Kathy Gille

Executive Floor Assistant, Representative David Bonior of Michigan

Oral History Interview
Final Edited Transcript

February 25, 2016

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

". . . I was in the Chief Deputy Whip Office at a time when there were not very many women around and not other women who were floor assistants. They had something called the 'floor boys,' which was a night out—it seems like every week they went out and had drinks and steaks, and lobbyists paid for it. I knew it existed, and I knew I wasn't invited to it. And I thought a lot about whether I want[ed] to bang the door down. And I thought, 'Did I really even want to go into that room? Did I want to be there? Did I want to be doing that?' And I had to step back and think, 'What's my goal? Why am I here?' By then I was very deeply involved in the efforts to stop the wars in Central America, and that was an all-consuming job. I did not actually need to be going out late at night for drinks and steaks; I needed to get up early in the morning and do my job."

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Abstract

In 1981, Kathy Gille arrived in Washington, D.C., as a legislative aide in the office of Congressman David Bonior of Michigan. As a speechwriter, researcher and policy and communications advisor, she rapidly became an integral part of his congressional staff. In this interview, she recalls her political awakening in the Detroit student movement of the late 1960s and her wide-ranging work in Congress as one of the first women to supervise a Whip operation in the House.

Drawing from more than two decades of experience, Gille describes the working life of women staff in Congress. She discusses her foreign policy work for Congressman Bonior on the House Democratic Task Force on Central America, which worked to end the wars in Central America during the 1980s. Gille also reflects on the pivotal victory of the House Republicans in the 1994 election, as well as the Democratic transition to the minority in the House. She explains the workings of the Democratic Whip's office under Congressman Bonior from 1991 to 2002, including her day-to-day activities on the House Floor, the mechanics of "whipping a bill," and the role of the Whip in key votes, such as the 1993 vote to implement the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Biography

Kathy Gille worked in the office of Congressman David Bonior of Michigan for more than 20 years. Hired as a legislative aide, she initially handled constituent services and conducted foreign policy research. Her responsibilities quickly grew to include human rights work, committee work, and speechwriting. She was later named executive floor assistant, becoming one of the first women to supervise a Whip operation in the House.

Kathleen Gille was born in 1951, and raised in suburban Detroit. She attended an all-girls' high school, where she was part of the Detroit student movement. She participated in Detroit city politics and organized local talks about issues from civil rights to the war in Vietnam. Her Catholic faith provided another inspiration for her activism, and she was drawn to the Catholic Worker Movement because of its emphasis on social and economic reform to combat poverty.

Gille's interest in politics led her to study political science at the University of Chicago, where she also attended graduate school. In 1981, she began working for Congressman Bonior, conducting research on foreign and domestic policy issues, working on the House Rules Committee, and writing speeches. She also played an important role as a staff member on the House Democratic Task Force on Central America, which focused on exposing human rights abuses in the region and called for the U.S. government to cut off military aid to the Contras in Nicaragua.

Gille became executive floor assistant in 1987, when Congressman Bonior was elected Deputy Whip. She developed a skillful approach to tallying votes, and her role increased in significance when Bonior became Majority Whip in 1991. From her office in the Capitol, she often passed the statue of Congresswoman Jeannette Rankin on her way to the House Chamber. Gille was on the front lines organizing the Democratic Whip operation for significant votes in 1993 such as the budget bill and the vote to implement the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). She continued to work on the House Floor after Bonior transitioned to Minority Whip in 1995. In addition to her floor duties, she served as a senior advisor for policy and communications until she left Capitol Hill in 2002.

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*.

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— KATHY GILLE —
A CENTURY OF WOMEN IN CONGRESS

MURPHY: This is Mike Murphy with the Office of the Historian, and we're here interviewing Kathy Gille for the Century of Women Oral History Project [at the House Recording Studio]. Thanks for being with us today [February 25th, 2016].

GILLE: Oh, you're welcome.

MURPHY: I wanted to start with a question about your early interest in politics, but even before that, just a little bit about your background and where you grew up.

GILLE: Well, I grew up in a suburb of Detroit, and my interest in politics goes way back. I'm a child of the '60s, and when I say that, I mean that I was influenced by three major movements that were going on in the 1960s. One, the Catholic Church. I was raised Catholic, and I'm a child of Vatican II—that movement in the Catholic Church where people were moving away from the closed mysticism of the Mass towards a sense of social justice and the feeling that God's work in the world is to be our own work. And I was very much influenced by people like Dorothy Day and people in the Catholic Worker Movement.[1] I had this notion of being in the city, being with the poor, something that would eventually become called the "preferential option for the poor." That's the philosophy I came up with, even as a little girl, that was very much part of my thinking about what I wanted to do with my life: make a difference in that way.

Also, I was tremendously influenced by the civil rights movement. The speeches of Martin Luther King are the soundtrack of my life in many ways. I

think, even to this day, a lot about that phrase he has about injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere, and how we're really part of this network, this garment of destiny, the sense of beloved community that he had. So, I had a strong sense of the civil rights movement and justice from my very early days. I remember the march in Selma. I remember Viola Liuzzo, who was from Detroit, who went down to Selma and was killed.[2] I remember the stories of that, and it very much was inspiring to me. And then, finally, the peace movement, the antiwar movement—less in terms of protests, though I did go to some protests in Washington and elsewhere, but more in the sense of the people who were working within the system to try to change it. And the music, the folk music of the time, people like Joan Baez, and that sense that peace is possible, is really more my view.

Senator Phil [Philip Aloysius] Hart, after whom the Hart Office Building is named, was the Senator from Michigan at the time when I was growing up and was a great inspiration to me. That's my political background, and I got involved very early on. When I was 15, I was part of a group of kids from the Detroit area—some from the suburbs, some of the city—who formed a group called Students Organized Against Racism. We did things like a speakers bureau and interracial dialogues and sold "I Have a Dream" bumper stickers outside auto plants. {laughter} From that experience, I met a group of guys who were at Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit. We organized together—a group of girls from my all-girls Catholic school in the suburbs and the guys who were going to school in the city of Detroit—into a political organization that worked on campaigns, that worked on something called the Stop ABM [antiballistic missile] Campaign, that worked for the first black man to run for mayor of the city of Detroit.[3] We were a much sought-after political organization because we had about 40 volunteers who, if we endorsed you, we were your volunteer team. Senator Carl Levin came to my

house to be interviewed and to be endorsed by this group of people. So, even before I was in college, I was really active in politics in Michigan.

MURPHY: And where do you think that activism came from? Was there an expectation in your family that you should be involved, or was it a personal choice?

GILLE: It was my own vision, I think. I certainly watched a lot of TV with my dad, and *Meet the Press* was one of my favorite shows, even in high school. Of course, I saw the stories of the Vietnam War, Martin Luther King, and the march in Selma. Those kinds of things really shaped me, but no one in my family was a political activist. I just wanted to get out of what I felt was an enclosed suburb and become active.

MURPHY: And your activism, was it centered on that suburb, or did it really point towards Detroit?

GILLE: First off, it was Detroit. I wanted to be part of working to build a community across racial lines and to be part of that kind of a movement. And there was another aspect that is important because this is a project on women: I also had the sense that the women I knew growing up in Grosse Pointe—in this suburb most of them did not work outside the home, and I felt most of them were quite stifled in their life. So, I was hungry to have a different life for myself. The civil rights movement gave me the momentum to believe that my life could be different, and that I could work in a community-type organization, in a political organization that would bring change for social justice. And that would be empowering to me. It would give me voice, agency, and community, and that's what I was looking for.

MURPHY: So you recognized the rights consciousness of this movement, but at the same time you saw the restrictions within the suburban setting for women. Do you

think you were influenced by the prevailing social expectations for women at the time? You rejected them, or saw a way around them?

GILLE: I think I was looking for a way around them. I mean, I feel like I had a lot of support in my family and even from some teachers in the girls school that I went to, but it was as if we were having to carve our own way. It's not as if the door was closed to us, but it was as if trying to go through that door and do something different with our lives—we didn't have any idea how to do it. Somebody said to me recently, "Your career sounds like it was bushwhacking all the way." {laughter} And yeah, it was. It wasn't like it was going through all these big obstacles, but a lot of smaller things, and you just didn't know what the road was.

MURPHY: So, where did you start to search for those answers to how to wade through these obstacles?

GILLE: Well, I think it was learning by doing. I had a really great network of friends in this political organization—this quasi-political organization that we had. I became a speaker at high schools around the Detroit area about race relations, which, even now that would really intimidate me, but back then I was just determined to go out and do it. What other kinds of things? It's funny, at age 15, I was a much more confident speaker than I would be today. {laughter} So, I was a rebel; I was kind of feisty in that way.

MURPHY: And you mentioned there was this dynamic between this all-girls school and all-boys school. Do you think that opened up an opportunity for you to be more vocal, because you represented that institution and someone had to speak for them at these meetings?

GILLE: It was more like we formed a community of young people on our own, defining what we wanted—the change we wanted to bring about in the

world. And it was in Detroit—there had been the riots in 1967, so this is right after that, probably December, after that summer in Detroit when the city erupted. This is a group of kids who were saying, "No, we want to bring people together, and we want to do things differently, and we want to have an impact on things like social justice, on peace, on the direction of our country."

MURPHY: So, after this local conflict in '67, you thought that there was a way to solve some of these problems at the local level? Was this mainly your focus? Or were you trying to speak to national issues?

GILLE: We were interested in things all the way up the political spectrum, and I think that's been one of the themes of my whole career, actually, and something I learned back then. In 1969, we worked on the Campaign to Stop the ABM Treaty. Senator Phil Hart—who was our Senator then that I mentioned—a great leader for civil rights and in the antiwar movement—he was the leader in the Senate of the opposition to this missile treaty, which was an outgrowth of the militarism at the time. This group of kids got involved. We organized political lists, we made calls, we were all trying to put pressure on our other Senator [Robert Paul Griffin], who was a swing vote on that treaty.

The day of the vote, we went to Washington. There were about five or six of the kids of the larger group who went to Washington to watch what was going to happen. It was a very close vote; it was a tie vote. It was the [President Richard M.] Nixon administration at the time, and so the Nixon administration won it, with the Vice President casting the deciding vote. But afterwards we went in to see Senator Phil Hart in his office, and he thanked us for our work, and later he wrote us each a personal letter thanking us for carrying on, and telling us what an inspiration we had been to him. And then

he told a local, or actually a syndicated, columnist—a man named Saul Friedman—about us being there. And he wrote a column that was syndicated nationwide about "The Senator and the Kids," and I was one of those kids who was interviewed in that article about why we cared about the militarism in our country and what our hopes were for peace and how we admired our Senator. So that was one of my early political things. In answer to the question, we worked locally, but we thought about a lot of national issues, and we always thought about politics in terms of "what can we organize?"

MURPHY: Was that your first experience coming to Washington?

GILLE: Other than a trip when I was [in], I think, about sixth grade. I came with my family, but that's the first time I came on my own with other kids.

MURPHY: And so throughout this early activism, you didn't get a sense that there were any limitations on your role here, in Detroit or in building this broader movement?

GILLE: I think, actually, my sense was we were in a time that was changing, and that lots of people were working for justice in all sorts of new ways, that there were movements of all kinds that were getting going. I think that was actually empowering. I had a stronger sense of what the possibilities could be rather than I did of the limits.

MURPHY: And did other women you worked with feel the same way? Was there a kind of collective sense of empowerment at that moment?

GILLE: I think I was sort of the ringleader. Maybe . . . There were others who were striking out and doing new, different things either in the arts or . . . I had a friend who went on to be one of the first, or early, engineers at GM [General

Motors], but in terms of political, I was the one in my crowd among the girls, later to be women, who really kind of got that bug.

MURPHY: So, from the student activism, what's next? Did you go on to college and continue that in a different setting?

GILLE: I went to the University of Chicago, and Chicago—by then it's 1970, and some of these movements are kind of splintering, and the nonviolent civil rights movement of the early to mid-'60s has been replaced. Martin Luther King has died. Bobby Kennedy has died. It was a period in which the kind of activism that I was involved in seemed less prominent.

So I get to Chicago, I learned things about the Chicago traditions of community organizing. I studied movements in general, and I was always interested in the question of the relationship between people who are working in movements on the outside and people who are working in political roles on the inside. How are they joined? How do they shape each other? So, I studied that a lot. I was less involved—I stayed mostly involved in Michigan politics. Between college and grad school, I came back to Michigan, and I worked on a campaign for our Congressman, who was running in Macomb County, which is just north of where I grew up, but where I had been active. It's another suburb of Detroit. That was David [Edward] Bonior, and I was a volunteer on his first campaign.[4]

I went back to grad school in Chicago after he won his election, for four years, and in 1981, when [President] Ronald [Wilson] Reagan was elected, I felt that this was going to be a threat to so many of the values that I cared about that I wanted to get back involved in politics. So, I called up my friend Ed Bruley, who was this young man who I had started organizing kids with back in the 1960s—he and I remain friends to this day.[5] He's one of my

longest-lasting and best friends. I called him up and I said, "I really would like to go to Washington for a year before I finish my dissertation because I want to get out of the ivory tower. I want to get back and get involved in things." And he talked to David Bonior about it, and they hired me, and I started in my job on October 1, 1981—just coming to Washington for a year, supposedly.

MURPHY: {laughter} But that's a big leap, going from this involvement with the first campaign in '76 to '81. Why choose to become involved in that campaign in 1976?

GILLE: Well, I was between college and grad school, so I was living back at home in Michigan, and reconnected with some of the same people that had formed the political organization that I was in when I was in high school, and this was just an exciting campaign. Again, it had that grassroots philosophy that I loved. We handed out pine trees door-to-door, and actually David Bonior's campaign did that all the way to the end. It was one of the keys to his first victory and one of his keys to his success all the way through. It was this deep community organizing that we did around a lot of things, but the pine tree was the symbol of it—both of our concern for the environment and our concern for the community. I loved that very intensive volunteer-type campaign.

MURPHY: Did you know him before that? Or was it just [that] your connections had this connection to him?

GILLE: I knew him slightly before that. In fact, my friend Ed Bruley had run against him for state rep in 1972, and I had been on that campaign. So, this was a coming together of different forces in that county to win this congressional seat.

MURPHY: Now was that your home county?

GILLE: No, I grew up just south of there. I knew the area well, though.

MURPHY: So, when you came to Washington to work for Congressman Bonior, what do you recall about your transition into this very different world of work?

GILLE: Oh, interesting. Well, I started work, as I said, on October 1, 1981. I moved to Capitol Hill, and I walked to work every day. I remember as I was getting ready to come to my first day of work—it was the day that Ronald Reagan's first budget went into effect, and it had a lot of cuts for social programs, including it eliminated the Office of Economic Opportunity, [an instrumental part of] the War on Poverty. I can remember hearing the protests on the radio as I was getting ready to go in for my first day at work, and I had this feeling, "All right, the battle's engaged." I'm here and I'm going to be a part of trying to bring about some kind of change, some kind of more positive direction for my country.

It was a shift from academics to working in politics. You know, the pace is very different, but I took to it. I actually liked the energy level and I liked being able to respond to daily events. I liked a lot about that and I liked the fact that I could try to communicate with people. The first thing you do when you're just starting in a congressional office is mostly answer mail. So, I answered a lot of mail—just communicating with people and trying to learn how to listen to them and say something to convey what the Congressman's position was. Even if it was different from theirs, not just saying, "Oh, you might be right" and "Thank you for your views," but to try to have whatever little edge of dialogue you could have in a letter.

And that was probably the beginning of my communications work—I eventually went on to be speechwriter and run the whole communications

operation for the Whip operation, and even now, I do communication strategy for a human rights group. Trying to figure out how to answer those letters from constituents in the early days was the beginning. The other people in the office used to say, "Talk to Kathy, she'll give you your 101 in how to approach a constituent letter." I would always say, "The first thing out of your mouth has to be, 'I share your view that . . .,' and you have to try to find some common ground with a person." And that was a basic lesson in framing. Get it down to the value level, and then if people can engage with you on the value level, you can work your way up to the more complex details of things, but at least try to get that grounding.

So that was the beginning of my career in communications. But very early on, when I came to Congress, I got involved in Central America. The Congressman was already deeply involved in issues around the wars that were going on in Central America, and I came into the foreign policy job, and that's what I did primarily for a decade. Even when I moved into my leadership positions in the mid-1980s, we were still working primarily on Central America.

MURPHY: So, when you arrived, what was your title?

GILLE: Legislative assistant.

MURPHY: Okay. So you had a range of responsibilities. When you entered the office, what were the dynamics of the office? Were there other women working with you?

GILLE: Throughout most of the time David Bonior had his congressional offices, he had four people as a policy committee that ran his operation: two people in Washington and two people in Michigan, and when I came on, there was a man and a woman in each of those positions. So I had a sense that this was

an office that respected the views of women, gave women opportunities . . . and that turned out to be true throughout.

MURPHY: And when you looked at your colleagues in other offices—contemporaries—were there similar structures in terms of the gender dynamics of an office, for example? Or did you feel like this was an exception?

GILLE: We had an exceptional sort of democratic way of running our office, but there were women around. There were women who were staffing subcommittees and in higher-level positions. There were some women who were—they didn't use the term "chief of staff" in those days, it was usually called the AA [administrative assistant]. I talked recently to a woman who actually was on the Republican side, and she was appointed chief of staff in 1990. She said there were only 10 women chiefs of staff in that day. That could be true.

MURPHY: What was her name?

GILLE: Betsy Hawkings. She worked for [Representative] Chris [Christopher H.] Shays.[6]

MURPHY: And so it seems like this was an opportunity that you seized; but it didn't seem to you that this was something out of the ordinary. You were fitting right into the office. You were not treated any differently when you entered?

GILLE: No. I think I had a bit of a leg up because I was a little bit older. I was almost 30 when I came to work, and even now, congressional staff—probably especially now—congressional staff tend to be quite young. I was essentially going to be working on my Ph.D. I had already had my master's, so I came with more education. I think I had more confidence because of that.

Also, I know one of the things we wanted to think about was who inspired me, and who were mentors or role models at that time. And in terms of role models and women who really inspired me, I found a lot of inspiration from the women I knew who were working on human rights and in the peace community. There was a woman named Cindy Buhl, who ran the Central America Working Group, really coordinated all of what became a very large movement of human rights groups and church groups that were working against the wars in Central America.[7] She was so smart and so strategic and so tough. It was really an inspiration to me. Edie Wilkie who ran the Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus—that was a caucus that was inside Congress—was a great model of an incredibly smart, savvy woman.[8] She happened to be married to Congressman Don [William Donlon] Edwards, so she had a status as almost a Member of Congress, but she ran—and I think maybe founded—that caucus. So it wasn't just the people who were inside Congress, it was the broader political world where women were really making a mark, I thought.

MURPHY: Were there any other mentors when you entered into the office, or the House in general—other women working there or other colleagues that gave you an introduction to the daily work that you were going to experience, for example?

GILLE: As the years went by, you know, I rose higher and higher in the leadership and I actually went into positions where there were fewer women or where women hadn't even had a similar role, like eventually I ran the Whip operation. I didn't know of another woman who had run the Whip operation at that level. Or when I was appointed to be an executive floor assistant for the Chief Deputy Whip, which was 1987—that's when I moved over to the Capitol and we had a small office there. It was me, and another

male staff person, and Judy [Bonior]; her name was Briggs then. She went on to marry the Congressman. They had actually known each other from school in Iowa. Judy had worked for a former Whip in the press office. She worked for John Brademas, who lost in 1980, and then she went on to work for the Clerk's Office. She knew a lot about how the Congress worked and how a leadership office should work. In the 1960s, she had been a volunteer in Freedom Summer in Mississippi. So, she and I had a huge value connect, and I always found her incredibly supportive. She taught me a lot. She was a great writer. Whenever she gave me advice, I tried to follow it. When she told me I was doing a good job, it really built my confidence.

And then Sarah Dufendach, who I worked with, she was our chief of staff eventually. She and I had very different styles. We were sometimes competitors. That's a case where you see the kind of rivalry that can develop—but we always, in the end, worked it out really well and I think we were a stronger team for our differences.

MURPHY: I think that's really interesting the way that you and Sarah Dufendach had these leadership roles within the office, but did you get a sense that ideas about gender shaped your experience on the job? Or were you both consciously thinking about yourselves as women in leadership positions or executing the job first?

GILLE: You know, probably both, I think. Some of the ways these kinds of things shape you are hard to know—being a woman and walking into a room and realizing you may be the only woman staff person there, may be the only woman there, or there are very few. I think you don't necessarily know how it impacts you.

I can think of one example of something that came up when I was in the Chief Deputy Whip Office at a time when there were not very many women around and not other women who were floor assistants. They had something called the "floor boys," which was a night out—it seems like every week they went out and had drinks and steaks, and lobbyists paid for it. I knew it existed, and I knew I wasn't invited to it. And I thought a lot about whether I want[ed] to bang the door down. And I thought, "Did I really even want to go into that room? Did I want to be there? Did I want to be doing that?" And I had to step back and think, "What's my goal? Why am I here?" By then I was very deeply involved in the efforts to stop the wars in Central America, and that was an all-consuming job. I did not actually need to be going out late at night for drinks and steaks; {laughter} I needed to get up early in the morning and do my job. But I often use that example to tell younger women about tough choices because as I look back, it's always a question to me whether I should have raised the issue: "Am I being excluded as a woman? Am I not having access to the kind of currency of the day, the relationship, the boys club? And is that diminishing my effectiveness?" But I had another way I usually looked at it: I would always step back and say, "What's my goal, and do I need this to get to my goal?"

And I think the way I did that actually helped me develop kind of a larger sense of strategic skills. I mean, it's the way I teach strategy now. And when I do communication strategy, I make people sit down, and say, "What's your goal?" And I think that process of my having to do that over and over again because I was a woman . . . Because I would sometimes wonder, "Am I being excluded because of this?" It made me tougher and smarter and more strategic. And I think I made the right choice most of the time.

MURPHY: So in the end, do you think it affected your ability to do your job?

GILLE: It did not; I don't think it affected my ability to do the job I defined as why I was there, which was to work for peace. It would have affected my ability if I thought I was trying to have a career in Congress and sort of be a player in that way. But that never was my goal, and it never really interested me in that way. I loved Congress and I love politics, but I loved it partly because it gave [me] the opportunity to work on the issues and for the people that I believed in. And I was less interested in sort of "playing the game."

MURPHY: So this was kind of a networking session and do you think that business was relegated to the daylight hours? Or was this another opportunity for business that maybe you were walled off from?

GILLE: Well, you know, politics is all about relationships. It always is. So, those kinds of things are important, and I don't think things like that exist today where just the guys go out. I mean, maybe they do. I really don't know actually.

MURPHY: And did you talk to other people about this at the time? Or did you kind of struggle with it internally?

GILLE: I made up my mind pretty quickly that I had my plate full. There was a war going on, and people were coming to me with stories of people who were being massacred or alternative stories of here's how peace is possible—that's what I wanted to be worrying about. And if I had thought that was important . . .

There was another time when I walked into the Appropriations Committee, they had put some money in a bill for Contra aid. I'm not going to remember the exact details of this, but I walked into the Appropriations Committee and I went right up to the top staff person on the Appropriations Committee, which, if you know anything about Congress, that's a pretty big

deal.[9] A person who has been running the Appropriations Committee for many, many, many years is an institution. I walked right up to him and kind of accused him of putting money in there that was going to cause people to die, and he straightened himself up—and there were other male staffers around who were from the Speaker's Office and other places—and he picked himself up and just looked at me, and he said, "I am a professional. You are an ideologue." And I turned to him—and I can't believe I did this—I said something like, "Well, excuse me for failing to genuflect, but this is important." And I looked at all the rest of these guys and said, "We do not want to be funding the Contras." And I walked out. And I can see some of the other guys just . . . I mean, eyebrows were going up like, "What? Does she have any idea of what she just did?" I hoped my boss did not have any requests for projects in his district {laughter} that year.

MURPHY: And do you think you would have felt the same reaction if it was a different committee, a different issue, saying that kind of—taking that bold step to—

GILLE: You know, I think if I had been a man, I would have understood the rules of the game better, and I might've played it differently, you know. And I might not have been quite so rebellious. I think I walked in and was—now whether that was an effective strategy, {laughter} I think it probably didn't make any difference one way or the other, but I think I stood out. I actually think with the exception of the one who called me an ideologue, the rest of the guys were kind of like, "Huh, don't mess with her."

MURPHY: Yeah, that's something—that's an interesting question of the demeanor of women in Congress.

GILLE: Yeah.

