EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS A. DASCHLE

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Interviewer

James Sterling Young

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TRANSCRIPT

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Young: This is an interview with Senator Tom Daschle. Let's begin. You came to the House in 1978, I believe.

Daschle: I did.

Young: And you moved from there to the Senate in 1987.

Daschle: Correct.

Young: Did you have any contact with [Edward] Kennedy when you were in the House? When did your first contact come about?

Daschle: I had occasional contact with him in the House. I was a very junior member of the House leadership, and from time to time we would have legislative interaction with the Senate: certain projects, social events, and other things occasionally provided an opportunity. Then when I was contemplating running for the Senate in '85, he was one who reached out to me and encouraged me to consider a run for the Senate.

I grew up a great admirer of the Kennedy family. As a young person, my first real election was 1960. I had always, as had so many in my generation, viewed the Kennedys as somewhat catalytic in my own personal, political identification. That captured the imagination of many of us, so it was partly the Kennedy aura that led me to politics. I had a curiosity about the Kennedys, and Ted Kennedy in particular.

When I came to the Senate, we developed a friendship, not a close friendship initially, but a friendship. On occasion he would invite me to events at his home or around town and I would come. I participated in various events that were related to some of his causes , so the friendship started in a normal way and became far more intense over the years, and far more personal and far more meaningful to me.

In the last few months it's been particularly meaningful to me. I have a brother who has the same kind of brain cancer that Teddy has, and when we learned of this development, I called Teddy and Vicki [Reggie Kennedy], and they were kind enough to connect me with all of his doctors. We have followed the same regimen, the same sequence of treatments, that Ted has, which

involved getting something called proton beam radiation treatments in Boston. As my brother experienced those treatments, that therapy, the Kennedys were kind enough to allow my brother to use their apartment the entire time. I have two brothers who were there, because my brother needed constant attention and care, and for a couple of months they used the Kennedy apartment in Boston. We've been very blessed with their encouragement and their extraordinary caring approach.

I know thousands of people in politics, but I don't know of anybody who takes greater care in the personal side, or the human side, of relationships as Teddy and Vicki do. When I would go through challenging times in my leadership role, they would reach out to me. In fact, the two of them wrote a wonderful poem that I have in my office, with one of Teddy's pictures that they had had matted and framed and presented to me. And at various other times—the loss of my father—Teddy called a couple of times, but it seems that just about any time anybody goes through a difficult time in their life, one of the first calls they're going to get is from Teddy Kennedy. They've become very special in our lives, as they have in the lives of many others, and I consider them very dear friends today.

Young: This friendship deepened, as I believe you said, as time went on.

Daschle: It did. They were kind enough to invite us to their home on many occasions. We went to Hyannis Port for a wonderful weekend right after I became [majority] leader and spent a terrific weekend with them.

Young: Was he reaching out to you?

Daschle: I think so.

Young: He had voted against—He had voted for Chris [Dodd].

Daschle: He had voted against me, right.

Young: Did the relationship have to be renewed after that contest?

Daschle: No, because I wouldn't have expected him, under any circumstances, to have voted for me, given the fact that Chris was such a close personal friend. It was shortly thereafter that he came to my office and indicated that, while he had not voted for me, he certainly would be supporting me in my efforts as leader from then on. He lived up to that promise in every way and became a terrific ally and mentor, and somebody, oftentimes, who would help me in caucuses. If I was attempting to persuade the caucus to take a course of action or to support a particular matter, often just with eye contact I could connect with Teddy and he would stand and bolster my argument and support it. It would often make a big difference in the caucus.

Young: Can you recall some of those issues in which both of you were intensely involved? We know healthcare was—Would it be fair to say that *that* was the first issue that brought you together as working colleagues on an issue?

Daschle: Yes, we worked very closely together. I was on the Finance Committee. I was chairman of the Policy Committee in '93, and as chairman of the Policy Committee, the then

majority leader, [George] Mitchell, had asked if I would coordinate the caucus healthcare effort. That meant working very closely with Teddy and one of his staff at the time, [Bancroft] Nick Littlefield [Jr.], who also became a good friend.

