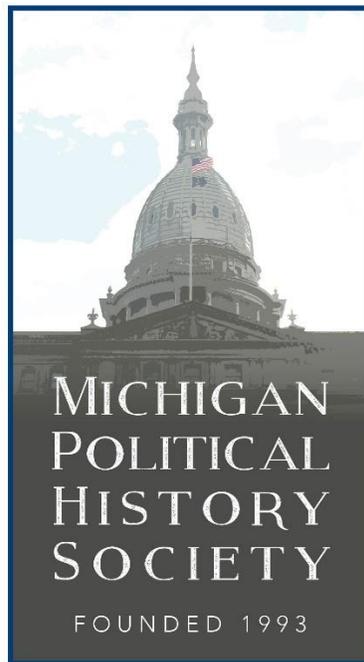


Elly Peterson

Interviewed by
Bill Ballenger
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Bill Ballenger: Hi, I'm Bill Ballenger, editor and publisher of the newsletter Inside Michigan Politics and a member of the Michigan Political History Society, and I'm seated here with a living legend, the first female chairman, and that's what they were called in those days, chairman of a major political party in the history of the United States, Elly Peterson. Elly, nice to have you with us today.

Elly Petersen: Nice to be with you, Bill.

Bill Ballenger: Let me just start out by asking you, what in your early years in Illinois and in the Red Cross in the military during World War II and maybe later on in Eaton County when you moved to Michigan, helped shape your interest in politics or got you motivated to work in politics? Was there a particular candidate at some point in your life that you got excited about?

Elly Petersen: Well, actually, serving in the Red Cross overseas and my husband being in the military really would have turned me off politics if anything because they never took any part in politics, but when we moved to Oak Park, Illinois, everybody that was our friend was in a republican club. It was more social. We didn't know anything about the issues, and they wouldn't have let us take any part in it, but I remember the most gruesome day of my life I think in politics was when they gave us sunflowers to pass out for Alf Landon and we walked down Michigan Avenue in the pouring rain, and the yellow paint going down your arm, and following along in his limousine was Colonel McCormick encouraging us along.

Bill Ballenger: So this was 1936?

Elly Petersen: Yes, that was when we first did that.

Bill Ballenger: Later, didn't you do something for Wendell Willkie?

Elly Petersen: Well, I worked as a volunteer passing out literature, but in those days young people and women especially were not expected to do anything that was worthwhile and didn't.

Bill Ballenger: So after you got through the 1940 campaign and then your husband Pete went off to war and then you joined the Red Cross, and then you came back to this country, I think you came to Kalamazoo at that point? Isn't that correct?

Elly Petersen: Yes, and we were in Kalamazoo when we both went away in the service. We came back to Charlotte. That's when he was transferred here.

Bill Ballenger: Well at that point, is that where you got active in politics in Michigan, like maybe the Eisenhower campaign in 1952?

Elly Petersen: Well, I got active because I have a friend, Gertrude Powers, and one day I'd been on a trip to the Caribbean. It was April, and I came back and she said that this man that she knew, Larry Lindemer had been elected state chairman and she said, "He needs you over in that office." I said, "I don't want to drive to Lansing." "No," she said, "You've got to go and talk to him."

Bill Ballenger: This was like early 1957 I think.

Elly Petersen: Right after he got elected, but it was couple months after he got elected, so I went over and Larry was-

Bill Ballenger: Floundering around.

Elly Petersen: Well, he wasn't exactly floundering, but he didn't have any help, and it sort of appealed to me even though the place was a terrible mess.

Bill Ballenger: Wasn't this the old Lincoln House on North Capital?

Elly Petersen: That's right, old red brick house.

Bill Ballenger: Red brick Victorian, like the houses that are used by Lansing Community College now. Apparently it was a mess, right?

Elly Petersen: It was so dirty, and there were piles of paper everywhere, and of course Larry was having trouble sorting it all and the only person there who knew where anything was Arnie Lemon, who was a public relations director. His desk was always two feet high but he could reach right in the middle of it and pull out what he wanted, but that was the way it was.

Bill Ballenger: So Larry Lindemer, who was an attorney in private practice and chairman, did he become a full-time chairman of the party or was he kind of putting in part-time and then you came in as his assistant and secretary to begin with and then from then on, kind of built up into other roles, were kind of running the office? Is that what happened?

Elly Petersen: Well, I came in just really as a secretary and do anything that came up kind of person.

Bill Ballenger: You could take shorthand, couldn't you?

Elly Petersen: Yes. I had been a secretary, and so I did all that but Larry would have I think been happy to work full-time, but the party didn't really have the money, so he did do some legal work on the side, and then as we began to pay our debts and build up a little money, well then we could hire some other people to help.

Bill Ballenger: Right. Well, now Larry Lindemer told me just this past weekend, he said, "You know, it wasn't a case of Elly Peterson growing on the job from secretary on

up." He said, "It was a question of the enormous strengths organizationally and otherwise that she brought to the job." He said, "If I, Larry Lindemer, deserve any credit, it's for recognizing what she brought and just standing out of the way and letting her do her thing." Is that true?

Elly Petersen: Well, he's being very modest. In those days, people organized every precinct, and I found that more fascinating than anything I'd ever done in my life, and he gave me the responsibility and let me go out and talk to people.

Bill Ballenger: How did you organize precincts in those days? What did you tell people?

Elly Petersen: All right. You'd come out here for example to the city of Charlotte, and you'd first have a Charlotte meeting, and there were a couple precincts and then you'd have a precinct meeting. We had cards that been drawn up nationally that told about every voter, and some people were wonderful precinct people. Some were terrible, but the best precinct people that I developed was an 80 year old woman here in Charlotte who knew every voter in her precinct, how they vote and if they voted, and Denny Dutko from Macomb County who was 16 and later became a democratic legislator.

Bill Ballenger: Right, exactly. He was a great republican precinct.

Elly Petersen: Oh, he was one of the best precinct chairman.

Bill Ballenger: That was here in Charlotte?

Elly Petersen: No, no, not here in Charlotte, in Macomb County.

Bill Ballenger: Oh, in Macomb County. Okay.

Elly Petersen: But those were two. I'll never forget them.

Bill Ballenger: Well, that's fascinating. Well, did you feel in other words that there were things that you were able to do organizationally then in terms of organizing precincts that you couldn't do today, or is it a question of people just not having the elbow grease or the whatever, the energy, to get out and organize today the way they did then, or do you think it's just such a different game with the media, with TV, radio, and the way campaigns work today, that the way you organized then is just kind of an anachronism today?

Elly Petersen: Well, it is. In the first place, people began to be afraid to go door-to-door, which we did. In the second place, they didn't want to do the telephoning, where we were constantly at that. And then, as television developed, everything became money. We had no money, Bill. We operated on a shoestring. I can remember once when we didn't have \$12 to pay the electric bill, and it took Larry quite a while to build up the financial end of it, but it's a totally different business now that people depend on television and radio rather than on person-to-person

contact. I can remember in the Nixon campaign, there was a headquarters in every county in the state, and that's 83 counties.

Bill Ballenger: Now, let me ask you this. In 1961, Larry Lindemer stepped down as chairman. George Van Pearson, who had been the house republican leader, speaker of the house, came in as the chairman of the party and you I believe were elected the vice-chairman.

Elly Petersen: Vice-chairman, yes.

Bill Ballenger: And so you served two years in that capacity, right?

Elly Petersen: I came and was elected in '61, and then I left in October of '63 when Clare Shank called from the National Committee in Washington and asked if I would come to be the assistant chairman of the Republican National Committee, which was quite a big deal for me.

Bill Ballenger: Right. And during those two and a half years, you worked for George Van Pearson, or with him, I should say. You basically were the ones who would kind of administer the party organization, right. He did more of the speaking.

Elly Petersen: Yeah. George Van Pearson was the voice of the party and he was a brilliant speaker, and he knew everything about issues so that he was perfect in that regard. But it would not have been his interest to go out and talk to six people about organizing a precinct, whereas if I got six people together, I thought it was a great night. So, that's what I did, and then we were able to hire a few more people as we got a little money, and so we had others go out.

Bill Ballenger: So you really built up such a reputation as an organizer that the national people took note of you, asked you to come down and be the assistant chairman of the National Committee in late '63, and you apparently did that for what, just about less than a year, because you came back to run for the republican nomination in the US Senate?

Elly Petersen: I just did it until the National Convention, which I believe that year was in July.

Bill Ballenger: Well now, you had to in other words be down in Washington and you had to be helping organize the republican party nationally at the same time, you were trying to run a campaign for the republican nomination for the US Senate in Michigan against Phil Hart, the incumbent democrat?

Elly Petersen: No. Well, I wasn't running then. I was running in the primary.

Bill Ballenger: Well, I know. I mean, to get the nomination in order to run again, so how could you do that? How could you be in two places at once?

Elly Petersen: Well, in the first place, we were looking for 100 people to help us. Gert and Nell Taylor, who lived in Grand Ledge and Joyce Braithwaite and others got together and we ended up with 2000 names.

Bill Ballenger: 2000 organizers statewide?

Elly Petersen: Yes, who had worked with me and were ready to support me, and so we told them about it and they went to work. I would come back on the weekends or pass through here on my way someplace else.

Bill Ballenger: So in other words, you were running against two men, Jim O'Neill, who I think was an elected member of the State Board of Education at that point, and Ed Meade, who was an attorney I think from Grand Haven on the west side of the state, and they were here hammering away full speed and you're down there in Washington during the week with your 2000 volunteers holding the fort, and you come back here on weekends and you actually were able to get through that primary, beat both those men and win the nomination?

Elly Petersen: That's right.

Bill Ballenger: That's incredible.

Elly Petersen: But it wasn't incredible, Bill. It proved the ability of women in politics because those women would raise little tiny sums of money. That's all we had. I think I spent \$23,000 on the primary.

Bill Ballenger: Wow. Well, you were the first, undoubtedly you were definitely the first female nominee of either major party for a US Senate seat in Michigan.

Elly Petersen: Right.

Bill Ballenger: No question about that, but then you found yourself up against Phil Hart in a terrible year for republicans. That was the year of LBJ's landslide win over Barry Goldwater and republicans of course took a terrible bath in every state. You were up against an incumbent democratic senator who had been in one term. What did you feel like between August and November? I mean, could you see how difficult it was, and what was your reaction to Phil Hart as a political figure?

Elly Petersen: Well, first, I don't think there was any intention that I would beat Phil Hart. He was a fine senator and a fine man. What my position was to try to hold the party together because you remember, George Romney and Barry Goldwater were not getting along, and the Goldwater people were furious, so we had that. Then, we had the Romney people who weren't gonna have anything to do with Goldwater, and so my principle job was to hold the party together.

Elly Petersen: Now, the funny part of it is, I've had women say to me, "But oh, I thought you'd win it." Well, I never thought I'd win it, and I shouldn't because Phil Hart was a

brilliant man, but that was the principle job and that's what I could do. So, I campaigned around the clock and these women, they did everything and they-

Bill Ballenger: Did you have any debates with Phil Hart? Did you ever have a debate?

Elly Petersen: No, no, no. He hardly campaigned. We used to laugh about that after the election. John Lowell traveled with me and it was so terrible for John Lowell because he had to get up and we went from about 6 in the morning 'til 10 at night, and the guy covering Phil Hart didn't have to go out at all, but we had a lot of fun.

Bill Ballenger: Well, okay. So, the election is over in November of 1964. George Romney wins reelection despite the Goldwater landslide. You lose. Michigan, you lost a lot of congressmen. You lost a lot of legislators, and what happened to you? You went off on a vacation to Florida?

Elly Petersen: I went to the Virgin Islands.

Bill Ballenger: Virgin Islands, and you figured, what, your life in politics was over?

Elly Petersen: I thought it was through. I didn't want to go back to working in the organization because I think I have always felt that these aren't lifetime jobs, and so I was glad to turn that over to somebody else, so I just went on vacation.

Bill Ballenger: So then what?

Elly Petersen: Well, in January I had come back and Joyce Braithwaite said to me, "Let's go in to the"

Bill Ballenger: She was your good friend from Charlotte.

Elly Petersen: Yes.

Bill Ballenger: She worked for the state accident fund. She never actually technically worked for you before. She later became your secretary when you were state chairman, right?

Elly Petersen: When I became state chairman, yes.

Bill Ballenger: And she, what, called you up and said what?

Elly Petersen: "Let's go over to the state central meeting." So, we got a room at the Jack Tar Hotel.

Bill Ballenger: Right across from the Capitol, what is now the Olds Plaza.

Elly Petersen: And then everybody went to the Jack Tar in those days, so we went in. We just had lots of fun seeing people. I always go to bed early, so about 11:00, I folded up and Joyce was running around. She could barely get through the door. She said, "You're never going to believe this. They're talking about you for state chairman." I said, "Don't be silly." I just turned over and went to sleep. I thought that was the dumbest thing, but she was out all night I think.

Bill Ballenger: She was probably drumming up support, huh?

Elly Petersen: Well, she'd heard it from a couple legislators I guess. One of them was Emil Lockwood, I remember, but I don't remember all of them.

Bill Ballenger: He was a republican leader, Emil Lockwood.

Elly Petersen: Well, they wanted Art Elliott to get out.

Bill Ballenger: They are trying to recruit you, and they wanted to get Art Elliott, the incumbent chairman out, and so then what happened? You're sleeping and Joyce is running around? Then what?

Elly Petersen: Well, then apparently somebody finally called Romney and he came down to his office and I believe he had Millikan come down to his office, and they begin to calling congressmen. Here are all these county chairmen who had told Romney that Art Elliott had done everything he could, which I firmly believed he did in 1964. All were saying, no, they didn't want him as chairman.

Bill Ballenger: They wouldn't say it to his face.

Elly Petersen: They wouldn't say it to his face, no. And so, Art I'm sure felt fairly secure because I thought he had done a great job. So then about 8:00 in the morning, the phone rang, and it was George Romney. At that time, Pete always said if George Romney said, "Jump," I'd say, "How far?" I was scared to death of him. So, he said he wanted me to come over to his office. Joyce said, "I knew it, I knew it."

Bill Ballenger: She felt vindicated, huh?

Elly Petersen: Yes. So I went over to his office and he told me about how he and Millikan had done that and I said, "I can't be state chairman. They don't have women state chairmen." He told me he thought I knew more people than anybody in the party, and I'd been in every county, and he thought I could do it.

Elly Petersen: Well, I thought, "Well, I'd better go home and talk to Pete about this." So, Joyce and I went home and on the way to Charlotte, Joyce said, "Oh, isn't this exciting?" I said, "Joyce, two years from now we may be Art Elliott."

Bill Ballenger: Exactly. Well, so what, Pete gave you his blessing? He didn't have any choice, huh?

Elly Petersen: I think he just shook his head.

Bill Ballenger: Shook his head. Well, what about Art Elliott? I mean, did you ever talk to Art?

Elly Petersen: We talked to him and Art said if they didn't want him as chairman,

Bill Ballenger: But he wasn't bitter against you?

Elly Petersen: He wasn't bitter. No, we remained very good friends.

Bill Ballenger: Well, let me ask you this. Beyond you're saying, "They'll never elect a woman as state chairman," was there any doubt in your mind really that you could do the job?

Elly Petersen: No.

Bill Ballenger: I mean, you knew you could do the job.

Elly Petersen: The part that bothered me, Bill, was raising the money, because I always thought most of the chairman in those days could write checks for \$1000 and that's hard to do in those days for us. So I did worry about the money, but when I met with the money people and the leaders, they all said, "You don't have to worry about money. We'll raise it." Well, that's the laugh of the century, too. I mean, don't believe everything you're told.

Bill Ballenger: Right, exactly.

Elly Petersen: But anyway, I thought I'd make a run for it, so I resigned at the State Central and hit the roads. I traveled almost to all the counties and certainly all the districts.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Elly Petersen: I worked up a program because that's what I believed in, volunteerism and organization, and so I would go and present that.

Bill Ballenger: Well now of course in '66, after you'd been chairman for about a year and a half, a year and nine months, arguably your greatest achievement, probably one of the greatest achievements for any party official in the republican party since World War II when the republican party made such a comeback in 1966. Was that your highlight, you think, of your term as chairman in those four years?

Elly Petersen: I would think so, but see, I couldn't take that credit alone because Bill McLaughlin was my vice chairman, and he was a superb organizer and speaker. And even with little children, he worked night and day, and we had a wonderful

staff, Joyce and Jerry Rowe and Jenny Kennedy. They all worked hard, and of course the strength of George Romney and Bill Millikan. I mean, people liked them. They liked Bob Griffin. Three honorable men. I think that's one of the high points of my career is that I was fortunate to work for three men, honorable, decent, good citizens.

Bill Ballenger: Right. Did you work closely with the Romney and Milliken in the Griffin campaigns? For that matter, Bob Griffin that year was running against Soapy Williams for US Senate. In terms of devising the strategy for the party, you may remember they ran a Romney action team campaign. You had bumper stickers with Romney-Griffin and Romney-Milliken and everything was tied together, all the top to bottom governor right on down to county board of supervisors almost. Was that something that you felt that you kind of honed to perfection in that particular year, or was that something you'd basically done as far as you could do it or as well as you could do it all the way along during the '50s and '60s when you worked for the party in other capacities?

Elly Petersen: Well, I think for one thing, people had been so turned off by the bitterness that was engendered during the 1964 campaign that people were delighted to see everybody pulling together, the whole team working together. That was I think due to the strength of those three men and the fact that they were so honorable. And so, that I think was good, but we just had a smooth-running organization.

Bill Ballenger: What was your biggest disappointment if you had to put your finger on one let's say during your tenure in those four years, 1965 to '69 as a chairman of the party? Did you have a big disappointment? Was there something that you didn't accomplish that you wanted to accomplish in your organization in terms of somebody getting elected or not elected?

Elly Petersen: Well, one of the strongest programs that I had was called Action Now, and I was trying to sell republican workers on the idea that their volunteerism was tied in with being a republican and that all that should work together. And so, we devised volunteer programs that were run by the republican party. I had a good troupe of women working on that and quite a few men, and I was so proud of that because we got acres of publicity, like in the riot in Detroit in 1967. We sent the food down and we never got any credit for it, but we sent the food by the truckload down to Detroit because our people were organized and wanted to help. One little lady came into the armory in Lansing and brought a plate of brownies to go down. I think the sailors who were packing the boxes took them. But we did lots of things like that in that era that didn't show up at the time, and really, were building for the future. I guess my biggest disappointment in political life was that there were very few people could see the future of that.

Bill Ballenger: They didn't keep it going after you left.

Elly Peterson: They didn't keep it going.

Bill Ballenger: It kind of died on the vine.

Elly Peterson: Romney tried to do something in Washington, but the average male chairman thought, you know. I worked with some fine state chairmen. Bob Ray became governor of Iowa, you know, and all.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Elly Peterson: And they did use the program a little.

Bill Ballenger: Don't you think it was peculiarly a woman's type of program? I mean, kind of a hands-on, people oriented person to person cooperative program that maybe only a woman chairperson could have really foreseen and really worked on and organized to the extent that it could be done well. Men weren't so likely to be that interested.

Elly Peterson: Well, the men here in Michigan, the young Republican men were wonderfully supportive. They taught the young students in the ghettos and that kind of thing. But I presume it was more women probably were involved than men. But some of the men took to the program very well and it gave us something to do in an off-election year, Bill.

Elly Peterson: Parties, organizations, didn't have anything to do in an off-election year except have a speaker come. These people were working, we had over 550 volunteer programs throughout the state.

Bill Ballenger: Let me ask you this, particularly when you started Action Now and what you did with it, what was your view of the Democratic Party? Your adversaries all during this period, from '57 right up until 1970, '72? Did you see the Michigan Democratic Party as evolving or changing during that time, were they pretty much the same? How did you look upon the Democrats?

Elly Peterson: When I first started, they were totally oriented to labor. Labor ran the party and called the shots, and raised the money and all that. And in those days, they could turn down an assembly line and they had Coke and they educated their people. And I was somewhat envious of their educational programs because they were excellent.

Elly Peterson: But as time passed, those people moved away from the Democratic Party and labor just didn't have the strength it had.

Bill Ballenger: So you felt there was a weakening of labor's influence during the time you actually worked for the Republican Party?

Elly Peterson: Yes.

Bill Ballenger: That's interesting because a lot of people contend today that organized labor's still too powerful.

Elly Peterson: Well all they have to take a look at is what they're able to do. They haven't won any elections around Michigan for a while, they can't turn out the vote like they did.

Bill Ballenger: That's true, that's true.

Elly Peterson: And it may just be my opinion, but my opinion is, if they don't have, I think don't think they have the people and I don't think they have the strength but I think they still have a lot of power.

Bill Ballenger: So in other words, they may be powerful enough to get somebody nominated in a primary, but after that they have a heck of a tough time in a general election trying to win Republicans and Independents compared to what they were able to do back in the '50s and '60s.

Elly Peterson: We didn't find during my tenure, that there was much democratic organization, right here in Eaton County there wasn't. And yet, there were a lot of Democrats. But they never seemed to bring them together. They just sort of depended on the labor unions to turn out the vote.

Bill Ballenger: How did you get along with legislative leaders when you were state chairman? In other words, people like Emil Lockwood who was the Senate Republican Majority Leader, Bob Waldron who was Speaker of the House?

Elly Peterson: We tried to build a bridge between the party and the legislature, which I don't think other people had done. We'd have them to breakfast meetings and we put on programs where if someone wasn't sure of themselves in their speaking ability, we'd try to teach them how to give a good speech, I guess.

Bill Ballenger: You mean you tried to actually help legislators make better speeches, huh?

Elly Peterson: And Harold McClure was one of our finance men and he wanted it fixed so the legislator didn't have to worry about collecting his own money, he'd get it from the party. And so they tried that. That didn't work forever, I don't think. That was short lived. But we did actually try to build a bridge with them. And at that time, we got along very nicely.

Bill Ballenger: Now, wasn't Emil Lockwood the chairman of the Richard Nixon campaign for president in '68 in Michigan?

Elly Peterson: Yes. Yes, when I was chairman.

Bill Ballenger: When you were the state chairman. But, you had to work pretty closely together then, right?

Elly Peterson: Yes, in fact, we went to California to the first meeting that John Mitchell had. He just was so happy to have a woman come to that meeting.

Bill Ballenger: Oh, he was?

Elly Peterson: No.

Bill Ballenger: Not two, huh?

Elly Peterson: He was the biggest chauvinist I have ever encountered.

Bill Ballenger: Is that right? Well, no wonder Martha had problems, huh?

Elly Peterson: Yeah, right.

Bill Ballenger: You were pretty sympathetic with her I imagine, later on when she started, you know, unburdening herself.

Elly Peterson: He really, he just did not believe women had any part. But I knew my state and I knew my people. And that's one thing. And that was why I had such a good working relationship with other state chairmen.

Elly Peterson: The first meeting I went to, Ray Bliss was the national chairman and, see, he would never let a woman in the meeting. If a woman came with a proxy from the state chairman, he wouldn't let them have the proxy. But he couldn't turn me down because I was the state chairman. So I got in there, and every time he was would swear, he would say, "Excuse me." And finally I said, "Ray, let's, you know, knock it off. My husband's in the army. I know probably more words than you know." And he became at ease and we had a good, wonderful working relationship. I respected and admired him. And he, of course, was the builder of the big city. He felt we shouldn't write big cities off and I felt that way too. Then we got along just fine from then on.

Bill Ballenger: You had to break down the resistance a little bit at the outset.

Elly Peterson: Oh, you had to do that every place. The first finance meeting I went to, in Max Fisher's office, he told me they were going down to some private men's club and I could down and have lunch in the basement with his secretary.

Bill Ballenger: And Max Fisher was your main finance chairman, yeah.

Elly Peterson: Yeah, I was the one that was going to spend the money and direct the organization and so it wasn't easy being a woman in politics in those days.

Bill Ballenger: But I got a feeling it didn't deter you too much, right?

Elly Peterson: No, you just sort of took it. I mean, you knew if you were going to do it, you had to accept all that. And I had, you know, Romney, Milliken and Griffin, they weren't that way at all.

Bill Ballenger: Right. And so they gave you a lot of support that way.

Elly Peterson: They did. They did.

Bill Ballenger: But you didn't have any trouble really confronting somebody like Ray Bliss or John Mitchell in a sense, if you saw they were hostile or uncomfortable. The woman saying the things to them that you just described saying and just getting them to turn around on a dime basically and say, "Gee, I'd better just shake off my old biases here.

Elly Peterson: We had an arm's length. The Nixon white house did not approve of women either. They had very few women working there. Rosemary Wood was Nixon's secretary, but Haldeman and Erlichman didn't approve of women either. And I remember once when I wanted to make some recommendations about appointments and nobody knew anything about appointments. But we had been sort of involved here, so I called up and one of the men said, well, I wasn't his dish of tea. So I just called back his secretary and I said, "I'd just like him to know that I don't plan to sleep with him I just want to give him a couple of names of women who would be a good appointment." Well, I never did care for that man. They were chauvinists in the white house.

Bill Ballenger: Let me ask you, George Romney, of course, as you say, was not, as you describe it, anti-female at all, and yet he used to go around and say this, he used to say, "Elly Peterson thinks like a man, looks like woman and works like a dog." And of course, he always got big laughs and everything else.

Elly Peterson: From everybody but me.

Bill Ballenger: Well, that's what I was wondering. But why, you? What did you think?

Elly Peterson: Well, those things are patronizing, you know. And I always said that when he said that, he meant that I think like men think they think. Because I found woman after woman throughout this entire nation who were very smart politically. They really, Pat Hidden, California, Lorraine Orr in Nebraska. Right here in Michigan, Gert Powers and Joyce Braithwaite. Oh, I had about 28 women in my group and they were wonderful strategists, fundraisers, whatever you gave. But, it was just a hard battle.

Bill Ballenger: So you just kind of cringed inwardly when George Romney would say this, not say anything outwardly, but you didn't really ... you thought this is loony tunes but this is the kind of stuff a woman has to put up with in public life.

Elly Peterson: That's right. You just had to put up, and he thought he was complimenting me, you know.

Bill Ballenger: Right. Exactly.

Elly Peterson: And that of course is, now, Bill McLaughlin would never have any problem with that at all. It didn't bother him that I was state chairman and he was vice chairman. And so, some men can take it. I always thought a man had to be awfully sure of themselves, Bill. My husband could stand me being gone and being in the public eye because he was absolutely confident of his own ability.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Elly Peterson: But men that aren't confident of their ability are afraid of women.

Bill Ballenger: That makes a big difference.

Bill Ballenger: Let me ask you about a few political personalities that we've touched on so far, some that we haven't just to get your quick impressions.

Bill Ballenger: Richard Nixon.

Elly Peterson: Richard Nixon, to my way of thinking, was the most brilliant politician probably the nation has seen but he was so insecure. I remember once he and I were flying alone to the Upper Peninsula, and this was before, I guess when I was running for the senate, and he gave me a lecture on counting votes that I never forgot. He knew all of that. And when I became assistant chairman, he said to me, I told him I was going to have a Jewish women's organization and a black women one, and an ethnic group because their culture isn't the same. He thought that was a great idea and called other people. He was very knowledgeable, but it was so difficult to get to see him. He had told Roger Morton and me when we were elected that we would have access, but it was very difficult to see him.

Bill Ballenger: But the Prussian Guard.

Elly Peterson: The Prussian Guard, yeah.

Bill Ballenger: That sort of thing.

Elly Peterson: It kept you away, but it didn't bother us. We just went ahead on our own. But, Nixon, if he just didn't have that insecure feeling. It was too bad.

Bill Ballenger: What about Bill Milliken?

Elly Peterson: Oh, Bill Milliken, everybody loved him and everybody respected him and everybody wanted to know him better. And Helen was so naïve when she

started, but she grasped the essence of the women's movement, you know? And both of them, I think are fine examples.

Bill Ballenger: Did Bill Milliken end up being a different kind of governor than you would have thought he would have been back in 1964?

Elly Peterson: Bill, I wasn't here. I really don't know a great deal about that. That's when I worked in Washington a while and then lived most of the time in Hawaii. So I really can't tell you that. I know that I never saw anyone who had the following he had.

Bill Ballenger: How about Zolton Ferency?

Elly Peterson: Oh I loved him. He was so funny. He always had a funny remark to make. And somebody asked him if he worried about working against a woman and he said, "Oh she's an old political warhorse with the scars of many battles." And I said, "I hope I give you a few, Zolton." But I had two farewell parties, both times I went to Washington, and he showed up at each one.

Bill Ballenger: At each one? I'll be darned. That's something. What about Millie Jeffrey? Did you know her?

Elly Peterson: Millie? Oh yeah. She and I knew each other through the Equal Rights Amendment and through the women's movement. And I'm a great admirer of hers. She's a stalwart and she gave much of her life to promote women and their interests.

Bill Ballenger: What about Lyndon Baines Johnson?

Elly Peterson: I didn't know him. Now Lady Bird was wonderful to me. He died before I got to know Lady Bird, but I lived with Liz Carpenter in 1976 and she was the secretary, the press secretary. And through her and going to Texas, I got to know Lady Bird and she was wonderful to me. I've been entertained in her home many times.

Elly Peterson: And one time, she had a party and she had all the political writers there, Tom Wicker and people like that. And Lady Bird didn't have a party where you just came around and had a drink and an hors d'oeuvre, you know, you had to do something. So, she said, "Now I want everybody to tell their most embarrassing moment." So I told them about being in the press studio, much as we are today, with George Romney. And he was tired and he was in a hurry and they had to go over it and repeat it and finally he said, "This is going to be the last time we're going to do this and it's going to take." And you knew he meant it. Would you believe a fly hit my face and it went around my mouth and up over my nose and I gave every word of my remarks and didn't twitch, well he had the grace to laugh and we all collapsed and it was very, we thought that was funny. So I told that story and they couldn't believe that George Romney would do that.

Bill Ballenger: How about Barry Goldwater?

Elly Peterson: I never knew him very well. And I didn't really have any reason to because I went to that convention for Rockefeller, Scranton and Romney, you know, one of those three. And they made you feel that. And the next morning when we went into our state chairman's meeting, those of us who had, oh, who had been for them, were given the real cold shoulder.

Bill Ballenger: What about Nelson Rockefeller?

Elly Peterson: Oh, I thought he was so understanding of anything you tried to do. He promoted the volunteer program to the hilt. And the last campaign that he did for Ford, he invited me to go with him and we flew all around Michigan together.

Bill Ballenger: This was in 1976?

Elly Peterson: Very fond of having him.

Elly Peterson: 1976.

Bill Ballenger: When Ford was President, running for nomination for a full term again Reagan?

Elly Peterson: And Rockefeller was Vice President.

Bill Ballenger: Right. Vice President, but wasn't there already a commitment that he was not going to be the running mate?

Elly Peterson: Well, the conservative group told Ford he couldn't have him.

Bill Ballenger: Right.

Elly Peterson: So I think that was sort of an upset for Nelson. He enjoyed that and he said, he told me once that he would have gone to work as Gerry Ford's Chief of Staff if he had been wanted because he believed so strongly in the fact that the Republicans needed to govern this country. But they didn't ...

Bill Ballenger: Right. Well, when you talk about the action program that you had and Rockefeller's interested in it and Romney's interested in it, is one of the reasons that you were so committed to that because you felt that the Republican Party of the two major parties in particular, had to demonstrate that they were a real grassroots, people oriented party, they had to overcome this stigma that probably still applied to a certain extent since Herbert Hoover in the 1930s that the party, the Republicans were the fat cats and the country club people who didn't really care about what was going on and this was a way to show?

Elly Peterson: Well that, and also, if you looked at the community, so many of the volunteers were Republicans. And it seemed to me that that could all tie in together and it would be beneficial. And it was, it was when we did it.

Bill Ballenger: Let me ask you this. What do you see as the major difference as you understand it, even though I know you haven't been really involved in politics much since the early or mid '70s, between the way politics was practiced in the '50s and '60s, your heyday, and what you see of it today?

Elly Peterson: I can tell you exactly. And I can tell you that there'd be hundreds who agree with me. The lack of civility. There is no civility in politics today.

Elly Peterson: I don't like the name calling. I don't like the innuendos about people. I don't like the personality challenges all the time. And it breaks my heart, especially, to see Republicans doing that kind of thing. I think it's low and that's one difference.

Elly Peterson: And the other one is the emphasis on money. I can't imagine, I mean that Huffington, or whatever his name was in California, spending 30 million dollars of his own money. And then these men setting up their own PACs so then with that money, they can buy people. I just don't think politics is on the level it was.

Bill Ballenger: So back in the '50s and '60s, even though you had bitter fights with people like Neil Staebler and John Swainson and Zolton Ferency, and your adversaries in the organizational ranks of the Democratic Party, you didn't feel this personal venom and animosity and hostility toward these people, or they toward you?

Elly Peterson: No, no.

Bill Ballenger: It seems to be evident today.

Elly Peterson: It wasn't. It was bitter fights as far as organizing getting your vote out was concerned. But I never thought of calling one of those unless it was something in joke, you know. Neil Staebler and his wife were very good friends of mine. We would appear together on programs.

Elly Peterson: No, there was none of that. I remember during the Constitutional Convention, that Harriet Phillips was the Democratic Vice Chairman, we'd debate that, then we'd go off together for coffee. And there was nothing, it just wasn't personal.

Bill Ballenger: It wasn't the same.

Elly Peterson: And the way they talk now is, to me, is unbelievable.

Bill Ballenger: What about the influence of Political Action Committees? You talk about campaign finance and money in campaigns.

Elly Peterson: Very bad. Very bad. I disapprove of them. You know, back in our day, we did try to get the doctors involved. Prior to my years, doctors hadn't been involved and we did get them involved. But these PACs with their money, capable of buying those, I just don't approve of.

Bill Ballenger: What about the role of the media in politics today? I mean television, radio, the newspapers, how is it different today than it was in the '50s and '60s and whatever difference there is, is it good, bad, whatever?

Elly Peterson: The media in those days would not have written as much about people's personal life. Witness Jack Kennedy and a dozen of others you could name. They just didn't do it.

Bill Ballenger: You think that was a proper thing for them to have done, they shouldn't have written about it?

Elly Peterson: I think they could have written about it. But I don't think they have to harp on it.

Bill Ballenger: The saturation is overkill?

Elly Peterson: Yeah, the saturation, there's just too many of them, I suppose. Maybe that's the answer. But these talk show hosts that preach this venom and hatred, you know we got to get an assault rifle in everybody's hands.

Bill Ballenger: You think that kind of talk might have contributed to something like the Oklahoma City tragedy or some of these other things?

Elly Peterson: I don't think it makes people feel that it isn't, some people probably feel it isn't too bad. I just don't think we're a nation that ought to talk about being a Judeo-Christian nation on one side and then have your airwaves spewing out hatred. And they do spew it out.

Elly Peterson: I mean, for example, I worked all my life to help women. I wanted to them to be able to go to school, I wanted to them to have good jobs, I wanted to them to be able to be president, but Rush Limbaugh calls me a Nazi, what's he call me, a Nazi feminist or something?

Bill Ballenger: A Femi-Nazi.

Elly Peterson: Yeah, a Femi-Nazi. What, I mean those things aren't necessary. He can point out where I'm wrong.

Bill Ballenger: What about some of the social-cultural issues that didn't exist really as issues back in the '60s that do exist now? Abortion, in particular, gay rights, things like that? These things never came up. If they had come up, would have probably found yourself you know, feeling the way Barry Goldwater does today, what are these issues doing in politics? Because Barry Goldwater, ironically, even though

he was supposedly a right-wing conservative Republican against whom basically you were opposed within your party.

Elly Peterson: Yeah, but he's changed.

Bill Ballenger: Well, has he changed, or is he now just speaking out on issues that weren't there, then?

Elly Peterson: That might be the truth of it.

Bill Ballenger: Because he's a Libertarian.

Elly Peterson: I mean, we never discussed abortion, and to this day, I don't feel abortion is a political issue. It ought to be. Of course, I am pro-choice, because I believe a woman should have the choice what she wants to do with her own body. I don't think some legislator ought to tell her. But we never discussed that.

Elly Peterson: Of course the Equal Rights Amendment came up, and I was strong for that and that did create some problems because while most of the states except the South passed it, for example, the Mormon Church came out against it and poor George Romney had always been a supporter of women's rights, then he had to follow his Church. I do believe that that Church then helped defeat Mitt Romney in the Massachusetts Senate.

Elly Peterson: So that was the beginning, I think of social issues that divided people.

Bill Ballenger: Did that drive any kind of a wedge between you and George Romney and some of the people with whom you'd been allied, back in the '60s, issues like that?

Elly Peterson: No. No, George and Lenore Romney have always been my friends and we keep in touch and talk to each other. I was an admirer of Mitt Romney's, I think he's a very fine young man. But I do think that churches ought not to be in politics.

Bill Ballenger: Let me ask you about your last two political campaigns, particularly in 1972, when you thought maybe you were out of politics, you were done with politics. You had just completed your second stint as Assistant Chairman of the Republican National Committee and then a rather obscure probate judge from Calhoun County named Mary Coleman decided she wanted to run for the state Supreme Court.

Bill Ballenger: There had never been a woman on the Supreme Court, what happened?

Elly Peterson: Well, she called me and asked me if I would work for her and if I would help her. It appealed to me and then I found out that every probate judge had signed a petition asking her to run and said they would support her. Well that in itself was an interesting sort of thing. So, I did come with her and took her to the Convention. Of course, she won the first nomination overwhelmingly and she

probably ran one of the best campaigns I've ever worked in, because she worked hard and didn't spend a lot of money and gave it everything she had.

Elly Peterson: She was known all over the state. She belonged to so many things, Bill, that you could tap into, like women's organizations and the probate judges came through for her. Oh my heavens. Not a hundred percent, but I'd say 95 percent came through and did something for her.

Bill Ballenger: And then she was elected with Charles Leaven, who is still on the Court.

Elly Peterson: Yes.

Bill Ballenger: The two of them were elected, he was an independent, she later became Chief Justice.

Elly Peterson: Yes, she did. And then she and Creighton retired and moved to Florida, where they both had ill health and he died. I still keep in touch with her and she was so thrilled that another woman was elected to the Court, this last year.

Bill Ballenger: Yeah, well not only are there two women on the Court, there are three.

Elly Peterson: There are three. Yeah.

Bill Ballenger: Two of them are Democrats, and one a Republican. Maybe she wouldn't like that so much, but she likes three women. Let me ask, in 1976, then, wasn't there an effort to recruit you, one more time? To get into a political campaign?

Elly Peterson: Yeah. Well, Gerry Ford, of course knew me and I don't think he knew a lot of women who had been involved nationally, and so he wanted me to come down and help with the campaign and I went down about a month or two before the Convention and tried to organize women and had some success in it.

Elly Peterson: Then of course he won the Convention and these things are so unhappy to me when people are so mean.

Bill Ballenger: That was running against Reagan for the nomination.

Elly Peterson: Yeah. And Betty's box was right about the Texas delegation and they would, oh, call out the worst things, and when Nancy came in across the hall, we didn't have to see her and they were talking and laughing and all and so then the Texas delegation really went. But anyway, he won that and I did not want to work in that campaign, because I did not feel I was conservative as the people he had hired, like Stewart Spencer and all of that group and so I left. I retired.

Bill Ballenger: So once he got the nomination, you said, "Thanks but no thanks," in terms of working in the general election.

Elly Peterson: But he found me at my brother's in Southern Illinois, and James Baker called me and he said, "Well, that President Ford wanted me back." I was very foolish, I shouldn't have gone, because I really didn't have the rapport with the leadership that I'd had before. But I did what I could.

Bill Ballenger: So you did work for him between then and November?

Elly Peterson: Yes.

Bill Ballenger: Organizing what? Mainly women's groups, nationally?

Elly Peterson: Mainly women and the ethnics.

Bill Ballenger: Okay. Let me mention one thing, I just misspoke myself a minute ago. You'll be happy, and so would Mary Coleman. Actually, two of the three women on the Court right now are Republican.

Elly Peterson: Or are they?

Bill Ballenger: Dorothy Comstock-Riley and Betty Weaver, they're both Republicans and it's Patty Boyle who's a Democrat. Let me just ask you, a last few questions about being a woman as a Party Chairman. Did you consider yourself a trailblazer? Did you consider yourself what is called today a feminist? I mean, feminism didn't really exist as a real term, then, but I mean, how beyond everything you've said so far, did you look at what you were doing, as a woman? Did you feel that you were carrying a banner, for femininity or anything like that?

Elly Peterson: No. I tell you, in the beginning, I have copies of my speeches when I said I was not a feminist. But I did believe that women should have the doors open to them because there were no women Presidents of universities and there weren't a lot of them in medical school and all of those things, and that was what I was interested in.

Elly Peterson: You know, you can't be for women and then just pick out my group of friends, you know. And so some of the women were strident and some of 'em were crude, but they're still women. I did come under a lot of complaints about that. But I took over the National Co-Chairman with Liz Carpenter and we traveled the nation, but we could make no headway in the Southern legislature at all. They were not gonna have women in that position.

Bill Ballenger: Let me ask you, was it a net asset, or a net liability to be a woman, as a Party Chairman. Were you able to use the fact that you were a woman in some ways that a man in your situation wouldn't have been able to utilize the position, take advantage of certain things? Or was it overall, did you feel you were always kind of swimming upstream? Or didn't it make any difference at all?

Elly Peterson: I think it made a difference, in that women rallied around me, and every county had women that were involved. Just a couple weeks ago, the Wallbridges, from Gladstone, MI stopped to see me in North Carolina and she told about how excited she had been in politics in those days and yet she's out of politics now. I think that my being a woman did help get women involved, but I just didn't have much problem here. I'd been all over the state and the men just sort of accepted me, and I didn't have any problem with them.

Bill Ballenger: How do you feel women are doing in politics today? Both as office holders around the country, whether they're US Senators or Congresspersons, or in state legislatures and as Party Officials, compared to 30 years ago?

Bill Ballenger: Let's put it this way, obviously there's been some progress, but do you feel they're doing as well, as they should be doing?

Elly Peterson: No.

Bill Ballenger: And if not, why not?

Elly Peterson: Well, I don't know, I think we get a few more each time, but then we might lose some, but it's sort of like pedaling up the hill and I don't think that women have advanced as far as they could. And yet, I see so many women Presidents of universities and that's a thrill and I don't think they do as well in politics. For example, it sort of grieves me that I don't even know who the National Assistant Chairman is, I've never read a word about her, in the paper. All you read about are the Chairmen, the men. So I don't think they have quite the coverage, perhaps.

Bill Ballenger: Do you think there could be a woman Republican Chairman of the National Party, today. Is the National Party ready for that?

Elly Peterson: They had one, you know. Mary Louise Smith, from Iowa was chair, when George Bush was there.

Bill Ballenger: Right, right. She ran into a lot of trouble, though.

Elly Peterson: Yeah, that's right, she did. I've never talked to Mary Louise about it, so I don't know if she felt that was because she was a woman or not. I always found her to be a level head, but I wasn't that closely associated with her. But I don't think you would see it happening today, because you just don't see women involved at that level in party politics.

Bill Ballenger: On the conservative liberal scale, what did you consider you were when you ran for the US Senate in 1964?

Elly Peterson: A moderate, I suppose.

Bill Ballenger: A moderate.

Elly Peterson: I'm very conservative in financial, I think the fact that they don't get that budget balanced is terrible and I think that the perks and all that they take in government today are just out of sight. But on social issues, I think you would say I'm very liberal, if being pro-choice and pro women is considered liberal.

Bill Ballenger: What about the so called Contract with America?

Elly Peterson: Well, I thought some of their ideas were good and some of them weren't, but unless they're put into law then they don't mean really much. It was a good public relations gimmick, though, that got them off and so now it's just wait and see if they pass it. But they haven't passed very much of it.

Bill Ballenger: Is the Republican party overall a little too conservative for you, today? Particularly on the social and cultural issues.

Elly Peterson: I should say so. Very much so.

Bill Ballenger: On the economic issues, you feel fairly comfortable with what they're trying to do?

Elly Peterson: Yes, but I don't believe that I would work in the Republican party today. I would consider myself more an Independent.

Bill Ballenger: Elly Peterson, thank you very much.

Elly Peterson: Thank you Bill.