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Oral History Interview of Martin Meehan (OH-035)

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Oral History Interview of Martin T. Meehan

Interview Date: September 30, 2004

Interviewed by: Joseph McEttrick, Suffolk University Law School Professor.

Citation: Meehan, Martin T. Interviewed by Joseph McEttrick. John Joseph Moakley Oral History Project OH-035. 30 September 2004. Transcript and audio available. John Joseph Moakley Archive and Institute, Suffolk University, Boston, MA.

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Interview Summary

In this interview, Congressman Martin T. Meehan of Massachusetts' Fifth Congressional District discusses the career of Congressman John Joseph Moakley. The interview covers Meehan's early interest in public service and his eventual election to Congress; his thoughts on the role of government in peoples' lives; the importance of Moakley's leadership role in the Massachusetts congressional delegation; and Moakley's legacy of public service.

Subject Headings

Massachusetts Politics and government

Meehan, Martin T. (Martin Thomas), 1956-

Moakley, John Joseph, 1927-2001

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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 Meehan, thank you very much for finding a few minutes in a busy day to come down and talk with us about Joe Moakley.

CONGRESSMAN MARTIN T. MEEHAN: Delighted.

McETTRICK: Well why don't you tell us, if you could, briefly, what was it that got you into public service, and how did you meet Joe Moakley?

MEEHAN: Well, I had been inspired like so many young Irish Catholic Democrats from Massachusetts—when I was a kid, President Kennedy, if he came on the television everything stopped in my family. And I remember where I was when President Kennedy was assassinated. I was actually in the second grade, and I remember it. Remember coming home. I remember my mother crying and my aunts crying. And followed Bobby Kennedy's career after that. Had a scrapbook in 1968 of the presidential campaign. And remember the morning when the news came across that Senator Kennedy had been assassinated at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles.

So I think inspired really by the Kennedy family. And then got involved—worked for Congressman Jim Shannon¹ who represented the Fifth District in Massachusetts, worked as a congressional aide and decided if I ever got the opportunity, I would like to serve in the Congress.

McETTRICK: So did you make it on your first try? How was the election for Congress?

¹ James Shannon (1952-), a Democrat, represented Massachusetts' Fifth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1979 to 1985.

MEEHAN: I did. Well I ran for Congress—first time running for public office was a race for Congress. And I ran against an incumbent Democrat who had won election both at the state house and in the Congress.² For twenty-two years had been elected in consecutive elections. And he was a pretty good member of Congress, but it was a year when redistricting was a big issue and I didn't know what the district was going to be. I was the first assistant district attorney in Middlesex County, and decided this might be the opportunity to make a difference in the Congress. So I ran and I won. And that's when I first met Joe Moakley, was after I got here.

McETTRICK: And so how did that work? We hear a lot about the Massachusetts delegation and how that all goes. Could you fill us in a little bit on what that was like?

MEEHAN: Well, I think probably mine was a little different than most members of the delegation. I got elected beating a democratic incumbent, and that was highly unusual. And I was part of the largest freshmen class that had been elected in a long time; 1936—'46, I think, was the last class as large as ours. We had 111 new members of Congress.

So I went in to see Joe Moakley, the powerful chairman of the Rules Committee,³ the dean of our delegation. And I'd never been in a legislature before. As I say, I had been a first assistant district attorney. And he said to me, "What committee do you want to be on?" And I said, "Well, I'd like to be on the Appropriations Committee or the Ways and Means Committee." Now, those are the two most exclusive committees in the Congress. And he kind of looked up at me and he said, "Hey, kid, you're not going to be on the Ways and Means Committee, nor are you going to be on the Appropriations Committee."

So we kind of got off to a rocky start. And I had been elected on a platform of trying to change Congress and shake up the way things are done, and reform the way Congress operates. So that

² Chester G. Atkins (1948-), a Democrat, represented Massachusetts' Fifth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1985 to 1993. Prior to that, he served in the Massachusetts State House of Representatives from 1970 to 1972 and in the Massachusetts State Senate from 1972 to 1984.

