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John Joseph Moakley Oral History Project

Oral History Interview with

Sean T. Ryan

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Interview Summary

Sean Ryan, a member of Moakley's congressional staff from 1992 through 2000, discusses his time as a congressional aide; his observations about Congressman Moakley's work to improve the city of Boston; Congressman Moakley's relationship with his colleagues in the House and Massachusetts delegation; his thoughts regarding the Boston school desegregation in the 1970s; Congressman Moakley's work to help improve conditions in El Salvador. He concludes by talking about Congressman Moakley's work on the House Rules Committee.

Subject Headings

Boston (Mass.)

Busing for school integration

El Salvador

Moakley, John Joseph, 1927-2001

Speaker's Task Force on El Salvador (Moakley Commission)

Ryan, Sean T.

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This interview took place on April 18, 2003 at the law offices of Donoghue Barrett & Singal, P.C., One Beacon Street, Boston, MA.

Interview Transcript

PAUL CARUSO: We'll get started. I was wondering if we could start off by you telling us how you met Congressman Moakley?

SEAN RYAN: Absolutely. It was really by accident, almost. I had graduated from college, worked for about a year at a job that I hated. I had always wanted to go to Washington and work on Capitol Hill and work in politics but I didn't know anybody. So one day I just got frustrated with this job and had friends in Washington, and I went down and started sleeping on their couch and started looking for work. And actually when I met Joe, when Joe hired me, I was a nightclub bouncer is what I had been doing for about six months. And just by chance, through a friend of a friend, knew someone in the office and knew that somebody was leaving.

It was just luck—I was just in the right place in the right time and I don't know how much Joe was really involved. I suspect little or not at all in my initial hiring. When I went to work for him he was more—I knew of him by reputation, having grown up in Massachusetts. There wasn't any personal connection at that point, but after I did go to work for him we hit it off very well, and we had a relationship that really grew into a very close and almost familial type relationship over the years. But it was just an accident; he hired me off the street.

CARUSO: And when was this?

RYAN: This was—it would have been in early 1992.

CARUSO: And what was your first function with his office?

RYAN: I was the lowest person on the totem pole. So I was a legislative correspondent—actually, even before that he had me on for a while as sort of part-time person for a couple of months. And then when someone left I was hired on as legislative correspondent which was, as

the title would suggest, you are moving a lot of paper around, making sure that the mail gets answered, supervising [interns]. We usually had five or so interns at any given time.

That was my first job with him and I was fortunate in a way because a lot of people—he had very little turnover in his office because he was really the type of guy that tended to breed a lot of loyalty and I happened to hit there at a time when a fair number of people who had been there for some time left to do other things. So I was in a good position, because he and I had hit it off well, that I sort of moved up and had different responsibilities very quickly.

But Kelly Timilty¹ was a former aide who came up here [who left to run for and now] sits on the Governor's Council; Jim McGovern² had already started to—he hadn't left, but for his first run for Congress which was unsuccessful. Now of course he has been in Congress for six or seven years, but back then was when he was first thinking about it. And one or two other people who had been with him for a significant period of time. So I was—it was all being in the right place at the right time

CARUSO: Yeah, truly, truly. Did you work for him directly, or did you report for someone else in the office?

RYAN: Well to the extent—It was a loose office and he used to like to brag that in forty or fifty years of public life he had never held a staff meeting. So it was fairly freewheeling. We had assignments, responsibilities, and when I worked in Washington it tended to be broken down by issue areas. You were essentially responsible for whatever the realm of issues you handled was and you reported directly to him. But there were other people; there was a chief of staff, there was a press secretary if there was a [press] component. But it was a lot of time directly with him.

CARUSO: So it was not a very hierarchal environment?

¹ Kelly Timilty was a member of Congressman Moakley's congressional staff from 1988 to 1993.

² James P. McGovern (1959-), a Democrat, has represented Massachusetts' Third Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives since 1997. He was a member of Moakley's congressional staff from 1982 to 1996.

RYAN: No, not at all, to the point there was almost no structure to it. Somehow it worked very well. Probably not how the Wharton School of Business would tell you to set up your office, but I think given his personal style it worked very well.

CARUSO: Sure. What were your first impressions of the congressman? When you first interacted with him do you remember what stuck out in your mind?

