



JOHN JOSEPH Moakley

ARCHIVE & INSTITUTE AT SUFFOLK UNIVERSITY

John Joseph Moakley Oral History Project

Oral History Interview with

Leanita Shelby

Interview Date: October 1, 2004

Interviewed by: Steven G. Kalarites, Moakley Archive Oral History Project Coordinator.

Citation: Oral History Interview of Leanita Shelby, OH-037. John Joseph Moakley Archive Oral History Project, John Joseph Moakley Archive and Institute, Suffolk University.

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Interview Summary

Leanita Shelby, a member of Congressman John Joseph Moakley's congressional committee staff from 1989 through 2001, discusses her experiences while a member of the House Rules Committee staff. In the interview, she describes how her career started on Capitol Hill with Congressman Gillis Long; how she became a member of the House Rules Committee staff; her work for Congressman Moakley; and how Moakley related to his colleagues and his constituents.

Subject Headings

United States. Congress. House. Committee on Rules

McGovern, James P., 1959-

Moakley, John Joseph, 1927-2001

Shelby, Leanita

Long, Gillis William, 1923-1985

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This interview took place on October 1, 2004, at the United State Capitol Building,
Room H204, Washington, D.C.

Interview Transcript

STEVEN KALARITES: It is October 1, 2004. We are in the U. S. Capitol Building here in Washington, D.C. We're with Leanita Shelby, a former Moakley congressional staff member. Thank you, Leanita, for taking the time to talk with us about the oral history project, and the life of Joe Moakley.

LEANITA SHELBY: Great.

KALARITES: I was wondering if we could begin with a little bit of your background, where you're from, and what brought you to Washington.

SHELBY: Well, I'm from Oklahoma. I grew up in a small town by the name of Stillwater, and I came to Washington to go to college; I went to college at George Washington University. But when I came to Washington—of course I loved the city, I loved the activity level—but I studied French language and literature when I was in school; never read a newspaper, had no interest in politics at all. And when I graduated from the university, I found that I had to get a job, and I had almost no skills unless I was going to be a French teacher.

So I tried to learn how to type fast, and I tried to get an entry level job in Washington. The entry level jobs, really, are in government. So I came to Capitol Hill, and I walked around, and I found an office that would let me begin. And that office was a Louisiana congressman by the name of Gillis Long.¹ Now Long was part of the Long dynasty, in the state of Louisiana.

The old populist Huey Long was a cousin—a distant cousin—and Gillis Long was, by Southern standards, a raving liberal congressman representing an area in central Louisiana that was

¹ Gillis William Long (1923-1985), a Democrat, represented Louisiana's Eighth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1963 to 1965 and from 1973 until his death in 1985.

relatively poor, middle-class—poor farming area. [Long] came to Capitol Hill in probably the late fifties, early sixties, and served until it came time to take a vote on civil rights. And that vote on civil rights took him out of office for ten years; he lost his job, he lost his career as a congressman from the civil rights vote, and he basically had to go out and earn money, and wait for redistricting to come back.

And one of the, I guess, rewards of his vote on civil rights was a job as assistant director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, which was Shriver—Sargent Shriver’s office.² Shriver began it. It was a Kennedy idea. [President Lyndon] Johnson followed through with it, and Shriver ran it. And Gillis Long was his deputy. So there was a long-standing sort of connection with Massachusetts politicians, and Gillis Long was as smart a southern politician as there ever was.

So when he came back into the House, they put him on the House Rules Committee.³ He got a special leadership spot on the Rules Committee when he came back in the seventies. And not long after that, I began working for him. And I did all kinds of work. I started from the bottom; I did case work, I worked on veterans’ problems, and social security problems, and how can you help people, and I worked my way up into a legislative assistant position.

And then I worked my way up—because Mr. Long was on the Rules Committee—to what they called associate rules position. I worked for him; I did his work on the Rules Committee. It’s the leadership committee that sort of narrates politics procedure around every issue that’s active at any particular time. It was my job to look out for his political interest as he was working on all those issues that they went through the House, so I came to the Rules Committee in the early 1980s, 1981, and Mr. Long had been in Congress a little bit longer—not in Congress a little bit

² Robert Sargent Shriver (1915-), known as Sargent Shriver, was the first director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, which was established in 1960 under President Lyndon Johnson. In 1953, he married Eunice Kennedy, the sister of John F. Kennedy.

