

Paul G. Rogers Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 3/25/1968
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Paul G. Rogers (1921-2008) was a Representative from Florida from 1955 to 1979. This interview focuses on the 1960 election in Florida and legislation on support for the mentally handicapped during the Kennedy administration, among other topics.

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Oral History Interview

with

PAUL G. ROGERS

March 25, 1968
Washington, D.C.

By John Stewart

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEWART: So let me just ask you if you recall, one, when you first met John F. Kennedy, and what your impressions of him were, what type of relationship you might have had while he was in the Senate and you were in the House of Representatives?

ROGERS: Well, my father was in the House of Representatives before me, and I guess I first met John Kennedy when he was in the House of Representatives. He was a good friend of George Smathers, who was one of our senators and then in the House of Representatives, too. I met him then and was quite impressed with him. Of course, I did not come to the House of Representatives until after my father died in 1954, and I was elected in 1955. I then came to the House of Representatives, and I got to know Senator Kennedy and worked with him on a few pieces of legislation. Some were the Hoover Commission recommendations which we did get passed. One particular piece of legislation we passed. And, as I recall, his father Ambassador Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] had been a member of the Hoover Commission. So we had a very interesting time in working out this legislation, and I got to know him then.

STEWART: Do you recall any impressions, for example, in

working on the Hoover Commission recommendations, as to how involved he wanted to get in such things?

ROGERS: Well, he was very much involved in this. This was to bring about better budgeting procedures in the government, to put expenditure limitations and to bring about better management in government. He was quite interested in it. And I got to know Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] then, too, and I was impressed with his pushing the legislation on the Senate side.

STEWART: Did you know him well when he was in the House?

ROGERS: No, I did not. I really didn't get to know him until he was in the Senate. And he was always very friendly and very cooperative, and of course, the family living in Palm Beach was another bond somewhat.

STEWART: Do you recall, as the 1960 campaign approached, what your position was as far as the Democratic nominee was concerned?

ROGERS: Yes, I do. As a matter of fact, I think the Florida delegation basically had supported Lyndon Johnson at the time, particularly with George Smathers who was very strong for Lyndon Johnson. Certainly at the beginning.

STEWART: Do you recall ever being approached by anyone from the Kennedy camp trying to enlist your support?

ROGERS: I don't think I ever was really. After the Convention I did support the Senator. In fact I introduced Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] when he spoke at a meeting there in West Palm Beach for President Kennedy. And then I was with him when he made his trip to Miami -- the President.

I remember going to his suite at the airport hotel. Dante Fascell and I were there and Senator Smathers and Pierre Salinger. And he was quite upset with Pierre at the time because there was a picture of him and of

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Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] -- it was on the American Legion Convention that I think was soon to be; he was to make an appearance -- and it said that Kennedy refused to wear his hat or something. And this was not the situation at all. He just didn't have his hat I think was what it was. But he was getting on Pierre at the time for letting that get out that way. It was interesting.

Then we went down with him and went to this big rally, which was terrific. I was very impressed at the time, I remember. It was the first opportunity I had been around a presidential candidate to see how he operates to any extent. And I remember up on the

platform as we got there, everybody was holding on, and he just went down the line, holding his hands, just touching their hands briefly. It was impressive, the reaction to the crowd.

STEWART: Nixon carried Florida by a very close margin.

ROGERS: Yes, he did.

STEWART: Can you think of any major errors that you know were committed by the Kennedy organization that possibly contributed to that defeat in Florida?

ROGERS: Well, I think Florida has just moved into being a very conservative state. So I think it was more that than any particular error. I don't think there was necessarily an error. I think it's just a philosophical difference there.

STEWART: Moving on to the Kennedy Administration, why don't we move right into mental retardation, and then there might be some general questions I'd want to ask you? The Mental Retardation Facilities and, well, what later became the Community Mental Health Center Construction Act was considered by the committee that you were on. First of all, let me ask you, in general, what had been your position on medical legislation, such as this bill for the mental retardation facilities?

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ROGERS: Well, you see, I didn't get on the Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee until about... Let's see, when I came to Congress, I went on the Public Works Committee; I was on that Committee four years. So I then moved into the Interstate and got on the Public Health Committee. So I had not been on this Committee too long. I guess that would have put me on it in '60. So this was really the first type of legislation of this nature that I had basically dealt with.

STEWART: Well, let me ask you this, had you had any contact with the commission [President's Panel on Mental Retardation] that had been studying mental retardation for the year preceding the proposals by the Administration? What I'm trying to get at is just how familiar were you with the whole mental retardation problem in the federal government?

ROGERS: Just in a very general way, not a specific or great knowledge on this.

STEWART: Then the legislation, had you gone over this enough in reviewing it to...

ROGERS: I was very active on this legislation; I knew about it; I took a very active part in the Committee on it. So I was very much aware of the various provisions and also was on the conference on this bill.

STEWART: There were a number of parts of that bill that were changed by the House Committee, and then a number of them revised upward in the conference committee. For example, the construction of research centers, the Administration had originally proposed a five year, thirty million dollar plan, and the House cut it to three years and twenty million dollars. Basically, what would have been your position on that?

ROGERS: I think maybe I really was the one who pressed in the Committee for reducing most of these programs to a three year program because it was my

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feeling that in the short time I had been on the Committee, the Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee was losing a great deal of its jurisdiction and determinative abilities on programs to the Appropriations Committee. Therefore, I tried to push for three year programs, no more than three year programs, on every piece of legislation that we had come before the Committee policy on the House side -- and it's beginning this way in the Congress between the two committee -- that we generally will restrict them so that the legislative committee will have a review, an automatic review on these programs. So this was the reason that we went for the three instead of the five; also, it reduced the money figure, which was a very evident, at this time, concern of the public.

STEWART: But your main concern was the reduction of the years?

ROGERS: This is right, for legislative oversight and review by the legislative committee, rather than enacting a program, then you turn it over to the Appropriations Committee, and the department or the program is never presented again to the legislative committee for five, six years.

STEWART: And you had no real quarrel with the amounts that were proposed?

ROGERS: As I recall, I did feel that the appropriation figures, the authorized figures were too high, in going into the department's use of them and what they thought. This was a new program; they were beginning to start it; and I felt that they were asking for too much, too quickly. And I didn't think they could use it.

I might point out now, as you know, there were two, well, about three sections of the bill, as I recall. First was concerned with mental retardation, which is a different problem from the community mental health centers. The Administration, itself, only asked for construction; they didn't ask for staffing. Then they go to the community mental health hospitals; they ask for construction and staffing.

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Now there was great concern about the staffing provisions for mental health on the Republican side and some on the Democratic side as well. We wondered whether the federal government ought to get into staffing these on community levels. But secondly, too, we felt that here they hadn't asked for it for mental retardation, and if you're not going to have it here, why was it so necessary to start out until we know a little more about the problem with the community mental health program? Secondly, it was a construction program. Now there was no need for staff until you had the facility constructed.

So we felt we ought to get some of these community mental health centers constructed, and then go into the necessity for staffing. And which, of course, we later did and it has developed; community mental health staffing came, what, with the Congress later, I think -- two or three years later. And now, of course, mental retardation staffing has come.

STEWART: Do you recall wondering or asking why there had not been a proposal for staffing in the mental retardation and what the answer was?

ROGERS: Yes, I remember going into that because it seemed not exactly consistent as long as they had a construction program. As I recall, they felt they needed to do more in training people in teaching, so we put in a provision so that we would have a teachers' training program to deal with the mentally retarded.

STEWART: You mentioned that there were certain areas where you thought that funds were too much, considering the amount of progress that had been made and that they were possibly going too fast. Was it your general impression, getting into the whole area of mental retardation at this point, that they were trying to do too much, too fast, that they were going too far based on what the Panel had recommended, and so forth?

ROGERS: Well, I think this: From just dealing with the health legislation, generally, they usually come in and ask for far more than they can

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actually do within the first three years because so much planning has to go in. For instance, we gave them funds for research in university research centers. This is where the thrust of this program really was going to be.

STEWART: Right. There were ten....

ROGERS: Yes. As I recall, about ten centers. And this is where they felt they could really do some research, and children could be brought into the universities and hospitals and have research units there. And I think we went along with this fairly well. As I recall the figures, we were agreeable to an upping of the figure in conference. And, of course, this was anticipated, too, what would have to happen with the Senate. So I think generally the program was pretty well adopted for mental retardation, and

because so much had been done for the community mental health program, we felt something should be done in the mental retardation field.

STEWART: What kind of support, or absence of support, did you find among your constituents, or among organizations located within your constituency?

ROGERS: Well, I think generally you had a pretty good acceptance of this program. People generally don't distinguish between mental retardation and mental health so that it was kind of a conglomerate program as far as the public, I think, was concerned. But they felt that something needed to be done in this area. Now, you did have certain of your groups that are particularly interested in the problems that one heard from very specifically. I know they were upset that we had out staffing as a first part. But really when you explain to them that it's going to take some time to get these buildings, to get the plans going as to where they should be built, what should be done, that there was time to consider a staffing proposal later.

