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## Oral History Interview of Peter King (OH-031)

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### Oral History Interview of Peter T. King

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

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#### Interview Summary

From the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., Congressman Peter T. King discusses the career of Congressman John Joseph Moakley. Congressman King recalls how he came to know Congressman Moakley and discusses issues they worked on together; the respect Joe Moakley had from other members of Congress; and the legacy Congressman Moakley has set for public service.

## **Subject Headings**

Cigarettes -- Safety regulations -- United States

King, Peter T., 1944-

Moakley, John Joseph, 1927-2001

Peace movements Northern Ireland

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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, thank you very much for finding some time to participate in this oral history for the Joe Moakley Archive. And since we're fairly pressed for time, maybe the best thing to do would be to ask you first off how you came to meet Joe Moakley, and what you worked on with him in Congress. And then maybe as we have time we can fill in some of the other details. But tell us how you met Joe Moakley, and what contact you had with him in Congress.

**CONGRESSMAN PETER KING:** Basically, my first contact with Joe Moakley came through Congressman Richie Neal<sup>1</sup> in Massachusetts who was pretty much a protégé of Joe Moakley. I worked with Richie on the Irish issue. And I got elected in 1992. And I would say within six months or a year, Richie introduced me to Joe Moakley. But it just took off from there. I mean, it was—talking to Joe Moakley went far beyond issues, because he and I wouldn't have agreed on very much. I was a conservative Republican, he was a Moakley Democrat. But really that never came up. It was just him telling stories about what went on during the days of Tip O'Neill.<sup>2</sup> Talking about how the House should run. And I don't just mean this in a storytelling way. We're using that really as a descriptive way of showing what he thought was wrong with the House today, what was right about it. How we can go forward, how we should try to work together.

And also he had all the neighborhood stories, basically showing how you can be a powerful guy on the Rules Committee.<sup>3</sup> And in Washington that makes you almost like an emperor, if you're

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<sup>1</sup> Richard E. Neal (1949- ), a Democrat, has represented Massachusetts' Second Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives since 1989.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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

on the Rules Committee. And he was ranking—when I first met him he was acting chairman of the Rules Committee, then later he was the top Democrat on the Rules Committee. But he was just as interested in what people in South Boston were saying, or people back in the projects, or people he grew up with.

To me it showed how you have to really walk with prime ministers and kings, but also remember how you can walk through your neighborhood and talk to the local people. So, I just found him a great guy. No pretense whatsoever. Either a very good or very deadly sense of humor, depending on how he felt toward you. Fortunately, I never picked up too much of the deadly part, but I saw some others who were victims of that. So, he was a great guy.

**McETTRICK:** Now was he able to maintain rapport and decent relationships with members of the Republican Party? You probably would observe, especially today there seems to be a lot of tension between the parties. How did Joe react when it was Democrat or Republican?

**KING:** Joe was very upset by the partisan divisions that interfered with personal relationships. He in fact—he even had some problems with people in his own party who he thought were becoming too partisan. But he maintained very good relations with, obviously, most Democrats. But also a number of the old timers in the Republican Party, and also some of the younger people, the newer people who didn't want to get caught up in the partisanship. And he was great. Every time on the floor, Joe used to sit in that first row off on the left side there, and you just sit down next to him and get him going. And he would again be telling stories, but also pointing out mistakes he thought people were making. If some Republican made a good speech, he'd say, "I don't agree with a word that guy said, but he was good." He knew what he was talking about. He was able to project that.

And I've seen him do favors for the most conservative Republicans who were good guys in Joe's mind. People who had a valid core, somebody trying to get a constituent into a college in Massachusetts, and they were having a hard time. They'd come to Joe, plead their case, and he'd

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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.

get on the phone with the dean or the president, and somehow those kids seemed to make their way into the college.

**McETTRICK:** You spoke of Irish issues. Were those immigration issues or governments in Ireland? What were you working with Congressman Neal—?

**KING:** Oh, this was the whole Irish peace process. Northern Ireland and President [William J.] Clinton. And that's when the IRA [Irish Republican Army] called a cease fire. And then you had both the Catholics and Protestants from Northern Ireland come to the U.S. In many ways, the U.S.— these people couldn't talk back in Ireland because of centuries of hostility, but they're able to find common ground here in the U.S.

And Joe was an important part of that. His door was always open. And that's how I again met him through Richie Neal, Joe was involved in that. But again, my relationship with Joe ended up going far beyond that. I mean, it was only a few times—I went to dinner with him, which would be great. My rule when I went to dinner with Joe Moakley is say a few words at the beginning and then shut up for the next two or three hours and let him talk.

**McETTRICK:** Now Joe is from South Boston, and many of us are from the Boston area, and so we're familiar with Irish history, Irish American issues as well. What was Joe's approach or attitude toward the modern day politics in Ireland? Did he have much to say about that? How did he feel about some of the issues that we were dealing with?

**KING:** He was very concerned about the violence. He really wanted to find a way to end that. He thought it made no sense at all, at the end of the twentieth century, for people to be fighting over issues which he thought, looking at it from the outside, should be resolved. And so he wanted the U.S. to be a forum for that. If they could use us as an outlet for some of their anger, some of their tensions, and then find a way forward, Joe was all for that. Even though he was of Irish descent, even though he was Catholic, and he did feel that Catholics were getting their rights violated in Northern Ireland, he wanted both sides protected. He didn't want to substitute

Catholics being oppressed with Protestants being oppressed. Whatever the new solution was, he wanted to make sure that both sides were protected. That was basically his attitude.

**McETRICK:** So, how did you get into that issue? You represented a portion of Long Island. Was it your constituents that were involved in that? How did you get into those Irish issues yourself?

**KING:** A lot of it was personal. All my grandparents were from Ireland. I had grand uncles who were involved in the uprising back in 1916. And I'd gotten to know a lot of people in Northern Ireland who were involved in the struggle, on both sides, Catholics and Protestants.

When I come down here in 1992, probably the leading person in the House of Representatives was Richie Neal. So, I sort of attached myself to Richie and we worked together. But Richie would also always be saying, "In the end we can't get anything done without Moakley. You've got to make sure Moakley's involved," that type thing. Because Joe, especially when the Democrats were in control, he had direct access to the democratic leadership. Then even when the Republicans took over, Joe was really held in the highest regard.

I remember the first—I guess it was when President [George W.] Bush first came before the Congress to speak, after he was elected president; Joe had just been diagnosed with his terminal illness. But President Bush singled Joe out and mentioned him, spoke about him. Again, it was roaring ovation on both sides.

**McETRICK:** We saw that when you were looking at some of the research on yourself, that you had an interest in health issues, cancer issues for women. But also we saw that you'd been involved with Ed Markey<sup>4</sup> from Massachusetts on the Cigarette Safety Bill.<sup>5</sup> And I think that

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<sup>4</sup> Edward J. Markey (1946- ), a Democrat, has represented Massachusetts' Seventh Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives since 1976.

<sup>5</sup> After a family in his district died in a fire that was caused by a cigarette, Congressman Moakley obtained passage of the Cigarette Safety Act of 1984, which established Congressional committees to determine if a fire-safe cigarette was technically feasible, and the Fire-Safe Cigarette Act of 1990, which required the government to develop a test to assess how "fire-safe" a cigarette was. As of 2008, there was still no federal law mandating fire-safe cigarettes, but sixteen states, including Massachusetts, have regulations in place.

Joe Moakley had something of a history with that issue as well. Could you tell us about tobacco issues, your involvement, and did Joe get into any of those concerns?

**KING:** Yeah, Joe did—speaking to me about it. And that’s one of the reasons Ed Markey came to me. This was basically, in many ways, like a legacy of Joe Moakley. Joe felt very strongly about this issue. I certainly felt strongly about it. I felt strongly about the issue, but also I had the personal attachment because I knew how strongly Joe Moakley felt about it. And so when Ed Markey came to me I was more than delighted to work with him on it.

Also, if I can go back to a point you made before—and I’m not trying to make the comparison at all. We were talking about Catholics and Protestants. Joe Moakley would sometimes kid, that even though he was known as this Irish guy from South Boston, his mother was Italian. And he used to say, “Listen, if I can make it,” and he’d call it “with Gaelic and garlic;” he said, “Certainly, you know, people should be able to get along around the rest of the world.” So he in his own—again, we’re dating ourselves a bit talking about the differences with Irish and Italians. But going back to certainly the days with Joe’s mother and father, that would have been a pretty unusual marriage to have back in those days. So, he used to kid about that. That if he could survive that, then he could survive anything.

**McETTRICK:** So what was the politics of the cigarette issue? Joe carried the bill I guess for a number of years, but it didn’t meet with too much success. And then I guess finally things started to happen with the issue. How is that going now? I mean, is there people for it or against that? What are the concerns of getting something like that through?

**KING:** Well, suing tobacco companies, they resist it; they feel it’s extra cost it’s going to put on them. We’re making progress. And then a number of states are adopting it anyway. But as far as politics, politics in the narrow sense was never part of it for Joe Moakley. I don’t think he would have picked up—he was so popular anyway, he wouldn’t have picked up—if anything he probably would have lost votes on it. Because anyone who was going to vote for Joe, was already going to vote for him. So all he could do was build up some opposition by being for this.

