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Oral History Interview of Kathleen Teixeira (OH-024)

Moakley Archive and Institute

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Oral History Interview of Kathleen Teixeira

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Interview Summary

Kathleen Teixeira, a member of Congressman John Joseph Moakley's congressional office staff from 1989 through 2000, discusses her experiences as his congressional aide. Her interview covers how she became involved in public service; what her role was as a member of Congressman Moakley's staff; Moakley's constituent service; his political leadership role as a member of the House Rules Committee; his involvement in issues in El Salvador; and how his legacy is a model for government service.



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Teixeira, Kathleen, 1967-

Table of Contents

Ms. Teixeira's background	p. 3 (00:02)
Working for Congressman Moakley (1989-2000)	p. 4 (02:12)
Constituent service	p. 5 (04:24)
Political leadership	p. 8 (13:55)
House Rules Committee	p. 10 (20:16)
El Salvador involvement	p. 11 (22:37)
Congressman Moakley's legacy	p. 12 (27:09)

Interview transcript begins on next page

This interview took place on September 29, 2004, at the Cannon House Office Building, Room 441, Washington, D.C.

Interview Transcript

STEVEN KALARITES: I'll just set the stage. This is September 29, 2004. We're here with Kathleen Teixeira for an oral history interview for the John Joseph Moakley Archive and Institute. Thank you, Kathleen, for agreeing to participate.

KATHLEEN TEIXEIRA: You're welcome.

KALARITES: I thought we'd begin with just a little bit of background about you and how you came to get into public service.

TEIXEIRA: Okay. I'm originally from Taunton, Massachusetts, which was part of Congressman Moakley's district, in the Ninth District from Massachusetts. And I studied political science at UMass Amherst. I had met Karen Harraghy¹ who was Congressman Moakley's district manager for the Taunton office. As I was telling her that I was interested in doing an internship, she suggested that I think about doing an internship on Capitol Hill with Congressman Moakley. So she was the one that had originally planted the seed. So I did do an internship with his office my first semester senior year back in the fall of 1988 during the [presidential] election between then Governor Dukakis² and the first George Bush. And it was a great experience. So after I graduated from college, I came back to Washington because I knew that that's what I wanted to do, to work on the Hill. And [I] really enjoyed working for Congressman Moakley and his staff. It was great.

Around the time that I arrived in Washington, Congressman Moakley became chairman of the Rules Committee³ because then-congressman Claude Pepper⁴ had passed away. And so

¹ Karen Harraghy was Moakley's congressional assistant at his Taunton office from 1983 to 2001.

² Michael S. Dukakis (1933-), a Democrat, served as governor of Massachusetts from 1975 to 1979 and from 1983 to 1991. He was the Democratic presidential nominee in 1988, but lost the presidential election to Republican George H.W. Bush.

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

Congressman Moakley became the chairman, and so a position opened in his office, and I was literally at the right place at the right time. So then began my service in August of '89.

KALARITES: Now, what was it like when you first met Joe Moakley?

TEIXEIRA: Well I think that I was—I was twenty-two years old, so I was very young and idealistic. You know, I was very impressed because I think that when you're in school and you learn about how Congress works, it's so different in the books as opposed to the actual day-to-day operations.

I was just kind of overwhelmed at all of the issues that he was involved in, and that a congressional office had to have their hands in. But I was very intrigued by the whole thing and definitely wanted to be a part of it.

KALARITES: What kind of issues did you work on when you started in his office?

TEIXEIRA: When I first started I was the entry level person, so I was answering the phones and arranging for White House tours, and sending flags to the Capitol to be flown on behalf of Boy Scout troops and veterans and things like that. So real kind of basic stuff, and opening mail and answering constituent letters.

But I was so excited just to have my foot in the door. And actually at that time as well, Mr. Moakley was very involved in the situation in El Salvador, so I really saw that we all played a role, because I was answering the phones, and so you really had to know what was going on. That gave me a lot of insight as to what was going on on that issue because you had so many people calling and so many people coming through the office that even the lowly front desk person was part of all that. So it was a lot of fun. It was a very, very exciting time.

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.

⁴ Claude Pepper (1900-1989), a Democrat, represented Florida in the United States Senate from 1936 from 1951 and represented several of that state's congressional districts in the House of Representatives from 1963 to 1989. He served as chairman of the House Rules Committee from 1969 to 1989.

KALARITES: Did you ever work in the Boston office, or were you just in Washington?

TEIXEIRA: No, I was just in Washington.

KALARITES: Besides El Salvador, what were some of the more domestic issues that Joe tended to care about the most?

TEIXEIRA: I think that healthcare was definitely an issue that he cared about a lot. And I actually worked my way, and started working on healthcare issues, and then worked on healthcare issues throughout my tenure with his office. So I think that because he represented Boston and it has such a huge healthcare infrastructure with the medical schools and the teaching hospitals and biotech companies and all of the medical technology innovation, that that stems from Boston.

