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Biographical Note

Tree, New York political figure; member, Democratic Advisory Committee (1956-1960); member, New York Citizens for Kennedy (1960); delegate to the Human Rights Commission, United Nations (1961-1967), discusses her work with the Democratic Party, John F. Kennedy's (JFK) early political career before becoming president, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

MARIETTA TREE

October 22, 1969
New York, New York

By Dennis J. O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'BRIEN: I wonder if we could just start with the rather obvious question. When did you first meet then, I suppose, Senator Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]?

TREE: I met Senator Kennedy when, I think, he was Congressman Kennedy in 1952 at the Convention [Democratic National Convention] in Chicago. That was the Convention where Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] was drafted, as you may remember. He and I were exactly the same age, but at that time he seemed to me to look incredibly young. I couldn't believe that anybody who looked so young was an august statesman or congressman.

Well, after that time, I saw him from time to time because I was tremendously involved in local politics, state politics, and national politics—mostly as a volunteer worker. I was a N.Y. State committeewoman during that time, and head of research for the State Committee. Then, from '56 to '60, I was one of the few non-elected politicians or leaders of the party who worked on the Democratic Advisory Committee. Its purpose was to put the liberal ideas of the party before the people, especially of those leaders outside of Congress, because at that time we did not own either the White House, because Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] had it, or the press, because practically every publisher was Republican. It was therefore very hard for Democrats to get any attention at all. The Democratic Advisory Committee was a rather successful device at the time because a lot of the party brass were

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involved as well as a lot of the thinkers and doers. It was effective in that the ideas of the liberal wing of the party became dominant.

O'BRIEN: Who were some of the more important figures in this movement, this liberal movement outside of the party, particularly here in New York?

TREE: Well, here in New York, I would say that Tom Finletter [Thomas K. Finletter] was the leader of the Democratic Advisory Committee. But other people involved were [John Kenneth] Ken Galbraith [John Kenneth Galbraith], George Ball [George W. Ball], Arthur Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.], Paul Nitze [Paul Henry Nitze] and Dean Acheson [Dean G. Acheson]. Lehman [Herbert H. Lehman], of course, was a very important member of it. What was disappointing was that, apart from Senator Lehman and Hubert Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey], there were no senators; and very few congressmen on the Democratic Advisory Council. That's because Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] organized them all to stay out of it. He was the Majority Leader, and he wanted to stay the leader of the Party. Although he gave lip service to cooperation with the D.A.C. and, indeed, had to cooperate with it to a certain extent, still he laid the muscle on the others in Congress not to join it.

O'BRIEN: How did this group react to the campaign for the vice-presidency in 1956?

TREE: This was Kefauver [Estes Kefauver] versus Kennedy, wasn't it?

O'BRIEN: Right.

TREE: I can only speak for myself and some of those around Stevenson, like Bill Blair [William McCormick Blair, Jr.], and Jim Finnegan [James A. Finnegan], et cetera. As you know, it was Jim Finnegan's idea that there be an open race for the vice-presidency, since it was sure that Stevenson was going to be nominated for the presidency. He thought we had to get publicity and interest focused on the Convention, which would be boring if everything was known ahead of time. Just before the Convention and after a series of really bloody primaries between Stevenson and Kefauver, and (Stevenson won the important ones in Florida and California) Kefauver came out for

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Stevenson. He probably assumed he would be given either the vice-presidential spot or something important in the Cabinet should Stevenson win. It's interesting to remember at this time how optimistic we all were about Stevenson's victory. In any case, Finnegan and various other people in the party didn't like Kefauver very much, as a person, although everybody recognized he was an important and valuable Senator, responsible for many important reforms. He was brave as a lion, but he was a "loner". Looking back, I think he was one of the most important senators ever in the Senate because of his courage and because he raised

issues that everybody else wanted to underplay, such as investigation of the mafia, and investigation of the drug industry. Remember how many years ago he did it, and all alone. It's really quite impressive. He was also one of the few against McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy].

