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Oral History Interview of David Dreier (OH-029)

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Oral History Interview of David Dreier

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Interview Summary

Congressman David Dreier, chairman of the House Rules Committee from the Twenty-Sixth District of California, discusses the career of Congressman John Joseph Moakley and his legacy of public service. Congressman Dreier talks about his background and early career in public service; his relationship with Congressman Moakley while serving on the Rules Committee; his involvement in the Speaker's Task Force on El Salvador (Moakley Commission) following the murders of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter in San Salvador; his thoughts on today's political environment; and Congressman Moakley's public service legacy.

Subject Headings

Dreier, David

El Salvador--Politics and government

Moakley, John Joseph (1927-2001)

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

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This interview took place on September 30, 2004, in the United States Capitol Building,
Room HC9, Washington, D.C.

Interview Transcript

PROFESSOR JOSEPH McETTRICK: Well, Congressman Dreier, thank you very much for participating with us this morning for the Moakley Archives. And I just wanted to ask you briefly a little bit about yourself, your district and what brought you to public service.

CONGRESSMAN DAVID DREIER: Well, I was very young when I first got interested. I was an intern. And actually what happened to me was that in the late 1970s I was talking to some friends of mine. And some people said, Oh you know, you ought to think about public service. And I was in college—I was in graduate school then. And it wasn't something I really thought about. I was planning to go back to the mid-west to where my family was, my home, our family business and all. And I looked at the record of the guy who represented the area in Congress. And it was a Republican district, and one of the problems was that he had a tendency to talk like a Republican when he was in California, but his votes didn't mesh with that.

So, I kept talking to friends about that. And they said, Well, why don't you run against the guy? And I lived in the dormitory actually. I had finished graduate school and I was working at my alma mater. And I started when I was about twenty-four years old. And I ran and I ended up, I won my party's nomination over four other people. And I came back to candidate training school here in Washington, and interestingly enough—this is a side note, my seatmate was a guy who had just won the Republican nomination for the candidate training from Midland, Texas. And today he sits down at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. So, that's when I first met George W. Bush in 1978.

We both went on, interestingly enough, to lose the 1978 election. I lost and he lost. We both lost very narrowly. As he likes to say, "We came in second in a two-man race." But, the fact is

that I then decided to run again in 1980, and I came here with Ronald Reagan, an Irishman. And, obviously, someone with whom Joe Moakley and Tip O’Neill¹ had some things in common.

And that was really-- I was inspired a lot by Ronald Reagan. And, of course, by others. And because I had come so close I was encouraged to run again, and put together a campaign. And, obviously, won. So I always plead guilty, I have spent virtually my entire adult life as a member of the United States Congress. So, when people say I’ve done nothing else but serve in Congress, they’re not too far from being correct.

McETTRICK: So when did you first encounter Joe Moakley from Massachusetts?

DREIER: Of course, I knew of Joe Moakley because I grew up—my home is Kansas City, Missouri, so I grew up with Richard Bolling² who was one of the predecessors to me and Joe Moakley. He served [as chairman of the Rules Committee]³ my first term there. And so I do remember coming before the Rules Committee the first time, which was in the mid-1980s. And the testimony that I gave as I recall had to do with Nicaragua and the democratic resistance that we were providing in Nicaragua then. It’s sort of interesting, Joe was very involved in the neighboring country of El Salvador, and we can get into that in a minute.

But, I met him, and of course just knew him slightly. I mean, he was a very senior guy on the Rules Committee and from Massachusetts. And old Tip O’Neill was Speaker of the House. But, I really got to know him when one of the greatest tragedies when we know that Joe chaired this Commission, on November ninth of 1989, we saw a terrible, terrible attack take place in the city of San Salvador in El Salvador. And then on November sixteenth there was a brutal, brutal massacre of Father Ignacio Ellacuri□a and six other Jesuits and their housekeeper. And this

¹ 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.

² Richard W. Bolling (1916-1991), a Democrat, represented Missouri’s Fifth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1949 to 1983. He was chairman of the House Rules Committee from 1979 to 1983.

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.

happened at the Central American University [sic – University of Central America] in San Salvador. And Joe was asked to be the chairman of a task force by then-Speaker Tom Foley.⁴ And I was appointed as a minority member as a Republican on that task force.

And so the first time I really got to know Joe, as we often find around this place, the first time you really get a chance to get to know someone well is when you travel with them. Because when you travel with someone you see their habits, you're spending morning, noon and night with them, you're in meetings. And then, of course, you're in downtime with them. And so that was really the chance. And I have fond memories.

