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Oral History Interview of Richard Neal (OH-032)

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Oral History Interview of Richard E. Neal

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Interview Summary

From the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., Congressman Richard E. Neal, who represents Massachusetts' Second Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives, discusses the career of Congressman John Joseph Moakley. Congressman Neal talks about meeting Congressman Moakley; the important leadership role Moakley played in the Massachusetts congressional delegation; legislative issues they worked on together; how Congressman Moakley developed bipartisan relationships within the Congress; Congressman Neal's own thoughts on today's political environment; and what Congressman Moakley's legacy is to public service.

Subject Headings

Moakley, John Joseph, 1927-2001

Neal, Richard E., 1949-

Peace movements Northern Ireland

United States. Congress

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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 Neal, we appreciate your taking some time out of a fairly busy day to meet with us for the Moakley Archives. This is sort of a home game for us, that it's someone from the Massachusetts delegation that we are talking to so thank you for coming by. And I guess if you could just describe a little bit about yourself and what brought you to Congress, and how long you've been here, just so we have a record for someone in the future looking at this tape, they'll know who you were.

CONGRESSMAN RICHARD NEAL: I think one of the unknown aspects of congressional life is the story of how each member got here. And there really are 435 terrific stories, about how individuals come to the House of Representatives. When you consider that in the history of Congress, that there have been less than twelve thousand men and women who have been asked to serve, it's quite extraordinary. The odds of one getting here are overwhelmingly poised against that candidate.

And once you arrive here, I use the metaphor oftentimes, "It's the major leagues." And you meet people of profound political skill along the way. In a sense those who aspire to a Pulitzer Prize or a Nobel Prize, you aspire in the same manner to a congressional seat. And one of the nicest things for me as I recall these pleasant memories was my friendship with Joe Moakley.

McETTRICK: So, when did you first meet Joe? And how did your relationship develop?

NEAL: Well, I'm an institutionalist and have great regard for what it is that Congress does every day. And I think that I recall fondly that my introduction to the House of Representatives was offered by Joe Moakley. He introduced me to the House of Representatives, and little would I have known then that my career in the House of Representatives would be largely sponsored by Joe Moakley.

He was the dean of our delegation, which technically really meant he was the dean of the New England delegation. And in the Democratic caucus he would have responsibility for the six New England states as well as Guam, Puerto Rico, and Washington, DC. That would be how our region set aside seats for respective committees.

And as you know, in congressional life, your committee assignment is where one prospers. And I take great satisfaction from the fact that after a short stint on the Banking Committee, that Joe Moakley sponsored my move to the Ways and Means Committee. And there's a terrific story, if you'd like to hear how that was done.

McETTRICK: We absolutely would. That's what we're here for.

NEAL: In our delegation, we are known as a regular order delegation, meaning that as seats open up on exclusive committees that it would be seniority that would dictate where the next person might aspire. And for me there had been a retirement on the Ways and Means Committee, and the defeat of one of our incumbent members on the Mass. delegation. And I had my plans set on going to the Appropriations Committee only because Joe Kennedy¹ was ahead of me in seniority by two years. And he indicated to me that he was going to move from the Banking Committee to the Ways and Means seat that Brian Donnelly² had left when he retired.

Joe Kennedy, on the day after the elections in 1992, apparently called Joe Moakley and said that he had changed his mind, that he was going to remain on the Banking Committee. And I think largely it was based upon Joe's [Kennedy's] gubernatorial aspirations, the idea being that as a subcommittee chairman on the Banking Committee, you can hold hearings across the state. And I had spoken that morning, because Joe and I had seemed to work out the agreement where I'd

¹ Joseph P. Kennedy, II (1952-), a Democrat, represented Massachusetts' Eighth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1987 to 1999.

² Brian J. Donnelly (1946-), a Democrat, represented Massachusetts' Eleventh Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1979 to 1993.

go on the Appropriations Committee, and I had spoken with the Speaker of the House, Tom Foley.³

I called him in Washington state, and I said, “Mr. Speaker, a member of our delegation had been defeated last night. And with Brian Donnelly’s retirement, it means that two seats are going to open up in the best committees in Congress.” And I said, “I’d like the Appropriations Committee because Joe Kennedy is going to take the Ways and Means seat.”

Well, within an hour the phone rang; it was Joe Moakley. He was calling me from Boston, and he said, “Richie, I just talked to Joe Kennedy. He is not going to take the Ways and Means seat. You have to take the Ways and Means seat.” And I said, “Joe, I’m embarrassed because I’ve spoken to Tom Foley, and he seemed to indicate to me I’m going to get the Appropriations seat.” And he said, “Well, I want you to take the Ways and Means seat.” And I said, “Well, that’s what I wanted, but I thought I was behind Joe Kennedy in the regular order.” And he said to me, “I’ll straighten it out with Tom Foley.”