RYAN: Yeah, he was a—and I do remember this very vividly. He was one of those people—he had the rare gift that you just loved to be around him. And it had nothing to do with his stature or power at this time. When I first met him he was the chairman of the House Rules Committee,³ had been for a couple of years—which really [made him] one of the most powerful members of Congress, and so to the extent that everyone in Washington was so deferential to him it wasn't that. It wasn't that he was just this important guy. There is a culture down there where people tend to feed off how important somebody is. He was just, you know his sense of humor, his sense of decency; it was just this overriding sense that you were with someone who was completely on the level in a very likeable decent way.

That was my first impression. I will say that I told him this when I left his office, and he laughed because when I told him the first part of it he said, “Where is this going?” But sometimes when you, at least I found this in Washington, sometimes you can know somebody by reputation or reading about them in the newspaper and get a very high opinion of them. You respect what they do, as politicians or in public life. But then as you tend to get to know them better, as you do working on Capitol Hill, you tend to be a little disappointed when you really get to know them better, and you find out that they are very human after all.

With him it was the opposite. I went in there with a very high opinion of him, and the day I left working for him it was with a much higher opinion of him. And I saw—the good times, some

³ The House Rules Committee is responsible for the scheduling of bills for discussion in the House of Representatives. According to the Rules Committee website, “bills are scheduled by means of special rules from the Rules Committee that bestow upon legislation priority status for consideration in the House and establish procedures for their debate and amendment.” (See <http://www.rules.house.gov/>) Congressman Moakley was a member of the House Rules Committee from 1975 to 2001 and served as its chairman from 1989 to 1995.

very bad times I was through with him, the warts and all. I just respected him and liked him even so much more the day I stopped working for him, and right through to the end.

CARUSO: Now were you a student of political science or politics prior to coming to Washington?

RYAN: Yes. I was at Wesleyan University and majored in government, and always loved politics, loved government, and I like domestic issues, I like international issues, and that was always what I wanted to do. But like a lot of young people, I wasn't overly focused on how you actually get these jobs and go about doing it. But that was absolutely my background.

CARUSO: Did you have any perceptions of the Congressman prior to meeting him that proved to be untrue, or were reinforced after you had met him?

RYAN: Yes and no. I knew him to be—had a reputation as an exceedingly fair person and an exceedingly decent person and that absolutely was borne out to be true. I think what I was so pleasantly surprised with is he had a reputation, in some circles anyway, as being a pretty parochial guy, South Boston politician, a guy that was very much focused on bringing money back to the state.

In certain elements—I think that this is something that he never really got a lot of credit for, I think that up until he died a lot of people just saw that element [of his career] in him. But what I was somewhat surprised by, and give him so much credit for, is that in a lot of ways he was a visionary, and a guy that really did have a big picture sense of the world. And on a lot of issues, whether it was here in Massachusetts, or overseas or his work in El Salvador, he [demonstrated] a lot of vision. And I think in some ways I guess it frustrates me that he didn't always get credit for that side of him.

And that was partly because of his style. He wasn't—he was never really perfectly comfortable with public speaking. I always thought he was very good at it, but he wasn't all about giving policy speeches. He wasn't home at night necessarily writing pieces for the editorial pages. But

in spite of that maybe that not being his style, it didn't mean that he wasn't thinking in a very visionary way.

CARUSO: Sure. You mentioned that he got credit, and justifiably so, for bringing money and programs back to the district. How was his relationship with the rest of the Massachusetts delegation?

RYAN: I think very good, very good. He was [the dean of the delegation for] the entire time I worked for him. I think the Massachusetts delegation had for many years been incredibly powerful, and he was an important part of it at that time. But throughout the seventies and the eighties you had Tip O'Neill,⁴ you had Ted Kennedy⁵, for him to work with, you had Silvio Conte,⁶ Congressman Boland⁷ from western Massachusetts. So there were some people who had been in congress for a long period of time, had a lot of seniority, and were extremely influential. By the time I started working for him, with the exception of Senator Kennedy, all of those folks [were gone], and I think Congressman Conte had died the year before I started.

CARUSO: Yeah, that is right.

RYAN: But that was a shift. Instead of Joe being an important part of what was a larger group of extremely influential senior people, he all of a sudden became—you know, the most influential or certainly the most influential in the House. So it was a little bit different dynamic. He went from being one of sort of group of peers to becoming really the most important figure on the House side and it was a role I think he played very well.

