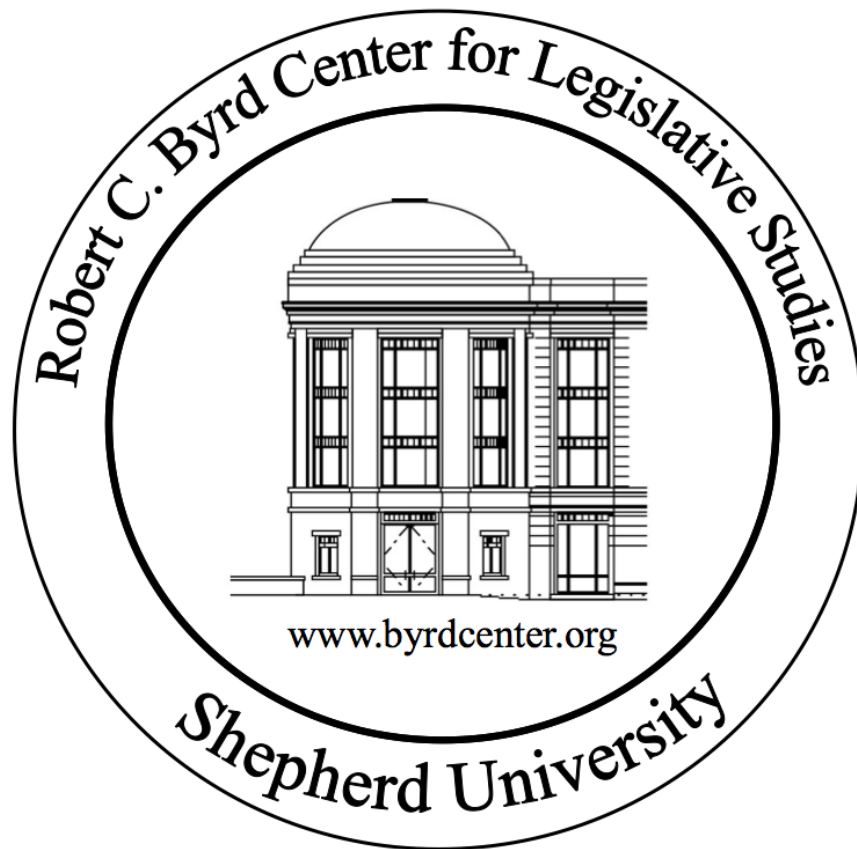


Robert C. Byrd Legacy Project
Oral History Interview
Congressman Harley O. Staggers

October 3, 2012



Preface

by Keith D. Alexander

Harley O. Staggers, Jr. served in the United States House of Representatives from West Virginia's second congressional district from 1983 to 1993. Though politics was in his blood—his father, Harley Staggers, Sr., represented West Virginia in Congress for sixteen terms—he did not start out wanting to be a politician, planning to become a professional athlete. Instead, he attended Harvard University, then the West Virginia School of Law, where he received his JD in 1977.

In this interview, conducted by Alan Sturm in Staggers's office in Martinsburg, West Virginia, Congressman Staggers recounts his interactions with Senator Byrd, from his earliest memories of Senator Byrd visiting his father to Senator Byrd dancing to bluegrass music at Staggers's first Washington fundraiser to learning the hard way not to speculate about Senator Byrd's future plans.

After West Virginia lost a congressional seat following the 1990 census, Congressman Staggers ran again for Congress, this time unsuccessfully. He then returned to his law practice of Staggers & Staggers, where he remains a partner. He lives in Keyser, West Virginia.

Since the Byrd Center archives holds the congressional papers of Harley Staggers, Jr. and those of his father, Harley Staggers, Sr., the second half of the interview explores some of the son's observations about his father's career.

About the interviewer: Alan Sturm is a retired educator, former teacher, principal, and assistant superintendent of Upshur County Schools. He also served for two terms on the Jefferson County Board of Education. He has a BA in history from West Virginia Wesleyan and an MA in Public School Administration from West Virginia University. He has made the study of West Virginia political history his lifelong hobby, and he has been working to collect interviews for the Robert C. Byrd Oral History Project since July 2012. He lives with his wife, Libby, in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

Interview #1
Wednesday, October 3, 2012

Sturm: Today is October 3, 2012. I'm Alan Sturm. I'm working with the Robert C. Byrd Center for Legislative Studies on the oral history segment of the Robert C. Byrd Legacy Project. Today it is my pleasure to be speaking with former Congressman Harley O. Staggers, Jr. Mr. Staggers served five terms as West Virginia's representative from the Second Congressional District. He's currently a partner in the law firm of Staggers & Staggers. We are speaking today in Mr. Staggers's Martinsburg office.

Congressman Staggers, first I want to thank you for taking the time to do this interview.

Staggers: Sure.

Sturm: As you know, this session is being recorded.

Staggers: I do.

Sturm: Is that all right with you?

Staggers: It's all right.

Sturm: I'm going to ask questions today which will deal with two individuals. First I'm going to ask you some questions about Senator Byrd. Some will be based on your personal observations of the senator, and others may be more speculative and be based on a combination of your knowledge of the senator and your knowledge of West Virginia and congressional politics. The second set of questions will be about your father, Harley Staggers, Sr. Let's begin by having you tell us a little bit about yourself and your background.

Staggers: Well, I'm not sure how much you want to get into my background, but I grew up in Keyser, West Virginia, went to Harvard University, then back to WVU Law School. Started practice in the Attorney General's Office in Charleston as an assistant in consumer protection. My brother and I did open up a law practice, and it's still in existence.

I was a candidate for Congress in 1980, I guess for the '80 term, and lost that term, but state Senator Bill Oates died in a car wreck, and so I was appointed by the governor to run in his position. I actually was appointed as state senator for two months. I was fortunate enough to win that election. That was when the senatorial district was, I think, eight counties, so it was much larger. It went from Berkeley County that we're in today all the way over to Hardy County. I served two years in the state senate.

This is, I guess, the first connection I had with Senator Byrd. Cleve Benedict, who had won, had beat the guy who beat me, for some reason decided to run against Senator Byrd, which

left the seat open again. So I ran for Congress two straight times and then beat a gentleman from Buckhannon, who spent a lot of money.

But that's when I went into Congress. We'd lost population in West Virginia. We went from four congressmen to three congressmen. We went through a very contentious redistricting fight. I would probably still be in Congress, but the Senate vote was tied, which meant that they couldn't move forward with it. The district would have kept most of the counties that I represented.

I don't know what happened after that, but I do know that the other three congressmen got together and they came up with a plan where they took about—and you have to give them credit too—it took about a third of my district and put it in each one of their districts, which probably if I'd been wise, I could have saved money and maybe political capital and just not run. But I chose to run anyway from my home country and lost and went back into the practice of law.

Sturm: Had politics been a goal of yours when you were growing up, with your father being in Congress and everything?

Staggers: Actually not. I mean, I had been around it all my life, and I guess I'd seen not only the positive stuff, but I'd seen the negatives. I mean, I had seen the things that my father had to do and I'd seen what people had done to him too. I can remember riding in a parade in Winchester with my father when I was a teenager, and some guy just cussing him and stuff. I was ready to jump out of the car, and he just smiled and waved. I thought, "I don't know how he does that type of stuff."

So I was interested in politics, because you can't not be interested if you're around the kitchen table talking politics, so I was interested in it. I can remember when it really came down to making a decision, a Republican lawyer, Johnny Rogers from Keyser, put it in a different way. He said, "Why wouldn't you run?" And I really couldn't give him an answer why I wouldn't run. You know, typically people ask you, "Why are you running?"

The other strange thing, having a degree from Harvard and a degree from WVU, it would appear as a résumé type thing that I would have been well qualified to serve in Congress, but I was always attacked because I had a Harvard education, which I guess in a rural area might be a negative. But that's politics. I probably couldn't have adapted to that if I had not seen my father, so there were a lot of positives.

But, no, it wasn't one of my goals. Actually, when I was growing up, probably what a lot of kids say, growing up, I always thought, well, you know, I could be an NFL football player or an NBA basketball player. Those were my goals. Yes, I guess everybody wants to be rich and famous. But it's like with sports, a lot of athletes want to be, but they just don't put effort in, and I guess I knew in politics it was a lot of hard work, because I saw what had to be done, so that

may have been on the list in my subconscious someplace, but, no, I was like every other kid growing up, I thought I'd be in the NBA or the NFL.

Sturm: It sounds like even with your dad in Congress you had a pretty normal childhood then, at least as far as your goals and aspirations are concerned.

Staggers: Well, I think it's one of the reasons that he served the way he did, is that we grew up not in DC, which a lot of families did, of members of Congress. But, yes, we had to go through that. I guess I've heard comedians talk about this, is that I always thought we were poor. My parents grew up in the Great Depression. A family story that I'll share with you, I hated squash because we had a garden and we had squash every which way you could think about. We'd have it for breakfast and lunch and dinner, and I just got so sick of squash. But that's what families did. It was a different time.

But, yes, I didn't grow up differently, so I can only speak from what I experienced. But because of my parents, we were never at a point where we thought we were better than anybody else. I can remember, speaking of sports, being envious of the rich kids that had the nice baseball gloves, and I had the Sears glove.

Sturm: Mine was Western Auto. [laughter]

Staggers: Yes, it was a good experience. I'm glad my father did that. In fact, when I was in Congress we had to make that decision, and for the early years of my children's lives we did have them in Washington, but my wife and I decided soon is that she would come back here. Of course, then the circumstances dictated that we be back there anyway. So I'm glad I grew up the way I did.

Sturm: I think it probably did a lot to mold your character.

Well, let's move on to Senator Byrd a little bit. How did you first come in contact with Senator Byrd?

Staggers: The earliest memory I have of Senator Byrd would be at our house out on the porch when he was there. He was in Keyser, and my dad was there, and I just knew that there was this famous senator coming in, and shaking his hand. Being a young kid, I didn't know what a senator was. That's my earliest memory of him.

Of course, my dad running every two years and, of course, the senator running, his terms were different, but I sometimes would have to go to political events because we didn't have babysitters and stuff. We'd all get in the car and drive to things. My earliest memories of politics and political events were they were boring, but I can't tell you that I have any real clear early memories of Senator Byrd playing the violin or anything like that, but that was my first exposure.

I guess being in a political family and seeing how hard my dad worked, I always had a little bit of respect for politicians, but then growing up in the sixties and seventies, you couldn't not be exposed to media where some of the politicians, the human part of what they did came into the forefront of the media. I don't know, I guess that helped shaped everybody but my dad's thinking that, "Well, some of these politicians are doing stuff that they shouldn't be doing."

I never really actually thought about Senator Byrd much. I do know that there were the stories about how he would call people on the phone late at night from six to nine. I thought, "What a great way to convince people that you're working." But I, until I was elected, I never really had any kind of close relationship with him.

Sturm: How well do you feel over the years that you knew him?

Staggers: As I said, up until I was elected, I didn't know him at all. It was just basically, I guess, the perception that he was trying to present to the public, and I was just part of the public, even though my father was in Congress with him.

One big surprise, the biggest surprise for me, with Byrd, as a freshman, you try—I mean, they have teaching and seminars and stuff, and they tell you how important fundraising is, at least back then they did, and how important it is if you can get senior members of your delegation to attend, and if you're really lucky, you might be able to get one of your senators to come. My first fundraiser, in trying to be true to my roots, I had some bluegrass musicians from my district that came down to Washington to present the entertainment for my fundraiser. Nick Rahall was the only senior member of our [delegation] and of course he dropped by, but he had to leave.

Senator Byrd came and pretty much stayed. [laughs] And not only stayed, but participated. He didn't get up and perform, but I can remember him doing the simple buck step for bluegrass dancing. First of all, it surprised me that he would stay, because we weren't close, and thinking that his time is—I'm sure his staff was probably going crazy that he spent so much time at my fundraiser. But that was the first time I really had any personal perception that this guy might be different than what I had put him in, category, as just another politician. So that was my first.

Another time that I remember very vividly is, again, my first term in Congress in talking to the media, I thought I was media-savvy, which I realize now I was not, at least in addressing media and taking questions, but I didn't know who was asking the question, but somebody from the media was asking me about there was rumors that Senator Byrd was going to retire. Being a freshman down in Congress, I said, "Well, it's a possibility." I could say that with so many years he'd been in, he might want to do that. Of course, my dad had just retired, too, so from my personal experience it seemed logical to me.

But I got a phone call from the senator asking me to come over and have lunch. I just assumed it was going to be a delegation luncheon, and I show up and I'm the only one there. We sat down in his office and had lunch, and I'm thinking, "This seems a little odd to me." I mean, like I said, I wasn't that close to him. We just talked generally for about an hour.

When he got called to a vote, I guess it was, when he had to leave and lunch was over, he stopped and he said—I guess he called me "Harley," I can't remember exactly, but he said, "I just want to let you know I read in the paper where you thought that I might be retiring. I just want to let you know I'm not." [laughter] Once again, he took an hour of his busy schedule to make sure that I knew.

So from then on, no matter what the speculations were, any reporter that ever asked me, I would tell them that story and just say, "I will never speculate about Senator Byrd."

Sturm: Understandable. [laughs]

Staggers: But he made his point. He made his point, and he could have done it a lot of different ways. You hear stories about delegations and politicians, and he could have just called me up and yelled at me. He did it in, as I said, a very gentlemanly way, and I guess he knew that I didn't have any malicious—I wasn't ambitious that I was going to take his position or whatever. It was a simple question, and I'd heard the rumors too.

Sturm: And you gave the wrong answer. [laughter] That's a good story.

So I gather, then, and I'm not trying to put words into your mouth, that your relationship with Senator Byrd over the years was on a professional level rather than personal.

Staggers: Yes. I'd like to tell you it was all professional, and I'll tell you another story which jumped out of my head. I was relatively young when I was elected to Congress. Of course, everything is relative. I still think I'm young, but looking at the gray in my beard, most people would disagree. But we would have delegation meetings with groups. It was more convenient, I guess, for all of us that when groups would come down to lobby us, that we'd all just do it together. I think it was on a Friday, which I typically would get back to the district and I was anxious to leave, and I guess everybody else's schedule was different from mine.

But I didn't want to be at this one meeting, and it was a group of West Virginians. Of course, the budget has always been a problem, at least at the time I served and ever since then. But there was questions about they needed additional money. It's unprofessional on my part, not on anybody else's part, but I thought, "I've got to get out of here." So I stood up and said, "Gentlemen, I need to leave. If there's anybody in the U.S. Congress that can get this done, it's Senator Byrd." I shook hands and left.

I don't know how long later it was where we actually had a delegation meeting, and Senator Byrd was very angry at me and let it be known that he was angry at me, and how could I put him in that type of position? I knew that money was tight. We probably couldn't get them any more money. I thought, well, you know, if I had done this for a different reason, I may have been angry, but I did it for my own personal reasons to get the hell out of that meeting.

I told the senator, "But I truly believed that." At that point if there was anybody in the US Congress that could get this done, it was him. So he sort of sat back and his anger dissipated, and we went on.

Sturm: How did he show his anger? Did he yell at you or was it just—

Staggers: I wouldn't call it yelling at me, but, yes, he raised his voice, his facial expressions and body language. The fact that, yes, I was elected with two members the same year, so we sort of were on equal footing. Nick was young when he was elected, even if he was the senior member of our delegation. Watching all three of the others sort of sink down in their chairs, you know, sort of lean away from me also, it was pretty obvious that he was angry. It was obvious that nobody wanted to jump to my support here.

Once again, I don't think he thought it was malicious towards him, and it wasn't. It was my own personal—I just wanted to get out of the meeting, because there was nothing I could have done to help get money for that group, as the senator reminded me later.

Sturm: You mentioned the delegation, and as a member of the delegation you had a chance to see the senator in a light that most people don't ever have a chance to see. I guess there are many delegation meetings where even staff aren't present, just you and the other members of the delegation. Talk a little about how he related to you and the other members of the West Virginia delegation during these meetings.

Staggers: Well, as I recall he controlled it, as I said, three of the congressional four were all elected at the same time, and I think at that time everybody knew that we were going to lose one eventually, so there was no one of us that, at least I perceived, that was sort of as the head of our little three group.

Sturm: Would that have been you and Mollohan and Nick Joe Rahall?

Staggers: No, Bob Wise. Rahall had been elected earlier, but he'd been young, too, and he, I guess, could have tried to exert that, but he never did. So we were all sort of on equal footing. Then even when Jennings Randolph was in the Senate, it was obvious that Byrd took a more leadership role. Then with Jay [Rockefeller] coming in after us, at that point Jay never really took that type of leadership role, so we sort of all looked to Senator Byrd and he readily accepted that. We would do it at his schedule. Normally it would be done in his office.

Sturm: Even when he was not the senior senator?

Staggers: I think he's always the senior.

Sturm: I think at one point Jennings Randolph was the senior senator. Because of that freakish kind of thing, I was going to ask you about his attitude as being the junior member, because I remember they used to introduce Jennings Randolph at the senior senator from West Virginia, and how Senator Byrd reacted to being the junior senator.

Staggers: He never acted like the junior senator, at least the way I experienced it. It wasn't very long that I was in with Jennings.

Sturm: I think he was [in with you] maybe two years.

Staggers: And Senator Randolph, he was a complete different story. But I can tell you a story about him, too, that I got to know him a lot better once I served on an equal footing with him. But no, it was always—now I can't remember whether the meetings were always in Senator Byrd's office at that time, but it appeared to me, at least my personal recollection is that it was at Senator Byrd's. Yes, historically, I guess I don't know how that worked, where he was the senior or junior, but they were elected—

Sturm: I think it is the same kind of situation that we're going to have now with Senator Manchin. One of them was elected for a short term and one of them was elected to a full term. Back when I guess there were two Republicans in the position back in the fifties when Underwood was there, and I think that's why it was just a freakish thing.

Staggers: Right. But it wasn't like one had served a long time.

Sturm: Yes. It was, I think, just a bookkeeping kind of thing.

Did you see any difference in his attitude after he became the senior senator? After Randolph retired and Jay was elected, did his attitude change?

Staggers: Yes, I did see it. Until you asked the question, I really would have never thought about it, but, yes. Of course, Jay Rockefeller is not just a senator either. Jay Rockefeller brought a lot to the table that none of the rest of us could have brought to the table. So there was a difference, I guess maybe a sense of responsibility by Senator Byrd that he did show a lot more leadership of getting us together and talking issues out and such, but it's nothing I would have even thought about until you asked the question.

Sturm: There were, I'm sure, times when members of the delegation disagreed with Senator Byrd on positions, or maybe there weren't, I don't know. But if there were times, how did he handle disagreements within the delegation, since he obviously ran the meetings?

Staggers: Well, they were never direct. Specifically I can remember a time I was sort of hung out to dry. There was a river, I think in Pocahontas County, maybe the Greenbrier River, that I thought should be protected, and Senator Rockefeller agreed with me and I sponsored a bill. I think I actually got it through the House. I thought that Senator Rockefeller was going to do the same in the Senate, and evidently it was not very popular with Senator Byrd.

I can remember a call from Jay and him saying, “I really think we should do this, but I can’t do it.” I thought, “Well, it’s a little late to be telling me since I’ve already—.” [laughter] So I sort of weathered that storm too. But I never got phone calls. I guess it wasn’t a direct threat, because Senator Byrd knew it was never going anywhere because evidently he’d already talked with Senator Rockefeller and it was not going to go anywhere. So it was never really, I guess, the type of thing where I was ever in a situation where my disagreements were such that the senator had to take them seriously.

Sturm: Did any of the other members, particularly the House of Representatives members, disagree with him on anything?

Staggers: I have a couple vague memories. Something with Congressman Wise, and it had to do—once again, I was one of the ones that sunk back in my chair and leaned away, because it was an issue in his district. The senator brought it up, and there was a brief discussion, and I can remember Congressman Wise stating his position but saying he was willing to go along with Senator Byrd.

Another even bigger memory was with Congressman Rahall, and it had to do with coal. I don’t remember the issue, but it was a similar type of thing where it was blocked out. It wasn’t my issue, I didn’t participate in the discussion, and at the end of the meeting I guess it was agreed that he would take his position, but it wasn’t going to go anywhere. [laughter]

Sturm: So there’s no doubt about who was in charge of the delegation.

Staggers: Well, actually I guess there was, because we were sort of left to our own devices. Like the river I wanted. It wasn’t like Senator Byrd was wanting to call me up and say, “You’ve got to take that out.” I guess it was more there was no doubt who had the power. [laughter]

Sturm: Yes, I guess I asked the question wrong.

Staggers: But in some delegations, they would sit down and have votes.

Sturm: I’ve heard about that.

Staggers: We never were like that. At least I was never included in those meetings where the delegation—we would discuss things. A lot of those hot issues back then were things that we would sometimes disagree with and it just wasn't discussed. A lot of it we tried to work together.

One of the eye-opening things, too, in my first couple of terms is that our delegation was one of the highest ranked delegations as far as black issues were. My first thought was, "How can that be?" We didn't have a large black population, but the issues were similar. We had poor people. Blacks had poor people. We were trying to get education. That's what the black delegations were trying to do. They were issues that we agreed on. So it was more, I guess, democratic issues. It sort of, I guess, underlines how different it is today than it was back then, at least my perception of what goes on today is that it seems much more partisan, whereas we could work as a delegation, as a region, and we did have regional meetings every once in a while. We would have other states sit down, particularly with coal and some of the energy issues.

So, yes, I think it was clear he was the leader of the delegation, but it wasn't a draconian type of handling of the delegation. I'm sure I would have rebelled and probably the other three members of the House delegation. I can't speak for Senator Rockefeller's relationship, but obviously they had some sort of relationship because, once again, I'll go back to my experience with the river I wanted to protect.

Sturm: Do you attribute the way he handled things to his political skill?

Staggers: I don't know. I never really thought about it. I guess a better answer to your question is that as I worked with Senator Byrd, I became aware that he was the best politician that I think I'd ever met, and I include my dad in that because my dad was less political than a lot of other politicians. It just seemed to me that Senator Byrd never lost. Whatever the issue was, he may lose a vote, but in the long run, he would come back and win.

Once again, a memory I have is that when the rumors were that Senator Byrd might be calling it quits and people were wanting to know, I was in a meeting and he started talking about the Constitution—I forget what group it was—and Roman times and stuff. I thought, that's not what we were talking about. I started feeling a little bit ill at ease. But in about two minutes, he brought all that together to answer the question that this group was sort of opposing him on and explained to them that, no, that's not what we were going to do. I thought, "Whoa." [laughter] I mean, obviously intelligent. A lot of people, I had heard, would joke about him talking about the importance of the Constitution and all this trivial historical data, but he also had a way of bringing that to issues that were directly in front of us.

I guess maybe he was ahead of his time, because if you look at the Tea Party, it's easy for them to appeal from a historical fact. "Let's go back to what the founders intended. Well, what did they intend?" Senator Byrd if he were alive today, I think, would say that's not what they intended. [laughs] And he was able to do that.

Sturm: What you said there about the black issue leads me into another thing that I wanted to ask you about. Some who have observed Senator Byrd's career contend there were at least two and possibly three different Senator Byrds over the course of his political career, while others feel that he was a man who maintained the same basic core beliefs and values but changed his view on some social and political issues. This is in part because he voted against the Civil Rights Bill and then in his last years in Congress I think he received almost perfect scores from the NAACP. He was a hawk on the war in Vietnam and then wrote the War Powers Act and was one of the strongest opponents of the war in Iraq. What do you think is the case with him? Was he different people over the course of the years, or did he remain the same person who modified his beliefs to fit the times?

Staggers: I think he was the same person. I'm not sure he ever modified his beliefs. I'm not sure that his beliefs when he was voting against the voting rights or even when he belonged to the KKK, I'm not sure that that person ever changed. The times changed. I think there's a difference.

I don't see him as, in today's parlance, would be flip-flopping. I think he had a core. I think he grew up in a time, and if you look at the history of the KKK, it was a reaction. In some communities it's like joining the Moose. Did I perceive that he may have had some racist thoughts? My perception is that anybody of that age and that era in West Virginia probably had some racial thoughts. You couldn't be a white man and be behind closed doors and not hear racial jokes, which, if you allow me, I can give you another funny story, is that I'm Catholic. My dad was Methodist. I was invited to a church out in Morgantown that—I'm trying to think of the right word to characterize sort of the born-again preacher. We were at the head table, and the minister was between my dad and I, and he was telling Catholic jokes, which I thought were hilarious. I could see my dad getting madder and madder. [laughter] But, as I said, I could see the humor in it, but my dad was offended because his son's religious views were being attacked. So I think it's just—I mean, my views are different than my son's views, and if they're not, something's wrong.

I think he was in there long enough that the views reflected those core values that he had. So I have no idea his motivations for his early actions, but I don't think they were unique to him. The fact that he would grow, I think is—I don't want to just praise Senator Byrd. I think that any politician during that era that could grow or any politician of this era that can grow, I think you have to compliment them.

Sturm: I think that's a good answer to the question. We probably never will know exactly what motivated him.

Staggers: I can't tell you the motivations that I had in 1981 in the things that I voted for. Early on in my career, I sat up in Preston County with a Libertarian that didn't want a whole lot of government involvement, and the advice he gave me is, "Know what you think government's

supposed to do before you—.” And I thought, is it a republic? Is it a democracy? Is it pure? And I’m not sure a whole lot of politicians even take that time.

Obviously Senator Byrd historically went through some sort of a journey there. Like I said, when he starts quoting the Romans, obviously he had given some thought to that, and I think that allowed him to grow.

Sturm: That leads me into the next question. Here is a man who we all know had limited educational opportunities as a child. His background even as a young adult was extremely limited. What personal qualities about the man enabled him to become one of the most powerful men in the world in his time?

Staggers: I don’t know. I mean, I didn’t know him personally. I never visited his home. I would meet his wife, but never really got to know his family. All I could do is to say that in my experience of dealing with that generation, that he seized opportunities that maybe other people never saw. When I go back to what I do know is that being able to get up in front of a group of people and fiddle and have his wife sing, he did that not just as senator; that was his calling card. So he was able to sell himself, the package, to appeal to people and get elected. Of course, that’s the first thing you have to do is you have to get elected before you can do anything politically. You can take stands and never get elected and then you don’t have any input into what’s going on.

One story that he told me—he didn’t tell me a lot of stories; this is one of the few he ever told me—was that when he was running for the Senate, that there was sort of powers-that-be, the union people and coal operators would come together and called him up and said, “You’ve got to get out. We’re not going to support you.”

He said he was on the road and he and his wife were in the car, and he said, “I’m not getting out.”

They said, “Where are you going?”

He told them where he’d be next or something, or they knew. I don’t know those details. But he was telling me that he got in the car with his wife and said, “We’re not going to win this. They’re withdrawing their support, and I’m going to keep going on.”

He said at the next stop or the next day or something, that they called and said, “We’ve reconsidered. We still want to support you.”

But he did have a fire which not all politicians have either. It’s sort of when it’s easy, it’s fine, because he was faced with that decision, do we go on or do we not. Of course, he shared it with his wife, and they decided they would go on. So something drove him, and I guess it would be easy for me to speculate that it was his upbringing and whatever, but I can’t believe that.

Once again, Jennings Randolph, who had been in Congress and gotten beaten by, I guess, Melvin Snyder, it was Melvin Snyder that my dad beat. I can remember Senator Randolph telling me that he decided not to run because he didn't think Melvin Snyder could be beat. [laughter] So I guess seeing the era, seeing the state, two different regions of the state, two different circumstances, and two different men that made sort of different decisions. You have Senator Randolph who had—as I say, discretion's the better part of valor. He was able to withdraw and fight in another battle.

Sturm: Fight again another day.

Staggers: But with Senator Byrd, he was faced with the reality is that he wasn't going to win and he evidently made the decision, "I don't care." So there was something different personally.

Sturm: Do you perceive him as being a driven man?

Staggers: As I say, I didn't really interact with him enough. I saw him as a reserved man. In my dealing with him, I don't know why, but my wife and I, after I got defeated, went down in Washington and met with him, and he was showing us a picture he had, I guess, of his wife, a painting, not a picture but a painting, and he had it in his office. I thought, "Why would you give it to your wife and keep it in your office?"

Some of this is inconsistencies in my world, I mean, if I'm going to pay some guy to paint my wife, if I'm going to give it to her, I'm going to have it in our home, you know, not in my office. So I think there were a lot of inconsistencies. I think that makes it harder to understand him, and I don't know who was close to him.

Another story about who was close to him, we had some issue and it was about coal, I guess the electric plants that obviously were coal-fired. We were at a congressional delegation meeting and we were trying to work out some sort of compromise. There was a vote, and Senator Byrd and Senator Rockefeller had to leave. One of Byrd's staff members started crying and saying, "How will the senator be perceived?"

Of course, I'm sitting there thinking, "I don't care, how I'm going to be perceived," but to have the emotions of a staff person in a meeting come out, I thought, "This person's very loyal to the senator, and there has to be something there that would make that loyalty." So I didn't know him that personally, but obviously there were people that he was close to that were very loyal to him.

Sturm: You know, I think that's one of the purposes of this whole project is to try to understand the man better, because he's obviously a very complex person.

Staggers: I think he is, and I'm not sure you'll ever understand him. Only he can tell you that. But obviously there were some inconsistencies.

Sturm: Maybe to better understand. You partially touched on this, but let's hit on it just a little bit more. Again, what personal and political qualities do you think that he had that enabled him to get elected to the U.S. Senate from West Virginia nine times, a record that is exceeded by no one anywhere in the United States? During that time, we're talking over fifty years, times changed, attitudes changed; socially we're a totally different country than we were when he was first elected. What enabled him to do that, do you think?

Staggers: I think two things. I will characterize one as luck. The time period that most of that, it was just the Democratic—I mean, he was the Democratic senator, and he really didn't have to do a whole lot. As he progressed, then it made it harder and harder for any challenge from within the party. But going back to our earlier observations, I think that he could adapt, and obviously his record shows that he adapted. He didn't give up his values, but he was able to adapt. So I think it was a combination. Some of the emotional issues, like in the sixties, the Vietnam War, I guess, dominated that, and in West Virginia it really wasn't an issue.

Sturm: That's true. It wasn't.

Staggers: I can remember going to Harvard and thinking, "Well, yeah, everybody supports the war." Of course, at Harvard everybody didn't support the war, and it was a shock for me. I just assumed that I would be serving and I wanted to get a college education first. But the world was different. Taking a stance pro war in West Virginia wasn't something that took a whole lot of courage.

In my perception, of course, a lot of this is limited by my age, but my perception is really the first challenge would have been Cleve Benedict. He hadn't been elected, he was somewhat articulate, and he had a lot of money. The cynical view is that the senator put away his fiddle during election for political reasons. Of course, his stated reason was the death of his grandson. He became a more serious person. It wasn't just the fiddler and his wife singing and, yeah, let's have a good time. Although I've been to those political meetings, and it was a good time. [laughter] But I think Cleve Benedict made him focus politically. He was able to raise the money, which I think the most my dad ever raised was \$20,000, and after I got elected, I thought my dad could not have survived. Of course, that may be because the closeness he may have been able to adapt to.

But, you know, I think the times and his ability to adapt. I think politically he had very good instincts. That's what I said, I came to realize that he was a very good politician. He doesn't lose. And that experience in the Senate of the United States, where you're dealing with all these other politicians that are very good at what they do, too, and he was able to maneuver through that. So experience, luck, and his ability to adapt, I guess.

Sturm: That's interesting. It's another one of those things that there doesn't seem to be a ready answer to, have a nice bottled answer that you can put on the shelf and refer back to.

Everybody who knew him has a favorite story about him. Do you have one? If so, would you share it with us?

Staggers: Most of mine, I've already told you, is that lunch meeting. That left a very permanent mark in my brain. In fact, if you asked me if I thought he was going to retire today, I'd say, "Oh, no." [laughter] It's more the personal stuff, and I think I've already shared those with you. When I thought I'd be cute and sneak out of a meeting, it was like going to the principal. You won't do this again. [laughs] In my experience, he was removed, and I never really had a close relationship, and I don't really know anybody who did.

Sturm: Are there any stories that you are particularly fond of about what happened between him and your father?

Staggers: They had a disagreement and I wasn't there, but they had a big disagreement and it affected my dad maybe more than it affected him, Senator Byrd. I don't even know what it was about, but I can remember the effect it had on my father is that my father regretted the confrontation. My dad was never close to him either, and knowing that my dad wasn't close to him, and the one story I shared with you the first time I ever met him as a kid shaking his hand and thinking, "He seems not really interested," I guess in a way, "Nice boy."

Sturm: Sort of a script.

Staggers: Not even a script, he was just going through the motions. I didn't feel like he was interested in me.

There are other politicians that I've met that I had the first impression was negative. Jay Rockefeller—the first time I met him—I guess he was in the House of Delegates. He was in Charleston. He wasn't federally elected. My mother was there and she was very proud that I had graduated from Harvard, and she introduced me as graduating from Harvard or in Harvard at the time, one or the other. I think a good politician would have picked up on how proud my mother was, but Jay was like, "Oh, he went to Harvard, that's not that big a thing." I didn't care, because I was going to Harvard and I agreed with him, but it probably wasn't the best thing to do in that situation. I guess the flip side of that is I think that had it been Senator Byrd, he probably would have picked up on the politics of it, but he wouldn't have picked up on the personal part of it. If not for me, then . . .

Sturm: Well for Senator Byrd, that probably would have been a very important thing, maybe with his background the fact that you had—

Staggers: But that's not really the point I'm trying to make. I think the point is that maybe the same reaction by both or taking the same stimulus, but Byrd would have, in my perception, been more political, where Jay was just very upfront. His experience was, "It wasn't that big of a deal."

Sturm: Oh, dear. We learn so much as we go through this life. [laughter]

Staggers: But, of course, at that time a lot of people would say the same of Jay Rockefeller, is that he just didn't understand politics.

Sturm: And we're saying that about him in West Virginia, too.

Okay. Is there anything else you'd like to add about Senator Byrd?

Staggers: Let's see. I'm trying to think of anything. I didn't really prepare. I just thought

Sturm: Oh, that's fine. We'll come back to it at the end. If anything comes into your head, why, you can add it then.

Now let's move on to the second individual I'd like to discuss with you. The Byrd Center, through the generosity of your family, is honored to be the repository for two sets of Staggers' papers, those which belonged to you and those which were your father's. Having these papers there will give scholars the opportunity to see how business was conducted by both houses of Congress during this particular period of time. We found, however, that while we do have the official papers of Harley O. Staggers, Sr., the Center does not have a great deal of personal information about him. I'd like for you to see if you can fill in some of the gaps for us with the next few questions I'm going to ask you.

Staggers: Sure.

Sturm: First I'd like for you just to tell us a little bit about your father's life, his beginnings, his education, his first shot at politics, anything that you think would be appropriate at this point.

Staggers: Obviously, it's hard for a son, and I'm the oldest son, and I'm named for him. My oldest sister jokes that if she'd have been born a male, that she'd have been in Congress and it wouldn't have been me. [laughter] Which is probably true.

He came from a large family, and I know some of the stories, the experience I have, comes from his siblings. It was not always easy growing up during that time, and having my father tell me that he actually dropped out of high school to get a job on the railroad and then having the football coach talk him into coming back so he could play football, hearing some of

these early stories about he played at different colleges. He told me, I'm not sure it's true, maybe it's just a joke, but he was talking about how he played under a different name at one college. I don't know what college it was. But a big deal for him was he did get a college education and he got a scholarship to play football. It was in a small Virginia college right on the border of Tennessee, I think it is, Emory & Henry [College].

Sturm: I've heard of that.

Staggers: I've visited it a couple times, and it is a long drive – for me.

So he was away from home, and the story he told is his dad said, "You're not leaving. You've got to stay here and work the farm."

He said, "No, I'm leaving." [laughs]

His father was a strong-willed person. I can remember hearing a story that my grandfather had the first motor vehicle, the first car in the county, and he got pulled over for speeding. I guess the speed limit was 15 miles per hour. I don't know how they determined how fast they were going back then, but they pulled him over for speeding. It was a JP [Justice of the Peace] system back then, which pretty much you'd go before the JP, you were going to be found guilty. The JP found that he was going five miles over the speed limit, and she was going to fine him a dollar for each mile over the speed limit. So my grandfather gave her \$10, and she goes, "Don't you want the change?"

He said, "No. I'm planning on speeding on the way out of town." [laughter]

My grandfather, because of their situation, invested in land. He was never rich, ran a junkyard, in fact, but had land.

Sturm: Was this in Mineral County?

Staggers: Mineral County. My grandmother's birthplace and farm was in Monongalia County, which was sold for taxes back in, I guess, the twenties maybe. One of the things that my dad was very proud of is that he worked and saved and bought that farm back for my grandmother. It's actually still in the family. My oldest sister owns it now. But that shaped a little bit of my father, a very strong father, a very big connection to the land.

But more of a political story is, as I said, my father was a football player. He's in the Hall of Fame at Emory & Henry. He and my brother and I are in the Hall of Fame at Keyser for football. I'll tell you another story about football, is his father and mother only made one college football game, and my father kicked the extra points, and he didn't know they were coming and saw them in the stands and missed the extra point. [laughter] I don't know what significance that

has, but obviously my father remembered it. He was happy to have them come down and see him play.

Another thing is my father, when I was playing, never missed a high school football game, which didn't mean a whole lot to me when I was in high school. I just expected him. Everybody else's dad was there, so why wouldn't my dad be there? When I got to be in Congress, I thought, "Wow." [laughter] He didn't always see the whole game, but he always saw at least part of the game. The way it worked out is he could get there at least for part of the game.

He taught school. He graduated from college and taught and then coached and was a very successful coach. He got hired at Potomac State. He was the second coach at Potomac State. But because of his politics, they fired him. During those times, losing a job was not the best thing.

Sturm: When would this have been, in the thirties?

Staggers: Yes, before the war. I know it affected him and I know he never forgot. He was very proud of the fact that that committee of Republicans that ran him out, each one of them had to later come and ask him for something, and he was very proud that he didn't turn them down.

Sturm: He didn't turn them down.

Staggers: He helped them. He never brought it up, never made them feel bad. He was very proud of it.

Sturm: That says a lot about his character.

Staggers: It does. But, it was very, as I said, it was devastating. Of course, then with the [Great] Depression I think he worked for the WPA [Works Progress Administration]. I'm not sure how, whether it was a right of way or something. It wasn't out working roads and stuff, but he did work for the WPA.

My father grew up on a farm and was very proud of his skills. In fact, he boxed some. My grandfather was very proud of my dad's strength, would have him show off lifting different weights and stuff. I've heard other people, their family stories about my dad and his dad, my dad and my grandfather. He was a very good shot and actually had been chosen to compete on, like, a national level. I can't remember the—I'm sure people in that era would know and could help me out, but I forget what it was. But he had gone with groups of other kids his age and was a very good shot.

The war came. Because of his age, he volunteered, but because of his experience, they wanted him to teach other people how to shoot, which meant that he would remain stateside. He, for whatever reason, I can't speak for what his reasons were, but he wanted to fight. So he was in

the Navy and he became a navigator and actually flew, I guess, in both theaters, but was shot down in the Pacific and did have an injury, a back injury that remained with him.

I'm getting ahead of the story. At some point he ran for sheriff in Mineral County.

Sturm: I've seen the poster out in your outer office, yes.

Staggers: So I guess that was his first experience with politics. I don't know why. I have a feeling it may have been just a job. Once again, the stories he shared about being sheriff is that he never wore a gun. I was just talking to a friend this past week that was talking about how they had a guy that had broken into their house. I think it was this guy's grandparents that had a guy had broken into their house, and they called my dad and he came up and said to the guy, "Now come on. I'll go get you breakfast," you know and got him breakfast, took him down and sobered him up. I get the image of Andy Griffith in Mayberry. [laughter]

I do know that my dad told me about never wearing a gun that evidently there was a guy that was holed up, and I don't know what he was accused of, but he had a gun. My dad knew him too, and was a little bit concerned, and then heard a shot, and the guy had killed himself. So then my dad was like, "Well, before he killed himself, I was a little worried because I didn't have a gun." But he was proud of that too. He thought that as the sheriff you didn't have to be—of course, you wouldn't survive today, but back then, that you didn't have to be armed. You could reason with people.

He ran for sheriff. I guess that's where he met my mother. She was, I think, one of his clerks or something. My mother came from a large family, too, but because they were Catholic, they didn't get in politics, although my, I guess, oldest uncle, which I didn't know very well, worked for Senator [Matthew M.] Neely. So, I mean, there were some political ties that—

Sturm: That would have been her brother?

Staggers: Yes. Leo Casey. And listening to my other uncles' talk about how they would go out in the communities and it was sort of, as they would call it today, "retail politics." They would set up these in every neighborhood. They would take people to the polls and they'd check names off. My brother and I both were like that, too, that we believed in retail politics. When my brother ran for prosecuting attorney, he knocked on every registered voter's door. He'd go door to door, which is still amazing to me.

Sturm: Yes, even though it's a small county, to find the time to do that is just absolutely unbelievable.

Staggers: Well, I'll tell you another funny story. That's what my dad believed and he said you just have to shake everybody's hand and ask for their vote. My dad had retired or was going to retire, and, as I said, I was a young man. I think at that time I was probably twenty-seven,

twenty-eight. I was down in Pocahontas County, and I went into a department store, which was not like today's department stores. I know you know what I'm talking about, but they sold everything.

Sturm: The old general store.

Staggers: Yes. Down in Marlinton. I went in and asked to meet the manager and asked him for his vote, and I said, "Do you mind if I asked your salespeople and your customers?"

He said, "Yeah, go ahead."

There was a lady who was looking at some sort of clothing with hangers and stuff, and I interrupted her and said, "Ma'am, do you mind if I take a minute of your time?"

She said, "Sure."

I said, "I'm running for Congress, I'm Harley Staggers, and I'd like your vote."

She put that piece of clothing back and took a step back and looked at me, and she goes, "Yeah, and I'm Jackie Onassis." [laughter] And it took me about five minutes to explain I really was Harley Staggers.

But that was what my father believed. As I said, the most he ever spent was \$20,000. When I first ran, I went all over the place. I shook everybody's hand. I can remember being in, I think it was Monroe County and arguing the abortion issue with two guys about my age for over half an hour and I left them with, "We don't agree, but at least vote, even if you vote against me."

They said, "Oh, we can't vote for you or against you. We're from Virginia." [laughter]

I thought, "I just lost half an hour."

But my dad was like that. My family would tease me, because while if I would go sit down in a restaurant, by my nature I had to get up and shake everybody's hand and go over. So I'd stop by 7-Eleven and get a soda and a candy bar and shake one person's hand and get back on the road. They always teased me that my favorite restaurant was 7-Eleven.

Sturm: Your dad told me one time that in all the elections that he ran in, he never once mentioned his opponent's name.

Staggers: True. Well, I think there may be one amendment to that. I think that at least according to my dad, and I think it was Sheriff Givens had made some outlandish accusations, and I think my dad may not have mentioned his name. I think he said, "My opponent is making these things—." Today it would sound like to any of us, his handling of it, telling him how to

spin this, but that came from my dad's mind. He said, "He's either the most ill-informed person in the state or the biggest liar." [laughter]

Sturm: If he didn't mention the name, then it sure wasn't anything positive. [laughs]

Now, when he ran for sheriff first time, did he run as a Democrat? Because I seem to remember Mineral County was probably Republican back then, wasn't it?

Staggers: Probably was. In fact, I'm sure it was.

Sturm: But he ran against the opposition and won.

Staggers: Evidently, yes.

Sturm: Now, I know you remember him serving in Congress in his later years, but growing up, what memories do you have of him being in Congress?

Staggers: I have a lot of good memories. It was always a big deal. We would get in the car and go down to DC. There's a lot of good memories. I know Sears—and they still do it, they had a big baseball thing that they do. In fact, I played in their baseball games, and they still have those, Republican-Democrat things. They didn't have baseball games back then. But Ted Williams, I can remember sitting down and having lunch with Ted Williams and a bunch of other congressional kids.

Sturm: He probably managed the Senators at the time, I would imagine.

Staggers: It was before that.

Sturm: Was it before that?

Staggers: Before that. But, once again, the funny part of the story is that he autographed a baseball for my brother and I, and, of course, the first thing we do is go out and play with it. [laughter] I have no idea where that baseball is now, but I'm sure it's grass-stained and you couldn't distinguish it from any other baseball.

On my dad's birthday, we would always go down to DC. I remember those, in fact, my brother tells the story we would go to the House Dining Room. Of course, for me when I was in Congress it became less of a special treat because I could eat there whenever I wanted to. When my brother was at Georgetown, he would go and he'd always get bean soup, which is I think even when I was in Congress I'd try to get bean soup on a regular basis. But he would get a cheeseburger and a milkshake. And because my dad was the kind of person he was, he knew every police officer, every guard, every person who worked in the building and knew them by

name and he'd speak to them. My brother talks about how when they would walk in, he, my brother, got the nickname "Cheeseburger" because every time he would get a cheeseburger.

The other thing about growing up is that once I started playing football and my brother started playing football, my dad decided that he wanted us to go to bowl games so we could see the big bowls. Of course, for him they were bigger, and they've become so diluted now.

Sturm: Yes. There only used to be about four or five.

Staggers: Right. Well, he took us to all those. He took us to the Rose Bowl and to the Cotton Bowl and to the Orange Bowl, and we saw some good football. But I can remember the first one we went to was the Rose Bowl, and I was old enough to know—I must have been maybe tenth, eleventh grade or so, not worldly by any stretch of the imagination, but I can remember being on the elevator with my dad, and he just automatically introduced himself to these people and asked them what they did and stuff, and I was thinking, "Why are you talking to these strangers?"

He just liked people. I think it goes back to, it pretty much characterized his, I think, his whole service, is that he liked people. He became the chairman of a very powerful committee, but he was reluctant even to do that. Sam Rayburn, because of the labor strike during my father's—the fifties and stuff, my dad, being a veteran, wanted to be on Veterans Affairs Committee, and Sam Rayburn said, "No, I need you on Foreign and Interstate and Commerce Committee because we have all these rail issues and you worked on a railroad, and we want you to be on that." My dad reluctantly agreed to do that, never really had the ambition. But I think there were a couple deaths and all of sudden he became chairman, which it never really changed him, is that he would know every guard.

When I got elected, it was funny, is that I'd show my card and they'd say, "Oh, you're Harley's son." It was amazing that it didn't matter where he was, whether it was in California or dealing with the cheeseburger maker, that he knew their names. That goes back to the story my dad tells is that at Emory & Henry, he said the first day on campus, he said he was walking across campus and everybody called him Harley. It just amazed him, and it was explained to him that a man's name is one of the most important things that he has, and that my dad learned that over his four years and that sort of became the basis of his—he would take the time. Number one, he cared, but not just politically. He would take the time and find out what a man's name was, and he would remember it.

Of course, my mother was a big integral part of that too. I can vividly see in my mind's memory that we were stopped someplace, I'm in the backseat, and my dad said, "Who is this? You know. His wife says he works over here."

My mother said, "Joe something."

And he jumps out, “Hey, Joe, how are you doing?” [laughter]

So they worked as a team. But he did take an interest, and I think it helped his service when he – he didn’t go on junkets. We were never left alone while they were traveling the world. In fact, there were many a time we had to go with them when they went on these post office stumps, and I’d always get sick, it seemed like, when I was young.

But he cared about people, and I think it goes back to early on, and it definitely goes back to his college days where you were interested in people and you remembered them.

Sturm: You partially mentioned this and this is sort of out of order of what I was going to ask, but your father didn’t seem to be a politician who craved national recognition or necessarily positions of power. What do you think his goals as a congressman were?

Staggers: I think he saw it as—I told you in Preston County this guy said you’ve got to know why you’re there, and I think my dad saw it this way, is that he was very proud, as he told me more than once, is that you can’t be appointed to the House of Representatives; you have to be elected. Going back to the Tea Party or the Senator Byrd type of philosophy is our founding fathers, this was the people’s house. You’re supposed to be close to the people, and I think he was driven by that.

Number one, sort of similar to Senator Byrd, is that he grew up in a time where he never really aspired to be on national TV. He saw it as a job. I can tell you that he worked it like a job. He’d be exhausted, and he always tried to come home. In fact, I’d have people tease me about, “You’re going to be like your dad. You’re going to drive home tonight and sleep in your own bed.”

I said, “Yeah, I’m driving home for maybe different reasons,” but he had kids and he enjoyed the family, and he would come home. So I don’t think he ever lost those core values.

I mean, towards the end of his career, there were people around the family that would say, “Harley, you need to exert your influence more,” but I don’t think he ever really felt comfortable. Although I also know this, is that he never did hesitate because he felt it was his job is, for instance, I know that people my age that had been to Vietnam, is that they would call my dad and ask for help, and the next thing they knew, my dad had actually picked up the phone and called their commanding officer and then it filtered back. They’d go, “We don’t know who you know, but the chairman of Interstate and Commerce called, and we’re going to do whatever you want.” [laughter]

I think that when it was set up, that’s probably the way it was meant to be. He felt he was the representative of the people, and I know this because I tried to emulate him. He said, “You know, I’m a Democrat but I was elected by the people. I don’t represent just the Democrats; I represent the district.” I’ve already told you the story about how the people that had run him out,

and he felt very proud that he was able to put that anger aside and help them, and I think that obviously helped him.

But, you know, my dad was an intelligent man, too. With the Vietnam War he used to drive me crazy. I didn't have a whole lot of opportunity to talk, but there was a lot of car trips. I couldn't figure out why my dad supported the war, and I remember my junior or senior year being at Harvard and one of my friends coming up. He was doing, I guess, his paper on Congress, and he said, "Your dad's one of the most liberal members of Congress."

I looked up. "My dad?" [laughter] But he maybe would argue with me, and that didn't really reflect what he was voting. So it was interesting.

And he never stopped caring. I can't remember the lady's name, but I remember I went home one weekend, and my dad saying down at the post office—I'll use Mrs. Smith, just because I can't remember her name. Is that, "Mrs. Smith has some problems with her Social Security and I told her that you'd help her."

I said, "Well, what Mrs. Smith? I don't even know which Mrs. Smith."

Of course, my staff was the one that got it. I said, "Well, my dad saw Mrs. Smith, so find out about it." So remarkably they did.

Another funny story about how my dad just never saw himself, even though he was comfortable in that arena, we had late votes or something and I couldn't go out to Morgantown, so my dad went out to speak for me for the Democratic committee. They said, "Harley, we're going to have a fundraiser, and it would be really nice if we could get another congressman to come in. If we could get [Thomas P.] "Tip" O'Neill [Jr.], we could raise a couple hundred dollars, you know."

He said, "Well, that sounds good. We'll get him. I'll tell my son." [laughter]

I said "Dad! Times are different. This is my first term."

So I made the appointment. I sat out for fifteen, twenty minutes it took for Tip to see me. I didn't have a hat, but I felt like I had a hat in hand, you know. I went in, and he said, "What can I do for you?"

I explained the situation, and I said, "You know, my dad said you'd come out."

He goes, "Harley said I'm coming?"

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "Well, I guess I've got to go." [laughter]

So, I mean, he was comfortable in that setting because I don't think he ever took himself that serious. I can't imagine him ever being, like you said, in the national spotlight debating these issues on TV for the public consumption. I think that would have been foreign to him. But when he believed that he was helping people that he represented, I don't think there'd been anything he wouldn't have done.

And Tip, we're flying out there, and he told me these stories about you're raising millions of dollars, you know, in different places, and this was at the end of his tenure too. In fact, he told me a story about meeting a guy out in Nevada. He told me his name was Bob something. He said, "We're talking and the guy said, 'You don't recognize me, do you?'"

Tip said, "Look, son, I meet so many people. No, I don't recognize you."

He goes, "I'm Robert Redford."

So Tip O'Neill gives me Robert Redford, who I guess introduced himself as Bob, and, no, I didn't recognize him at the fundraiser.

Tip was raising millions of dollars. He said, "How much you want to raise out here?"

"Probably maybe \$500." [laughter]

So he laughed. He said, "You know, down in California we raise like \$10 million, something like that."

I just shrugged my shoulders.

It got a little turbulent. He said, "You know, son, you might get more than a footnote in my book if this plane crashes." [laughter] I didn't even get a footnote.

Sturm: Well, that's good.

Many people over the years who have observed West Virginia politics feel that your father, and to a degree both you and your brother, were never accepted by the West Virginia Democratic machine in Charleston.

Staggers: Oh, I think that's true.

Sturm: Do you feel this is true, and if so, why do you think this is the case?

Staggers: Well, I do think it's true, and I think it's just because we were different. I don't know why. You'd have to ask those people.

Maybe to give you another funny tale, Jay Rockefeller appointed me, and when they came—I can't even remember who the chairman was at that time—they wanted to know if I'd run, take the position. It wasn't something I was, "Oh, yeah." I was like, "Oh, well, I don't know." So they had to do a little bit of selling. But it was obvious to me I was going to help the Democratic ticket too. It wasn't just for me. In fact, when Jay ran for Senate, he insisted, that I, because I did very well down in this county, that I ride in the parade with him. I'm looking at the polling numbers and thinking, "Well, it's not going to do me any good." But I did it.

We had a vote in the state senate, and he had appointed Jerry [Gerald R.] Ash, who was from Preston County, and myself. He was pretty much saying we owed him. "No, I don't owe you anything." I listened to him, but I was insistent then. "No. I will consider what you're saying, but, no, I don't owe you."

Jerry Ash, on the other hand, said, "You're right. I would not be here, and I do owe you, and I'm probably going to vote with you."

I went home and I examined the issue and the pros and cons, and I voted with the governor, and Jerry Ash voted against him. [laughter]

So we are different. Our philosophy is different, and I could never raise money. When I would go to liberal groups, I was too conservative. When I went to the conservative groups, I was too liberal.

I remember being at the Hampshire County Fair one time early in my career. A guy came up and said, "You're Harley Staggers. You're running for Congress."

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "I think I'm going to vote for you. You're not as liberal as your dad was."

And I'm thinking, "Oh, you have no idea." [laughter]

So I don't know. I mean, you know, I tried to stay true. In fact, my only regret in Congress, it wasn't a long time, it was ten years, but Bob Wise came to me and we were electing, I guess, the Democratic Whip. There was a friend of mine who was running against Tony Coelho, and Bob made the proposition that he would give me his votes, so it would be two votes, and I might be able to get on a better committee. So for personal gain, I said yes and I voted for Tony Coelho, hoping I would get on—well, I wasn't hoping; I was told I'd get on a better committee. And Marty [Martin O.] Sabo from Minnesota was a friend of mine and I didn't vote for him, and that's the only regret. I shouldn't have done it. As it turns out—and I think this is probably a good lesson for any up-and-coming politician—is I didn't get on a better committee. [laughter]

Sturm: Unfortunately, that's one of the bitter lessons, I guess.

Staggers: It is, and it's a hard lesson to learn.

Sturm: It's not generally very well known, I don't think, at least it is in West Virginia, but your father had a rather unique relationship with the late President [John F.] Kennedy. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Staggers: I don't know a whole lot about it. I know they were friends, and it was the type of friendship is that I'm pretty sure my dad supported [Hubert H.] Humphrey [Jr.], but the friendship remained. Of course, you know, with John Kennedy, I mean, his life just ended too soon. I just don't know a whole lot about it. I mean I do know they were friends, and he would call him John and they would talk. Or actually I don't know what he called him, but it was a first-name basis and they did share. I remember him talking about sitting on the House floor with him and stuff. But I think my dad was an admirer of Humphrey too.

Sturm: I have a letter, I think probably Danny [Staggers] gave you a copy of it, that I've had for several years, I believe it's from 1958 when your dad was thinking about running for governor, that Kennedy had written to him and offered to come to West Virginia at any time to go anywhere to campaign on his behalf.

Staggers: I just want to say I think they were friends. I don't know. I just don't know a whole lot about the details. Joe Kennedy was in Congress with me. He came in and spoke for me. Regardless of [what they say about] the mess and stuff—that family, for all the disaster, there is a core there too. Even today, I'm not even sure that you've got a whole lot of the family in politics, but they go back and they have a certain core that they believe in. I can't be real helpful with the Kennedy thing.

Sturm: Well, that's understandable. Let me ask you a question about this. Your father does not have a lot of buildings or highways named after him throughout his district, even though he was there for thirty years, because I don't think that was his goal or ambition. At least that's my perception.

Staggers: Correct.

Sturm: What do you think his proudest accomplishment was in his thirty years of being in Congress?

Staggers: This may seem trite, and you may think it's manufactured, but I think the proudest thing he had was that he was able to raise six children, and not have any really big embarrassments.

I do know that during that time there was corruption. He tells the story of some lobbyist in his office that he said, “I can’t help.” Then once he’d left, he found a bag of money, returned the money, and told him, “Never come back.” That kind of stuff.

I think it was the fact that he was able to do it. I think he enjoyed the job. I know he loved people. But he never really sacrificed what I think a lot of politicians have to do, is your family. As I said, he came to every football game I had. I’ve got a sister [Margaret Anne “Peggy” Stagers] who’s a doctor. I think my dad—and I can’t speak for him, but I think that in that day and age and with the way women were treated—my sister is a very gifted person. She’s in the House of Delegates now. But he asked her what she wanted to be, and she would hem and haw and say maybe a doctor, and he was like, “Oh, you can’t be a doctor.” I think it was a psychological thing, that if the father says you can’t do it, that’s really what motivated her to become a doctor, and she could have done a lot of different things. She’s artistically inclined and writes very well, and I think it really would have been something that she would have been maybe happier in, but I think my dad challenged her.

Some of the little things that my father did is that I was about ten years old and evidently he learned one of my sisters had started smoking cigarettes, and he told us he would give us \$500 if we didn’t smoke or drink till we were twenty-one. I’ll tell you, to a ten-year-old, on \$500 I’d retire. [laughter] And it became very difficult, but then when my friends found out about it, it became almost a dare. “Well, no I can’t drink. I’ve got that—.” Of course, that \$500 didn’t seem as much.

Then he took the money and invested it. It was my brother and I. He wanted a farm so that we would have that experience, and he bought some cows and sheep and said, “You take care of them, and then whatever’s made will be yours.” He did that, and I don’t know, he could have never gotten me out of bed on those cold mornings to feed those cows without that incentive. But once again, he was giving me the experience, and I don’t think any kid actually ever appreciates what their parents do.

Sturm: I think you’re right.

Stagers: I’ve got to believe from my dad that that—I mean, he told us that. I think he was very proud. He was obviously proud about our athletics. I know he was proud of me, and I know with my brother, who had a better football career than I did, he was proud of my brother. He was proud of all my sisters.

So he took a lot of pride in his grandkids. I remember when my wife was pregnant and we were talking about names, he said, “What are you two talking about?”

I said, “Well, what we’re going to name the baby.”

He goes, “You’re going to name him Harley.”

Of course, it was a girl, so we didn't name her Harley, but I did name my oldest son, Harley III.

So I think that was important. I think that things that were important to him you really can't translate into a piece of legislation. For instance, the Staggers Act, I mean it was just to him it was just the logical thing to do. He didn't think of it as something that deserved credit.

The only thing I know of that was named for him is the road right next to the bridge that goes up to Danny's house now, but where he lived, and I'm sure it will never happen again. I guess the answer to your question, I should have started with this, is on his gravestone it says, "What a man does for himself dies with him. What he does for his fellow man lives on forever."

And Danny and I experienced that, is that even today at out-of-the-way places people will say, "Well, you know, your dad did this for me."

Sturm: That's what I was going to ask you next. You've run in his district. You've had a chance to meet the people who were his constituents before they became your constituents. What do you think the people are going to remember about him?

Staggers: Well, I'm going to have to take a jaded view on this. I'm not sure people will remember him. It's been twenty years since I was in Congress, twenty-one years since my dad died. I coach seventh-grade basketball, so I happened to be in the gym and I was talking to some grade-school kids, fourth- and fifth-grade kids in Keyser. I enjoy talking to children, which you can hear some amazing things.

Sturm: Absolutely you can.

Staggers: They were asking me my name, and I was just joking around and stuff, but I said, "Harley Staggers." I forget how we came up with that, but—oh, I know what it was. They said what's my name, and I said, "Well, it's the name of the road that's out here." And they didn't even know what the road was. They didn't know who Harley Staggers was. I think that that's probably good, because I also get the sense that even though there's jokes about that on a Friday night that there will be half the state will be driving on the Robert C. Byrd Highway to go to the Robert C. Byrd Stadium, I'm not sure that those football players know who Robert Byrd was. That doesn't diminish what he did. It doesn't diminish his values. Then the same thing, it doesn't really diminish my dad.

I'll give you another example. They recently did a film of Mineral County, history of Mineral County, and there's no mention of any Staggers in Mineral County. But I've heard people, not only from my perspective, but people who knew my dad, "How could they do this?" There's been complaints. Ironically, it was done by Republicans. They complain, and the

explanation, at least with these other people who complained, they said, “Well, you would be amazed about how much we had to edit out.”

I’m thinking, “Well, that’s true.” It doesn’t bother me. I guess I’m a lot like my dad. I believe that he really wouldn’t care.

I heard recently that the reason you don’t see a U-Haul at a funeral possession is you can’t take it with you.

Sturm: That’s true. That’s true.

Staggers: I think if you live life that becomes very clear. I think there are a lot of people that never really live life, and that’s sort of the sadness I had with Senator Byrd, was like with the picture of his wife. I’m not sure that with all he had, that he ever really lived. He was revered, like you said, but I think the difference between him and my dad is that I think my dad definitely lived life. We’d sit on the couch and watch football, and we’d always have a running joke, if my dad’s team was losing, “Oh, they’re on drugs,” professional football. “They’ll all on the take.” Just the experiences he had with family and with constituents. I think he saw constituents as people, as opposed to a problem. Like I said, I think he just liked people.

So I think that when he died, he was very happy with the legacy that he left, and I don’t think it’s any bill—the Staggers Railroad Act. I still hear people say, “Oh, he wanted to travel. Oh, are you related to—?” They have some of the railroad ties. I don’t think that’s really something he would identify as his crowning accomplishment. I think it’s got to be his whole life, and I think that he lived a very full life.

Like we talked earlier, from a very humble beginning, where he thought he had to quit school to help the family, to where his dad said, “You can’t go to college because you’ve got to help on the farm,” where he was able to do that. He paid for my two aunts that went to Shepherd. One aunt said that she cried when she went there, and then when my dad picked her up to bring her home, she cried because she had to leave. [laughter] So he did believe in education.

I guess I admire him because some of these things are words, but he believed in them, and obviously, looking back to the Byrd thing, it’s obviously that story about on the road where he said, “I’m running anyway.” So there’s some similarities.

I don’t think my dad would have ever wanted anything named for him, although he did chuckle—speaking about Kennedy. I can’t remember the congressman’s name from Massachusetts that was on the committee with him, that would fight him about like with the people mover in Morgantown, and there was talk about naming that for my dad. He didn’t want that. But in the *Boston Globe*—and I know my dad chuckled about this—it said it’s just a good thing my dad didn’t live in Hawaii because we’d have our first railroad from the mainland to

Hawaii, and he chuckled about that. So I think he was aware that he'd had a big influence, not just with his constituents but nationwide.

He never forgot the veterans, because that was one of the things that he believed in, and he never forgot what we called when I was in Congress constituent service, is making the government work for the people that elected you, not getting your face on the news, but making the government work.

Sturm: Can't say much more about a fellow than you just said, I don't think. Is there anything you'd like to add?

Staggers: No. I was just figuring out some other way to – I just don't think it was for material gain or anything – I think that's the way he lived his life.

Sturm: I think what you said about the inscription on his tombstone speaks volumes for the way he lived his life.

Staggers: Oh, absolutely.

Sturm: Absolutely. Well, thank you for your time, sir. I do appreciate it. Let me explain the ground rules here. A complete transcript of this interview will be sent to you, at which time you can go over it, make any changes that you want, and send a corrected copy back. At that time, you will be asked to sign a Deed of Gift stating that it will become a part of the Robert C. Byrd Oral History Collection. Until this happens, everything that we've said is private and confidential and is subject to your control until you're happy with it and actually sign it over to the Byrd Center.

Staggers: I appreciate that. It's almost like when I was in Congress, we could get up and say, "I revise and extend my remarks," and just say whatever the hell we wanted to say. [laughs]

Sturm: You know, Ray was the historian for the Congress. I suspect that may be where he learned that.

I do appreciate it. Thank you.

Staggers: Thank you.

[End of interview]