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Casey, U.S. Representative from Massachusetts (1935-1943), discusses Massachusetts politics, including his 1942 Senate race against John F. "Honey Fitz" Fitzgerald, his interactions with Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr., and John F. Kennedy's years in Congress, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

Joseph E. Casey

February 24, 1967
Washington, D.C.

By William McHugh

For the John F. Kennedy Library

McHUGH: This is an interview with Mr. Joseph Casey, former congressman from Massachusetts and nominee for senator. The interview is taking place in Mr. Casey's law office in the Ring Building in Washington, 18th and M Streets. Mr. Casey, do you remember when you first met the President's grandfather?

CASEY: Yes indeed. I remember it very well. I first met Honey Fitz [John F. Fitzgerald] in 1942, when both of us were candidates for the Democratic nomination to the United States Senate. He appeared in the picture at that time by virtue of the fact that he was backed by his son-in-law, Joseph Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.], father of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Briefly, the background to his entry at the age of 79 into a statewide race is this: Joseph Kennedy

had been Ambassador to the Court of St. James and had retired, or had been retired, under rather unpleasant circumstances and he had a grievance against the Roosevelt Administration [Franklin D. Roosevelt]. That was why he put his father-in-law in the race for United States Senate. He supplied his father-in-law with money. He had speechwriters brought from New York. And when the 79-year-old John F. Fitzgerald stood before a microphone and in his crisp manner enunciated his views on his discontent with the

Administration, his discontent with gasoline rationing, his predictions that New England would freeze because of inept administration policies, and so forth, he was a formidable opponent. I met him in the lobby of the Bellevue Hotel during the campaign. He rushed up to me, shook his finger at me, and said, "You have maligned me. You have told the people of Massachusetts that I'm an octogenarian, and that's false." I said, "How old are you?" He said, "I'm 79." That was my first meeting with Honey.

McHUGH: Did you meet him on other occasions?

CASEY: Oh yes. After the campaign was over and I had won the nomination, he closed ranks and spoke in my behalf, although I'm afraid that was a little too late because

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they had furnished my opponent Henry Cabot Lodge with enough ammunition, which he quoted freely, to defeat me.

McHUGH: What was your impression of the President's grandfather as a person at that time?

CASEY: Well, he was one of the many great Irish in politics during his time. His contemporaries were Senator Walsh [David I. Walsh], Governor Curley [James Michael Curley], and Governor Ely [Joseph B. Ely]—all of them attractive personalities, good speakers; little or no money to campaign, but indomitable campaigners; no political machines, but attracted a personal following. They were men on horseback, individuals on horseback. There were many clashes, understandably, among these strong, vivid, colorful personalities. The main objective was to weld the minority groups together and achieve victory—the minority groups being the Irish and the Italians and the French and the Polish. John F. Fitzgerald was in this mold. He followed the rest of them in that they were liberal to the extent that they were for labor. They were pro-labor. They wanted the minimum hours, higher pay, better working conditions. And under their influence the Workman's Compensation Act was enacted in Massachusetts, the first state to adopt that most help-

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ful legislation for the working people.

McHUGH: Did the following that you mentioned that the President's grandfather had and that these men had had—I was thinking particularly of Curley—was that true in the western part of the state also?

CASEY: All of these men, except Walsh and Ely, came from around Boston. That was the nucleus of their following. When they went to the western part of the state,

they aroused antagonism. For example, Curley would be preceded before he spoke in a small town rally by a gang of obviously Boston men who would rush down the aisle, ignoring the local candidate who was speaking, and shout, "Everybody up! Up! Up! Up! Governor Curley is coming." Of course that caused antagonism. Honey Fitz was more or less beloved by virtue of his public image as a man who could sing and do a soft shoe and was a happy, energetic individual who'd been a good mayor of Boston. But, the following in the western part of the state, outside Boston, was still a following of the Irish and a solid core of Democratic voters. And it wasn't until the Italians and the French and the Polish started to vote Democratic that they achieved solid success.

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McHUGH: Would you attempt to compare John Fitzgerald's administration with Curley's as mayor of Boston?

CASEY: Well, I don't think that there was a great deal of difference. They both were attractive personalities. They clashed of course; they were bitter enemies.

McHUGH: Do you know when the enmity originated?

CASEY: It's simply that the pair of them happened to live in the same time and had a great deal of talent and both aspired to public office. It was an inevitable conflict. They were both in each other's ways—running for the Senate, running for governor, running for mayor. And a clash of personalities resulted.

McHUGH: Did John Fitzgerald have an important position in the party when you began your career?

CASEY: No. He had been mayor of Boston. He had been a congressman. And he had practically retired from politics until resurrected by his son-in-law, Joe Kennedy.

McHUGH: Do you recall when you first met Ambassador Kennedy?

CASEY: Well, I first met Ambassador Kennedy when I was in congress, and he was here for the Roosevelt Administration.

McHUGH: I see. What was the occasion? Do you recall?

CASEY : Oh, Washington was a very stimulating place in the early New Deal days. We met at quite a few gatherings. We

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never knew each other very well.

McHUGH: In 1932 I think he was at the Democratic Convention. I believe you were there also. Did he have any particular role at that time, do you recall?

CASEY: I don't know whether he did or not. At that time I was completely associated with the Walsh-Ely-Fitzgerald group. I was a delegate at that '32 Convention. I know that we were all pro-Al Smith [Alfred E. Smith]. As a matter of fact, at a meeting I was selected to speak after John McCormack [John William McCormack], who is now Speaker of the House, was presumed to speak for John Garner [John Nance Garner] of Texas, who had been the Speaker of the House. John McCormack didn't speak so I wasn't called upon to answer him at that time. I don't remember that Joe Kennedy was in with the Walsh-Ely-Curley group at that time.

McHUGH: Had you met him enough to form any definite impressions of him as a person—Joseph Kennedy?

CASEY: No, I don't think I'm in a position by virtue of having known him personally to form any definite impressions of him.

McHUGH: In your terms in Congress did you have any other contact with Ambassador Kennedy? You apparently didn't have much.You had very limited contact with him?

CASEY: Well, yes, my contacts with him were very limited.

McHUGH: Did he take much interest in Massachusetts politics?

CASEY: Did he take what?

McHUGH: Much interest in Massachusetts politics?

CASEY: I don't think so. I think that his first keen interest in national politics arose out of his resentment against the Roosevelt Administration after he'd been ambassador at the Court of St. James. He took a keen interest then.

McHUGH: But he wasn't involved in Massachusetts politics up to that time?

CASEY: No, no.

McHUGH: I see. He didn't give any financial support, either, to your knowledge?

CASEY: What?

McHUGH: Would he have given any financial support to the Democratic Party in Massachusetts?

CASEY: Oh, I don't know that. I don't know that.

McHUGH: I see. What was the reaction of Massachusetts Democrats when he was appointed Ambassador? Do you recall?

CASEY: I think that they were all pleased that a fellow Irish American had been appointed to the Court of St. James and they were proud of him.

McHUGH: When did you first meet President Kennedy?

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CASEY: I first met President Kennedy when he came down here as a congressman from Massachusetts. I was attracted to him because he seemed to be something new from Massachusetts, something along the idea that I had about myself. For example, I was having a difficult time in Massachusetts by virtue of the fact that I opposed the Flood Control Act which the governors of New England advocated. My opposition was because the flood control dams did not contain penstocks for power and I wanted flood control dams to have penstocks for power so that we could provide cheaper power for the people. When Congressman Kennedy came down here he advocated nuclear reactors located in high cost power areas. That struck my fancy as being a courageous thing because the power companies were powerful in Massachusetts and New England politics. That was the first intimation I had that he was not of the old mold, but that he was a man beyond this rather limited philosophy that the leaders of the Democratic Party in Massachusetts have held.

McHUGH: Governor Dever [Paul A. Dever] once expressed the idea that John Kennedy's popularity grew from the fact that he was the first Irish Brahmin. Do you think that that had anything or very much to do with it?

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CASEY: I think that perhaps that is a very apt phrase. I feel that his first success in politics, which was his election to Congress, was due to the fact that his father masterminded the campaign and financed it. I don't think that Jack Kennedy had any great stomach for politics at the time.

McHUGH: Why don't you think he did?

CASEY: Well, he—from what I heard about that campaign, and I knew several opponents of his—Mike Neville [Michael J. Neville] who was mayor of

Cambridge, was an opponent, and among his observations was one that he didn't think that this young fellow cared for politics. He thought it was distasteful for him but that his father was insistent that he go in. And it dawned upon Neville after he had first taken him lightly that here was a rival that, due to his father's beneficence, particularly to the Italian groups, that here was a formidable rival who later defeated him for the congress.

McHUGH: What beneficence were you referring to?

CASEY: Gifts to hospitals in the Italian section, to Catholic churches that were Italian, things of that sort. Perfectly legitimate, fine, laudatory gifts. However, they were also political currency.

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McHUGH: You said that his father masterminded the campaign. Can you say in what ways, in general, he did this?

CASEY: He had a great many friends in Massachusetts. He spent a great deal of money. He knew the many chaps in Boston who lived out of politics and made their money out of political donations, and who were very resourceful in building up a candidate or tearing down an opponent.

McHUGH: I see. Can you mention any of these people who might have been especially influential?

CASEY: Well, I'd rather not. I'd rather not. I only recall my own experience which Joseph Kennedy had nothing to do with it—but I recall that when I ran against Cabot Lodge, Tom White who was the manager of his campaign told me later that he had hired a chap named Mike Ward, who had been on the school committee in Boston, to do a job on me and to misrepresent that I was a divorced man, which would knock down a Catholic who came from the western part of the state, and that I was living with a lot of loose women up on the Fenway. It spread around so much that a priest said it was better to vote for a good Protestant than a bad Catholic. And that's due to the fact that these chaps worked their wiles, and it was pretty hard to combat that sort of thing.

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McHUGH: Do you remember the—was this a public statement this priest…?

CASEY: Oh yes, it was a public statement.

McHUGH: Do you remember the priest's name?

CASEY: I don't, but John McCormack wrote to the Bishop and called up the Bishop in absolute indignation because John McCormack and his wife, Harriet [Harriet

McCormack], had been godparents of my son, Joe [Joe Casey], and they knew that I had never been divorced and that I was a good practicing Catholic.

McHUGH: In other words, it was complete fiction.

CASEY: It was a complete fiction, sure, but that never bothered these people.

McHUGH: In 1940 Joe Kennedy, Jr. [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.], was a delegate to the Democratic Convention. He supported Farley [James A. Farley] to the end. Did you have any contact with him?

CASEY: No, no, I didn't. No, but I do recall that around that time there was a movement that Joe Kennedy would run for lieutenant governor and I would run for governor, somewhere around 1940. I don't recall who put the proposition to me but there was talk about it. It was commented upon publicly.

McHUGH: Did Joe Kennedy ever push this to any extent?

CASEY I don't know that because the war intervened, and Joe

Kennedy, young Joe, went off to war and, as you know, was killed.

McHUGH: Do you know if Ambassador Kennedy's differences with FDR had any effect on the election in Massachusetts?

CASEY: Which election—FDR's?

McHUGH: Yes, in 1940. Did that affect voting in Massachusetts?

CASEY: No. No, it didn't affect voting in Massachusetts in 1940. I do remember an interesting incident in 1944 when FDR was running. Vice President Harry Truman [Harry S. Truman] was at the Ritz Carlton Hotel with Bob Hannigan [Robert Hannigan], the Democratic chairman, and Bob Hannigan said that he would like to get in touch with Joe Kennedy. Truman asked him why. Hannigan said because he considered Joe Kennedy the most influential Irishman in the country, more influential than Jim Farley. And so Joe Kennedy was sent for, and he came up from the Cape to see Vice President Truman in '44. So he was helpful in the election of Roosevelt in '44.

McHUGH: Do you know in what areas in general? I guess that's probably documented in other places.