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/>)

longer, he was a little bit older than Joe Moakley, so he was a little more senior in the committee lineup, sitting right behind Claude Pepper.⁴

And one day, he told me, “There’s somebody I want you to meet. I want you to meet this congressman. I’m going to take you by the office.” So he brought me down here on the first floor, in H152, which was Joe Moakley’s subcommittee office—Joe Moakley was chairman of the subcommittee at the time—and he introduced me to Mr. Moakley, and he said, “His staff prepares work for him in a way that I think is first-rate. I want you to look at how this work is done, and I want you to watch how this man works, because he’s very, very good.” And that was my first introduction to Joe Moakley.

Now, Gillis Long died of a heart attack watching the Super Bowl on Super Bowl Sunday in 1985, and at that time, Claude Pepper was the chairman—Claude Pepper being the boss of—a very famous congressman, a great stature from the South, in Florida—offered me a job, a position as the professional staff on the Rules Committee. So I went from looking after a Southern congressman’s political interest to a professional job on the Rules Committee, looking at the interests of, at that time, thirteen members, nine of them which were Democrats. I worked with Claude Pepper for another four years. He died in 1989.

And at that time, Joe Moakley took over the chairmanship of the Rules Committee,⁵ and I stayed on as professional staff. So I really came to him through a populist congressional office of the South, through the training of the Rules Committee into the professional staff of the Rules Committee. And that was my relationship with him.

KALARITES: And what were your first impressions of Congressman Moakley, as a person?

SHELBY: As a person, he was fun and funny, and very open. Very willing to spend time with staff, tell jokes, and have a good time. And he was also very serious; he was very tough-minded.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Congressman Moakley was a member of the House Rules Committee from 1975 to 2001 and served as its chairman from 1989 to 1995.

And he wanted things done, he wanted things done quickly, and he wanted things done right. He was—as a staff person working for him—he liked to be briefed orally, not in writing. You had to prepare things in writing for him to be able to look at it or to review, but he really liked for you to—when you were ready to brief him on something, you’d go talk to him, so that he could have a chance to maybe look at the memo, and then he would talk through it. He would have questions, there would be an interaction. He would want to know things, that he would want to do it while he was with you.

So he was really somebody that you briefed orally, and I think probably the first big issue I handled for the committee—my portfolio was financial institutions, banking committee issues, which included housing, consumer issues, and the commerce issues—Energy and Commerce Committees, the energy issues, all kinds of telecommunications, other kinds of issues, and the International Relations Committee.

Now, I didn’t do any of the El Salvador work.⁶ Jim [McGovern]⁷ did that, and then later Steve LaRose⁸ handled it for him. But I did the rest of the issues for the International Relations Committee, and I did some of the appropriations work. But my first real issue to handle for him when I came on—because Boston has so much of the financial industry in it—was the Banking Monitorization Act. And this was the act where they were taking the firewall down between banks and commercial business, the firewall that had been there since the 1930s since the Great Depression, and the fall of the stock market.

And they were taking that wall down, and they had to figure out how the banks and the insurance companies, and home securities industries and the mutual funds, all could get into each others’ business. How they could interact and expand the kinds of activities they did. So there was a

⁶ 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.

⁷ James P. McGovern (1959-) has represented Massachusetts’ Third Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives since 1997. He was a member of Congressman Moakley’s staff from 1982 to 1996.

⁸ Stephen LaRose was a member of Congressman Moakley’s staff from 1993 to 2001.

huge fight that was going on for years and years and years between all those industries: the insurance companies, and banks, and the brokerage firms, everything. Everybody was involved in it; everybody had a different opinion, and everybody was very much wedded to their opinion. And it was my job to sit in on the meetings when all the people would come through, and they would go into Joe Moakley's office.

And they would tell him what their interest was, and what they wanted, and I remember sitting in those meetings. And I had a big, black binder that I kept on everybody, every group that came in, and every position, and how it fit together with the bill that was moving forward. And we would go over it periodically; we would sit there and go through the binder. But those groups came through, I remember sitting there, and every single one of them who came in that office was Joe Moakley's best friend. And I remember sitting there, thinking they were all opposed to each other, and we were trying to figure out how to sort it out.

