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Oral History Interview of David Pomerantz (OH-028)

Moakley Archive and Institute

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Oral History Interview of David Pomerantz

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Interview Summary

David Pomerantz, a member of Congressman John Joseph Moakley's congressional committee staff from 1989 through 2001 discusses his experience while a member of the House Rules Committee staff. His interview covers how he came to work for Congressman Moakley; how Congressman Moakley developed relationships with his colleagues; and how Congressman Moakley's public service legacy is an example for government service.



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This interview took place on September 30, 2004, at the Longworth House Office Building,
Room 1016, Washington, D.C.

Interview Transcript

STEVEN KALARITES: Today is September 30, 2004. We're here with David Pomerantz in the Longworth Building. This is for the Moakley Archive and Institute Oral History Project. Thank you, David, for taking the time to talk to us about Joe Moakley.

DAVID POMERANTZ: It's my pleasure.

KALARITES: We'd like to begin with a little bit of your background, and how you got into public service and government.

POMERANTZ: I was a teacher in New York. I taught at State University of New York, Stony Brook, and they had a program to bring two political philosophy professors to come work on the Hill, and I took advantage of that in the early '80s, and caught Potomac fever. And I've stayed here since. (laughter)

KALARITES: Great. Now when did you meet Joe Moakley?

POMERANTZ: When I was working for the Rules Committee,¹ I was hired when Claude Pepper² was chairman. And at that time, Joe Moakley was chairman of a subcommittee. So I had met him through Rules Committee things. In fact, the first time I had spoke to him, Kevin Ryan³ was working for him. And we were working late one night, and we had ordered some

¹ 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/>)

² Claude D. Pepper (1900-1989), a Democrat, represented the state of Florida in the U.S. Senate from 1935 to 1950, then represented Florida's Miami-area congressional district in the House of Representatives from 1963 until his death. He served as chairman of the House Rules Committee from 1983 to 1986.

³ Kevin Ryan was Congressman Moakley's chief of staff at his Washington office from 1997 to 2000.

pizza. And I called down to where Kevin was working, which was in H-152 in the Capitol, and Joe Moakley as subcommittee chairman had that as an office, and he had some staff in there.

And I called down to tell Kevin we had pizza, and Mr. Moakley answered the phone. I thought it was Kevin, so I'm making jokes with him, and all this. And then he introduced himself after about ten minutes into the conversation. (laughter)

KALARITES: Now what were your first impressions of Congressman Moakley?

POMERANTZ: Well, certainly his sense of humor.

KALARITES: Many people have commented on that. Many people—the staff and the people around him laughing and joking. Now, did you—you were working for the Rules staff, not his staff, when you first met him. But then did you join his Rules staff?

POMERANTZ: Yes.

KALARITES: What year was that?

POMERANTZ: When he became chairman in '89,⁴ he had a guy—. (pause) So Moakley had a guy working for him, Jack Dooling,⁵ who I'm sure you've heard lots about, and Moakley used to say that Dooling came with the furniture. Dooling had worked for a New York member, and when Moakley was first elected, he picked up that office. He was assigned that office where the New York member was leaving, and found Jack Dooling sleeping on the couch. And Dooling was with him all that time. Anyway, I sort of came with the furniture when he took over at Rules. And I became—he made me deputy staff director, after he became chairman.

KALARITES: Now what—after becoming deputy chair—excuse me, deputy chief of staff to the Rules, what other responsibilities did you have? Did you work on any specific issues?

⁴ Congressman Moakley was a member of the House Rules Committee from 1975 to 2001 and served as its chairman from 1989 to 1995.

⁵ Jack Dooling was a member of Moakley's congressional staff from 1974 to 1988.

POMERANTZ: Yeah, I worked on budget issues, but also just keeping things going on the floor. And he was the kind of guy who was interested in everything and everyone, so he wanted to be informed about everything. Whatever was going on in the House, and whatever anyone else was doing and interested in.

KALARITES: What was his relationship like with other members of the committee, and on both sides of the aisle?

POMERANTZ: Probably the most classic relationship was between Joe Moakley and Gerry Solomon,⁶ the lead Republican. And they—when Moakley was chairman, Gerry Solomon from upstate New York was a ranking minority member. And then when the House shifted, they changed their positions. But there was always a battle of wits between them.

Gerry Solomon was a very dramatic kind of guy, and I remember one time he was—we were in a Rules Committee meeting, and Solomon is just—oh, he's outraged by this rule, and he's yelling, and ranting and screaming, and he stands up and just rips the piece of paper that has the draft rule on, and says, "I can't even stay in the same room with you when you propose a rule like this!" And he slams it down, and starts walking out of the room. And Joe Moakley says, "Well, I guess we should put him down as undecided." And Gerry Solomon started cracking up, and he couldn't finish leaving the room. He ended up coming back in, with a smile on his face. And that was sort of a classic relationship.

The other thing is, it was part of Moakley's style to find some common connection with every member, and there was another member of the committee, a junior member on the Republican side⁷—this is when the House had shifted—he came from a very conservative, small town out west. And when this guy came to Congress, Joe Moakley represented everything he hated, you

⁶ Gerald Brooks Hunt Solomon (1930-2001), a Republican, represented New York's Twenty-ninth, Twenty-fifth and Twenty-second Congressional Districts in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1979 to 1999. (The area he represented was redistricted twice during his tenure.) He was chairman of the Rules Committee from 1995 to 1998.

⁷ Mr. Pomerantz is referring to Scott McInnis (1953-), a Republican who represented Colorado's Third Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1993 to 2005.

know. He was an urban liberal, and this guy was a western individualist. And Tip O'Neill⁸ was Joe Moakley's mentor, and to him, that represented all that was wrong in government, so he came ready to hate Joe Moakley when he came on the committee.

And you know, Moakley would find an occasion to kind of talk to him, and he found a few things that they shared. By the end, this guy was Moakley's best friend. And there came a time on legislation when Joe Moakley would have an amendment; he'd go over to this guy, and because of their relationship, McInnis would go find other conservative Republicans and say, "It's okay to vote for this, Joe Moakley's a good guy." You know? And he always would say that politics, you had to know the policy, you had to know the process, what rules, what obstacles would be in the way, but you also had to know the people. And you never really had a full understanding of the issue if you didn't have all three in your grasp.

KALARITES: So would you say that maybe his best quality—to understand the Rules Committee—was his ability to connect with people?

POMERANTZ: Oh, absolutely. I mean, there was nobody better than him at that.

KALARITES: Now, how did—the House changed in '94, and he went from being the chairman to the ranking member. Was that difficult for him? Did he have trouble adjusting to that? I know you have to reduce staff, and—

POMERANTZ: Yeah, that part was very tough. That part was probably the toughest part of it. But in terms of his role, there's a certain amnesia that comes. I remember many conversations when he would say, "We never did that to them!" And of course, it wasn't true, but you remember the best about things, and he never intended to hurt anybody.

But simple things like, they'd keep him waiting. The Rules Committee was supposed to meet at a certain hour, and he'd come, and they weren't ready. And he never remembered that that was

⁸ 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.

true when he was in the majority. You know, you don't mean it as a slight or anything, you're just not ready to go. But he was always interested in other people, and in helping people. That's what he saw public service as, as an opportunity to help people.

KALARITES: Are those kinds of relationships still practiced in the Rules Committee, or in Congress today? It seems today that it's a different feeling of reaching across the aisle for help.

POMERANTZ: Yeah. I now work on the Appropriations Committee, and it seems to me like it's the last bastion of that kind of bipartisan behavior. And understanding that you and this other guy may have totally different political ideologies, but he still is just another person. And maybe it's baseball you share an enthusiasm for, or cars, or kids, or you know—you can always find something to talk to with somebody else, was the way that he went about things. And he always found some human connection first with another member, whatever their political stripe. And he had relationships with everybody, and there are still members like that.

KALARITES: I know Congressman Murtha⁹—from what I've read about him—seemed to have a good relationship with Congressman Moakley. And they have a similar background in philosophy.

