at the time was on the third floor of the Capitol. Ironically, it is two doors down from where Senator Kennedy’s hideaway once was on the third floor. I went in and started reading Congressional Records, until my eyes were glazed over. It was like trying to prove a negative. In a complete full day, I could never find an example of him speaking out against the Shah. On the other hand, you can’t fairly write a story that says he never did, because who knows?

Young: Somebody could turn something up.

Espo: Right. But the Carter people were—Everybody understood that that was a gaffe. On the other hand, it didn’t help him. But the fact on the ground, of Americans being held hostage, Americans responding viscerally to that, helped Carter.

Young: Very shortly after he formally announced, the hostages—I’m trying to think, in November.

Espo: It was November, 1979.

Young: It was a funny month, a strange month. He announced, and there was the opening of the Kennedy Library.

Espo: Oh, that’s right. Carter went.

Young: Carter was there. That was on—I’ve got the dates here. It was November. There was the [Roger] Mudd interview. It was aired in November.

Espo: Those things happened not only before I was on the campaign, but before I thought I would be on the campaign, so I didn’t pay any particular attention. I do remember the Senator and Mudd being at a party many months later, and it was amazing how they avoided looking at each other. When one got in the same room as the other, they would turn away, so they didn’t have to acknowledge each other’s presence.

Young: The militants took over the embassy; there was the Mudd interview that had happened in August; and within a matter of just a few days, his formal announcement at Faneuil Hall, that he was running.

Espo: Right. You couldn’t have had a worse lead-in. But you know, that was a gaffe. It’s hard to believe that—Well, nowadays, no one would announce for President without being able to articulate why they wanted to run. In part because of that, but in part because you’re subjected to so much more scrutiny than the formal sit-down interview with Roger Mudd, or anybody else. You’ve got to answer that question a thousand times before you ever get there. But anyway, he had these larger historical forces, and the personal character issue.

Young: But also, a lot of people were pushing him to do it, weren’t they?

Espo: Yes, because there were a lot of Democrats who had no use for Jimmy Carter. Some of them were in Congress, where there was remarkable contempt for President Carter. Again, this
was 30 years ago. Jim Wright was the Majority Leader, and I went and talked to one of his people one day. I barely knew the guy, and the next thing I know, he’s telling me about how Jimmy Carter is the least impressive President he has ever seen. This is not Mr. Wright, but one of his people saying, “He walks into a room and nothing happens,” speaking of the President.

And then Carter, very early in his administration, vetoed legislation funding water projects, which is about as sacrosanct as it gets for members of Congress. So they had no use for him, but they also understood that the economy was so bad, he was—They were going nowhere with him and they were going to get wiped out.

I also remember, and this goes to the same thing, I think: Robert Byrd was the Majority Leader at the time, and obviously he and Kennedy had been rivals in the Senate. I think it’s fair to say Senator Byrd has never been a liberal, and Senator Byrd is one of the most press-averse politicians I have ever encountered. He is manifestly uncomfortable in the presence of reporters. Every Tuesday that Senator Kennedy lost a primary would be followed by a Saturday press conference where Senator Byrd would invite in a group of reporters and say, “I think Senator Kennedy ought to keep right on running.” And I’m sure it wasn’t for any love of Senator Kennedy, but it was for his fear that Jimmy Carter would lead the ticket. So sure, there was that, and obviously, they had policy differences.

Young: After the defeat in New Hampshire and Iowa—There’s been a fair amount of commentary on the switch, or the new focus, of Kennedy’s campaign, in which he broadened his attack on Carter. It became much more the traditional liberal attack, of little things, to their attacks on him, and added foreign policy. You know, the Soviets had invaded Afghanistan after that November.

Espo: By December.

Young: And Carter had scratched the Olympics.

Espo: I was going to say, didn’t that happen when they were campaigning in Iowa? Because the embargo was a concern.

Young: It was in December, when the Soviets invaded.

Espo: Yes. And Carter announced the embargo, which did not sit well with the Iowa farmers.

Young: Yes. That was in December.