I remember sitting there, thinking, Oh my gosh, every single one of these people, it's like he's greeting his brother, how are we ever going to sort all this out? But it was easy in the end, because what he did was everyone that came through, he would use the arguments of the group before, to that group, to see what their response was. He wouldn't just listen to them, he would have already heard what their opponents had to say, and he would use those arguments in that meeting.

And then I would keep track of it all, so in the end, you just sorted it all out. And the truth—which was halfway between all of this—became a lot sorted out of the whole. It was a very interesting process for me, because I realized that Joe Moakley doesn't have an enemy anywhere; everybody's his best friend.

KALARITES: That leads me to a very interesting point: One of the things that I think, as we've talked to more staff, has come across, is that he was a true professional politician, in that he really had a very professional way of handling things. But he did it with such a smile, and a way to bridge the gap between opposing views. I was wondering if you could expand on that a little

bit, because he not only—not just interest groups, or people who came into lobby him, but Republicans, Democrats—I mean, he really worked the system to help them.

SHELBY: Yes, he did. And he had friends, and this is one of the—I think this is one of the things I'm almost glad he didn't live to see, is the level of partisanship that there is in the House today. It doesn't exist I think as strongly in the Senate, but there is an enormously large partisan divide here in the House. He would have hated that. He was friends with his colleagues, he was friends with people across the aisle. And he was of the era when it was fine to argue, and he was tough-minded.

He did not back down from stating or from arguing his point of view, but he was very capable of putting it aside at the end of the day, and going out with people at night. I remember sitting when they did eulogies for him on the floor—and the staff was sitting in the back there, of the chamber—and watching members just come up one by one to the microphone, and give their story of how—what they remembered about Joe Moakley.

And I remember Republicans coming to the microphone—if I remember distinctly, there was one Italian member who came up to the mic and said—he was a Republican—he said, “You know, on Tuesday nights, Joe Moakley and his wife used to go out with us, and we'd go out to dinner.” And it was like, I had—I worked for him for twelve years, I had no idea. But that's what he would do. He would be here at work, but at night, he would be having dinner with Congressman X and his wife, [who] were Republicans. He loved people, and I think that is one of the great skills as a politician.

He had just such an enormous gift for getting to know people, wanting to know people, wanting to know about them. And it was a great personality gift, I think, that he had to let people open up to him. People were very willing to talk to him, and kid him. And people would come over—I would sit on the floor sometimes when we were doing a rule—and he would come over to talk to them from the other side of the aisle. He was very, very gifted at—it wasn't like he was working the sides of the aisle, he just wanted to know about that guy and what he did, and what his life was like, and where he came from. He wanted to know about it.

KALARITES: Now, he was also—I mean, he was chairman of the Rules Committee in '89, which is an extremely influential committee, and he's one of the most powerful people in Washington. How did he use his persona, his position on Rules, to help advance the Mass delegation and the Democratic Party? I don't know how much of an opportunity you had to see that aspect of it.

SHELBY: Well, they're really, I think, two different roles. He was also the head of the delegation, so he really did work very closely with the delegation in forming alliances; obviously the Senate and the House members vote on issues that were important to Massachusetts. On the Rules Committee, when he took over as chairman—I'm trying to think—when Claude Pepper left, Claude Pepper was probably in his late eighties, getting closer to his nineties, and was also a skilled orator; Pepper had great oratorical skills. And he was a great debater; he would debate issues very purely, with very little preparation.

Joe Moakley I think addressed issues more in terms of people and—the bedrock values were always the same, and it was just the core and democratic values we keep talking about today: What you believe in, what you stand for, who you're looking out for. We're all the same. But he was more of a street-smart savvy guy. He knew how to read people; he knew how to size up situations very quickly.

I remember sitting on the Rules Committee watching—not when he was a minority member—but I think one of the interesting things about him is how easily he made the transition from being the party in control, to being the minority party. A lot of members, it took a while to learn they weren't able to get their bills passed because they weren't in control. They weren't in control of the apparatus, they weren't in control of committees. But Joe Moakley was then—he was a voice.

And it was interesting to watch his questioning, how he was always present, and he always made the case, whatever the Democratic Party position was. But I remember sitting there and watching him once, not too long after we were in the minority, question—and we only had

members of Congress as witnesses before our committee, we didn't have very many outside organizations that testified about things.

They were members who were testifying for the committee, and asking policy questions, or making statements. He—I watched him lead a member down a series of questions, and it was just one question after another, after another, after another. And all of a sudden, the trap was set and it was too late in the game, and (inaudible), “You mean to say this?” And I realized that was the old attorney; he had just questioned a witness on trial, and the whole room laughed.

Because they saw—and they didn't even see to the end where he was leading this man—to come out and make him argue against his own position, but he did that. So his skills, I think, which had been part hidden for a long time because he's a majority person—he just used his power just to say—help create that strategy within the leadership. But when you're in the minority, you don't have that power, all you really have is your own ability to make a point or to raise an issue.

And he never wavered in that, and he never—if it was the right position, he never hesitated to walk out and make the case for it, even though he knew he was going to lose in the end, because we didn't have enough votes to sustain it. It's different, making a case when you know you're going to win, and going out and having the same level of interest and passion to make a case when you know there going to vote you down. And he never wavered from that.

KALARITES: What do you think were the most important personal issues to Joe Moakley, throughout his career?

SHELBY: Well, clearly, human rights was—and I think that personally, he wasn't aware of it in those exact terms, “human rights,” I think he just always looked at how people treat other people, and a lot of them in the right way. But I think that was an outstanding mark in his career, whether it was in China, or Cuba, or El Salvador, wherever it was. In my issues, there were really two dimensions to him.

I think probably the one he felt more dearly, in my portfolio, is housing. You know, he was a huge advocate of public housing. He never forgot where he grew up, or what it was like in the projects. He was just really interested in people having the opportunity to have someplace decent to live; it was a huge issue for him. On the other side, the financial institutions, all the businesses downtown, that was his district. And he stood up for his district. He loved the city, he loved Boston, he loved the people in it.

Very, very proud of all that. So I think in the sense that—you wouldn't think of him as a proponent of a big securities firm or a big insurance company, but he was, because that was business, and that was business with people, and that's where people got jobs, and that's what makes it run. And he had very astute—interested in a lot of friends, a lot of people. I've learned—I still do that portfolio for Leader [Nancy] Pelosi, and I see a lot of the same people, it's just different—West Coast-East Coast banks just is not the same, but the issues are the same. So on the one hand, he never forgot where he came from, but on the other hand, he knew how the city worked. And he knew what was important to it, and he knew what—had to sustain it, so it was just amazing.

KALARITES: I know that a lot of people back in the Boston area, we've talked to them about Joe Moakley, [and] they all have a Joe Moakley story. And they all say, I ran into him at a deli, and he was wonderful. Or, I saw him at Castle Island, taking questions on a Sunday. Is there any kind of Joe Moakley story that sticks out in your mind?

SHELBY: Well, there are many Joe Moakley stories. I guess if I were to tell—to tell one on tape—I would say just to illustrate how he communicated with people—and when he went to El Salvador—I just tell this second-hand, this is a story that comes down from Jim McGovern, who traveled with him when he was in El Salvador. And he found himself in the school one day, and there are all these school children around. And the people wanted him to say something, and of course he doesn't speak Spanish.

And he's looking at them, and the only thing that he can do is to open up and sing, "I'm Irish, come into the parlor." This image of Joe Moakley standing in this small school in the rural parts

of El Salvador, singing, “[If You’re] Irish, Come into the Parlor,” to a bunch of third-graders. But to him, it was the only way he felt he could communicate. And that was, “You see me, you see what I am. I’m funny, I’m jolly, I sing songs. And that’s me.” I think that’s the way he introduced himself to people, and it was just instinctive, it’s instinctive. I have no idea how to communicate with you, so listen to this song.

KALARITES: You mentioned Congressman Jim McGovern; he was one of Joe’s right-hand men. Do you see some of Joe Moakley in Congressman McGovern, how he works on Rules?

SHELBY: I do. They were very simpatico; they had a lot of—a meeting of the minds in many respects. And I think—I’m glad Jim’s on the Rules Committee; he followed Joe Moakley on to the Rules Committee. And it’s a very good position for him to be in. It’s going to be a very good position for him to be in. I think their value systems were the same, I think their hearts were the same. Jim was—had a very inquisitive mind. He has a very intellectual approach to things, but he also feels things the same way Joe Moakley—Joe Moakley was a person who felt things very deeply, and I think Jim does too in a certain level.

And, I think there are aspects of Joe Moakley that probably people wouldn’t think about when they think about him. Like, he loved crossword puzzles. If your looking for the paper, “Where’s such-and-such? I always do the crossword puzzle.” Joe’s got it. Joe Moakley loved Jeopardy! You could come down here at a late-night session, and he’d be in his office and have Jeopardy turned on, trying to get the questions out before the guy could say them on the TV.

So I think there was—I certainly think the inquisitiveness of mind people don’t necessarily associate with Joe Moakley that he had, Jim also has. So they’re alike in those ways. It’s a good legacy. Joe Moakley’s portrait is hanging over Jim’s shoulder in the Rules Committee; if he ever feels like he forgets anything he knows the boss is watching.

KALARITES: Well, that’s got to be quite a responsibility to have that level of talent to live up to, I guess. I know you’re very busy, and I’ll try not to take up too much more of your time. How would you like to see people on the Hill, people in public service, remember Joe Moakley?

SHELBY: Well, I think the fact that he loved public service so much—I mean, he was the quintessential public servant. He showed us what really means and matters: knowing the people around you, taking care of the people around you, making sure the people around you have some element of power in what controls their lives, and they speak really through their elected representatives. I think that’s the way he approached things. It’s a wonderful job. He loved his job.

He was absolutely in love with coming into work every morning, and staying until whenever he needed to be here until going home at night. But it was an exciting, even when I started here, an exciting career. There’s a lot going on, there’s a lot of opportunity to give back to your community, do things for people. And I think he would want young people to want to give something, whether it’s working for a state or local government or community, or neighborhood association, or some way to be involved in the world around them. I think that would be good.

I think he gave a lot of people opportunities up here, a lot of—he was, at one point—had a patronage for the House of Representatives.⁹ He was in charge of who the pages were, who the elevator operators were, who worked in the folding room. And there were a lot of kids up here who went to school at night, and worked during the day. They could read their books in the elevator or do whatever, but he gave young people an opportunity to get ahead, whether they stayed in public service or went out and did something else.

So I think he was very involved in the youth, and keeping people stimulated. He ran campaigns even when he didn’t need to, just to keep the machine going. I mean, there were kids who came in to get signs, to do the standouts. Just to be involved in the community, to say, “Here’s what I stand for. Let’s go do something.” And so I think that—what I would like people to know about Joe Moakley is he’s a man of public service who was able to achieve great things, and others can follow in his steps.

⁹ From 1973 to 1975, Moakley served on the House Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, which was responsible for issues relating to government employees. Moakley therefore had some influence on the hiring of House of Representatives employees.

KALARITES: You mentioned young people, and that brings us to our final question. And that's the mission of the Archive and Institute is to preserve the legacy of Congressman Moakley. It's also to encourage young people to pursue a life in public service, and I was wondering what advice you would have for them, of how they can better advance their career, or better understand what it means to be a public servant through Joe Moakley, through his legacy?

SHELBY: Well you can do it any time of life. I mean, I came to politics very late, and only by accident. My life was reading fourteenth century French novels, and—when I was in school. So I don't think you really have to know in advance; there is always an opportunity to get involved in your community politically. You could go the legal route, but there's a lot of ways that you can become involved. If you're going to go into politics as a way of life, a lot of people go to law school; they think, "I'm going to go into a career in politics, I should have a background in law," which is not unhelpful; it's definitely helpful.

But what I learned from Joe Moakley, and also from my mentor, Gillis Long, is that it's a job about people, and you've got to really like to be around people. And I would think that knowing, studying something like sociology, something that tells you, What makes people work? How do you motivate? What element is it that moves people to do one thing or another that they do?

It's really, I think, something that if I were taking a career in school, I would take psychology and sociology in addition to perhaps a law degree. I think that's good training. And there's no better training than just to go out and do it. Be in a campaign, walk door-to-door. I've been in politics a long, long time, and I still have to get out and knock on doors and talk to people, and try to get them out to vote. To try to get them interested in—at least exercising their right to vote. So I think those are the things I would say.

KALARITES: All right. We appreciate you taking the time. It's been a pleasure having this nice conversation with you. Thank you very much.

SHELBY: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW