

Tip O'Neill on the State of the Union

ANNOUNCER: Welcome to Larry King Live. Tonight: Mr. Speaker — Tip O'Neill. The Boston Irishman who made a career as the man of the House sets his legendary political sights on the current scene. Now, here's Larry King.

LARRY KING: Good evening. We're back in Washington after last night's town forum in Pittsburgh and a week in Los Angeles. We hope you enjoyed all that programming. We're back in the friendly confines of our studios in America's capital city, the District of Columbia.

A quick note: Tomorrow night we're going to do a major story and program dealing with breast implants, and Wednesday night Cybill Shepherd will be with us.

Sometimes it's hard to believe anyone else could call the House to order. Tip O'Neill no longer makes the trains run on time on Capitol Hill, but he's such an icon — such a symbol of Government for the people — it's as if he still rumbles through those halls. Like Congress itself, the man is hearty, ruffled, entertaining, passionate, and never above a good ribbarb. When President Bush awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom two months ago, he called Tip O'Neill a tough partisan. Far more important, he is a true patriot. He'll be with us for the full hour tonight. We'll be taking your phone calls, if you want to talk with one of the legendary figures in American political history — the Honorable Tip O'Neill.

And on this very auspicious occasion, the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. — I know you knew him.

THOMAS P. O'NEILL, Former Speaker of the House: I remember I was there for the great speech that he made and I'll never forget it, either, because it was a tremendously hot summer's day. And Jim O'Hara from Detroit and Jim Roosevelt, who were members of Congress, got a bus, and about 25 of us went down and we sat right to the left of him as you look up. He came over and shook hands with all of us. I've heard a million speeches in my life and "I Have a Dream" — That was the greatest that I've ever heard. That was a beautiful, beautiful speech.

KING: Were you involved in making his birthday a national holiday?

Mr. O'NEILL: Very, very much so. I was Speaker of the House when that was made and Coretta came in to see me. Now, the question on how we were going to get it made —

KING: By the way, by asking "very involved," sometimes a Speaker can be very involved in something and sometimes he can —

Mr. O'NEILL: Well, I was very involved in this one. The question was — There was no question we could pass the bill. It was how you get the rule onto the floor. If you get the rule to the floor with an open rule, then they could attach all types of amendments around it and it would kill it. If you brought it in with a closed rule that no amendments could be offered to it, which the Rules Committee did at her behest and my behest — It passed and became the legal holiday.

KING: Are you surprised that Arizona as a state still doesn't celebrate it?

Mr. O'NEILL: Yes, I really am, to be perfectly truthful. It's kind of small on their part. I don't think that there's — I don't think it's racial. I think it's stubbornness right now more than anything else. But as a factor for the state, it must be costing them millions of dollars. It's stupid.

KING: Did you watch last night's town meeting?

Mr. O'NEILL: I loved it. I absolutely loved it. I've got to tell you, it brought back memories of me of 40 years ago. Forty years ago, I was speaker of the house in Massachusetts. The telephone rang, I'm in my office, and it's General MacArthur calling from Japan — and I couldn't believe it. Members of the Japanese Diet were in Massachusetts to study democracy and they went to the Boston city council. One of the members of the council, his son had been killed, and he ordered the Japanese Diet members out of the chamber. And they carried a big headline in Japan how they were rebuffed in Boston.

MacArthur called me. He said, "Will you take them into the legislature?" He said, "Would you tell them about town meetings?" So we took them for a week and every day we taught them how you operate a government and how you operate a legislature and how parliamentary procedure worked, and every night we took them to town meetings.

Well, some of them were open town meetings and some of them were those town meetings that members from each precinct — but I had a week with them and I saw town meetings. And it brought me back. There's nothing like the good old town meeting. It originated in Massachusetts. And you did a great job last night.

KING: Thank you.

Mr. O'NEILL: That was a beautiful program.

KING: They got up and sing it out, too.

Mr. O'NEILL: Yes, that was great.