Espo: Even that, however that helped him, Senator Kennedy—It was problematic. You’d think that the farmers would be unhappy enough that they would not turn out for President Carter, but they’re probably going to vote Republican and not go to a Democratic caucus. But sure, Carter had all kinds of problems. You know, you can always say, “What if?” But it would have been quite an interesting race had Kennedy been running only against Chappaquiddick, and not against this national rallying around the President.

Young: You say they were rallying around the President, but they were actually moving away from the Democrats, weren’t they? Double-digit inflation—There were all these problems.
Espo: Yes. I just mean that there was a patriotic surge when the hostages were taken, and it worked to the advantage of the President, who happened to be Jimmy Carter, for a few months. Sure, I didn’t appreciate this at the time, I guess, but given the economy at the time of the election and the run-up to the election, he was never going to be reelected. The only hope the Democrats had of holding the White House was to take him out in the primary, and even that might not have worked. But it would have been more interesting and we would have gotten to travel around the country with Senator Kennedy for a few months longer.

Young: [Hamilton]Ham Jordan told me—I was interviewing him for the Carter project—This is all public now—He said, “We had a hostage crisis; we had double-digit inflation; and we had Ted Kennedy against us. We could have won if we had only two of those.” I don’t think so.

Espo: I don’t want to argue with someone who is not here to defend himself, but I don’t think so. The economy was a slam-dunk. He was not going to be reelected. He was, as I say, propped up by the hostage crisis briefly, and then it became a matter of national embarrassment and national disgust, and people wanted anything but to have him in the White House. By then, Senator Kennedy had lost the nomination.

Young: Did you have a sense, in the Kennedy campaign, that they had this feeling that Carter was not going to make it for reelection, and could that have been part of the motivation?

Espo: I don’t know this, and I will never know this, again, because I wasn’t there when they were discussing it and I basically knew none of his people when I stepped onto the plane in November. My guess is he would not have run. He’s a very smart politician and he would never have run if he thought President Carter was going to be in a strong position, if the party were unified behind him. That would have been a nonsensical challenge.

He’s a Democrat in a family of Democrats, and he obviously knew that when you run against the President of your own party, it’s unlikely much good is going to happen as a result for your party. I think he ran just because the economy was so weak, and he had talked himself into thinking—or they had talked themselves into thinking—that they could overcome Chappaquiddick and all the rest of it. It’s possible they could have. But that one event occurred and froze public opinion, in my view. People obviously can disagree with that.

I just want to say one more thing, which is if you look at the history of the New Hampshire primary in recent years, particularly the Democratic, Massachusetts politicians almost always fare extremely well in the Democratic primary: Michael Dukakis, obviously, Paul Tsongas, John Kerry. It’s so ironic that Senator Kennedy is the exception. There has to be an explanation for that. I don’t think Carter was any more popular in New Hampshire than he was anywhere else; it just was that moment. Senator Kennedy used to say to that he thought that when the United States won the gold medal in the hockey game, it probably cost him a point or two, because the country was just so happy that they’re going to stick with the status quo. I don’t know if you believe that or not, but I heard him say it.

Young: After he lost, but gave the famous stirring speech at the convention, some students and scholars have felt that it was after that moment that he really buckled down to becoming a legislating Senator. Do you think that will hold up? You’ve covered Congress for a long time.
Espo: The only question I have about that is the extent to which he had started down that road before his campaign. I don’t know the answer, because I was new to covering Congress and really don’t have an appreciation for what he had done before, but there is no doubt in my mind that when he came back—President [Ronald] Reagan had won, and the Republicans had won control of the Senate for the first time in a quarter-century, and he was very aware of the importance. He was very aware of the party’s situation, and he really decided to plunge into the work.

But also, certainly for a while he thought about running in 1984. But he behaved like a man who decided he was going to be the standard bearer for the party in the Senate. He waged a pretty long and contentious struggle in the Labor Committee to block President Reagan’s Labor nominee, Ray Donovan. An interesting sidelight: Senator Kennedy had Walter Sheridan on his Labor Committee staff at the time. He had been a racketeer investigator and had worked for Robert Kennedy at the Justice Department. Sheridan used to work in the Dirksen Office Building, and he had a completely nondescript government desk and just a telephone, and he’d sit there and talk to his contacts all day. He was assigned to the Ray Donovan investigation.

Anyway, I think Senator Kennedy decided he was going to stake out his turf to be the party’s most prominent Senator, if he could, and also position himself to possibly run in 1984, which he ultimately decided against.

Young: Was Larry Horowitz on the campaign trail?

Espo: Yes, he was.

Young: And Paul?

Espo: Paul Kirk was and Carey Parker was.

Young: Carey Parker was traveling with him?

Espo: Yes. Carey traveled with him all the time, and Bob Shrum, and Larry. I don’t recall if Paul was there all the time. There was a fellow, a guy whose name was Rick Burke.

Young: Yes.

Espo: Whom I’m sure everybody has spoken of.

Young: Not often, actually.

Espo: Not favorably? He was his—I don’t know what you would call him—his administrative assistant, but he sort of disintegrated at the end of the campaign. I remember getting the sense from him that he was just unraveling personally, because he would say things. I’d be talking to him, trying to write a story, and he would say things that couldn’t possibly be true, and I wondered. Always, as a reporter, obviously you want to get ahead on the news, but you’d like to be right, more than you’d like to be first. If I had printed some of the stories that he said, I would have been laughed out of the business.
Young: Yes.

Espo: So anyway, Rick was there, Carey, Bob Shrum, Larry, and at the end, Ron Brown, who ran the California campaign.

Young: Yes.

Espo: There would be Senator Kennedy’s health staffers. One of his health staffers was a guy by the name of Stuart Shapiro, who traveled quite often. He was a physician who later became the public health administrator, I think in Philadelphia. Other people from time to time, but that was the core.

Mentioning Stuart reminds me of the mistakes that are made and the incidents that just stick out in your mind for no reason at all except that you were there. In Pennsylvania, Senator Kennedy was at a hospital and he was talking about healthcare, obviously. They’re in a little room and they’re talking to a number of people, and he is evoking stories about what it’s like not to have health insurance, what’s it like not to have money for prescription drugs, et cetera.

The Senator’s got his little index cards, and every camera in the greater Pennsylvania area is there, as well as the three networks and all the reporters. He says to this woman, “So you take eight pills a day and what do they cost?” And she says yes and she’s barely able to speak. She’s emotional, she’s holding back. She answers his question, and then the Senator says, “And your husband, I understand he’s also quite sick and he takes five pills a day. Tell me about that.” And she looks at him and says, “Well actually, he died.” A few days ago, or a few weeks ago. Kennedy looks at her like, “Oh, I’m terribly sorry to hear that.” You could tell that he’d been poorly staffed, let’s just say. It was a moment, you know—There’s no way to get it back. The poor woman. I found out later that he had expressed his frustration to the staff.

Young: Threw a fit, I’m sure.

Espo: I think he was not happy.

Young: That would be an understatement.

Espo: I didn’t witness the aftermath, but I did hear about it.

Young: What was Larry doing on the campaign? What was his job?

Espo: You know, I don’t know.

Young: I don’t either. That’s why I’m asking.

Espo: Part of the reason I don’t know is I don’t remember. I understood what Shrum did, what Carey Parker did, what Rick did, and what the political people did. I think he was there because Senator Kennedy trusted him. But, behind the scenes? That’s a good question and I don’t know the answer.

Young: Could it have been because he was a doctor?
Espo: I’m sure that was part of it, but Stuart was a doctor also.

Young: Stuart was there.

Espo: Right.

Young: He generally had a doctor always with him.

Espo: Well, I think one of the two of them was always there, yes. I don’t know.

Young: I forgot to ask Larry that.

Espo: You forgot to ask him what he did?

Young: Yes. He spent a lot of time on the Soviets.

Espo: Yes, but I don’t think that was in that period. I think that was during the Reagan Administration, when they were going to Russia and bringing Refuseniks back. I remember that.

Young: I have heard about the staff situation when Larry was chief of staff.

Espo: You mean in the Senate?

Young: Yes. Well, I can’t tell you what other people have said, but he was very much a take-charge—

Espo: Oh sure, but he always—in any case, after many years of trying to figure this out, chiefs of staff obviously do what their principal wants, and more or less in the way they want it done. It wasn’t as though Larry or anybody else was a loose cannon. He was getting done what he was asked to get done.