Kefauver was a marvelous public man, but personally peculiarly unattractive. He was unable to relate to many people except brassy blondes. He was generally so tired, poor man, that he went through political meetings in a kind of sleepwalkerish way; his eyes were glazed; he never could remember anybody's name; he got everybody mixed up, in fact, he had a little black book—which he left at my house one day, which I read with interest (I shouldn't have, of course)—giving all the names and addresses of his supporters, how much they'd given, who they were, what their wives' first names were, all of that kind of thing, which was strange for a man like Kefauver. It was the kind of book that Stevenson never had to have at all because he would know automatically who everybody was, and what their wives' first names were, as well as their children. And I imagine the same could be said about Jack Kennedy, President Kennedy. I'm diverging here a great deal.

O'BRIEN: Well, that's fine. Again, something like this—this project, of course, is an oral history project—is to acquire just simply observations and reactions of people to politics.

TREE: Is the machine on, by the way?

O'BRIEN: Yes, it is. And this is as much a study of you as it is, in a sense, the Kennedy Administration. So feel free to wander wherever you wish.

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TREE: It doesn't make me feel too free, that remark, but I'll do the best I can. In any case, to go back to the Democratic Advisory Commission, just before the Convention of 1960—I mean by that the spring of 1960—there were four or five marvelous candidates for Democratic nomination for president. They included Humphrey and Kennedy, of course, and two or three others. I think Muskie [Edmund S. Muskie] was one—could he have been?

O'BRIEN: No, that was a little early for Muskie.

TREE: Yes.

O'BRIEN: Symington [Stuart Symington, II].

TREE: Symington was one. Isn't it terrible how one forgets Pat Brown [Edmund G. Brown]. Pat Brown. I don't remember him as a candidate. And, of course, for the hardened Stevenson supporters like myself, we always thought there was a chance that there'd be a deadlock at the Convention between Kennedy and Humphrey and that Stevenson would get it. Well, that obviously was a great load of wishful thinking,

because I think now that after winning the California primary, Kennedy obviously had the whole thing sewed up.

All during these years, let's say from '52 to '60, I saw Jack Kennedy at various Party functions and sometimes at social functions. I think he was quite uneasy with women who were involved in politics. I remember him saying to Arthur Schlesinger once and later to me, "I don't know how to treat women politicians—as women or as politicians." I was staggered by this, because I knew lots of women in politics, and I think they just thought of themselves as people involved in politics and the issues of the day and would like to be treated like people. In any case, I think he grew more sophisticated as his orbit became national and accepted women politicians or women involved in politics in an equitable fashion.

In any case, I always liked and admired Jack Kennedy in those years. Although I don't think he was a tremendously active congressman, he was a very interesting one. He always had lots of interesting ideas. Do you remember that speech he made about freedom of Algeria? He was for Algeria becoming independent of France. I was in France at the time that speech was made, and all "the estab-

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lishment" there went wild with fury with Jack.

O'BRIEN: Is that right?

TREE: It's interesting when you think that a few years later they were all in the palm of his hand when he made that official visit to Paris. In any case, my French friends were purple and fulminating, and made me feel personally responsible for Jack's speech on Algeria. But I was terribly proud of it; I thought it was a great speech.

Also, he was here in New York a great deal one winter because he had that terrible back operation here. I remember Jackie [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] came to dinner once or twice, and I would send him books, and he sent nice notes back and forth.

He and Governor Stevenson always hit it off very well I think, up until the time he went to see Stevenson in Libertyville in the winter of 1960 and asked him for his support at the forthcoming [1960] Convention. Stevenson did not give it, because he'd given his word to a number of people publicly that he wouldn't support anybody, that he would not run himself but he equally would not support anybody. Now we're getting away from the vice-presidential race of '56.

O'BRIEN: In '56.

TREE: We were talking about Kefauver being personally unattractive but publicly a really remarkable figure and statesman and a very courageous one. A lot of politicians, therefore, did not like Kefauver. Certainly he was not a member of the "Club" in the Senate. A lot of politicians saw Kennedy as a bright young star in the ascendant, and in order to bring some excitement to the Convention of '56, it was Jim Finnegan's idea (who was the manager of Stevenson's campaign) that we throw it on the floor for an open vote and have a horse race. And indeed, it turned out to be a horse race. Actually,

I was sitting alone in some room with Finnegan, while the ballots were being counted, or when the states' roll call was being read. It was terribly exciting. And I could tell Finnegan was for Kennedy although he wouldn't admit it. I think that was Kennedy's first moment of national attention. And he never looked back, did he? He campaigned very hard in that presidential campaign in 1956. He went all over the

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country speaking for Stevenson. And thus he focused national attention on himself all during that Fall of '56.

O'BRIEN: Did Finnegan sense, or did Finnegan have any contact with any of Senator Kennedy's staff or Senator Kennedy at that point?

TREE: I don't know enough to say. I simply assume that he did. Because Finnegan was very close to Bailey [John Moran Bailey]. At that time there was a kind of trade union of Irish Catholic politicians of the Northeast, or anyway of the Eastern Seaboard, and they had a kind of shorthand with each other—which I don't think exists any more, perhaps because so many of them have died, alas, or just gone into other fields. But at that time they were terribly close supporters of each other.

O'BRIEN: What's the reaction, let's say, of the New York group that you're talking in terms of here—the reform group, the Finletters and in a sense, former Secretary Acheson—towards that group of Northeastern Irish (I guess the Massachusetts term would be "pol") political pols?

TREE: Well, you might think that they would all be conventional and scornful of the "pols". In effect this was not so. All of these men were men of experience and knew every single one of those "pols" very well indeed, because they had all worked together at various times, and all of them had a lively appreciation and deep affection for Finnegan. He was a most lovable man. He really tried his very, very best. He didn't seem to be ideologically motivated, but I think that deep down he was. It showed through. Everybody mourned him grievously when he died a year or so after the '56 campaign. Everybody liked Bailey too. He has a most delightful personality, combining shrewdness and loyalty, and everybody feels better when Bailey walks into the room with a joke.

I think the group was much more suspicious of somebody like Carmine DeSapio [Carmine G. DeSapio], who certainly was not part of that trade union. I remember going to some political meeting in Boston in the late fifties and sitting at a table in the Copley Sheraton Hotel with

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Bailey, Finnegan, Carmine, and various other party leaders. Carmine acted just like a little boy who wanted to be included in the group with the older boys, and they treated him rather like a new boy at school. At that time, I remember, the subject of discussion was how much

kickback you get from insurance, state insurance brokers. Bailey and Finnegan and all of them were very honest. Bailey would say, "Well, we only get 10 percent in Connecticut," or something like that. I don't remember the exact figure. And Finnegan would say how much they got in Pennsylvania. So then I said to Carmine, "How much does the Party get in New York?" At that time he was the Secretary of State to Governor Averell Harriman [William Averell Harriman] as well as the top party-leader in the state. And he looked as if I had mentioned something obscene. He said, "I don't think Governor Harriman knows about this at all." And I said, "That may be so, but how much do we get back anyway?" And he hemmed and hawed, but he was unable to be free like the rest of them about it. They considered him rather an outsider. I don't know how we—we're diverging a great deal.

O'BRIEN: Again, it's fine because the sort of people that will be using transcripts of this nature will be interested in the study of American politics, not only at the presidential level, but the way presidents are made. So really, anything you feel that's of interest in the presidential campaign, particularly the '60 one, whether it's from the viewpoint of a John Fitzgerald Kennedy or an Adlai Stevenson or Stuart Symington, as far as that goes, would, I'm sure, be something of value. In the campaign of 1960, particularly, when is it that those of you that are Stevenson supporters realize that the deadlock that you're hoping for is not going to materialize?

TREE: I didn't accept it until the day that Kennedy was nominated. Then I remember going up to Santa Barbara with Stevenson and a bunch of his friends, and I felt very sad, even though I admired Jack very much indeed. It's hard to understand now the depth of our feelings about Stevenson. We'd been working for him for so many years, and we had hoped fervently that he would be President—and that possibly because he was so well-known in the country that he would have a better chance to be President than anybody else on the Democratic side.

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However, he wasn't. I got back to New York about a week later—(in the interim, I had acted in the first and last film I've ever been in, a John Huston film with Marilyn Monroe and Clark Gable). By the time I got back, I was more or less accustomed to the fact that Kennedy was now our standard bearer and that he was a good man. I was asked to become vice-chairman of the Citizens Group for Kennedy. Tony Akers [Anthony B. Akers] was the head of that. I worked day and night during that presidential campaign of 1960. We had our offices down in the old Marguery building, and I worked on fund-raising, which is, the least glamorous and the most difficult aspect of politics.

O'BRIEN: But a very important one.

TREE: However, there was a great deal more money for Kennedy than there ever was for Stevenson, because I used to work on fund-raising for Stevenson as well. There was a great deal more money. I was staggered at these breakfasts that we put on for eight or nine big givers, that young men, I suppose hopeful for embassies,

would give as much as fifty thousand dollars at these breakfasts. Naturally, the money had to be spread about in different committees because you're only allowed to give three thousand dollars to each committee. But the money was quite forthcoming in comparison with '52 and '56.

I remember one day when Jack Kennedy came to New York for a day's campaigning and he dropped in to meet all his loyal supporters and workers at the Marguery. Jackie was there, too, very pregnant, and very beautiful in a mauve coat. They had a big drive down Broadway. And I remember being delighted and surprised to hear how well he'd done in the Wall Street area for instance. That seemed to indicate to me that things were going much better for him. During that campaign both Galbraith and Schlesinger, who at that time lived in Cambridge, spent a good deal of their time staying here in this house. So I felt very close to Jack Kennedy because they were seeing him and briefing him every day. They were his chief briefers before the famous television debates, and they went on the campaign plane with him everywhere.

I also remember a most beautiful day campaigning before the election at the beginning of November. We went all over New England in planes. The fall colors in New Hampshire, Vermont,

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and Massachusetts were beautiful. Again, I was impressed by Jack and his method of campaigning. Instead of being dissatisfied with his one speech, he used a variety of paragraphs, put together in different ways. He didn't feel, like Stevenson, that he had to make up a new speech for every little whistlestop. That seemed to me the most terrible waste of Stevenson's time. His small speeches were never printed in the paper, in any case. But Stevenson used to worry terribly over every little whistlestop. That meant he could never meet the local politicians because he was always working on his next speech, whereas Kennedy seemed to be enjoying this lovely procession through New England while he said more or less the same things, excellently phrased. Besides he met everybody, and was relaxed.

Again, I thought that these were very good signs about him. There were always such tremendously enthusiastic and huge crowds everywhere we went. Of course, this was his country, so to speak. But even so, it was terribly invigorating and exciting to see masses of people pressing into every public square where we went. And I'm terribly grateful to Jack to have asked me to go on one of these last days of the campaigns. It was a kind of reward for working in that kitchen and trying to get the money all those months.

O'BRIEN: Well, I'd like to get into that. First of all, was there much conflict between your citizens movement and the regular Democratic Party organization here in New York?

TREE: Well, I can't say that it was a very happy relationship, but on the whole it went pretty well because Bill Walton [William Walton] was the coordinator between the two organizations. But remember the regular organization was headed by Carmine at the time, and Carmine had never been for Kennedy, so Walton kept a

sort of precarious balance between the regular Democratic organization and the citizens committee. Sometimes Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] would come to town—and Bobby was in a very brash mood during that election—and would give absolutely everybody hell in the regular organization. I suppose he imagined that they were inefficient and slacking on the job. They were actually doing their best, but their best was nowhere near good enough. That's probably the first time that Bobby realized

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that the organization was not efficient. In any case—we won New York State, didn't we? That was the key, obviously, to a Kennedy victory.

O'BRIEN: How did you organize the citizens movement here in New York? Was it organized along geographic lines or ethnic lines?

TREE: We organized along ethnic and professional lines. Geographic lines define the Democratic organization. Of course, we had offices in all the five boroughs, and a great many activities and workers, especially canvassers. But mostly we staged occasions such as rallies when either of the candidates would come to town for President or Vice President. But I think we were useful for raising money and for creating excitement, for getting public attention focused on the campaign and, of course, trying to involve more and more people and their enthusiasm in the work and in the election.

O'BRIEN: You were talking in the beginning about fund raising and the comparative success that you'd have in fund raising. Might I ask where the money was coming from? Where were you....

TREE: The kind of people who would give money to the citizens committee were people generally of the liberal persuasion, non-organization. Therefore, we didn't get any money from contractors, but from certain unions, such as the Clothing Workers Unions, both the AFL [American Federation of Labor] and CIO [Congress of Industrial Organization], that is Dubinsky [David Dubinsky] and Rose [Alex Rose], I think, but they would probably funnel theirs straight through the Liberal Party, as a matter of fact. Oh no, Potofsky [Jacob Samuel Potofsky] probably funneled his money through us. Not many unions did, however. Mostly they would go direct to Kennedy, or they would perhaps go through the Democratic organization.

O'BRIEN: Do you recall any particular individuals?

TREE: These were mostly liberal, wealthy individuals in New York, and they are the backbone of the liberal

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movement in the country. They really support practically all the liberal

Congressmen and Senators and the liberal nominees for president.

O'BRIEN: Who were some of these people in 1960? Do you remember?

TREE: Well, I would imagine that some of the biggest givers—and it's hard for me to remember who they were—were people like Mary Lasker, not Ruth Field because she always was an anti-Kennedyite (I'm not quite sure why), Bob Dowling [Robert W. Dowling], Bob Benjamin, Arthur Krim [Arthur B. Krim]. They in turn had a group of friends, businessmen, who would contribute to them. I remember getting pretty large sums from all of the former Stevenson supporters, such as Hochschild [Harold K. Hochschild] or Walter Hochschild, Agnes Meyer [Agnes E. Meyer] and her children. It's now nine years ago, and I can't remember. But we put on several large dinners where people would be asked to come forward and say how much they had given, and also quite a few breakfasts of nine or ten people where really big sums were handed over at the rate of fifty thousand dollars a person and sometimes more. I'm ashamed to say I can't remember who all those people were. But I'm sure Bob Benjamin and Arthur Krim could tell, you.

O'BRIEN: I think that some time in the future one of the people in our project is going to do an interview on New York politics in the Kennedy period. So I think this would be very helpful.

TREE: Of course, Bill Walton would be the key person to interview on this as well as Tony Akers.

O'BRIEN: Did you have any tensions or any problems in convincing some of the loyal Stevensonians in the fifties in making the transition...

TREE: Yes. It would be fair to say that we did, right up to the middle of the campaign. We had a difficult time too, to persuade them to come over and contribute to Kennedy. I don't think any of them ever thought they'd vote for Nixon [Richard M. Nixon], but I think that a lot of them

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felt that they wouldn't vote at all. I think we persuaded most of them to vote for Kennedy, and we even were able to get some money out of some of them. A lot of the people involved were not necessarily strong supporters of Stevenson, although they had supported him and given him money. But they were terribly nervous about Joe Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.]. They felt he was very anti-Semitic. And these Jewish liberals who are the best people in New York, not only support all the liberal candidates here and throughout the country, but they also support all the important hospitals, charities, and good works of every kind. They are the most important people in this town for getting good things done. They were very nervous about Joe Kennedy, and as they didn't know Jack, they thought that somehow or other he would have influence on his son. There's no reason to suppose that he didn't at that point. So that was one of the strongest elements that we had to combat.

O'BRIEN: Who were some of the leaders among the wealthy liberal Jewish Democrats?

TREE: Well, I'll tell you. At that time Herbert Lehman was the leader of the group, and he was never very pro-Kennedy. His whole extended family and friends are the leaders of this Jewish liberal group. They are immensely public-spirited and rich and generous.

O'BRIEN: Well, let's pass on to your appointment unless—is there anything else you recall on the citizens movement?

TREE: No, no.

O'BRIEN: Let's pass on to your appointment to the United Nations. When did you first realize that you were going to be appointed to a post in the United Nations?

TREE: Well, now that it's so many years ago, I guess I can say that Stevenson first told me that he wanted me for the Human Rights post in the United Nations and that he was sure that it would be all right with the President

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because I think that the President gave him more or less a free hand with his appointments at the U.S. Mission at the U. N.

I must interject here: I went down to Washington for the inauguration and stayed with Bill Walton at that time. I remember the day before the inauguration, in fact the moment that I arrived at his house, there seemed to be a lot of flurry outside. I went in and there was Jack—I must call him Jack because that's the way I thought of him at the time—about to sit down to lunch in front of the fire with Bill Walton, and with Rowley Evans [Rowland Evans, Jr.]. And I was so overcome with the excitement of seeing our new young President. I said to him, "Oh, Jack, I'm so proud to have you as the President." And without the flicker of an eyelash he said, "I'm very proud to have you as a citizen." That was very sweet of him.

In any case, a day or so later, perhaps it was even a week after the inauguration, I went to a dinner party at Senator Cooper's [John S. Cooper], where were the President and Jackie. It was then that the President said to me, " You know we'd like to have you in the U.N. Human Rights position." I was tongue-tied, and very excited. I can't remember my response, but it must've been a fuzzy one because I didn't know if he was telling me, or if he was asking me if I wanted it or what. But in any case, he did mention this briefly as he left the house. So then, a couple of weeks later when I was in Barbados, I got a cable from Stevenson saying, "You have now been nominated by President Kennedy, as Commissioner of Human Rights, U.S."— not Commissioner, I'm sorry, "U.S. Representative to the Human Rights Commission." The session begins at such and such a time. You are to come back to be confirmed by the Senate."

I was very hesitant about taking the job because I didn't feel that I was worthy of it. I didn't feel that I was equipped for it. But Stevenson said, "Oh nonsense, of course you can

do it." And I'm very grateful to him for this, amongst other things. He was always saying to me when I said I didn't think I could do something possibly; "Of course you can. Now just get up there and do it." I was sort of pushed off the diving board, so to speak, several times by him. And I'm very grateful because I finally did learn to swim in various pools. In any case, I think the reason why I was suggested by Stevenson and appointed by Kennedy was not only a personal relationship—although I'm sure that played a small part—but

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because I had been working in the field of civil rights and in politics in this country since 1943. In fact, a group of us established the first inter-racial hospital in the United States at a time when it was not at all fashionable to work in civil rights. In fact, because of it most of my friends thought I was a Communist. We had a difficult time in establishing this interracial hospital Sydenham. The board was integrated as well as the doctors and nurses staff for the first time in United States history. I had worked in civil rights all during the forties and fifties for the Urban League, where I was a director, and also for the National Commission against Discrimination in Housing as director, et cetera.

In 1957, Mayor Wagner [Robert Ferdinand Wagner, Jr.] appointed me Commissioner of Human Rights of New York City. That was an unpaid job, and the Commission numbered about twelve people, but it was the strongest human rights enforcement agency in the country. We had the right of subpoena long before all the other civil rights commissions of government. We were quite effective in the field of housing, although we didn't dare tackle subjects such as getting blacks into the labor unions.

After a few years of working full-time in the civil rights movement, I realized that we weren't going to get very far at changing the minds and hearts of men by persuasion, and that laws were more effective ways of getting integration and equality for all our citizens. That is what impelled me to work so hard in politics, because often a party platform becomes law when the party gets into power. And of course, the Democratic platform was very strong on civil rights beginning in 1948.

O'BRIEN: Did you have any role to play in the Platform Committee in 1960?

TREE: Yes. I was on the civil rights committee of the Platform Committee of 1960 of which Mrs. Roosevelt [Eleanor R. Roosevelt] was chairman.

O'BRIEN: Would you care to go into some of the things you recall out of that?

TREE: I'm afraid my mind is a bit hazy on this. I do remember meeting several times, and I do remember our writing

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a good strong civil rights plan, and I remember that we got it accepted at the Convention without too much trouble, but I don't remember any particular details about it. I remember Neil Staebler was on this committee. I think he was the director of it, and did most of the

work. Eleanor Roosevelt was the leader of it, and our great inspiration. But don't remember any particular incidents because it seemed a matter of course that we would have a strong civil rights plan.

O'BRIEN: A little while later I'd like to—come back to this, particularly when you deal with—and I would suspect that you had some dealings with it—the problems of, particularly, African diplomats in New York community.

TREE: Yes, you know, the way we're going, I can talk to you for about five more hours. The trouble is I've got someone coming for lunch at one. Perhaps we could go to my office. Meet at my office this afternoon.

O'BRIEN: That would be fine. I get up to New York other times.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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