CASEY: Well, I think that he made speeches and public pronouncements, which was what they wanted him to do.

McHUGH: Did you anticipate any opposition to your nomination to

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oppose Lodge in 1944 [1942]?

CASEY: I knew there would be opposition because there were thirteen candidates in the field. The most prominent of them was former Governor Ely, a prominent Boston man named Daniel Coakley [Daniel H. Coakley], and Honey Fitzgerald. And that was pretty formidable opposition for a fellow who came from upstate and who hadn't much experience around Boston. And of course Honey Fitzgerald had been a very favorite mayor in Boston. I certainly had a lot of opposition. It was a difficult task.

McHUGH: Did the vote in Boston at that time tend to determine the election or was the rural vote more of a factor?

CASEY: At that time we were in the middle of war, and as far as the Democratic candidates were concerned—I'm talking about these old timers, Walsh and Curley, Fitzgerald—foreign policy was confined to a concern for the Irish and the Italians and could be summed up by a simple statement, "We are for a united Ireland, and Trieste belongs to Italy." That brought together both the influential races. And that was the limit of foreign policy.

McHUGH: Is that right? So they weren't really involved in the war. They did feel that was—it wasn't an issue in

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the campaign.

CASEY: Oh yes, it was an issue because there was a great anti-English feeling, particularly among the Irish. There was a district attorney named Bill Foley [William J. Foley, Jr.] who met my wife [Constance Dudley Casey] in an elevator at the Copley Plaza Hotel and she said, "Mr. Foley, are you going to support my husband?" And he very belligerently said, "No, because your husband ought to be running for Parliament." Now this sort of thing was predicated upon the fact that I had kind of left the Irish community on foreign affairs and gotten a little beyond the "Trieste belongs to Italy, and Ireland must be united," and was thinking about America's world responsibilities. And I had voted for lease-lend and similar other provisions, which incensed a certain segment of the Irish in Massachusetts.

McHUGH: Do you remember other issues in the campaign?

CASEY Oh yes. There was a big issue between Lodge and me. He was an isolationist,

a complete isolationist, said, “There’s no need of our helping England. She’s going down the drain anyway. If she can’t help herself it’s no business of ours.” He was a complete isolationist at this time. Senator Walsh, who came from my home town and was a member of my party, didn’t support me in that campaign

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because he also was a complete isolationist. So it was a matter of our participation in the War, which I supported, versus an anti-ally or anti-British feeling.

McHUGH: Did your district include Worcester?

CASEY: No.

McHUGH: It did not?

CASEY: No. I had fifty-six cities and small towns. It ran all over the western central part of the state.

McHUGH: Did your constituents tend to be isolationists or were they for United States involvement?

CASEY: Well, I had no trouble with my constituents because I was the first Democrat to be elected in that district, and I made it a practice of reporting to the constituency by radio once a week, and I think I educated them to the issues and as to why I was voting as I voted. And the result was that while I was elected by a scant two hundred votes out of a hundred thousand the first time, each succeeding time—I ran four times won by increased majorities.

McHUGH: What station did you…

CASEY: WTAG in Worcester. That was the principal station that covered my district.

McHUGH: Were there any other issues in that campaign that you

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wish to comment on, that were particularly significant?

CASEY: Well, yes. With respect to the domestic policy, all of these men—Walsh, Curley and Fitzgerald—were liberal, but liberal only as regards labor. They didn’t have in mind anything like federal deposit insurance or Medicare or unemployment insurance. And, as I’ve suggested, their appeal was that they were for the working man.

McHUGH: Well, did they oppose unemployment insurance?

CASEY: No, they didn't oppose it, but they never thought of it. So when I advocated under Roosevelt's New Deal policy all of these measures, there was a great deal of opposition because it wasn't an easy accomplishment for a representative of the Irish community to be a genuine progressive. For example, the *Boston Post*, which was conservative Democratic, said that I was one of the delegation who opposed the flood control policy of the New England governors and that I opposed the protest of New England industry against competition from low wage Czechoslovakia. Now my opposition to the flood control program was that it ignored possible power developments. And I refused to blame the decline of the New England shoe industry on the fake foreign competition issue. So there was opposition from the power

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companies, there was opposition from businesses, and there was a general difficult time of awakening the people to national interests and our responsibilities in the foreign field.