⁴ Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill (1912-1994), a Democrat, represented Massachusetts' Eleventh and, after redistricting, Eighth Congressional Districts in the United States House of Representatives from 1953 to 1987. He served as Speaker of the House of Representatives from 1977 to 1987.

⁵ Edward Moore "Ted" Kennedy (1932-), a Democrat, has represented Massachusetts in the United States Senate since 1962.

⁶ Silvio Conte (1921-1991), a Republican, represented Massachusetts' First Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1959 to 1991.

⁷ Edward P. Boland (1911-2001), a Democrat, represented Massachusetts' Second Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1953 to 1989.

Because of his stature, because of his power, he really saw it as part of his job to help the rest of the delegation. And this—he was not just about trying only to take care of his district. He was somebody whose door was always open and was extremely helpful to everybody else in the delegation. And I think that bred a lot of loyalty, a lot of good will, and they were able to work together very effectively. But because he could really [call the shots] there was no question about who the leader was, there was no question that if they were going to do anything collectively he had to make the call. He would organize the meeting; he would implement whatever they collectively decided to do on an issue. So he balanced being the boss and being a leader, but also in very benevolent way that everyone found mutually beneficial.

On the Senate side, and I think I was really there for this, I think he always had a good relationship with Senator Kennedy [but became closer in the 1990s]. He used to talk about how he was elected in '72 to help Ted Kennedy pass health care reform. That's something you see often repeated in different biographical pieces about him. I think he and Senator Kennedy became much closer over time. You know, particularly, I think they found themselves, by the 1990s, as being two folks who had been there for such a length of time because of their respective stature in each body. They really formed a very formidable team when they put their sights on something. With Senator Kennedy shepherding so much through the Senate, and Joe was handling things in the House. So that was a relationship that I really think I had the opportunity to see blossom, and get the sense that they shared a perspective that only two people who had been at something for a long time could share.

CARUSO: And truly two lions of the Congress, I mean you know, not just personalities because that falls so short, but real focal points of congressional activity and action.

RYAN: Yeah that's right. They were two people who could really get something done. They were, if you were to ask anyone down there who were the most influential people in the House Joe's name was always going to be on that list, and Senator Kennedy's name was certainly always going to be on that list in the Senate. So that was the dynamic. Now when the Congress turned in '94, the dynamic shifted surprisingly little, at least in terms [of their ability to get things done for Massachusetts]. Obviously Joe was no longer chairman of the Rules Committee. One

of things that I was [frankly surprised] by was how much clout he continued to retain and I think again a lot of it went to how fair he was as chairman, and as a colleague.

And, much as he had done with so many members of the Massachusetts delegation; to the extent a colleague, whether a Republican or Democrat, had a problem and came to him, and asked for his support, or asked for his assistance; if he could do it he would. And I think all of these years of operating in that way [greatly benefited him when the Democrats became the minority party]. It was surprising to see how much power he retained in the minority party and how little his ability to get things done was actually affected by that. In some ways he became almost more important within the Massachusetts delegation because he had those relationships, and he had that stature and respect with his colleagues.

CARUSO: It's usually convenient but not necessarily accurate to think of a collection of congressmen by state—you have the Massachusetts delegation or the Texas delegation—but it doesn't always break out that way. Did you notice relationships, common relationships with a broader or more narrow group of congressmen?

RYAN: I think what was tough for him in some ways; Tip O'Neill was his best friend, certainly his best friend in Congress. He and Tip loved each other's company. And I think for the first fifteen or sixteen years of Joe's congressional career, they were both constant social companions. I think he really enjoyed that interaction, and I think they had a broader circle as well socially. I do think, and I heard him remark quite often that a lot of the fun went out of the job when Tip left. That's not to say that he still didn't love the job, and found it very meaningful, but in terms of personal types of relationships, I know that he missed Tip O'Neill quite a bit after Tip retired. I just think they were two like-minded people with personalities that enjoyed each other.

