



EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN KERRY

June 21, 2010
Washington, D.C.

Interviewer

Janet Heininger

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TRANSCRIPT

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Heininger: This is an interview with Senator John Kerry on June 21, 2010. Let me start at the very beginning. When was the first time you met Ted Kennedy? I know you went and worked on his campaign.

Kerry: The first time I met Teddy was on the campaign trail, as a young 18-year-old volunteer. I think I first met him on Tremont Street, in the headquarters that was one door away from Eddie McCormack's headquarters.

Heininger: Right.

Kerry: It was a battleground in and of itself, but I met him when he came through there. I was excited, like everybody. It was all new. It was just a new adventure in so many ways, because his brother had been President just for two years and he was from Massachusetts, the family was very much present in everybody's consciousness. I met him in the headquarters, I think the first time, when he came through and thanked the volunteers, and then I saw him a few other times on the campaign trail. One of my great goals was to get to go out on the trail one day with him, and see what the campaigning was like, and I finally got my moment.

Heininger: You did.

Kerry: Somewhere along the trail.

Heininger: A new high school graduate going off to college, you got to do it.

Kerry: I think I badgered Terri Haddad, who was running the press office with Eddie Martin. I think it was part reward, for having done a good job rushing around, getting nomination papers from hosts of different city halls or something, so they helped me out. And Eddie Moss was the chief guy out on the road with Teddy and tragically, he died in the plane crash with him. I remember him well.

Oh, the Majority Leader, let me just—

[interruption]

Heininger: That was a pretty heady experience for you.

Kerry: It was very exciting, it was a lot of fun. I learned a lot and made a lot of friends. I mean, for a kid fresh out of high school, who was just sort of looking at politics for the first time, it was an exciting way to see it.

Heininger: Did you know you wanted to go into politics at that point?

Kerry: I knew I was interested in public life. I didn't know that I wanted to run for office, but I knew that I was interested in issues and interested in the process, and I wanted to learn about it. I thought of journalism back then, I thought of diplomatic service, which my father was in, so I had different—but it was all *publicly* oriented. I knew it was very public service oriented.

Heininger: What did you think of Teddy at that point? I mean he was the youngest—more than just a spare.

Kerry: No, I thought he was interesting. He was charismatic, he was young, and so perhaps I related to that to some degree, and he was part of that sense of change that a lot of us were excited by. I mean, I'd come out of school, where I'd given a speech at school, on the Revolution and the South, and the battle of segregation and the transformation of America. That was one of the early things that President [John F.] Kennedy had to deal with and I was just about to go to college, and we were all beginning to feel the earliest moments of the 1960s transformation that was taking place.

Teddy was sort of a continuation of the new frontier, of the moment of excitement if you will, and the possibilities of new things happening, of change, of difference in the country, breaking out of the [Dwight D.] Eisenhower years and so forth. I don't think we completely understood that, I mean it's not as if we had a great capacity to define it all. It was a feeling as much as it was anything. But I think that Ted was just a continuation of that effort. You had this sense of possibility and perhaps even inevitability about some things.

Heininger: By the time you came back from Vietnam, you'd gone through a lot, he'd been through a lot. You come back committed against the war. What was it like dealing with him and his office in those times?

Kerry: Well, they were very helpful. I remember that as clear as a bell. He was a floor below here at that period. I can't remember, but I think he was pretty much over here in Russell, and his office was enormously helpful to us. They became our base headquarters up here on the Hill. Melody Miller and who else was there back then?

Heininger: Who speaks very highly of you.

Kerry: There were a gang of folks who really put themselves out for us and were enormously helpful; making phones available, connecting us to people, giving us suggestions, things like that. We were a bunch of ragtag neophytes. We didn't know what we were doing, thinking that you could just knock on a door and a change a vote, right?

Heininger: Right. We all thought that.

Kerry: So that's what we were doing. But Ted—you know, that's the next time I saw him. I hadn't seen him since he was elected. I was a freshman at Yale in the fall of 1962 and I remember talking to Terri Haddad that night, from the university, "How's it going, does it look good, what's happening?" And boom, he was in and that was that, and so I sort of went on. I think I may have seen him once in Washington when I went down as president of the Yale Political Union, to get some people to come up and speak or something like that, which was my responsibility.

So I probably in passing, at a distance, saw him, without any sign of recognition, any personal give and take, until I came back from Vietnam and led the demonstration here in Washington. That was the first time he and I connected again after that, and he came down. He was the first person to come down to the encampment on the mall, the first person to dare to do that, because a lot of them were unsure. Who are these guys and what do they represent? Was this safe, what's this going to do? Teddy came down that night, and I think he brought John Culver with him, and they spent some time in the tent and we all sat and talked and he listened and asked questions.

And he came again, I think the next day, one more time. He might have brought John Tunney with him the next time. It was a breakthrough moment at that point. Other Senators came down during the day, I think [Eugene] McCarthy and [Hubert, Jr.] Humphrey, and a few others. It was a moment where people thought *Oh, okay, we can go do this*, but it was the brand of leader—it was a leadership and a statement on his behalf, of inquisitiveness, curiosity, risk, willingness to put himself out there, and I think all of that was very important.

Heininger: Did you see any changes in him by that point?

Kerry: Oh, yes, very much so. There was always, I think in Ted after that, a slight weariness in public, a capacity at times to be there but not completely there. I sensed that anyway sometimes, but maybe I was transferring something, I don't know, but I mean that was 1971. Both Jack [Kennedy] and Bobby [Kennedy] had been assassinated, Martin Luther King had been assassinated, and Medgar Evers had been assassinated. It was not the easiest of times in that way.

Heininger: Camelot was over at that point.

Kerry: Yes, at that point we had President [Richard M.] Nixon and it was a very different world. It had to be particularly difficult for Ted Kennedy, to have made the journey he made, with his brother running against Nixon.

Heininger: Right.

Kerry: And all of that loss and all of a sudden Nixon is the President and his brothers are both gone. I can't imagine beginning to process all of that, and I've often wondered how he processed as much loss and pain as he did over the course of a lifetime.

I have got to run to Senator [Olympia] Snowe. I apologize for that.