POMERANTZ: Well, both of them were students of Tip O'Neill. Both of them came to Congress at that time, and were sort of lieutenants to Tip O'Neill; I think that's where their friendship developed. They also had the old school style. The line I remember Moakley always saying, and it makes me kind of feel a little odd about the whole project—as much as I love Moakley, talking about him—he would always say, I can't remember the exact line, but something like, “Don't write it down if you can say it, don't say it if you can wink, don't wink if you can nod, and only nod if you absolutely have to.”

KALARITES: I heard another congressman say that one day, and I went, “That's very interesting.” (laughter)

⁹ John “Jack” Murtha, Jr. (1932-), a Democrat, has represented Pennsylvania's Twelfth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives since 1974.

POMERANTZ: But Murtha and Moakley were that style. They'd find a quiet corner, and find a way to talk to other people. But out of the lime—they weren't on TV; they didn't think that was the way that you got the message across, that you worked quietly, and worked hard, but got the job done.

KALARITES: How will you personally remember Congressman Moakley? Outside issues, but just as the man—

POMERANTZ: Well, I mean, nobody who worked for Moakley—everyone who worked for Moakley, in fact, everyone who knew Moakley, loved him. There's nothing else you can say about it. He loved people, and you could see it. When we'd go to his—when we were in South Boston—there are a lot of different images. I'll remember certain lines he had; his quick wit was great.

And his jokes, and how he'd say, "How ya doin'?" every morning when he'd come in, and really try to draw out information from you, but in a—you didn't even realize that he was grilling you, but actually he was. And then I'll always remember at his funeral, just the streets lined with people with tears in his eyes, and union guys with hard hats, and just regular people just all out there, who loved him for the things that he did.

KALARITES: You mentioned that the union guys at his funeral—and I've seen pictures of it, and kids with flags, and people with flowers, and just row after row after row of people—what do you think made him so determined to help his constituents? What was it that was inside of him that said, "I'm going to help people?"

Because some people seem to be—they helped the district, but like you said, they want to get on TV, they want to advance their career. He seemed—because I was told that after Tip resigned as speaker, there was talk that Joe Moakley would become the speaker, that he had seniority. But he said, "I'm happy being a congressman, I can do more." What was it about Congressman Moakley that made him think that way?

POMERANTZ: You know, he had a tough life growing up, and I think he always felt lucky for how things turned out, and grateful. And grateful to the United States for the opportunities it gave him; he served his country in World War II, but then he got some educational opportunities, and it helped him along the way. He looked around where he grew up, in the projects, and some of the other people made it, others didn't. He knew what was—what could have been his life, and I think he always wanted to—he always saw that as his neighborhood, that part of South Boston.

And nothing made him feel better than to see—the program that he—to find young people, and give them scholarships, and get them interested in public service. Nothing gave him more pride than that kind of thing, seeing young people from circumstances similar to the ones he grew up in. One time when [William J.] Clinton was president, he invited some House members there. And Clinton kind of took him aside, and was showing him some things in the private residence, and sort of said, “Aren't you impressed?” And Moakley said, “No, I grew up in public housing. That's all this is: public housing.” (laughter)

KALARITES: Well, you mentioned that he had a strong desire to encourage people to get into public service, and the mission of the Archive and Institute is to preserve the legacy of Congressman Moakley, but also to encourage young people to pursue a life in public service. So I was wondering if you had some advice or your thoughts on what people today should know about getting involved in public service, so they can live up to the standards, or strive to the standards that Joe Moakley set.

POMERANTZ: Well, I'd say the things that he did that made him special, again, were always trying to find a human connection with everybody, no matter what their political point of view. And understanding that when you're working for goals in government and public service, you have to work with all different kinds of people, and you have to make the alliances and the friendships with everyone. And I know he loved what he did.

Near the end, when the doctors said, You have a limited amount of time; do you want to think about leaving a pressured job like you have on the Hill? And he said, “This is what I’ve always wanted to do; why would I leave this?” So actually, it’s good advice whatever the job, but especially in a job like this, where you can get criticized no matter what you do, or it can be a hard life to work in Washington and also represent a district and have to travel all the time. But to love what you do. And he certainly did.

KALARITES: Unless there’s anything else you’d like to add, I think that’s a good place to—

POMERANTZ: That’s great, thank you.

KALARITES: Thank you, we appreciate you taking the time.

POMERANTZ: My pleasure, my pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW