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Joseph F. Leahy
Date Sept. 6, 1972

Archivist of the United States
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Oral History Interview

with

JOSEPH F. LEAHY

June 18, 1964

By Ed Martin

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MARTIN: The following interview is with Joseph F. Leahy, Somerville, Massachusetts, a former representative from that city and also a former school committee member. Joe, can you tell me how much you remember of your first contact with any member of the Kennedy family, who it was and what were the circumstances?

LEAHY: The first contact of the Kennedy family was through a cousin of mine at Boston College by the name of Joe Minnehan, who knew Joe Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.], who later died.

MARTIN: This was Joe Kennedy, Jr.?

LEAHY: This was Joe Kennedy, Jr. and this was in 1928 or ’30 or ’35.

MARTIN: It would be sometime in the mid-thirties, I should….

LEAHY: In the mid-thirties.

MARTIN: You got to know him fairly well or was it just a casual meeting?

LEAHY: Just a casual meeting. Yes.
MARTIN: Well, then later, what were your circumstances at that time? Were you working in Boston?

LEAHY: My circumstances at that time were I was working at the Boston Naval Shipyard, in Charlestown. I was also

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a former secretary to the former Governor’s counselor, James A. Brennan [James H. Brennan] of Charlestown, who ran in the Eleventh Congressional District for Congress on four or five occasions and I knew that district pretty well.

MARTIN: Well, the Eleventh Congressional District, Joe, took in not only Charlestown and East Boston but also went around through Somerville and the town of Brighton, too, was it?

LEAHY: Ward 1 and 2 in Cambridge and also Ward 1 in Somerville.

MARTIN: Who was congressman at that time? Higgins [John P. Higgins]?

LEAHY: The honorable John P. Higgins, who later became Chief Justice. And through my work in the Navy yard I worked with the chief planner and estimator of the Boston Navy Yard by the name of William Cummings, Bill Cummings from East Boston, who was friendly with Joe Kane [Joseph Kane], a relative of the deceased President. And they asked me, at that time, if I wouldn’t help them in the campaign for Congress.

MARTIN: Now you are speaking of 1946, aren’t you?

LEAHY: I’m speaking of 1946. Yes.

MARTIN: Then this was prior to his announcement probably. Yes? Before he announced?

LEAHY: Before he announced. Yes. Maybe a year before his announcement. He was sounding out the different people he knew and the different contacts that he had. This was, oh, in 1945.

MARTIN: Joe, would you say that you were the first contact that they had in the Somerville area?

LEAHY: Yes. Definitely.

MARTIN: Yes. And when they were asking your opinion about young Jack running for Congress, what was your opinion at that time?
LEAHY: Well, my opinion at that time, knowing the people who were willing to help him in his campaign, I decided they were outstanding people like Bill Cummings, Joe Kane, Jimmy Kelley [James Kelley], and some other fellows that I decided that he was a good enough candidate for me. Although, as

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it turned out, the man he was running against was a personal friend of mine. Mike Neville [Michael J. Neville] of Cambridge, but I had already pledged myself that I would help John F. Kennedy in his campaign.

MARTIN: Well, Joe, you had a long interest in political life and later ran for the house, but even before that, back in this era, you were familiar with political life around that district. How could you compensate for a guy like Jack Kennedy, completely untried, coming into an area like that, not well-known, and going to take on such pros as a guy like Mike Neville? I mean did you think he had a good shot at it, or….

LEAHY: No, as I say, going through the district in the past with Jim Brennan, the former Governor’s counselor, I had seen Brennan defeated by newcomers and new faces, and I knew that the district could be taken by a new face, that the old pros were ready to be counted out. So, when Kennedy, the family came from East Boston, naturally, it was no problem for me at all to decide that he would be a good candidate.

He was young. He was aggressive. He was easy to handle. He was easy to talk to. He wanted to meet as many people as he possibly could. There was no high and mighty attitude. One instance I recall very well. We were going up Bunker Hill Street one day and there was a stalled automobile and we were in a car.

And Kennedy said, “Let’s help this fellow with his automobile.” So we pushed the car and got the fellow started. The fellow went on a little farther and he said, “Gee, thanks a lot, fellows!”

And I said, “You know who this is? This is the next congressman from the district, Jack Kennedy!”

The fellow got a real kick out of it, so we made a vote there. But that was the type of fellow he was—very easy to handle, very easy to meet. And he had no problems, and he’d go anywhere.

MARTIN: Joe, as they started organizing for a campaign like that, they’d go into each section of that district like Charlestown or the North End and pick out some key people or some people who they could depend on, and bring them into the overall organization. Now they apparently went into Somerville in the same fashion. Now who did they pick and why did they pick these people?
LEAHY: Well, speaking of Somerville, at that time in the district there was only one ward in Somerville. They picked me to handle Ward 1 in Somerville, I remember specifically one day, Billy Sutton [William J. Sutton], myself, and Jimmy Kelley starting on a Saturday morning and going around to different places and I said to the candidate, “Well, Jack, where do you want to go and who do you want to meet? Anybody in particular?” He said, “I want to meet everybody that I possibly can.” With the result that I took him into the Olympic Club in Somerville and they were glad to see him. As a matter of fact, they made it their Ward 1 headquarters for him afterwards. I took him into the Cozy Grill, which is a restaurant and bar, and Jack sat down at one of the benches and called a lot of the fellows around him and told them that he was running for Congress and would everybody have a drink. And they said, naturally, that they’d have a drink, but the funny part of it was that he didn’t have any money and he asked me to pay for the drinks. It only came to a dollar and sixty something because they were all beer drinkers. That actually happened.

MARTIN: Joe, what was the Olympic Club?

LEAHY: The Olympic Club is the oldest social club in the city of Somerville. It’s been there for over eighty years. Prominent men like Dr. Whittaker, the dentist, who is still out in Somerville, former Tufts alumnus, and Lyman Hodgen, a ranking Republican in the city. And they’ve been there, I guess, for over eighty years.

Kennedy, at the time, wanted to meet Republicans and Democrats alike. I took him into a school committeewoman’s house, by the name of Mary Whaley and she was glad to know that he was running. It turned out that she was a friend of Mike Neville’s also, but she was with Kennedy all the way because she felt as though they needed a new face.

MARTIN: Joe, how many of the Somerville people who worked for Kennedy in that first congressional fight can you remember? What are some of their names?

LEAHY: The names of the people who actually worked during the campaign?

MARTIN: Some of them that worked for him over there.

LEAHY: Ted Cheriak, that’s a French name. As a matter of fact we had a headquarters right over this Cozy Grill that I speak of, and a big Kennedy sign, and I opened up a little office there as Ward 1 Kennedy headquarters. Then we had Tony Langone [Anthony Langone], Arthur Cheriak, Mike Langone. Of course you must realize that in this particular area in Somerville the Langone family has about eighty votes in the family. So I got most of those myself, when I was running. Jack was happy to meet the Langones.
As a matter of fact, when Tony Langone was going to get married they gave him a bachelor dinner and I told Kennedy about it. He said, “Well, I want to certainly be there—with that Langone family.”

MARTIN:  Did he go?
LEAHY:  Oh, yes. He was there and made a speech. Yes. I’d like to have you talk with those Langones some day. They are still around there. And fellows like Joe Thornton, who later became one of his speech writers, and made speeches for him in different parts of the congressional district.

MARTIN:  Was he a school teacher at the time?
LEAHY:  He was an assistant principal at the time and today he is a school principal. He was a former intelligence man in the Army, a great orator, and Kennedy used him a lot not only during his first congressional campaign, but also in his Senate campaign. When Jack ran for the Senate he used Joe Thornton. I have to emphasize the fact, too, that Joe Thornton was also a personal friend of Mike Neville’s.

MARTIN:  So quite a few of these people, who normally would have supported Mike Neville, were attracted to young Jack Kennedy. Did they hear from Mike Neville at all? I mean was…
LEAHY:  Yes. Mike Neville called me. He met me personally and told me what he thought of me in no uncertain terms. I said that I was sorry. That I didn’t realize that I was going anything to hurt him because the people that Kennedy had with him were also personal friends of mine and they had come to me and asked me if I wouldn’t actively work in the campaign and I had promised them that I would. I couldn’t very well go back on that.

MARTIN:  Joe, during the campaign throughout the entire district, how often did he come into Somerville and what were some of the occasions for his visits there?
LEAHY:  Well, as I related before, the Tony Langone bachelor dinner. A thing like that he’d always show up. A carnival down at Foss Park in Somerville; he’d show up at that. He’d come into Somerville at least once or twice a month at least, now maybe three times a month. I can’t recall the exact number of times but it was many times he’d come into Somerville.
MARTIN: Well, were there house parties in those days?

LEAHY: Oh, yes. They had house parties around the different sections. Some of the names I can’t remember. Some of them are deceased now. My own house, of course. I can’t name the company now. My mother’s house at Browning Road. Another family by the name of Collins. I know there were numerous house parties.

MARTIN: How were these house parties run, Joe? Would the host or hostess, the home owner, call the neighbors in and….

LEAHY: Call the neighbors in. Even if there were five or six or it wouldn’t make any difference, even if there were seven or eight, they’d call the neighbors in and Kennedy would show up. It didn’t make any difference. Kennedy would be there at these parties.

MARTIN: And they’d serve cookies and ice cream.

LEAHY: Coffee and cookies.

MARTIN: And they’d give them a little pitch about his campaign and his candidacy?

LEAHY: Oh, yes. Why he was running and what he was going to do for the district and why he was the candidate.

MARTIN: And this was the style, Joe. Did he run a different sort of campaign than the so-called pro, or the style that used to exist in Boston?

LEAHY: No, it was altogether different. At that time even I, myself, said to him many times, “Why don’t you go someplace? You’re a Harvard [Harvard University] graduate, but sometimes when you talk and speak you don’t sound as though you’re going to say anything.” I said, “You ought to go around to the ‘Stanley College of the Spoken Word’ where Curley [James Michael Curley] went.”

But he was only a young man, at that time, and he was nervous, but he was also attractive with that three-inch Kennedy smile and that’s what won him over to many people and it wasn’t the way he talked.

MARTIN: He certainly could draw the women in.

LEAHY: Oh, yes. All the girls went for him a mile a minute, I might say.
MARTIN: Joe, the primary out here was on June 18 so if he announced sometime around the first of January that year, he didn’t have much time for campaigning. Did he….

LEAHY: You mean active campaigning?

MARTIN: Active campaigning.

LEAHY: Active campaigning. Don’t forget, he was campaigning long, long before he announced. He started out, don’t forget, as I said…I went with him early in 1945. Because I ran for the school board in Somerville in ’45 and he was campaigning then. So it wasn’t a case of him announcing and then campaigning. He was campaigning long before he announced.

MARTIN: Well, what would be…

LEAHY: Or, at least, making contacts. Let me put it that way.

MARTIN: Joe, when he campaigned, did he go, too, to areas where there were large crowds and that sort of thing? Handshaking visits? And did he walk up and down the streets?

LEAHY: Oh, yes. He walked up and down. I remember starting in Bunker Hill Street one day in Charlestown with him and walking up the street and meeting people and shaking hands; and in Somerville. Also his walking along Broadway and meeting people and shaking hands and telling people who he was and what he was running for.

MARTIN: Did they ever have these rallies where they would take over a school hall and have a sort of candidates night in that particular campaign?

LEAHY: Well, they did in Boston. We didn’t so much in Somerville because in the district of Somerville, there’s really only two halls you can go to. The old Circle Ballroom and what they call Newcomb Hall which is an apartment house; and he’d go to those places.

But his method of campaigning was—as I have read, and in many places it is true; it is very true—his method of campaigning was house-to-house, upstairs, downstairs, no matter where it was. It wasn’t so much the crowd as it was meeting the people personally and shaking hands with them and letting them know who he was. And never once, and he was a tireless campaigner in that respect, so much so that we’d be half dead and

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he’d want to know where he was going next.
MARTIN: Joe, in the course of his visits over to Somerville, did he ever seek out any of the city officials, representatives from the area and enlist their support?

LEAHY: Oh, yes. He wanted to meet all of the elected officials. This Mary Whaley that I spoke of before who was on the school board. As a matter of fact, I defeated her that year, the year that I introduced Kennedy to her. [Laughter]

Also, I was the first one to introduce him to John M. Lynch who was then mayor of the city of Somerville. And the day sticks out in my mind very well on account of circumstances surrounding it. Billy Sutton, Kennedy and myself went up to Lynch’s house on a Saturday morning unannounced. I knew that he’d be home because Lynch was a personal friend of mine and I was a Lynch man in Somerville. We went and rang the bill and I introduced Kennedy to Lynch and Jack said to me, “Joe, why don’t you and Billy wait outside? As long as I’ve met the major, we’ll go inside.” And I said to him at the time, “Well, I’ll see you over to my mother’s house. Let me know how you make out.”

Along about half an hour after that, my mother lived across the street from Lynch at the time, and the next thing we knew, Jack came over. I said, “Well, how did you do?” He said, “I didn’t do very good.” He said, “He called me a carpet-bagger [carpet-bagger]: that I shouldn’t even be running in the district, and that he was with Mike Neville.” And he thought that I had a hell of a nerve bringing him to his house.

So Jack said to me, “I don’t know if you’re in trouble too, Joe, or not.”

But as luck would have it, Lynch didn’t happen to vote in the district, so it didn’t make too much difference. [Laughter]

MARTIN: Well, later on this same Pat Lynch [John M. Lynch] became a close friend of Jack Kennedy’s, didn’t he?

LEAHY: That’s right. I was later on elected to the legislature. In the intervening years, when Kennedy ran for reelection for Congress and he had practically no opposition on account of the job he had done in Washington and what he had done for the district, we patched up, if you can call it that, many, many heartaches and personalities that existed at that particular time when Kennedy, a newcomer, went into the district. So that it wasn’t hard to meet Kennedy after that, although Lynch didn’t become fully acquainted with Kennedy. It was Paul McCarthy, who was a former representative out in Somerville, who served with me in the house, and Harold Palmer,

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another former rep, who said, “Listen, Pat, this guy’s going places and it looks like Neville won’t run any more.” And that happened; that actually happened. From then on I guess the thing was pretty well straightened out as far as personalities were concerned.
And the next thing I knew, Lynch called me one day and told me he had a call from Kennedy in Washington one time and how would he like to be state chairman. I said, “What, after you calling him a carpet bagger? And he wants you to become state chairman.”

Anyway, Lynch became state chairman. And after that they were very loyal and Lynch was loyal to him. Of course, Lynch was a loyal Democrat anyway.

MARTIN: And after his long tenure as state chairman, Joe, I think he became collector of the port.


MARTIN: Well, going back again, Joe, to the beginnings of that campaign. Did you have occasion to work outside of Somerville or come into Boston in connection with the campaign?

LEAHY: Oh, yes. I was with Kennedy. Of course I worked in the Navy Yard at the time, and then, being on the school board, but every night I’d be out with him and Jimmy Kelley or Billy Sutton or Patsy Mulkern [Patrick J. Mulkern] and Joe Kane and Bill Cummings. I remember going to the Michelangelo School in the North End and we had to break through a crowd to get him in there, he was so well received.

Oh, yes, we’d go every night, as far as it was physically possible. Of course, in those days, he’d ruin the average fellow going around.

MARTIN: Well, where was he living at the time?

LEAHY: He was living in the Bellevue.

MARTIN: What? Did he have a room there?

LEAHY: Yes, he had a room there underneath his grandfather’s John F. Fitzgerald [John Francis Fitzgerald].

MARTIN: Well, did you often go up to the room?

LEAHY: Oh, yes. We’d go up to the room and have pep talks from him and discuss the previous day’s events and different people would be coming in of course. Once the campaign got rolling there were so many people. I didn’t know who most of them were, but they’d keep coming and going back and forth.

I think I’ll tell you a little story, Ed. I’m reminded of Calvin Coolidge when he was on the Mayflower when he was President he invited all the newsmen out there to have a
drink and they were cruising around the Potomac River and Cal said to the porter, “Give the boys a drink.” So the porter went to one of the drawers in the cabin there and brought out a pint of liquor for about twenty or thirty newsmen. So it reminded me of that story. One night somebody said, “Hey, your father owns all the ‘pinch’ bottles in the world. Do you ever give out a drink?” He said, “Sure.”

So Kennedy reached in the closet and brought out a “pinch” bottle of Scotch; it was half full. So I made the crack then. I said, “You’re going to be President the United States someday, because Calvin Coolidge did the same thing with some newsmen when he was on the Mayflower.” [Laughter]

MARTIN: Later on, Joe, he moved over to 122 Bowdoin Street.

LEAHY: Yes. That’s right.

MARTIN: So that you had occasion to go up there. But, getting back a minute to some of these sessions at the Bellevue, did any of the family, outside of the grandfather, John F. Fitzgerald, ever participate in this first congressional fight? Did they ever come into the Bellevue?

LEAHY: No. I don’t ever recall any of them in 1946. I’d like to add, I left out about a girl who was a former representative or something, Catherine Falvey, who had taken out papers to run against Jack in that first fight. It was in the first fight, as I recall, and I think that was one of the main reasons that he was so interested in Somerville in letting people know who he really was, because this Catherine Falvey was a very aggressive campaigner. And she’d been in the legislature and had a wonderful war record. She was a WAC [Women’s Army Corps], a captain of the WACs, and she was well thought of in the district.

And I thought I’d bring that up because they used to say…He said to me at one time—this was in the Bellevue—“What about this Catharine Falvey?” And I told him that I thought she was a very aggressive candidate. And those are the things we talked about.

MARTIN: Did you have any associations at all with his father [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] at that time?

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LEAHY: No, the only associations I had with his father was when he dedicated the Joe Kennedy Post out in….I think it was on Commonwealth Avenue they dedicated it, they started, at any rate. The father was there for the dedication. I drove his father to the airport from there. He had to get away and Jack asked me if I’d take him to the airport while he stayed there, you know, for the regular exercises.

And then you’d see him every once in a while, but you didn’t have much to say to him because he was the boss.
MARTIN: How well did you know Joe Kane and what did he do there?

LEAHY: Oh, Joe Kane. Joe Kane was formerly Peter Tague’s [Peter F. Tague] secretary, a former congressman, well known in Boston and well known in Washington a few years ago and a great political astronomist, if I can call him that. He could visualize a campaign like nobody’s business. We’d sit every night and Kane would be there and Bill Cummings and myself and Billy Sutton, Jimmy Kelley and different fellows—Dave Powers [David F. Powers]. Dave Powers came into the campaign shortly after Kennedy had announced. And Kennedy picked Dave Powers as the man to take him through Charlestown. The past records of history will tell you what he did. But Joe Kane was always the adviser and pulled no punches. He’d tell Kennedy when he was wrong or when he was right, and when he thought he was wrong, and how to handle a section of Boston, whatever it would be—the Italian section, the Irish section—tell him what can I talk about besides what I do know about the district. And Kane would advise him about that. Kane was more or less of a political adviser, and a good one, if I do say.

MARTIN: Joe, after his election to Congress, did you have any occasion to go back and forth to Washington to see him down there? Meanwhile, you are now a member of the school board in Somerville? You won election that year at the same time that he won his congressional spot?

LEAHY: That’s right. And then I was elected to the house in ’49.

MARTIN: And you used to go down to Washington to see him?

LEAHY: Oh, yes. Quite often.

MARTIN: Could you remember some of them, those visits and what they were about?

MARTIN: Margaret Ambrose?

LEAHY: Margaret Ambrose. Yes. And we’d go down and he’d invite us to supper at his house and many a good steak I had there and a piece of Margaret’s famous apple pie. And we’d spend many pleasant evenings talking about Boston and the going-ons up here. Yes. I went there many times.

MARTIN: Billy Sutton said he liked good food.
LEAHY: Oh, yes, but he wasn’t a heavy eater. But what there was of it, was very good.

MARTIN: Well, these visits were generally then, pretty, purely social?

LEAHY: Most social and informal and mostly he’d, I and Billy, ask all kinds of questions about what was going on in Boston although he knew, but he wanted your version of it—what you really knew about what was really going on. I was in the legislature at that time.

MARTIN: Yes.

LEAHY: So he was more or less on that too.

MARTIN: Well, he also had a Boston office, Joe. Can you recall whether or not it was busy at the time or was it just normally?

LEAHY: Oh, no, it was busy all the time. Frank Morrissey [Frank X. Morrissey] was his chief secretary in Boston and Congressman Higgins’ former secretary, Miss Burke [Grace M. Burke].

MARTIN: Grace Burke.

LEAHY: Yes. Grace Burke. Yes, the office was busy and I’d go down there a couple of times a week and the office was always full of people and requests were being made of Morrissey time and time again.

MARTIN: Yes.

LEAHY: The office was full of people.

MARTIN: Now as he moved along as a congressman, he made frequent trips around the country, Joe.

LEAHY: Yes.

MARTIN: Also, he’d be back here and he started accepting engagements from all over the state—sort of a prelude to running for a state-wide job. But I understand that he was undecided about what to run for. Do you recall about that time?
LEAHY: I certainly do. In 1951, I think it was, I was in the legislature at the time and Dever [Paul A. Dever] was Governor. And everybody was prevailing on Kennedy to run for governor against Dever. And one day he called me over to 122 Bowdoin Street and I went in and he asked my opinion.

And I told him that I thought he could win because I was more or less prejudiced with his activities and I thought he could beat Dever. Not only that, but I told him that if he did beat Dever….Let me put it this way, he was undecided whether to run for governor or the United States Senate. And, as I said, I was pro Kennedy because I knew how he campaigned. He wasn’t lazy and I knew he could win any office that he ran for, with the aggressive campaign that he put on.

So he asked me what I thought about running for governor, and I told him that he could win. But I said if he did win that that would be the end of the rope for him because not only, and this includes myself, going to the governor’s office, asking for requests, he wouldn’t be able to fulfill them, and not only that, but after they were through not getting what they wanted, they’d go after his personal fortune. Those are the exact words I used and I said, “You are better off running for the United States Senate because I figure you can beat Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge].” And he said, “I think so, myself.”

As a matter of fact this was in his bathroom when he was shaving one day and Frank Morrissey was outside in the other room. And Frank Morrissey thought I was wrong. And I said, “I don’t think so.” I said, “I think you can win the Senate place against Lodge,” because I thought that the Kennedy name was as powerful as Lodge’s. And the results proved that it was.

I’d like to say right now, Eddie, that all these fights that he was ever in, even the presidential fight as you well know and history tells us, these were all tough fights. He had no easy road to travel. That goes not only for the congressional fights, but also for the Senate fight and also the presidency. He won these things by hard work and perseverance. It wasn’t because it was Jack Kennedy, or the Kennedy name. I agree that helped to a certain extent, but if he had laid back

and relied on the Kennedy name, I don’t think the results would have been what they were, because he was a hard, hard worker and a real campaigner.

MARTIN: Joe, what role did you play in that Senate fight? Did you play an active role when he was running for the Senate?

LEAHY: Oh, yes. Just the same as all the others in making different contacts among all my friends and people that I knew. I, at the particular time, couldn’t run around the state with him. I didn’t have the wherewithal, but the few places that I did go that were local I went with him, and many times.

MARTIN: Was that the campaign that began the famous “coffees”? 

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LEAHY: The coffees. That’s right. When that happened, of course, fellows like myself just felt that we had done our work and we didn’t want to intrude on any of those things, and that was it. And they got on to a high plane.

I remember one time when he invited us down to Hyannis Port, the whole legislature, as a matter of fact. And Paul Feeney [Michael Paul Feeney], who is now in the legislature, and I….He called Paul and I into the little sun parlor off the main house and was having his breakfast and he asked us to have breakfast with him. And that was the start of the Senate fight when he asked Paul Feeney—who in my opinion is one of the greatest, I won’t say politicians, but practical men that I know of….I remember sitting there and Paul giving him his advice.

It was not work all the time. You asked questions and answered questions and then, of course, I played in a few of those touch football games down there in Hyannis Port. And Ted [Edward M. Kennedy] was a young fellow and is now the present Senator. I don’t suppose that Ted would recall me. And Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] used to be around in those days.

But then when the thing got on a high plane—the coffees—they let the women handle that problem. We were the grassroot fellows, as they say.

MARTIN: Patsy Mulkern said that the coffee, the Kennedy type of thing, was primarily for what he called the flapper set, the flappers. [Laughter]

LEAHY: That’s what he used. Well, he could….I think, Eddie…. 

MARTIN: Now, Joe, the campaign for reelection was against a

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Vincent J. Celeste. That wasn’t too much of a contest, was it? But he had a purpose in mind in trying to get a big vote. Do you recall what that was?

LEAHY: What?

MARTIN: His purpose in wanting to get a big turn out and vote in that campaign.

LEAHY: Yes. The way I analyzed that was…Of course, Celeste deserves a lot of credit for the courage in taking on a man who had defeated Henry Cabot Lodge. And it took a lot of courage and Kennedy welcomed it. While he didn’t minimize Celeste’s ability—he knew that he was a young man, an aggressive man, and an educated man—while he didn’t underrate him, he thought that somebody stronger should be in there so that he could roll up this tremendous vote that he got, and that’s why he wanted him in there.

I’d like to go back to one of these anecdotes that you may get a kick out of. You asked me about the visits down in Washington. I haven’t said anything about this before, but
I used to make up campaign songs for Kennedy and on several occasions I’d sing the campaign song before he’d speak. There was one song that he loved in particular; it was “Danny Boy.” One time I was in Washington and he came out of his office and Mrs. Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln] and some of the girls there said, “Senator, ask Joe to sing ‘Danny Boy’ for the girls.” With the result that I sang “Danny Boy.” And across from his office in the Senate was Vice President Nixon’s [Richard M. Nixon] office. So, when I started to sing “Danny Boy”—it is a ranging song and I hit a few high notes, from across the hall came Vice President—and it was Vice President at the time—Nixon, and wanted to know what the hell was going on in Kennedy’s office.

The President said, “Did you ever hear anybody sing like that before?” And the Vice President said no, he never did. But that was how Kennedy was. With all the tremendous work that he did, he always had time for relaxation of some sort.

MARTIN: So he had a great love of Irish music. It was quite evident, even as President, that he had Irish folk song albums. I know he apparently liked “Danny Boy” a lot. What were some of the other Irish tunes that were favorite of his?

LEAHY: Oh, he used to love “Macushla” and “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling” and “Killarney” and songs like that. And one of his great favorites, as a matter of fact Sander Vanocur, one of the reporters down in Washington sang it one of the times I was down there, one of the times when he was President. I guess Sander was quite a singer. He asked me, “Well, what does the President really like?” I said, “Well, there’s one song that he always loved.” Now I can’t think of that. It was “Let the Rest of the World Go By.” And he thought there was no other song like that, along with the Irish songs that he always loved.

And he used to try to sing a song himself but he was a better speaker than he was a singer because he couldn’t carry a note. [Laughter]

MARTIN: There was another occasion when he sang “Danny Boy” and that was on a highlight of his career down in Washington.

LEAHY: Oh, yes, the day he was inaugurated, the day of that severe snow storm down in Washington. I was standing with a group of many thousand people outside the Armory when he and Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline B. Kennedy Onassis] and his brothers Bobby and Ted came out of the Armory. And there were several big spotlights there and he happened to see me as he was getting into his limousine and he called me over to his car. And as I started to run over to the car, all the police there grabbed me, and they didn’t know what had happened but he had beckoned to me to go over to the car. So he hollered to the Secret Service men, “Oh, he’s all right.” With the result that I stuck my head in the car and he said, “Joe, give us one bar of ‘Danny Boy’ for Jackie.” And, if Mrs. Kennedy recalls, she remembers that night very well, because we held up the whole
procession and they were wondering what it was. And when I got back to the crowd, everybody wanted to shake my hand and they said, “What did he say to you?” I said, “He didn’t say anything. I just sang ‘Danny Boy’ to him.” And that was the night he was inaugurated and coming out of the Armory. It was a great thrill for me.

MARTIN: Joe, you were showing me an album with quite a number of pictures. You remember, you keep them. What were some of the occasions at which those pictures were taken?

LEAHY: Well, on many occasions. When I’d go to Washington on those trips to Washington, that you asked me about before. My granddaughter, Kathleen, who is twelve years old now, was only three years old when he was in the Senate. I have a picture of the President and my mother and my daughter-in-law and my granddaughter, in color. And the President is holding my granddaughter in his office. I also have pictures of him with my mother, who is still alive. And when my mother first saw him at our house on Browning Road in Somerville—this was back in ‘46 or 1945 during the campaign—

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I remember one time she said to me, “Why doesn’t he ever get a haircut?” And she said, “That hair, I’m tempted,” she said, “to cut it off with a scissors.” But I have several pictures of him, and he never hesitated to accommodate you when you wanted his cooperation.

MARTIN: Joe, I understand he attended your father’s funeral too. Was that when he was a congressman?

LEAHY: Oh, yes, he attended my father’s funeral. He attended a couple of birthday parties of my sister, Rita; not a couple of her birthday parties, but her birthday party and that of my sister, Catherine. He attended them and he attended the funeral. As a matter of fact, I had a brother that got killed on a year ago, my brother Tom. He was killed in an automobile accident a year ago and I happened to meet…I was in Washington and I mentioned it to Ted Readon [Timothy J. Reardon, Jr.] and they sent a bouquet of flowers from the President to my brother Tom’s wake. I do say that I admired him. We were very, very close personal friends, personal friends.

MARTIN: Tell us about some other occasions when you went down to Washington while he was the President and visited him at the White House.

LEAHY: Well, whenever I went to Washington, they were all social calls, of course. I’d call Mrs. Lincoln and she’s say, “Oh, by all means, the President can see you at 11:00 or he can see you at 10:30,” or whatever it might be. And there were other times when she’s say to me that he was busy that
could we put it off until tomorrow or some other time and such. But most times I got in to see him and I had coffee with him and toast.

But he was never much of a spender. I remember one time Frank Morrissey and I drove him from Copley Plaza over to catch a plane. This was when he was a Senator. He had to catch a plane to Washington and he was running for the plane. And as he was running for the plane, he said to me, “Have you got a nickel?” I said, “A nickel. What is a nickel? What could he get with a nickel?”

“A Hershey bar.”

So, he took the nickel and grabbed a Hershey bar on the run and that was the end of that. [Laughter]

MARTIN: Was it on occasion, Joe, down in New York when you saw him in a parade?

LEAHY: Oh, yes. I was in New York. I think it was a couple of days after the seventeenth of March in 1962. And

I was standing on the corner of 46th Street and Broadway, which was practically right in Times Square. And the motorcade started to come down from upper Broadway. And as the parade went by it slowed down going through Times Square and as it did I hollered across, “Hi, Mr. President.” And he turned to me and, “Oh, hi, Joe. Come here.” So I ran over to the car again and the cops grabbed me again as I was going over to the car. He said, “What are you doing in New York?” And the thing started moving and we didn’t have much time to wait, but he went down to the Battery and then they came up Fifth Avenue, up to the St. Regis Hotel. It was the St. Regis Hotel, I think, where he was making a speech. We saw him going up Fifth Avenue again.

But he was always, always, wanting to say “hello,” whenever he saw me. I know that.

MARTIN: What else, Joe, do you recall about your visits down to Washington to see the President?

LEAHY: I remember going down there on one occasion and I went up to his office and he had written that book, Profiles of Courage, and he had several of them on a desk there and I said to him, “What do you do? Read your own book?” I said, “You should know what’s in them.” And then his secretary, Evelyn Lincoln, said, “Joe, have you got one of those?” And I said, “No, he never gives me anything.”

Well, anyway, he autographed a book for me and in the book it says “To Joe Leahy. I don’t know about his profile, but I do know that he has plenty of courage.” Signed “From his friend, Jack Kennedy, United States Senate.”

MARTIN: Joe, what would you say your best memory of the President is?
LEAHY: The best memory?

MARTIN: The one that will stick, perhaps, in your mind the longest in your long association with him?

LEAHY: Well, then, as I say, my best memory is—and I know millions and millions of words have been written about the man, but my best memory of him is that he was easy to meet, he was easy to know even when he was President. The thrill that you get going to the President’s office, you were made at ease and you knew that you were with a friend. Those are my best memories of him.

He was a fellow that was, as I say, easy to meet, easy to know, and would listen to your troubles if you had any, and was willing at all times to help. That’s about all I can say. He was a….

[END OF INTERVIEW]

MARTIN: Joe, would you try a bar or two for the Library of the President’s favorite song, “Danny Boy” as sung by Joe Leahy?

LEAHY: Well, I don’t know how good it will be now, but I’ll attempt to do it the best I can.

Oh, Danny Boy, the pipes,
The pipes are calling
From glen to glen
And down the mountain side.

And that’s about all. When I’d get there, Eddie, he’d say, “Well, that’s enough of that.”

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