So by the time—fast forward to the early nineties he had tremendous I think respect and good personal relationships [with his colleagues] because of how he treated people as a chairman and as a colleague [not because he socialized frequently with other members of Congress]. In fact the first year I worked for him, *Roll Call*⁸ might have done a survey of who was the most popular

⁸ *Roll Call* is a newspaper that publishes congressional news and information.

member of the House, and he won. But that wasn't—it was because of what he did during the day. It wasn't because he was out to dinner with these colleagues at night and doing that type of thing.

I think he felt like the collegiality, the [mutual] respect; the ability for members, particularly across party lines, to let things go at the end of the day is really something that was lost. And I know [he felt that] with the whole Newt Gingrich⁹ mentality, and with a lot of the people that became important in the Republican Party, the whole dynamic [as to how members interacted with each other] shifted. And I really think he felt like something was lost. So while he continued to have very good relationships, the institution had fundamentally, I think, changed by the mid nineties and the late nineties. And I think that was something that saddened him in some ways.

CARUSO: I can see that. Did he have any particular friends within the Congress?

RYAN: Within the Massachusetts delegation, of course, Jim McGovern who was like—in many ways like a son to him. You know, Congressman Neal¹⁰ of Springfield was somebody he absolutely thought the world of. But many other people—and he had relationships with people, and would always go out of his way to learn the names of some of the new members of Congress and develop relationships with them. So that's something that I think—it was something he enjoyed but it was something that he found was wise [politically] over time. That he would develop relationships before these folks became household names. So he continued to do it. But certainly, he really had good relationships. Barney Frank¹¹ was someone he always thought was one of the funniest people that he absolutely ever met. I know he enjoyed him. He had good feelings for everyone.

⁹ Newt Gingrich (1943-), a Republican, represented Georgia's Sixth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1979 to 1999. He served as Speaker of the House from 1995 to 1999.

¹⁰ Richard E. Neal (1949-), a Democrat, has represented Massachusetts' Second Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives since 1989.

¹¹ Barnett "Barney" Frank (1940-), a Democrat, has represented Massachusetts' Fourth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives since 1981.

CARUSO: That was absolutely my next question. The Massachusetts delegation has had its share of characters, and I say that with no pejorative meaning whatsoever, just individuals who are genuine characters. Who stands out in your mind as being truly individualistic—Barney comes to mind immediately, Gerry Studds¹² from the Cape, Peg Heckler¹³ certainly before both of our times.

RYAN: Well that's right and Joe was—all types of people Joe enjoyed. It wasn't—he might have enjoyed Tip O'Neill because they had a lot in common, I think they were both sort of urban people from similar backgrounds and he enjoyed that. But that wasn't the only type of personality that Joe enjoyed, and I think one of the things, again this is something that always struck me about him, was his open-mindedness. And he was extremely respectful of, and enjoyed, I think, very good relationships with female colleagues, Louise Slaughter¹⁴ who sat on his committee. And people with different lifestyles, I know, for instance Barney Frank and Congressman Studds, the fact that they were gay didn't bother him in the least. And, in fact, he really respected and you know worked very well with both of them.

CARUSO: I think we'll change the tape over before we get into the next segment.

(interruption)

CARUSO: I'd like to move away from the mechanics and the relationships to some of the issues. He truly was a proponent to some very consistent issues throughout his career. Do any of those stick out in your mind in memory?

RYAN: There are a lot of them, but something, and it goes back to what I said about his being a visionary and maybe not being as appreciated, as he should be for it. I think if you—certainly a lot of people deserve credit for it, but if you look at the city of Boston or a picture of the city of

¹² Gerry Studds (1937-2006), a Democrat, represented Massachusetts' Tenth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1973 to 1997.

¹³ Margaret Heckler (1931-), a Republican, represented Massachusetts' Tenth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1967 to 1983.

¹⁴ Louise Slaughter (1929-), a Democrat, has represented New York's Twenty-eighth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives since 1987.

Boston when he was first elected to the state legislature, or even the State Senate¹⁵ or even Congress, and then you look at it now—how dramatically, how it’s changed and improved over the years. You can really tie so much of that back, and sometimes in subtle ways, back to him. It’s probably—nowhere is it more evident than a lot of what’s gone on with development on the South Boston waterfront and that whole area.

And it really goes back to his days, I think, in the state house, but more specifically in the State Senate. He had a committee assignment, was chairperson of the committee that had environmental responsibilities and also had some authority over some development-type issues. And you know, he started with what at the time were incredibly progressive proposals, and saw them through. And really saw a lot of good, responsible development throughout his entire career.

