

Interview with Jim Edgar
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Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: I want to get to the 2004 Senate campaign. As always, I would imagine, by 2003, people might be approaching you.

Edgar: In late spring of 2003, Peter Fitzgerald surprised most people and said he wasn't going to run for another term. Now, there had been concerns that he would have a hard time getting reelected. Part of it was he had problems with some of the party folks because he had a tendency to want to go out and pick fights.

DePue: He was somewhat of a lone wolf as far as the...

Edgar: Yes, I think that's a good way to describe it. But I can't say that he'd pick up a whole lot of support from the public in general. Senators aren't that visible in Illinois. They go off to Washington, and they're never seen again. Because Dick Durbin's a leader, maybe you see him more on television, but even that—people just don't think about senators like they think about the governor or the mayor. So even though he [Fitzgerald] had been there, he hadn't built up all that much... You'd do his job approval; head-to-head with other possible Democrats, he didn't run all that strong. He looked like he could have a tough time. I think he would have probably won, but no guarantee. Also, he had a young family, and that took time away from that family. He was kind of a lone wolf in the Senate, too, even among the Republicans in Washington; it wasn't just in Illinois. I had some talks with Trent Lott; he kind of rolled his eyes about it, said, "It'd be nice to have you here—somebody we could work with." (laughs) Peter had been that way in Springfield, too, just kind of his nature, but in some ways that was his strength to a lot of folks. I got along with Peter, actually. I was one of the few Republican leaders in Illinois that had an ongoing conversation with him. We didn't always agree on things, but I thought we got along pretty well—probably better than I did when I was governor and he was a state senator.

I have about a hundred-yard lane from my house down to the road where the mail and the newspaper come. One morning, I walked out and picked up the *Tribune*, opened it up, and it said, "Peter Fitzgerald Not to Run."¹ I'm thinking, "Oh, this is going to be a long day for me." I already had some indication from some people that they thought I'd run for the Senate. I had said, "I think Fitzgerald..." They said, "Well, he may not." I said, "Ah, he'll run." So I just thought, Uh-oh, I'm going to have people on me after this. So I walked in the house and said, "Brenda, this is going to be a long day." She said, "Why?" I said, "Fitzgerald just announced he's not running for the Senate again. I think I'm going to start getting phone calls."

¹ "Fitzgerald Not Going to Pursue Re-election," *Chicago Tribune*, April 15, 2003. The headline Edgar would have read the following morning was "Edgar Leads GOP's List to Replace Fitzgerald."

An hour later, I started getting phone calls. I can't remember if Karl Rove called me first... Somebody called me from Washington. Then somebody called me from Springfield and said, "We need you to think about this." I said, "I'll think about it. I don't have any plans to do this, but I'll think about it." That night, actually, we were going to Springfield. Carter Hendren was leaving the Senate staff. Pate Philip had gone out as leader that year, and Frank Watson had become the Republican leader; they were jointly having a going-away party for Carter, and I'd been invited. I'd already told them I'd come over there. I thought, Oh, of all nights to go to Springfield. I know what this is all going to be about. I got several more calls during the day from people in Washington and Springfield about I ought to run for the Senate; I needed to run for the Senate.

So we get over to Springfield, and we go into what was [George] Baur's—I'm not sure what they call it now—over by the capitol building. I go in, and the whole press corps is there to meet me first and ask me. So I say, "I was surprised. People have asked and called today, and I told them I'd think about it. I don't have any plans at this point, but I'll think about it." Then we go into the function, and what was to be a going-away party for Carter started to be a "let's recruit Edgar to run for the Senate." Pate Philip gets up and makes this long speech about why I'm the guy to run for the U.S. Senate and blah-blah-blah, and "oh, by the way Carter, thanks for your service." (laughter) It was really a phenomenal thing. It's something that was interesting because, of course, all of a sudden this was the only game in town and there wasn't anything else going on. We didn't have any statewide races this year, so this was it, and it surprised everybody. So there was a lot of visibility on what am I going to do.

Now, on the Democratic side, you already had a lot of people lining up to run against Peter Fitzgerald. You already had Obama, who everybody thought was probably about the third candidate on the list. You had a very wealthy guy who was going to spend a fortune to run. There were a couple others, actually, that were figured—

DePue: Dan Hynes?

Edgar: No. Dan Hynes ran. I think Dan Hynes finished third in that race. Who else? Read through the names there you have.

DePue: I've got Barack and I've got Dan Hynes.

Edgar: There was somebody else that was a multimillionaire who had donated a lot of money. He got in trouble; they found out he had a very nasty divorce, and that came out.

DePue: Oh, you're talking about Jack Ryan.