Young: Perhaps a little more gruffly.

Espo: Yes, probably.

Young: Much has been said about the Kennedy staff when we talk with other Senators and other staffs. What was it about the staff that made it so special among Senator staffs?

Espo: That’s a hard question to answer. In both parties, there are Senators and Congressmen, leaders, whose staffs are really head-and-shoulders above most everybody else’s. It would be very hard to predict sometimes. In this case, he had extremely smart, ambitious people. They were very knowledgeable in their field and they knew that they were working for an activist Senator who wanted to write legislation, who wanted to get things done, who always wanted to be in the mix, and his name was Kennedy. It was a very enticing and rewarding environment to work in, and plus, of course, he had the Walter Sheridans.

I remember [Theodore] Ted Sorensen showed up at an airport one day. He had been his brother’s counsel in the White House. The ones who do succeed tend to stay for quite a while. They stay
for ten years or more. They work hard. They’re always staff, but they’re welcomed into the larger Kennedy family.

**Young:** And maintain contact, most of them, after they’ve left.

**Espo:** Absolutely.

**Young:** They’re still available.

**Espo:** Oh, constantly. Larry obviously was involved in the medical care, not only for the Senator, but for his daughter. I think Bob Shrum is still there.

**Young:** Still there.

**Espo:** He worked on his staff, and actually after the campaign, he was on his Senate staff, and then went on to become sort of Bob Shrum, Inc. I heard that, at various times, Senator Kennedy tried to get other Senators to hire Bob when he was a consultant. So there’s a lot of loyalty both ways. As I say, they’re also very bright. One of them is now a Justice on the Supreme Court.

**Young:** Steve Breyer.

**Espo:** Ron Brown was a Cabinet Secretary. Several people in the Obama White House had staff jobs, senior staff jobs. I had lunch, maybe a year ago, with somebody who worked on the campaign. He was running a trade association when we got together. We were talking not only about his working for the Senator, but he told me that when Patrick Kennedy first ran for office in Rhode Island as a state representative, they were very concerned about his first race, and they picked up the phone and they called a handful of people that they needed, and the next thing they knew they were in Providence, trying to help a then very young Patrick Kennedy get started.

It also amazes me—you see extremely sharp lawyers and other people who have worked for Kennedy as younger men and women—I saw somebody on TV. It was a funeral. It might have been John Kennedy Junior’s funeral. I saw somebody I knew that worked for Senator Kennedy, and had been long since spun off into the legal world. He had an earpiece on and he was doing logistics at the church, getting people in and out. So they’re always seemingly close at hand, and willingly. They had enormous affection for him.

And yet, obviously, he’s a Senator and a politician. He could be unhappy and express his anger. He once did a call-in show in Chicago, and he had the idea somehow that the host was black, and somehow did this sort of black patter. Kennedy gets on and he’s doing the interview, and Kennedy’s looser than he might otherwise be, and it turns out it’s not the guy he thought it was. It was just some guy. So Kennedy later believed that he had sort of looked ridiculous. I don’t remember who the staff person was, but Kennedytold him, “I make enough mistakes on my own. I don’t need you making any mistakes.”

Yes, the staff is legendary, justifiably. I don’t know of any other office—Well, he was in the Senate for 47 years, so there isn’t going to be anybody else who has that, but it was and is remarkable.
**Young:** Were you covering healthcare under [William] Clinton?

**Espo:** Yes.

**Young:** Can you talk a little bit about Kennedy’s part in that?

**Espo:** Well, I don’t really—What I remember most clearly is that he just wanted it to happen. He wanted to make some deals. He wanted to get the right people into the room and try to figure out what it would take. Even close to the very end of the debate, after months, when it was pretty clear that the Republicans weren’t going to work with Clinton on it, I remember him saying to me—We just had a very brief conversation right off the Senate floor. He said, “I can see how this ends up with a deal.” He starts talking about this and that. I don’t remember the details. Most of the drama, actually, the meaningful drama on healthcare, was in the House. I just know that he really wanted it to happen and he was willing, as always, to compromise in order to get the beginning of something that he could later add to.

He said to any number of people I’ve heard this from, that one of the biggest—if not the biggest—mistakes he ever made in public life was to reject the offer Richard Nixon had made, because they ended up with nothing, and if he had taken it and it had been passed, you could always go back and add to it. It’s that first step. I forget whose book I read recently—maybe it was his book, his autobiography—about community health centers, which started out basically as a pilot project.

**Young:** Yes.

**Espo:** They wanted a couple—He wanted two. He went over and [Lyndon B. Johnson] LBJ said fine. I guess it was LBJ. He went over to the House and had to testify at Ways and Means. Adam Clayton Powell basically said, “Well, sure, we’re okay, as long as I can have one.” “Sure.” Why not? That’s all to the good. Here’s a project that now, in the healthcare bill that just passed, they raised the appropriations by ten or eleven billion dollars.

I don’t really recall, frankly, what he did in healthcare except try to have it happen.

**Young:** But he wasn’t in the lead, was he? This was the President.

**Espo:** It was Clinton’s deal, and they had to get it through the House first. Then [George J.] Mitchell, the Leader, took over in the Senate but by then the Democrats in the House were incapable of passing anything. They never got it to the floor, and in an environment like that, it just doesn’t matter what’s going on in the Senate. You can’t pass it first. It has taxes in it and it’s got to wait.

This is not directly on point, but you had three House committees of jurisdiction, and they finally got to the point where each of them had a bill. It was clear that this was not going anywhere, but they then proceeded to have the three committee chairs negotiate for two or three days, in private, over which committee would have jurisdiction over which part of the bill. Now this is a bill that wasn’t going to pass. They were so incapable of governing at the time—a weak Speaker, a very strong chairman, no one to crack the whip. Republicans were in no mood to help, and to methat always symbolized their ineptitude—in 1993, I guess.
Young: It was ’93. How was it different this time around? Kennedy was in at the beginning.

Espo: Well, for sure. President [Barack] Obama has said publicly, and I don’t know if it’s true, that before Senator Kennedy endorsed Obama, he asked that he make healthcare his number one priority. He was in it from the beginning. He went out and hired brilliant staff and brought them on, and I think fully expected to be there negotiating every step of the way. So it was different that way.

But it was different in the way the White House went at it. One of the little-noted things about this is the White House split the special interest groups. They made a deal with Pharma, and it worked brilliantly to the drug industry’s advantage because it shielded them against more punitive legislation, but it also gave the White House, as I say, a split in the special interests, and it was then very difficult for the insurance industry and anybody else to defeat the effort. So, he co-opted a couple of special interests and that really was—the rest of it, in my own personal view, flows from that. Once he had that piece and a couple of other pieces locked into place, he could then go and make whatever deals he needed to make, and work Congress, so he could let Congress take the lead.

But the big issue for the liberals early on, and in the middle stages of the debate, was the public option, that he would have a government-run option.

Young: Single-payer.

Espo: Right. Obviously, Senator Kennedy supported that, but there’s no doubt in my mind that if given a choice between healthcare and no single-payer, or standing on some sort of liberal principle that didn’t have the votes, he’s for healthcare.

Young: “Don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good,” he would say.

Espo: Or, start small. Right, exactly. Take what you can. If you can get something through and it’s good—That’s the other thing: If you get something through and people like it, you can add to it, community health centers being probably the best example of that.

Right to the end, his staff was very heavily involved in the legislation, the specifics of it. He had a staff that understood as much, if not more, about the policy of healthcare, and what was going on. And so even in the period where he was sick and not able to come to the Capitol, his staff was with Senator [Christopher] Dodd on the Health and Education Committee, and very much involved in what was going on.

After Senator Kennedy’s death—I’ve never seen this, I don’t think. That week that the Senate passed its bill in December, Senator [Thomas] Harkin, who had taken over as chairman of the Health Committee—They had a celebratory news conference, and Senator Harkin went out of his way to praise Michael Myers, who was Senator Kennedy’s staff director on the Health Committee. I’ve never heard anything like this. He called him “the incomparable Michael Myers.” Michael never leaves any fingerprints. He’s very unassuming in public and he’s a complete gentleman, but he obviously made an impact on Senator Harkin. He didn’t have to do that.
**Young:** What do you think Kennedy’s most distinctive or distinguished—What made him so different, to the degree that he was different from other senior Senators you’ve known or watched over the years?

**Espo:** Well, for one thing, his personality. He was outgoing. He had, obviously, a distinctive voice, a loud laugh. A lot of Senators have good interpersonal or social skills. His tended to be, in public at least, sort of backslapping, and in private, he was very considerate of others. I think it was his personality. And it was the body of work that he put together over the years.

Senator [Alan] Simpson, who at the timeworked with Senator Kennedy on immigration legislation, said, “I’d much rather work with Senator Kennedy than some of the yahoos in my caucus.” He wanted to get stuff done. He cared about what he was working on, but not enough to refuse to take a compromise when he could. On the one hand, he was very passionate. He could attack, he could berate the Republicans, he could call them whatever he wanted to call them. But they also—

**Young:** And they him.

**Espo:** And they him. I’m convinced that for a period of years he was the Democrats’ best fundraiser and the Republicans’ best fundraiser. Also, of course, he had the family history. You always knew—maybe not always. My kids, one a teenager and one in her young 20s, don’t fully understand who he was, but people who were paying attention always understood who he was, and recognized that he stayed at it. Personality, stick-to-it-iveness, or whatever you call it—his willingness to work.

**Young:** He was a real workaholic, wasn’t he, in terms of preparing?

**Espo:** You always heard that he always went home with the bag and it was returned marked up. I’m sure there were nights when it wasn’t, but fair enough. I know from other people who now have been detached to help Senator Harkin, that the work habits are remarkably different. Senator Harkin has been in the Senate for many years and he has his own style, and he’s obviously very successful getting reelected, but he gets to work at 9:00 and….

So, I think it’s all those things. He also just had an ability to spot an opening. There were a number of years, when the Republicans were in power, where he would basically decide in January that he would give the Democratic State of the Union Address.

**Young:** That was quite deliberate.

**Espo:** Absolutely, it was deliberate. He’d make sure that he had an audience, a distinguished audience, at some building on the Hill somewhere, and he would invite reporters to cover it, and they always staffed him so that they would do the rollout of the speech and they’d get coverage. Then he would have a little interview with reporters afterwards, which would extend the coverage. Absolutely. He loved that stuff. He just loved having that spotlight. It’s obviously harder when he’s in the majority, when the Democrats have the White House, because he knows that the President’s a Democrat.
Young: Well I noticed that in the Carter Administration, he rolled out a national health insurance proposal in the caucus room.

Espo: I didn’t know that. In the caucus room in the Senate?

Young: It was a proposal that called on the President to—an interesting reversal. It’s usually the President who rolls it out and calls on the Congress.

Espo: Yes. I don’t think he had a lot of use for President Carter. When he ran for President, he was running—When he retooled—Was it after Iowa and New Hampshire? All of a sudden he came out on freezing wages and prices and interest rates. It might have been interest rates, which was pretty radical economics, even in 1980. It was a pretty remarkable thing that was so far to the left that if you stopped and thought about it, you’d sort of wonder, What’s that about?

Young: Well, Nixon had imposed—

Espo: Nixon had imposed price controls, and then Carter had inflation controls. There was a period where I was covering organized labor, and every contract negotiation, every deal, had to be blessed by [Alfred E.] Fred Kahn, who at the time was the inflation czar. But like everything else in Washington, they figured out ways to get around it and it became meaningless.

Senator Kennedy said something in that campaign that I have never forgotten and that I believe to be true, and it’s true today. One of the things he used to say from the very beginning was, “When the economy is wrong, nothing else is right.” I think it was designed to tap into the insecurity that people felt, to cause them to desire, obviously, to change in his direction, to make him the change agent. It’s a very useful way to look at elections, always, right up until 2010.

Actually, it reminds me of—By the end of the campaign, when he was sort of swinging from the heels, the rhetoric got more and more biting, and there was finally one day—I don’t remember where we were—where they gave us a prepared text in which he was going to say that Jimmy Carter was a clone of Herbert Hoover. You wouldn’t say that if you thought you had a chance to beat the guy. My memory is that initially when he read the speech, he didn’t say it, and so of course immediately, “What about this, Senator?” He ultimately said it, but it was the only day he said it.