Teddy was obviously the primary motivator and the primary architect of our caucus healthcare policy. Of course he worked very closely with Hillary [Clinton], but he was in his prime at that time. He had the seniority; he had the clout; he had the respect. Nobody challenged his credentials. But unfortunately he didn't have the committee assignment. You would think that that committee assignment would be the key, but there was the Finance Committee, and unfortunately, there was a difference of opinion with regard to how we should approach this between many of us and the chairman of the Senate Finance Committee at the time, Pat Moynihan, so things got substantially delayed. Ultimately, in part because of the delay and because it languished for so long, we ended up on the defensive, and it was unsuccessfully concluded. It was a very significant learning experience for me, to say the least. That was probably the first time that I worked in depth with Teddy on a project.

Young: Were you George Mitchell's point person for healthcare?

Daschle: I was, right.

Young: And with the Finance Committee, it's the money that matters, I guess. To his committee, it was less that; it was the program and the policy goal, not the accounting. Has that gap been bridged yet, do you think?

Daschle: Yes, I think it has. First, just out of complete respect for Ted's contribution to health policy these four decades, I don't think there's any doubt that this is probably the best working relationship that the HELP [Health, Education, Labor, & Pensions] Committee and the Finance Committee have ever had. I give credit to Max Baucus, as well, for his attitude and for the way he's gone about this, from what I can tell. I'm not nearly as plugged in to that on a daily basis as others, but from my perspective, it certainly would appear that they're working pretty closely together and they've vowed—"vowed" may be a strong word—but promised or committed to a one-bill strategy on the floor, and that's also very encouraging.

Young: Would you say that he has learned any lessons from the 1993 experience? You've observed and worked with him on both of these occasions, getting ready for the next push. Has he ever mentioned any lessons he's learned? "We're not going to do *that* again," or something?

Daschle: First of all, he wasn't calling the shots, unfortunately. If he had been calling the shots, we'd probably have healthcare reform today, but he wasn't. He was *one* of those calling the shots, but he was only one. The Clintons [William Jefferson Clinton and Hillary Rodham Clinton] were the primary architects of the strategy as well as the policy. George Mitchell, Pat Moynihan, and to a certain extent Bob Dole were all key participants. Ted Kennedy was one of those at the table, but again, not in nearly as dominant a role.

Looking back, the best lesson one could have used in that experience would be simply to have said to Senator Kennedy, "Look, work something out and we'll support the product." That blind assignment would have worked extremely well, because he would have salvaged it had he had the opportunity. But there are a lot of lessons to be learned and I've given a lot of speeches over

the years, talking about what those lessons are. To a certain extent President [Barack] Obama has applied those lessons so far.

Young: You worked closely with the White House as the Democratic leader, or you've had to. Did Ted have an independent relationship with the Clintons, working on policy issues, that the party would be concerned with in the Senate?

Daschle: He did, because he's such an icon and because he was viewed as such a legislative giant, especially in the '90s. He had a lot to do with many of the key questions that we faced at the time. He obviously is very deeply interested in health, but he's also interested in issues involving working people. He was very involved in the welfare reform debate with President Clinton at the time. He has an interest in foreign policy, and the war in Bosnia was an issue upon which he spent a good deal of time. He used to be on the Armed Services Committee, but I think he got off of it.

Young: I think he left all but—

Daschle: All but the HELP Committee.

Young: It doesn't mean he doesn't still have a foreign policy office. [*laughs*]

Daschle: Oh exactly, right. He, like many of us, had a respectful relationship with the administration, but I'll let others decide just how you would characterize his relationship with President Clinton. Overall, I think it was a very positive one. There were moments with all of the personal issues that were troubling to all of us. We went through a difficult impeachment trial, all the Whitewater business, and other issues there, but by and large, I think it was a productive relationship.

Young: On the impeachment, the arrangements for the Senate trial, I've interviewed him about this and I've interviewed a few others, and it appears to me that Clinton was leaning very heavily on Kennedy, concerning a strategy: "These are the 35 names," things he wanted, and a strategy he wanted to pursue. It's my impression that he wasn't consulting with the Democratic leader very much on these things. Is that correct?

Daschle: That's accurate.

Young: Okay. Did Kennedy create a problem, the fact that he had this relationship, for your responsibilities as leader?

Daschle: No, not at all. Having some distance allowed me to conduct the larger responsibility probably in a more independent way, which I think generated more ability on my part. There were many skeptics in our caucus and they didn't want to feel like they were lapdogs of the President—or that I was—and were simply going to rubber-stamp whatever it was the President felt we needed to do. By not coordinating closely with the White House, I was able to maintain more of a nonjudgmental air about it all and to speak to the skeptics within our caucus and others as an independent voice, looking at the facts, coming to some conclusion, and then working, maybe a little more subtly, but nonetheless with a hope in mind that we could stay unanimous, which we ultimately did.

Young: During this period, were you and Kennedy on the same page?

Daschle: No question, yes. He was very good. He's always been extremely good about letting the leader, whoever the leader is—George Mitchell and I have talked about this too. He rarely would do something without first having the appropriate notification. Harry Reid has mentioned that to me as well. He's very good about keeping the leader informed.

Young: Some people have called you a New Democrat, when you came in, and Kennedy's another kind of Democrat. [*laughs*] I don't know what label I would give to it, but it's of interest, your reading and his reading, and the responses to the Democratic electoral defeat of 1994 and its fallout, and its continuing reverberations when it came to the budget, the government shutdown, and so forth. What did you see your role and his role as being in bringing the party back together after that demoralizing defeat? There were certainly differences between what the appropriate response would be to the Republican victory, and whether that victory signified a rejection of Democratic programs in favor of a Contract for America kind of approach.

You were both survivors of that disaster, in the same election, but I know he was very exercised at the time about what strategy, what principles, the Democrats should follow. He spoke out quite early about that in his [National] Press Club speech, which you distributed to all the Democrats. What was your reading of that defeat and what you, as the new leader of the Democratic Party in the Senate, should do to help your party survive it, become effective, and remain effective?

Daschle: First of all, I felt that '94 was a much more complicated set of circumstances. Oftentimes we try to boil things down to one simple explanation, and it was more complicated than that. President Clinton had gotten off to a very rough start. President Clinton was viewed by centrist Democrats as the epitome of and the ultimate result of the tendency of many in the party to move more to the center, and with the centrist Democrats to create an agenda that was somewhere between where liberal Democrats were and the Republican Party was. Because he got off to such a rough start, and because of all the investigations at the time, that created part of the reason why '94 was such a traumatic political year for us.

But we also had something that people, surprisingly, have forgotten. We had a terrible check scandal in the House, where we had a House bank that was offering what amounted to free loans to members of the House of Representatives. That had all spilled out in the months just leading up to the election. The combination of the way that was handled, along with the issue of Clinton, undermined our political standing dramatically.

Young: Would you put the failure of healthcare reform into that mix?

Daschle: Oh, no question. That was part of the rough start. It was the healthcare failure, and all of the other problems that we had had with the Clinton White House. To their credit, they got better as time went on and were easily reelected to a second term in '96, but that was a very difficult time, and there was a struggle within the caucus as to where our caucus should be. After I was elected leader, the President called me down to have a meeting, and I sought out Ted and I talked to Senator [Robert] Byrd about my first meeting. Both of them had somewhat the same advice, which was to inform the President, however comfortable I was in phrasing what I was

about to say, that the message was that we work *with* you, not *for* you; we'll work with you as partners, legislatively, in creating this agenda, but don't count on us working *for* you. Basically that was my message, and that's how we functioned after that.

Over time I developed a reasonably good friendship with the President as well, and with the First Lady, but my colleagues insisted we be considered as an equal rather than a subservient body. We went through that period, from '95 through the end of '96, in a transition mode. The President became more popular and the Republicans had, of course, taken over the majority and sounded increasingly shrill. We had that big government shutdown somewhere in there between '95 and '96. That really worked to our favor. Then slowly we began developing some political momentum again, and then we had the debacle of 2000. It was a very tumultuous time.

Young: It was certainly the worry of some on Capitol Hill that the President needed to be told more, or to understand more, that you would work *with* and not *for*. There was the question of how he would respond on budget issues, for example, to the Republican agenda: the [Newton] Gingrich agenda, the Dole agenda, or the mix in between. There was a great deal of worry that he would, so to speak, sell the store if you didn't watch out.

