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Editor's Note

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Editor's Note

Padraig O'Malley

In 1943, at the age of fifteen, he forged his birth certificate so that he could join the Navy. "When the war came," Joe recalls, "I was in the third year of high school, pretty big for my age, and was running with an older crowd. I had mentioned to my father that other kids were going to join the Navy and that I was thinking of going with them. And he encouraged me because he had stowed away at the same age on a Coast Guard vessel. He was very patriotic and just felt that I was big enough to handle the job." It's all said matter-of-factly. Duty called; duty responded to. It was the right thing to do so he did it, with no caveats and no regrets, serving with the Seabees in the South Pacific for three years.

We are sitting in his office, on the third floor of the federal courthouse that had been named after him a week earlier, looking out at the harbor, the sheen of the water reflecting kaleidoscopic images of the majestic building. It is Friday, the 18th of May 2001. I was on my way to South Africa and something in my bones told me that Joe would not be with us when I got back to Boston.

I had come to say goodbye.

Joe and I had known each other for close on thirty years. We went back to his campaign in 1972 when he "dethroned" Louise Day Hicks. He had hired me to write speeches and develop position papers. I soon found out that Joe didn't need a speechwriter and that he wore his issue positions on his sleeve. But he kept me on. That was Joe. He was educating me and would always take time out to let me in on the intricate world of Boston politics — how the inner machinery worked, the shenanigans played out, mysterious alliances forged, and that in the battle for the last vote you pounded the pavements till your shoes wore out and your feet ached.

Over the years we kept in touch. His door was always open. He was more than a mentor, more like the father I never knew. "Geez, Padraig," he would say when I came up with some far-fetched notion. He had to say no more; that particular idea was for the trash can.

He had an immeasurable impact on my life. He taught me to be humble, to listen, to follow the heart when it comes to adjudicating between right and wrong. He had an invisible influence on all the causes I pursued: ending the conflict in Northern Ireland; recording the transition of South Africa from apartheid to a post-apartheid society; helping countries through the difficult passage from authoritarianism and one-party state dictatorships to democracy; calling for debt forgiveness for countries too poor to feed their own people; the consequences of North/South imbalances, an absorption with human rights and measures to terminate abuses in the countries that

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engaged in them as routine practice, trying to find ways to bring about reconciliation among peoples who have been deeply divided in the past.

"You know," he says, leaning back in his leather-upholstered chair, "I don't care about dying. I've had the richest, fullest life anyone could wish for. Who would have thought that a kid from the projects in Southie would have gotten to where I am?" He pauses, still amazed that such good fortune had come his way. "But, I'll tell you one thing. I'm pissed as hell that I can't run for re-election!"

We laugh. Pure Joe. If you can't see the funny side of things, you may as well call it a day.

But there's no funny side when he talks about El Salvador.

On the night of November 16, 1989, six Jesuits from the University of Central America, their cook, and her daughter, were dragged from their beds in the middle of the night, lined up, and murdered with machine gun fire of such velocity that their brains were splattered in puddles around their dead bodies. Afterward their murderers stood around and drank beer and nonchalantly littered the blood-drenched murder site with empty beer cans. A public outcry ensued, and the Speaker sent Joe to El Salvador to investigate.

As a result of his indefatigable efforts, bullheaded tenacity, and an unwavering commitment to dig the truth out of the dirt heaps of lies that piled up every time he asked a question, the perpetrators of the murders were brought to trial, and the fact that the highest echelons in the Salvadoran military had ordered the murders was established.

In 1990, an outraged Moakley pushed through legislation that halved foreign aid to the region. Military aid to El Salvador was cut from $83 million to $10 million, opening the way to negotiations that led to an eventual settlement of the conflict and the ouster of the military regime.

"You know," Joe says, "I've been asked on many occasions what it would have taken to satisfy me in the Jesuits' case. My response has always been simple. I wanted the truth. I wanted the truth because I believed the Salvadoran people deserved the truth. The whole truth."

In July 1991, Joe delivered the keynote address at the University of Central America's University Forum on Contemporary Issues.

In the course of his address, he began to speak with a voice that was characteristically his.

> You do not have to travel far from this beautiful campus to see whole urban neighborhoods constructed out of tin and cardboard, wedged into ravines where nothing grows but the appetites of young children.
>
> You do not have to travel far in El Salvador to understand why it is so important that the destruction end and the rebuilding begin.
>
> The Jesuit fathers taught us that peace is better than war for the simple reason that life is better than death.
>
> They taught us the value of dignity and to respect the rights of every human being, no matter how humble.
>
> They taught us that although it has often been considered a crime in this country, it is never a crime to speak up for the poor, the helpless, or the ill; it is never a crime to tell the truth; it is never a crime to demand justice; it is never a crime to struggle for a just peace. It is never a crime. It is always a duty.

Truth, he was fond of saying, is not the enemy.

But in his pursuit of truth, he uncovered something that would haunt him — that his government, the government of the United States, put as many obstacles in his way as the Salvadoran officials.

We sit there in the comfort of his office on a beautiful May morning, reminiscing on things past. Joe turns on the video PBS made some years back on the war in El Salvador.

We watch the footage. Joe is full of concentration. "Do you know," he says, "that during the Reagan years we gave that god damn government six billion dollars to buy arms to gun down their own people? Six friggin' billion!" He is still outraged. "And do you know that since the war ended, we've only given them a lousy half a billion in aid?" He shakes his head in disbelief. The moral arithmetic isn't right.

The smooth features of the then Minister of Defense in the government of El Salvador appear on the screen. Joe gets more animated. "That bastard," he says, "gave me the official version of what had happened, and when he was finished I looked him in the eye and said, 'General, you're full of bullshit!' Geez, did the guy hit the ceiling! 'You can't use that type of language with me,' he screams. And I said to him, 'General, you should come to one of my constituency meetings in South Boston and you'd find that the word *bullshitter* is one of the more polite forms of expression. And besides, you can't bullshit an old bullshitter.' The guy was speechless."

He chuckles and shakes his head.

Time to go. "Watch yourself in South Africa," he warns, and in the same breath he starts to get going on AIDS. But his aide intervenes. "Joe," he says, almost pleadingly. "Others are waiting."

Days later he is hospitalized in Washington, D.C.; the leukemia was taking its inevitable toll but the short wait for the inevitable didn't diminish Joe's appetite to finish work undone.

After Joe had announced that he had terminal leukemia, Fidel Castro wrote him. "I have recently had news, from common friends, of your health condition; and I decided to write you a few lines, aware that I run the risk of perturbing your rest," Castro wrote. Joe had met Castro in spring 2000 when he led a delegation to Havana. He and Castro hit it off; getting along with people of every shade of ideology was one of the hallmarks of Joe's ability to get things done. Of course, the fact that they both were baseball nuts didn't hurt.

Castro praised Joe's work to improve U.S.-Cuba relations and wished him well. "The consideration and the esteem of those who shared the privilege of knowing you will always be at your side," he wrote.

Seizing this one last opportunity, Joe sent his longtime friend, former aide, and now congressman Jim McGovern to Cuba with a letter to Castro on May 24. "As I write this letter, I am very ill," he wrote. He urged Castro to release political prisoners and invite President George Bush or Secretary of State Colin L. Powell to Cuba as a gesture of goodwill. "I've always thought that if it's going to change, it will require some new thinking and bold moves."

Congressman Joe Moakley died on May 28, 2001. Memorial Day.

One of the greatest philosophers of this century, Reinhold Niebuhr wrote:

> In modern society the basic mechanisms of justice are becoming more and more economic rather than political, in the sense that economic power is the most basic power. A just political order is not possible without the reconstruction of the economic order.

> The fact is that democratic principles and traditions are an important check upon the economic oligarchy, even though the money power is usually able to bend economic power to its uses.

In El Salvador, Joe bent the money power and broke the political power.

Had he lived, he just might also have done so in Cuba. And no, he didn't forget to look into why Mrs. O'Leary hadn't received her Social Security check.❦

Without the intrepid assistance of Congressman John Joseph Moakley, there would be no John W. McCormack Institute of Public Affairs. Without a McCormack Institute, there would be no New England Journal of Public Policy.