McHUGH: Did you feel that there was anything in particular—well, you mentioned that these rumors appeared against you—do you feel that they contributed to your defeat by Lodge primarily?

CASEY: I don't know. That's hard to say. I do know that was my first political outing in Boston, and that I was an Irish Catholic from upstate, and that sort of campaign against my religion could not have been run against a Boston Catholic such as Maurice Tobin [Maurice J. Tobin] or Paul Dever. It's well known that it probably was effective to a degree, and undoubtedly it hurt me.

McHUGH: Of the candidates who campaigned against you, who did you feel was the most effective? Well, who took most votes from you, let's say?

CASEY: Well, none of these fellows ran against me in the election against Lodge. My principal opponent in the primary was John F. Fitzgerald.

McHUGH: You mentioned that he had this natural appeal. Was he an effective campaigner beyond that?

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CASEY: Well, he was an effective campaigner in that campaign of '42 when he ran against me for the Senate nomination because he rested all day and he was rubbed down and he was handed a beautifully written speech by these New York speechwriters. And he could deliver it with that staccato manner of his, and you just thought you here listening to some youngster on the other end. And they did pile together all

the grievances, the annoyances that were due to war, shortages, and so forth, and that was most effective.

McHUGH: Did the campaign have any lasting effect on your relationship with Ambassador Kennedy or with John Kennedy?

CASEY It didn't have any lasting effect on my relationship with John F. Kennedy. And as far as my relationship with President Kennedy is concerned, why I saw when he came to Congress, saw him develop, saw him develop into a man who understood the humanities, who was beyond the Irish community concept, a man who got himself elected to the Foreign Affairs Committee, who had a knowledge of geography. And here was a big man from Massachusetts. And I just admired him and did everything I could to help.

McHUGH: You said that when he first ran that he didn't have much

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taste for politics. When you first met him, did you have any impressions that seemed to back this up?

CASEY: I couldn't give a yes or no answer to that. I think that he probably got a taste for Congress, for politics, when he was maybe in his second year in Congress. He was likeable. He had grown so that he could express himself simply and lucidly, and he had an easier manner in meeting people.

McHUGH: This suggests that originally he was somewhat ill at ease in meeting people.

CASEY: Yes, yes, there's no question about that. I think Dave Powers [David F. Powers] has suggested that when he campaigned for Congress the first time, his speeches before gatherings in the tenement districts where Dave took him reminded Dave of—well, he said the words would come from him as though each one was a tooth being pulled.

McHUGH: Is that right? Do you have any other impressions of him in those early years that you remember?

CASEY: I have an impression of him as being shy, but determined, a great deal of guts and courage in developing himself.

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McHUGH: I see. What made you feel that he was particularly determined?

CASEY: When it became evident that he was a candidate for the Senate. Also, when

there was a move among the Democratic congressmen to get a presidential pardon for Governor Curley who was in jail for an offense which I don't believe he committed, incidentally—but the only member of the Democratic delegation in Congress who did not sign it was John F. Kennedy.

McHUGH: Since you didn't believe it, did you attempt to persuade Kennedy to sign it at all?

CASEY: No. I wasn't a member of the delegation then. I had nothing to do with it.

McHUGH: Oh, I see. Do you know why he opposed signing that for Curley?

CASEY: I don't know. I think that he had rather a distaste for the type of politics which I've described among the Curleys, and even his father-in-law, Walsh. It was narrow. It was provincial. And he had grown beyond it, and he wanted nothing more to do with it.

McHUGH: I see. Were you involved in his '52 senatorial race?

CASEY: No.

McHUGH: No. I see. Were you involved in any of his later campaigns?

CASEY: Well, I introduced him in 1952 here in Washington. At that time I predicted that he would—let me see, I still have that—I said that he would be re-elected in 1952. I said that his victory is a foregone conclusion, but the landslide proportions of his re-elections I predicted would be another shot around the world, a signal from Massachusetts to the rest of the nation that here's a man to hold against the world, a leader to match the problems of today and tomorrow.

McHUGH: Do you feel that President Kennedy had a lasting impact on Massachusetts politics?

CASEY: I think that he brought the level of Massachusetts politics way up from where it was, way up from where it was. He had interested the professors and people who had very little use for politics as a dirty game. And he has caused a general interest on the part of the finest type of young men in politics.

McHUGH: Do you think he could have become a strong leader of a reformed Democratic Party?

CASEY: I think he was a strong leader of a reformed Democratic Party.

McHUGH: Did you have any contacts with him after he became president, or with his staff?

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CASEY: Yes, yes. Before he became president I helped in gathering delegates. There were a great many people that I saw—Governor Hodges [Luther H. Hodges] of North Carolina, Averell Harriman [William Averell Harriman], ex-governor of New York. Mrs. Roosevelt [Eleanor R. Roosevelt], for example, told me that she was incensed at Senator Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] for using a quotation that would indicate that she was behind him, against Kennedy, and she told me that she would stay aloof and would back whichever nominee won the nomination. I think that was most helpful. Also, I arranged for a meeting between Scott Lucas [Scott Wike Lucas] who had been a senator from Illinois and a majority leader in the United States Senate and a delegate to the presidential Convention from southern Illinois where he had great influence on other delegates.

McHUGH: How did you happen to become involved in this, Mr. Casey?

CASEY: Involved in what?

McHUGH: Well, in this work of gathering delegates.

CASEY: Well, I'd been in the congress and my acquaintance had widened, and I just admired this fellow John F. Kennedy so that wherever I had an acquaintance who could be helpful I was there to see what I could do about making that acquaintance…

McHUGH: You did this on your own initiative or were you asked

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to help?

CASEY: It was my own initiative to begin with. But, for example, John Kennedy and I drove down to Scott Lucas' office, and he asked Lucas to help. I arranged that meeting. So we were both cognizant of it. When Senator Kennedy became president, I lobbied with the Rules Committee for the increase in members of the Rules Committee and I received his commendation for my assistance in that.

McHUGH: Did you notice at the time you saw him before he became president whether the campaign seemed to have affected his health to any extent? Do you have any particular impressions about that?

CASEY: No, no. I had no indication that the campaign took that much out of him. He

must have suffered from what we later discovered. But he had great will power of mind over matter. Just as his mind overcame his original embarrassment so he could overcome any situation. While he may have been inwardly nervous, outwardly he was calm and composed and at ease.

McHUGH: What other people were involved with you on this work to enlarge the Rules Committee? Who did you work with most closely?

CASEY: Well, I worked with the congressmen I knew to get their votes. I went into offices and talked to congressmen

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whom I knew and sometimes came across a very nice little surprise. I think that it's interesting to note that I talked to Majority Leader McCormack at that time about prospective votes to enlarge the Rules Committee, and I went to see Congressman Bill Bates [William H. Bates] from Salem, Massachusetts, a Republican. I told him that Majority Leader John McCormack had said that his dad, who had preceded him as a congressman, was much more liberal and less partisan than his son. Bates was greatly surprised at that statement and said, "You know, I think the world of John McCormack and I look upon him as a sort of uncle." And he said, "I was on Lodge's campaign train in the election (Lodge having been the vice presidential nominee), but I don't owe him anything. I like Jack Kennedy and I'll give him a vote." I think it's rather enlightening about Bill Bates' character in that when I told President Kennedy that, President Kennedy called and asked him about his vote on the Rules Committee and Bates said, "Mr. President, I've already promised John McCormack that I'm going to vote for an enlargement of the Rules Committee."

McHUGH: I see. Did you ever consider joining the New Frontier, Mr. Casey?

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CASEY: No, no. I have long ago given up any idea of getting into active politics.

McHUGH: Do you have any other comments you wish to make?

CASEY: I can't think of any.

McHUGH: Well, we thank you very much for your comments. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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