

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Democratic Party of Trumbull County

Personal Experience

O.H. 872

WALTER J. DRAGELEVICH

Interviewed

by

Mark D. Dittmer

on

May 9, 1977

WALTER J. DRAGELEVICH

Mr. Walter J. Dragelevich, a native of Youngstown, Ohio, was born and geared towards the Democratic Party by his father, Walter Dragelevich Sr., and family background. Dragelevich graduated from Woodrow Wilson High School in 1969 and proceeded to the Ohio University with the ambitions of studying law. He graduated from Ohio University with a B.A. and headed to Syracuse University's College of Law to receive a degree, in 1966.

Dragelevich's interests were that of teaching, and in 1966, he accepted a position at the University of Puget Sound, to instruct International and Constitutional Law. After teaching for only a year, Dragelevich was offered a position in Warren, Ohio by a private firm, to practice law. Being allowed to break his contract with the University, Dragelevich came to Warren in 1967.

Dragelevich became familiar with the Prosecuting Attorney by proceeding to give P.A. David McClain his first setback ever in a criminal case. In 1968, Dragelevich was offered the position of Assistant Prosecuting Attorney under his new boss, David M. Griffith. Griffith later moved up to a Judges position, which led to an opening for Dragelevich to run and become Prosecuting Attorney in Trumbull County, and he is now serving in his second term.

Dragelevich resides in Youngstown, Ohio with his wife Martha and two children, Mary Beth and Robert David.

During the 1976 presidential campaign, Dragelevich became quite familiar with the Jimmy Carter family. He entertained Rosalynn Carter and her two sons, Jeff and Chip, during their stays in Mahoning and Trumbull County. Dragelevich was invited and met with President Carter and family this past winter. He received high recognition from the president for the help he gave for the campaign in this area.

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INTERVIEWEE: WALTER J. DRAGELEVICH  
INTERVIEWER: Mark D. Dittmer  
SUBJECT: Democratic Party of Trumbull County, Prosecuting Attorney, judicial system, Democratic Party at its peak and at its ebb  
DATE: May 9, 1977

MD: This is an interview with Mr. Walter Dragelevich for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the history of the Democratic Party of Trumbull County, by Mark Dittmer, in Warren, Ohio, on May 9, 1977, at 4:00 p.m.

Mr. Dragelevich, the first thing I'd like to ask you is to give a description of your family and political background, and relate what or who has motivated you to proceed in the field of politics.

WD: Nobody else in my family prior to myself has held political office. My family has always been interested in politics. I must say I happened to be standing on the right street corner at that right time, that's how I got into politics. I think many people are like that. As far as what motivated me toward the Democratic Party, I think it goes back to my family tradition. My family stock goes back to Europe and because of the working conditions and what have you, everybody in my family has always been geared toward the Democratic Party. So, I kind of was born into that type of relationship.

MD: Now, what schools did you go to?

WD: I graduated from Woodrow Wilson High School in Youngstown, in 1959. Then, I went to Ohio University. I graduated in 1963 with a Bachelor of Science Degree. Then, I spent the next three years . . . graduating in 1966 from the Syracuse University College of Law in Syracuse, New York. I came back. I took the Ohio Bar Examination, and I was ready to take the New York State Bar Examination. I thought I might want to end up practicing law there. I had no intentions of being a prosecutor or even getting involved in politics. And I received a very nice, lucrative job offer from the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington, to teach international law and constitutional law. I was interested in teaching, and I taught there for one year. Just as I was going back to my second year of teaching, I received a job offer from a law firm in Warren. I asked the president of the university if I could break my contract. He told me I could if he could get a replacement for me. And I was lucky, they found somebody to take my place. I came to Warren, practiced law for one year, met the prosecuting attorney, who's now Judge David McClain, and had a case against him. After the case was over--it was the first case that he ever lost. He had never lost a case, and I happened to win a case against him, a criminal case. I was appointed to defend a man charged with stabbing with intent to kill. I came over here and was First Assistant Prosecutor, and my boss then was Dave Griffith, who became the Prosecutor after Dave McClain. He became a Common Pleas Judge and the Democratic Party appointed me, since I was First Assistant, and then, I was elected. Now, I was reelected again.