KING: We've got a lot of issues to discuss, but one I wanted to mention to you —

Mr. O'NEILL: Sure.

KING: —because Tip was mentioning to me before we began that he watched Governor and Mrs. Connally and Frank Mankiewicz last week discuss JFK and the events of November 22nd, 1963.

And I know that you hold the seat — The seat you held in Congress was the seat that John Fitzgerald Kennedy held. You know him since he was a boy. What do you think happened that day?

Mr. O'NEILL: Well, two weeks before he went —

KING: By the way, did you see the movie?

Mr. O'NEILL: No, I haven't seen the movie and, really, I have no desire to see the movie. About two weeks before he went down to Texas I was visiting him and we were talking about the program, how things were going in the House. Things weren't going good in the House, as a matter of fact. He in this conversation said to me, "You know, my nominee — the nominee will be Goldwater and he'd bring us into war." I said, "Jack, what are we in now, Mr. President?" He said, "No, no, I'm going to bring the troops home as soon as the election is over."

KING: He definitely said that?

Mr. O'NEILL: Oh, no question about it. I put it in my book and, as a matter of fact, there were those people that questioned it. Now they have records where he wrote to the U.N. and they have found records that he intended to do that.

KING: Did you fear his going to Texas?

Mr. O'NEILL: I feared him going to Texas. I said, "It's ridiculous." He said, "I've got to straggle on the party down there." He said, "There's a difference between —" oh, I can't think of the old senator's name —

KING: Yarborough.

Mr. O'NEILL: Yarborough, who was a good friend —

KING: Governor Connally denied that. He said he was there —

Mr. O'NEILL: Well, that's what Jack said to me. The President said to me, "There's problems between Connally and Yarborough," and he said, "I've got

to straighten them out." Well, anyway, I remember the day. Of course, everybody remembers the day and where they were. I was in my office in Boston and Cathy O'Brien, one of the other congressman's secretaries, came running in. She had a word for me. She said, "I heard the President was shot. I can't believe it." I called the Boston Globe. I said, "Let me speak to Bob Healy," and the girl said, "Is this you, Tip?" I said, "Yes." She started to cry. She says, "He's dead. He's been shot." And so I'll never forget it.

I always believed the Warren report. I talked to Jerry Ford about it. I talked to Hale Boggs about it. There was no question. One day I said to Hale—I remember reading a piece in the paper they had found a stray bullet. He said, "That's probably so," but he said, "There's no question." He says, "The authenticity of the Warren report is absolutely correct."

Well, a couple of years later, Kenny O'Donnell ran for governor. I was with Eddie McCormick and he—Eddie McCormick defeated him for the nomination quite easily and he had the debt of \$50,000 or \$60,000. Well, I was a fundraiser and I was a leading figure in the party in Boston and Massachusetts in those days. Some of my friends came to me and they said, "Poor Kenny. He owes \$60,000. Can you help him out of the mess?" So we ran a fundraiser, got him off his \$60,000—straightened it out.

That night we went to Jimmy's for supper. Kenny O'Donnell and his wife, Dave Powers and his wife, my Millie, Leo Deal and his wife, and Joe Maloney and his wife. And in the conversation we started to talk about what happened down there in Dallas and Kenny said, "I was in the sixth car with Dave."

KING: He was.

Mr. O'NEILL: And he said, "I'll always remember." He said, "There was a bullet came over the fence. A bullet came over the fence." And Dave said, "I'm absolutely in agreement with you." I said, "You didn't say that in the Warren report." I said, "You didn't say that in the Warren report." I said, "You denied it. You said there was only one bullet." He said, "The FBI came to us. They asked us to tell that story. They didn't want to disrupt the family." I said—

KING: Now wait a minute. If that's true then—
Mr. O'NEILL: Well, no, wait a minute. No, let me tell you the rest of the story. So Dave said, "Absolutely, a bullet came over the fence. The FBI said to us, 'No, you heard echoes. There was only one bullet. And don't upset the family.'" So he said, "I went in and testified." I said, "I never would have testified that way in a million years. I'd have told them what I thought I saw, or what I thought I heard."