So I don't think he ever thought of it in the partisan sense. He just looked upon it as a health and safety issue, and the right thing to do, which was the way he was on an awful lot of issues.

**McETRICK:** One job that we have at the Moakley Archive and this oral history project is to develop knowledge of Joe Moakley's legacy, and to try to transmit that to people who are coming along who might be interested in public service. And since you've had a chance to observe Joe very closely, what would you describe as his legacy? What messages there in his career for people who are coming along? Is there advice that you would give people based on Joe as a model? What would you say to them yourself?

**KING:** Well, I mean, Joe was an effective legislator. He, obviously, fought for principles of the Democratic Party, a number of which I would disagree with. But that's neither here nor there. He had principles, he fought for them, and he stood by them. But more than that, I think if there's any legacy of Joe Moakley—and that's why I think having an oral history is important—because I don't know if it comes across on paper or black and white, is the spirit the guy had. He did not take himself seriously. And that is so unusual down here in Washington. He's a guy who could laugh at himself, who wanted to get the job done, who was willing to reach out.

I use the example, when the federal courthouse in Boston was named after Joe Moakley, and we had one or two hours of speeches on the House floor when all his friends got up and said good things about him—what always happens at a time like that, if the person is still alive, he sits there on the House floor and he takes it in and he nods approvingly. Joe Moakley hid in his office. We didn't see him the whole time. He stayed in his office with the door closed, because he couldn't handle getting all those compliments. He felt very insecure about it.

And when he'd come over, he said, "The only reason you're saying those good things, in case you guys get caught before the grand jury, I'll give you a break in the courthouse," or something like that. I mean, he really felt very—one way to keep Joe Moakley quiet was to say something good about him.



But there's a more serious point there. For democracy to work there has to be a harmony across party lines where you can accept your defeat and you can realize that life goes on, and you're going to find another issue to agree with somebody on. That is what Joe Moakley did. He really brought a sense of comedy, a sense of decency. And it's easy to say, and everyone says that in politics, very few people live it out, and he really did.

And I couldn't think of any issue that I would hesitate—if I needed a favor on, if I felt strongly about it, and going to Joe, and say, “Joe, could you help me on this?” If he had a real principled objection, he'd say, “I'd like to but I can't.” But if not he would do anything he could for you. He'd do that for anybody else that he felt was dealing fairly, not just with him, but with the institution. And so that really is important. And maybe one hundred years ago it wouldn't have been that important, because maybe most people going into politics, or going into Congress, felt that way. Today it's really a dying breed. And the hostility and the thirty-second sound bites, people getting themselves styled so they look exactly the right way, say exactly the right thing for their own narrow constituents, and the hell with everybody else—that was not Joe Moakley's style. He really transcended all of that. And that to me should really be his legacy. Definitely his legacy.

**McETTRICK:** Why does that happen to us? Why had there been the changes that you're describing? And could a Joe Moakley just starting up today survive, do you think, in this environment?

**KING:** It would be tougher. To me Joe Moakley is the type of guy who could survive in any environment. But, having said that, it would be a lot tougher. But if we had more guys like Joe Moakley around, it would make it easier for others to come along who are from the neighborhoods who didn't become so self-important when they got to Washington, and didn't lose touch with people. And also realize that you can have honest differences with someone, and go out that night and have a drink with them.

(pause)

**McETTRICK:** I appreciate you coming. Was there any other point that you wanted to make? You said quite a bit, but—

**KING:** Maybe it's sort of a repetition of what I said, but in a way I would ask Joe various times his impressions of famous people that he had met, like John Kennedy, obviously, Tip O'Neill, people like that, people of historic stature. And he would tell stories, but in every story Joe was always like the butt of his own joke. I mean, he never would say, "And Tip O'Neill came to me and said, 'Joe, what do you do?' John Kennedy<sup>6</sup> came to me and said, 'What do you do?' Ted Kennedy<sup>7</sup> came to me—." He would tell you, I mean great insights into the person. But then somehow near the end of it he would always make it out that he just happened to be the Irish guy standing there when all this happened.

He couldn't bear to tell a story where he was the guy who really got it done, but you knew that he did. But he was very uncomfortable talking about himself. But he had great insights into other people. He was very good with taking shots at people he thought had become pompous or self-righteous, people who considered themselves to be holier than thou, or more honest than the next guy. Joe felt if you thought you were more honest than somebody else that meant you were dishonest.

**McETTRICK:** Well, Congressman, thank you very much. I know you're putting in a tough day, but we appreciate it, and the Archive staff appreciates it.

**KING:** It was my pleasure, it really was. Thank you very much.

**END OF INTERVIEW**

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<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Moore "Ted" Kennedy (1932- ), a Democrat, has represented Massachusetts in the United States Senate since 1961.