And maybe an hour later he called back and said, “You’re going on the Ways and Means Committee.” There were seven presidents of the United States who have served on the Ways and Means Committee. At the moment there are seventeen Democrats. It’s the most sought after committee assignment in the House of Representatives. And Appropriations is fairly close behind it. They are exclusive committees. And for me to be able to request the Speaker of the House put me on the Appropriations Committee, and an hour later, say, “Well, no, I’m going on the Ways and Means Committee,” was quite a morning for me. But, it was that sponsorship of Joe Moakley that delivered a Ways and Means seat.

And it’s terribly important to our region, in terms of taxes, trade, Social Security, Medicare, tariffs, welfare and part of Medicaid. And as the Constitution reminds us, every revenue measure has to begin in the House of Representatives. And in the House of Representatives, every revenue measure begins in the Ways and Means Committee.

³ Thomas Foley (1929-), a Democrat, represented Washington State’s Fifth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1965 to 1995. He served as Speaker of the House from 1989 to 1994.

McETTRICK: That is a good story. We were talking with Congressman Peter King⁴ this morning. And actually he mentioned yourself and some issues that he had worked with you on relating to Ireland I guess it was, and the peace initiative in Ireland. And he said that Joe Moakley had been involved in some of that. Could you tell us a little bit about that piece of it?

NEAL: I actually went to Ireland with Joe and Tom Foley. It was sponsored by the Speaker. As a relatively new member at the time, to have the Speaker of the House say to me in the cloak room, “We’re going to Ireland. Would you like to go?” Geez, delighted. And spent a week with Joe and Evelyn,⁵ and had a terrific time. That was really kind of prior to the great breakthrough of the IRA [Irish Republican Army] decision to announce their cease fire in 1994. And that’s the defining event.

It also represents, for those who doubt the role that Congress plays in international affairs, the Good Friday Agreement was inspired and driven largely by congressional initiative. Obviously, we had to have the intervention in support of Bill Clinton who really did change the parameter of the debate. But it was Congress that time and again said, Look, we’ve got to take a look at the Birmingham [Six] case, we’ve got to take a look at the Joe Docherty case. We’ve got to look at the Guildford Four case.

And virtually all of those cases, in fact exclusively all of those cases, proved that the nationalist community, they were right based upon trumped up charges. And Joe was sort of a bridge from the days of Tip⁶ to a younger and perhaps more aggressive generation of members of Congress who looked at Ireland and said, Geez, the Berlin Wall has come down, the Soviet Union has collapsed, and there’s majority rule in South Africa, when is Ireland’s turn? And as we became more assertive, I could see that Joe was on our side, and very sympathetic for the nationalist position, as all of us have been.

⁴ Peter T. King (1944-), a Republican, has represented New York’s Third Congressional District since 1993. OH-31 in the Moakley Oral History Project is an interview with Congressman King.

⁵ Evelyn (Duffy) Moakley (1927-1996) was Congressman Moakley’s wife. They married in 1957.

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.

McETTRICK: And it looks like you met with fair success on that, I mean you're still working on it, but moving in the right direction.

NEAL: The American dimension has been indispensable. And if you want to look at a tangible achievement for American foreign policy, it's Ireland. Today Ireland is relatively free of that sectarian strife that has dominated the last three-hundred years. The idea that this weekend Ian Paisley⁷ is going to travel to Dublin. Just unheard of a year ago, never mind ten or twenty years ago when we were all working on this issue.

And part of the Good Friday Agreement calls for a Belfast/Dublin relationship; that's our desire. For those of us who want to see Ireland united, we believe strongly that Dublin/Belfast is the essential ingredient.

McETTRICK: Can you recall other projects that you worked with Joe Moakley on, or perhaps sometimes with Tip O'Neill as Speaker in terms of projects or funding for Massachusetts and industrial development? It seems to be very effective state delegation. Can you tell us what that's like? How did that really work?

NEAL: Well, I thought it was always humorous in retrospect as he described the sort of brick that was going to be placed on the Moakley Courthouse. And that's the kind of detail he kept in mind. I was his dinner companion at least once a week, and usually twice a week, for twelve or thirteen years. So I got to see, listen to, and know the real Joe Moakley. And I thought that his ability to leverage federal funding for the New England region was legendary. And he was not exactly the kind of individual who took no for an answer.

In the legislative life you really do have to get along. But he exercised extraordinary clout as chairman of the Rules Committee.⁸ It's the Speaker's committee. In the House of

⁷ Ian Paisley (1926-) was the leader of the Democratic Unionist Party in Northern Ireland from 1971 to 2008.

⁸ 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

Representatives, every piece of legislation that comes to the floor has to have a rule that's attached to it. So it's a small committee that operates relatively in obscurity on the third floor of the Capitol. But anyone who is a member of Congress, you know how important it is.

I also, with a moment of humor, I was a bit intimidated one day when I was coming over for one of my first pieces of legislation. And you have to testify before the Rules Committee asking for a certain allocation of time. And it's generally done in a party line vote. It's a committee that they don't attempt to disguise their partisan activities. And I went over, and here I was very nervously with my papers and my staff sitting in the audience waiting to be called upon. And Joe was chairman of the Rules Committee. And I just wanted to get my bill to the floor, and I was waiting with great eagerness to testify. And all of a sudden, he whispered in the ear of one of the staff members. And the staff member came out and said, "Your bill is coming to the floor. You don't even have to stay and testify." (laughter)

McETTRICK: Music to your ears.

NEAL: I'd love to go back to those days. (laughter)

McETTRICK: It would certainly make things a lot easier. We were talking earlier this morning with members of the Republican Party, as well as some Democrats, talking about the party relationships and conflicts. And you've been down here for a while and you've seen this evolve. What can you tell us about Joe's relationships with the other side, with the Republicans? He seems to have had a fair amount of success. So how would you describe his success?

NEAL: Well, I think in terms of congressional largesse, there is a great sense of bipartisanship. In fact, I think you can make a pretty compelling argument that despite what editorial writers think, there's a fair opportunity for success in an election year because both parties, I think, drop the pretense of obstruction and try to move to some sort of achievement so that they can go back to the voter and say, We did this, we did this, we did this.

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.

And I remember as bipartisan as Joe could be in terms of seeking revenue for projects back in Boston and New England where he helped me on a very significant project in Springfield, a public works facility. And he helped me secure that funding almost overnight just based upon his word.

But what is interesting at the same time, Joe was a great Democrat. And he could be ferociously partisan. I know the press and modern day political figures tend to see partisanship as somehow a role that is from a different era. But that's how you crystallize ideas for the consumer and the voter. You really have to say, We would do it differently. Because if you say, We'll do it the same, they're going to vote for the real thing every time.

I recall a long time member of the House who serves on my committee who was most disappointed to discover that Joe had contributed financially to his challenger in Florida. And I was sitting next to Joe, and the fellow came over and he said, "Joe, I thought we were friends." And Joe Moakley looked at him and said, "We are. You just wear the wrong uniform."

McETTRICK: So there really is a place for partisanship; it's just that it has to be kept in perspective, I guess.

NEAL: Well, you know, I think there's a tendency to believe that somehow we're town managers when we get here. And we want to somehow sanitize this process to the point where honest disagreements are cast aside. That's a mistake. If you disagree, you state your case, and you let the voter make up their minds.

McETTRICK: One thing that we're trying to do with the Moakley Archives project and the oral history project, is to capture an image of Joe Moakley and try to develop what you might call Joe's legacy, and then be in a position to transmit it further down the line to perhaps younger people who are interested in getting involved in political careers or careers in public service. If you were to be speaking to them, really, in the aggregate, what would you describe as Joe's

contribution or legacy? And how would you interpret it for them? And what would you tell them was important about Joe Moakley's example?

(Pause—tape change)

NEAL: I think that that generation of the Tip O'Neill, Joe Moakley, Eddie Boland⁹, Silvio Conte¹⁰ and others who served here, including Everett Dirksen¹¹ and people like that, they saw the times were changing, and they embraced the change. In our lifetime the Civil Rights Act of '64 helped to make America a much more egalitarian nation, that we've lived out our promise. Who would really entertain the idea of undoing the Voting Rights Act of 1965? Or the Wilderness Act or EPA [Environmental Protection Agency], Medicare?

You know, life expectancy today I think for a male is close to eighty, and for a female it's closer to eighty-one or eighty-two years old. If you were living in the year 1900, the average male in America lived to be forty-six years old. Look at what's happened today. So for my friends that are always hollering about intrusive government, I wonder if they would really de-fund the National Institutes of Health. And look at those hospitals in Boston and Springfield and Worcester; they're among the best hospitals in the world, the best doctors, the best nurses, the best care. And much of that came because a generation like Joe Moakley said that it represented the reasonable expenditure of public dollars. And it worked.