STEWART: Just how upset were the managers, or the people in the Administration who were directing, or trying to direct, the passage of this legislation,

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how upset were they with you in your attempts, and relatively successful attempts, to cut down the number of years on each part of this bill?

ROGERS: Well, I don't know that they were so basically upset. Of course, they wanted all that they had asked for, which is a normal reaction. But they did try through the Senate to reestablish certain figures, which was to be anticipated. But the House felt very strongly on this and did not give except in those areas to help reestablish some funds for mental retardation, as I recall, but we would not go with staffing. And as I recall, we kept it to the three year program.

STEWART: For example, the construction was reduced from the five to the three...

ROGERS: To four maybe, was it?

STEWART: No, to three. The university facilities were reduced from five to four: the community mental retardation facilities went to four, from five to four, and the House had proposed two.

ROGERS: Yes, that's right, this was the compromise figure.

STEWART: Do you recall who in HEW [Health, Education, and Welfare] or in the White House you talked to or dealt with primarily on this legislation?

ROGERS: I'd have to refresh my memory on that. It seems to me, maybe it was Wilson [Henry Hall Wilson, Jr.] and Ray [David B. Ray, Jr.] worked on mental retardation, and did a very good job

STEWART: David Ray on Dr. Stafford Warren's staff.

ROGERS: Yes, that's right. And Warren. But we saw more of Ray, I think than we did Warren, and I suppose Wilbur Cohen some, I think, a little on that and, I presume, the Surgeon General [Luther Terry].

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STEWART: In general, how would you rate the Administration's handling of this legislation as compared to other pieces of legislation that you may have been involved in proposed by the Kennedy Administration.

ROGERS: Well, I think they did a very good job on this because I think they built up a great deal of public understanding for the need for it. And they tied it in well. I think it was well done. It makes it easier where there is already a public acceptance to get into the legislative field, rather than having to go and educate and build a public acceptance. So I think they did a very competent job on this. And, of course, the President's own peculiar family situation in this area, and the great interest that the Kennedy Foundation had taken in this, I think was an added boost to the passage of the legislation. And, of course, Mrs. Shriver [Eunice Shriver] was very active in this, and Sarge [R. Sargent Shriver] too.

STEWART: Do you recall anything specific as far as what role Sargent Shriver played in the passage of the bill?

ROGERS: Well, I remember there was an indicated interest and a visit in showing the need for all of this, with Mrs. Shriver as well, as I recall. They both were quite interested in this.

STEWART: Am I correct now that there was no doubt in your mind as to the need, that they had definitely proven to you the need for all these programs and in the general size that they were proposing?

ROGERS: Well, I think this: I think they had proved that we needed to do something, that we needed a new approach to mental health. I was very much impressed, as I remember, and I spoke for this legislation on the floor. As I recall, we also....

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I was impressed by the fact that some of the work with community mental health hospitals that had already been established in various localities, like in Missouri, where they gave figures how treatment in the home locale without moving to a great state hospital was so much more beneficial, and the results were fantastic. I think they gave us the information that nine out of ten could be cured here; where you go to a state hospital, it's maybe three or four out of ten. I've forgotten the exact figures, but it was very impressive, the evidence of the cure that could come about from community mental health centers. And, of course, the mental retardation problem, the Kennedy Foundation had gathered facts on this that were quite effective.

STEWART: Is there anything else you can think of as far as the mental retardation bill is concerned? It was just that one bill that your Committee was concerned with, that you were concerned with, although there were other mental retardation bills that came up that year.

ROGERS: Well, I think this was the main thrust.

STEWART: Yes, that was the only one certainly that was...

ROGERS: And, as I recall, wasn't this about the last major bill the President signed?

STEWART: Right, it was signed late in October or early November.

ROGERS: Because I was present at that, I remember, and I have the picture of it here and one of the pens that was used. And, as I recall, that was the last major bill that he signed.

STEWART: Is there anything else then about.... Did you later receive any serious criticism because of your opposition to the bill in the way that the Administration had proposed it?

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ROGERS: No, I don't think so. No, I think we felt that we came out with a pretty good piece of legislation that got things moving in a realistic way. And I think it has since proven so. But it's beginning.... Some of the programs are quite slow in developing, much far behind what the legislation had contemplated, as I'm sure you know.

STEWART: Okay, a few other things.... Is there anything else about the mental retardation bill that you can think of that stands out in your mind?

ROGERS: No, I don't recall offhand.

STEWART: You, according to the White House files of visitors and people who spent

certain time with the President, accompanied him a number of times on trips to Palm Beach, I assume on weekends.

ROGERS: Yes.

STEWART: Do you recall, could you discuss generally how these trips came about, and what generally was the atmosphere? Did you normally see him when you were riding down? And do you recall anything about his...

ROGERS: Yes, he was very thoughtful, knowing that, of course, my home being in West Palm Beach. I'd often run into him somewhere or over at the White House sometime. He'd say, "Well, I'm going to Florida this weekend. Won't you come along?" And this is generally the way it would happen; or you might even get a call sometime, saying the President was going down, and wondered if you would like to go down. And he was always very cordial.

STEWART: You opposed the Administration on a number of fairly key issues, at least according to the *Congressional Quarterly*. One, do you recall

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the President ever talking to you about any of these on any of these trips? Was there ever any kidding about it or...

ROGERS: Oh, no, he never.... Oh, sometimes, he'd needle me a little, not much, but always very friendly. I remember one time, at a party at the White House, he was talking about going down, and I think Betty Beale was there and said, "I wouldn't let him ride unless he voted on a particular bill," something like that. And he said, "Oh no. I'm not going to say anything to him. I'm just going to shame him into it." But in a jocular sort of way.

STEWART: But there was never any serious...

ROGERS: No, he understood my district. He lived down there; he knew the makeup of the district, the conservative makeup; so that he was quite understanding. And I appreciated that. I remember going down with him. I flew down from Washington to Palm Beach, and he invited me to fly up with him to the Cape when John Glenn made his trip, and the President was going to present him with his medal. So he asked Dante Fascell if he wanted to come up from Miami, and Dante and I flew up with him from Palm Beach to the Cape, along with Prince Radziwill [Stanislaus Radziwill]. And we went back down to Palm Beach after the ceremony, after he presented Glenn the medal, and then we flew up with him on Monday when Glenn came to address the Congress. And I remember, when we got off the plane in Palm Beach with Glenn and we were going over to

the car with him, the President said, "You and Dante stick as close to Glenn as you can. This will do you good."

But he was always very thoughtful about including you in things. And after he was nominated... Oh no, after he was elected, he came to Palm Beach, as you may recall, and he asked me to come over to lunch one day. I was going to play golf up at Seminole, so I came back down from Seminole. And he had Speaker Rayburn [Sam Rayburn] there and Vice President Johnson in a group. And

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I remember when I came in, they were all at lunch out on the terrace there at the house. And he said, "Mr. Speaker, what does it mean when Rogers carries his area by fifty thousand, and I lose it by fifty thousand?"

But he always was one for just a slight needle, but great humor, and very warm personality.

STEWART: Do you recall anything of his attitude or his general approach to things during that transition period?

ROGERS: Well, I was impressed by almost -- which I guess would be natural, maybe it was in my own mind -- a complete transformation into the Presidency.

STEWART: Really?

ROGERS: Yes. Of course, I think this is brought about by all the surroundings, and the fact that people give this... But he was still very warm; he didn't change his personality. But just the whole surroundings, I suppose, of people addressing him as Mr. President -- there was a hesitancy to call him Jack, as you used to, and everyone felt the same way.

STEWART: Do you recall anything about his relations or his dealings with Speaker Rayburn that day?

ROGERS: Yes, the Speaker went fishing that day, as I recall. And the President had them there, and it was very pleasant. He was very warm to him, although yet, somehow, I sensed maybe a slight apartness, which I suppose it takes a little time to overcome. But I just got that feeling.

STEWART: You mentioned that at least the President understood your situation, as far as your constituency and so forth, as to the reason why you voted against a number of their major proposals. Did everyone in the White House understand it the same?

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ROGERS: No, I doubt if they did. Although I think a great number did, I'm sure there were some that would be upset because you didn't do everything they wanted. But this was to be expected, you know...

STEWART: Were there ever any serious pressures on you on particular things that you can recall by anyone on the White House staff?

ROGERS: Oh, I'm sure we had numbers of calls and this sort of thing, but I don't think any serious pressures, just a lot of calling, you know, we want this, we need this, and so forth, which is a considerable amount of pressure in itself. But I think no threats or anything like that, maybe because I think they operate according to the member. A direct threat would have reacted very adversely with me, and I think people knew that, that I dealt with. So this was not attempted.

STEWART: You never recall anything they did that you thought was quite unfair or that was unreasonable, any demands or any pressures they attempted to apply?

ROGERS: I don't know, there was some statement in New York, issued in New York...

STEWART: Right, that was in 1963.

ROGERS: I don't recall all the details. I remember there was an article in the *New York Times* saying there would be certain Democrats who would not be supported because they hadn't gone along with the program, or something to that effect. But this was not a great concern. As a matter of fact, at that time, in the constituency this would have been an aid rather than a hurt because of the political climate in my constituency. That's my second bell, I'm sorry.

STEWART: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]