Joe—early in the morning, I would go swimming at the hotel swimming pool. And as I would be swimming my laps, there would be Joe Moakley counting my laps for me as I would swim in the morning. And he always talked about that.

And then he joked—and I was a strong supporter of President Reagan's policies in Central America. And I happen to think that we've been successful in implementing political pluralism, self-determination, free and fair elections and all. But, Joe was correct. And we found that there were real problems that took place, and the horrendous, heinous acts committed by those who were responsible for killing the priests and the other innocent victims there.⁵ But, I felt very, very strongly about our policies in Central America. And Joe had a slightly different view. But, that didn't keep us from being friends.

And then it was shortly after that time, just months later, actually it was in the 1990 election that the then Minority Leader in the House of Representatives, Bob Michel,⁶ appointed me to serve on the Rules Committee. And Joe had become chairman. In fact, I remembered-- I testified before the Rules Committee, I don't remember what the amendment was, shortly after Joe

⁴ 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.

⁵ The Moakley Commission investigation revealed that the Salvadoran military was responsible for the murders at the University of Central America.

⁶ Robert H. Michel (1923-), a Republican, represented Illinois' Eighteenth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1957 to 1995.

became chairman, because he had been sort of acting chairman because Claude Pepper was the chairman leading up to Joe. And I remember, it was June of 1989 that Senator Pepper⁷ passed away, and then Joe took over then. So, it was sometime during the summer of 1989 I remembered being before the Committee when Joe was chairman of the Committee.

And then once I became a member of the Rules Committee, I was down second from the bottom of the four minority seats on the Rules Committee, and we spent an awful lot of time together. And I remember Joe—he was very kind—my father who was the same era of Joe, came back to Washington, and so they had a chance to get together. And Joe was so friendly and so nice, and kind to my father. And my father really liked Joe. They had lunch or dinner a couple of times together, and my father is a Republican, Joe a Democrat. That was one of the great things about Joe, and I try my darndest to emulate Joe in that way. And that is to have a friendly, warm, kind relationship with people, even if you disagree with them politically; you know, the old lines of “you can disagree without being disagreeable,” and statements like that, I think do inspire us. And they do help us—we do share similar goals around here. I mean, we want to improve the quality of life for the people whom we represent, the American people and around the world. And Joe really emulated that. He just believed in bigger government, higher taxes, more regulation, control over our lives, and I believed in less. But, having said that, we were able to work together on a number of issues.

McETTRICK: How did you find the El Salvador experience? Were you surprised at what you found? Did it change your view at all? What did you gain personally from that?

DREIER: Well, obviously, it was—just at this moment as I’m thinking about it, I mean I’m remembering the sights that we saw. We saw blood when we went in because they had everything there. I mean my stomach turns right now as I think about what took place there, because it was very brutal. It had followed the largest urban assault which had taken place in the war in El Salvador; over eleven hundred people had been killed. And frankly, the Central American University had been a spot which had been used for the planning by the Farabundo

⁷ 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.

Marti □ National Liberation Front,⁸ the communist guerrillas who were there. But that didn't in any way, in any way, you know, excuse the heinous act of killing these priests.

So the time that I spent with him there was very interesting and eye-opening. I mean, if anything changed—the case that was made by what's called the *tandona*, the people who were involved in the—had been educated there in the military, who ended up were responsible for this—I mean, these people were the ones who claimed to be completely innocent of it. And a number of them weren't. And so that was clearly an eye-opening experience.

McETRICK: So how did things spread back to the Capitol once your committee made its report in terms of the aid to El Salvador? Was it a successful result in the end?

DREIER: I would argue that where we are today is a successful result. If you look at El Salvador as a nation, very strong, I mean four to five percent GDP [Gross Domestic Product] growth in El Salvador. I had the privilege of witnessing, and this was before this tragedy took place, but I had the privilege of witnessing, it was just months before, the first transition from one democratically elected government to another in the history of El Salvador when it went from Jose Napoleo □n Duarte⁹ to Alfredo Christiani.¹⁰ And they had a very rigorous election; it was very tough. And this incident which we investigated actually took place after that.

But, you know, at the end of the day we have, by and large, a free, stable, pluralistic society on the isthmus of Central America. And I think that means that it's really the combined effort that we had. And I think there's plenty of credit to go around for that, demonstrated that our policies were correct.