Daschle: The President?

Young: Yes. That his inclination was to maybe split the difference or go at least partway with them on it. Was that part of your job, to get him to hold the line?

Daschle: It was. You don't hear the word as much as you used to, but at that time the word "triangulation" was on everybody's mind. Triangulation was a reference to the fear that the President was going to cut deals with the Republicans and cut the legs out from under Democrats who thought they were fighting on the same side as the President. There was that concern, and around that time Clinton brought in Dick Morris as an advisor, who was not trusted by Democrats, and time has shown for good reason.

It was a defining time for our relationship with the President. I was always fairly pleased that we could keep the kind of unity we had in light of all of this. I can only recall from reports—I can't cite the reference—that that was when Democrats were as united as they've ever been. In part it was because people knew that we were on the defensive to a certain extent; we were in the minority. We were working with a President who for the most part developed an increasing rapport with the caucus in spite of these worries and these concerns. Then the more shrill the Republicans became, the more determined we were to try to see if we could put some balance back into the legislative branch.

Young: You were teaching the President the virtues of not going too far? That's the wrong way to put it, but I know that Ted had a meeting with him very soon after the defeat, perhaps before his speech. It was a very interesting conversation, in which it seemed as though Clinton went him one better on many of the things he was proposing, which was an interesting strategy to deal with his friend Ted, who was somewhat left of his views.

Daschle: Yes. It's great.

Young: But there was a continuing concern on Kennedy's and Nick's and on other people's parts, as you well know, that you had to keep at the President. It was crucial to the way the Democrats in the Senate would set the tone for this, or set the parameters of what was feasible.

Daschle: That's right.

Young: I haven't heard much about your role in that because you are too modest, or too silent, about it, but as party leader, you would have been perhaps at least as concerned about this as the Kennedy folks were.

Daschle: That is where we bonded, probably as deeply as at any time in our relationship, because we had a mutual agenda. To a certain extent it involved making sure that we could build on what potential existed for a good relationship with the Clinton administration, but it was difficult, because oftentimes the messages from the White House were conflicting.

Young: Could you give a good example that would convey to people of future times a sense of, let's say on a particular issue or a particular occasion, how the three of you and other Democrats worked on a particular issue to help the President get it right and to keep the party together, something that would illustrate that for them? For example, would an issue be on the rescissions to the budget? That was 1995 and the Republicans had proposed a budget that cut an awful lot of things, and the question was how to respond to those cuts. Do you come up with a Democratic version of moving toward a balanced budget, or do you take another strategy or tactic? There was much discussion in the caucus about that; certainly there was in Kennedy's accounts. Would that be a good example? Or you pick the example: Ted and Daschle and Clinton locking horns on a difficult issue of some kind.

Daschle: As I look at the many times, there was a real concern about the direction the Clinton administration was going to take. It was usually a conversation that would start with Teddy and expand then to the caucus. We would attempt to frame the issue as best we could and then ask for a meeting with the President; I will say he was always accessible. We were trying to better understand how it was they were coming at this in a slightly different, or maybe a completely different, way than we were, and then making the effort to coordinate the constituency-based pressures that you can bring to bear.

Over time, we developed a pattern of doing this with some regularity on things that we cared a lot about, but the budget was a good example. We were always concerned about where the Clinton administration was going to go, budget-wise. To his credit, I was involved in these budget negotiations, and by that time the President had become convinced that the direction that many of us felt needed to be taken was the one that he could subscribe to. He was a very good negotiator and we spent countless hours in the Oval Office just negotiating.

I remember once where it was Newt Gingrich, Bob Dole, Dick Gephardt, and Al Gore, Leon Panetta, the President, and me. We negotiated hour after hour, day after day, over the holidays. On several occasions Gingrich, who has a temper, would get up and walk out. Not knowing how long he would be gone, we would just sit there for a while, and on occasion the President would put in a movie and we'd watch a movie, waiting for the Republicans to come back. He'd make

microwave popcorn and we'd wait for the Republicans to come back into the room so we could keep negotiating. It was a theatrical time in more ways than one.

