

Linda Steele

Deputy Chief of Staff, Minority Leader Robert H. Michel of Illinois

**Oral History Interview
Final Edited Transcript**

June 7, 2016

Office of the Historian
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C.

“So people would call the office or write letters, and it was my job to try to solve the problems for them—or to at least make them feel confident that if they didn’t get the desired result, at least someone really tried for them. . . . One of the great satisfactions of that job was the phone calls that would start out totally hostile—they were so frustrated when they would call—and by the time the phone call was over, they’d say, ‘Oh, thank you so much.’ So, I’d make a friend on the phone, and then I would follow through as best I could on whatever I could do for them. Of all the years I spent on the Hill, it was the most satisfying job I had, because every day I went to work, somebody’s life was a little bit better off. I may not have improved their life, but I certainly helped to improve their attitude about the problems at hand that they were dealing with.”

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Abstract

In 1961, Linda Steele arrived in Washington, D.C., to take a secretarial position in the office of Congressman Stanley Tupper of Maine. After two decades of constituent casework and office management experience on Capitol Hill, she was named deputy chief of staff for House Republican Leader Robert Michel of Illinois, a position she held until her retirement in 1993.

In her oral history, Steele reflects on her long career in the House, providing a window into the world of working women in congressional staff positions. She recalls her rewarding work in constituent service and her method of addressing questions and concerns from district residents. She describes the cooperative spirit among Member offices, and the lively office culture that brought together congressional staff outside the workplace in recreational sports, clubs, and social gatherings. As the primary staff member for the Republican Committee on Committees during the 1980s and early 1990s, Steele also provides insight into the committee selection process. Throughout, she highlights the ways changing ideas about gender roles in American society shaped and reshaped the workplace during her three decades on the Hill.

Biography

Linda Steele arrived in Washington, D.C., in January 1961, as a 19-year-old working in the office of Representative Stanley Tupper of Maine. Initially, her office duties involved secretarial work and handling questions from constituents. In 1970 she joined the staff of Representative (and future Republican Leader) Robert Michel of Illinois, where she spent more than two decades in his Member and leadership offices focusing on constituent casework and office management.

Linda Steele was born in Camden, Maine, in 1941. Her mother worked as a hairdresser and a housewife, and her father was an attorney active in local politics. During a campaign visit to her family's home in 1960, Tupper offered Steele a job in his Capitol Hill office should he win election to the U.S. House. After Tupper's victory, Steele joined his small staff in Washington in early 1961.

To quickly adapt to life and work on the Hill, Steele and her co-workers received advice and instructions from their colleagues in the Maine delegation in the House. She learned to use new office technology and to skillfully navigate the web of offices and agencies that constitute the federal government. She also joined the Congressional Staff Club and became an active part of the community of congressional workers in the 1960s, participating in recreational sports, clubs, and social gatherings with her colleagues.

After a brief interlude working for a nonprofit in downtown Washington in the late 1960s, Steele used her social connections with congressional staff to interview for a job with Representative Michel in 1970. For the next decade, she worked primarily on constituent casework and became adept at helping district residents solve problems and understand the workings of the federal government.

When Michel was elected House Minority Leader in 1981, he named Steele deputy chief of staff. From the leadership office in the Capitol, Steele administered the office budget, managed employee work schedules, and served as the primary staff member for the Republican Committee on Committees, the precursor to the Republican Steering Committee, which assigns Members to House committees. In 1993, she retired after more than three decades in the House.

Editing Practices

In preparing interview transcripts for publication, the editors sought to balance several priorities:

- As a primary rule, the editors aimed for fidelity to the spoken word and the conversational style in accord with generally accepted oral history practices.
- The editors made minor editorial changes to the transcripts in instances where they believed such changes would make interviews more accessible to readers. For instance, excessive false starts and filler words were removed when they did not materially affect the meaning of the ideas expressed by the interviewee.
- In accord with standard oral history practices, interviewees were allowed to review their transcripts, although they were encouraged to avoid making substantial editorial revisions and deletions that would change the conversational style of the transcripts or the ideas expressed therein.
- The editors welcomed additional notes, comments, or written observations that the interviewees wished to insert into the record and noted any substantial changes or redactions to the transcript.
- Copy-editing of the transcripts was based on the standards set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

The first reference to a Member of Congress (House or Senate) is underlined in the oral history transcript. For more information about individuals who served in the House or Senate, please refer to the online *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov> and the “People Search” section of the History, Art & Archives website, <http://history.house.gov>.

For more information about the U.S. House of Representatives oral history program contact the Office of House Historian at (202) 226-1300, or via email at history@mail.house.gov.

Citation Information

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Interviewer Biography

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— LINDA STEELE —
A CENTURY OF WOMEN IN CONGRESS

MURPHY: This is Mike Murphy in the House Recording Studio on June 7th, 2016. Today we are happy to have Linda Steele join us for an interview for the Women in Congress Oral History Project. Thank you for joining us.

I wanted to start with your story before you arrived in Washington, D.C. Where did you grow up?

STEELE: I grew up in Camden, Maine. It's a lovely little summer resort on the coast, very small. After I graduated from high school, I took what is now called a "gap year," apparently, trying to figure out what I was going to do with my life. Camden was a little too small to build a career, and it's a tourist-oriented town. It was a lovely place to grow up, but it wasn't where I envisioned spending the rest of my working life. But as a child of the '50s—in the 1950s women were not encouraged to be much of anything besides wives and mothers—it wasn't like I had guidance counselors trying to push me in one direction or another so that I had to make big career choices.

Ultimately, it turned out to be a fortunate decision because I ended up working in my father's law office. My father and grandfather were both attorneys and judges at certain points, and I remember being in my grandfather's law office watching this woman type without looking. She was typing stuff without looking at the keyboard, and I thought that was really cool. So in my sophomore year of high school, I took one semester of personal typing and learned how to type. Then, in anticipation of going to college, I took two years of shorthand, figuring that would be a great way to take notes in college.

But during that period of time I was working in my father's law office, this man who was running for Congress comes in to reacquaint himself with people that he had known over the years. He had known my father in the Maine state legislature. So he was making acquaintances up and down the coast during the primary campaign, and I was sitting there typing well. That was when I first met him, and he ultimately won the primary. Later on, during the general election campaign, he was scheduled to speak in Camden at the Lions Club. My father was a Lions Club member, so he had to be there early. My mother wasn't going to be at home, because she was secretary of the county Republican women's organization, and they were having a meeting. My dad said, "Would you mind staying home for a while and entertaining this man while he kills a little bit of time before he has to make his speech?" And I said, "Yeah, sure." Why not?

So during that discussion, Stan[ley] Roger Tupper—the man who was running for Congress—said, "Well, listen, if I win this election, would you like to come to Washington and work for me?" He said, "Do you think your father would mind?" I said, "I'm sure he'd be glad to get rid of me." And I said, "Yeah, sure." Because I'm thinking, this isn't going to happen. I'm just agreeing to do something that I have no clue what I'm saying yes to, really. But he won, and that was in 1960, and here I am, some 50-odd years later.

MURPHY:

So was your family involved in politics? Besides being a lawyer, was your father a state representative?

STEELE:

He was a state rep, and I believe my grandfather was as well. It wasn't a heavily political family, but it was mildly political. Very Republican, though. I remember when one of my friends in grade school told me her mother was a Republican and her father was a Democrat. I thought how in the world

could this woman be married to a Democrat? So I probably was more ingrained [in Republicanism] than I realized at the time.

MURPHY: You said your mother was involved in the local Republican Party. Did she talk about these issues at home?

STEELE: No, not really. We always had dinner together. We were the typical, you know, the *Leave It to Beaver* kind of family, where you had dinner together every night. I don't have a specific memory of political discussions at the dinner table, but there may well have been.

MURPHY: When you were young, did you look at your mother's involvement in politics, or her involvement in things outside of the home, as some kind of—

STEELE: No, because it wasn't intensive involvement. I think my father may have talked her into doing that, because she was nervous about having that responsibility.

MURPHY: What kind of responsibility did she have? What did she do?

STEELE: She was secretary of the county Republican women's organization, so anytime they had a meeting, she had to take notes, transcribe them, and read the minutes at the next meeting. I think having that responsibility, for her, was uncomfortable.

MURPHY: When you were young, did you—you said you thought about going to college. What were some of the possibilities that you thought of? Did you see any role models that you thought—

STEELE: No, that was the whole point. I didn't have any. I didn't have possibilities, I didn't have role models, I didn't have guidance. It was like nothing was expected of me.

MURPHY: Do you think something was expected of you? Something different from a career might have been expected of you?

STEELE: Marriage and motherhood, that was about it. I don't ever recall anybody—none of my female friends, my girlfriends in college, in high school, I don't ever remember them talking about goals, you know? We were the children of the '50s. The sexist roles were very well defined. The father was the breadwinner, and the mother kept the house.

MURPHY: And did you feel that [expectation] from your family, your community, or both?

STEELE: Both. Everywhere. I mean, that's just the way it was. No one ever suggested that it was different than that.

MURPHY: And did you feel that this—when Congressman Tupper was elected, did you feel that this was something different to experience?

STEELE: Oh gosh, yes. And why I didn't get nervous enough to say, "Oh my goodness, what in the world have I gotten myself into?" I'm glad I didn't. I'm surprised I didn't. But, I packed up my stuff, and my dad cosigned a note for \$200 at the bank so I'd have some cash after my move to Washington. I know he could have given me the money, but he cosigned a note. My folks were very good fiscal-management teachers, my father in particular.

MURPHY: And you made that decision on kind of a whim, or did you say—

STEELE: Well, I had said yes. He won the election.

MURPHY: Did you think about it for a little while?

STEELE:

You know, I don't think so. I must have, because the prospects of it had to have been somewhat daunting. Our initial office started out with just three people. For the longest time we just had three people: myself, one other girl, and a male administrative assistant. The two of them were from Augusta, Maine, so before we went to Washington, we had this meeting. I drove to Augusta and had a meeting with just the four of us—Mr. Tupper and three staff people. We were it. We were green as the grass. And here we were, headed to Washington. Frankly, I think if any one of us had known what we didn't know, we never would've gone. The events just kind of made it happen, made it stay true. Maybe there might have been something subtle in there, without my remembering it, that my father would be too disappointed in me if I went back on saying yes. I'm not sure. I'm just glad I made the trip.

At the time, Margaret Chase Smith was the Senator from Maine, and there was a girl in my hometown who was working for Senator Smith in Washington. She was living at the YWCA at the time, and she made arrangements for me to live at the YW before I got to town. So I at least knew I was going to have a place to stay. Otherwise, I wouldn't have known how to go about finding a place to stay. But April [Campbell], my female coworker, and I ended up becoming roommates in an apartment, because my third week at the YWCA in Washington was the week of John [Fitzgerald] Kennedy's inauguration, and the YW was fully booked. So I was going to have to move out of my room. April's uncle lived in Suitland, Maryland, and worked at the Census Bureau. He found us an apartment in the development where he lived. So that's where we moved.

MURPHY:

Had you ever been to Washington before?

STEELE:

Yes, I had, during my senior year in high school. Annually there was a bus trip to Washington for seniors. We did an overnight in New York, an

overnight in York, Pennsylvania, an overnight near Luray Caverns, and then I think we spent three or four days in Washington. I remember saying to someone during that week, "If I was ever going to move away from home to go to a city to work, I would go to Washington, because the buildings are low and there are so many trees." It just felt a lot more like home. New York, to me, had been overwhelming. It just was hard to find the sunlight. Anyway, so prophetic, you know? By default.

MURPHY: You said you lived with your coworker.

STEELE: Yes. And we bowled together.

MURPHY: Was this a common arrangement for many people who worked in offices at the time?

STEELE: I doubt it. I would imagine it could get a little dicey. It worked out okay for us, but when you spend all day together in an office and then you go home and you're still together, that's a recipe for a bad time with the wrong combination of people. But, we didn't live together for even a full two years, because we each got married.

MURPHY: When you first arrived on Capitol Hill, what were your impressions of the workplace, but also [of] just living and working in the city every day?

STEELE: Well, my first impression was, "How in the world do you find your way around?" Because when you grow up in a town that's small, and then you come to the city, it's like how in the world do you find your way around this place? But I was really fortunate. The girl from Camden who was working for Senator Smith had just gotten married, and she and her husband were living at 14th and U Street [NW], which wasn't that far from the YWCA. He was in the Navy, but he was being medically discharged and not working. He

would take her to work every day and would swing by the YW to pick me up. So they would take me to work, pick me up, then take me back to the Y at the end of the day.

And then, when April and I moved into the apartment in Suitland, we would ride the bus. Then we both bought MG convertibles. Hers was red, and mine was white. I loved that car.

MURPHY: Did you park it here every day, drive it in? Or did you carpool?

STEELE: We drove. We would take just one of the cars, and we had one parking permit in one of the outside lots. I think it was where the Cannon parking lot is now.

MURPHY: So what was your job title when you started?

STEELE: We didn't have titles. Nobody had titles. Even on the paperwork, everybody was listed as clerk. It was a whole different pay outline then. It wasn't in current dollars; it was [in] original civil service dollars that translated into contemporary dollars. But nobody had titles. I was hired by [Representative Robert Henry] Bob Michel in 1970. And the first thing I was told was nobody has a title, but somehow they started appearing eventually.

MURPHY: And what were your responsibilities when you arrived?

STEELE: Dictation, typing, answering the phone, taking constituent requests for House Gallery tickets, answering legislative mail. Our responsibilities weren't strictly defined one way or the other. We would each handle the legislative mail. Just the variety of what would come at us, we just kind of divided it up, but not strictly. Stan Tupper was an excellent writer, and so he would write a weekly newsletter, and we had a mimeograph machine. We'd type this

newsletter on purple paper and run it off on the mimeograph. Then we used the addressograph machine to print addresses on envelopes. So we would do the whole job in the office ourselves: type, print, stuff, and mail them.

MURPHY: And that machine was the addresso—

STEELE: Addressograph.

MURPHY: And it printed the labels for—

STEELE: The mimeograph made the paper copies, and the addressograph printed the envelopes. I think it was an Elliott addressograph. Could be wrong about that, but I think so.

MURPHY: Did you feel like you were prepared for those kind of tasks when you arrived?

STEELE: No. I didn't know those tasks existed. It's all part of, "If I had known what I didn't know." The thing that saved us was, at the time Maine had three Representatives, so of those three offices, two of us were newbies. We were the Second District. The First District was a brand-new Member as well. The Third District Member had been here for a while, and he had a couple of women that worked for him that were from Maine. They were veterans, so we were on the phone to them all the time, and they were very helpful. We really got the information we needed on how to survive from them.

MURPHY: What did you ask them for help with?

STEELE: Who do you call to get your phone fixed? Who do you call for—everything!

MURPHY: And they were very helpful in an easygoing way?

STEELE: They were mentoring. They were kind and mentoring, in a motherly sort of way.

MURPHY: They had been here for a long time, or for a few terms, or something like that?

STEELE: They had been here for a while, I don't know how long. They were considerably older than we were. We were 19 years old. I mean, come on, it's like we could barely vote. In fact, we couldn't vote then, you had to be 21 to vote. I don't know how old they were, but they were older.

MURPHY: As you were adjusting to the workplace, what kind of social life did you have in the early part of your time in Washington? Were there places for coworkers to come together outside of work?

STEELE: There were, but we didn't really know about them. We started out on the second floor of Cannon, and Bob Michel's office was across the hall from us. His office had newly relocated into that corridor, and there was a social gathering in his office for everybody in our hallway, because many of us were new. Some weren't brand-new to Washington, but they were new to that hallway. It was just so people could get to know each other.

This guy in Bob Michel's office said, "The Congressional Secretaries Club is starting a bowling league. Would you girls be interested in bowling?" And I had bowled maybe five times in my life, but we said, "Yeah, sure." It was something social to do, because we didn't know what to do socially. And we were the only people we knew. So we joined this bowling league, and that's where I met a lot of really nice people, one of whom eventually became pretty much responsible for my getting the job with Bob Michel about 10 years later. I met Pat Kelly and her friend Jean Gilligan. They and a group of their friends invited me to join them at the Carroll Arms Hotel bar after work one time. And that's back when Mark Russell was performing there. He would play the piano and do political comedy. He was a masterful political

comedian, and he was very well known in Washington. He went national on television for a short time, but his comedy was so inside, folks outside the Beltway didn't get it.

And you have to remember, in 1961, there was no such thing as Bullfeathers and stand-up drinking. There weren't quote, unquote bars, because in the District of Columbia there was a rule against stand-up drinking. If you went to a restaurant for dinner and ordered a drink while you waited for your table, you had to sit at the bar with your drink. When it was time to go to your table, your waitress would have to carry your drink from the bar to your table. After the riots in '68, when downtown business interests were being impacted so negatively, I think that ordinance either was repealed, or it just got overlooked forever. That's when so-called "bars" as we know them today were born in Washington.

MURPHY: So the bowling league became a social space for you to interact with other people. Was it made up of all staff from—

STEELE: It was primarily staff, but there were also Members of Congress that bowled in it as well. There were at least five or six Members. There may have been more, but at least five or six. Bob Michel was one. The Congressional Secretaries Club back then—it's called the Congressional Staff Club now, if it's still in existence—had a very active social schedule. They would have trips each year, and there would be a big dinner every year. At one point they had a "Man of the Year" or "Person of the Year" award for someone in the Club who had distinguished themselves. Even the bowling league's annual awards presentation banquet was a big evening event. You got dressed up, you fixed your hair, you put on good clothes, you brought a spouse or a significant other, and it was at hotels—nice places—where we had drinks and dinner, and they would hand out the awards.

So it was the first social structure that April and I were exposed to, and through that we met a number of people. She became involved with the Young Republicans in Washington, so her social circle widened that way. Mine was more of a local group because of who I started dating. He had a wide circle of friends in the Washington area because they had grown up here.

MURPHY: And so there were men and women in the Secretaries Club, and—

STEELE: Oh, yes. It was called the Secretaries Club, but it was men and women.

MURPHY: And there were no party divisions?

STEELE: No. Everybody usually knew whether you worked for a Republican or a Democrat, but there was no hostile distinction. You weren't a pariah if you were on this side or that side. The Hill back then was treated more from a career standpoint. Probably in today's world, it might be hard to find someone who's under the age of 50 who has worked here for 10 years. I've been retired for over 20 years, but I think it's viewed [now] more as a stepping-stone to more-lucrative careers, because back then K Street hadn't been invented as a culture. So you'd go to the Democratic Club, and you'd see Republicans there; go to the Capitol Hill Club—which is the Republican counterpart—and you would see Democrats there. So there was a lot of social crossover. There probably isn't so much today.

MURPHY: So in the social interactions that were outside of the working day, these distinctions kind of just played a role in the background, really. What other kind of connections were there? What about *Roll Call* or other newspapers on the Hill? Did you read those? Did you keep up on Hill affairs?

STEELE: *Roll Call* was relatively new. A man by the name of Sid Yudain single-handedly, I believe, published and distributed that paper. It came out just once a week.

MURPHY: So as you got here, were you—

STEELE: But it was more gossipy then. It wasn't so much political news as it was Capitol Hill gossip. Informational gossip, not salacious stuff. Good stuff.

MURPHY: And as someone who wasn't that interested in this before you came to Washington, did you become involved in the political intrigue of D.C.? Did you follow that?

STEELE: I didn't, no. I didn't become involved in the Young Republicans organization like April did, and the people that I hung out with socially—the group that I married into—weren't really politically inclined. So, no. Politics as an entity of my life really didn't exist. I was raised as a Republican and I started out working for a Republican, and for one brief year I worked for a Democrat, but the rest of the time I worked for Bob Michel, who is a Republican. We didn't always agree on things, but that was okay, we had some good discussions. It didn't matter to him.

MURPHY: So you were interested in these issues, and you had a position on these issues, but you also—

STEELE: As I grew older, I would develop my own opinions about things and questions. Thank goodness I didn't stay stagnant.

MURPHY: And did some of your ideas come from the work that you did? The ways that you interacted with the public in the district? Or did you learn on the job?

STEELE: I'm not sure. It was probably just overall exposure to—maybe being part of conversations that would take place. If I was at the Democratic Club, group conversations would take a bit of a different direction than conversations that would take place in the Capitol Hill Club, because they're more politically oriented in each of their respective directions. My evolution was very gradual.

MURPHY: And your work in Congressman Tupper's office—you worked there throughout his terms in office?

STEELE: Six years, yes. He didn't run again after six years. He was like a maverick. He was a charter member of the Wednesday Group. I don't know if it still exists. There were six moderate Republicans, and they were outside the mainstream core of Republican Members of the House. So I'm sure a lot of my political evolution—my political ideas were influenced by him, because by working for him I was forced to see more than one straight-line observation on any given issue, because sometimes he'd be on the other side of the line, or he'd blur the lines a little bit.

MURPHY: The party lines.

STEELE: Yes, the party line. Yes, exactly.

MURPHY: So when he decided not to run again, did you think you might return to Maine? Did you think of other options? What were you thinking?

STEELE: No, actually, at that time I was still married, so I was living here, but even when I got divorced, I didn't think about moving back to Maine, because I didn't know what I'd do back there. My only other thought was eventually I would retire. After I retired, I might move back to Maine. Washington is an expensive place to live, so salary structures were better in Washington. So

once I retired, my pension might support a better lifestyle if I went back to my hometown.

But in the meantime, my hometown became an expensive place. A lot more of the outside world discovered it, and so it looks a lot different now. The whole culture there is different. It's still a great place, and it's better now, but I would have had to reduce my standard of living if I had moved back. Plus I'm now so used to having access to doing a lot of different kinds of things that aren't as readily available there.

MURPHY: So what did you think—when he was leaving office, what were your choices?

STEELE: I wasn't sure what I was going to do, but he felt that it would be to the benefit of the Member replacing him if he had someone like me—who was from Maine and who had some experience on the Hill—working for him, and that new Member agreed and hired me. I didn't have to think about it for a long time.

MURPHY: Was he a Democrat?

STEELE: He was a Democrat, yes. I worked for him for a little less than a year.

MURPHY: And then you said you left Capitol Hill.

STEELE: I worked for a nonprofit organization downtown for a couple of years, and I was bored stiff. So that's when I thought, well, I'll go back to the only other thing I know, which is Capitol Hill, and I called a couple of people I knew from the bowling league. It's like so many things dovetail right back to that decision to join that bowling league. One woman that I had contacted called me one day and said, "Well, I understand Bob Michel is looking for somebody. I don't know whether they filled the position or not, but you

might want to give him a call.” She gave me the name of Mr. Michel’s administrative assistant, whom I didn’t know. I had known Bob Michel and—this was in 1970—I knew two of the members of his staff, but I didn’t know the administrative assistant. He was new to me. So I interviewed with him for the job, and I was hired.

MURPHY: And you said you had these connections that you maintained with some women from the bowling league. How did you keep up those connections even though you were off the Hill?

STEELE: Well, I didn’t, really, during the time that I wasn’t on the Hill. It’s just that I had known them long enough, and we’d had enough interactions. I used to do some volunteer work for the Congressional Secretaries Club, so over the course of the first seven years that I worked on the Hill, I was in the secretaries’ staff club, so I knew them well enough.

MURPHY: What about the organizations like the bowling league? Did you leave the bowling league and come back into it?

STEELE: Eventually I did leave the bowling league, only because you had to be a member of the staff club. But the league itself moved to a location where it was going to be around midnight before I got home, because by then I’d moved from Maryland to Virginia. But, I did join the league again when it started bowling in Virginia.

MURPHY: And you talked a little bit about this before, about your connection with your coworkers even outside of the workplace. What do you think brought people together there? Was it because so many people were newcomers to D.C.?

STEELE: No, I think it was more of a family. It was sort of like we’re all in this together—it was like being a corporation, almost, like a large corporation.

We weren't all working for the same person, but we were all working for the same reason. There is something inherently insecure about being a congressional staff person, because you have no employment protection. Congressional employees are not covered under any of—or at least they weren't—covered under any of the labor laws that have been passed to protect American workers, and so, virtually, if your boss dies, if he is defeated, if he resigns, you're out of a job. So, you have no continuum protection for salary. If you're making \$50,000 today, you're working for Member X, he dies, you get a job for Member Z, you could start out [making] \$20,000 less and in a totally different job. You just become part of the whole competitive market looking for a job, and it happens every election year.

So there was probably some of that “We're all in this together” and kind of [agree to] look out for each other. There was always that sense of, if you have a break in service, it affects things like life insurance, health insurance, and pension plan coverage. There were times when staff people became unemployed because of the departure of a Member, that in order to eliminate a break in service, they would be put on a payroll at the absolute minimum that you could pay someone, and that maintained their continuity. They would do some work but also have time to job hunt. I remember hearing of some instances where that would happen, and that certainly was a product of people being friendly with each other.

MURPHY: And the Member would have to decide to do that, right?

STEELE: Absolutely, yes.

MURPHY: Did you ever hear of any Members refusing to do that, or [any who] didn't participate in that kind of system?

STEELE: I didn't hear about them, but I'm sure there were instances. But Members are as vulnerable as staff, so there's a lot of similarity there in the environment. It comes with the territory.

MURPHY: Did you feel that pressure every two years of the reelection process even as a staffer?

STEELE: One year I did. We had a recount that went down to 218 votes, and that was after the first of the year, and I remember thinking, "Man, by the time this thing is decided, all the open jobs are going to be filled." As it turned out, my guy had the extra 218 votes, so I didn't have to deal with it. But yes, obviously it had an impact, because I remember the 218.

MURPHY: When you went to that interview for Bob Michel's office, you were seeking a similar position as you already had in Tupper's office?

STEELE: No. I was just looking for a job. I wanted any job. What they were looking for was a caseworker or a constituent-service worker who would also take the dictation for the administrative assistant and fill in for Bob Michel's personal secretary when she was on vacation, because she would do all of his dictation, personal mail, his personal dictation, and type his speeches. So, that was the job that was available, and I said okay, and they hired me. Which was lucky, you know? I was very fortunate. I was in the right place at the right time a couple of times.

MURPHY: And you said casework, right?

STEELE: Casework.

MURPHY: Your position was staff assistant for constituent services. What did that consist of?

STEELE:

Anybody who has a problem—everything but immigration. All the immigration cases were handled in our district office in Peoria, Illinois. Everything else came under my umbrella here in Washington. It basically involved every federal agency at one time or another. People have problems of one type or another, and they get frustrated. The bureaucratic red tape can be an awesome thing. At the very least it can be overwhelming to the average citizen, who isn't vaguely familiar with dealing with anything federal, except for the IRS, and tax returns are tax returns, but that's not the same thing as trying to figure out whether you're being mistreated or ill-treated or not treated at all for Medicare problems, Social Security, veterans, active military. Every federal agency at one time or another—I had a book filled with handwritten notes for all the agencies: the person I talked to, the phone number, etc. It was like my little bible, which grew every year. So people would call the office or write letters, and it was my job to try to solve the problems for them—or to at least make them feel confident that if they didn't get the desired result, at least someone really tried for them. And it was a lot easier for me to do that on their behalf because every agency has a congressional liaison office, where their sole responsibility is to deal with people like me. I'm calling on behalf of a constituent in Illinois, and I'm asking you, the congressional liaison person in your department, to help me figure out this problem, solve it if we can, or find a logical, acceptable resolution.

One of the great satisfactions of that job was the phone calls that would start out totally hostile—they were so frustrated when they would call—and by the time the phone call was over, they'd say, "Oh, thank you so much." So, I'd make a friend on the phone, and then I would follow through as best I could on whatever I could do for them. Of all the years I spent on the Hill, it was the most satisfying job I had, because every day I went to work,

somebody's life was a little bit better off. I may not have improved their life, but I certainly helped to improve their attitude about the problems at hand that they were dealing with.

MURPHY: Can you think of an example of something like that, where you had a specific problem that you had to solve?

STEELE: Not really.

MURPHY: What about this connection to these agencies? Was that a daunting task when you began, and did you build a network of people that you knew in each agency?

STEELE: Yes. You build an identification by name over the phone. I probably only met half a dozen personally. The military was somewhat different, because they had military liaison offices in the Rayburn Building. I could walk to their office and deal with them directly for military inquiries, whether it be from parents or from the service people themselves. But with all the rest of the agencies, it was always by telephone or letter. I unknowingly ended up talking to one of my next-door neighbors in this high-rise building where I lived. We'd been on the phone for almost 10 minutes. I think he was at the Veterans Administration. He said, "You said your name is Linda Steele." I said yes. He said, "Would you by any chance live at . . . ?" I said yes. So, you know, it was one of those small-world moments.

I would have kind of a go-to person, eventually, at a given liaison office, but if I didn't have a go-to person, I would just deal with whoever happened to take my call, because their jobs were the same. My job was the same and theirs was the same.

MURPHY: And when you interacted with the constituents when you were in Congressman Michel's office, did you feel like there was something different about them than when you were in Congressman Tupper's office? Was there a different experience?

STEELE: Oh yes, definitely. People in Maine didn't ask for help. It's like, "Yeah, we're gonna do this ourselves." We're independent. I suffered from that for a long time. It was like pulling teeth to ask people to help me with anything. So casework as a job description in Stan Tupper's office, you could have shown up for 15, 20 minutes a day and gone home, you know? It didn't take up a lot of time. When I started working for Bob Michel, I only had a smattering of experience doing casework. I knew the concept, and I knew where you had to go for assistance, but it wasn't like I had already built my little bible. I didn't have a little bible that I was making notes in all the time, because I didn't really need it. I would just use the regular old *Congressional Directory*, where you flip to the page that has the number for the congressional liaison office.

MURPHY: And when you started interacting with the constituents, did you find that you received calls from supporters of Congressman Michel, or everyone from the district?

STEELE: Both sides. A lot of people would say, "Listen, I didn't vote for him, but. . . ." And I'd say, "Doesn't matter. We're your Representative no matter whether you voted for him or not. We're here to represent you."

MURPHY: And did you find that really satisfying, that work, in a way that brought you more closely involved in some of the political discussions that the Congressman was involved in, or did it really center your work on Peoria?

STEELE: Not really, no. Political discussions really weren't much of a factor in casework, because that's all "people stuff," and that's people stuff in arenas that are already on the books. Political stuff comes in more in the legislative aspect, and I never wanted to be a legislative worker. Personally, I was always much more comfortable and more geared towards dealing with the tangibles, and for me the tangibles were the programs that are on the books, the laws that are already enacted, and the people that have the problems with those laws or those programs. Political policy really was not even a minor factor in that job.

MURPHY: Because you needed to know what could be at hand for you to use in response to a constituent? Instead of—you looked at it as what was available for you, what tools were available to you?

STEELE: Yes.

MURPHY: So you became familiar with the tools available, and then you applied them to the district's problems.

STEELE: A lot of people's problems with the federal government can often be resolved by other people that are in the government, and sometimes it just becomes a judgment call, or a perception, or a lack of the appropriate amount of information that they need, in order to make what might then look like a more appropriate determination for someone. Things look like they're going to be very cut-and-dried to the average citizen when they start dealing with the federal government on different types of programs, but truly they're not. There's a lot of judgment calls going on, and there's a lot of—at some point in the line of red tape, someone might have a day where they say, "I don't feel like dealing with this today, so I'm going to just checkmark here,

checkmark there.” We all have bad days, and you never know for sure whether your paperwork is going to be caught in that.

MURPHY: All right, so we were talking about your job with constituent services. At what point did you make the transition to deputy chief of staff? How did that occur?

STEELE: Well, in 1980, Bob Michel became Minority Leader. So that meant some of the staff would be moving from the congressional office in the Rayburn Building to the leadership office in the Capitol. Mr. Michel suggested that because I was so good at constituent service, we really need someone who can do that, and I said that although I had enjoyed it a great deal, I’d done it for 10 years and felt like I was burning out on that particular type of work. So, at that point I wanted to either move over into the leadership office or just find some other spot.

I had sensed that my own level of desire to be the best constituent-service person wasn’t as deep as it had been, and I think I just felt like it was time. So I moved over to the leadership office. And I didn’t start out as being deputy chief of staff. I’m not sure what my title was when we first started in the leadership office, probably executive assistant or something like that. I’d worked so many years without any title, I wasn’t really a title-focused person. So the first responsibility that was given to me was to manage the Committee on Committees work. I believe the Republicans now call that the Steering Committee. But its function is to manage the process that appoints Republican Members of Congress to legislative committees. That was my first job assignment in the leadership office.

There were also boards and commissions that the Minority Leader has to make appointments to, so I was given that. And our administrative assistant

from the congressional office also moved over to the leadership office, so I would still take his dictation and do his mail. Those were the first responsibilities that I started out with in the leadership [office].

MURPHY: In that office, how many other people were working there besides you and the administrative assistant?

STEELE: We had, I would say, eight. We may have started out with eight or nine people. There were four people at least that I can remember who moved from the congressional office to the leadership office, and then we added other people.

MURPHY: And did they each have separate tasks like you? You really were confined to these particular functions at first, right?

STEELE: Sort of.

MURPHY: The Committee on Committees and the appointment process.

STEELE: Yes, but the boards and commissions weren't . . . the hardest part of that job in the beginning was just formulating a list, so that we had a tangible reference. But the work for that by itself wasn't that extensive early on.

MURPHY: So most of your time was spent on the Committee on Committees.

STEELE: Initially, yes. Because it was the beginning of a new Congress, and even though I hadn't put the information together that was going to be used, there was a meeting that was going to take place right away, in early January 1981, for that process.

MURPHY: So you had to compile all of this information beforehand.

STEELE: No, I didn't. The girl that had done it for the previous Minority Leader had put together the information that was going to be used in that first meeting, so I had to work with that, and just kind of feel my way through it. It was a process totally unfamiliar to me.

MURPHY: Did you have to spend a lot of time familiarizing yourself with the process of the procedural guidelines of the committee?

STEELE: Well, yes, but the process itself really wasn't that complicated. It was a group of Members, and they each represent others—one Representative covers a certain area, whether it's one state or several states. I think there were between 15 and 20 Members that were on the Committee on Committees at various times. So at the meeting, we would have these giant boards with slots for names on them. Each row would have the current Republican Members that were on the committee, and there would be blank spots for those positions that needed to be filled. Using a nominating process, we would start with one committee. The members of this group would make nominations, there would be discussions, secret ballots, and we would count the votes. That's basically the way the process worked.

So as it evolved, once you get over the initial grouping of new Members, or you get a full complement of Republican Members on each committee, then it's a matter of just keep up with it on an ongoing basis for a variety of reasons. Members would leave a committee, or maybe they'd switch around. So it wouldn't be just one or two meetings a year, it was something that had to be overseen all the time.

MURPHY: And you had to keep up the records?

STEELE: Yes. I had to keep track of everything that was going on, and then schedule meetings throughout the year.

MURPHY: And how would you compile the information?

STEELE: By telephone, basically. I devised my own methods of compiling information and making reference information available for myself. I tend to overorganize, but that's what makes me feel like I'm not going to lose control of what's happening. And certainly when you start out with a brand-new organism and you don't know how it works, you're going to dissect it a lot just so you can understand it better. So I devised my own recordkeeping systems. You discover things along the way, like minor things can affect seniority, so I had to keep track of every Republican Member's seniority. It's not like you were first elected to the 100th Congress (1987–1989) together. Somebody might have come in two or three days early, when a prior Member resigned, just so that his successor could get—because it becomes important in many instances, not the least of which is room selection when it comes time for Members to select their office suites. You've got two Members, and they want the same suite; the one that has the more seniority gets it. That's when party affiliation means nothing.

And likewise on committee assignments, if you have people being appointed to the same committee at the same time, their placement on the hierarchy within the committee has to be by seniority, and it has to be correct. I know I had to talk to the Parliamentarian a couple of times. I said, "How am I going to resolve this one?" Because it was maybe a less-than-24-hour-period kind of thing. So, it was always something.

MURPHY: Were there some tensions in that committee over who gets what position?

STEELE: Oh, sure.

MURPHY: Did you get any Members—

STEELE: Yes, there'd be a lot of little side discussions going on at times.

MURPHY: Trading places?

STEELE: I don't know exactly. I just know that conversations would take place. Maybe not in the committee while we were meeting, but you could tell. My boss could read it better than I could. I was always so focused on the minute parts of the information. Bob Michel was not a difficult person to work for, but when he wanted something done, he wanted it done right. So I was always hypersensitive to making sure that everything I told him was correct, and that all the information I gave him was correct, and that all the information that I gave all the Members in this committee structure was correct. It was stressful.

MURPHY: Sounds like it.

STEELE: My dental bills went sky-high.

MURPHY: So you worked on that committee throughout the rest of your career, right? And during the 1980s there were anywhere from nine to 12 Republican women Members of Congress. What kind of positions did they acquire on this committee, and was there any discussion of appointing women?

STEELE: I don't remember how many Republican women there were. There weren't any Republican women on the Committee on Committees. I don't remember that being a particular, within the committee discussions. Now whatever may have taken place outside, I don't know. But that wasn't an obvious topic for me, from my observation.

MURPHY: Okay, that's interesting. So, when you started in the leadership office, how did you come to the position of deputy chief of staff?

STEELE: I gradually was assigned greater responsibilities. At one point the chief of staff, who was originally our administrative assistant, said, "We need an office manager. Will you be the office manager?" So that was an added responsibility. And then there were a couple of other things, too. I never mastered the art of saying no, and I also didn't master the art of delegating. So I just allowed myself to end up with a lot of responsibility, which by itself really wasn't all that bad. It made the days go by a lot faster, I know that. After our first chief of staff retired from the Hill and went to work downtown at a lobbying firm, our former press secretary became chief of staff. It was his decision to give me the title of deputy chief. I said, "Is a salary raise coming as well?" "No, I'm sorry."

MURPHY: But you had greater responsibilities. What kind of responsibilities did you have?

STEELE: I already had the greater responsibilities. I think basically he thought I deserved the title because of the additional responsibilities that I had agreed to take on.

MURPHY: Such as?

STEELE: Office manager, doing all the personnel, the salary records, the office budget, the Committee on Committees, the boards and commissions, and proofing all written correspondence each day.

MURPHY: What was it like to create the office budget?

STEELE: It really wasn't as difficult as it probably is in the private world. A lot of it is predetermined. I would start with a composite layout. My recollection is the budget itself was about \$1 million, but it wasn't that much of a difficult task, it's just that some parts of it, I had to pay a little more attention to. There

was certain requisition paperwork and other factors that went along with it that I remember being unfamiliar with at first. It was just a bit time-consuming, but not a really overall difficult thing. It wasn't stressful. Anything that wasn't stressful, I was grateful for.

MURPHY: So, overall, what was the experience when there was that shift into leadership for the Congressman? Did you feel like there was an increase in stress on the office? Your role in the leadership office acquired greater responsibilities, but he, also, had these greater responsibilities, so did it make more work?

STEELE: Yes. And it is a lot more stress because you're responsible to the whole Republican membership. And yes, it's more responsibility, more stress.

MURPHY: So in a way, now you were—instead of serving the constituents in Peoria—you were now working for many of these Republicans.

STEELE: Now we were in service to the Republican Members, exactly.

MURPHY: And when you took this title of deputy chief of staff, did you feel more of a leadership role yourself within the office?

STEELE: No, because although the title was new, my responsibilities were not. Like I said, I think that chief of staff was just giving me the title that he felt that I should have already had, because he said, "My God, you're doing that, too?" Because he had been press secretary before, his focus had been on that arena. So I think he was just trying to give me a little bit of recognition for the work I was already doing.

MURPHY: So that didn't really change your relationship with your coworkers at all?

STEELE: No, not really. I don't think we made any announcement about it or anything. I just had new notepads made up.

MURPHY: So you didn't consider yourself in a supervisory position.

STEELE: Well, I was, but I already had been, you know, as office manager, but that office was a pretty well-oiled organism. It ran pretty well. Bob Michel was a relatively easy person to work for. He had kind of a fatherly sense about his staff—he treated us like family. But there were certain things, like for a weekend, if the House was going to be in session, we had to be there. You wouldn't necessarily be doing much of anything, but the office had to be open. So it would have to be staffed, but it didn't need to be staffed by everybody. So that was part of my responsibility, just to come up with a body count for this period of time and try to space it out a little bit. Just try to be as fair as possible. Whether you showed up for work on any day at all during the month, you got paid the same. There was no overtime—the check was the same every month, no matter whether you had to work weekends or you'd work late. So I instituted a comp time thing: If you had to work weekends or worked until 2:00 in the morning, you should be compensated somehow. You couldn't do it with money, so we did it in time—comp time.

MURPHY: And you came up with that idea?

STEELE: Yes.

MURPHY: So that was unique to your office in a way?

STEELE: Probably not. There are 435 Members in the House, plus the committees and leadership offices, and they all operate individually. So there's got to be duplication in there somewhere. Vacation time alone: some offices allow one week, some offices allow two—we always had a month. I didn't always use it. When I was doing constituent service, a lot of times I didn't use all my vacation time. I'd get antsy to get back to work after I'd been gone for a week

or 10 days. That's how much I liked that job. I'm sorry I couldn't have liked it forever.

MURPHY: That's interesting. So you came up with the idea, you proposed it to the Congressman, and he thought that was a good idea?

STEELE: I said, "Yes, I'd like to do this." I said, "It's only fair, because not everybody is participating." Not everybody would participate in this—the required presence of being there during certain times. It was usually the women.

MURPHY: Was it?

STEELE: Yes. Always the women.

MURPHY: By choice, or by necessity, or—

STEELE: Just by design. It's just the way the culture dictated, that the female staff was—if people were going to be designated to have to be there to staff the office during times when there wouldn't be a lot of activity going on but the office had to be open, it was always female. Not to say that some of the men wouldn't be there—because of their respective responsibilities they might be there anyway—but they weren't on the books to have to be there.

MURPHY: So it was a custom in a way, an assumed responsibility. So were there particular positions in the House that women staff members were more likely to attain? For instance, your position, deputy chief of staff, was it unlikely for a woman to have that role when you were in Congressman Michel's office?

STEELE: I would say yes, in the congressional office, in the 1970s. I worked in the congressional office in the '70s, and then in the '80s and early '90s I was in the leadership office. I think that was a slow evolution. Well, the very fact that our current Clerk of the House is a woman—she's only the third female

to hold that title.¹ That's a very powerful position, and it's significant that the entire House elects the Clerk of the House. There are also [now] a lot more female Members of Congress. I'm sure there are a lot of women now in the House that are chiefs of staff, deputy chiefs, or holding significant positions.

MURPHY: And at that time, did you meet other women in a similar position as you when you became deputy chief of staff?

STEELE: No. The responsibilities of my particular job really didn't take me outside of my office very much. I probably had more interaction with Members of Congress than I did congressional staff people, just by the nature of the work that I was doing. So there are probably a lot more women now in positions of authority in congressional offices that did not exist when I first started in the '60s, and probably a lot during the '70s as well.

MURPHY: You said you had a lot of interaction with Members when you were in the leadership office. Do you have any memorable interactions with women Members, or any Members, that you can remember?

STEELE: Actually, no. My particular job didn't overlap with the jobs that female Members had. I knew some of them by name and to have casual conversations with, but I didn't work with them, or I didn't have to work with them that much.

MURPHY: So when Members came into the office, they were mainly going through to meet Congressman Michel, and that's where your interactions occurred, in that sense.

STEELE: Not necessarily if they were going in to meet with him. I was separate. You didn't have to walk through my office. My office was a self-contained area—

Members going in to see Mr. Michel would go through his reception office to get into his office. You didn't have to go through mine. My interaction with Members was primarily as a result of [the] Committee on Committees, and then there were a number of congressional delegations—the Members that are appointed to congressional delegations of a variety of areas that they would want to serve on—and that would fall under my umbrella. So it would be that kind of situation.

MURPHY:

As the first woman to serve in Congress, considerable attention was paid to Jeannette Rankin's dress and demeanor when she entered the House. Obviously, that changed by the time you came into the House. To what degree did women face similar scrutiny at the time?

STEELE:

When I first started working in the House in 1961, I remember actually wearing gloves to work. Cloth gloves, not winter stuff. This is even summertime. So it was high heels, skirts, and everybody looked nice. I don't remember what year [it was] the first time I saw women wearing slacks at work, but it had to have been in the '70s, at least when I noticed it. And I would notice it mostly in the Longworth cafeteria when I would get out of the office and go to lunch. But yes, the dress codes were—well, it wouldn't be a code, but the dress culture for women was dressed up and high heels, and wearing high heels walking on marble floors is tough. I remember times when I would take my shoes to a cobbler and ask him to put rubber tips on the heels. Because with steel-tipped heels, you could slip easily. Anyway, just one reason why, as a retiree, I don't have to do that anymore. I wear flat shoes.

But when I first started working for Bob Michel, I remember there was a prohibition against wearing slacks. This was in the 1970s. Our congressional office was always open on Saturdays, and then one of the women had to be

there to keep the office open on Saturday, and so this one Saturday I decided I was going to broach the subject of “Why can’t women wear slacks to work?” I said “Pantsuits are becoming very popular, you see a lot more women in the professional world wearing pantsuits.” “Well, you know, it’s just women look so much better in skirts and high heels.” And I said, “Yeah, but you know, we probably should try to catch up with the times.” I was just looking for an excuse to wear low shoes.

Anyway, so I made the argument and he went along with it. He said, “But it’s going to have to be like a three-piece suit, or blazers and, you know, matching sets. I said “Okay, but there’s a lot to be said if you don’t have to wear panty hose.” I said, “Every man should be required to have to do that at least once.” So he went along with it. I remember there was one time when a friend of mine was wearing blue jeans. Blue jeans. So I guess it’s changed a lot.

MURPHY: So the dress code was kind of a point of contention for a while there in the office.

STEELE: Well, it became one. It became one when I saw other women wearing pantsuits, because certain things are just a lot more comfortable, you know.

MURPHY: So that was a difference in the way that women in the office came to work every day. What about other differences that you might have noticed in terms of the way ideas about gender shaped your experience on the job?

STEELE: Well, when I first started working in 1961, *Roll Call* magazine was a weekly publication, and one of their features was called a “Hill Pinup.” So they’d have a picture of a woman in a posed position, and she would be the “Hill Pinup.” There’d be a little blurb about who you were, who you worked for, whatever. So I was chosen for that once. I doubt that they do that now, and I

doubt that any woman working on Capitol Hill now would even agree to do that, because in today's world it probably would be like a kiss of death from a career standpoint. It wouldn't go very far to enhance someone's career because they never had a male pinup, so it's just too much [of] a gender identification. If men and women are going to be vying for the same positions on Capitol Hill, you don't want to distinguish yourself in a gender role—probably wouldn't be advisable.

MURPHY:

One thing that many of the women that have participated in the project reflected on was the way that their attempts to establish a balance between the workplace and their family life played a role. Was that something that you and your coworkers were concerned about at the time, and had to deal with certain issues that came up, like scheduling, for example?

STEELE:

It really wasn't a problem for me, because I didn't have children. The few years that I was married, my work schedule was normal; it was a basic 9:00-to-5:00 day, so it wasn't difficult. It was difficult sometimes to schedule a dinner date or something like that. But I did have a number of friends who had families, and it can be quite a problem, because there are a lot of offices where you can't be sure you're going to be able to get off work at a certain time. And even in the corporate world I'm sure that's as much of a problem, and maybe a drawback for women in the corporate world, as much as it can be in the congressional arena as well. If the presumption is that because you're the woman, and you're going to be the primary caretaker of family, of children, then if you can't be relied upon to be there at certain times when you're needed, it could have a negative effect on your career path.

MURPHY:

Changing the subject for a minute, I was wondering if you could describe your interactions with Members and staff members from the other side of the

political aisle while you were in the House, working in the House. Was there a lot of interaction across the political divide at the time?

STEELE:

Yes, certainly compared to today's world there was. It was common to see people on the floor of the House having conversations with people on the other side of the aisle. The Democratic Club and the Capitol Hill Club both have after-hours social atmospheres. There were many times when I'd be at the Democratic Club—I had several friends who were Democrats, so I would join them sometimes at the Democratic Club. I would see other Republicans there, and likewise if I was at the Capitol Hill Club, I would see Democratic Members there. And just in the interactions, in the course of congressional business there would be more friendly conversations.

There used to be a staff table in the Capitol restaurant. One acquaintance of mine was a neighbor. She had always worked for a Democrat. I had always worked for a Republican. We were friends—we were friends in the neighborhood—we would have nice conversations if we were both sitting at the staff table having lunch at the same time. There was comfortable interaction. There were times when I would have to deal with people in Speaker [Thomas Philip] Tip O'Neill [Jr.]'s office. I made two or three nice friendships with some of the women that I had to deal with. I'm not sure that happens now. I have heard that people have been criticized if they're a Republican, [and] somebody saw them talking to a Democrat on the other side, like, "What in the world were you thinking, being over there?" You hear conversations about the toxic atmosphere, and it's unfortunate. There are a lot of good things that can happen when there are decent intellectual and just common conversations that take place when people are coming from different sides of an issue.

MURPHY: So, when you finally left the deputy chief of staff position in the early '90s, that was for retirement, right?

STEELE: I retired, yes.

MURPHY: And was that an easy decision to make at that time? Were you ready?

STEELE: It was, and it wasn't. I didn't have a time certain when I was going to retire. I had always figured I would do that when Bob Michel retired. Having grown up on the ocean, I knew I always wanted to have a place at the beach. So in anticipation of my retirement, I bought a condo in Ocean City, Maryland. I had started playing golf a few years earlier, so I joined a country club. I knew when I retired, I was going to need a place to go where people knew me, where I felt comfortable, and where I could kind of replace my work family. I did both of those before I was retired because—as I learned when I tried to buy my first condo in Virginia—the financial world doesn't treat women smoothly. It's a little more difficult as a woman to do financial things, so I knew that as long as I had a decent salary, I would look a lot better on paper to join the country club and to buy a place in Ocean City.

I would go to Ocean City on the weekends, fixing the place up and taking stuff there. I would start to get this little downer feeling on Sunday mornings knowing I had to drive back and go to work on Monday, and I was making good friends at the country club when I was playing golf on the weekends. There were a couple of women's golf groups during the week, and I thought, "Gosh, it would be kind of nice." So it all kind of started coming together for me. Since I had already bought my house in a price range where I thought my pension would support my mortgage, I finally just decided I really want to do this now.

The only thing I didn't know—which once I would find out, it would be too late to change my mind—was how much of my self-identity was tied up in my job. You know, when you have a job that looks really good to the outside world, probably you tend to absorb that a little bit as your own identity. When I was signing my papers to retire, I didn't know how much of my self-image was going to be tied up in my job and how I would feel no longer being that person. Fortunately, it turns out it didn't have any impact at all, so I was really lucky on that scale.

MURPHY: But you still felt that way when you left?

STEELE: Well, before I left, I thought this is my only unknown. I still have my place at the ocean, and I like the place. Yes, it's a nice little place, and I have a nice group of friends there now. I still belong to the country club, so I still enjoy that, and I have a good group of friends there, too.

MURPHY: Was there anything else that surprised you about the decades that you worked in the House? Was there anything surprising that you came away thinking about when you finally finished your career here?

STEELE: I don't think so. There were all those changes that took place from when I started to when I finished. And some of my close friends and coworkers have ended up in really nice positions—Clerk of the House, and one of my former coworkers was Deputy Sergeant at Arms before she retired.

MURPHY: Did that surprise you, that those positions were possible [for women to attain] by the end of your career?

STEELE: A little bit, but I think things had been changing just enough, certainly with the advent of more women being elected to the House and to the Senate. It was evolving well in that direction. The only thing is that I'm sorry that

today's atmosphere on the Hill—you know, the political atmosphere—is hostile and toxic. I would say, since I've left, that's probably the one unsettling thing that's changed the most.

MURPHY: Well, Linda, thanks for joining us today. It was really great speaking with you.

STEELE: You're welcome. I'm glad to do it.

MURPHY: Yeah, it was a lot of fun. Okay, thanks.

STEELE: It's a good project.

MURPHY: Hopefully you'll like the way it comes out in the end.

STEELE: I hope so.

MURPHY: All right, thank you very much.

STEELE: You're welcome.

NOTES

¹ The Honorable Karen L. Haas was the second woman to serve as Clerk of the House.