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Biographical Note
Neil O. Staebler (1905 - 2000) was the Chairman of the President's Commission on Campaign Costs from 1961 to 1962 and the Representative from Michigan from 1963 to 1964. This interview focuses on Staebler's role in Michigan politics, the 1960 presidential campaign, and John F. Kennedy (JFK)'s political legacy, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

NEIL O. STAEBLER

December 4, 1964

By Howard Cook

For the John F. Kennedy Library

COOK: Good morning. This is December 4th, 1964, and my name is Howard Cook, and I'm interviewing Congressman Neil Staebler, Democrat, of Michigan, formerly State Chairman of Michigan, formerly National Committeeman of Michigan, who was appointed to the Commission on Campaign Costs in 1961 by the late President John F. Kennedy.

We're going to talk a little bit this morning about the late PresidentJohn F. Kennedy and, Congressman, my first question might be to you: What is your first recollection of Jack Kennedy?

STAEBLER: He was elected to Congress just about the same time that Mennen Williams [G. Mennen Williams], was elected Governor, so my first recollection was reading of him and observing that some new person had entered the political scene in Massachusetts. But my first real contact -- not a personal contact but first involvement -- was in the 1956 convention. I had not yet met him at that time. But you will remember that after the nomination of Adlai Stevenson, Mr. Stevenson proposed that the convention nominate the Vice Presidential candidate. At that time, Michigan was very interested in Estes Kefauver and the moment that announcement was made, I teamed up on behalf of Michigan with Minnesota -- with Gerald Heaney, the National Committeeman from Minnesota -- and we worked through the night on behalf of Estes Kefauver. During the night we discovered as we were canvassing the delegations that the contest was going to be

between Kefauver and Senator Kennedy, that a third person involved was Hubert Humphrey but that he was going to be a rather slow third. And so our efforts during the following morning were in the direction of encouraging Kefauver people and Humphrey people to get together so that the Humphrey strength could be given to Kefauver. It was just that Kefauver was so desired in our state -- in fact, he had been a kind of close contender for the top nomination -- that we thought he would make a great contribution all over the middle west. And so we worked hard for his nomination and ultimately were successful, as is history.

A subsequent little follow-up to that was the Senator's remark after he was nominated. He appeared in Michigan at a dinner and with that nice Kennedy irony thanked Michigan for its work at the 1956 convention for Kefauver, and said that if we hadn't been successful,

then he might have been nominated to the Vice Presidency and carried down in the General Eisenhower flood, might never have been nominated for the Presidency.

Well, I didn't meet him until the following year when we had him -- that's 1957 when he first visited Michigan and spoke to the 14th District dinner. It was a speech of some consequence but at that moment we didn't quite think of him as Presidential dimensions. But we kept in touch with Kennedy as he grew in popularity and had him in Michigan on other occasions. The great stride forward he made in Michigan was in 1960 at the conference of the Midwest Democrats which was held in Detroit, and by that time -- early in 1960 -- he, of course, had become a serious contender and he made a very good showing at the Midwest Conference. He was one of the last candidates to arrive and the conference lasted some three days. And his impact on the Democrats from the fourteen states of the midwest was a very heavy one.

Michigan had been studying him very carefully. We had our own favorite son candidate, G. Mennen Williams, but Mennen had proposed that we also look over all the other candidates, and many of us were taking great pains to get acquainted with the candidates. And we had Jim McGregor Burns in Michigan, and with him we read the speeches of the various candidates, looked up their records and were very favorably impressed by Senator Kennedy.

A subsequent meeting -- subsequent to the Midwest Conference -- occurred here in Washington in perhaps June of 1960 when Governor Williams and I had breakfast with the Senator at his home -- on his invitation, of course -- and we talked again about the growing interest in him.

This finally took shape and blossomed in the endorsement of Michigan of Senator Kennedy at Mackinac Island. Now the time of that was somewhat influenced by Senator Humphrey who asked that we not endorse Senator Kennedy prior to the Wisconsin primary. And so we waited until the Wisconsin primary had been held, then invited Senator Kennedy and his party to Mackinac Island. This we did partly for dramatic consequences, for dramatic effects. Mackinac is a name that means a great deal in Michigan and there have been some other

conferences, political in nature, in past years that have been held at Mackinac and have helped to identify the event. The Senator and his party landed at the airport -- Pellston Airport, some twenty miles from Mackinac Island -- and were taken in cars to the boat.

COOK: Did you meet him there at the Island?

STAEBLER: Yes. Well, at the airport. And then on the boat on the way over to Mackinac, he and Governor Williams had an opportunity to chat alone and on the way back, similarly. At Mackinac Island we had an hour or an hour and a half conference in the Governor's home on the Island -- the state mansion as it's called. It's just a kind of large and elaborate cottage but beautifully situated on the bluff. And at the conference our effort was directed at trying to encourage the Senator to keep an attitude toward the Democratic Party that we thought had been beneficial in the '58 election -- a growing attitude in the country emphasizing the Party. We knew that his experience in Massachusetts had not led him to be very close to the Party and we hoped to broaden it. We specifically discouraged any emphasis upon people. Governor Williams did this knowing that it would be interpreted as an attempt on his part to assume some personal role in the new Administration. But he was keeping it wholly on the Party.

COOK: Was Robert Kennedy with the President at that meeting?

STAEBLER: No. No. I think these were campaign aides. I don't believe that Sorensen was there. I'm not very clear as to who the other people were but I do remember there were no members of his immediate family. And the effect of it -- well, let me add one more point we were trying to make. We were also very impressed with the work of the Democratic Advisory Council and were urging the continuance of it. Well, the Senator reacted on the latter point negatively. Said he did not see any room in a Democratic Administration for an advisory council but that he did look kindly on the idea of expanding the role of the Party. We wanted to have a greater educational influence and to be more of a year-round device for encouraging participation and party activity, and that we thought Presidential encouragement would greatly facilitate this. We were reasoning after the analogy of Michigan

where we'd had a very weak Party at the time the Governor was elected. And it had developed in the state and had accomplished a great deal in the way of stimulating the development of the two-party system. Well, during the campaign of 1960 -- I perhaps haven't emphasized another aspect of the Mackinac conference.

This was an occasion in which the Governor said Michigan and most of its votes would be behind the Senator. We couldn't say all because we didn't have a unit rule and we knew that some of our membres -- some of the delegates, a very few of them -- would be

voting for other delegates, a very few of them -- would be voting for other candidates. But the Governor had canvassed the delegates, knew that overwhelmingly they would support Kennedy and that proved to be the case. We had all but a handful of them voting for him at the convention, and the support at that time had some additional national impact in that we were one of the midwest states -- the liberal states -- the very first ones to take a strong position that helped considerably in the later development of support for the Senator.

Now let me move on to the campaign itself and to several events during it. First the Labor Day campaign opener in Cadillac Square -- now renamed Kennedy Square -- in Detroit.

COOK: Where President Johnson appeared this year.

STAEBLER: Yes.

COOK: To his largest crowd.

STAEBLER: Right. This had been the spot where President Truman had opened the campaign, and it was greeted by the Kennedy staff with just a little apprehension when we proposed it because they weren't sure what public reaction to the President was going to be. So the whole day was one in which the Kennedy staff people were watching with great concern. Michigan is not the demonstrative kind of state that some other states are. We never get the crowds in the streets that turn out in some other states. We vote pretty well.

COOK: You voted quite well this time.

STAEBLER: But we're not the great crowd state some states are. The crowd at the then Cadillac Square was adequate but sort of left a few doubts in the minds of the people on the staff.

We went on to other places in Michigan and ended up at Muskegon. Well, Muskegon resolved all the worries of the staff people. At Muskegon there had been quite some efforts. The crowds were never wholly spontaneous, you know. And at Muskegon there had been very considerable efforts to build up the crowd and it was very adequate. There were quite a few miles between the airport and the speakers' platform and they were lined with people, and people were very enthusiastic. This helped to reassure the President and his staff that reaction to him would be warm and friendly. His speech in all occasions -- both at Cadillac Square and at Muskegon and elsewhere -- the speeches were fine and led to enthusiasm. But there hadn't been, prior to Muskegon, the opportunity to see what the reaction was going to be. I think from then on the Kennedy people felt that he was going to get the warm kind of reaction in the campaign they hoped for.

The second memorable visit to Michigan was the one in which the Peace Corps was born. Now the idea didn't originate on the occasion of that visit. Senator Humphrey had

introduced the bill previously. But the enthusiasm that was generated gave rise to a chain of circumstances which led the President later on to push the Peace Corps. It occurred very late at night. The Senator flew in to one of the Detroit airports and was going to stay overnight at the Student Union at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. A group of cars got into the Union -- I think as late as 2:00am, and this was several hours later than had been anticipated. The President delivered a very short speech. The students were still there in force. There were 3 or 4 thousand waiting and they were very enthusiastic but he very wisely was very brief. What he said in four -- maybe five -- minutes of speaking was that he hoped students would dedicate themselves, would give higher priority to serving their country in foreign affairs, in fact in all ways, but especially in paying more attention to making themselves available for foreign service. Well, that led to such a great reaction, beginning the next morning, that it literally gave rise to the Peace Corps, because the next day a committee was formed to encourage student participation in foreign service.

This led to the formation of committees in other schools and other places. The report was carried back to the President as he went along to other cities, that it had struck a very responsive chord. And he used it again in his campaign, in the campaign in other places, and it continued to strike responsive chords so that during the campaign this issue was built up sufficiently to convince him and the public that there was a strong public support for the idea, and I think sufficient… Well, it caught on in such an adequate way that he and the public were totally prepared for doing something, and when he later announced the Peace Corps, of course, it took hold of the public and has been a great success ever since.

The building at which he made this speech -- this brief five minute speech in the morning -- the Michigan student Union has installed a plaque at the place commemorating that speech and calling it the place where the Peace Corps originated.

A third occasion is memorable for me in that campaign -- his last campaign appearance in that campaign in Michigan. It occurred at the Colosseum at the Fair Grounds in Detroit and he delivered a very stirring speech there. But what remains especially clear in my mind was the visit in the car afterwards going back to the airport. The National Committeewoman, Mildred Jeffrey, and I had arranged to ride back with him so we could talk, and we talked then about the Party and the commitment at Mackinac Island. But by then he had changed his mind on the Party and had reached the conclusion that the ambitious ideas we had for Party development and Party change were not going to work, and he'd gone back to the narrower ideas of his own Massachusetts experience. I subsequently taught politics -- practical politics -- at the University of Massachusetts and had an opportunity to see Massachusetts politics at first-hand, and it explained a great deal about his reservations about politics. But it was a keen disappointment to many of us that he didn't catch the glimpse we'd had and which we thought we had imparted to him at Mackinac Island.

COOK: Perhaps, Congressman, if he had had a national chairman…

STAEBLER: He had some very good ones but…

COOK: It was dedicated to that principle that if you were a state chairman it would have prevailed…

STAEBLER: Well, he had a good national chairman and I'm an admirer of Scoop Jackson and John Bailey. They did well but it was a different approach to politics.

Anyway, on that occasion he pretty much wiped out the commitment that he'd made at Mackinac Island and said he didn't visualize this kind of Party development, and subsequent events bore out his continuation of a much more orthodox development in the Party. Well, after the election I was away from the country -- went 'round the world -- and during that time, he appointed me to the Presidential Commission on Campaign Costs in which I participated early in 1962. But I missed the meeting of the Commission where they met personally with him, and had very little personal contact -- had no personal contact through the Commission.

But I began having more contacts in the 1962 campaign when I ran for Congress, when he came out again to help kick the campaign off. And on that occasion he helped Governor Swainson, who was running for reelection, and me by giving us top notch support. And that event is commemorated by a plaque in front of the Sheraton-Cadillac Hotel in Detroit -- his last campaign visit to Michigan. He might have made more visits to Michigan but the Cuban Crisis began to heat up and the Vice President agreed to represent the Administration. And even the Vice President had to cancel out when it got serious and I remember with vividness the hottest, the most critical moment, the very day when the Cabinet canceled all meetings and Mrs. Johnson came instead of the Vice President and helped the campaign along mightily at a very crucial moment in history and, of course, in the campaign.

After my election to Congress I again saw him on occasions, of course, one occasion being his appearance in Congress -- several appearances in Congress -- the State of the Union Message, and I saw them at various formal occasions. Never had the opportunity then to see him in the small groups, which many Congressmen did, due to several constellations. We had the invitations, all set to go, and the death of his son canceled one occasion, and the tragedy of November 22, another.

But there are some things that ought to be said about the Administration and I'd like to say them from the standpoint of a life-long liberal. I'm a New Deal Democrat with strong Jeffersonian thoughts and adherences, and I measure the progress of politics partly from the standpoint of the effectiveness of change. I, in this last campaign, had the opportunity to say that a liberal is not necessarily a person who believes in the greatest amount of change. In fact, maybe liberals are more conservative than some conservatives in the way they promote change and that we break up change into small pieces, are critical of the proposals and we

correct them in debate and finally weave them into the scheme of things with a minimum of disruption.