Anyway, it gets back—I'm writing the book again and I call Dave on the telephone. I said, "Dave, I'm going to put in my book on the chapter on Kennedy our conversation with Kenny and you. How do you feel about it?" He said, "Tip, I say the same thing today I said that night. That's in opposition to what I said to the FBI. No question I heard a bullet shot over the—"

KING: Then why don't you want to—
Mr. O'NEILL: So from that time on, I always believed that there was a conspiracy and I always believed that there was somebody else—
KING: Then why don't you want to see the movie?

Mr. O'NEILL: —and, as a matter of fact, Congressman Stokes did a pretty good job.

KING: You appointed that committee, right?

Mr. O'NEILL: I did. I appointed it.

KING: Stokes headed it.

Mr. O'NEILL: That's right.

KING: Stokes now has said, "Let's release all the materials." Do you agree

with that?

Mr. O'NEILL: Well, I'm for that. I'm for that.

KING: All right. Why don't you go see the movie?

Mr. O'NEILL: I just—You know, every time I see on television the President getting hit I get sick. I had a love and an affection for the man and I—

KING: So you can't go emotionally?

Mr. O'NEILL: I just can't—I just, really, I can't go emotionally.

KING: You believe there was a plot?

Mr. O'NEILL: Oh, there's no question that he didn't do it by himself in my opinion.

KING: We'll get a break and come back and talk politics with Tip O'Neill, and then take your phone calls. He's with us for the full hour. This is Larry King Live. Don't go away.

(Commercial break)

KING: This is Larry King Live in Washington. Our guest for the full hour is Tip O'Neill. In a little while, we'll be going to your phone calls.

OK, a new poll, CBS poll, out today said Bush's approval rating—President Bush's approval rating—is at 45 percent; an unnamed Democrat would beat him, but named Democrats still lose. How do you assess the presidential picture today?

Mr. O'NEILL: I'd say since they started polling back in the 40's I've been an avid poller myself. I go to Chicago. I go to Denver. I ask the taxicab driver. I ask the waiter. I ask the elevator operator. I ask—

KING: The O'Neill poll.

Mr. O'NEILL: The O'Neill poll. I'm in Boston the other day. I said to a taxicab driver, "What do you hear?" See, you don't want to ask him his opinion. You want to know what he hears. He said, "If the election were tomorrow," he said, "Bush couldn't win."

KING: Couldn't win?

Mr. O'NEILL: Couldn't win. And he said—

KING: Against anybody?

Mr. O'NEILL: —he said, "Everybody that gets into my cab—whether they come from Chicago, Indianapolis, no matter where they come from—I always ask them." He said, "It's a conversation piece." He said, "The President couldn't win." Well, that's one cab driver and I've asked probably—

KING: But that is not what you would have heard a year ago.

Mr. O'NEILL: Oh, my golly, after all, you've got to think that just a year ago this time at the end of the Persian Gulf he was 78 percent. We couldn't get anybody even thinking of running against him.

KING: Do you think he's beatable?

Mr. O'NEILL: Yes, he's beatable, and he's beatable—

KING: Not by any candidate, though?

Mr. O'NEILL: Well, he could be beaten by any candidate if it were immediately. He's got to straighten things out. I used to call it the "belly issue." People call it the "pocketbook issue." It's the same thing: How's everything going? You know, there's no confidence in the American people today. You need a new refrigerator? You're not going to buy a new refrigerator. "The fellow next door lost his job. We can't afford it. We've got to hold on." A new car—

KING: Why aren't they? It's befuddling a lot of people. Why aren't they buying the refrigerator?

Mr. O'NEILL: Well, because—

KING: They don't have faith?

Mr. O'NEILL: Because they haven't got any faith. They've lost confidence.