And you know, maybe one place to look at was the Harbor Islands. He was insightful enough to pass legislation while he was in the State Senate, transferring ownership of those islands to the state to preserve them as a natural resource. And then it was, you know, over twenty years later that he was working with Congressman Studds and actually made them a national—federal a federal park. But, I mean those are the types of things we normally don’t see somebody who is able to work on an issue for thirty or forty years and really see it through to a final result and he was able to do it. And the cleanup of Boston Harbor, sitting the federal court house right along the harbor, what he was able to do in terms of extending mass transit down to that waterfront, but also expanding the commuter rail and so many of those projects.

To the Big Dig, to the Third Harbor Tunnel, I mean this was really someone who looked at the potential the city of Boston had, and in a very focused, deliberate way went about putting all of these pieces together that were necessary to set the table to improve the city to what it has been today. And it’s—he deserves a lot of credit for it because he went about it in a very workman-like way over a long period of time and he changed the whole face of the city.

¹⁵ Moakley served in the Massachusetts House of Representatives from 1953 to 1960 and in the Massachusetts Senate from 1963 to 1970.

CARUSO: The congressman was a political figure on the Boston landscape during a very tough time for the city, the busing crisis.

RYAN: Yes.

CARUSO: Did he speak about that?

RYAN: He would in sort of private discussions. It was something he didn't talk about publicly because I think it was a very [difficult time for him]. In fact he didn't speak about it [often] publicly later because I think it was personally a very painful time for him. When he first ran for Congress, Louise Day Hicks¹⁶ was successful the first time. They ran—she of course ran on a strong anti-busing platform, and was considered by many to be a racist, and really played those types of racial politics. Of course, Joe was successful in unseating her in 1972. But he really didn't win—I don't think it was until the eighties that he actually won his hometown of South Boston. And a lot of—and of course this is a town he had represented in the state legislature since 1952, and it was his hometown that he loved so dearly. And he is now considered—he and [Richard] Cardinal Cushing were given the award as being South Boston Citizens of the Century.

But lost in all of that there was a very painful period during busing. He once told me that he thought busing was wrong, and that he didn't think it was sound policy. But he thought throwing rocks at buses was more wrong. And I think it boiled down—it was that simple in his mind. But at the same time it was very [difficult]—he had marched in the Saint Patrick's Day Parade with people who were screaming at him.

People that [were old friends]—someone he took to a prom shouting epithets at him. Just a really difficult and personally painful time, but a time that really shows what character is all about. You know I think he could have taken—the easy thing for him to do would have been to play to that, lead the marches, and that would have been a politically expedient thing to do. But

¹⁶ Louise Day Hicks (1916-2003), a Democrat, represented Massachusetts' Ninth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1971 to 1973. It was in the 1970 election that Moakley lost his first bid for Congress, in part because Hicks was an outspoken critic of forced busing in Boston, while Moakley did not take a strong stand on the issue. Moakley defeated Hicks in the 1972 congressional election when he ran as an Independent so he wouldn't have to run against Hicks in the democratic primary.

he wasn't comfortable with it. While he was opposed I think to busing he was not comfortable with the approach that so many other people who were opposed to it were taking.

And I think he took a lot of personal and public criticism for that among the people that he really, in a lot of ways, cared about [the most] and were closest to home. So, a very tough period for him, and I think that the fact that he was able to get through it is just a testament to who he was, his ability to stay true to himself. But tough, tough times and I think by the time I worked for him he was this revered figure in so many ways, but talking to folks that were with him through some of those tough times, that wasn't always the way it was for him politically. And I think that in terms of how that shaped him, I think that period was never entirely out of his mind.

CARUSO: Sure.

RYAN: That did play a role in who he was later in life.

CARUSO: The busing issue was a civil rights issue, regardless of what you think of the manifestation of that. How did that impact his performance as a legislator going forward? Did he take that experience with him to Washington? Did that push him in any policy areas? Did that send him off in any directions? Knowing that this solution was clearly imperfect, where did that take him?

RYAN: Yeah, I think—it was frustrating. That was an issue to which there were no easy solutions. Court ordered busing was going on here and in other places. You're right, no matter what you think of it, whether you think its right or wrong, it's tough to argue that how it was fundamentally implemented by the courts up here was particularly successful. I've heard very few people argue that. But to the extent that it was something that he was in a position to influence one way or another, I think it was probably frustrating because in many ways, because he was very limited in what he could do.

So I think it was difficult. I think to the extent that—it influenced him. I think he saw the victims in the whole thing that you had by and large, you had poor white people and poor black

people who I think he fundamentally saw these people have the same issues and the same concerns; they want a better life for their kids, they want to be able to educate their children, and then provide them the best life they can. And this brutal situation had developed.

I think that core, What is it all about, and, What is it all about to be a congressman and a legislator? I think it was always about trying to help those people, regardless of color, achieve that dream, and create a better life and be able to educate their children. I think that did very much focus him on what issues he thought were important. When you see the intensity of what went on with that debate—you know the ability to educate your children is a very fundamental concern for most people.

CARUSO: Other issues came onto his plate after he got to Washington I think his attention was directed towards Central America substantially and viscerally. Do you have any recollection of that?

RYAN: I do, in fact that's something, for a period, I worked on for him. And it's interesting, this is an example where a local connection brought him into a much broader issue. So many of his skills really were effective. He became involved in Central American issues in the early 1980s as a result of a town hall visit. These town hall visits he would go to the town hall or the post office in every corner of his district. He was in Jamaica Plain, which at the time had a very significant Salvadoran and Central American community.

CARUSO: And still does.

RYAN: Yeah, I believe that the community is still there, and someone came in off the street and brought in a relative who was in this country illegally and basically explained what was going on in El Salvador. And was concerned that if they were deported, that immediately upon arriving in El Salvador they would be put in front of a death squad and would disappear. It caught his attention because here was a real person with a real fear, and it seemed outrageous that this would be going on. That we would be shipping people back to their deaths, and somehow supporting the government that was doing this. So it was really as an immigration issue that he

first became involved in for El Salvador. I think his initial—his entire scope—what was so troubling for him was that without any analysis we put someone on a plane back to El Salvador to their death. That was wrong, and there should be some mechanism [to prevent it]. These were people who were not necessarily here for economic reasons. These were people who were fighting for their lives and were true refugees.

So that was something he began working on in the early to mid eighties. He introduced legislation, and it took him a number of years and a lot of persistence to get it passed. And unfortunately the civil war in El Salvador raged on for that entire period, so the problem did not go away, it became more intense. He finally was successful in getting legislation passed—at the time it was called temporary protected status¹⁷—which would allow these refugees to stay in this country for a limited period of time, essentially until the war was over, and then arrangements would be made in effect for them to leave.

So that's how he got involved. It was with the assassination of the Jesuit priests by a death squad that was really how his involvement deepened that much further. It was something that really, the images of priests being assassinated, that first put El Salvador more into the mainstream of public consciousness here in this country. The Speaker of the House formed a task force and asked Joe to be the chairperson of the task force to investigate these deaths.¹⁸ So often organizations form a task force, and they do some analysis, and write a report, but maybe not a whole lot changes as a result of that. But this was something that he was passionate about and—I think got the feeling immediately that his own government was stonewalling him, was stonewalling his investigation. And that just set him off. He got the feeling that our government

¹⁷ Starting in 1983, Congressman Moakley introduced legislation to protect Salvadorans in the U.S. using the “Extended Voluntary Departure” provision that allowed a temporary stay of deportation and work authorization. Moakley was finally able to pass legislation that granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to Salvadorans in the Immigration Act of 1990 (PL. 101-649). TPS grants temporary legal residency and work authorization to immigrants fleeing civil wars, natural disasters or other conditions in their home country for a set period of time. In El Salvador's case, TPS has been extended several times since 1990. The TPS designation has been used by other countries experiencing civil unrest and is administered by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). (See <http://www.uscis.gov>.)

¹⁸ In December of 1989, Speaker of the House Thomas S. Foley appointed Moakley as chairman of a committee to investigate violence in El Salvador, specifically the November 16, 1989, murder of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter at the University of Central America in San Salvador. The committee is commonly referred to as the Speaker's Task Force on El Salvador or the Moakley Commission.

was protecting a government that was really filled with bullies and people that were performing terrible human rights violations as a result of our government's assistance to them.

So, through dogged determination, and also a lot of help and assistance from Jim McGovern, was successful in solving the Jesuit murders, and was successful in drawing a direct connection with the basically soldiers from the regime that we supported, and was even successful for a period of time in getting our military aid, the billions of dollars that this country had been sending down there to this regime, cut off. It was later restored, but that was the beginning of the end for that civil war. His findings were just so critical to that. To the extent that when he traveled to El Salvador and would give a speech it would be on the national radio. He really became one of the single most important figures in that country's history, and particularly in ending that civil war. So, big stuff for a supposedly parochial guy from South Boston.

CARUSO: Absolutely, absolutely.

RYAN: And I had the opportunity to travel to El Salvador on his behalf in the early nineties when he was unable to go, and I could understand how he was really gripped by what had gone on as the poverty and the suffering that the war had caused was evident to me. And it was interesting because he had, this was after the civil war was over, they were in the process of and we were providing a significant amount of aid but it was tied to them holding free elections and making sure that it would be distributed the way it was supposed to be.

And that was our group's mission, going down there making sure that was happening. And as his representative, I was given a whole different level of respect and treatment. Whether it was from peasants who lived in the mountains who did not have anything who lived in horrible conditions, but they knew who he was, and I was treated as something very special because I had some connection to him. As well as government officials, whether they be from military or conservative party. They knew and respected and even feared him and that was evident to me in my dealings with them. Because I was accorded a different level of treatment in some ways and that this wasn't just another congressman, just another American coming down.

CARUSO: As chairman of Rules, and eventually ranking member of rules, he was involved in just about every piece of legislation that came through the Congress.

RYAN: That's right, and that's why he was very much a generalist and that was driven by his committee assignments. The Rules Committee is the traffic cop of the House. The Rules Committee plays a very important role in shaping every bill before it goes to the floor. Now I guess, the plus side of that is that you have an opportunity to shape every bill before it goes to the floor.

If there is a down side to it, it's that you are not working necessarily on one set of issues. So you don't necessarily carve out one type, whether it's crime legislation or maritime legislation, that's a path that typical representatives would take. But it was the perfect assignment for him because he really knew how to use his leverage and power to get what he wanted out of each bill. Sometimes it was money for something important that he wanted back here, other times it was a broader change to make legislation reflect what he thought was the right thing to do with it. And it was a role that he thrived in and as a result he had his hands on just about everything that went through that place.

CARUSO: Yeah, it must have been—well, his phone must have rung a lot.

RYAN: Yeah he was a popular guy. And because he had that ability, it put him in an interesting situation a lot of times. Because there would be people, whether they sat on the committee or didn't sit on a committee with jurisdiction, people wanted to change the committee version of the bill. And really if you couldn't get that done at the committee level, the Rules Committee was the place you had a chance to do that. And he had to be very—he wasn't afraid to take a chance and give someone a shot with that.

At the same time, it is very much a leadership committee and part of his mission was advancing the Democratic Party's agenda, and not just opening this up to anyone who had an idea. So it was something I think he did masterfully. He was really able and very good at advancing the party's agenda, and getting the rules passed, and having the legislation go to the floor in such a

form as to be successful. But at the same time he gave folks that had worked hard on an issue an opportunity, and that left him I think in good standing with his colleagues.

CARUSO: We'll run out of time soon, but there was one more issue that scholars will be interested in and I'm personally very curious about; the impeachment of the President, an emotionally charged issue to say the least. What was that issue like from his office's point of view?

RYAN: I think it was tough. I think he had mixed feelings about the president, not mixed feelings he would ever express publicly. But I do know that he felt here was who he often told me [Clinton] was the most talented politician that he had ever worked with and he was such a smart and talented guy. At the same time I think there was a level of frustration. Because Joe was really was a creature of the House and of the Congress, and under the Clinton administration there were some missteps. It was not entirely the Clinton administration's fault, but when they lost the House in '94, that was tied to it. And in subsequent elections different things, possibly the impeachment, were not helpful either. So I think he was somewhat conflicted. At the same time, he saw the impeachment process for what it was, this was supposed to be an investigation into a real estate deal in Arkansas, and how did it end up you know [being about] lying about this liaison with somebody, and that bothered him equally.

END OF INTERVIEW