MURPHY: Right? And that's something, as we're doing this project on Jeannette Rankin—she was the first woman to serve in Congress, and there was really considerable attention paid to her dress and demeanor at the time when she entered the House. What was she wearing? How was she acting as a woman in this previously all-male space? And do you think that had changed by the time you came to the House, or did women Members and women staff members face the same scrutiny?

GILLE: Well, I mean it's certainly different from Jeannette Rankin's day, right? Obviously.

MURPHY: Right, but as a matter of degree?

GILLE: But yeah, but let me think about that. I think there are a couple ways to answer that. I mean, some of it is . . . It was a challenge to figure out what to wear. The men had jackets that had inside pockets, I remember that. And it was really hard to find a women's jacket that had an inside pocket, and they all kept whatever secrets of the day that were what they were working on, and the list of who needs to be whipped or whatever it is, all in this inside pocket. And I was always carrying a folder full of stuff. I didn't carry a purse, I carried that folder. And so, yes, I had to kind of figure that out. There wasn't anybody showing me the way. What shoes to wear? Those halls are so . . . the marble is hard. I never was a high-heel-type person anyway, but just figuring out shoes that you could wear that would last the whole day and that you could run . . . because sometimes you had to run from your office to the floor if something was happening. One time we moved from one office to another in the early days, and it was a joke how many shoes I had under my desk. I was always trying some new pair of shoes, because I wanted something comfortable. I had so many shoes that didn't fit sitting under my desk. {laughter} So, I mean, so there's that.

There is the appearance, the demeanor . . . am I looking professional? Because obviously I'm not just going to blend in. There was a time women were wearing these kinds of suits that looked just like a man's suit. I never tried that. I wasn't somebody who was tremendously into clothes. When I was in high school I wore a high school uniform and I sort of liked it that way. {laughter} But, there's that, there's sort of just the demeanor question, but there is a bigger, a much deeper kind of . . . Is there a double standard for women? You know, so that if a woman is angry, she is strident. If she is assertive, she may be seen as angry or strident or lacking humor. That's a great one. Not warm or nurturing. So, how to be smart and serious without being someone who is treated like a schoolmarm. It's both a challenge for how people view you and it's one of those cases, I think . . . a lot of the barriers we face are . . . What's psychologically going on inside of us? Where are we limiting ourselves? And where have you walked into a situation where maybe there's something going on that you don't even understand, but is actually diminishing your effectiveness or your ability to be taken seriously? I just tried to keep doing the job. You know, made sure I was working on things I believed in, and kept my eyes open, and learned as I went.

MURPHY: Can you think of an example with that kind of, entering a room and feeling that kind of lack of understanding? Or any other type of status as an outsider, I guess you could say.

GILLE: I mean, the two examples I've given already have something of a feel of that. I think the way it comes about is sort of a constant pressure on you that you've got to work harder. You've got to be more aware. I was probably a little bit less at ease than probably than a lot of my male colleagues because you're constantly having to scope out the situation and try to figure it out. And again, I think it helped, my developing a strategic sense, and it was very

effective for somebody who's working a Whip operation, where your job is to actually be incredibly observant about all the Members in your caucus. That's really mostly what a Whip does, is deeply understand who the Members are that they're working with and what their districts are like, what their temperament is like, who their friends are, how they relate, so that you know how to persuade them or where they'll come out on an issue. So, walking into rooms all the time, having to be that observant, I think was, again, sort of perversely an asset. It gave me some skills that I really needed in the Whip job.

MURPHY: So, speaking about these expectations that you felt, were there any outlets for, kind of, relief from that—organizations or informal meetings among colleagues that you felt [gave you] some relief from that?

GILLE: Our office was, I always felt, a really strong team—running all the way from the district office, through our personal office in the Rayburn Building, to the Capitol office. We were a lot like a family, and it's a group of people that I had been working with, some of them since I was 15. But by the end, 20 years, I had worked with a lot—five or six of these people, I had worked with for 20 years. And people tended to stay quite a while in our office, even if it wasn't that long. So we had good relationships, I think, for the most part. I'm not saying there weren't tensions. My boss was always really supportive, and I think who we were as a team, the Bonior team, was probably my biggest outlet for it all.

MURPHY: And with this . . . well, let me think about this. In the kind of developing role of women in the House, your roles changed over time as you moved up in terms of leadership, in terms of your role in committees and the Whip operation. Before we get to all that, were there any other instances where you saw a Member or staff member move into a particular role or a new role—or

take a stand on an issue, perhaps—that you viewed as a turning point for the role of women in Congress?

GILLE: I'm trying to think of a turning point. Most of this happened much more gradually than a turning point. Obviously when David stepped down as Whip, Nancy Pelosi ran for that job, and David endorsed her. This was in the last few months that we were in Congress, but obviously that was a huge turning point. She was on track to be Speaker. It was very clear. So smart, so inspiring—I really admired Nancy Pelosi's political skills and her commitments, the depth of her commitment to her values and to building a great team. But in some ways it did feel like the years that I was there were sort of building towards that. Rosa [L.] DeLauro was a great leader of the message team. When David became Whip, he appointed Barbara [Bailey] Kennelly as the Chief Deputy Whip—we expanded the [number of] Chief Deputy Whips. There were three, and then four, eventually, to include more diversity in the leadership, and so when we came in, there was another leadership role for women. But I think all of that was pretty gradual.

MURPHY: Did you think a role—like when Pelosi moved into that role—did you think of that as . . . when you started in Congress, did you think of that as something that was inevitable, possible, or in the distant future?

GILLE: You know, that's interesting because we were talking about my early years in politics, too, and how I was influenced by the civil rights movement, [and] to some degree, the women's movement. The feeling that I was living in the time of change, and it felt more like opportunities than barriers to me. Like there was more momentum around the change, even when there were what I would think of as serious political setbacks. But I wouldn't call the changes inevitable. This stuff is hard work, you know, and it's not inevitable that Nancy Pelosi became Speaker. She is one of the most brilliant politicians to

ever be in the House of Representatives—and I've seen a lot of them. So, it's not inevitable, but I did feel like I was living in the time of opportunity for women.

MURPHY: What's an example of a setback that you saw along the way?

GILLE: Well, I mean, some of the setbacks are in terms of policy issues. I'm working in Congress in a time when we're seeing major cutbacks. I mentioned the poverty program that was eliminated the first day I walked into the office—the cuts in funding for education. The whole early, mid-years of the 1990s, the big battles over, "Are we going to cut out school lunches? Are we going to cut Medicare?" All of these things have tremendous impact on women. They're larger economic, social issues, but the ability to fund education and fund Medicare . . . and so many of those social programs really impact women's lives, so those are the big setbacks that I've seen in my lifetime.

MURPHY: But in terms of working in the House and other women working in the House, whether as Members or staff, were there any persistent barriers, something like a leadership position for a Member, a woman Member, or staff members moving up the ranks within an office? Were there times where there was consternation about the slow pace of change?

GILLE: You know, I don't see it that way. I'm trying to think of what would be an example. Because it's gradual, of course. Are things moving fast enough? Are things changing fast enough to really welcome women in? Some of the problems that are barriers for women have to do with things that are hard on family life. I think that's one . . . how hard it is to balance a family and a career. I think women still are the people in the society that struggle with that most, and in Congress, I think, it is particularly difficult. The hours are so long. Even as a staff person, the hours were so long and the pressures are so

great, that I think that is a limitation on just how satisfying of a career it can be for anybody who wants to have a family, and wants to have much of an outside life at all, frankly.

Congress lags behind a lot of other institutions in terms of the professionalization of its staff, the staff development. I think there is maybe a congressional day-care center now, but just the kind of support that you might find in other places for staff development in general, I think, is still lower in Congress than elsewhere. You know, you can go to the Congressional Research Service and learn procedure, but there were not opportunities for you to learn to manage an office. Now I'm a leadership coach. That's one of the reasons I got into leadership coaching, is I felt in my career I could've used somebody who would have helped me understand what leadership is, and how to run an office. I comanaged an office of 30 people with very little, if any, kind of training and professional management skills.

MURPHY: Your academic background was in political science, and do you think that if you had taken a different path to Congress, you would have had more familiarity with those tactics, or a starting point? Or was it kind of a structural obstacle for women in a way?

GILLE: You know, I might have, had I come in from a different place, but I think the way Congress worked back then for the most part, is you came in quite young, and you worked your way up through from being an LA [legislative assistant], to being an LD [legislative director], to maybe being chief of staff, learning how your office worked along the way but not necessarily getting a lot of professional management skills. Now there is something called the Congressional Management Foundation that does some work in that realm, but there's so much turnover, and I think it continues to be—I think it's a

huge challenge for the institution. And of course there are cuts in funding for a congressional staff, and the workload has gotten worse. In the information age that we're in now, people are inundated with information. It's so easy to communicate. So, how do you manage all this input, as well as manage a staff, as well as understand policy changes and things? It's a very complex environment.

END OF PART ONE — BEGINNING OF PART TWO

MURPHY: So, I wanted to talk a little bit about your career more directly, and I was wondering if you could describe some of your responsibilities in the office when you began. And I know you talked about letter opening and responding to the letters, but there was more to it than that. So, what else were you involved in at first, before you transitioned into some of the Whip operation later on?

GILLE: Well, my very first job was as legislative assistant. When I came, I wasn't seeking any particular issue or area. I guess I thought I'd probably be working on something more related to labor or domestic issues, because that was more my background in academics. Coming from Michigan, I knew my boss was a strong champion of labor. I thought I'd maybe initially start on some things like that, but I came into the foreign policy job; that's the job that was open. And it turned out that as I started in 1981, the wars in Central America were just beginning to ramp up.

So, I walked into a set of issues that were just forming as enormous national issues that would go on for a decade. The 1970s in Latin America had been a

time when human rights became a key focus. In 1973, there had been a coup in Chile. The socialist government of President [Salvador] Allende had been overthrown by a military coup, a very brutal military coup.[10] A lot of people had come to Washington in exile from that period in Latin America and formed the basis of a very strong human rights movement in Washington. As the wars in Central America began to get going, the human rights focus on that region intensified. Archbishop [Óscar] Romero had been killed in El Salvador in March of 1980.[11] And four church women from the United States were killed there in December of that year.[12] The Sandinistas had come to power in 1979 through a revolution overthrowing a military dictatorship that the U.S. had supported.[13] So, there was a lot of ferment in the region, and a lot of people in this country becoming very concerned and active around the issues of peace and trying to support human rights and social justice in Latin America and ending U.S. aid to military dictatorships.

So, I walked into a movement that was just beginning to form around those issues. And one of the very first things I did was some work on Guatemala. My boss—and this is an example how David Bonior worked and something I admired so much about him—had gone to some small event on Capitol Hill. It may have even been at somebody's home, sponsored by Amnesty International. And he had heard a priest talk about massacres in Guatemala. He came into the office—this is one of my very, very first assignments—he came into the office, he gave me the name of this priest, and he said, "I want you to organize a briefing with this priest because he has incredible stories to tell about what's going on in Guatemala."

And so, I didn't even know where to find a room. I had to figure it all out, but I put together a briefing. I contacted the people who were organizing the schedule of the priest. I contacted all the different congressional offices. I was

learning how to organize my colleagues who were working on foreign policy and human rights in the Congress. We had a great briefing. It was just packed, and the priest told a very powerful story. I began to learn right there how important it is to bring in the voices of people who are experiencing things on the ground, whether in Latin America or whether it's throughout the United States. I learned just how powerful that kind of witness can be. Then, staying in touch—it's always the way my boss worked, building these strong ties, kind of inside-outside.

I started to learn things about how to organize, how to build a network of people, and eventually, over the years, I became this link. There were lots of people working on Central America, lots of fabulous staff people who cared a lot about it. They worked on it for a decade, and they deserve all sorts of credit for the standing up for human rights and peace. I eventually became a key staff person on this issue because my boss was appointed to be head of the Leadership Task Force on Central America. I was his person who staffed that task force, and it became the most important link to the congressional leadership and the votes on the floor. We had many, many, many votes, especially on Contra aid during the 1980s. I was the main link between the floor strategy, the House leadership strategy, and the outside groups.

I came to Washington for a year thinking, I was going to go back and do my dissertation, but that movement changed my life and all my understanding about politics and how to do it, and how to build these inside-outside strategic coalitions.

MURPHY: So, it's interesting, as the foreign policy staff person—because of this happenstance, he attends this event, you get channeled into this work and embrace it, right? So would you have been working on other issues just more generally about foreign policy positions for the Congressman?

GILLE: Well, I did all his foreign policy work, so I worked on the Middle East as well. This was the time of the invasion of Lebanon, and my boss ended up being very critical of Israel, and that became sort of a theme in his career. He was somebody who had a sense of how we were ignoring the Arab Muslim world. And that would lead all the way through to the times when I wrote his speech for the debate on the First Gulf War. He closed the debate in opposition to the First Gulf War in 1991. So, all the way through the days.

He was always trying to get the United States to look at a broader perspective on the Middle East and the Arab Muslim world in general. So, I was there at the beginning of a lot of that work for him. I did some environmental issues, but the 1980s, in particular, were very much about Central America, and David rose through the ranks of the leadership on the strength of his leadership around that issue. I think that's why he was appointed Chief Deputy Whip, primarily because he was seen as a strong leader on that issue.

When he eventually won the Whip race in 1991, I think people had seen what an amazing job we did, not just over a decade of whipping bill after bill to try to stop military aid to the Contras, but also in envisioning and supporting a broader peace process in Central America that brought an end to the war. I think it might be one of the first times in history that Congress not only was involved in stopping a war, but actually building support for the peace process under the leadership then of Speaker Jim [James Claude] Wright [Jr.]. But we were key liaisons to all of that, both to people in the region—eventually I went down with Congressman Bonior to the peace talks, where the final Central American peace agreement was signed. The final agreement was signed in Costa Rica, and these are the peace talks that President Óscar Arias won the Nobel Prize for.[14]

MURPHY: I'm interested in the Leadership Task Force on Central America. What was the function of this group? This was within the Democratic Party. What kind of authority did it have? Was it an advisory organization?

GILLE: Well, it started out as a Whip task force. Every time you whip a bill, a major piece of legislation that comes to the floor, at least in my day, we would put together a task force to work on that bill. The Central America legislation came up so often, and in so many different formats, that we had a long-term task force, with David Bonior as the head. There were times when the decision as to whether we were going to have a continuing resolution to fund the government went right down to Christmas Eve. The top leadership in the House had to decide whether to put money in this bill, as the Reagan administration requested to support the Contras. And we faced the possibility of the entire government shutting down over Contra aid. Or President Ronald Reagan speaking to Joint Sessions of Congress over aiding the Contras.

It's hard to imagine now what a big deal it was, but it was a huge deal because the Reagan administration had made it such a priority. These were the last days of the Cold War. The administration continued to see this battle as [being] about communism coming through the hemisphere. We continued to see it as, "Let's not get into another Vietnam." The United States really needs to stand for human rights in foreign policy and not be involved in supporting dictatorships. So, it was a struggle over what this country was going to be in the world—probably the first really big struggle after Vietnam about how we were going to think about foreign policy.

[Thomas Philip] Tip O'Neill [Jr.] is the one who originally appointed the task force, but it became a permanent task force on Central America, so we could continue to work on strategy, day in, day out. And we did a lot of

different things, including with the press; we held a lot of briefings; we did liaison with outside groups who were doing visits back to Members of Congress in their districts. Many people from the United States went down to the region and knew what was going on and saw alternatives. The prevailing view from the administration was not what they saw. There was this tremendous energy and frustration in the country to try to stop these military efforts in Central America. And so many church groups were involved in it. My work involved a constant coordination of the strategy of a social movement to make a difference inside the House of Representatives and change policy.

MURPHY: So, the first priority was mobilizing support or opposition to legislation, but it became kind of a multifaceted organization that . . . Were you involved in bringing in some of those outside human rights groups, for example?

GILLE: Yes, and usually people who had been down to the region—I gave the example of the priest who had been working in Guatemala and had witnessed and had a lot of evidence around massacres and human rights abuses. There were many others—Maryknoll nuns who had been working in Nicaragua who had witnessed Contra attacks.[15] Outside groups that had done studies. I now work for an organization called Washington Office on Latin America that provided really powerful information because of their links to church groups and human rights groups in the region. So, I would be marshaling all that information. David did the response to the President's radio address. Almost every time President Reagan spoke about Central America on a radio address, which was quite often, David did the Saturday response to that. I often wrote those for him. Talking to the press, writing op-eds, providing information to other Members. Early on, David saw that there was a peace process that was starting to develop in the region, and we eventually came in

close contact with people from Costa Rica. Speaker Jim Wright took some very heroic risks to try to support a peace process, which did eventually work. So it evolved over time.

When the Iran-Contra scandal happened, we weren't actually on that select committee, but we marshaled a lot of evidence from that committee to help people see that not only were we aiding people who were not freedom fighters, but [that] the Contras were, in fact, human rights abusers.[16] Here was a scandal within our own government that was so determined to violate our own laws in order to give the Contras funding. So, it was very tense, but wonderful work because the people—both in Washington and [those] who had come up from the region who were working on human rights in Central America at that time—were so inspiring, so courageous. And I traveled to the region several times, twice on my own.

MURPHY: To do research? Activism?

GILLE: In 1983, early on in the Central American wars, I got this feeling I needed to see what was happening. No one was inviting me on a congressional delegation. I wasn't on any committee. Not even any of these outside human rights groups that I was working with had invited me to go down, and a lot of people were going down. I thought, "I'm going to go down and see for myself." So, I took my own money went down, and went to a refugee camp in Honduras, where I saw refugees from El Salvador. All the years I worked in Congress, I kept a picture of three little girls that I took at that refugee camp. I kept it at my desk just to inspire me because meeting them was so powerful, and hearing the stories of their families and what they had been through in El Salvador helped me keep going. Twice I went down on trips that I just figured out how to organize on my own from knowing priests or human rights activists down there. I put together my own schedule.

MURPHY: And why do you think this issue was so important to you? Was it the human rights aspect? Was there also this convergence with your Catholic activism?

GILLE: It really did bring together all those themes I mentioned earlier. It was a time when so many people—like the four church women who were killed in El Salvador who had been working with people in base communities—inspired me. And the people themselves, who were beginning to stand up for justice, were facing a very brutal military repression. Óscar Romero, people like that, were tremendous inspirations to me from that Catholic [social] justice upbringing. And then also, understanding the civil rights movement and what the lessons were about organizing. So, yes, it was a beautiful match for my own passions and values.

MURPHY: What role did religion play in the debate in Congress on the issue of violence in Central America?

GILLE: Well, I think the fact that so many church groups were involved mattered a lot. In 1989, six Jesuit priests and their housekeeper and her daughter were murdered at the University of Central America in El Salvador.[17] This was after the peace process and had pretty much brought an end to the conflict in Nicaragua. U.S. aid had been cut off to the Contras, but the war in El Salvador was still going on very strongly, and these six Jesuits were killed. That really shook not just the activist community, but Congress itself.

David was still essentially in charge of the Central America Task Force, but we really felt it was time for somebody else to take a lead, so we went to Speaker [Thomas Stephen] Foley and suggested that Joe [John Joseph] Moakley, who had just become chair of the Rules Committee, take that on. He put together a task force of Members staffed by Jim [James P.] McGovern, who is now a Member of Congress, and they did an amazing

investigation of the death of the Jesuits: the links to the military in El Salvador all the way through to people who were trained by the U.S. Just this month there's been a ruling that one of those people who was involved in the death of the Jesuits could be extradited to Spain for trial.[18] There's never really been justice in that case, but that investigation allowed us to have the evidence and to cut off military aid to El Salvador. So, in fact it was the investigation of the death of these very eminent Jesuit priests, who actually themselves were trying to build a peace process in El Salvador and were very well known, that turned U.S. policy. The Jesuits had spent time up here with Members of Congress and people in the human rights community. Their deaths ironically helped bring about the end of that war.

MURPHY: Interesting. I wanted to talk a little bit about your role in the Whip operation as well, and it seems like some of the Congressman's status in that regard came out of this activism on Central America. And in 1987 one observer described Congressman Bonior's Whip organization this way: "Bonior has organized the membership of the House so that hardly a throat can be cleared without his whips knowing about it."[19] How did your office create this system?

GILLE: {laughter} Well, some of it we had inherited from an earlier Whip, Tony Coelho, who, I think, was the first elected Whip, and he brought in a lot of organizational strategies.[20] I think David did take it to even greater levels in a lot of different ways. Some of it's just he's a really good listener. There are a lot of myths about how you twist arms in the House of Representatives, and I think in the bygone eras there was more of that. I think now sometimes things hold together—or back in my day—there was a certain amount of affinity in values and ideas, just in a party point of view. I mean, a lot of people just shared a stance—say on Central America—people generally

within the caucus shared that commitment to peace and human rights. And then, some of it's just really just knowing the Members very well and understanding the constellations of things that influence them.

Another example of a really fantastic Whip operation that we had was during the 1993, I guess it would be, budget vote. [President William J. "Bill"] Clinton's first budget, which, when it came down to the final moments on the floor, it came down to one vote. A rule of thumb—especially when you're whipping in the majority, you do not bring a bill . . . when you're in the leadership, you do not bring a bill to the floor unless you already have the votes lined up. And that's what the Whip operation is about, is helping you understand where those votes are, if there are changes that need to be made in the legislation or compromises that are needed to pass the bill. Usually that's done at the committee level, but there might be some kinds of compromises or some more time that's needed or some new messaging strategies or something to get the votes. So the Whip operation gives you that data that you need to know about where the Members are. And you lay it out in a format that's five columns: people who are no, people who are leaning no, people who are undecided, people who are leaning yes, and people that are yes. And then you put together a task force, and it's usually made up of these people who are with you among the yeses. They go and talk one-on-one to each of the Members that are undecided or leaning no or leaning yes. You try to bring them over into that yes column. That's essentially how you whip a bill. And in the House, at least on the Democratic side, well, we did it with a task force. I think the Republicans had a little bit of a different system, but that was our system.

So, the budget bill was incredibly controversial, and we weren't going to get any Republican votes for it; we had to win it on the Democratic side. We

actually—that's the only time in my years where we went to the floor without actually having the votes completely lined up, but we were so organized. We had Members who were for the legislation paired up . . . each Member was paired up with another Member who was undecided. We had Members who were assigned to different parts of the floor, so they could watch where a Member might be and try to convince them right there on the floor. We had the President of the United States on a live phone line in the cloakroom. So if somebody needed some last-minute persuading, they could have a personal conversation with the President right there in the middle of the vote. And it was very dramatic.

Finally, in the last minute of the vote, I think it was Pat [John Patrick] Williams from Montana, held out his arm to Marjorie Margolies-Mezvinsky and they walked down the aisle together and cast the last two votes. People do not understand the human drama of the floor of the House of Representatives. She was a brand-new Member, elected from that class of '92, which back then some people called it the "Year of the Woman"—a lot of women were elected that year. That's when Clinton came in, and a big class of new Members came in. But these are many, very marginal seats, so controversial votes are tough. She took that tough vote, and it was partly our Whip operation that allowed people to see exactly where we were going to get that one last vote, or who were the possibilities. So that's the power of the Whip organization.

There's one other thing I'd like to say about . . . Well, maybe two other things. One of the things that is really great about working in the House—at least in the years that I was there—what I loved about it was that team building. The Senate is much more [about] the individual Member; they give longer speeches, they have more individual power. In the House it's a lot

about "How do you build your coalition? How do you build your organization?" And David was really good at that. He did a great job back in our district, and he was really great doing it in Congress and great doing it with outside groups. A lot of that organizing came into play in something like the budget. But the interesting thing—it is one of those times I thought, "Would this have happened if the swing voter had been a man?" When Marjorie Margolies-Mezvinsky cast that deciding vote for the President's budget, all the people on the other side of the aisle stood up and started heckling her. "Bye-bye, Marjorie," almost like a song, mocking her. And it went on for quite a while and I thought, "Would this have happened had this been a man?" She did eventually lose her seat over that vote.

MURPHY: In that process of garnering support, I'm interested in the way that you convinced someone like that who was on the fence on an issue and needed to be told of the merits of a proposal, for example. What was your strategy going into that, and then also, what was your exact role in this process?

GILLE: By then we were running the Whip operation. David was not just the Chief Deputy Whip, he was the Whip. So, we ran the whole Whip operation, and that was when we were in the majority, so he would have been the number three person in the leadership. When we got to the minority, he was the number two. I supervised a staff of people who worked on the floor, and including staff people who reached out to the regional whips at the staff level. The first thing you do is send out a question and describe the bill, and ask staff whether their bosses are going to support the bill. There is a certain kind of messaging, even that goes on in that. I always supervised everything related to communications, national policy, and the floor operations for David, so I would be involved in helping them craft that question that went out. Other staff people in our office would send it out. They would compile a

spreadsheet that tells where the votes are. I would keep track of where Members were. David or I would often have an instinct about who could talk to who, but some of this, especially on a big vote like that, when you've got the President on the phone in the cloakroom, a lot of the persuasion is happening at a higher level.

But messaging is always really important. And one of the things that I developed is that every time we took a big bill to the floor, we had a flyer that would be basically your "bumper-sticker message" about what this bill was about. It might be even on individual votes we would have that. So, people always had a very clear, simple, succinct phrasing of what we thought was the most powerful way to describe this bill, and I usually supervised that as well. And then there were two or three other people who worked on the floor operation.

MURPHY: Did you ever speak directly to Members about these upcoming votes?

GILLE: Congress is a pretty hierarchical place, people have their roles. It's very unusual for a staff person to actually try to lobby a Member about something. You might provide information; if they ask you questions, you would respond. More often I would try to intuit what their problem was and then I would tell my boss or some other Member . . . I might tell another Member of the task force. "Congressman so-and-so seems to be having problems with this aspect of the bill. It seems like they need this information, why don't you talk to them?" So, it's that linking piece I might do, but I wouldn't be engaged in a debate with a Member of Congress about whether they should vote for the bill.

MURPHY: So it was more strategic planning and then putting—those tasks were executed by Members?

GILLE: Yes. Making the connections.

MURPHY: So, did you work on the floor?

GILLE: Yes.

MURPHY: And what was your kind of day-to-day role on the floor?

GILLE: On the floor, I would always be down there when there was a vote. So, any time a vote was going on—a major vote—and I would stand at the back of the chamber and watch the computer screen that would help us see how the vote was breaking down, and who was voting which way. I could check the vote against our Whip list, and we could send a Member—there would be other Members who were with us on the bill standing at the back, too—I could send one of them over to talk to a Member who hadn't voted yet, or maybe voted in a way that we didn't expect. They would check, make sure that wasn't a mistake. We hoped it was just a mistake. {laughter}

I wrote a lot of speeches when we were in the Chief Deputy Whip Office, I was both the press secretary and speechwriter, and then eventually supervised speech writing and press work. So, I would definitely be monitoring the debate and what arguments were being used and how we could insert ourselves into the debate or summarize the argument effectively. Let's see . . . I would usually be there first thing when the Congress went into session, and when a vote is going on that's when you do a lot of whipping. I might be there—usually I would be at the side of my boss. Almost everywhere he went, I would be. That was usually my role, so that included meetings at the White House and meetings at the leadership offices and the floor.

MURPHY: So, you were planning beforehand, and you'd be there in an advisory capacity as the vote was in process or during the day-to-day workings on the floor? And were there many other women on the floor at the time?

GILLE: Well, it varied over the years. I think in the first years when I became executive floor assistant for the Chief Deputy Whip Office, there weren't that many. Maybe one other woman who worked for the leadership was there. And I think Muftiah [McCartin] was there as a Parliamentarian.[21] I'm not sure when she started. There were other women who worked in the Clerk's Office who would be sitting up there on the rostrum. There was a woman who worked in the cloakroom who supervised the Pages, but most of the staff were men. There were women who worked on committees when the bill came to the floor, probably not too many staff directors in those early days. But it changed pretty quickly. Around 1990, '92, things really did start to change, I think.

MURPHY: And in laying out that strategy for the Whip operation, did you feel like you were the primary mover in this strategy with Congressman Bonior because you had to set the strategy for other Members to put into practice? And as a woman, was that a new role for women to be taking on? Did you feel like you had a little extra pressure there, or were your ideas accepted without question among the other Members who were Deputy Whips?

GILLE: That's interesting. I do remember that when David won his Whip election in 1991, and I had done a lot to coordinate the strategy around his Whip campaign itself, I sensed that probably was not something that had been done primarily by a woman before. Sarah [Dufendach] was involved too, so David had two women on his team, but I did the floor work. I remember thinking "This is a big jump between the Chief Deputy Whip Office to the Whip because we've really got to run these task forces now, and when the bill

comes up to the floor, it's on us." And I'm remembering now that that did seem like a really big jump, and I wondered how I would do. Plus, you know, we had a huge staff to hire then, too. Our staff grew dramatically then, too. It was a big move.

MURPHY: Did you have to do the hiring for that?

GILLE: Yes. Sarah and I did the hiring together.

MURPHY: So, in that capacity . . . you talked about some of these hierarchical institutional traditions that prevented, kind of, staff Members from different offices [from] interacting with Members, but was there a level at which you interacted with other staff Members from other offices in the process of building the Whip operation, or any other facet of your work in the House?

GILLE: You know, an interesting thing that happened to me over the years is that when I started as an LA and was working in Central America, my job was really about building a network of staff people and connections to outside groups to advise the Congressman and build strategy around Central America work. But when I moved into the leadership, I was staffing him much more directly, one-on-one. Every day his schedule was my schedule, pretty much. And my contact with people on the outside, especially after the Central America work was over, got smaller and smaller, and my focus became more on the leadership meetings that he was in. It was higher- and higher-level meetings. So, there would be meetings at the White House or in the Speaker's Office or the [Democratic] Leader's Office, and less of a breadth of work with other staff people. That wouldn't be true for everybody in the office, because there were staff people who were more in charge of the details of the Whip operation who would be coordinating other staff people or working with committees more directly. But I delegated that. I tended to be

the internal advisor to our staff and to Congressman Bonior, to the Whip himself.

So, it became in some ways a more lonely place for me because a lot of my contacts faded. These groups had given me so much support and affirmation and inspiration over the years. I had less contact with them, and I was more focused on things that were about running the House of Representatives. Shaping the message of the whole political party. So, I feel like I had a narrower network. It's not that my work got technical; I was still dealing with kind of big picture on a range of issues, but at a higher level.

In, let's say, in the early '90s, when the first President [George H. W.] Bush was in office, we were making an issue of unemployment. In fact, there were so many unemployed people, we wanted to extend unemployment benefits, and the administration did not want to do it. So, we mounted a whole campaign in the House of Representatives to draw attention to the need for unemployment benefits, including David Bonior coming up with the idea for an all-night vigil on the unemployed, where Members of Congress talked all night through special orders. Then my boss went on the *Today Show* right from the floor to talk about this all-night vigil and the problem of the unemployed. So I would have been doing message strategy around all of those kinds of issues, but still very much primarily advising Congressman Bonior on what he should say, about where he should go strategically and less about coordinating other staff people outside our office.

MURPHY: One of the big issues that Congressman Bonior was involved in was NAFTA. It seemed a very interesting position to be in because of his problems with the trade agreement, and the party had Clinton supporting it, right? So, how did that affect your approach to the issue as Whip?

GILLE: Oh, that's interesting, yeah. Well, NAFTA came up right after we did this big budget vote. The first Clinton budget, when we had put this amazing operation together working with the President, was in the beginning of August. We went on the August recess, and during that August recess my boss announced that he was going to be opposing NAFTA. He was the first leadership person out there against it. And there were questions about how does the Whip of the party oppose his own President. And I think it was difficult for David because he's somebody who believes in loyalty. But he just was so committed, and he believed that this trade agreement was so bad for American workers and workers in the other countries as well. It was a race to the bottom. So the issue was so clear to us. Again, David has a good instinct of where he wants to draw the line and where he wants to make the fight. And so it became . . . we did whip it strongly. We had an organization that was working on it, but it was informal. It wasn't considered [an] official Whip operation. It was not considered a party position by any means, though the vast majority of the Democrats were opposed to NAFTA. I think we did a good job. It was a close vote down to the last week or so.

It's where you learn the difference between the power of the Whip and the power of the President. The President was able to make a lot of side deals with people to convince them to go with him, and we primarily had the power of persuasion and the power of people's constituencies and their own understanding of what would happen to jobs and the environment. But I think the fact that we fought that so well and so strongly really set the framework for the way, at least the Democratic Party, has seen trade agreements ever since. It's important that concerns about labor and environment . . . that we use our leverage to not be a race to the bottom, but to actually try to protect and empower workers just as we're empowering intellectual property.

David gave an amazing speech at the end of that debate. I wasn't the main author of it, but I worked on part of it. And I remember David coming to me and telling me how he wanted to do that speech. He says, "I want to make it sound like evoking *Field of Dreams*, like that movie. That sense of all these people are standing with us, kind of coming out of the shadows from all these other years." So, we wrote this speech with the feeling of "We're not here alone." People are standing with us, and he went through people all over the country who are dealing with problems and who "pack a lunch, punch a clock, and pour their heart and soul into every paycheck" was one of the lines. And then all the people from historic struggles—women who had fought for the right to vote, to people at the Selma Bridge, to farm workers who had fought for justice in this country. I know someone who still keeps that speech in his wallet today because he thought it was such a powerful speech. I thought David was going to give it like a rallying cry, and he gave it in the most solemn tone. He was almost in tears through it, and he had to stop several times. The House was packed—everybody was there—and it was just electric. Again, one of those moments of incredible drama.

MURPHY: It seems like that was kind of a transformative period for the party in those few years, and especially with the change in position in the House with the shift to the minority, I wonder how that affected your work in the mid-'90s.

GILLE: It's huge, the difference between the majority and the minority is huge. In some ways it was less so for us in the Whip operation. It's the committees—losing the majority on a committee, you lose almost all your staff. But we held most of our staff, and we then actually moved into the number two position, because Democrats no longer held the speakership, so there was the Minority Leader and the minority Whip, the Democratic Whip. David was immediately up and running on this. That's when we began to fight back

against both [Newton Leroy] Gingrich and what we saw as a very unethical network of outside groups and activities that he had. We raised a lot of ethics issues about Speaker Gingrich. And also, then on policy, fighting back against the "Contract with America," which tried to cut so many programs and things that we felt people really, really needed. But we no longer had the votes.

MURPHY: Just a couple of questions—kind of wrap it up—to think about your time in the House as a whole and some lessons we can learn. Did anything surprise you about your time in the House?

GILLE: I think the very first really big surprise I had when I came to work in Washington is how many inspiring people there were—people I really admired—and how much I learned from them. I often said I was sort of like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* in reverse. You know, the idea that you come to Washington and you expect to see all these cynical people, and I saw people who were so inspiring working on human rights, working on social justice. There was a phrase back in the days of the reformers in the 1970s in Congress that was "know how to make it operational." They took their ideals, and they knew how to put them into practice and make policy and make changes in this country. And I always saw it as . . . I'm not sure this is the way everyone saw it, but for me, my whole career, I've always been interested in the question of how do you make the link between the inside and the outside? And how do you create more power to do good by doing that linkage? And I saw that as my role, primarily—as linking with people back in our district and what was happening in their lives. How does that personal or local problem become a national issue? And how do we do something effective for them there? That's sort of the basic role of a Member of Congress in a lot of ways: to link both the local and the global, as that

phrase goes. Also with outside groups or big social problems or social issues—people who may care passionately and ideologically about an issue but not really know how to strategize about it.

That's what I learned in my days working on Central America, but over and over and over again, David Bonior was always leading the way on issues that had that feel to it. Whether it was from Vietnam veterans in his early days, issues about the environment, issues about NAFTA, labor, and on to when we fought for school lunches to raising the minimum wage—always building an outside-inside coalition and strategy. It was just such a privilege to feel that I was in a space where I'd seen the social movements of the '60s grow and begin to change the country, and then in a position of some power to help make those linkages, and to turn them into at least a strong force to fight for those values.

NOTES

[1] Dorothy Day (1897–1980) was a Catholic activist and a central figure in the Catholic Worker Movement, which promoted nonviolence and social justice and addressed issues such as poverty and wealth inequality. Made up of autonomous lay organizations that were not formally affiliated with the Catholic Church, the Catholic Worker Movement established local centers in urban areas to provide social services, and published a newspaper, *The Catholic Worker*.
[2] Viola Liuzzo was a 39-year-old mother of five and a student at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, when she traveled to Alabama to participate in the voting rights campaign. On March 25, 1965, she was murdered by members of the Ku Klux Klan while driving marchers between Montgomery and Selma, Alabama.
[3] The Stop ABM Campaign was part of a movement to protest the funding and development of an anti-ballistic missile (ABM) system, which was a major component of the Cold War arms race. Richard Austin was the first African-American candidate for mayor of Detroit in 1969. He was elected secretary of state in 1970, becoming the first African American to serve in a statewide elected office in Michigan, and held the post until 1994.
[4] David Bonior represented Michigan's 12th District from 1977 to 1993 and its 10th District from 1993 to 2003. He also served as Chief Deputy Whip (1987–1991), Majority Whip (1991–1995), and Minority Whip (1995–2002). He ran unsuccessfully for governor of Michigan in 2002.
[5] Ed Bruley worked in Congressman Bonior's district office from 1977 to 2002 and, later, on Bonior's gubernatorial campaign.
[6] The Office of the Historian interviewed Betsy Wright Hawkings for this women's oral history project in 2016.
[7] Cindy Buhl was a legislative consultant at the Central America Working Group, a human rights advocacy organization that was originally known as the Central America Lobby Group. It is now known as the Latin America Working Group.
[8] Edith B. "Edie" Wilkie directed the bipartisan Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus from 1978 to 1995. She promoted human rights and nuclear arms reduction around the world and strove to end U.S. funding for armed groups in Central American conflicts during the 1980s. She was chief of staff for Congressman Ogden Rogers Reid from 1968 to 1975 and for Congressman Fortney Hillman (Pete) Stark, Jr., from 1975 to 1978. Wilkie was married to Congressman William Donlon (Don) Edwards until her death in 2011.
[9] During the 1980s, the U.S. government sponsored the Contras, a military force fighting against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. The leftist Sandinista government was targeted by the Reagan administration as a threat to U.S. interests in the region during the Cold War.
[10] The government of Chilean President Salvador Allende was overthrown by a military coup on September 11, 1973, which ultimately brought General Augusto Pinochet to power. Allende committed suicide during the coup.
[11] Archbishop Óscar Romero was murdered on March 24, 1980, while celebrating Mass. He was an outspoken advocate of human rights and a critic of the repressive actions of the Salvadoran military.
[12] Three American nuns and a lay worker were abducted, raped, and murdered in El Salvador on December 2, 1980. Four members of the Salvadoran National Guard were sentenced to 30 years in prison for this crime in 1984. This event raised questions about U.S. government funding for El Salvador's military government, which was engaged in a civil war against leftist guerrillas.
[13] The Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front) came to power in Nicaragua in 1980.
[14] Óscar Arias won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987 for his efforts to promote peace in Central America. He was president of Costa Rica from 1986 to 1990 and from 2006 to 2010.
[15] The Maryknoll Sisters are a community of Catholic religious women that was founded in the United States. They are dedicated to serving the poor overseas.
[16] The Iran-Contra affair involved senior Reagan administration officials' clandestine sale of arms to Iran in an effort to win the release of American hostages in Lebanon and to raise funds to support the Contras in Nicaragua. The United States had placed Iran under an arms embargo, and supporting the Contras was prohibited by congressional action in 1982. The scandal emerged during President Reagan's second term.
[17] On November 16, 1989, six Jesuit priests who were well-known critics of human rights abuses by the military were murdered at the University of Central America in San Salvador, El Salvador, by the Salvadoran military. In response, the

House created the Moakley Commission, led by Congressman Joe Moakley, to investigate the murders and the U.S. government's funding for the Salvadoran military. The commission's findings prompted Congress to reduce military aid to El Salvador and to tie continued support to the initiation of peace talks.

[18] Colonel Orlando Montano of the Salvadoran army was living in the United States when he was convicted in a U.S. court on charges of immigration fraud and perjury. The Spanish government requested Montano's extradition to Spain so he could be tried for the 1989 murder of the Jesuit priests, five of whom were Spanish citizens. On February 5, 2016, a U.S. judge approved Montano's deportation.

[19] Mary McGrory, "Reagan's Last Hope: Ortega," 11 October 1987, *Washington Post*: H1.

[20] During the 100th Congress (1987–1989), Congressman Tony Coelho became the first elected Democratic Whip. Prior to the 100th Congress, Democratic Whips were appointed by party leadership.

[21] The Office of the Historian interviewed Muftiah McCartin for this women's oral history project in 2016.