Edgar: No, that's the Republican side. This is the Democratic side. There was a question about spousal abuse and some really nasty things that came out.² He was the frontrunner, because he'd been working at it and had given a lot of money to a lot of Democrats. He was considered the frontrunner, but he fell aside as it went along. So the Democrats were already lining up, thinking that Peter was beatable. There were already people out there, but not any huge name. Dan Hynes was state comptroller, but that's not a huge name necessarily. So all of a sudden the focus is on: What's Edgar doing to do?

DePue: But they're focusing on you because there's this vacuum on the Republican side, a lack of really prominent names out there.

Edgar: Yes, there was really nobody else out there at that point. Some lesser names maybe began to [emerge], but it was all, What's Edgar going to do, before anybody really jumped in on the Republican side. It was very intense. This was in the spring; it was very intense for maybe a month at the most, then I finally made a decision. You never know if you can win. People always said, "Well, if you had run, Barack Obama wouldn't be president." I don't know. After he made that speech at the convention—but maybe he wouldn't have made that speech, he may not have been... We had some joint supporters, financial supporters, and there was talk that "If you run, we'll talk him out of running." I don't know if that would have happened.

DePue: We'll talk Obama out of running?

Edgar: Yes, because Obama was somewhat of a long shot at that point. As I said, in the polling he maybe came in third on the Democrat side.

DePue: At that point.

Edgar: At that point.

DePue: This is even prior to the primary then.

Edgar: Oh, yes. No, this is before the primary. This is before he did the speech.

DePue: When he's still pretty obscure.

Edgar: Yes. He's just a state senator who had lost a congressional primary; he'd finished third in a congressional primary.

DePue: And he's a state senator who was not all that prominent in the state Senate either, was he?

² Blair Hull, a wealthy options trader, was leading the Democratic field in the 2004 U.S. Senate primary, until the media began reporting on the order of protection his wife had filed against him during their divorce in 1998. *Chicago Tribune*, March 9, 2004.

Edgar: No. I mean, he wasn't one of the leaders, but that doesn't mean anything when you run statewide. But he was also not from the black Democratic organization; he was from Hyde Park, which is a whole different thing. I think it helped him win statewide, but it didn't assure him that he was going to have the South Side of Chicago for him in a primary. Because they always viewed him somewhat as an outsider, and he was in Hyde Park; Hyde Park's a whole different ballgame to the rest of the South Side.

DePue: That's probably like being a lakeside liberal.

Edgar: It is, except it's on the South Side. (DePue laughs) It is very liberal and very independent. I didn't know Barack Obama well, but I knew him somewhat, and I thought, You know, he'd probably be a good United States senator. African American and all, bright guy, and he wants to go. I'd gone through this four years or six years before, and I wasn't really sure I wanted to be a U.S. senator any more today than I did then.

The big difference was 9/11. Because of 9/11, I felt that the Senate does have a real, important role to play on national security and foreign affairs. And while I may not personally want to do it, maybe I have more responsibility to do it now than I thought back in '98, when you didn't have that kind of problem out there. So that weighed on me a lot more than anything in '97 that said you ought to run. I had people calling, so I made a few phone calls around. I talked to some people that I knew could be with Obama, and I just said, "Hey, if I ran..." They said, "We'll be with you; we'll try to talk him out of running." This independent group out there that I thought I could appeal to—I didn't necessarily want to lock horns with Obama. I probably gave Obama more credit that he might be able to emerge as the nominee than most people did at that point in the process. And again, we're talking almost a year before the primary. This was 2003, and the primary wasn't until March of 2004. A lot of time, a lot of things change.

I got a call from the president, and he said, "I would like you to think about this. Now, I'm not telling you, you got to do it, but I just wish you'd think about it. I could use the help in the Senate, and you could also help me in Illinois in the election in 2004." We had been friends before. So I said fine. He said, "If you ever want to talk to me about it, you give me a call." I said, "Fine, I'll think about it." Then the Senate campaign committee people came out and talked with me; they were much more organized than I thought they were in '97 when I'd talked to them. They had answers to questions, and they were very candid and very good, I thought. But it was one of those things: every place you went, that's all people asked, "Are you going to run?" I mean, people on the street, so you knew this had a lot of traction. Guys on the street, who you didn't think knew about politics, knew this and wanted to know if I was going to run. We met with the guys on the Senate campaign committee. I still had the same concerns I'd had six years before: Can I afford it, because it's costly, expensive to live out there; two, would I get bored? I always worried about being in the legislative branch after being in executive branch, but I

also thought the stakes were higher because of 9/11. Also, the kids were all in Colorado; I'd be in Washington and it would be hard to see them.

Brenda and I talked it over. Then they set up the two of us to go have dinner with the president and Laura Bush at the White House. I said, "You don't want us to come if I haven't decided I'm going to do this." They said, "We really kind of want to be sure that if you're coming to have dinner with him, eventually you're going to say yes." They had a date all set and everything. I said, "Let's hold up, because I'm not there yet." The Democratic National Committee was putting out things against me to stir up the media to try to keep me from running. I think they questioned one of the corporate boards I was on about some of the things they had done. It's just all that kind of stuff, which didn't bother me, but it's just kind of a...

DePue: Did they resurrect MSI?

Edgar: Oh, no, no. I don't think MSI had a whole lot of legs. By that point, everything had been cleared up. No, Kemper Insurance Company had gone into run-off, and they had to cut out their pension plan and some things. They raised a fuss a little bit about that, which Blagojevich also did four years later. It was hard for him to make that stick, since it was his department that approved all these actions. (DePue laughs) You just thought, Oh, shoot, this is going to be nasty. That's what some of the press said, "We're really a lot nastier than we used to be." So for a whole host of reasons, Brenda and I finally decided we're not going to do it.

We were going to go up to Chicago and make that announcement. We were driving up that night, and we stopped at Manteno to get some gas and go to the restroom. Brenda was in the restroom at the filling station in Manteno, and some woman who she didn't know said, "Well, is he or isn't he?" (laughter) I remember Brenda coming back: "We've got to get this thing settled. We've got to get this thing over with." So I went up, and we did a press conference—in fact, at the University of Chicago's downtown campus across from the PR firm I was doing some work with—and made my announcement I wasn't going to run. I never did get that dinner with the president and the first lady. In fact, we never got invited till the last week of the Bush administration. (laughs)

DePue: That gets us through the preliminaries to the Republican primary, and the Republican primary eventually selects Jack Ryan. I don't know if there's much more of a story to that or not.

Edgar: Unfortunately (laughs) his last name was Ryan, too, which we had (unintelligible).

DePue: What a run.

Edgar: Yes. Jack Ryan was a very impressive young man; in fact, he reminded Brenda of John Kennedy, Jr. She'd spent an evening with Kennedy at a function in Illinois, back when she was first lady, and was always taken by how handsome he was. Jack Ryan kind of reminds you of John Kennedy, Jr. a little bit. He'd been a very successful investment banker at Goldman Sachs, was very committed to improving

education in the inner city. In fact, he had spent time teaching—he had left Goldman Sachs and was doing that. Just a very nice, impressive young man. Didn't know much about politics at all, had never been around it. I think was very sincere. He won the primary. Then Barack Obama won the Democratic primary because this other guy had self-destructed. Obama clearly emerged as being very articulate; he had good support among white suburbanites. He was the African American who could win white votes.

DePue: By this time, I would think, David Axelrod is one of the political advisors in his corner.

Edgar: He had been throughout, yes. He had been throughout. But he [Obama] had originally spent time at one of the big law firms downtown when he came to town. I always say people forget he's half—he was raised by his white grandparents; he's as white as he is black. He could move in that circle very comfortably, and people felt very comfortable about him. So his strength really was from white suburbia in a lot of ways, but he also got, needless to say, a lot of votes out in the African American community because he was viewed as African American. This other guy self-destructed over this nasty divorce with his wife earlier; all the things that had been said just killed his campaign. Hynes never really caught on. There was somebody else who they thought might, but Obama caught on and won that primary.

So I thought going into it that Obama definitely had the advantage, because he's a very good speaker; he's very comfortable in the white community. He's kind of like a Colin Powell. He's the kind of African American that white voters could vote for very easily. Whereas Jack Ryan, getting up and making a political speech was not his forte, and he had to learn a lot of things; still, I thought he was a credible candidate. Then it unfortunately came out about his divorce; they got into divorces now because of what happened on the Democratic side.

DePue: Well, it also had that peculiar thing where Jack Ryan had somebody shadowing Barack Obama wherever he went. I don't know if you recall that one or not.

Edgar: That's pretty common in all campaigns now, though. I don't think that was unique to that campaign.

DePue: Yes. But go ahead, talk about the divorce.

Edgar: It came up that he'd been divorced from his wife, who was a Hollywood star or something like that.

DePue: Jeri Ryan. She was a star on *Star Trek: Voyager*.

Edgar: Yes, it was something like that. Unfortunately, to get divorces, sometimes you have to tell things or claim things just to make it so you get... There were some questions about some activities they had had in Paris, France, where he had asked her to do certain things and go to some lounge or someplace that was questionable. All of which, anybody who knew this couple said, was completely turned around. He was

the most strait-laced, shy, kind of reserved guy, and she was a little more... And he'd created her career. They had a child, and he was very concerned about the child, didn't want to...

DePue: It's got to be a pretty short range, but a nasty little court battle whether or not to release some of those child custody records.

Edgar: He had always thought that they'd never release those, and you should never think that when you're in politics. If there's anything out there, no matter what, it's going to get out. Eventually it's going to get out. And he didn't realize that. Again, it was a little bit of his naiveté toward being in politics. So all this was brewing, and there was a lot of, Well, wait a minute, maybe we got the wrong guy on the ticket; maybe we need to... He called me to say, "All these stories are going along, but I want you to know there was nothing. My wife and I went to this French bar. We got in there, it was rather risqué, and we left. She cried—she was upset—and we left. There was nothing to any of these..." I said, "Okay, if that's it, you don't have a problem." The next day the press said, "What do you think?" and I said, "From what he explained to me, I don't see a problem." The next day these things got released. It was pretty vivid stuff, and it was obvious he had misrepresented what was in there to me. Now, not to say that he was all—but what he had told me was completely wrong, or he didn't tell me...

DePue: Why did he call you in the first place? Why you?

Edgar: I'm one of the party people the press comes to and asks, "What do you think?"

DePue: Was he or other people in the party still thinking, Maybe Edgar will get back in there?

Edgar: It wasn't so much that; it was just there wasn't anybody else in the party to go to.

DePue: Which is part of the problem.

Edgar: Yes. I was the person at that point they wanted to have my support and my blessing; they knew the press would come and ask me what I thought. Also, since I didn't run for the Senate, they had talked me into being chair of the Bush campaign in Illinois. I said, "Well, he won't spend any time here." "Oh, yes, we're going to spend time in Illinois," and all this and that. The people running the Bush campaign got me to Washington and got on me; everybody in the party said, "No, you're the one person we need doing this," blah-blah-blah. So okay, I'll do it, which I knew was going to be a waste of time, and it was.

The day after he [Ryan] called me was the day we were announcing that I was going to chair the Bush campaign. The RNC chairman was out here to go around with me, to make the announcement that I was going to chair the Bush campaign. Well, we spent the whole day talking about Jack Ryan, and I was defending him based off what he had told me. That night, it comes out what had happened, which was far worse than what he had told me. In fact, Christi Parsons—who's now at the

Tribune in Washington, DC and was the one who came over and covered me that first time—asked Eric Robinson, my former press secretary, “Jim and Brenda Edgar think this is normal stuff in a marriage?”³ (laughter) Right when I heard that I knew... So I put out a statement; I just said that what Jim Ryan told me yesterday is far different than what was released tonight.

He called me. I said, “Jim, that’s not what you told me. I was out there for the whole day defending you based off false information, and I don’t really appreciate that.” So he had that press conference. I don’t know if you were around then, but he did this press availability after the stuff came out. It was terrible. He had not thought through how to handle it. He thought they’d trust him or believe him or whatever; they didn’t, and it was a terrible thing. It’s unfortunate, because I am convinced that he’s probably not guilty of anything bad. I think he’s just the victim of a divorce case, and it’s unfortunate that he panicked and misled me and other people. But I think at that point he did the only thing he could do, and that was get off the ticket. He could have stayed on, but he’d have been humiliated, I think, throughout the campaign.

DePue: How far beyond the primary are we when he did that?

Edgar: Oh, jiminy. We’re probably in June or early July at this point. I think we’re at least in June. I could be wrong. I think we might have even been in early July. I just remember when we flew around to do the thing on Bush, it was hot, but it was before the Republican convention, because Alan Keyes was at the Republican convention. It must have been June, because I didn’t go to Colorado. I tried to get Kirk Dillard to do it, knowing that he probably wasn’t going to win, but he could make a credible race and build up IOUs for later. We thought he was going to, and then he backed out. Then there was somebody else I thought we had lined up. I got this call from Judy Baar Topinka, who was state party chairman, and she said, “These guys are nuts, the central committee.” (laughs) She said, “They want to bring in Alan Keyes.” I said, “Alan Keyes? That right-wing ...” “Yes.” I said, “Well, he doesn’t even live in Illinois.” She said, “You don’t have to live in Illinois. That’s who the Senate Republicans are pushing.”

Then Dillard, who’s on the central [committee]—I called him and said, “What?” He said, “I’m not there, but I’m telling you, I’m getting pressure from the Senate Republicans and from Denny Hastert’s office to be for this.”⁴ I said, “That’s the craziest thing I’ve ever heard.” I made a couple other calls, but Topinka didn’t even have a vote on state central, because she was the chairman but wasn’t a state central committeeman. Dillard had a vote, but it was already too far gone. So (laughs) they nominated Alan Keyes. Dillard voted against it, to his credit, and a couple others did, but most of them voted for Keyes. He is just, needless to say,

³ Parsons had shown up to cover Edgar’s first day of teaching for the University of Illinois at the Institute of Government and Public Affairs. Jim Edgar, interview by Mark DePue, November 18, 2010, 9.

⁴ Dennis Hastert (R-Yorkville) was a member of the Illinois House (1981-1987) before serving in the U.S. House (1987-2007). He was Speaker of the House from 1999 to 2007. *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774-Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=H000323>.

almost a greater disaster than George Ryan was to the Republican Party. He made outlandish statements because he was a radio shock guy, and I think he was trying to enhance his radio listening audience. Just one thing after another.

I have a guy who shines my shoes at Nordstrom, and he has for years. He's an African American, he loves politics, and he's very conservative. I mean, he probably thinks I'm too liberal. But he's a conservative Republican and he's black, so I'm thinking, At least this one guy in the state is really going to be happy with Alan Keyes being our nominee. So next time I was in Nordstrom, I said, "I bet you're happy with our nominee." He said, "You got to be kidding me. Keyes is crazy. Plus he's a carpetbagger." And I thought, Wait a minute, this guy thinks he's crazy and a carpetbagger; we don't have any chance. Needless to say, (laughter) we had no chance. It was a disaster.

On top of that, we had Keyes before the Republican convention, because I remember that's the first time I'd met him. He was sitting next to me, because I was vice chairman of the delegation. Judy got to be chairman because she was the state party chairman. I said make her chairman. I was sitting there, and he came and sat by me. I said hello and all that. The next day, he made some attack on Dick Cheney's daughter, who's a lesbian; he talked about how she's going to go to hell and all these things (laughs) and kind of took a shot at Cheney, too. I was just thinking, Oh no. Of course the press doesn't have anything else to cover but things like that at a convention, and I got hit by all the press about what do I think about this and that. At that point I just figured, There's no use on this guy.

Then Obama did that speech at the national convention, and I'm not sure I could have beat him after that. That made him a rock star. During that campaign, I had invited both candidates to come to the University of Illinois, not in a debate, but just to make an appearance. Obama agreed, so Obama came over here. It was like having a rock star. I'd never seen anything like it. We had it over at the law school. The place was packed; kids were hanging out on the rafters to see Barack Obama. Of course, he did a good job. Then I got worried. We knew we were going to have trouble with Alan Keyes. Some people were going to demonstrate and stuff if he came. Fortunately, he declined to come, because I wasn't sure (laughs) what I was going to do with him, but we had to offer. But he didn't come.

That was a disaster at the top of the ticket. I ran into Bush, and he said, "I'm not coming to Illinois. You guys are nuts out there. Alan Keyes?" (laughter) I said, "Well, don't look at me; I didn't have anything to do with it." So Bush only came in once. In fact, Pat Ryan had a fundraiser at his house; that's the only time he came in.⁵ After that, the whole campaign was to raise money, because he didn't want to get close to the Alan Keyes thing. They thought that was crazy.

⁵ Yet another unrelated Ryan active during this period, Winnetka billionaire Patrick Ryan is retired executive chairman and co-founder of Aon Corporation.

DePue: Were there any people who were mad at you because you hadn't taken that up; "See what happened to us afterwards?"

Edgar: Oh, no, I don't think they blamed me for that. I had people call me up later and complain, "Oh, you should have run, you should have run." I said, "If I had run, Hillary Clinton would have been president." (DePue laughs) That worked until Obama got into office, and then it stopped working; they said, "Well, we'd rather have her." But up till then it worked. They said, "Yes, that's true. I don't want her."

DePue: That was the carpetbagger argument: Hillary Clinton had proven that you can be a carpetbagger and win.

Edgar: Well, that's New York.

DePue: Yes, that was New York.

Edgar: That isn't what beat him. Alan Keyes beat himself. I mean, he was just terrible; just made outlandish comments.

DePue: But it wasn't a case where it was a combination of two bad candidates, and just see who could beat himself; Barack Obama clearly won that race. Would you agree with that?

Edgar: He was going to win that race, but he wouldn't have won that race with 70 percent of the vote. Against Dillard, he'd have won maybe 55–45. He wouldn't have gotten a free ride. I think he'd have been challenged a lot more. I think he'd have probably won that year, because Bush didn't do well in Illinois at all, and after that speech Obama was a rock star.