He was always very interested in that. But he was interested in all facets of it. I mean, from fostering incentives for biotechnology to flourish, but also for the people in the poorer communities that maybe weren't benefiting from this technology. And just simple access. We worked on a lot of things from community health centers to different issues that the hospitals were having. So those were some things that I was intimately involved in and that he really, really cared about. And, of course, education and the environment. And just jobs, jobs, jobs. That was really his motto, was helping—finding a role where government could help people get a hand when they needed it, because that's really how he saw government. And I think that he tried to do that through legislation and just through his individual service with individual constituents.

KALARITES: I was wondering if you could just expand a little bit on—explain what the key issues were. I'm just curious what the office structure was if someone came in and said, "I have a problem with healthcare." What was the structure and how the Joe Moakley office would handle that?

TEIXEIRA: Well, I guess a lot of the individual constituent matters, we kind of both worked on them from Washington and Boston. But I would say the Boston office was more kind of hands-on with constituent services. But I can give you an example of something I was involved in.

Joe Moakley, of course, later on in his career had a liver transplant. And he became very involved in the issue of organ donation and transplantation because he was, obviously, so tremendously grateful that he was given a second chance to continue on and do his work as a congressman, which he loved. There was a patient who needed a liver transplant, and there's such a shortage of organs in the United States. And especially with liver, it's not like a kidney, you can't go on dialysis; if your liver fails, you die.

So there was emerging advancements in terms of live liver transplantation where you could have a live donor take part of their liver and transplant it into the person that needed the organ. However, there was a policy in place, and I'm trying to scratch my head to see if I can remember all the facts. Basically there was a hospital in Massachusetts where they were the leading experts in this then-new technology. Now, it's more advanced. This was back in '98 or '99, so long ago. (laughter)

In any event, the long and the short of it was that this team had literally left one hospital and gone to another hospital. And so it was not a quote-unquote Medicare-certified facility to cover transplants. And so Joe Moakley and I worked for a very long time—and this is how much he cared about people, that this patient was not even from his district. This hospital was not even in his district. But yet we spent a lot of time working with then Healthcare Financing Administration [HCFA], the arm of the government that oversees the Medicare Program, to try to get the rules changed because of the way that our healthcare infrastructure changes so much where hospitals are merging together and different teams of healthcare professionals were moving from place to place that they should really try to update their rules to reflect those changes.

And the long and the short of it was, is that we prevailed and HCFA did change their policy, and this person was able to get a transplant. So that's kind of a long convoluted story, but that's just one of many examples of things that we did that we would get involved in that if he believed in something, he would just say to us, "Just explore it and let's just see what we can do to try to—try every angle, exhaust every angle." And he would have no problem getting on the phone. Because a lot of times in Washington it takes the top person to get on the phone and say that, "This is important to me." And then it will move the bureaucrats along a little faster, because they tend to move a little slow.

KALARITES: I think that's an appropriate story because a lot of the things that I've heard about Congressman Moakley are the Mrs. O'Leary Social Security—everyone has the Moakley story about how he helped constituents, whether it was in South Boston, or in the western part of the state out in the Berkshires. It just seemed that he had this incredible desire inside to just do what was best for Massachusetts, New England, the United States, the world.

What do you think inside of him drove him so much to do this?

TEIXEIRA: It was certainly I think his upbringing. Where he was from a neighborhood where people cared about each other, and you looked out for one another. It wasn't like, Oh, I'm just worried about me and getting mine. I think that he grew up in a community, in every sense of the word. I'm sure that you've heard a lot of people say that he never forgot where he came from. And so he carried that sense of community with him to Congress, and he never forgot it.

I think another part of it certainly is his religious upbringing. And trying to help his neighbor. I think that he knew what the next right thing to do was. And that was to help a person in need. Especially because he was in a position to help people, and he did. I don't think he ever forgot that. I think a lot of it stems from the community he grew up in, and from his religious upbringing, and obviously from his family.

He talked a lot about his father. And his father—I'm sure somebody told you the story about him driving, and there was a bully beating up another kid. And his father told him to go out and

help the little kid. And he said, “Why should I do that? I don’t even know him.” And his father taught him why he should help him, because you know, sort of the little guy needs help. So I think he never forgot things like that. He always said throughout his career, always, that he hated bullies. And he really did. He encountered a lot of them in Congress and through the world. I don’t think he could ever tolerate them.

KALARITES: He also had a great working relationship with the Mass. delegation, and also the entire Congress, all his colleagues. Could you explain a little bit what kind of relationship he had with everyone?