MD: Since you're in the judicial system, is the judicial system in Trumbull County a fairly well run organization, and how is the crime rate going in Trumbull County?

WD: Well, the judicial system, like any system devised by man, has its good points and it has its bad points. I do a lot of public speaking on our judicial system and the role society plays in that system and the role that system plays within society. It works. It's not perfect. We make a lot of errors. And the question that I have in my own mind now regarding the judicial system, it's a system that was developed hundreds and hundreds of years ago. It was developed to control society when society was small without all the complex problems that we have now. Our judicial system developed when we were a rural area, both in America and in England. And like any machine, whether it be a washer or a dryer or a big piece of factory equipment or a car, any machinery is designed to handle a certain case load. It has certain limitations as to what it

can handle. And now we see that our judicial system has reached the area whereby some of the burdens placed upon it, that system cannot handle. And we see a breakdown. And the breakdown affects us all.

And when I talk about the judicial system, I'm not just talking about the courts. I'm talking about the police function, the prosecutor's function, the courts' function, and of course, our rehabilitative function, a penal institution. None of these functions are really working with the efficiency that they should. So, we're having problems, and I think we're going to have to redesign it.

You asked me about how it's working in Trumbull County. I think it's working reasonably well. However, we have problems. And our problems are the similar problems that the system in general is facing. Just to give you an example, we've tried, since I've been in office, to handle these problems as best we can. We used to have a grand jury in Trumbull County once every four months. When I became prosecutor, we changed it to three months, then, I changed it to once every two months, then to once every month. Now, I have a grand jury meeting every 12 days. So, you can see that the system, just in a short period of time, is having to change itself to meet our demands, today.

And as far as the rehabilitative function within the system, I don't think it works. I don't think we have rehabilitation, and I would be foolish to even claim that we do.

MD: Can you give an analysis of your main political philosophies and how you put them into practice?

WD: Well, I guess I'm kind of an easy guy, at least, in my mind, to put a label on. I've never believed in labels. I don't think they apply. But I'm kind of an old-time democrat with questions about democratic spending. So, let's say that I'm a liberal democrat in philosophy, however, I think I'm somewhat conservative when it comes to spending.

Many times the democrats favor social programs that I favor, but I think they sometimes go too far in thinking that money spent, alone, is going to cure the problems within our society, and I don't think that's true. I'm very happy to see that possibly Jimmy Carter believes somewhat the same way that I do.

MD: Turning back a while, could you examine the distinction between the Johnsonian era--this is President Johnson in the 1960s--and the Democratic Party today?

WD: Well, we have to put ourselves in Lyndon Johnson's footsteps if we can. I don't know that it's possible, but you have to remember that the country was in a turmoil. A lot of our young students were unhappy over an unpopular war, whereby society's eyes were geared toward social change. The Civil Rights Act was just in its infancy, if not passed. People were concerned with the discrimination that existed in the country. People were concerned with losing a young boy's life to fight in a war that we didn't know the philosophy behind that war. And as a result, I think, Johnson being the leader, made the Democrat Party look at programs that were going to benefit society, but they didn't look down the long run of what it was going to cost or what the effects were going to be. And I think that now we're feeling some of the pains that he started.

And I think the Democratic Party, under Carter today, has retrenched. Their hand--if I can use an example--under Johnson was stretched out. And I think Carter is bringing the fingers back and he's saying, "Let's analyze this a little more." We have other problems in addition to the society's problems. We have problems with our air, problems with pollution. We have problems with big government. And I think that Carter is going to continue, basically, along these lines. However, I think, before we jump in and spend a lot of money, we're going to reconsider how it's being spent, why it's being spent, and what the long term effect is going to be.

MD: Also turning back, do you think the youth movement of the late 1960s was a valid movement, and what do you think our country learned by it?

WD: Well, as any movement, I think every generation thinks that they've been called upon to bear the biggest burden and the biggest torch. We go back in history and we see that every generation carried some social burden that they made society aware of. So, just saying that the 1960s did it themselves or the 1960s were responsible for drastic change and students in that generation, I don't think that's true. I grew up in that era, and they made us more aware of individual and civil rights. I'm not saying that no other generation did it, but the other generations were content to make us aware of this by peaceful means. And finally, in the 1960s, under Martin Luther King, the Kennedy's, Lyndon Johnson, and even--I'm just not restricting this to democrats. But people said, "We're not just going to be content with passing laws. We want to go a little bit further, and we're going to flex our muscle and make you listen."

I don't know if I answered your question, but I do think that the young people in our society in the 1960s, they performed a function. I think the function was valid. Often times, they went overboard. When you burned buildings and when you harm other people, I think we all agree, that's going too far. But if nothing else, I think we learned a lesson, and we can see those lessons being incorporated into the thinkings of our senators and congressmen and leaders of today, because I think they're aware of what the students were saying.

MD: Changing to the Trumbull Party itself, what do you think the Trumbull County Democratic Party was at its peak of existence, and can you recall some of the individuals and events that made this high point possible?

WD: As you might know, 12 years ago, the Trumbull County Democratic Party was a minority party. The officeholders and the majority of registered voters in this county were not democrats. And the change took place within the last 12 years. So, I don't know if this is a proper analogy, but up until 12 years ago, the Trumbull County Democratic Party was not a smooth functioning, operative party. They took the back seat, and they didn't really offer any direction. They didn't give the voters the type of candidates that the voters wanted to elect. The democrats had a majority of the cases. So, up until 12 years ago, it was a party that existed, but I don't think it was a cohesive party.

The change occurred during the tenure of Dr. Timmins. He had been the chairman for that period of time. I'm not saying he's the sole one that's responsible or what have you, but the change did take place during his tenure as party chairman. And one thing that I see, the Democratic Party in this county has made sure that many of the candidates who run, are qualified. And I don't say this simply because I'm sitting here talking to you. I look at the people that run for office under the democratic label, and I'm not saying they're all good or all the best or can solve the problems we have, but one thing I can say is [that] I'm proud to run with these people. Their integrity is great, their abilities are great, they care, and they do a good job. And I think the voters have seen this.

And you have to remember one other thing, Trumbull County, up until 12 years ago, was kind of a rural county. Now we have the influx of new businesses and manufacturing plants like Packard Electric growing so much, the Lordstown Plant growing so much, the small manufacturing plants. The union 12 years ago was not a real strong force, and they've grown to be a force,



both from a sociological standpoint and from a political standpoint. When all these forces grow, it brings in the blue collar worker and the worker that works with his hands. And those people tend to be democrats.

Now, it was a question of organizing these people along a political philosophy. And as a result, we see that 67 percent or something along those lines, of all registered voters are Democrat, 17 percent are Republicans, and the rest are independents. So, you can see a party that has really developed within 12 years. I think it has developed because of a lot of hard work and the public seeing that the Democratic Party has been doing something. And I think we've done a good job.

As far as when the high peak is, I think it's right now. Looking at the Carter election, both the primary and the general election in 1976, I think personally, we've witnessed a teamwork effort, whereby all segments of the party have worked together and they have elected candidates that I think are good candidates. And this is probably the high point, right now.

MD: Having speculated on the high point, could you now speculate on its lowest ebb and the problems of the party?

WD: I think the lowest ebb occurred a dozen years ago when the chairman of the Democratic Party, along with several democrats, were indicted and convicted under a sewer scandal involving city officials in the city of Warren. And it seemed like this occurred during a democratic administration in the city of Warren. The democratic chairman of the party was convicted along with several democratic councilmen. And that was probably one of the lowest points within modern time. And this, of course, turned a lot of voters off. They wondered, "What's this party doing? They're looking out for their self-interest as opposed to the good of the electors." That's, without a doubt, one of the lowest points because up until that time, there weren't too many democrats elected.

MD: Are there any other problems that are created within the [Democratic] Party at the present time?

