

Bob Traxler

June 15, 2001

Jeff Charnley,
interviewer

Charnley: Today is Friday, June 15, the year 2001. I'm Jeff Charnley, Interviewing the Honorable Robert Traxler, former Michigan congressman also former member and chairperson of the MSU Board of Trustees. We are at the Traxler summer home on beautiful Mackinaw Island in Northern Michigan. This interview is part of MSU's Sesquicentennial Oral History Project commemorating the 150th anniversary of the university coming up in the year 2005.

Mr. Traxler, you can see we've got a tape recorder here today for this session. Do you give us permission to tape the interview?

Traxler: I certainly do.

Charnley: I'd like to start with some general questions about your personal background, your educational background. Where were you born and raised and where did you go to high school?

Traxler: Bay City. Well, Kawkawlin, Michigan, just outside of Bay City, is my little home town. My father was a small farmer and a rural mail carrier. My mother was a housewife. I attended high school in Bay City, T.L. Handy High School. It's now an intermediate school, through consolidation. I next went to, at that time the Bay City Community Junior College, and I was there for two years, transferred my junior year to Michigan State.

Finished there in 1953, did a military service in the U.S. Army of two years in Germany. Returned to Michigan State for a year and used that time to come to some career decisions. I think when you're faced with a draft situation as a senior, you're really not thinking about the future,

because it's short term definitely.

Charnley: My number for the Vietnam War was nineteen, so in 1972 I was in a similar situation.

Traxler: You know exactly what I'm saying.

While I was at State that year, which was the beginning of the summer of '55, I decided to go to law school, and attended Detroit College of Law, which I think is an interesting fact due to DCL having merged with Michigan State University now. I was very pleased as a member of the board to participate in that matter.

Following law school, I returned to Bay City and became an assistant prosecutor for two years, and was elected to the State House of Representatives, and began my service there January 1 of 1963, with George [George W.] Romney as the governor, and served in the Michigan House as the majority floor leader, and subsequently chairman of the House Judiciary Committee for a couple of years before running in a special election in 1973 for the U.S. Congress. I was a so-called Watergate baby. Upon entering the Congress, I was appointed to the House Appropriations Committee, and served there during virtually my entire time in the House of Representatives, and that was for a period of eighteen years.

I left the Congress January 1, 1993, declined to seek reelection, was elected to the MSU board in November of 1992, assuming office in January of '93, so I went on for eight more years of elected public service, nearly eight years, because in August of the last year of my term in 2000, the governor appointed me to Mackinaw Island State Park Commission in return for my resignation from board. Since I had only a few months left, I thought that was a fair trade. I've been a Mackinaw person for too many years. I'm enjoying my work on the commission, which is not very substantial, but terribly interesting.

Charnley: What's that term?

Traxler: I'll finish out an unfinished term. The term is for six years, and I've got four years left.

Charnley: We'll jump back, otherwise it would be a short interview. When you were in high school, what was your field that you were interested in studying?

Traxler: I was really undecided. It really wasn't until I got to MSU that I made a career decision that I wanted to major in political science and history, and that was based on gravitating to those subjects which were the easiest for me and which I had the greatest interest in. I had always been interested in politics and government, and indeed my father had taught me that government service was next to the clergy in terms of its importance as far as society, and I have always recalled that and found government service to be really one of the most enjoyable and personally rewarding of any experience that I have ever had. I sometimes feel sorry for others if they haven't had the opportunity to really serve both the state and the nation in terms of doing what one can to improve the lot of fellow man. In that sense it's kind of related to what the clergy do, I suspect.

Charnley: As a high school student, did you have any contact with MSU?

Traxler: Not in those years, no. When I was a high school student, I was the first person in my family to go to college, and that was really kind of a distant goal, even though I was on the college prep program. I was quite undecided, because of financial reasons, as to where I would go. The local at that time junior college, now Delta Community College, the junior college, by the way, had an outstanding reputation across the state, and I received, I think, a very fine basic education there. That was the thing. The finances of that and living at home permitted me and my family to save money, so that I could attend Michigan State for the last two years.

Charnley: When you arrived on campus in the early 1950s, what was the campus like?

Traxler: Well, very different from today. The student population was less than half of what it is today. The north campus was principally where everything was. Shaw Hall had been constructed on the south side of the river, but principally the dairy barns were over there and the agriculture school sort of ran everything on that side of school, except for Shaw. The university was deeply involved in preparing for the centennial in 1955. So we're fifty years later.

Charnley: Did you have any contact with President [John A.] Hannah as a student?

Traxler: Very causal. The person that I knew best was Dean King, and the fraternity that I belonged to, we seemed to have a propensity for being in violation of college regulations, so Dean King occasionally visited the fraternity and saw to it that we were on social probation for two years.

Charnley: What fraternity were you a member of?

Traxler: Kappa Sigma.

Charnley: Of your professors while you were at MSU, any memorable or that had a lasting influence, for good or bad?

Traxler: There was Professor Fisher. There was the indomitable great lover of MSU, and raconteur of lots of stories, Walter Adams was my favorite, even though I was not an economics major and had little interest in economics because of the perception that I had in that time of my life that economists did not understand the world. As a young socialist, I thought that wealth came from labor. They, of course, argued that it came from capital. I'd never seen such a group of biased

bigots in my entire life. And they still think that.

Charnley: So Walter Adams, you had him for a variety of courses?

Traxler: I just had him for one, and Walter was the kind of professor that left an impact on you. Of course, he was very progressive in his thoughts. I had him for a courses called "War Economics," and the purpose of the class was to demonstrate how the military industrial complex ripped off the taxpayer through procurement and the purchasing of ordinary items. We became friends, and he would stop in and visit me in Washington. He lectured at the War College in Washington. He'd come in usually once a year. I suspect that he was sort of the flip side of every other person that they had lecture. [Laughter]

Charnley: The military service, you served in Germany?

Traxler: Yes.

Charnley: Did you go ROTC or were you commissioned?

Traxler: No. Because I attended a junior college where there was no ROTC, I wasn't eligible for the program. I was a buckass private in the rear ranks.

Charnley: You served in Germany in occupation time?

Charnley: Well, we were sort of guests. I was there in 1954 and 1955, portions of those years, and we were more looked upon as guests of the German Government.

Charnley: Where did you actually serve?

Traxler: I originally was in Kaiserslautern. They moved me around a bit, my unit moved. Principally I was in a town called Kaiserslautern which was a quiet rural-type atmosphere, and Kaiserslautern was not one the prominent German cultural centers, shall we say, sort of the backwaters of Germany in a sense. The proper Germans didn't think that they spoke very good German there. They thought that they were without culture, although they did have a wonderful opera house and a great performing group.

Charnley: Was that your first time overseas?

Traxler: Yes, and it had a profound impact on me. I was able to travel quite extensively on leave, and I had a month. I think that that was very important for me to get a perspective of the world and different people and how they saw the United States and how I saw them. It was most interesting, very helpful in forming my philosophies in later years.

Charnley: Was there anything else about your military service that you thought of?

Traxler: No, except I think that it knocked a lot of the idealism out, and I found out that it was very difficult to be successful against a huge bureaucracy that's able to impose its will upon you, and that if you're at all to survive, you have to learn the rules and follow them, maintaining as much of your self-respect and dignity as you can. Actually, looking back on it, I don't think that I thought that at the time, looking back on it I think it was probably two of the more formidable years that I've ever spent. I became acquainted with large numbers of people.

We talk about the diversity on campus, but there is nothing to compare with the diversity of the military when a draft is on, because you truly do get a cross-section of America. I mean you're

living with them, you're sleeping with them. You all have the same issues, the same problems. I knew those people better than their mothers did.

Charnley: What was your MOS? Not the number, but what did you actually do?

Traxler: I was the battalion supply clerk. I was a private battalion supply clerk.

Charnley: Doesn't appear high on your résumé. [Laughter]

Traxler: [Laughter] No. It sounds impressive. A supply clerk. Good God.

Charnley: You decided not to stay longer than two years in the military?

Traxler: In fact, I even applied for a sixty-day early release, and I always recalled the first sergeant saying, "Traxler, you're going home in sixty days. What's this application?" I made it ninety days, of course, and I filed it, and he said, "You're only going to be out sixty days early." And I said, "Every second counts. Freedom."

Charnley: That perspective must have helped later on when you were in Congress.

Traxler: Truly. One of the early subcommittees I served on was the Military Construction Subcommittee, and of course we had all kinds of generals marching in and out of there. It was very helpful to me to have the experience of being a private and getting saluted by generals in later life. Not quite saluted, but deferred to, shall we say.

Charnley: When you got out of the service and you came back to Michigan State, had it changed in

those couple years at all?

Traxler: Well, it was the year of the centennial, and there was a lot of activities on campus, and the Water Carnival was still going on. My fraternity in '53, my graduation year, won the Water Carnival first prize for a float, so that was a great evening celebration.

I think, looking at '55, it hadn't been so much that the campus had changed in those two years. I think that the students were beginning to move towards the sixties, and the Beatles were coming. I'm trying to recall--who was that silly character who shook his hips and strummed the guitar, and got it all going?

Charnley: Elvis.

Traxler: Was that Elvis? Elvis was coming. I think I noticed this more, I came back for a football game and stayed at the fraternity house in 1958, fall of '58, maybe '59, and I was absolutely shocked. I mean, these students were so young, even though I had been there less than three or four years earlier. The music was very different. Their attitudes were very different. And I was only there two nights. I truly knew that I had achieved adult status and that there was no going back to college days.

Charnley: I've talked with other people who mentioned the Water Carnival, but I haven't talked to anyone who participated, actually. That's not there now. It went away in the sixties?

Traxler: The various housing units on campus participated in building floats on steel drums. There was a theme for the Water Carnival each year, and your float related to the theme. I don't recall the theme for 1953, but I do recall our float. It was a carriage, and I must say it was well done, well made. In any event, it took first place.

Charnley: And you just floated down the Red Cedar?

Traxler: You just floated down the Cedar.

Charnley: Students lined up along?

Traxler: Yes, they had bleachers, and it drew the community.

Charnley: Who did the judging?

Traxler: I think that they had a group, typically they would have off-campus people, celebrities and stuff.

Charnley: And Greek life also, I haven't interviewed anyone who was a fraternity member at the time, so this will be the first one.

Traxler: I don't think things have changed in terms of fraternities. I think my fraternity years really made a direct connection with the university, because the people that I lived with in that house are still my best friends today, and our association with the university is homecoming over at the fraternity house, there they are, look through some of the old scrapbooks and realized how prominent, shall I say, we were in terms of maintaining a scrapbook during the years that we were there. It's still there today, and I think it's the best.

Charnley: Is the house the same place?

Traxler: No, the house was sold. The fraternity went de-active for a period of a couple of years and finally got started back up again. I can't tell you what those years were. I sort of lost track with them. While I was working on my career, it was very difficult being in the Congress and trying to get back and do things on weekends when I had other commitments in the district or in Washington. I'd get over there occasionally.

Charnley: When you came back to Michigan State and then you made the discussion to go into law, what was involved in that? You were going into teaching?

Traxler: I had come back to Michigan State to work on a teaching certificate. That was starting in '55. As I took the education courses, I was also paralleling that with some additional political science classes, and I became a research assistant, and did some things relating to the law. My professor was particularly interested in doing research on *amicus curiae* briefs, and my assignment was to interview a selected group of lawyers in the Lansing area and ask them about *amicus curiae*, whether or not they'd ever intervened, had they filed a brief on behalf of any client or any interest.

I really had been thinking about the law, but it was sort of an aspiration beyond--I mean I wasn't focused on it, and I realized that I wasn't going to be a teacher, even though I had kind of liked the idea in a sense. I was really almost preordained to be in politics. I mean my father thought that politics, again, was one of the highest callings. He voted every year, and I would go to the polls with him when I was a boy. He ran his own voter identification program and took little widows, as long as they were Republican.

He was a classic rural farm Republican whose greatest hero was Theodore Roosevelt, and he loved Abraham Lincoln because Abraham Lincoln had freed the slaves, and that was critical. Part of his very being was the sense of equality among men, and that was an important historic event for him. He liked Theodore Roosevelt because Theodore Roosevelt represented a force on behalf of the little people, as he called them, the little people, and opposed the monopolies, the

railroads, the Rockefeller monopoly of oil.

He was not a laissez faire Republican, even though he had great reservations about Roosevelt, because Roosevelt, with his efforts to revitalize the nation's economy, injected, from my father's standpoint, too much stateism, and the idea of killing little pigs. I think that was sort of a war cry for Republicans at that time. "How could you slaughter little pigs, the innocents?" That troubled my dad. He thought that farmers should produce, and that there ought not to be any artificial constraints placed on them, even if you could make a strong case that that would be healthy for the small farmer.

Charnley: Did the Depression shake any of those views?

Traxler: No, he was a rural mail carrier, so he came through the Depression relatively unscathed. He didn't go without any checks. He always had a job there. He retired in the late thirties after thirty-five years of carrying the mail.

Charnley: When did you become politically active in the Democratic Party?

Traxler: During my law school years. In my college years, principally it was a plague on both parties, and I thought that the government ought to own the basic means of production and transportation, government should own the steel mills, government ought to own the mines. I'm sort of a Fabian socialist. I think that my first ballot was for Adlai Stevenson, even though I wanted to vote for the socialist candidate, I knew that he couldn't win, and I liked Adlai Stevenson because of his rationality, and he had just some of the best speeches probably of any recent candidate for the presidency. He was my favorite.

Charnley: Would you talk a little bit about Detroit College of Law and your experiences there?

Traxler: DCL, of course, was a downtown Detroit law school, and it was a private school and had a reputation for its graduates being the highest percentage passing the state bar exam, for whatever that's worth. DCL doesn't do that well currently, for whatever reasons, but it was an interesting experience there. DCL had a whole wide-- [Telephone rings. Tape recorder turned off.]

Charnley: We were talking about Detroit College of Law and your experience there.

Traxler: I think that by the point in time that I became a law student, and I was very fortunate I had the G.I. Bill of Rights, which paid my tuition and gave me a stipend to live on, and I carefully husbanded that \$100 a month that I received. I think that by the time I was a law student, I had pretty well decided that I was interested in politics as a career, and that law was an excellent means of supporting myself as a candidate or between political offices, or in the event that I was a failure as a candidate, then as a career of and by itself, because I truly love the law. It's my second love, first being politics and government.

Charnley: Then after graduation you went to Bay City?

Traxler: I was appointed an assistant prosecutor in Bay City, which is an excellent stepping stone to an elected position, namely state legislature.

Charnley: What about that first election?

Traxler: It was interesting. The county was malapportioned. This was 1962, and we did not have the concept of "one vote, one man" by the state U.S. Supreme court, and the county wasn't a legislative district at that point. It wasn't evenly divided; it tilted slightly towards the Republicans.

We hadn't had a Democratic state representative there since the Depression, and that person only served two years.

So it was quite challenging to get elected, but because of the contacts that I had made as assistant prosecutor in the two years I was there, and the fact that I came from a rural part of the county, and my father was well known as a farmer and a rural mailman, I had a strong base of support in the Republican part of the county, and, of course, the Democratic areas, the ethnic areas, the Poles, the French supported me, the Irish supported me very strongly, and consequently I won by, I think it was 1,800 votes. I went on to serve eleven years, twelve years something like that, State House.

Charnley: What was service in the House like at that time?

Traxler: For me it was just challenging and interesting. I wasn't on the Appropriations Committee, so I lived in a world of ideas, and I was the majority floor leader my second term, and that got me involved in all kinds of policy issues, making decisions about what was going to be scheduled on the floor, working with other members to get their bills out of committee.

That was the Democrat landslide in 1964, Lyndon Johnson's landslide, and we controlled the House almost by two-thirds vote, and I was the majority floor leader at that time. The House flipped back Republican at the end of those two years when the Democrats stayed home in 1966. Nationwide, the Democrats took a beating. Things were too good. There's an old saying that if a Democrat has a full belly, he has an empty head. Prosperity really was the Democrats' worst enemy.

But this was the first Democratic legislature since two years in the early 1930s, and there was a lot of legislation to do. The Republicans principally believed in no government, not less, just no government. They hadn't done anything of any consequence in years and years, and we had a lot of new members who were very proactive and receptive to ideas, and we, unlike the current

legislature, we really worked ten, eleven months out of the year. I can recall leaving on the Fourth of July as the sun was coming up, it was about 5:30, and walking out of the Capitol after an all-night session to wrap up the appropriation bills and some other needed legislation.

Charnley: Did you work with Governor [John B.] Swainson?

Traxler: No. George Romney.

Charnley: What was it like working with him?

Traxler: I truly enjoyed it. He had good staffing. By comparison to today's Republican, he was very modern, quite progressive. He fought for a state income tax. Imagine that, a Republican fighting for an income tax. But there was an element of reform within his tax program. It was further enhanced, and I can recall sitting at the table with him, with Bill Ryan, who was the principal negotiator on behalf of the Democrats. Bill was an old UAW negotiator from Detroit. He was Jesuit-schooled. He had an immense amount of patience, and he and Romney would sit there for a couple of hours, literally, talking about the finer points, and each of them making a case for or against the other's idea.

It was all done, I think, by today's standards it was a very civilized process, very congenial. It was the issues that mattered, and no one went away, or came to the table, for that matter, with the sense that the person on the other side of the table was an enemy, a trader, someone who is doing great disservice to the nation. But that is today's politics. American politics have always been, I think, really, really rough. If you look at some of the old campaigns in the last century, but at the same time, when those campaigns were over, people got things done. My years in the Congress, at least the early and middle years before the right-wingers got there, my best friends were among the Republicans, not all of my best friends, but I had numerous Republicans who were very good

friends, and still are today. But you know, I don't know that people in the Congress or legislature today can say that, can say--

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Traxler: It was an attitude of self-righteousness, an "I'm right, you're wrong" hypocrisy, virtually, and these candidates go off to candidate school where I think their brain is sucked out and mush is pumped in. It's really a sad thing for the nation. If you look at the House of Representatives today, there is no interaction between the two parties on a personal level and when-- [Doorbell rings. Tape recorder turned off.]

Charnley: We were talking about politics and how modern-day politicians frequently in Washington don't cooperate beyond the House or the Senate.

Traxler: And there it is very contentious. As a member of the Michigan legislature, I think, by the way, the same mentality carries on in the Michigan legislature as in the Congress. I think politics have become extremely confrontational and it isn't just a contest of ideas, but it becomes a contest of, in several people's minds, of right versus wrong, and they're right and the other people are wrong, not just philosophically but morally as well. They interject this issue of "You are evil. Your views are destructive to our society," and put on a very personal level, which it ought not to be because there isn't that clearly defined road map to goodness and to, shall we say, salvation. But they make it that way, and that's their principal failure. They think that politics is mortal combat and you have to kill your opponent. It's very sad, very sad.

Charnley: Do you think term limits have made that worse?

Traxler: I don't know that term limits have made it worse. I strongly oppose term limits. It's ridiculous for the citizenry to place the limitation on their right of who they want as their elected representative, senator, governor makes little sense to me. It was one of those things that the right wing got enthused about. The media kind of liked it because it was controversial. It was something, quote unquote, "new," and it was nothing that they examined at any depth, of course, not that they do anyhow, but nothing that they had looked at from a serious philosophical standpoint, or it never would have passed, of course.

I think the people are beginning to understand that term limits isn't the way in which you correct the wrongs in the system. The biggest wrong in the system, of course, is financing, and nobody's prepared to really address that question. A lot of talk about it.

I think in the Congress they're moving in the right direction. They have certain limitations by way of the Constitution in terms of free speech. But the state legislature doesn't go anywhere near that question of the corruption of political money of the system, and that's one of the major factors that makes our system unrepresentative. It's representative only of the money and not of people and what's best for the country.

Charnley: When you were in the State House, what was your contact with the university at that time?

Traxler: Well, it was frequent. Jack Breslin represented the university. Occasionally I'd see President Hannah in my early years of the State House. Later on, of course, Hannah resigned as president and Walter Adams was interim president. And then we had Cliff [Clifton R.] Wharton [Jr.]. I didn't get to know Wharton. What was Wharton's term?

Charnley: 1970 to '77.

Traxler: My election was in April of '73 and I had been campaigning in '72 for the position, and so I had very little contact with Wharton.

Charnley: Will you talk a little about Jack Breslin?

Traxler: Well, Jack was the consummate MSU'er. He was "Mr. MSU," and he dearly cared and loved the university. I think he was so knowledgeable about the institution and he wanted so much for the right thing to happen in the legislature towards the university.

A lot of his issues went to the question of financing, as they do now. The representatives of the university, public affairs people, legislative affairs people, they are so focused, and rightfully so, on the finances because the legislature, under our Constitution can do very little to effect the internal operation of the university. They do put some limitations on appropriations that probably aren't constitutional, but we haven't challenged them, neither have the other universities, because they haven't gone right to the heart of control.

So Jack was a lobbyist, an ambassador of good will, a personal friend. We differed politically. Jack was, of course, a Republican working for [unclear]. He had to be a Republican. I think that it was during his years, as a consequence of the state income tax, the state had money and it was a very different kind of a place from the first couple of years I spent there, which was kind of a log cabin legislature. And as a consequence of George Romney, Bill Ryan, Jim Corruie [phonetic] in the House, also, he was a legislator, these are the people that negotiate the final package.

On the Senate side, I don't recall who spoke for the senators, who was part of that conference. I think a senator from Detroit who was majority leader, Denzen [phonetic]? It's been so many years. I haven't thought of him. Denzel? Delzel? Denzel, I think it was. But there was no one on the Senate side that could hold a candle to Romney or Bill Ryan or Jim Corruie. They really were knowledgeable on the details.

I sat there as majority floor leader and, frankly, my contributions were minimal, because my interests were not in taxation or expenditures at that time. I had to be concerned with the flow of legislation and the type of legislation that would be coming to the floor. Some things we didn't want on the floor, other things we did. So I was a traffic cop in many respects. I had to cajole the Democrat majority and move them, sometimes they thought too fast, too much.

One of them said, after we had lost the majority in the election of 1964, he said, "You did too much. You didn't leave anything on the plate that was unfinished."

I said, "No, no. This election demonstrates that politicians are really victims of circumstances in many respects." We had very fine people that were elected in the Lyndon Johnson landslide of '64 and here it is, 1966 and I want to correct myself. I said '64.

Charnley: Yes.

Traxler: I meant the election of '66 that we lost the control of the Michigan House. Talented and gifted people lost their bid for reelection; they only served two years.

Charnley: Jack Breslin's method of lobbying, was it anything different or special from what most lobbyists did? Obviously he had a different interest.

Traxler: Sure he did. He was a gentleman and he really tried to deal with the facts and he would also, for those of us who were MSU'ers-

Charnley: He had a good list of those.

Traxler: He had a good list and he worked our heart. [Laughter] I think with quite favorable results. I think as a consequence of John Hannah and his long association within the Republican

party, and you remember he was the vice chairman, along with George Romney, for the Constitutional Convention of 1963.

Charnley: Which was on campus.

Traxler: Yes.

Charnley: Do you remember any time when Hannah came to legislature and dealt with money issues?

Traxler: It's hard for me to answer that, because I wasn't on the Appropriations Committee, especially higher education part of it, and I can't comment on how often he came over or if he even did. I'm not that knowledgeable. My areas in those two years, we were in the majority at that time, my areas were, as I've said, were playing traffic cop and moving legislation. I was interested in certain reform legislation that really hadn't been addressed in the previous years.

There was a long list of bills that were enacted at that time, the creation of the Arts Council, no-fault insurance legislation, reformation of workmen's comp, of workmen's unemployment. These weren't extreme because we had a Republican governor, but they were needed, necessary changes to those important social--and had been very, very contentious because of the opposition of kind of a Neanderthal business community.

So consequently, there was a lot of work to be done, because principally in the thirty years preceding that legislature, nothing much had been achieved. We need mental health legislation. I think under [G. Mennan] Williams there were certain steps that were taken to move the state forward with the help of five or six members of the House. They were called young Turks. A couple of them I became acquainted with, later after they left the legislature. One was Dick Smith from Bay City. Another chap was from Midland. Another one was from Ann Arbor. They're just

people of good will who wanted to see the state come out of the Neanderthal stage and move forward.

During the two years in which the Republican controlled, a fellow by the name of Bob Waldron was the Speaker at that time. I was in sort of a neutral mode. I found it hard to adjust to being in the minority after having worked long hours for two years and been used to pulling the levers. So I was sort of silent. I took a seat on the Judiciary Committee. When we came back into power in 1968, I became chairman of the Judiciary Committee, where I stayed until I left in 1973, resigned in '73 following my special election.

I thought those years as the chairman of the Judiciary Committee were probably the happiest and the most productive of my legislative career. Wrote the state lottery law, the state bingo law. We were involved in reforming the jury process, jury selections, no-fault divorce. A long list. Reformation of the method by which you select county commissioners. They were then called supervisors. Some were appointed. It was all malapportioned. During the first Democrat majority, the majority of the election of '62, that legislation passed. Very important. I was very, very satisfied with my work during those four years or so.

Had outstanding committee of Democrats and Republicans, people like Don Holbrook, Court of Appeals judge, Joe Swallow, who was a circuit judge, Jim O'Neill, Hal Ziegler. They were people who really liked the idea of working with ideas and draftsmanship. We were not just visionaries, but we were darned good technicians and we had an outstanding staff person, Bruce Kimmens [phonetic], and Bruce has been with the legislature since--came as an intern in 1962 while he was in law school and he stayed on and he became counsel to the House Judiciary Committee, a very, very young age, and served under Democrats. It was strange, it was the Republicans who kind of bounced him out or moved him around. Moved him around and made him part of their central staffing where he sort of gets lost. But Bruce was an incredible gifted and talented, and is. He's still with the legislature.

Charnley: How was it that you came to run for Congress in that special election?

Traxler: Well, it was opportunity. I'd always been a child of circumstance and good fortune, and I think that in politics we say "timing is all," but there's another factor and that is good luck. It was an interesting story surrounding how I came to run. I was with some friends on a Friday, TGIF'ing it back in Bay City. We were just discussing the usual things about politics around our roundtable, and a friend of mine from the newspaper came in and said, "Well, are you going to run for Congress?"

I said, "I have no intention of running for Congress."

He said, "Oh."

I said, "Why are you asking?" This is 1972 and elections are a bit away. Reapportionment had taken place and I was pretty happy in the House of Representatives. And the district was a Republican district, and I didn't want to end my career by running against a Republican incumbent who no one was angry with and throwing away my future. His was Dave Rogers [phonetic]. Dave went on to say, "Well, we just got a wire story out of Washington saying that Nixon is going to appoint Congressman Harvey to the federal bench, and that will be in our paper tomorrow morning." Oh my God.

Charnley: He planted the seed.

Traxler: So my friends at the table said, "Well you've got to run. It'll be a special election. You need to be a candidate."

I said, "I haven't even considered that."

And one of the chaps sitting there was one of my mentors, his name was Ray Kewen [phonetic]. He had been with the *Bay City Times* for a number of years and had just recently retired. He said, "Come on. We're getting out of here. We've got to do press releases. Call the television

stations. You've got to be on tonight announcing your candidacy."

I said, "I think I'll be announcing Harvey's leaving."

He said, "That's not the damn story; the story is you running. Don't forget that."

So we went over to my home, batted out a quick press release on an old broken-down Underwood typewriter, called the TV stations and asked to get on and, believe it or not, I made the six o'clock news and I was announcing that the Republican congressman was going to take over an appointment from the Republican President, and that I was a candidate for the vacancy. Nobody could believe this story. It was hot off my lips.

Subsequently, I came to know that the Republicans believed for weeks that the Republican congressman, who was a moderate, had leaked this information to me and was sponsoring, in that fashion, my candidacy, which was ridiculous because the story really came out of a friend at the local newspaper.

Charnley: You scooped the President.

Traxler: It was just hilarious the way it all played out. Of course, the Watergate matter. Dick Nixon came to the district to campaign on behalf of my opponent.

Charnley: Who was your opponent?

Traxler: A fellow by the name of Jim Sparling. I haven't thought about Jim in years.

Unfortunately, he's now deceased. But he had been Harvey's press secretary and administrative assistant, he had worked at the *Saginaw News* as a sports reporter. He had, just a couple of months before, maybe five, gone over to the White House as a legislative affairs person. All in all, he had good credentials. He knew the issues fairly well. It was a spirited campaign, nationwide attention, international publicity. He had television crews from Germany, Holland, Scandinavia that came,

plus the three networks here in the United States.

Charnley: So it was viewed as a referendum on Watergate, on Nixon?

Traxler: Correct. When I won that election, he never ventured out of Washington again. He became a captive of the White House and by that time, end of April, of '74 he was simply trying to evade prosecution and the next months he resigned, of course. I think it was the first part of August. The way I found out about his resignation was I got a call from [Gerald] Jerry Ford's office saying that Nixon had resigned, and that Ford would be sworn in that morning in the White House and wanted the Michigan delegation to be present and could I attend? And, of course I said, "Absolutely."

I went over to the White House, and there were no more than two hundred people there. The entire Michigan delegation was there, both the two senators, United States senators and the members of the House. They had the House and Senate leadership, four from each body in the entire Michigan delegation, which I thought was most thoughtful of Jerry Ford. He was, and is, wonderful human being and he had many, many friends. He came out of that time when you could be friends. You could disagree, but you disagreed politely. You may even be voting differently, but didn't impact upon your personal relationships, which, as we said, isn't the case today. And so he had this gentlemanly courtesy about him and thoughtfulness when it came to members of the Congress. He was a decent human being.

Charnley: That tension in the room must have been--

Traxler: What an historic event. Nixon had already climbed on the helicopter and gave that famous wide, sweeping-of-his-arm farewell as he turned just before he entered the helicopter, and went off to Andrews Air Force Base to fly to California and became part of history. A few hours later, Jerry

Ford was sworn in.

Charnley: During your congressional career, did you ever have any contact with Michigan State?

Traxler: Frequently. Frequently.

Charnley: Were you back on campus at all?

Traxler: Yes, on occasion. Usually it was the vice president for research that would interface with me, but not always.

Charnley: Probably John Cantlon.

Traxler: John was the person who I first did, and then, of course, it was the Cooperative Extension and the Ag School, and John. So there was a three-pronged attack. [Laughter] I happened to serve on the Appropriations Committee and on the Agriculture Subcommittee. It was interesting. John let me know, came to Washington to tell me that the question of financing a Cyclotron-Michigan State has a cyclotron. At that point in time, these things were funded from Department of Energy, and they said that it was unnecessary, that there could be no original and creative research coming out of a cyclotron, and they weren't going to fund it.

So I went to a friend of mine, Eddie Boland, who served on the energy subcommittee of appropriations and explained to him that this was terribly important and this was a very essential matter for me. I think I perhaps stretched things a bit and said that it was necessary for my reelection. And he put it in the bill. I can't recall if it was six or nine million. It went forward, became law, and that's how the cyclotron got started.

There was another project that Gordon Guyer was responsible for, and he talked with me

and my administrative assistant and the guy who followed my ag matters. He was really "Mr. Agriculture," and that was Roger Shamrye [phonetic]. Roger and Gordon became fast friends, as Gordon and I were and had been. Gordon was extremely helpful in my second election, because I had just been appointed to Appropriations Committee and Gordon got me together with some of the prominent farmers and several of the thumb counties. He was very cautious, of course. He wasn't into partisan politics. I was a congressman and he wanted me to, in informal settings, meet some of the prominent agriculture types in Heron and Tuscola and [unclear].

Charnley: Do you think it worked to your advantage that you were a Michigan State alum in that election, or in that location?

Traxler: Absolutely. Absolutely. And the fact that my father had been a small farmer and a rural mailman, nobody's mad at their mailman, not in those days, at least. So I was in ideal position, because the other committee I served on funded the National Science Foundation, which is where John had a lot of interest. So I was able to be helpful.

The Food Toxicology Building was something that Gordon had spoke to me about over a period of years, and we kept asking questions and questions of the Department of Agriculture in terms of this issue and building a foundation to get the appropriation. Finally, I had worked my way up in the committee, as well as was, I think, a personal friend of the chairman who I deeply admired. He was a Southerner, Jamie Whitten, a remarkable individual. Towards the conclusion of my congressional career, we got the first appropriations for the building, and before I'd left, the building was fairly well locked in place. It was interesting to come to MSU and participate in the groundbreaking. And then the dedication. [Laughter] And they wanted to put up a plaque in the building. I said, "No, no. You can't do that. I'm not going to have that."

Charnley: While you were in Congress, other than the couple of these situations in terms of contact,

were there any other contacts with the presidents, either [M. Cecil] Mackey or [John A.] DiBiaggio at that time?

Traxler: Yes. DiBiaggio came to Washington to speak to my subcommittee on the importance of funding for the National Science Foundation. He was selected to do that because I was the chairman of the subcommittee then. So the other presidents appointed him as their emissary to plead the cause of more funding for the National Science Foundation.

It happened on that day I had a conflict and I couldn't chair the subcommittee because of the other conflict, so what I did was I came into the committee room, and John was there waiting his turn to address the committee and he knew that I wasn't chairing, obviously, and I asked him to step into my office off the committee room's floor, and I told him that I was very regretful that I couldn't hear his testimony. I'd read his prepared remarks and told him he could be assured that his National Science Foundation will be well taken care of to the fullest extent that our finances will allow.

John was very distressed, and let it be known that he had come all the way to Washington to testify before the chairman, he chairman, not the vice chairman. I was frankly somewhat amazed that he was so insensitive to the fact that congresspeople can have conflicts, and that you may be required at more than one place at the same time, and that you make your apologies and you make your amends and you try to explain to constituents that this, unfortunately, is the case.

Well, I don't think there was any way you could persuade John that there could be a conflict, that his presence commanded everyone else to be there. That was one of my first realizations of the egos of presidents, university presidents. I always thought that some members of the House and Senate had egos, but I soon discovered that it was a common phenomenon among academics. In fact, I almost told him to go to hell.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

Charnley: This is tape two of the Bob Traxler interview.

When the last tape ended, we were talking about the decision to run MSU board.

Traxler: As I was saying, the decision was based on several factors. One, what do I do with my life after Congress; two, how can I still serve the public. And I didn't want anything to do with partisan politics, didn't want elected office. I wasn't going to be engaged, so to speak. I thought that in going to academia, it would be the perfect kind of a slow build-down to a settled life where I could still be involved in public policy, but at a much higher level than I'd participated in, shall we say, than in elected office, partisan office. Even though MSU's board, they're elected and nominated in a partisan fashion.

Little did I know what awaited me. [Laughter] Another reason I wanted to be on the MSU board was my deep affection and love for the university, and I owed it a great deal. It had been very formative in development in my persona, in my education, the development of my philosophical views of the proper society, and I thought it was payback time. So I looked forward to that.

I think I was there something like four months, five months, had been to a couple of board meetings, and announced that I wasn't going to seek reelection. [Laughter] This was not a place for me. You go to a university after having been in elected office, I think especially the Congress, especially having been what's referred to as a member of the College of Cardinals, and you go to a university board where boards really don't matter and you think that you're going to be involved in policy and voting on issues of some importance, and you discover, first thing, nobody wants to vote on any issue. The next thing is, no one, including most of the members of the board, want to make policy. And thirdly, all of the above plus, "The only thing I'm interested in is athletics." [Laughter]

So I didn't want to be a do-nothing trustee and that's why I said, "I'm not going to run for reelection."

And everyone kind of looked at me and said, "Oh well. This guy. Who's he kidding?" But most of my colleagues can't imagine a life after the university. Most of them all seek reelection, and

for them it is the beginning and the end of everything.

Charnley: Dr. DiBiaggio left and then the search.

Traxler: Yes, Gordon Guyer was acting president. I tried to get Gordon to stay on for a couple of years, at least one. I said, "Gordon, you're in an ideal position to make the necessary changes here and to leave this place for the next president well structured."

And he looked at me and he said, "Bob, I've spent my entire life at Michigan State University. All these people are my friends, and I'm not going to disturb that relationship."

I said, "Even doing what needs to be done?"

He said, "That's the job of the next president." [Tape interruption.]

Charnley: We're talking about the early years of Gordon Guyer as acting president when you first came to the board, and then you said that he didn't want to continue on as president.

Traxler: Yes. And I was a freshman on the board, my first year, and I became chairman of the search committee. I didn't know what I was doing. We had a good committee in many respects, but the secretary to the committee was Bruce Miller. Bruce was from the philosophy department. He'd been in MSU for a number of years. Bruce was looking forward, within a few years, to retirement. Very even person, very even personality, totally devoted to the institution, very helpful.

I had formed an alliance with the three Republicans, with the commitment that we would look for a strong academic person to come in as president of the university. Of course, there were a lot of problems. I mean, you've got so many different stakeholders. When the appointment of a president comes up, every one of the stakeholders wants their person as president. The faculty would like a strong academic who's had experience teaching and research. The minorities want one of theirs, whether it's black, Hispanic, Asian. The other factors are, "Is this candidate strong on

athletics? Is he going to do justice to our academic or our sports traditions at the university, or is he one of those fuzzy-haired thinkers who is focused on academics and doesn't care less about football?"

So there were these confrontations done quietly, but differences of opinion as to what kind of a person we really wanted. The then construction, interpretation of the Open Meetings Act really hurt the search process. The media doesn't believe this but, more importantly, they don't care. They don't want to believe it and even if they did believe it, "It's irrelevant and we don't care what kind of president you got. We want to be sitting in that room and listen to every bit of gossip that comes out on that nominee, each and every one of them. We want access to every report you got on him and on her and we want to know what size underwear do they wear." It was an impossible process.

The search committee, we were going to have three invitees for a public appearance, interviews, public interviews. And one of the three was a chap, an MSU graduate, whose sister-in-law had served on the board as a trustee several years ago. He was a mathematics major and he was the president of Florida State University, and he had been president in two previous institutions, one in the Mid-Atlantic, I think, South Carolina. Maybe a private school, I'm not sure. And also a university in Maine. He struck me as exactly the kind of person we were looking for. Clearly, Florida State, a large university, land-grant institution, and strong in athletics, which was important to a number of members of the board. I thought with his academic background, especially mathematics, I was very impressed with that, I thought that this was just ideal.

What happened was, he got sabotaged by some of the stakeholder organizations and he was accused of racism. They wanted to wipe him out, hoping that their favorite candidate would rise to the surface, whoever that happened to be. So he got wiped out and that presented an opportunity to put forward a candidate who hadn't made the preliminary cut, and that was [M. Peter] McPherson.

McPherson had as his allies, the governor, unknown to me at that point, and one of the governor's best friends who had known McPherson, they were both students at MSU and that was Richard McClellan. McClellan was able to move several Democrat trustees into McPherson's

camp, and McPherson sort of appeared very, very suddenly. It was just at the tail end of the process, and the search committee recommended him.

I wasn't the chairman of the search committee. I had resigned, because I so strongly believed in keeping this process a congenial one, I wanted to get off the search committee to comply with Open Meetings Act so that we'd have no more than four members on the search committee, four members of the board of trustees. I got off so the search committee could meet in private. That was the way the law was interpreted then. Of course, it's quite different now. The Supreme Court has said you don't have to have open meetings for the selection of the president, thank heavens.

Charnley: Did you take flak at the time, in the press? Did you take a lot of flak?

Traxler: I took that position during my election. I just said, "The Open Meetings Act as it is being applied today is unconstitutional." I had argued that in the board when we got involved in litigation. The question was, should we appeal the decision of the Court of Appeals on this issue? We'd won on the circuit court level and lost at the court of appeals level. The president was very nervous about this, because he was afraid that if we went to the Supreme Court, they would affirm the court of appeals and he'd sort of be out in never-never land, having been quote, unquote, "selected improperly." Well, he didn't want that kind of publicity. He's very conscious of--he's got a very thin skin.

I persuaded the board. It was very interesting that the Constitution is very clear in this regard and that we had as a matter of responsibility as a board to uphold both the Constitution and our duties as trustees for the selection of the president. We had to appeal. And finally, the president realized that and climbed aboard our express train, and we were successful in the Supreme Court. That's the interpretation in the law today.

Well, the night that the board met to consider McPherson's presidency, well, first off, my three Republican friends abandoned me. They got calls from the governor and McClellan.

McClellan lined up two Democrats on the board. He didn't have to line up Joel [Ferguson]. Joel already cut a deal with the governor on this issue, and Joel got what he wanted out of the governor. The two Democrat women were both state employees and they were in a precarious position, obviously, so they supported McPherson's presidency, and all three Republicans did, too, of course.

[Robert E.] Bob Weiss and myself voted "no" and made it clear that there was nothing personal in this, it was just simply in our best judgment, the process had failed and that, number two, the candidate lacked the qualifications to become president and wasn't the appropriate kind of a person that we wanted at that point in time for the presidency. So that's how McPherson came to MSU.

Charnley: In some of those early years, what were the issues that you've had to face as a board?

Traxler: The board really doesn't go out and initiate a process. I argued, for instance, we ought to change the bylaws. I was procedure oriented as well as substance, and I felt that the secretary of the board ought to be appointed by the Board of Trustees, which put me at considerable odds with the president and all administrators who just were terrorized with the thought that the board might have an inside representative. I was told that this could never work, the secretary would be ignored, would not be in on any of the decisions. I said, "It doesn't matter now. She's in or out. She's serving two masters. The president appoints her, or recommends her. Under our bylaws, he makes a recommendation. We approve or disapprove." And I said, "You've never disapproved. It won't happen," even though I voted "no" on every secretary that came before us for a vote, not because I didn't think they'd do a good job or had some problem with them, it was simply the process was flawed. If I am constitutionally held accountable for what happens at the university, my judgment was that I ought to be involved in the policy issues, and that distressed the administrators to no end. Boards are supposed to be seldom seen and never heard from.

I don't think this is a unique phenomenon at MSU. I think, though, it's probably accentuated

at MSU because we've had a history of, by and large, strong presidents, going back to John Hannah, who originated it all. I think that there were concerted efforts during my years on the board to provide members with those things that a member of the board was most interested in, and, generally speaking, that would involve the question as to who would run the athletic department. Bob and Joel was always vying for that title. And if there's any land mine that a president is constantly aware of, it's the issue of athletics.

I think for some other members they had different views as to why they didn't want to behave as a trustee, but rather wanted to be known as a cooperative, supportive, a non-engaged trustee. And those reasons would vary from one to another. One would like the attention of being a confidant of the president, whoever the president was--DiBiaggio. She was a very good friend of DiBiaggio's, a very good friend of McPherson's and couldn't see the role of trustee as a policy-making position in which you could be original and creative and businesslike.

My sense is that the election process of trustees is not a suitable way to bring people to the board at MSU. I think Michigan is much more successful in having people of judgment and understanding of the role that this region plays, because the region is, indeed, a trustee. The definition of trusteeship really is one that Michigan State, I think, has, by and large, failed. I think Michigan is much better governed than Michigan State from a standpoint they have a better board. Not that the people at Michigan State aren't gifted and talented; that's not the issue. The issue is, historically, at Michigan State, all effort is made to subvert the board and turn it into lapdog. That doesn't work at Michigan. They don't have that tradition and, indeed, their last president, not the present one, but the last president before this one lost his position because of failure to advise the board on several important questions and acting unilaterally. That hasn't happened ever at Michigan State. I'll salute the day that it does. I think, unfortunately, having served on the Appropriations Committee in the Congress, a place where there's immense amounts of tradition and incredibly gifted staff and where you're focused on a couple of agencies, and you hold extensive hearings with the agency people coming before you and you ask them, "What did you do with the money we gave

you last year, and what is it you want for next year, the next cycle of appropriations?" We have careful review of what they said the year before and the year before. You have extensive comparisons in the finances as to where the money went over a period of time. Even though you're dealing in billions, it soon adds up, as the old saying goes.

I think that that questioning, no matter who was before you, whether it was a president of your party or president of the other party, the nominees and appointees that were before you, gave an appropriate sense to a member of the committee that the role of the Congress as appropriators and as policy-makers is one that's vital to the success of the democratic process. When presidents ignore the law, or you get things happening like Watergate and Iran Contra, it behooves those bodies which have a constitutional responsibility to perform their task in keeping with the objective of check and balance.

Lord Atkin [phonetic] said, "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." That is an axiom that no one ever ought to forget. It holds just as true in a university setting as it does in some other governmental setting, and it's essential that there be a balance of check to administration power. Otherwise, it will soon turn into a corrupt organization.

So I viewed my period as a trustee, one, as kind of a watchdog. One, are they following all the rules? Are they doing what we've instructed them to do? Are they following the policies that have been long established here? Number two, what are policies that we need that will enhance our watchdog role? What can the board of trustees be doing by way of policy that will assure that the highest degree of fiscal and ethical accountability exists at the university?

The budgeting process, having come from almost twenty years of budgeting, the budgeting process basically leaves out the Board of Trustees. Principally, they're rubber stamps. The question on development of policy is very much a mixed bag and the board is better in terms of policy than it is in terms of budgeting. Of course, budgeting in itself is policy. Where you put the money is a very important policy decision.

In terms of policy, for instance, there were a number of areas in which good business

practices were just ignored. I strongly believed in what I refer to as request for proposals. I firmly believe in periodically shifting vendors. I think that the buddy relationship that develops between university officials and people who are selling to the university is not conducive to getting the biggest return to your dollar spent, and that eternal vigilance is necessary when you're dealing with money. You need internal controls that are workable and working. You need good independent auditors. This was something that I firmly believed in, I felt that the board should appoint our internal auditor and that that auditor had the responsibility of reporting back to the board, both in terms of the fiscal matters of the university and how the money was being spent and who spent it, but also in terms of were the policies that previous boards have adopted, were they being followed.

That concept of having a board that appointed internal auditors was absolutely chilling to the administrators and especially to the president. The idea that a university official would be accountable to the board and not directly to the president, where you filter it through these layers of bureaucrats and finally it gets to the board and it's so sanitized, you'd think you'd arrived in heaven. So I made the case for that. One or two people on the board knew what I was talking about, were sympathetic towards it. But as one of the guys said to me, he said, "Bob, when and if you got four votes, I'll be your fifth." And that's the way it was.

I had some other hopes. I was very distressed the way in which our travel was handled at the university. We had a preferred travel agency, which had big contracts with the university for more years than anybody could remember. I often wondered, is this really the best way in which to spend over twenty million dollars a year, on airlines and car rentals and housing? Is there a way in which we can be assured that we are getting the biggest value for our dollar?

I had a personal experience that really scared me in terms of the way things were done. I'd been on the board, I think two years, no more than that, maybe a year and a half, and Michigan State was playing in a basketball regional tournament in Tampa, Florida. I had contemplated going down for that game, and I asked one of the secretaries at the board to make some flight reservations for me. I looked at the reservations, I said, "This is crazy. What a weird schedule this is. I'm flying

through Pittsburgh to go to Orlando? That don't make any sense." Especially when I was paying \$1,200 roundtrip. I said to her, "How does this get done? What is this?"

And she said, "Well, it's made by our travel people."

I said, "Oh, those preferred travel people, yeah."

"They said there was no seats available on Northwest Airlines the way you wanted to go."

I said, "Really?" I said, "That's incredible. Okay." So I called Northwest, because I've always flown Northwest to and from Washington for almost twenty years, so I knew a little bit about their booking system. So I just called them direct and said, "Look, I want to go to Orlando." I looked at the timetable. I said, "Here are the flights I want. Tri-City Airport to Detroit, Detroit to Orlando. Orlando back to Detroit and up to Tri-City. Here are the flight numbers."

And she said, "Yes, sir, we got you plugged in."

I said, "Very interesting." And it was the same fare.

Now, generally speaking, if you have a layover, see, the way the travel agent was sending me was Orlando to Pittsburgh, to Detroit, to Tri-City. Now, generally with that kind of a roundabout you get the cheapest fare. The more stops you make, the cheaper it gets. It ought to. We all know that. And I was very irritated because they were charging 1,200 bucks. I had a 1,200-buck ticket. I thought, "Where is the difference going?" If the university is paying 1,200 either way, and I knew that going through Pittsburgh was a cheaper ticket, who got the advantage on that? Well, of course, the travel agent. And I thought, "That's a hell of a way to run a railroad."

So one of the things, over a period of several years, I was able to achieve was an agreement on the part of the administration that they would do an RFP for travel. And I thought, "I've done it! I can't believe this. This is an incredible event. The first time, my God, a trustee has actually proposed policy that the administration is buying," because out of hand they reject trustees' policy initiatives. I mean, it's a dangerous precedent and you have to kill that sucker instantly before it comes out of the nest because it could spread. It's kind of like a disease, and we can't allow trustees to think that they have a role in policy. So I was utterly amazed.

And then we sat down at board meeting. Actually, it wasn't a board meeting, it was really our every-other-month briefing session. We went over the request for a proposal. I got down in the fine print and it said, "Local providers will be given preference."

"Oh my God, this is incredible. What are you people doing? You take us for fools?"

And so, immediately after I chastised them, the president said, "Well, we'll take that out."

I said, "You know, it doesn't matter anymore. It's over. I know what you're going to do. The same people that got it now are going to have it after the RFP, and they submit--

[Begin Tape 2, Side 2]

Traxler: And the same-o, same-o's got the contract. I felt pretty good about being a predictor, but I felt very bad for the university because it wasn't served with this process at all. It couldn't. It's ridiculous.

I think one of the other issues I felt very strongly on was to establish a code of conduct for the principal administrators. I wanted very much to put the board in that also. Well, I had suggested to a couple of the administrators, "If we don't start working on this, it's going to be a lengthy process. It's complicated. The board doesn't understand it, and we've got to get started on it." It's something that I wanted to get done before I left the board.

So we started the process. The first thing that became apparent to me was, there wasn't going to be anything enacted if the board was included in it, because they said, "Look, we're elected by the people and if you put us in this, what it means is, there will be a bunch of whistle-blowers who will be trying to damage us politically. And, besides, we have a couple of board members who are in conflict."

So the first thing I had to do was assure my colleagues that they were not going to be part of this ethical standard, and then we began to review different alternatives. I took it upon myself to become involved in the drafting of this document. Now, that was unheard of, to have a trustee sit

with administrators and prepare language. It happened that I'd been deeply involved in the establishment of the conflicts-of-interest policy that the 1963 Constitution required that the legislature do. So I had some familiarity with the issues that would be involved in when you're dealing with conflicts.

I worked with the general counsel for the university, [Robert A.] Bob Noto and also talked with the vice president for finance and his years of experience as a dean in this area.

Charnley: This is Fred Poston?

Traxler: Yes. It was so distressful for these administrators to have a trustee again moving forward on a policy question and intimately being involved in the design of the policy. It was so unheard of for them, they simply could not adjust to it. Noto could. The others couldn't. They thought it was a horrible precedent. The issues that I would talk with Noto, I said, "I want this in the proposal that will come to the board as a beginning discussion draft." About half of those never showed up. They got sabotaged along the way. The president had his cabinet sort of intervene in this. The deans got very nervous. Other people in the administration got very nervous because of potential conflicts that they were involved in, or, in one case, a spouse.

The last meeting of the board that I attended was a retreat of the board in which we discussed the issues here, and the question came up as to how we would proceed and whether we would have votes to amend or change any of the proposed verbiage. I wanted votes because I wanted to know where my colleagues stood on the issue, how these various issues as we raised them, as we went through the draft. The draft was very benign. I said, "You know, there are going to be several important questions here that what we should do is simply a member of the board puts forth a proposal and it's voted up or down."

The president didn't want that. He said, "I don't think we have to do that. We'll just work from consensus."

I said, "This is kind of a miniature legislative body. We can't work from a consensus. We don't know what the consensus is. So we have to explain what each amendment is, have a vote on it, one way or the other and move forward, go right through the document."

"No I don't think that's necessary. We've never done that before. There's no reason to do it."

And I knew, looking around at my colleagues, that it was hopeless. Same old guy, friend of mine said, "Well, you know," he told me afterwards, "well, if you'd have had four votes, I'd have been there."

"I always think of you as the guy that would have been there if I had the votes." [Laughter]

Well, the bottom line is, we're a year later, no ethics policy has come out of the board. No ethics policy will come out of the board. No conflict of interest, and the university is poorly served.

Charnley: How about Detroit College of Law? Were you on either board at the time when the proposal--whose idea was it, anyway?

Traxler: I was on the MSU board, yes, and very supportive of it and encouraged the administration to move forward. Weiss was very, very positive in that regard, very helpful. He really led the way for DCL. I was very supportive.

The president and I, it's fair to say, had such disagreement on the respective roles of a president and a board that it was difficult for us to communicate. He would argue that the Constitution didn't mean what it said, indeed, the board did not have final authority in terms of the university finances and policy. I don't know who he thought did, but I assume he believed the president. So we had a basic philosophical disagreement as to the respective roles of the parties.

Sometimes the board, in a very informal way, was able to affect what was going on. Weiss and myself were more proactive than the other board members, but at the same time, the other board members, several of them, would privately speak with the president and say, "Don't just reject that out of hand. Listen to what's being said. There's some value here."

He was very reluctant, initially, very reluctant to down the road of affiliation with DCL. He moved off that as soon as he found a way to effectuate a management of all the issues, a control. He really is a control person and he's not a collegial, work in a cooperative fashion. He's an old-fashioned manager in many respects. Most, in fact. Given over to temper tantrums, sadly enough. So, anyhow, that's the story.

Charnley: Were you aware of any of the previous attempts for Michigan State to get a law school?

Traxler: I think there'd been some conversations in the legislature going back a number of years. The other law schools in the state were not sympathetic to that, and the legislature said, "We don't need a new law school." And that's why it made some sense to affiliate with DCL. I think that in order to get that accomplished, this merger, partnership, as it was then described, the university agreed with the opponents of MSU in having a law school of any kind. That there would be no state financing for the law school. I think that was a mistake. It was a terrible price to pay, and it's very unfair to the students who are attending DCL and MSU, MSU and DCL are currently.

Charnley: Whatever. Name du jour. [Laughter]

Traxler: And there's no question that eventually the DCL part of this will fade away, and it will be the law school at MSU, MSU Law School. But I think that without state financing, it's going to be a marginal school, unfortunately. The tuition is excessive and they're doing well, but they would be doing much better if they had [unclear] grant.

Charnley: Would you have been able to attend law school there without the G.I. Bill?

Traxler: No.

Charnley: The G.I. Bill was critical in your case.

Traxler: Totally enabled me. Yes.

Charnley: You talked a little about the issue of agriculture. Having come from an agricultural district, born on a farm, your own experience, how would you say that Michigan State, the focus on agriculture has developed during your experience? Has it changed at all?

Traxler: I think that modern technology, especially communication, has made it much easier for the university to relate to the producers, the farmers, and to the agribusiness people as well, but principally to the farmers. The kinds of Internet opportunities to get the latest information and to use the university programs for finance have been of immense assistance to most of the farmers who take advantage of this, and ever-increasing numbers of them do. Then, of course, you've got the research component of the university that I think has demonstrated that Michigan State is probably the number one research agricultural university in the nation. Some great competitors out there. Iowa State, Iowa.

Charnley: In Washington, was that recognized that we were a leader in many areas?

Traxler: I think that's the case. Yes, yes. And we do very well in the competitive area of research in Department of Agriculture. In fact, I think we lead all other universities in that regard, all other agriculture schools.

Charnley: The issue of technology, obviously, has been important in the last ten years in particular. Students now this fall are being required to either bring a computer or have a computer in class.

With your experience on the board, what was your position about that?

Traxler: I supported it, but with caveat. The way the administration was doing was, every student would be required to have a laptop. Laptops were expensive at that point. That the administration was moving on the belief that since this would be an add-on to their student loans, finance, that, hey, it's okay, but there were a lot of students who weren't participating in the loan program. The key here, really, is to make them computer-literate. For some students I think it is a necessity to have a portable, the engineering and science students, especially. But those students who are in a more broad-based program, the social sciences, for instance, while they are helpful for notetaking, you can make that case, I think the option should be left with the student, and if they've got a computer at home that is functioning, it's a desktop, and they want to bring it and use it, I think it should be their choice.

I think as the university gets some experience in this area, I'm always ready to change my mind. But the good news is, I don't have to worry about that now. [Laughter] I think that it was just a common-sense approach, and rather than dictate that it had to be a portable, I got concerned—there's another element here, too. My father taught me several things, and one of the things he taught me was, "If you want to know what's going on, follow the money." Another thing he firmly believed in, "Don't pay a hell of a lot of attention to what they're saying. Watch what they do." And something else was that money is a factor that you can't ignore in decisions, what motivates people.

So I thought, in this situation, what is it that motivates them? Well, the principal laptop manufacturer at that point was Dell. Dell was very instrumental in getting the law specifically to provide for computers, and they hoped to capture the market, because they do make a good product. It's awful expensive. And they have a good relationship with many of the universities around the country, including MSU. So that was troublesome for me, you know, these vendors. People run around damning government, but I'll tell you, when the Treasury is there, it's the first place people go.

I always recall a guy in my home town, I was in the Congress, and I recall reading--this was a number of years ago--reading in the newspaper that he was appealing his assessment by the city assessor. He had a business and he thought they had over-evaluated him. So he marched into the Equalization Board and got his assessment somewhat lowered. It was only a matter of within a year, the city had decided to put a new bridge in, made that decision and located the new bridge where they would have to take his property. His property went from his 200,000, at most, to 1 million. I wasn't aware of what the terms of the agreement was between he and the city until he called me, and he said, "Look the money is in Lansing." There was federal money involved, and he said, "They're just kind of sitting on it." He said, "Bob, that's my million bucks and every day it costs me money that they're drawing interest on my money, and I want to get a deposit and I want to draw the interest."

Well, that makes some sense. And I started to laugh to myself about how when it was being assessed, it wasn't worth spit, but when it came time to deal with the government, and the Treasury, the government Treasury, it was worth five times what he had estimated.

So that was a good illustration of how people look at government. They see an opportunity there. The vendors are always looking for a sweetheart arrangement. Corporations have to deal with that mentality with their purchasing agents. They have to deal with the fact that vendors are always looking to get one leg up and make special friends among the purchasing. Most corporations have a policy in which their purchasing agents be very careful in their relationship with these vendors, and they're not permitted to accept any gifts or tokens of appreciation, lest it influence their decisions.

Charnley: In looking at the money issue, the tuition guarantee, that phrase came to symbolize a lot under President McPherson's administration. What was your position on that originally?

Traxler: I strongly supported it. I had been telling my colleagues on the board that the good times

weren't going to roll forever and that we should begin to develop policies that would deal with a situation where if we had an economic downturn and the university was cut right in the middle of the school year, how are we going to deal with that? Nobody would approach that issue. Nobody. I couldn't get them even think about it, let alone develop a policy.

In fact, I actually amended the budget proposal that came to us from the administration and said that they would develop and submit to the board, within a year, policies to deal with the process of reducing expenditures in the event that the constitution mandated a reduction in the middle of the school year.

They were appalled. Nothing came of that, of course. They never went to the policy question of how are we going to set in motion a process that will ensure careful review of programs, what would go and what would stay. And [M.] Cecil Mackey went all through that, you know. It cost him his presidency. He believes it. Some of the board members at that time told me that, no, he made a misjudgment, he did have the support on the board, not for the policy, but for his presidency. He assumed because they refused to abolish the School of Nursing and some other initiatives that I don't recall now, that it was a rejection of him as a president and that he didn't have the votes on the board. Well, he may not have had the votes to abolish the School of Nursing, but that didn't mean that they were rejecting he as a president. I think there was a little confusion there in his mind.

Charnley: Looking back at your career as a student and then even in Congress and then, later on the board, your experience at Michigan State, is there anything that comes mind that you see as most important?

Traxler: There are a lot of important things here. I think one can never lose sight of why the institution is there, and that is as a mission that touches and affects everyone in the state of Michigan as a land-grant institution, to bring knowledge of agriculture, of industrial skills, and of research to

the people of the state, whether they're a student or a non-student. Secondly, the role of education, of educating the masses.

Charnley: I think that's a good point to end.

Traxler: That's a good way to end. Thank you.

Charnley: I appreciate your time and especially sharing your insights for the project. Thank you.

Traxler: Thank you.

[End of interview]

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