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Oral History Interview of Dr. John Eisold (OH-030)

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Oral History Interview of Dr. John Eisold, M.D.

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Interview Summary

Dr. John Eisold, M.D., attending physician to Congress, discusses his relationship with Congressman John Joseph Moakley; his role as a physician on Capitol Hill; his congressional trip to the Vatican with Congressman Moakley; and how Congressman Moakley's legacy is an example for public service.

Subject Headings

Eisold, John, 1946-

John Paul II, Pope, 1920-2005

Moakley, John Joseph, 1927-2001

United States. Congress

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This interview took place on September 30, 2004, in the United States Capitol Building,
Room HC-9, Washington, D.C.

Interview Transcript

PROFESSOR JOSEPH McETTRICK: Well, Doctor, thank you very much for coming in to participate in our oral history project for the Moakley Archives. And maybe the place to start would be just to ask you to describe a little bit about yourself, and what did you do in the Capitol building as a physician?

DR. JOHN EISOLD: Well, I'm the attending physician to Congress, which is a position which has oversight for all health issues on Capitol Hill. So anybody who's on Capitol Hill should fall ill or have a medical need, I've got health units as well as doctors, and a rather large staff to be able to provide whatever need. And, obviously, we take care of the members that choose to. And that's how I met Mr. Moakley.

McETTRICK: So maybe you could tell us about how you first met Joe Moakley and what your relationship was with him.

EISOLD: Well, my relationship was very close. Not only as a physician but as a personal friend. And we just developed a bond over a period of time that we were together and enjoyed each other's company. He had been followed in the clinic for, I guess, well before when I came on board ten years ago. So I simply saw him as one of the first patients I saw in routine follow-up. And we struck it off together right then, and stayed close ever since that time.

McETTRICK: Many people have told us that Joe had a good manner as a political figure, and that he was able to encourage people to cooperate and trust. Could you tell us about what you observed about Joe in terms of his relationships with other members of Congress?

EISOLD: Sure. It sounds trite because you hear it a lot of times about certain people, but he truly was a people person. He loved what he did. And he loved talking to his constituents,

handling their problems. Nothing would make him prouder than just to get some widow's electric bill paid. I mean, that was as much as getting the Big Dig,¹ as far as he was concerned. So he made it very personal, and gleaned just energy from all of the people that he served.

In terms of his ability as a leader, because he had been chairman of the Rules Committee,² as a leader and then the ranking member when I got here, he liked everybody. He could pull people together. He was issue-oriented, but he knew how to build bridges. And I don't think that he had one detractor on Capitol Hill, which is pretty hard to do.

And so it's easy to see—I mean, he had a way about him, obviously friendly, great sense of humor. But he also knew how important it was to get things done in a bipartisan way. And so he would never engender any sort of animosity by anyone. And our visits were always part social, part clinical and just plain fun.

McETRICK: Now you must see a lot of people come and go, and many people who are in Congress. What would you say really distinguished Joe from the others? What was it particularly about him do you think that—

EISOLD: I think what I would say distinguished him—there were a few like this, which I won't name over the years—but this was his life. There was nothing outside the work he did here or in his home district that was of interest to him. There were no hobbies, there was nothing. This was his life. And you could sense that. And it wasn't ball and chain. I mean, he loved it. Coming to work every day was exhilarating for him. And he loved a good fight. He liked to win. But when the dust cleared, you know, whatever went on was past history. And he was just interested in everything.

¹ The Big Dig, or Central Artery/Tunnel Project (CA/T), for which Moakley helped secure federal funding, was the largest public works project in U.S. history and involved the replacement of downtown Boston's elevated highway with a tunnel. The project began in 1991 and ended in 2007.

² Congressman Moakley served as chairman of the House Rules Committee from 1989 to 1995.

McETTRICK: We all know that he did have a serious illness and it was for a prolonged period of time. And I'm sure that you'd seen that with other patients. But did you see qualities in Joe exhibit themselves during that interval that he dealt with that?

EISOLD: Well, definitely. And then he had other serious issues over the years as well. What was clear was that this was a man at peace. He had a great Catholic faith. We traveled together with a delegation to bring the Gold Medal to the pope³, and that was his last overseas trip. But he wasn't going to miss that. And this was in the waning months of his life.

But when I say he was at peace with himself, he was proud of his accomplishments. He had done everything in life he could possibly do. He would have loved to have continued to do it. But he was unafraid of what was going to come around the corner. He was uncomplaining about any of his infirmities and the things that detracted his energy. And he just plugged ahead. And he worked—he worked until he couldn't work anymore, and never thought of stopping what he was doing. His mind never, never wavered. But he was fearless. And really great courage.

McETTRICK: Did you ever have occasion to travel with him, or have involvement with him away from the place of business? Was there contact socially?

EISOLD: No, pretty much everything we did was here, except for that large co-del [congressional delegation] House and Senate combined trip to Rome to present the medal.

McETTRICK: So you did go on the Rome trip.

EISOLD: I did.

McETTRICK: So what was that like? That must have been quite an adventure.

EISOLD: Well, it was an adventure. It's always an adventure, as you can imagine, to have a private audience with the pope with just these House and Senate members. So that was

³ Pope John Paul II (1920-2005) was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal on July 27, 2000, in Rome, Italy.

extraordinary. And as people have spoken about the pope on other occasions, you do realize you're in a room, no matter what your faith is, in a room with an extraordinary person. And I know that particularly Joe enjoyed that. And I think that fulfilled him. I think when he finished up with that trip, that's what he wanted to do. And the last thing he did was dedicate his courthouse in Boston. And I think with those, he had come to closure with everything.

McETTRICK: Now how did it happen that a large number of members of Congress went on the Rome trip? I mean, I had known that Joe went, but I guess I haven't really heard the story about what brought that event to pass and why there was such a large group.

EISOLD: Well, traditionally, when the Gold Medal is given, the recipient is presented the medal in the rotunda. It's a major event, and hundreds and hundreds of people go. So that it is not a trivial award. And so that it was fitting to have a substantial group, House and Senate, present to present it to him.

McETTRICK: I see, so this was pretty much in recognition of his achievement that so many people participated.

EISOLD: Exactly.

McETTRICK: So did you have a chance to meet the pope yourself? Were you one of the ones?

EISOLD: We all went up and knelt before the pope, kissed the ring, and said whatever was appropriate in our own minds to the pope.

McETTRICK: Did Joe have occasion afterwards to talk to you about this? It must have been interesting to see the effect that this had on him. (interruption—voices in background) It must have been that after he received the award that you had occasion to talk to him about it. Did he describe—

EISOLD: I don't think that we ever had any specific conversations about that. And [in] my role I'm trying keep in mind I'm taking care of twenty people overseas, so I'm busy thinking of other things. But he was thrilled.

McETTRICK: Well, I guess he did have some experience as a traveler, but that must be tricky to have so many people on the road with their different health needs. Is that a difficult—

EISOLD: Traveling overseas is always challenging, so that this co-del was no different than other congressional delegations overseas, just larger.

McETTRICK: Now let's see. Did you have occasion to meet Joe's wife? I suppose it was pretty much focusing on Joe.

EISOLD: I only knew Joe. Didn't know anybody else in his family. And I knew his staff, inside and out.

McETTRICK: Now, it seems like it's a very high pressure job that people have. I suppose you must spend a lot of time trying to keep people calm and make sure they're following whatever regimens they're supposed to follow. Did you encounter a lot of stress-related injuries, so to speak?

EISOLD: Sure, but also it's a large population with just the same kind of medical problems the rest of the world has. Some serious, some minor, some require continuity and ongoing follow-up. We're pretty aggressive about following people and making sure if they're on medications, they stay on them, they get follow-up and that sort of thing.

And the stress—it's interesting, Capitol Hill thrives on stress. And I think by and large the members are a very durable bunch. And stress is all relative. The stress that would crush most people, they deal with on a day-to-day basis quite well.

McETTRICK: Joe struck me as pretty much indestructible. I had an interview with him, and he really seemed to be someone that, whatever issues he was dealing with he did manage to overcome. Most people in Congress must be relatively young actually, I guess, in terms of the population.

EISOLD: Well, you have a whole spectrum. Two years ago Strom Thurmond retired at age one hundred. And at the other end of the spectrum we take care of the pages who are teenagers. And it's all in between. I think the average age, or the median age of the House and the Senate, is somewhere around fifty-three or fifty-four. And within that you've got some people in their eighties, some in their seventies, some in their sixties. So it really is a whole spectrum.

McETTRICK: Well Joe did remark that the treatment that he had, it's an excellent program at Bethesda.⁴ So you've got all kinds of backup.

EISOLD: I have the good fortune of being able to access healthcare, either at the institution like you mentioned, or Walter Reed [Army Medical Center], or really any civilian institution. So in Joe's case, I could do hospitals in Boston sometimes. And with other members I might deal with the Mayo Clinic or the Cleveland Clinic or Johns Hopkins, et cetera. So that I'm very fortunate to have that kind of backup.

McETTRICK: Part of the function of the Moakley Archives and Institute is to develop Joe Moakley's legacy and to pass along the significance of Joe's career to young men and women who might be considering careers in public service, so one thing that we do ask people who we interview about Joe is to ask you how you would describe Joe's legacy, and what advice you would have for people who were just thinking about public service, or getting into public service. Would you have anything to pass along?

EISOLD: I don't think you could find anybody more proud of public service than Joe. I mean, he was a role model. And I'm sure that he could nurture young people and convince them of the honor of serving.

⁴ Moakley received care and treatment at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland.

One of the things that I note that makes people special who are in office is the loyalty and longevity of their staff. It says everything about them as a human being. And he had many loyal and long-serving people with him. And that's just a reflection of how he treats—you treat your staff that way, that's the way you treat your constituents, your colleagues, et cetera. And so it really is a measure of a man.

So I think that people were proud to work with him, understood how much he loved what he did, how proud he was of what he did, and how even handed and fair minded he was.

McETTRICK: Were those were certainly words to think about, and we appreciate your sharing that with us. It's difficult, I suppose, to walk into an interview like this, but we appreciate you taking the time to chat with us.

EISOLD: Well, my pleasure. And he was a good—wonderful friend, hated to lose him. But his humor and his character taught me a lot of things too. And so he's a fond memory and I'm delighted that this legacy piece is being done.

McETTRICK: Well, thank you.

EISOLD: Thank you.

McETTRICK: Thanks very much. We appreciate it.

EISOLD: Yes, indeed.

END OF INTERVIEW