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.

put me in direct conflict with somebody like Joe, who was a powerful chairman of the Rules Committee. So I would say my first two years in Congress were difficult years in terms of I didn't know Joe before I had run. So we had our share of battles in the first two years. But I learned a lot. I learned you didn't want to have a battle with Joe Moakley (laughs) because you probably weren't going to win.

McETTRICK: How soon after your arrival did they have the turnover of the leadership in the House? And how did that affect you?

MEEHAN: I was in the House two years. In 1994 Newt Gingrich⁴ had this "Contract with America" and the Democrats lost power. And it was shocking, actually, to a lot of people. And it was difficult, very difficult. It made working across party lines really important. And I recognized how lucky we were being from Massachusetts, because we had the chairman of the Rules Committee. Joe Moakley had this huge office over at the Capitol. And all of our meetings—you know, the bank presidents would come down, or the Red Sox would come down, or whomever came down from Massachusetts—it was very prestigious because Joe had the Rules Committee room where we would have all of our meetings. And I don't think I initially realized how fortunate we were in Massachusetts to be in the position we were in.

McETTRICK: Now, did you think that Joe Moakley was able to bridge that gap even after the change in leadership? It must have been a difficult situation, to have been in the leadership and then have the other party take over. It must have been difficult, really, for everybody in the Congress, and especially for senior leaders like Joe Moakley.

MEEHAN: A senior leader like Joe Moakley, absolutely. But, you know, Joe is—as I got to know Joe better and watch him operate in the Congress, everybody loved Joe, Democrats and Republicans alike. He was very effective at working across party lines. He had a great sense of humor. He always had a joke. Whenever Joe Moakley was on the floor, we would all gather

⁴ Newt Gingrich (1943-), a Republican, represented Georgia's Sixth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1979 to 1999. He served as Speaker of the House from 1995 to 1999. He was one of the authors of the "Contract with America," a document released by the Republican Party during the 1994 Congressional election campaign.

around him, and he'd kind of hold court with some of us from Massachusetts, but also people from other delegations would come over. And he always had a smile, and he always had a joke. So Joe was very effective, even though we weren't part of a majority party.

It was frustrating for all of us, particularly for Joe. And Joe wanted to get that majority back. He really did. But Joe was effective because everyone liked him. I think he was the best liked member of the entire Congress.

McETTRICK: I think it's difficult for people who aren't really in the Congress, or following it closely, to understand what that means for somebody to be dean of the delegation. Apparently, it has something to do with committee assignments, but also I guess in terms of projects and getting okay's for regional initiatives. How does that all work?

MEEHAN: Well, the dean of the delegation is the person who has the most seniority in the delegation. But there are deans of delegations, and then there was Joe Moakley, the dean of the Massachusetts delegation. He was the chairman of the powerful Rules Committee, but more than that he was an extremely effective member. And he represented an era that—Tip O'Neill,⁵ and an era where Democrats and Republicans actually used to work together. So Joe was—he wasn't just the dean of the delegation; he was again the most well liked member of the House. And somebody who could tell stories of, you know, President Kennedy,⁶ the Kennedys, Tip O'Neill. I mean, he was a walking history book or encyclopedia on the House of Representatives and politics in Boston and South Boston.

I remember once I had been in the Congress for many, many years. One time we were kidding on the floor, and Joe said, "Boy, you were a pain in the neck when you first got here. And it's good to see you beginning to straighten out." And I would quip back, "Well, you know, I beat a Democratic incumbent. And I styled my whole tenure my first term after the last guy in

⁵ 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.

⁶ John F. Kennedy (1917-1963), a Democrat, represented Massachusetts' Eleventh Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1947 to 1953, then represented Massachusetts in the U.S. Senate from 1953 to 1960, when he was elected president.

Massachusetts who had defeated a Democratic incumbent.”⁷ And, of course, Joe—nobody around knew what I was talking about. (laughter) And Joe looked at me and he said, “Oh, well you’ve got a lot of work to do if you’re going to keep up to that standard.” (laughter) So he had a great sense of humor.

McETRICK: Now is there anything that specifically comes to mind in terms of things that you were trying to do for your district that you had to really work with Congressman Moakley on or other members of the delegation?

MEEHAN: Well, in particular—Joe put me on the Armed Services Committee. And he said, “Look, Armed Services Committee is important to Massachusetts. Massachusetts has this huge defense R and D [Research and Development] that’s important to national security. It’s important to Massachusetts and the economy.” And I didn’t really understand how important at the time. But it was a very important committee. Massachusetts gets a billion and a half dollars a year in research and development, defense dollars, critical technologies in Massachusetts. We’ve got Hanscom [Air Force Base] and the spin-off with MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] and Lincoln Labs. Very important to the Massachusetts economy and the defense industrial base of the country.

But any time I’d be working on something with—defense-related, Joe would have to handle the appropriations part of it. And he had a great relationship with Jack Murtha;⁸ Jack and Joe had gone back a long, long way. And Joe would help on any appropriations having to do with Massachusetts and defense industry. So I worked together with him on all of those issues. And also took his advice on everything. Joe had a great perspective, and always had great advice. And I came to rely on him for advice, and also to navigate my way around the legislative process in the House.

⁷ In his first successful congressional election in 1972, Moakley beat Democratic incumbent Louise Day Hicks.

⁸ John “Jack” Murtha, Jr. (1932-), a Democrat, has represented Pennsylvania’s Twelfth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives since 1974. He served as chair of the House Appropriations Defense Subcommittee from 1991 to 1995, then became chair again in 2007.

McETTRICK: Well, one thing that we're trying to do with this Moakley Institute and the Archives is to fashion a picture of Joe Moakley, and to try to capture what you might call his legacy or what his contribution is to public service. And we like to pass that message on to people who are coming along who are interested in government or public service. Since you saw him in action, what would you say you could describe as Joe's legacy? What lessons are there for people who are just starting out or thinking about a career in public service?

MEEHAN: Well, the first thing I think is that Joe never forgot where he came from. Joe was in many respects just a regular person. If he went to a diner, he knew everyone in the diner. He treated everyone with respect, no matter how high he went. And he was one of the most powerful people in the country.

He would travel around the world representing the United States of America. He made an incredible difference in El Salvador with hearings and investigations and getting to the truth in that country, and had enormous credibility.⁹ But he never forgot where he came from, and was always down to earth. And I think oftentimes people get involved in government or politics—I think when people make mistakes they oftentimes get arrogant or they get full of themselves. Joe was never that way. Joe could—he'd be at a meeting at the White House and then he'd go back on the plane and he'd get off and go have dinner at Amrhein's in South Boston. And he was the same guy all of the time.

Joe was—he produced for the people of Boston, the people of Massachusetts as well. I mean, his fingerprints are on every major development in Boston. He helped build that city into what it is today. And he was always committed to it. And he was a tough negotiator. If Joe wanted—Joe got the courthouse, the new federal courthouse. And Joe was tough. Some people would say he was a softie in many ways, and he was. People from Massachusetts who came to Washington looking for jobs with the federal government—he'd help anybody. He had a big heart.

⁹ 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.

But at the same time, he could negotiate with the toughest negotiators around. He was tough, but yet at the same time he could be a softie. I remember one time I got into this battle with him, and I went in afterwards, I said, “Look, I apologize; I want to work more effectively.” And he said, “You know, you’re lucky I’m a softie. I want to work with you. You’re a good kid, and we’ll go from there.” (laughter) So he had a soft part of him. But he could be as tough as anyone.

McETTRICK: Well, the perception is that it’s become a very difficult track in Congress, that there is a lot of partisanship. And I guess you’re suggesting there’s a place for that kind of thing, a place for contesting what you really believe in. But then there’s supposed to be another side to this. What are your thoughts on that? How is it supposed to work?

MEEHAN: Joe was a Democrat all the way, a lunch bucket Democrat. And he would fight for working families every single day. But it never got personal with Joe. Joe never had—he never personally wanted to hurt anybody. He never personally wanted to attack anyone. He fought for the things that he believed in. And I think that was really an important part of who Joe was.

You know, Joe was also a person that believed in education. He had an opportunity to go to Suffolk Law School, for example.¹⁰ And that meant a lot to Joe. And those of us—when I would talk to him about Suffolk Law School, he’d talk about how much it meant for him as somebody who actually said he was underage to get into the service and serve his country, and then get an opportunity to get a law school education. It was always important to him to make sure that other young people had that same opportunity. So I think education was really important to Joe.

McETTRICK: Well, it’s difficult, I guess, to sum him up, but I think you’ve done a good job with describing what it was like. Anything else that you’d like to—now that we’ve got you here? (laughter)

MEEHAN: You know, it was interesting, the day that Joe announced that he was sick, and that he was going to leave the Congress, I had, as a member of the Armed Services Committee, I had

¹⁰ Moakley graduated from Suffolk University Law School in 1956.

traveled down to his part of the district and was going to meet him there, because we were sending some troops off. And we had a ceremony down there. And I was down there as a representative of the Armed Services Committee. I expected Joe to be there. And Joe wasn't there. And then somebody else said he wasn't feeling well. And there were television cameras all over the place. And it was a very visible ceremony. And I got up and did the ceremony.

I get back and I noticed that I was on the television stations, and I got a call from Joe about nine. And I thought for sure he was calling me to rib me and kid me about being in his district and getting on television. (laughter) And he gave the shocking news that he was sick, that it was terminal, and that he was going to be leaving the Congress. And I'll never forget that conversation.

He had just a wonderful way of dealing with his sickness, as well. I remember President [George H.W.] Bush had just been elected. And there was a State of the Union Address, President Bush's first State of the Union Address. And he took time out, because it had been announced that Joe was sick and going to leave the Congress, and President Bush honored him in his first State of the Union Address.

And Peter King,¹¹ a Republican from New York, who used to always be kidding with Joe and with me and Richie Neal¹² and the other members of the delegation, came down the next morning, and he said, "Joe Moakley, I can't get over the president of the United States, a Republican, and the first guy that he mentions is a member of the Congress. He doesn't mention any other senators, or any of the House members, he mentions Joe Moakley. I mean, how do you do it? How do you get honored that way by the president of the United States?" "And Joe looked up, he said, "Peter, believe me, it's not worth it." (laughter) And it just had that moment. And then Joe laughed, and we all laughed.

¹¹ Peter R. King (1944-), a Republican, has represented New York's Third Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives since 1993. OH-031 in the Moakley Oral History Project is an interview with Congressman King,

¹² Richard E. Neal (1949-), a Democrat, has represented Massachusetts' Second Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives since 1989. OH-032 in the Moakley Oral History Project is an interview with Congressman Neal.

You know, just a great sense of humor, but also he had—he wanted to make sure at the end that he finished everything up, and he wanted to make sure that the courthouse got done right. He wanted to make sure that his former aide and a great member of our delegation, Jim McGovern¹³—wanted him to take his spot on the Rules Committee, and he did that.

And just a career that today with politics and voter participation going down, and people being turned off by politics, Joe Moakley and his approach to helping people is something that everyone should emulate. And we should have more people who go into politics for the right reason. And fundamentally—Joe used to always say, “Being involved in government is about helping people, and it’s really that simple.” And it is that simple. At the end of the day it’s about whether or not you can improve people’s lives and make a difference. And help people achieve their full potential. And that’s what Joe always thought that it was about. And it was that simple to him.

McETRICK: Well, thank you very much for telling us what happened, and how it was. That gives us another piece of the mosaic, so we appreciate it.

MEEHAN: Thanks very much, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

¹³ 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. OH-013 in the Moakley Oral History Project is an interview with Congressman McGovern.