Young: Yes. His standing on the Republican side, inside the Senate, was quite high, wasn’t it?

Espo: I believe so. Senator [Orrin] Hatch, who was the Republican on the Labor Committee—They worked on a lot of legislation together.

So you know—Senator Simpson, Senator Hatch. After Senator Kennedy had died, Senator [Saxby] Chambliss made a little eulogy on the floor, in which he referred to the fact that after he had become chairman of the subcommittee that Senator Kennedy was on—He had been in the Senate not long, and Kennedy called him up and said, “Let’s get together, I think there are some things we can work on.” According to the speech, I remember Senator Chambliss said, “Well, I’ll come on over.” And Kennedy said, “No, you’re the chairman. I’m coming to your office. That’s the Senate way.” It was gestures like that.
Young: He almost always went to another person’s office.

Espo: Right, that he appreciated. There was in his office a letter signed by Trent Lott—Actually, I’ve been trying to find out what this referred to—where Lott said, “If people only knew….” It implied that they had done stuff together. And then, of course, during the impeachment, they were in a caucus of 100. I don’t know all of the details, but they were trying to figure out how to work their way through the trial of President Clinton and how many witnesses to allow, and so forth, and basically Kennedy and Phil Gramm, who is a very conservative Texan, proposed a way out. It turned out to be the classic Senate, “Kick the can down the road” compromise, but it was clearly a case where he was able to work with the Republicans.

I think he had huge respect among the Republicans, who also understood and delighted in making whatever use they could of his reputation, his liberalism, his Massachusetts—everything. He was a wonderful foil for them. But they worked with him successfully.

Young: Do you think he was getting tired of the Senate?

Espo: I don’t know.

Young: This is just a conversation I was having with him once and he said, “The Senate is getting more like the House all the time.”

Espo: Everybody says that.

Young: I don’t know whether he had a changed attitude toward the Senate, but he kept referring to it as “the institution I so love.”

Espo: Right.

Young: He had almost a Senatorial temperament, I think, beyond all the Irish and the—

Espo: Right. That’s the difference, I think. That is an essential difference between him and his brothers, politically. Neither of them had much interest in staying in the Senate and obviously, after he ran for President and lost, he chose to go back to the Senate and chose to stay for 30 years. That’s a lot of hearings and a lot of boring press conferences and markups. You have to really love what you’re doing to do that.

Young: He did a lot of things that were very low profile. I don’t know whether you noticed many of those or not, but that really struck me, in hearing all the things that he would try to get done.

Espo: Right.

Young: You wouldn’t have done that kind of thing if you wanted to be President.

Espo: Right. He once did something for me. I broke my own rule of never asking a politician for a favor. A number of years ago, very shortly after the campaign, one of Robert Kennedy’s kids was graduating from a private school in Rhode Island. I had gone there, and my mother, at the
time, was still teaching there. I saw the speech. In those days, they mimeographed and sent around the paper copies of the speech. I saw it on the schedule with something, and I said to Shrum, “Really, he’s going there? I didn’t know that. I went there and my mother teaches there.” Shrum said, “Don’t worry about it.” And the next thing I know, my mother calls me up and says, “You can’t believe what Senator Kennedy said.” He had recognized her, and said something nice about me, and it made—I’m sure she told all of her friends. I remember it to this day because it was very generous, gracious, and he didn’t have to do it. That’s the one I know of personally, but I know he did that kind of thing, you know, when somebody got sick. When the late Helen Dewar of the Washington Post was sick, he sent her a watercolor painting, which she put up in her room at the nursing home.

You know, he would say, “famfamilies,” and that kind of stuff. His verbal gaffes were fair game.

**Young:** Well, then it may have.

**Espo:** It may well have, I don’t know, but it was an example of how he could get—

**Young:** But not for purposes of ridicule.

**Espo:** People make mistakes.

**Young:** People love that sort of funny joke.

**Espo:** Right.

**Young:** I think our time is about up. Thank you very much, David.

**Espo:** Thank you very much.