

RECORDED INTERVIEW OF MARK BEGICH
JUNE 9, 2009, WASHINGTON, DC
ORAL HISTORY 2009-13-07
TED STEVENS PAPERS PROJECT JUKEBOX

CHARLES FEDULLO: Senator, thank you. I know how busy your schedule is. Thank you for (inaudible).

MARK BEGICH: Sure, it is just, yeah, it is insane around here.

CHARLES FEDULLO: Um --

MARK BEGICH: No comment. I'm sorry, what was your question? (Laughter)

CHARLES FEDULLO: The name in the interview is Senator Mark Begich. The names of the interviewers are Paul McCarthy and Charles Fedullo. The place of the interview is Senator Mark Begich's office in Washington, DC. Date of the interview is June 10th.

MARK BEGICH: Ninth.

CHARLES FEDULLO: Ninth, 2009. Ted Stevens Oral History, Side A, Tape 1. So let's talk about.

MARK BEGICH: And the big tobacco debate is occurring on the senate floor as we do this.

CHARLES FEDULLO: Oh, wow.

MARK BEGICH: So.

CHARLES FEDULLO: Thank you, again.

MARK BEGICH: So there is a little bit of -- like some days some might look at this and say what was going on that day, okay. Give a little map that says what is going on that day in history.

CHARLES FEDULLO: Talk about Senator Stevens' significant accomplishments. What do you think his major successes were?

MARK BEGICH: I think he had, you know, one thing his office was known for quite a bit was his constituent work. You know, working with individuals on their small issues as where is my Social Security check -- the major policy issues, but when you look at the large issues from Steven-Magnuson Act with regards to fisheries. And when you talk about fisheries today in this country and people want to know what is the most sustainable fisheries literally in the world, Alaska is what comes to mind to most people. And so I think in a lot of ways that is an interesting legacy because it not only is important for Alaska's economy and what is going on in Alaska, but it also today provides about 62 percent of the wild fish caught in this country. So it is significant volume -- it is a huge export for us, but the world is touched by it. I mean if you think of, you know, next time you go into McDonald's you can get, you know, one of their fish sandwiches more than likely 90 percent of the pollock that they utilize comes from Alaska for that food product. So every day people are having a fish sandwich in a McDonald's probably has no clue that it is Alaska connected and I think that is because of sustainable levels of fisheries that we have here.

The, you know, there is a variety of things when you think of the other one which is -- I think it is still in its early days and I think the story is still out on it. As time progresses I think it will be more solidified and that is the Denali Commission. And why I say the story is still out or the verdict is still out on it is because it is early. It has been around for

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a few years. He came up with the concept of how do you help impoverished communities of Alaska in rural communities; ensure they have the infrastructure, you know, and delivered in a way that it is a very efficient delivery system. Denali Commission is that, but in the last few years it has kind of had its ups and downs, but I think as more and more people see its value, its efficiency, the work that it has done around clinics and dealing with energy issues now, they are seeing how well it works and I think as time progresses, that will continue to be one of those evolving legacies that he triggered, invested time in and people then have seen it. And even though in its early days it was the idea putting money into it, but now you are seeing some of the results. Meaning projects are completed. Result of the people who end up going through the facilities. So you are starting to see -- oh, that is what that is. So you create a generational around the issue. And I think so, you know, the story hasn't been completed on that. But I think as time progresses it will and it will be another one of those. Because I think again, you know, rural context Alaska is so unique this is one of those pieces of the puzzle that I think are going to be very powerful for us to talk about in years to come and he had an impact to that.

I think when you look at it -- I just came from a committee meeting on aviation and, you know, in a lot of ways again Alaska which is, you know, the pilot capital of the world when you think about aviation, but also it is where the unique new technologies are being tested and I think the role that he had in the Commerce Committee which deals with aviation and I sit now on that committee you can see the elements of that work that he did early on for those new programs. NextGen which is huge change in how aviation will work started in Alaska because of the unique flying and the technical difficulties of flying sometimes in Alaska. And now here I am sitting on that committee and listening to this and realizing that we were the cutting edge on that and through Senator Stevens' work that was again one of those seeds planted and now the nation will benefit from it.

Those are -- you know there is a lot when you think about if you even go back way back to the modifications when Alaska Native Land Claims actually passed in '71, but was '71, '72, but really where Stevens was a critical piece of that was when all the corporations -- not actually say all, when a sizable amount of corporations were having financial difficulties. Because literally when the claims act was passed we said here is a billion dollars and 44 million acres of land, good luck, we wish you the best. Predominantly, Alaska Native community was subsistence users so to now have to run multi-million dollar corporations was a whole new process. And, you know, maybe not thought out as well as it could have, but then later years the piece that made the difference was coming back even though it was a small thing. It was the whole idea of the tax credits and so forth. Even though there is some criticism on that, it ensured the corporations survived and today, you know, the regional corporations, the village corporations are huge. In the sense of the economic engine they are not only for our state but for around the globe now and the employment that is occurring now and seeing that piece of the equation.

CHARLES FEDULLO: You know you talk a lot about some national issues.

MARK BEGICH: Uh-huh.

CHARLES FEDULLO: Do you think that his view and I am getting a little bit off script and I promise not to do it much.

MARK BEGICH: That is okay.

CHARLES FEDULLO: His view on Alaska Natives in the state was different than other western states and do you think that is something that will be remembered nationally as well as in the state? You talked about the tax benefit when there were problem with the Native corporations and you talked about the 8A benefit.

MARK BEGICH: Uh-huh.

CHARLES FEDULLO: Some of the other senators we talked to said that is something that is very different than any approach that had been taken.

MARK BEGICH: I think so, but I think the 8A for example a lot of hard work that he put into 8A's in modifying it to ensure the Alaska Native community was recognized for its uniqueness that it is not a single owned individual business. It is a business that represents, in some cases a few hundred people; in some cases thousands and because that has unique issues. This one a lot in a lot of ways the book still isn't finished on this. As we sit here today, there is senate inquiries in regards to 8A's, but because the 8A's we had one today. TDX Corp which I think they are St. Paul if I remember right, corporation, they have a great story, you know. They are producing wind energy for their community in the sense of saving them money. But they also have a now wind energy business to export that through an 8A process. Having them bring that up at the meeting we had today where we had tribal leaders from across the country and we had TDX there. It was a very interesting discussion because obviously they never said the word 8A until I said well that is because 8A. And everyone kind of laughed and said cause the tribes it is all common business. But was interesting was for the senators that were there it was important education. So the book hasn't been completed on 8A's. We have some challenges ahead of us, but I think the way he laid it out was -- the goal was, I think and at least from my perspective how I viewed he was doing this, was there was great potential, but access was not getting -- the doors weren't opening. And 8A piece kind of forced the door open. Now the advantage of that is it helped Alaska Native corporations, but it also helped is in and will be helping in the long term other tribes across this country and as they form their 8A's, as I have met with senators who have had 8A's in their own communities who are now starting to understand what that all means and they start evolving, that is an important piece of the equation.

So I think that is an important one, Long term the question we will have over the next six months or so will is 8A model sustainable in the political environment we live in today. I think the answer is yes because they can prove what I think Senator Stevens was -- was attempting to do and I think he has succeeded to do and that is it is giving opportunity where sometimes the doors are not opening because of the way the system works. And what he did is crack the door open, but said now you are on your own. Prove yourself up. And I think several of them have done a very good job.

CHARLES FEDULLO: The legacy of Senator Stevens -- major accomplishments four decades in office. You talk about a couple of things, Magnuson-Stevens. You talked about Denali Commission.

MARK BEGICH: Uh-huh.

CHARLES FEDULLO: Which is important. Talk a little bit about his legacy. If there is not accomplishments, just that you want to add just how do you think people in the state and in the nation are going to view the senator when -- when the story of him is written and told over the next 10 years?

MARK BEGICH: I think, you know, in some cases the story has already been partially told and that is he came in to office in '68 when the state was very new. Even though we had been around in some cases people would view thousands and thousands of years, but as a state very new. And he came in at a time when most people had never really understood Alaska or been here. And when I say most people, today, you know, you think back then and you say geez, you know, are there going to be cruises to Alaska? The answer would be no, we got, you know, you go up the Alcan. That is the cruise you are going to have for the next week and a half, you know. Driving on dirt roads and whatever might occur. The biggest cruise you would have is the military rotation, you know, that was it. So he came in at a time when the infrastructure of the state was critical, ensuring that we had the base; water, sewer, making sure the military component was recognized as we are strategic piece of the national defense of this country. Recognizing we had some resources here that had been exploited by others and not related to the benefit of Alaskans as individuals. I think he -- he understood that and he used what someone described around here today an old style politics that has basically fading.

It is very interesting the dynamics of what has happened in the senate. In the last four years -- three -- two and a half years, 30 percent of the senate has changed hands. So it is a very changing dynamic here, but he came in at a time when you could make your point and earn the respect by garnering, you know, putting the issue out there, but also working with your colleagues and, you know, strongly in some cases. In his case, he at times as people always would comment he would be very aggressive about some of his positioning, but at the end the result was he was trying to make his point. He would call it passion. Some might call it anger. Some might call it aggressive, but the goal was he was trying to make his point about Alaska. And in those days, also it was kind of a, you know, I remember he had some cuff links someone actually gave me and it was -- his motto was we don't care how -- I think it was like we don't care how they do it outside or something like that. I can't remember exact.

CHARLES FEDULLO: (Inaudible) do it outside.

MARK BEGICH: Yeah, that was his cuff links and I actually have a pair of those. And -- but I think that is kind of that attitude which helped us get the resources that this state enjoys today as kind of the basic core infrastructure that has given us kind of a launching pad. Like for example, I think the last battle on BRAC on our military bases, you know, a few years ago, in my view might be the last battle because Alaska is viewed very differently by the military today than it was in '68. They saw it as an outpost far beyond their use. Today they see it as a very critical strategic component. Now maybe the military would have come to that conclusion over time, but I think he might have accelerated it and I think the last BRAC that accelerated it too potentially I think to where BRAC may have impact in the future but minimal. Like we, you know, just because if you look around the military bases they are increasing in capacity. When it came to the reductions in this budget cycle that occurred actually Alaska gained almost, you know, 300 plus million

dollars this cycle. We didn't get a reduction or elimination of things. We have had some issues with our ground missile defense, but that is a global issue not an Alaskan issue what they see as part of the global answer. So it very -- again I think in '68 he had to kind of kick and scream about it. I think that is what he did very well and brought attention and maybe accelerated some of that which was good.

CHARLES FEDULLO: Talk about some of the frustrations that he may have or some of the things that you feel he started that you will try to carry on. I know that that is -- ANWR is the issue that most people will talk about.

MARK BEGICH: Uh-huh.

CHARLES FEDULLO: But on that one and any other issues that come to mind?

MARK BEGICH: I think the Denali Commission is one. I think, you know, ensuring that it is a continuation. It is not just a moment in time program cause it has great value. And so I think that is an important one. I think he had a strong interest in aviation. From a personal perspective actually he and I had that to our own families and I think he saw Alaska as kind of the test ground for new technologies and we are now seeing that implemented on, you know, kind of a nationwide level. And I think that was something he felt very strong about and, you know, a strong interest to me because we have a, you know, probably had not only a professional connection on it but a personal connection on it. I think the issue of ensuring that the defense department continues to recognize Alaska as strategic. I think in one way I feel like he knew that was -- he had finally reached that moment, but now he kind of put the cream on it. You know, he got the base done, he got the frame done, he got the filling all in. I think he -- I think in some ways he wanted to put the final touch on it. I think that is one thing we are doing to the Armed Services Committee. Oddly enough it is the first time an Alaska has served on the Armed Services Committee since 1968. The last person who served there was Bartlett. Oddly enough and yet Armed Services Committee is so critical to Alaska. His work on defense was done through appropriations which is year by year. The value of being on the Armed Services you can do sustainable long term because you are about authorization. You are about legislation. You are about policy. It is a different -- so you can take some of these ideas that were annual ideas he had and implement them into a full, you know, sustainable program or long-term existence which I think is important. I think those are, you know, again in fisheries I think he saw a new emerging challenge which in a lot of ways and I, you know, said this during the campaign with him that it was -- it was a struggle for some of the people who had been here so long to understand this new emerging issue which is climate change. And the fisheries industry, as well managed as it is, how great the law is, the problem is acidification of the waters. Those issues that are out of his control when he was here in an emerging issue I think it would, you know, this is just my own interpretation. I think it would be frustrating for him to see all his great work of sustainable fisheries and now the issue of acidification, the warming of the waters is having such a -- potentially have an impact on fisheries that comes with an issue in a lot of ways he was learning more about where in my generation it is common to talk about it -- climate change. So it is very -- I think that would have been an interesting to see how he would have dealt with climate change recognizing something that is a legacy of his is now at risk because of something out of his control. I think it is a very interesting piece of a puzzle here.

CHARLES FEDULLO: Is there anything you would to add?

MARK BEGICH: No, I think, you know, in general I think I said a lot about, you know, kind of the lay of the land of the legacy and what he has done and I think in a lot of ways, you know, every elected official has kind of their own piece to the puzzle, but his span of so many years that, you know, when I think about when he started to serve in '68, you know, I was six years old. So, you know, you don't -- you don't have that kind of generational connection in a lot of ways to your elected official in most states and the impact you have for such a small state. And I think in a log of ways when people look back it won't be about, you know, was it a new clinic or it was a new airport or was it a new road. I think it would be more about '68 those early years especially, '68 to about mid-80's. I think in that period of time his impact was transformational to the state and then what sort of happened in the mid-80's on there is a lot of things he kind of put into place sort of to happen and it started to feed into other things that really wasn't about him making those -- that next stage happen, but he seeded it which then creates its own in a lot of ways. And so I think that is what people look back will say I think, you know. People will probably ask the question, you know, what -- what -- why did we have the Stevens or Magnuson-Stevens Act? You know, why did we have NextGen? You know, who thought of these things or why were they important? And I think what we will see is these will be not only local, state, but national impacts that he had.

CHARLES FEDULLO: Thank you for your time.