I think Kennedy was that kind of a liberal. He has been called a conservative but I found myself heartily in agreement with practically everything he did, and I thought that he made a very great contribution to liberal thought and to liberal progress. He had a very difficult time in Congress because of the nature of the House. The Senate supported him very well but in the House there were really three groups: the northern Democrats, the northern Republicans and the southern Congressman -- a hundred of them Democrats and ten of them Republicans. And he had to have a majority of two of these groups to get anything through the House. Now School Aid was passed by a majority of the northern Democrats and the southern Democrats, and later on the Civil Rights Bill was passed by a majority of the northern Democrats and the northern Republicans -- not during his lifetime but during the following year. And very frequently the majority of the northern Republicans and the southern group got together, as they did when they cut foreign aid, so that it was always a touch and go matter as to what combination could be put together. He secured a tremendous amount of legislation and this will be one of the great moments of progress in American history. I admired him particularly for his program of economic growth. I think this is crucial to anything we do in this country. We have to grow, and I think the sophistication and energy and the new programs he developed in the field of economic growth will remain one of the great monuments to him in American history. But along with that went the emphasis on social gains. I'm not going to repeat things that must

have been well covered by other people but there was this combination of the economic foundation used with social progress. In fact, often the two are interchangeable because many of the social programs had an economic growth aspect as, for instance, the Aid to Dependent Children -- a social program but yet it had the effect of putting several hundred million dollars of economic stimulation into effect.

But his great contribution to liberalism, I think, was his emphasis on lifting the standards of the country. Prior to him, I would say that we liberals had emphasized quantity rather exclusively. We wanted economic growth. We wanted development. He changed the emphasis to that of excellence and he put the emphasis on lifting personal standards and public standards. I think this, too, will remain one of his great contributions to our country and to the development of our people.

Now in the few moments that may be left, let me just add a couple of observations on the memory in which he is held. I shall never forget the moment at which I heard the news of his assassination. I was in an airplane just landing in one of the Detroit airports. The pilot announced one moment that he had been shot, and a moment more that he was dead. And in the confined space of an airplane, this had a tremendous impact. People were stunned. They gasped at the news and there was first that great hush when people were really unable to express themselves and then, of course, the murmurs -- everybody trying to comment on it and reconcile and get their bearings. This was sort of symptomatic and illustrative of what happened with people and the public generally. The public was stunned for several days. I

remember collecting friends and spending that evening talking and trying to piece together my state of mind, and they were doing likewise. And I think for three days people listened to the radio and television rather steadily, trying to compose themselves, and this was with very considerable difficulty. In fact, at the start they hadn't exhibited any emotion, but later they began to express it and there was a tremendous outpouring, of course, in many ways. Two of them will always remain

in my mind. One, the reaction in Congress. We were several days before we met again and, of course, when we first came together we were stunned and hushed. When finally we had the memorial speeches for the President, I think it was one of the most difficult afternoons that people will remember. As one of the junior Congressmen, I was one of the very last to be called upon, and I remember the many speeches made before and the various kinds of emotion they evoked and the recurrent pent-up feelings that were released by one speech after another.

But I think no memory will exceed the memory I have of the people who joined the throng who viewed the body in the Rotunda. We were living in the Capitol Hill at that time and my wife and I went out the few blocks over to the East Capitol to see the throng. We went first at eight o'clock, and at eight o'clock the crowd was four abreast, and we walked out to ten or twelve blocks to a park and the line had begun to bend back again. In fact, as we walked out we were part of a host of people who were walking to join the end of the line. Well, then, that night, perhaps between twelve and one, we went over again. We were receiving many calls from people in Michigan who were coming down and wanting accommodation, and we filled our house with students and others who came down. And at one or thereabouts we walked over again. By that time the crowd was no longer four abreast. They were perhaps twelve abreast. They extended from the sidewalk out into the street, and the line then went out to the park ten or twelve blocks and bent back. And we walked back and it was another twelve or fifteen blocks extending back toward the Capitol on one of the other streets.

The people just had to come to Washington to somehow be near the occasion and express themselves. Well, I have difficulty even at this late date retaining my composure and I suppose this is a rather common experience.

COOK: I would say so, Congressman. I think all of us feel the same way.

[END OF INTERVIEW]