Teddy was always the benchmark by which many of the issues were defined, and that benchmark was extremely important as we tried to find consensus with the Clinton administration.

Young: He would push from the liberal side. He could push very hard, but he also has a reputation of being somebody, as you have put it and many others have, who wants to get something done. So there are two sides to him as a Democrat and as a Senator, and I guess as a Kennedy. One is the shouting liberal, his public image. The Republicans love that public image, because it's red meat for them. But then you hear from Senate colleagues and others about how he crosses the aisle, he compromises, he gets mobilized, he does what needs to be done. It seems to me that history and students of government, or students of the Senate, are going to be very interested in how one can have it both ways. Do you have any insights on that?

Daschle: He's become far more pragmatic as years have gone on, and had I still been in the Senate, my guess is that I would have taken that model myself in a more visible way. One of the best examples of that was the No Child Left Behind Act, and his willingness. . . .

First, the 2000 election was such a brutal and bitterly hard-fought race. Then shortly after the Supreme Court decision, Teddy was invited down to Texas to meet with the President [George W. Bush] to talk about education. The rumor had already spread that he was thinking about cutting a deal, and he and I talked. I urged him to be very careful, because I thought this could present some real problems. They began talking and they reached that agreement. It became very divisive in the caucus, so I called a meeting of the leadership and the key players on education in our caucus.

At that time, Paul Wellstone was the leading opponent of No Child Left Behind. He was one of them; there were many, but he was probably the most vocal. The two of them got into a terrible screaming match. They just both lost control of their emotions and it was an extremely volatile meeting, but we heard everybody out. The purpose of the meeting was to decide what the caucus should do and what I was going to recommend to the caucus. Wellstone was arguing that without resources up front, committed, locked in, No Child Left Behind could be far more detrimental than helpful, and Teddy was saying, "This is an important policy; we have to have accountability. We will get the resources, but we have to get this step. This is really where it starts; we can't ask for it all right now, but believe me, we'll get that funding." And Paul said, "We'll never get it. We'll *never* get it."

Ultimately, I came down on the side of supporting Ted, to the chagrin and outrage of Paul. We went to the caucus shortly after that and again they made their pitches, but I weighed in on Ted's side and the caucus then adopted Ted's position. It was a classic example of the concern everybody had at that time: why did Ted settle for so little when he could have gotten more from this administration had he pressed it? I don't think that's a fair judgment. I think Ted felt from the very beginning that we had to take what we could get and then build on it, which to a certain extent we've done, not anywhere near to anyone's satisfaction. The jury is still out as to whether that was a good call or not. I have been asked many times about No Child Left Behind and how

it played out and whether that was an appropriate outcome. Accountability will always be a key part of the reforms in education that are needed, but the funding really has been a problem.

Young: As somebody put it, "Ted got us to walk the plank, and then the Republicans sawed it off." [*laughs*]

Daschle: Right.

Young: Then they cut off the funding, which I think you had predicted at one point. Here was Teddy, going off on his own and being the great compromiser, and then it turned out the way it did. Weren't the prescription drug and the Medicare issues somewhat the same?

Daschle: Teddy was *way* out there in trying to cut a deal, and I was very worried, but he was consulting with me. There were two others. The Patient's Bill of Rights, which ultimately never got anywhere, in spite of his best efforts, but he had really gone the extra mile to get [John] McCain to come with us. Part D, the drug bill, was probably the most illustrative example of where—

On No Child Left Behind, he ultimately cut the deal with the Bush administration, with a sequence of events and negotiations that led him to believe that that was the best we could get. In part because of that experience, as he attempted to do the same thing on the drug bill, he finally concluded that it was a bridge too far, or a plank too far, and ultimately came back to the fold. He and I opposed the drug bill together, but for the longest time I was reasonably certain he was going to cut a deal. In that case, Senator Baucus and Senator [Charles E.] Grassley didn't—There were what Ted felt were questions of good faith with regard to how they were negotiating, and he thought he had some understandings that didn't ultimately come about, but for whatever reasons, he backed away from the deal and we opposed it.

Young: Speaking from a historical standpoint, here was Kennedy, pushing on *not* going halfway with those Republicans, then here was the new President Bush and the Democrats were pushing Kennedy to watch out, to not go too far. It's interesting.

Daschle: It is.

Young: Which also raises the question, What's with this guy called Kennedy? What makes him tick? Those are questions you can't answer.

Daschle: No, exactly.

Young: It does show the two sides to him. Could you just say a few words about Obama? Obama was a colleague of his in the Senate, a colleague of yours, who became the Presidential candidate and the nominee of the party after this fight. Do you have any observations on Kennedy's relationship with Obama before his candidacy was evident to the outside world?

Daschle: They developed a good relationship. Teddy has a healthy respect for people who pay their dues, who work their way up, and who earn their stripes. Initially he was perhaps somewhat skeptical that somebody as young and inexperienced to the ways of Washington could be a viable candidate. I only speak for myself. I don't know that he ever said it in quite this way, but I

think there was a bit of Clinton fatigue, that is, having been through eight years of Clinton administration relationships and issues, agendas, that there was concern about doing that all over again. Over time, as he examined the lay of the land—Of course, he had so many good friends in the contest—Chris was running and Joe Biden was running—he naturally stayed out of it for a while, with the realization that he wouldn't want to take sides with the people who were there.

One of my jobs in the campaign was to monitor and generally nudge, persuade, or just suggest to my former colleagues that they ought to look at Senator Obama. Because I had such a wonderful relationship with Teddy, from time to time I would call him, and I could tell that he was moving in that direction from our conversations. I sensed that maybe the Clinton campaign wasn't probably handling it quite—They were trying to put pressure on Teddy to go public and to be very supportive with calls from the President, and calls from many other friends of Ted's.

In this case, I don't think it worked well. He reacted negatively to what he viewed to be some real pressure, and then, of course, the Kennedy family was increasingly enamored and saw some of the parallels between Barack and John Kennedy. It was a natural progression, and then when Caroline [Kennedy Schlossberg] made the decision—Teddy and Caroline had talked extensively about it and had come to the conclusion that it was the right thing to do. After he made the decision, he felt especially invested and then became very aggressively involved.

Young: That was the only time he had come out in a primary for somebody.

Daschle: Yes. I don't think he'd ever done that before.

Young: You were the first person he called when he had made his decision.

Daschle: I don't know. He called me to ask if he could talk to the candidate. I didn't even bother to ask why; I was pretty sure I knew why.

Young: He was going through the proper protocol.

Do you have any observations on his relations with George Bush? You said a few words about the visits to Texas and the deal he made on education, but he was a very staunch, outspoken critic.

Daschle: What I love about the Kennedys, about Ted Kennedy in particular, is that as passionate as they feel about issues and about the progressive agenda in this country, they're always able to remain civil, maybe not in the heat of a debate—his passions and his emotions play themselves out—but it's never personal. I've never heard Ted Kennedy in a *personally* vindictive way launch against a political opponent. There's civility in their—The decorum they show is something others in politics could learn from, and that's especially true with the Bush administration. They had their agreements, or they had on occasion something for which they found common ground—No Child Left Behind is probably the most illustrative—but he was *passionately* opposed to most of what Bush stood for and how he performed. Yet on occasion we would be called over to the White House for various things, and they always had a level of cordiality that seemed completely natural, in spite of the fact that they had such *deep* differences of opinion.

I have seen President Bush on many occasions, in his most vindictive mode, and I've never seen that with Ted Kennedy. I have immense respect for his capacity for that, because it's something that seems to be lacking in today's political mode.

Young: Yes, he always seems to find a way to make a gesture, say a word, or something.

Daschle: It's very rare.

Young: When the new Irish government was being formed and there were meetings, I believe he said to Bush, "You ought to go over there. It will be good. It will give you some good press. Go over there and enjoy." [*laughs*]

Daschle: Yes. As I say, today's politics are just so much more negative, so much more personal, and so much more lacking the civility of that era. He brings an old-era political style that I wish could be brought back into vogue.

Young: Do you think it will come back?

Daschle: I think some day it will. I do.

Young: People will get tired of the shouting.

Daschle: Exactly.

Young: Thank you very much.

Daschle: You're welcome, absolutely. Good luck with your project.