TEIXEIRA: Yeah, I think first and foremost, he really loved this institution of Congress. And he respected it tremendously. He had a lot of respect for those that came before him. For Speaker McCormack⁵, for Speaker O’Neill⁶. And I think he was very much a student of the institution. And he really valued a lot of the rules and the procedures and the history. I think that he tried to instill those principles to some of his colleagues and his protégés. I think that he respected his colleagues.

I think that one of the things that’s unfortunate about today is that—obviously, a lot of members of Congress that serve with Joe Moakley, everybody loved him. I think because—he could be partisan when he needed to be, but he was never personal about it. I think, like I said, he respected everyone’s role. But, having said that, he really respected, for example, the seniority system and things of that nature.

I think that he looked out for his other Massachusetts colleagues. They knew when they had a problem that they could come to him, and he would try to help them any way he could. Whether it was ensuring that Massachusetts was well represented here in terms of getting key committee assignments—I mean, he was very instrumental in that. He saw the importance of it, because he

⁵ John W. McCormack (1891-1980), a Democrat, represented Massachusetts’ Twelfth and, after redistricting, Ninth Congressional Districts in the United States House of Representatives from 1928 to 1971. He served as Speaker of the House of Representatives from 1962 to 1971.

⁶ 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.

knew that, again, it helped everyone. Not just maybe some member in Springfield, but that would help him too. That we could all work together as a team.

And when I was here we very much did that, because we were kind of all spread out. You know, we had members on Appropriations, members on Ways and Means, Energy and Commerce, kind of all the key committees were covered. So that whenever there was a problem, we were all on the same page. I think that just having spoken with other staffers from other states—I mean, they didn't have that type of congeniality and working relationship where we could get a delegation letter off in a day to a secretary or the president or whoever, on an issue that affected us all. And that came straight from Joe Moakley being the dean of the delegation. And I think it was because he looked out for everyone. And it wasn't just all about him and getting the press recognition. It was because it was—these were the right things to do. And so I think in that people really respected him for that. If that answers your question.

KALARITES: Yes, it does. For a while Massachusetts has always had that—it's considered now a small state, but it's always had a large influence in the Congress because of people like Joe Moakley helping his colleagues get on the appropriate committees. I assume he learned that from people like Tip O'Neill, who was—I guess you could call his mentor.

TEIXEIRA: Yeah, absolutely.

KALARITES: How well did he work with Republicans?

TEIXEIRA: I think that he worked well with members on the other side of the aisle. Again, I think that he had good working relationships with them. I think he was always open to working with them, if possible. If they had a common interest, it didn't matter that the person had an "R" after their name. So I think that even Representative Solomon⁷ who was his counterpart on the Rules Committee, I think that they, outside the Rules Committee world which is, obviously, very

⁷ Gerald B.H. Solomon (1930-2001), a Republican, represented several of New York's congressional districts from 1979 to 1999. He served as chairman of the House Rules Committee from 1995 to 1999.

partisan—the leadership appoints membership on both sides. You know, when there were issues involving their constituents, they could work together.

Another example is when he was chairing the commission on El Salvador⁸, it was a very intense time, and you had some real liberal Democrats appointed, and then some real conservative Republicans. And Joe Moakley was probably the only person who could have kept that group together and kept them from killing each other. He, obviously, had a great sense of humor. He used that to his advantage to really, I think, humanize situations. I think people appreciated that. Because he always said not to take yourself too seriously, and not to say that we weren't working on some very serious issues, but I think he brought an element of humor into situations that was good and comforting for a lot of people.

KALARITES: I've been interested in—as chairman of the Rules, I just think that's such a great place for such a good professional politician who really knew—as you said, respected the system of government which we had, and to respect those that have come before you and look out for those who will follow in your footsteps. I'm trying to think of an appropriate way to ask. As the Rules chairman, how valuable was that to his career and to his constituents?

TEIXEIRA: I think it was extremely valuable because, obviously, he was in a very powerful position. I don't think that he abused that position at all, but I think that he used it, I think, when all other avenues failed to try to get something that he wanted. I think that—and I'm sure Jim McGovern⁹ will probably—if you talked to him he would probably expand on this more. But, I remember when he was involved in the El Salvador situation, and also he had legislation for many years trying to give temporary protective status to Salvadorans who were living in a civil war-torn country. And couldn't get it through, couldn't get it through. Well, it wasn't until he was chairman of the Rules Committee that he was able to get some compromise language through. I think that that was very beneficial.

⁸ 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. The Moakley Commission investigation revealed that the Salvadoran military was responsible for the murders.

⁹ 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.

And certainly other instances—you know, just where he had leverage maybe where he hadn't before. That was really important for his constituents, because he had a louder voice maybe than some other people, and he wasn't afraid to use that to help people.

KALARITES: I wonder if you could explain a little bit more, because you said you were in the office in Washington during the El Salvador investigation and then, obviously, the findings that the military was involved in it. If you could just explain what it was like working specifically on that, and then the aftermath.

TEIXEIRA: Well, like I said, I had a very small role in that, in that I was answering the phones (laughs) and helping Jim McGovern in any way possible. Like I said, it was very exciting, because I think that it just kind of showed that if you persevere and you work hard, that you can accomplish things. And that government can do some good things, and that he was looking into our government and questioning our own government's policy. A lot of people then, including a lot of Democrats didn't want him—were questioning why he was getting involved. A lot of people may have thought like it wasn't politically smart, or, Why are you interested in this? Because he had never been really involved in foreign policy issues.

But, again, it was that he knew that this was the right thing to do. It was really exciting because every time he would come back from El Salvador, he and Jim would be there, and just hearing the stories of them going on these expeditions and fact finding missions, it was sort of like something out of a spy movie. I can't emphasize enough that it was very exciting. Then he started really to get a lot of attention, and I think more respect from his colleagues, because they knew he wasn't—he wasn't backing down until he could finally get an answer.

I think that for him, I think that he always said that that was one of his proudest moments in his career, was sticking through that whole investigation. Then I think when he concluded it by publishing his report, I think that he was really validated shortly thereafter when the U.N. put out their report, and it basically agreed with the Moakley Commission. I think that that was really a proud moment. It wasn't like, "Oh, it's done, I got this glory and that's it." Until he died, he

continued on in trying to implement a lot of reforms in that country, and to ensure that the people are actually living in peace. So again, just to emphasize I was very young and idealistic, but it just kind of proved that one person can make a difference.

KALARITES: His involvement in El Salvador, I think it's fair to say, changed that country forever. And I'm not sure if people across Massachusetts, or even in the country, are fully aware of just how valuable his efforts were. As a former staff member, I assume that you hope that history remembers his work for what it was, which is something that ended a brutal society and dominating all its people.

TEIXEIRA: Absolutely.

KALARITES: How will you personally remember Joe Moakley, as just Joe Moakley, the person?

TEIXEIRA: I remember him very warmly. Obviously, I'm getting kind of emotional. He was like family. You could really—he was very open. I had a really good relationship with him. You know, you always felt like you could always tell him anything. He was just a very kind—one of the kindest people I've ever met in my life. And just with an incredible heart. An incredibly generous person.

KALARITES: How would you want people to remember him, just like that or—if there was one thing that you wanted people to take away from the Joe Moakley legacy?

TEIXEIRA: I'd say his sense of humor and his compassion. To shorten it, I'd say those two qualities.

KALARITES: The last question is—and we ask all former staff people, and people in interviews—the legacy of the Moakley Archives and Institute is to preserve Joe Moakley's name and the work that he did, but also to pursue a career in public service for young people. So I'm wondering what advice you would give to a college student, a high school student, or someone

that wants to get involved, what would you like to see them take away from his work? What advice would you have?

TEIXEIRA: I'd say the importance of—well, I guess this applies to young people across all political affiliations, right? (laughs) Well, I'd say the value in public service in being a part of the political process. I think that today our political process has a real negative affiliation, or connotation, associated with it. I don't think that—certainly Joe Moakley's legacy doesn't view government that way. It views it very positively. There's a high regard for public service, and just trying to help people. It's kind of a simple answer, but—

And I would say if it's something that young people believe in, that they should definitely explore it. I'd say even if it's something that you're not interested in, I think that it's really valuable for everybody just to see how our government operates. Because like I said, going from a class in college, and going to the real thing, it was really an eye-opening experience. And I think that it really does give you a lot more respect for what legislators do. And it's not always easy, and it's not always—and I don't think it's as corrupt as people view it. So I think there's a lot of good that can come from public service.

KALARITES: I agree. Did you ever meet his wife, Evelyn?¹⁰

TEIXEIRA: Yeah. I think just once.

KALARITES: What was she like? What did you take away from that encounter?

TEIXEIRA: I took away that she was very strong-willed woman. Very independent. But, I didn't know her as well as maybe say people in the Boston office knew her. Because I was here. And when I worked for him, she spent a lot of time in Boston.

KALARITES: You're from Taunton. If I remember correctly, the Taunton area is now in the—

¹⁰ Evelyn (Duffy) Moakley (1927-1996) was Congressman Moakley's wife. They married in 1957.

TEIXEIRA: It's in Barney Frank's¹¹ district.

KALARITES: What year did that change?

TEIXEIRA: I think that that just happened as a result of the 2000 census? So I think in 2002, they implemented the change.

KALARITES: I was trying to remember back, because I always thought—

TEIXEIRA: Yeah, it was recent.

KALARITES: Well thank you so much, Kathleen, for agreeing to sit down and discuss the life and career of Congressman Moakley.

TEIXEIRA: It was my pleasure.

KALARITES: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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