⁸ The FMLN, or *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front), is a Salvadoran political party that formed in 1980 in opposition to the military government. It was made up of existing left-wing guerilla organizations and El Salvador's communist party.

⁹ Jose Napoleón Duarte Fuentes (1925-1990) was a Salvadoran politician who co-founded the Christian Democratic Party, or *Partido Demócrata Cristiano*, in 1960. He served as mayor of San Salvador from 1964 to 1970 and later as president of El Salvador from 1984 to 1989.

¹⁰ Alfredo Christiani, a member of the ARENA party, was president of El Salvador from 1989 to 1994. The ARENA party (*Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* or Nationalist Republican Alliance) is a conservative political party that was founded in 1981 in El Salvador in opposition to the revolutionary junta. It has controlled the Salvadoran presidency since 1989.

McETTRICK: You've been in Congress now for quite awhile, and you've seen the inter-play between the parties. And sometimes you know it can be a very contentious place, but you spoke of a need at some level for cooperation and working with the other party. What did you pick up from Joe Moakley? What was the key to his success in dealing with members of the other party, or dealing with people from different parts of the country with different backgrounds? Now, how did that look to you?

DREIER: Well, it may sound trite, and everybody says it. But, having a sense of humor is something that's very helpful. I mean, when things are tense, being able to sort of lower the temperature. We all try to do that, but no one did it better than Joe Moakley. I mean, two of my favorite stories that he liked to tell were the political ones. And Billy Bulger¹¹ tells this one, and he's told it at a couple of dinners. But, Joe always told it very well.

He told the story about the guy who was a ward boss, and he's taken before the committee a week after the election. He says, "Mr. O'Leary, is it true that you live in that three-story walkup there on Shaughnessy Street?" "Yeah, that's where I live." He said, "Well, we had a report that 282 people cast ballots out of your home. Would you care to explain that to us?" He said, "Sure, the second floor was vacant."

And then the other one that I liked was this other guy, another Irishman who goes down to the registration booth. He gets up and he says, "Well, I want to change my registration from Democrat to Republican." "Oh my gosh, Mr. Riley," he said, "you've been a Democrat your whole life. Every member of your family is a Democrat. Your father was a Democrat. His father was a Democrat. Why in the world would you change your registration from Democrat to Republican?" He said, "Well, I just came from the doctor and he told me I only have six weeks to live, and I'd much rather lose one of them than one of us." (laughter)

So, I mean, those kinds of stories that Joe Moakley told, I always enjoy sharing. Actually, I have many that I will not share for your television camera now, because he could tell some good off-

¹¹ William M. Bulger (1934-), a Democrat, served in the Massachusetts House of Representatives from 1962 to 1970, in the Massachusetts State Senate from 1970 to 1996. He was Senate President from 1978 to 1996.

color ones. And I—we share those often on the House floor. And that’s something that continues to go on.

But, doing that helps in the legislative process. Because there is a humanization which takes place when one gets into this kind of exchange. And it goes with-- I mentioned the issue of travel. I mean, when Joe and I took this trip—I traveled with Joe on this trip in 1989 to El Salvador, and he always talked about my swimming laps and the things we did down there on that mission. So, I do have a lot of things that Joe did that I learn from.

To this day his massive portrait hangs just to the right when I hold the gavel in the Rules Committee. And you’re welcome to come up and see the Rules Committee if you haven’t been up there.

McETTRICK: Oh, that would be fun.

DREIER: Yeah, please. Actually, we should have done this in the Rules Committee. You can take your camera up there. And you can get a picture of Joe’s portrait that’s hanging up there and all. But, I look at his portrait every day when I’m there, and I see him. A lot of people don’t like his portrait. I happen to really like the portrait and the way it was done of him. It was done just before he passed away, which saddened a lot. And a lot of people said that there wasn’t quite the twinkle in his eye, because he was dying at the time that the portrait was done. But, it was still a very, very good work.

So I really did enjoy the time that we spent. And it’s a very small committee, the Rules Committee. There are a total of thirteen members, nine in the majority, only four in the minority. And so we do spend a lot of time together.

McETTRICK: I think someone told us—I know you’re pressed for time, and I don’t want to drag this out. But, since you are the chair of the Rules Committee, perhaps you can explain to us, some have spoken of how the procedures have gradually changed in the Rules Committee with respect to minority reports in the amendment process gets onto the floor where some of

these budgetary items are. I saw in your biography that you've been interested in procedural change since the midnineties. Could you fill us in just a little bit on how that works from your perspective?

DREIER: Well, I mean, people have a different perspective on exactly what has taken place. I will tell you, and I'm speaking as a Republican now who served for fourteen years in the minority. We as Republicans were often denied, often denied by the democratic majority, an opportunity to offer amendments and to even have, you know, at the end of a bill substitute amendments offered. And even motions to recommit legislation.

So one of the things that we did, because we'd served in the minority so long, and I happen to be very sensitive to minority rights, is we guaranteed the minority the right to have a motion to recommit on every bill, meaning that they can have a bite at the apple. And we usually provide a second bite at the apple, which is a substitute proposal. But, the Democrats with a huge majority denied us often the chance to have our ideas heard.

We have a very narrow, very narrow majority. And so managing with that has been tough. But, when we won the majority in 1994, I was tasked with making sure we put into place institutional reforms. And as a member of the Rules Committee and just having worked on it, because in 1993 I co-chaired, along with former congressman Lee Hamilton,¹² the task force that we looked at the reorganization of the Congress. So, we'd done a lot of work on it at that point.

And we were able to come up with some recommendations that guaranteed the minority rights that did not exist before. And so I'm very proud of having done that. Now, there are a lot of people, Democrats will dispute and criticize the way I've managed the Rules Committee, but I criticized Joe for the way he managed the Rules Committee. Because part of the problem—and that's a proper role for the minority. Again, I had fourteen years of experience in the minority, and I argue that that gave me a sensitivity of minority rights, plus an understanding of James Madison's view as he outlined it in *The Federalist*. He talked about the importance of

¹² Lee Hamilton (1933-), a Democrat, represented Indiana's Ninth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1965 to 1999.

recognizing minority rights. And he talked about the threat of tyranny and all. So, I do feel that continuing to provide the minority with opportunities to allow their ideas to be heard is something that I continue to try to pursue.

McETTRICK: One purpose of the Moakley Archives and Institute is to try to present a legacy of Joe Moakley with an eye to educating people who are coming along for public service. Now that you've had this experience over the years and having been in the minority and majority, how would you sum up Joe Moakley's legacy? Or, what would you yourself say to new politicians coming along? It's a changing era it seems, and what advice would you give? Or, what advice would Joe have given?

DREIER: I mean, Joe is someone who really wanted to make sure that he could get things done. I mean, he loved public service. He was dedicated—he gave his life to public service. I know he'd been in the state legislature before, and so he sort of epitomized the Irish politician from Boston. And all kinds of stories about it.

But, I think that having deeply rooted principles is something that I feel strongly about. And I do think that Joe had those deeply rooted principles. And he and I saw the world differently. And yet, finding areas of agreement is something that Joe liked to do, and I like to always do whenever I can. You know, Ronald Reagan had an old line. He said, "Show me somebody who disagrees with me twenty percent of the time, and I'll show you somebody who agrees with me eighty percent of the time." It's the proverbial glass half full. And I think Joe really had that view. And I try to emulate that as well as I can, focusing on areas of agreement.

But, when we have disagreements, having rigorous debate and an exchange of ideas, because that clash of ideas is something that the framers wanted us to have. I mean, they didn't want everyone to be marching in lock step; I think they wanted there to be disagreement. So, doing it in a way that is respectful of others is something that I think is very important. And then everyone always sits around and wrings their hands and talks about how much better it was back then. I don't think that things are a heck of a lot worse today when it comes to this issue of civility. I know again a lot of people say that.

When Ronald Reagan passed away months ago, so many people said, Well, Tip O’Neill and Ronald Reagan used to sit around and have a beer, and that kind of thing doesn’t happen any longer. Well, frankly, I figured that you could count on one hand the number of times that Ronald Reagan and Tip O’Neill had a beer together. But, the point is that things are not as bad today as a lot of people say. Yes, they’re different, and the world has changed. We’re in a twenty-first century. But, there are a lot of us who are still trying to vigorously pursue that wonderful sense of civility that was epitomized by Joe Moakley’s life. And I will continue to hold him up as a model for doing just that.

McETTRICK: I know you have to leave, but did you have any final thoughts or things—

DREIER: I think that’s about it.

McETTRICK: I think you given us a very good picture. I certainly appreciate you doing this.

DREIER: It’s my pleasure. Thank you for doing this project. I think it’s very important.

END OF INTERVIEW