McETRICK: So if we were to take that example and that insight and try to tell the next generation what they should think of in entering public service, how would you interpret all that? What is their role—

NEAL: I think the young people should reject this anti-politics consciousness that has been built up around them. This notion that government doesn't do anything right. Remind people that the

⁹ Edward P. Boland (1911-2001), a Democrat, represented Massachusetts' Second Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1953 to 1989.

¹⁰ Silvio O. Conte (1921-1991), a Republican, represented Massachusetts' First Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1959 to 1991.

¹¹ Everett M. Dirksen (1896-1969), a Republican, represented Illinois' Sixteenth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1933-1949 and represented the state of Illinois in the U.S. Senate from 1951 to 1969.

men and women who ran into the Trade Towers [in New York City] on September eleventh, they were government employees. They asked no special favor, and without fear gave up vacation days; jumped out of cars; threw golf clubs to the side; leapt on fire trucks, into police cars; drove to the scene. Those folks who handle the mail in the anthrax poisoning, in which some died. The men and women of the American military. That's government. They perform admirably. And stand in for us every day.

What I am concerned about is that young people are missing a good definition of what we mean by community. And community means a place where no one is to be abandoned, and no one is to be left behind. I think that's Joe Moakley's legacy. If you sat with him, you could talk to him about the nuns in El Salvador. It wasn't a white paper that was produced at the State Department that talked about what was going on in El Salvador; it was a group of nuns that approached him. And he believed them. That's how he got involved in that issue.¹²

He used to joke and he'd laugh, and he'd say it over and over again. And, of course, that was the other part of Joe's career, we all had to laugh at the same joke. But, he would talk about El Salvador, and he'd say, "You know, for a guy like me," he said, "I thought foreign travel was going to East Boston for a grinder." He said, "For me to become involved in El Salvador was pretty telling." And I think that what he did in El Salvador was based upon a great act of the human heart.

McETTRICK: Now were you surprised that Joe got involved in that?

NEAL: Shocked.

McETTRICK: Or surprised by the outcome? Tell us about that.

¹² 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). Also, 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.

NEAL: He was a bread and butter politician. Great street smarts, great street sense. But he wasn't home at night reading *Foreign Affairs* magazine. But he had great instincts. And I think those are the instincts that you learn in the streets of South Boston. Those are the instincts you learn on the streets of Worcester, Lowell and Lawrence and Springfield, when you come from a background where you're not born into a congressional seat, you're not born to the Senate.

McETTRICK: Sure, well, now, we don't want to put you on the spot. I know you're pressed for time. But, anything in particular that you'd like to tell us about in terms of Joe Moakley stories or encounters? Sometimes it happens that there's an episode that does come to mind, something that you might recall and you think about when you think about Joe Moakley. Anything like that that you'd want to share with us? I know it's kind of putting you on the spot a bit, but anything?

NEAL: I think there was a great moment when I first came to Congress. I don't expect a lot of people to remember it, but there was this extraordinary struggle. I succeeded Eddie Boland, but as I succeeded him that meant his seat on the Appropriations Committee had opened up. And in a regional contest for that seat, it was Chester Atkins¹³ who by seniority would have had the upper hand in seeking the seat. But, Congressman [Joseph] Kennedy as well decided he wanted the Appropriations seat. So, it was actually the first vote I cast in our regional caucus.

And I sat next to Joe Kennedy, and although the ballots were secret, I showed him my ballot, because I knew something in that room could be up. Because you were talking about breaking the seniority system. And for members that have been here for a long time, that would be a very difficult thing to do. And the caucus with secret ballot is a place where treachery can prevail.

And I remember as the votes were counted, and one member of our delegation declared that one person had won. And, of course, Chester Atkins had won when the last ballot was turned over on the table. And Joe Moakley knew who it was that had committed to Joe Kennedy, but had not

¹³ Chester G. Atkins (1948-), a Democrat, represented Massachusetts' Fifth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1983 to 1993.

actually voted for him. And he took it to his grave. He never gave the guy up. And he used to say with great humor, on the floor, "I know who did that." (laughter)

McETTRICK: Well, we appreciate you taking the time to share with us. I just wanted to make sure that there wasn't anything else that you wanted to say when you were coming over here and that kind of slipped your mind in the heat of the moment. You've given us some good insights I think into Joe, and we really appreciate your participation.

NEAL: He was generous, he was kind, and he was very helpful to me along the way.

McETTRICK: That's a good summation right there. Well thanks very much.

NEAL: Thank you

END OF INTERVIEW