WD: Well, yes. Whenever you have a national or statewide election that comes up, I guess, everybody takes credit for it, and that's natural. Now, a party is made up of many, many different segments of our society. There's no one segment that stands out. Labor, of course, has always worked closely with the Democratic Party, particularly in Trumbull County. Labor, probably about 95 percent or thereabouts, they favor the democratic

philosophy, they favor the democratic candidates, and they work for the democratic candidates. Now, they may not work for them all. They may favor them, but may pick two or three or four people that they really push and the rest just come in on the coattail.

Of course, the minority community in our county, if you look at the precincts of vote, they've been democratic, but they may only favor two or three or four candidates that they like and the rest--not that they're against--they come in on the coattail.

Likewise, you look at different churches of an ethnic origin, people that come from my background, whether they be from Southern Europe, or whether they be Greek or things like this, they've always tended to be democrats, but that doesn't mean they support all democratic candidates.

In this election in 1976, it's the first time that myself and many people that have been around here longer than I have, have seen all these groups for some reason. Now, whether Carter did it or somebody else did it, I don't know who they rally behind. I have a suspicion. I don't know whether I'm correct, but they all got together around the democratic candidates and pushed them all as a block, supported them all, worked for them all, had rallies and parties, and with literature, by word of mouth with neighbors and passing things out door to door, or by advertising through the media. All these groups seemed, now, to get together and support the democratic team, when people that have been here for 50 years, they say, "We've never seen this before."

MD: Okay. Now, speaking on the internal structure of the party itself, what is the significance of the Precinct Committeemen, the Central Committee and the Executive Committee in Trumbull County?

WD: Well, our state law provides that every precinct has a right to elect a precinct committeeman. In Trumbull County, we have 286 precincts, voting places. Well, that's not really correct because maybe two or three precincts may vote in the same voting place, but [we have] 286 precincts. All the democrats within that precinct can elect precinct committeemen and all the Republicans can, too. They comprise the Central Committee. The Central Committeeman--each one has one vote--has the right at their biannual meeting to elect an Executive Committeeman. The function of the Executive Committee is twofold, to recommend candidates if recommendations are necessary for vote of the whole body--they can screen easier--and number two, they can be in a better position as a smaller group to take care

of and control the day to day activities of the party. The amount of the Executive Committee, number-wise, is not established by any law. It's established where between 30 and 50 people. So, that is the Executive Committee. You have to be a Central Committeeman to be on the Executive Committee. Then, the Executive Committee elects the officers of the party, your chairman, treasurer, secretary, people along those lines that, of course, are responsible for the nitty-gritty decision making. So, that's how the party functions.

MD: Are the major decisions made by the Executive Committee?

WD: I would say the major decisions are made by the officers.

MD: If a person wanted to run for an office in Trumbull County on the democratic ticket and he wasn't well liked on the Central Committee, what chances would he have of being nominated as a person by the party?

WD: We can even go one step back. I would have to say that there's no one group in Trumbull County that can guarantee an election or ensure the defeat of a candidate. Now, you asked me what the chances are of that person being elected. Well, there are two elections really being held. You have to win the primary in order to have your name on the general election. The primary, for the first time in ages, the Central Committee now endorses if they want to endorse. I don't know what that endorsement means. It doesn't hurt you, but I don't know how much it helps you. The person that's endorsed by the Central Committee doesn't necessarily have to get the endorsement of labor or doesn't necessarily get the endorsement of the minority groups, or get the endorsement of the so-called Democratic clubs, the Democratic Women's Clubs that exist throughout the county, the Jefferson Democratic Club, or the Democratic Men's Club. So, you can have a candidate that may be endorsed by all these clubs and labor and not receive the endorsement of the Central Committee. But you have to remember that the Central Committee does not speak as a body. They speak individually.

And those days of block control are pretty well gone, like one labor leader spoke for everybody. I think you have to sell the candidate. And of course, it takes a lot of people to sell them and it's easier if there are 20 people talking about your virtues than one. And it's good as far as letting the word out that you're a good, qualified, capable individual. But if you don't get the endorsement, I don't think you're dead by any means.

MD: At this present time, if you were ordained the head of the Democratic Party of Trumbull County, what type of platform would you run and what changes would you like to see come about?

WD: Well, interestingly enough, I thought about this, but I have no intentions of ever holding party office in my life and that's an unequivocal statement, [there's] no way I would ever hold party office. I refrain from holding party office now as Prosecuting Attorney because I don't think it's proper morally, because a prosecutor must represent democrats and republicans, and I don't think the two mix.

But if I were chairman, I think the one thing that I would want to do is to set up a more permanent organization. The organization springs up like a mushroom when an election is near. I think, in order to be viable, your organization should be a continuing thing with a headquarters and with functions so that people get a chance to discuss philosophy and to discuss who they like and make democrats more responsive to the everyday needs of other democrats or other people. So I think that, number one, I would make the organization more permanent and not only a viable organization at times of election. I think the next thing that I would do is have more input from the Central Committee or Ward Captains or Precinct Captains--to have some means by which they could express how their feelings are. And I think the next thing that I would do is somehow work a little more tightly with other democratic organizations, whether it be a women's club, a men's club, or labor, or what have you. I think the exchange of ideas is healthy.

MD: What future do you see for the Democratic Party in Trumbull County and also the National Democratic Party?

WD: Well, I think the future of the Democratic Party in both instances looks very bright. But like any position of public trust, you have to go out and re-earn that trust. It's just not given to you on a platter. When Roosevelt was in office and all of a sudden certain philosophers said, "Well, we won't ever see another Republican president," or, "We don't see the republicans doing this or that because we're so strong," the wind changes and tomorrow it may be a different situation completely. And as long as the Democratic Party, I think, continues to show that trust. . . . The democrats could have been in a different position this year, because Nixon abused that trust, and the Republican Party was building. They could have done a lot of good things for this country in the minds of a lot of

people, but now the people have said, "We've given you the opportunity, you've dropped the ball. Now we're going to try somebody else."

I think the democrats, now, have the ability. They have a philosophy that I think the majority of Americans believe in, and more importantly, I think they have the leadership to carry out that philosophy in a dignified and proper manner. And I think as long as they keep the public goals in mind, the Democratic Party is going to be here to stay for a long time.

MD: Changing the subject now to Plains, Georgia, how did you get about to meet Mr. Carter? What type of administration do you think he's going to run?

WD: I actually met Mrs. Carter before I met the president. I have friends of mine that I've met throughout the years that became very active in the Carter campaign. This is way back before people knew, "Who's Jimmy Carter?" This is when he was a candidate, a governor, a long show running. They talked to me about him and I was interested in what I heard, but I never met the guy, and all I knew was what they told me and what I read. And finally, one day before the Ohio primary, Jimmy Carter was still a dark horse running in back of the snows of New Hampshire, including me. I'll put myself in that category. A friend called me up and said, "Mrs. Carter is going to be in town and if you'd be kind enough to invite her to your house and throw a party for her and things along these lines, we would be very deeply appreciative." I talked it over with my wife and we invited Mrs. Carter, and she stayed at our house overnight. I had an opportunity to look eyeball to eyeball with the lady, and what she said, the philosophy she expounded, and the way she talked, I liked. Her ideas on what they thought America should be, I liked. I liked the fact that they weren't tied down to any political group or organization. They didn't owe anybody any political favors. I liked what I heard about his abilities in the state of Georgia. I liked what he said about America. There isn't a person alive that doesn't dream. And let's say that his dreams were somewhat dreams that I thought were good.

And because of that, we became very friendly with Mrs. Carter and her press secretary. Then, when her husband came into town, I was invited to meet him, and we talked, not long, but we talked. I liked what I heard. I was impressed with the fact that he would write me a personal letter, and she would write me a personal letter in their own handwriting, thanking me. This is a big country, and how do they have the time to do this? But they found the time. And then, when their son Chip came into town, they asked me if I would be

his host at a party. So, I got to know Chip. I spent a day and a half with him. And then, when the older son, Jack, came into town, they asked me if I would be Jack's host. I was more than delighted to do it and had an opportunity to see him. When I was recently in Washington, they invited me to be their guest at the White House. It's just that this family, I think they're not phony-bologna; they're not saying something to be elected. I think what they're telling us, they mean. Right or wrong, what they're saying, they mean. That comes from the heart. Their visions of America, I think, are very helpful, and I think we're going to see them try to do something about it. Now, I have always questioned whether one man can change that red tape, bureaucratic structure. I don't know if it's possible, but I know one thing: Jimmy Carter is going to try.

MD: What type of administration do you think Carter's trying to run, and what do you think he's going to do over the next four years, or try to do?

WD: Well, it just so happens that many of the people that surround Carter, I know personally. Some of them I know on a first name basis. I met them through the campaign. I spent a great deal of time with some of his top aides, and I was impressed with them when they were nothing but campaign workers and car drivers and press secretaries that go for this and go for that. I never questioned their sincerity then, and I have little doubt to question it now. I think that what exactly they're saying, they mean. They're looking out for America. They're not looking out for labor, they're looking out for the young people; they're not looking out for business or small business. They're looking out for everybody. And the majority of us Americans, the overwhelming majority, are average people that do not have a golden spoon in their mouth. We have to work for a living. We have to worry about how our parents are going to be taken care of when they retire. We have to worry about how the hospital bill is going to be paid. I think Jimmy Carter is geared toward people like that, because a wealthy person doesn't have to worry about that security. Jimmy Carter is worrying about jobs, he's worrying about equal rights and when he tells you he's concerned with it, I know that Jimmy Carter is concerned with that, and he's trying to do something about it.

You can have an open administration, an administration that's not going to be entirely free of outside influence. There's no administration that's going to be free as we've seen in our lifetime, at least. I think we're going to see some innovative programs, because he's not afraid to experiment and try. The only drawback that I see is that maybe we may get into some

programs without putting our toe in the water first. This is the only drawback. But as far as courage to try new things, this administration has it.

MD: What type of international relationship do you think Carter is trying to establish, or international politics?

WD: He recently criticized the various countries on their lack of given human rights to their citizens. And you can see that when he ran as a candidate for president, he talked about the same thing when it comes to Americans. So, all he is asking is that countries give the same treatment that we Americans have been accustomed to. I don't know how far we can go in international affairs and tell the Russians what to do or somebody in Bolivia or Saudi Arabia. Their philosophy and their government has existed longer than ours in many countries, particularly in the Arab countries. Women can't vote there, and if you want to have four wives, you can have four wives. It's something that they expect, and I don't know how far an American president can ask another country to change their cultural beliefs--this is what they are--overnight. But I think we can ask them to change their political beliefs. In that, Indira Gandhi puts 27,000 of her opponents in jail. I think it's proper to question why they're doing that. It's not tied to a cultural basis, a religious basis, or an historical basis. I think, if there's one thing that's true, the president speaking out against those countries is like dropping a grain of sand in the desert. Our affect is going to have a minor effect. But when we talk about political reasons, I think he's correct in questioning these countries. I think it's going to be beneficial, because these countries have never been criticized, and how they're shocked. Why is America doing this? Well, we have to speak what we believe.

We see Andy Young, Ambassador to the U.N., he's probably speaking too much. But he's only voicing, I think, an open policy that this administration has demonstrated to all of its chief lieutenants, cabinet officials and aides. Speak your mind. And as we know, sometimes we put our foot in our mouth, and this is going to happen.

MD: Also speaking on international policies, Carter seemed more to do things by himself than using a Secretary of State like Nixon used Kissinger or Ford used Kissinger, and why won't he use Mondale as much as he has?

WD: I think he's going to use Mondale more and more, and he's probably using Walter Mondale more than any other person in this administration. Walter Mondale is a

terribly talented guy. He's very brilliant and his abilities are not limited to any one area. And I think he's relied upon Mondale more than any other official in this administration. It's strange, because he has really only known Mondale since the convention in July, in New York City. So you see, not only have they become good friends, they became reliable friends and now that friendship is so close, he's really leaning on him a lot. He's going to use Mondale more, but Jimmy Carter has always been a Lone Ranger. And I think as any good president, he calls his people together, they give him ideas, but as his sign on his desk says, "That buck stops here. I'll make the decisions."

MD: Okay, thank you.

WD: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW