

AN EVENING WITH DAVID McCULLOUGH

LBJ Library & Museum - 6:00 P.M. - October 22, 1986

Introduction by Harry Middleton

DMc: Thank you Harry, Mrs. Johnson, Ladies and Gentlemen. I work in a Presidential Library in Independence, Missouri much of my time and I have worked at the Franklin Roosevelt Library at Hyde Park and I have always wanted to see the LBJ Library. I believe very strongly not only in presidential libraries -- they really transformed our ability, our opportunity to understand the presidency -- but I strongly support the idea that presidential libraries be located where the president came from. There is, as I am sure many of you know, a feeling among some historians and some people in Washington that all the presidential papers should be in Washington under one umbrella of the National Archives and I, for one, would argue endlessly against that.

When I go to Independence, Missouri, I am in Harry Truman's own town, among his people. The sun comes up in the same place and sets in the same place as it did then, the shadows fall the same way. When I'm sitting in the Truman Library at my work table, I look out and there's one of those wonderful old-time water towers with the word "Independence" written across it, ^{which} stands there as of old and is entirely American. Moreover Mr. Truman and Mrs. Truman are buried there in the courtyard of the Truman Library and one of the most moving sights for anyone working in the Library, is to see the people going by, paying their respects to those two graves. And the people come from, not only part of the country, but every part of the world. And particularly moving are to see people from Japan stopping at the gravesite.

Our presidential libraries are a great national resource and all of us who are interested in them, all of us who support them must continue to do so because every gesture of support that you can give, we can give, is well worth it because we have to pass the torch.

I would like to say just one more thing in preface. I think the most important document that we Americans are privileged to carry, own, use, is the Library card. That's maybe our most important American document as individuals to be able to freely go to a public library which carries the books of all opinions, all religions, all ideas, free...without restrictions and open to everybody. And this library and all the presidential libraries and the great National Archives are ^{all} still maintained in that spirit and thus may it ever be. End of my sermon.

When General Eisenhower became president, very soon after he took office, he had a press conference and one of the reporters asked him "Mr. President, who is your favorite author?" and without a moment's hesitation, he said "Harry Sinclair Drago" and everybody kind of looked around and some member of the press who had a good sense

of humor said "Mr. President, who is your second favorite author," and with no less hesitation he said "Bliss Lomax," -- he didn't realize how consistent he was being because Harry Sinclair Drago and Bliss Lomax were the same person, the same man, and Harry Sinclair Drago/Bliss Lomax wrote pulp westerns which President Eisenhower adored. And the purpose of this story is to tell you that I knew Harry Sinclair Drago, he was a fine old gentleman who lived in White Plains, New York not far from our home at the time and one night I met him at a party, and I was aspiring to write books. I'd written magazine articles and reviews but I wanted to write books and Harry I had heard had written more than 100 books and I got my chance to speak to him and I said "Mr. Drago, I understand you've written more than 100 books.." He said "Yes, that's right." I said "how do you do that?" These were his immortal words, he said "four pages a day." The mystique of writing is largely explained in that answer.

Faulkner is supposed to have stood before a large audience at a university in the south and after a glowing introduction, stood up and said "how many of you here want to be writers?" and a third or two-thirds of the audience put their hands up...and he said "then why aren't you home writing!" And that was the end of his speech.

This is a seat-of-the-pants business. You have to sit down and go to work and you have to do it every day, and you have to stay in shape, so-to-speak, and if you do it every day, it's a little easier just as it is to play tennis or anything else that takes discipline and exertion. But my kind of writing also requires research and if you're writing biography you have to be able to get inside your subject, you have to go below the surface and knowing anybody is extremely difficult. It's very difficult to know people that you count among your friends, people who live next door, who live within your own family, but to know somebody who is dead and gone, perhaps by one hundred years, or whose life was to a large extent a form of theater, wearing masks, is a real challenge.

Now after I finished my last book which is a biography of the early life of Theodore Roosevelt which was an attempt to capture the man, the person, without telling the story of the whole history of the personage. After finishing that I was looking for a new subject and one of my editors suggested that I do Franklin Roosevelt because at that point, there was, it is hard to believe but it is true, there was no good one-volume biography of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Well I had been living with the Roosevelt family (granted it was the other branch) but I had been living with the Roosevelt family for four years and I really craved a change of scene. Furthermore, and more importantly, I knew that Franklin Roosevelt had never put his heart on paper. He had never spilled out his feelings, his frustrations, his anger, his worries, to anyone in confidence on paper. He probably saw himself as a figure in history from the time he was about eight years old and he was not going to have some historian looking into his private feelings in life so that any biographer working with Franklin Roosevelt, if he wants to write about the person, has to resort to a great deal of conjecture. So I -- at this meeting -- said -- no, I don't want to do Franklin

Roosevelt -- if you're interested in a 20th century president, the one I would like to do is Harry Truman because he was quite the reverse, he poured himself out on paper.

8:11 He was this very 20th century president, an unreconstructed 19th century man, he hated the telephone, among other things, so thank goodness, he wrote letters to his mother, to his sister, to his wife, to his daughter, to friends. And he wrote private memoranda to himself and he kept a diary, a journal. We don't do that anymore. We don't write letters anymore. Future historians, future biographers are going to have a very difficult time with all of our generation because we aren't going to leave great trunkfuls of letters, and diaries. They will have mostly memoranda to work with, business-^{case}~~case~~. Imagine, they'll think we talked like that and thought like that.

9:16 Harry Truman, furthermore, never went to Washington as a Senator until he was 50 years old. So for 50 long years it never occurred to him that he was a character in history. Therefore he felt perfectly free to be himself on paper. So the letters and diaries at the Truman Library number in the hundreds, in the thousands. Now many have been published, but many more have not been published. He is probably the last president we are ever going to have for whom it is possible to go below the surface to get inside his life to know what he was really thinking and feeling to the extent that we can with Harry.

Harry S. Truman lived 70 years in Jackson County, Missouri. He lived to be almost 90 and 20 of those years are 19½ were spent in Washington. 70 years of his life in Jackson County, Missouri so obviously if you're going to understand Harry Truman, you've got to understand Jackson County, Missouri. And that's been great fun, that's been extremely rewarding.

11:11 He was born in the dusty little market town, 90 miles south, straight south from Independence, which as you probably know, is really (Independence) is a suburb of Kansas City. He was born in Lamar, Missouri and I think that in the columns of the Lamar Democrat (a wonderful newspaper) you right away see that many of the characteristics, personality traits, that we associate with Harry Truman, come right out of that part of our country. Right out of that way of seeing things and behaving. And I want to read to you one small example which was written well before Harry Truman became a public figure -- from the Lamar Democrat which was edited, written and distributed -- a one-man operation -- by a marvelous gentleman named Arthur Ahl (sp?). Now, my favorite item is an account of a wedding that took place in Lamar, and the wedding took place in a hospital room, a teller in the bank was marrying a lady-clerk from the bank, and the wedding took place at her bedside in the hospital room about an hour-and-a-half after their son was born! Now, this is a very small town and everybody is very interested in such things and Arthur Ahl, as usual, gave all the facts...it's all in the story...but I just want to read you his conclusion..."Don and Jenny, fine couple that they are, will stand forth soon with their little son, secure as ever in public esteem. We could have said they were married secretly, say a year or two ago, but it wasn't that way and we're not going to lie. Well true enough, there never was a better girl than Jenny and we all know Don as a grand old boy, but God, it was badly

managed." 12-47

13:37

I think with almost no exception it is hard to imagine any president of the United States with more on his mind, more dropped upon him suddenly than was the case with Harry Truman in April 1945 when FDR died. He suddenly found himself the Commander-in-Chief of the greatest -- of a two-ocean war -- in the greatest war of all-time. He was to a large extent unknown by the country. He had Roosevelt's very high-powered Cabinet to reassure, to guarantee that he would continue the policies of the great man. He was informed, as many of you know, within a very short time of the Atomic Bomb, the existence of this terrible new weapon about which he'd been told virtually nothing. 500,000 people worked on the Atomic Bomb, worked on the project and all but a few knew nothing whatsoever as to its real meaning, what the project really amounted to and Harry Truman, the Vice President, was one of them. He had to go up to speak to Congress, he had to go up to Hyde Park to be at the gravesite for the burial of FDR, he held two press conferences in less than a week, and he had to move out of his apartment house up on Connecticut Avenue into Blair House because Mrs. Roosevelt was still in the White House and he wanted her to take her time leaving.

15:07

He had to decide whether we would proceed with the United Nations. And, of course, he was in the spotlight, the limelight, as never before in his life and for which, really, he was unprepared. Now when you're working in a library like this, the tendency is to go, of course, to the great collections, the Acheson papers say, in addition to the Truman papers but I had a wonderful time looking at the papers that are very seldom looked at. And among those are the papers of Mr. Truman's sister, Mary Jane. In all the time that Mr. Truman was dealing with these crushing issues, with the fate of the world, Mary Jane was writing to him from Grandview, Missouri where she and Mama Truman, as everybody called her, lived which is a little town below Independence which is where the Truman farm was. These letters are all addressed to Blair House on Pennsylvania Avenue...one begins ..Dear Harry, we've received so much mail, I cannot remember all the details. I'm trying to answer some myself, I intend to go into your office, lock the door and keep at it until we get it all done. We try to read all about what you are doing and have kept up pretty well so far (now when she refers to 'we' she is referring to Mama and to herself). I lost 7 pounds the last week but its no wonder, breakfast is the only meal we've had on time since you went into office. Someone called for pictures yesterday for Mama, said he was an artist from Washington. I told him I was sorry but Mama had had all the pictures she could pose for at present. (Now the theme running through these letters is that it is a tremendous disservice that her brother Harry has put upon all of them by becoming President)...

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Here's another one which was written May 1st, just a short time after FDR's death.. ...Dear Harry, I do hope you can come home for Mother's Day, but if not, I feel sure you can persuade Mama to make the trip.. (in other words we'll bring Mama to Washington) and please tell me if you have any suggestions to make about what you would like me to bring in the way of clothes for I would look my best and also get Mama fixed up right, too and it is a pretty large order on such short notice!

Just one more...May 7th...Dear Harry, I arrived home yesterday and found Mama well and very much inclined to go to Washington on Friday if possible. I'd planned to go in today (in -- means into Kansas City -- into town) and get whatever is necessary but it is pouring down rain and I've lost my voice so Dr. Graham said I should stay in. Why do such things have to happen when I have so much to do? I am hoping and hoping that I can get everything ready to go Friday. However you call me Wednesday instead of me putting the call through to you. If you can, call as early as you can, if I cannot go shopping tomorrow and Wednesday, I don't see how I can get it all done!

18:04 Mr. Truman's answer read as follows: ...You both have done fine under this terrible blow.

One of the great benefits of a presidential library is the picture collection. And too few historians in my view take pictures, photographs, as a vital bibliographical source. They are a great source. You can learn an enormous amount by looking at pictures. And one of the happiest and most interesting of my recent discoveries at the Truman Library are pictures of Mary Jane Truman -- this sister -- who has always been described as an "old maid" a kind of picturesque, Missouri ^{farm} lady, "old maid" who never married and who took care of Harry's mother until her death. And then I found some pictures of Mary Jane taken on the Truman farm during the first World War. Harry went off to the war and Mary Jane stayed home and ran the farm and she was a beautiful young woman, really striking-looking. And suddenly it becomes a different story and you begin to wonder why didn't she marry. To what extent was she left with Mama so that Harry could go to war and of course, Harry never went back to the farm because when he returned from the war, he married Bess Wallace who lived in an entirely different world in Independence. Bess Wallace was gentry, the Truman house as we know it was a Wallace house. Mr. Truman never had a house of his own. He lived in his mother's house until he was in his 30s -- he went to war, and by the way, he went to war when he didn't need to go to war because he was over age, his eyes were bad and maybe more important than either, he was a farmer and President Wilson was urging all farmers to stay home, their services on the land were more important than uniform. So maybe Mary Jane is a much more important character in Harry Truman's life than we've been led to believe. I'm sure she is a very interesting person. The tendency with a biography very often is to concentrate on the main character...too much so in my view because each of us is a part, has something in us of the people that have mattered most to us and vice-versa, so it seems to me that in order to understand Harry Truman, I've really got to understand his wife, his mother, his sister his daughter -- all the people that really counted to him. As you may have noticed, all those people are women. This man who was very uneasy in the presence of women, who would sit there -- if he was in a room alone -- with a woman who was not his wife or his daughter or his mother or some member of his family -- he would sit there, doing this

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(speaker apparently demonstrates to audience) with his wedding ring which I think is a very interesting symbol...this very masculine man who chose such masculine vocations, soldiering and politics, had no intimate male friends, no men who were his confidants. His women, these four that I've just named, were everything to him and all through the letters, there's this running theme of ...how am I doing?....what do you think of me now? ...am I shining in your eyes.....

22-26 If ever there was a Mama's Boy, it was Harry Truman. He was Mama Truman's little darling, in part because of his affliction, his eyes, he was virtually blind as a little boy, very much like Theodore Roosevelt in that respect. He loved music and played the piano which no little boy did in Missouri in those days, as no little boy in Missouri (very rarely would you ever see a child wearing glasses) ~~did in those days~~. He was a very serious reader, he read history and biography from the time he was old enough to lift a book, and he couldn't play any games which involved a moving ball, so he..and he loved to stay home and cook and be in the kitchen with the women, and to braid his little sister, Mary Jane's hair, and to rock her to sleep in the rocking chair, he was very maternal, nurturing, loving child. And in later life, including his time in the presidency, the backstage Harry Truman, the private man at home, had virtually no resemblance to feisty 'Give-em-Hell' Harry of the platform...very interesting.

24-26 Margaret Truman never heard her father raise his voice in anger, never heard him use any profanity whatsoever. He was known in his family in Missouri as the peacemaker and he must have had enormous tolerance because you go into the Truman house (and it is open to the public now) and there's a large living room, a large music room, a large beautiful dining room, and there is one little alcove where his books and his music and his chair and his lamp sit...that was his place...there's not a trace of him, of what he was interested in, what he wanted, elsewhere in the house. Now there are presently portraits of him hanging there and there is a fine portrait of Margaret. But you see it was Mrs. Wallace's house and it was all as Mrs. Wallace and as Bess wanted it. He was a guest in the house. Mrs. Wallace sat at one end of the table at dinner, Mrs. Truman sat at the other end. A Mama's Boy, however, it seems to me, may or not be a derogatory term, it all depends on what kind of a person Mama is -- and Mama Truman was a very strong competent, opinionated woman who had been through a lot in her life, mostly struggle and failure, and who had a very decided idea about values, what was right and what was wrong. Now Harry you behave yourself...was always her parting word when he went out the door including the times he came to see her when he was President of the United States.

I had a wonderful interview one night with one of his nephews and I asked him ..let's suppose that I had never heard of Harry Truman, your uncle, I had never met him, never seen a photograph of him, how would you describe him to me?

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and there was a pause and then he just said one word...he said "Complicated."

Now we are all complicated, more so than we appear. He is a much more interesting man than we are led to believe. His reputation has gone through a kind of roller-coaster ride since he left office. When he left office he had the lowest public standing of any president in our history -- 21% approval, lower even than Richard Nixon when he left office. Then his stock began to rise in part because of Merle Miller's book Plain Speaking which was a compilation of interviews that Mr. Miller had with Mr. Truman in Mr. Truman's final years and it is 'salty' and sort of 'from the hip' and funny and wise and very 'American.' And James Whitmore's one-man play "Give-em-Hell Harry" created an almost comic character -- an American character who is kind of a cosmic hick. And his daughter, for example, seeing that play, reading that book, will tell you, that isn't my father. He wasn't that way. (10-27-78)

27-09
Now as some of you may know in the 1948 campaign the famous Truman upstep -- Harry Truman stopped using the speeches that were being written for him by Clark Clifford and others on the White House staff. He started just talking to the audience and something happened -- something magical happened and the campaign took hold, caught fire. And a kind of bantam rooster fighting against the odds man emerged. And that was real. That wasn't an act. There is that in him and there is that in his story. He had known failure again and again in his life. He knew what it was to be knocked down and to tell you the truth I don't think you can have a good president of the United States who hasn't been through that, who has been beaten, who has lost, who has hit the bottom and who has seen a lot of life. Harry Truman held a lantern while his mother was being operated on in the farmhouse. He failed, of course, in the haberdashery business, which actually wasn't a very serious problem because a lot of people were failing in the haberdashery...and haberdashery-like businesses in the middle west -- in that period in the 1920s when there was a prelude to the Great Depression. He was trying to sell the silk shirts, the fancy shirts that J. Gatsby kept stored in the Fitzgerald novel...and the Fitzgerald novel vision of the 1920s has nothing to do with the reality of Independence, Missouri where times were hard. And he had to outlive his reputation as Pendergast stooge -- when he first came to Washington he was known as the Senator from Pendergast. The interesting thing about it is that if you look through the Truman Library picture collection, you find the picture of his office in those days -- when he was known as the Senator from Pendergast -- and right over the mantelpiece in the reception room when you came into his office, was a portrait of none other but Mr. Pendergast. That's the Arthur Ahl (? sp) that the Lamar Democrat's editor attitude...you might as well just put it all out there. Pendergast is no way to cover up Mr. Pendergast and his activities with cosmetics..he was a very rough, unscrupulous, corrupt, extremely successful political boss and if you wanted to have a political career in Jackson County, Missouri, you had better go along. Mr. Truman said

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that Pendergast never asked me (Truman) to do anything unethical or corrupt, crooked... and I never did.

2101 I don't know that that's true or not true but I have been working for four years and I have yet to find anything of any real consequence. Again and again in every interview that I've had with people who knew Harry Truman, they always talk about his integrity. And I've interviewed over 100 people from all stages in the Truman life from neighbors to Secret Service men to Senators, members of his Cabinet, Generals who fought his war, his butler. There's that wonderful story -- J.B. West -- Mrs. Johnson will remember J.B. West -- who told me that when the Trumans first came into the White House, the first night, Mrs. Truman said that they would like to have an "old-fashion" before dinner. So Alonzo Fields who was the butler and had been a bartender for some of the best parties in the best social circles of Washington, made his prized "old-fashion" with all the oranges and the bitters and everything...

33-12 And after dinner was over Mrs. Truman said to J. B. West... "Mr. West that was a lovely dinner and we enjoyed the cocktails but would you please ask Mr. Fields not to make them quite so sweet." So the next night came and Mr. Fields made the old-fashions and they were delivered and consumed and the meal was consumed and the next morning came and Mrs. Truman went to Mr. West and she said "I don't know who it is you have making these old-fashions, but they are much too sweet." So Mr. West went to Mr. Fields and told him and he got very upset and so he put some ice in two glasses and he poured the bourbon on top of the ice and took the two glasses up to Mrs. Truman and Mr. Truman and they took a sip and Mrs. Truman said "now that's an old-fashion." They all adored him. One of his Secret Service men said to me "if I could have picked my father, it would have been Harry Truman." I have yet to find anyone who will really speak ill of him. If I ask what his greatest flaw is, was, they will say, 'impulsive' 'too-loyal' -- and that's about it. Many of them have never been interviewed before. I was listening one night to one of his Secret Service men who was telling stories about Stalin and Eisenhower and Mr. Truman to be sure and I said -- "well you've been very kind to let me spend all this time with you because I'm sure you're tired of telling these stories" and he said "Mr. McCullough I've never been asked to tell any of these stories." And that's a great loss you see because when those people are gone, that history will be gone. So the kind of work that is done by libraries such as this with oral history is of vital importance.

2-7 I feel that 1945 was the most important year of our century. It is really in my view one of the most important years in all history. It includes the first use of an Atomic Bomb, which alone would make the year qualify. It included the death of Franklin Roosevelt, the end of Winston Churchill's time and power, the death of Hitler, the end of the War in Europe, the end of the War in Japan, the establishment of a Republic called Vietnam with Ho Chi Minh as its President, the establishment of the United Nations, a new world. It's like

37-48
a dividing line between one kind of time and the time that we call 'the present' 'ours' 'modern time' and under Mr. Truman's administration, we had the establishment of the United Nations, we had the establishment of NATO, the Joint Security Council, CIA, the establishment and recognition of the State of Israel, we had the first effort to desegregate our society with desegregation of the Armed Services, it was a landmark administration, very difficult decisions because there was no precedent for so many of them. Some of the things he tried to do, he did not succeed with...what we call Medicare...and as some of you may be aware, Mr. Truman received Medicare Card #1, Mrs. Truman #2, when President Johnson was in office. He tried as best he could always to "behave as a president should." He never was seen in the White House without a coat and tie on. Now the pictures some of us remember are of the Hawaiian shirt...that was when he was on vacation in Key West. I asked one of the people who remembers both being in the White House under Mr. Roosevelt and under Mr. Truman -- what was it like that first day when suddenly you were there and Harry Truman was President? He said "well, he could walk...he said he came down that hall with that stride, that quick step and that stance he had, looking as his daughter likes to say [as if he just came out of a band box] and he went right to work. He worked every day, you know, up like a farmer, 5:30 took his famous walk, he also went through a routine of swimming and exercises in the White House -- the walk was just part of it -- sound mind, sound body. A lot of the things he believed in seemed very old-fashioned..you pay your debts. He was still trying to pay his haberdashery debts when he was in the United States Senate and was having a very difficult time making ends meet in Washington. He never took a dime outside of politics from anybody. When he retired and went back to Independence, Missouri, it was largely because he had no money. He had no great pension the way the presidents do today nor any Secret Service guards, he and Bess got on the train and went back to Independence. And there's that wonderful moment you may remember when Ray Scherer asked him the next morning "Mr. President, what was the first thing you did on arriving back home?" and he said..."I took the grips up to the attic."

And I think his conduct, his performance, if you will, as an ex-President was exemplary. He served on no corporate boards, he would never have turned up on the Merv Griffin Show or sold his name for Golf Tournaments or any of the things that we've become accustomed to. He thought that was beneath the dignity of the office. He wrote his book and he had an income from his book and he sold the property that had been the Truman farm which was made into a shopping center and the Independence, Missouri that he loved and remembered and that created Harry Truman is largely gone now, in part because (ironically) of Federal projects -- interstate highways, urban renewal, now they're talking about going back and restoring all that urban renewal destroyed so that they can bring more life back into the section of town which was the original Independence.

He once said "I tried never to forget who I was and where I came from and where I was going back to," which of course is in direct contrast ^{with} Thomas Wolfe's famous line "you can't go home again." He always knew he could go home again and when he got back to Independence, he had a good time. He loved being Harry Truman and I think that is extremely important to understand.

Think of the men he surrounded himself with. Think of that Cabinet, that Truman White House. George Marshall, Robert Lovett, Averell Harriman, Clark Clifford, Dean Acheson -- if there ever was an odd couple it was Harry Truman and Dean Acheson -- they could not have been less alike and yet they got along superbly. Mr. Truman never felt intimidated by those people, those men of backgrounds far different from his with education so very different from his. I think for example that part of the failure of the Carter Administration may have been President Carter's inability for some reason or other to bring in people of that stature. There's a new book out called The Wise Men which deals with this very phenomenon. [It is very hard to imagine for example, things going the way they did at Iceland had Ronald Reagan gone there with the kind of men I just mentioned.] Bolen, goodness me, these were giants, these were superb people, there's a professor at Harvard who said that he doesn't think any President has had a more distinguished official family except George Washington. It's a very different way to look at Harry Truman. He was also the kind of man for whom people remembered stories and I think that says a lot. Some of them I've just mentioned. He was very skeptical about John Kennedy's candidacy for the presidency. He really distrusted and disliked Joseph Kennedy and once lecturing to a law school audience in Virginia during ~~his~~ ^{the} 1960 campaign, somebody got up in the back and said "how do you feel about the Pope coming to the White House?" and he said "it's not the Pope I worry about, it's the Pop!"

He was keenly intelligent. Very, very well educated though he never went to college. I would urge people who are interested in the future of American education to take a close look at the curriculum of the Independence High School at the time that Harry Truman was enrolled there...What they studied and among the things they studied was Latin...and he loved Latin and he loved classical history ...~~Plutarch's~~ Plutarch's Lives...and he knew those books and could quote from them and talk about them in detail fifty, sixty, years later. He did not have a particularly introspective kind of mind, he was not an abstract thinker. One of my favorite lines in all that he said and wrote was when at one point he turned to his Cabinet and said "let's go ahead and do our jobs as best we can." That's pure Harry Truman. "Let's".....we're going to do it together...not the first person singular, "let's" go ahead...go forward...make things better...and do the job...we have jobs to do...as best we can. Live up to our utmost which of course is what he tried to do all of his life and succeeded almost beyond imagining...Imagine if you wrote a novel that was about this farm boy who becomes President of the United States and has

44:24
to face the kinds of decisions that he did...and he was a real farmer, let that be very clear. He was not the kind of farmer who poses for pictures. He didn't care too much for example about Franklin Roosevelt's pose as a farmer. Franklin Roosevelt was the kind of farmer in Harry Truman's eyes who had never pulled a weed, had never dealt with ~~death~~^{debt} or drought or his father dying suddenly. He'd gone through it all, he'd had his bones broken by cattle falling on him, but he was different. A neighbor, a man who is still alive, remembered Harry Truman never would wear bib-overalls, he wouldn't go that far, he knew he was destined for something else and that's in his letters fortunately.

45:59
I would love to have known him. I saw him once. I was coming home from work in Brooklyn and he was getting out of a car, a big limosine with Averell Harriman to go into a banquet at the St. George Hotel, it was at the time when Averell Harriman was running for Governor and Harriman as you will remember was a very tall, dignified looking gentleman, and he got out of the car first and then Mr. Truman got out, and there was a crowd gathered around and I was right up front...and my first reaction....when I saw him was "my God, he's in color..." ...black and white television...and he had very high color, he looked very healthy and he had very blue eyes which were greatly magnified by his glasses. His glasses are in many ways a metaphor because he had to overcome so much because of them and yet at the same time that which was his greatest handicap as a child was in many ways his gateway to a different kind of life and a different kind of outlook on the world. Had he never been President of the United States, had he never been elected to the Senate, he would have had a very rich and very satisfactory, satisfyin life.

46:50
I asked Margaret once -- what would be your father's idea of heaven? And she said "to have a good chair and a good reading lamp and a big stack of new books." Ken McCormick who was the editor-in-chief of Doubleday and Mr. Truman's editor of his memoirs, went up to see Mr. Truman once during the process of creating the memoirs, when the Trumans were staying at the Waldorf Astoria in New York, and it was early in the morning and Mrs. Truman answered the door and said to Ken -- "the President is in the bedroom, go right in and see him, he's expecting you," -- so Ken walked in and there he was with his chair and a reading lamp and a stack of new books right on the table which Ken said he could have only gone out and bought the day before, all brand new books. And Ken said "Mr. President, I can't help but say as a publisher how pleased I am to see you with all those new books. I suppose you read yourself asleep!" He said "young man, I read myself awake!" And that's what he had done all of his life. He knew history and because he knew history he understood much about the world but, import^{more} much about human beings and what made them tick, what made them work. I had a very long, very interesting interview just a day or two ago with General Matthew Ridgeway who is still very alert and erect and active both physically and mentally at the age of 91. Gene

Ridgeway, you will remember, was the Commander in the field at the time that General MacArthur was removed by Harry Truman and he succeeded General MacArthur. And we were talking about Harry Truman at length and he knew him quite well and had some very interesting insights about the Truman personality. And one of the things he said was -- 'there's no credit in doing an easy job' -- and in a sense that's an explanation of Truman's life. It was an uphill climb all the way. The 1948 election was only one example of that. Firing Douglas MacArthur was another very prime example of that. He knew in the long run the country would come around to see that what he had done about MacArthur was right and ^{not} just right for the moment but for the long-run because anyone who understands history is that it goes both ways, back and forward. He spent the last part of his life talking to children who came in to see him at the Truman Library because they were the future and he had that sense of time which encompasses past, present and future. I think one of the reasons his Secret Servicemen adored him so is he treated them like they were his sons. In part they speculate because he never had a son. I think reading his memoirs, his letters throughout the entire Korean War, the American men in the field were also his sons. We are, all of us, the beneficiaries of those who have gone before us and that's one of the reasons surely why we understand history and read history and biography. And ignorance of history is not just stupid, it is rude. And I think that one of the figures from our past that we should be most grateful for, is Harry S. Truman. Some of what he did may have been wrong but as the Wall Street Journal said in most of the big decisions he was right. The ultimate question, the question I am asked again and again is -- what about the bomb? And like any great puzzle, any great question there are arguments to be made by honest people for both sides, my own feeling is at the moment and I say at the moment because I've still to come to that part of his life where the decision is made, my own feeling is that the decision ^{in a sense} had already been made for him. To have made any other decision would have taken a kind of nerve and courage and a sense of lack of continuity that is almost inconceivable to imagine. He had been told by George Marshall that our invasion of the Japanese mainland, the Japanese islands, would cost 500,000 American casualties and that it would cost a greater number in Japanese losses. The critical event in this sequence of events in the decision is Okinawa where our losses had been terrible, where it had been said, predicted, expected, that they would be relatively light because the bombardment of Okinawa had been so heavy. He used the bomb to end the war and end the war it did. He used the bomb to save lives and probably in the long run, he did. If he didn't know about the horrors of radioactive fallout, it was because nobody told him. If he didn't know how many of the scientists who had created the bomb were against its use in the last few weeks and months before the decision was made it was because he hadn't been told. I asked General Ridgeway how he felt when he heard that the bomb had been used and he said he felt (he had been transferred from the European

Theater to the Phillipines to prepare for the invasion of Japan) and he said he felt as every soldier and sailor in the Far East, in the Pacific, felt and that was -- relief.

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We need to know a lot more about our presidents, not because they are Gods or sovereign rulers or because we wish to place more importance and reverence or attach more reverence to the office of the presidency, but we need to know about our presidents because they are an insight into ourselves and to the times in which they hold office.

Since 1945, since Harry Truman, the office of the presidency has expanded beyond anyone's imaging at the time. Harry Truman's White House, as they used the expression, his staff, his group, numbered about 200 people...very few people. One of the reasons for the expansion of all aspects of the office is television. He was the first president to use television, to speak on television, to campaign with television. He wasn't very good at it and he didn't like it...like the telephone. It belonged to a century he still somehow wasn't entirely happy with. He didn't like air-conditioning and he didn't like daylight savings time. And if he were here right now, he would tell me that it was time that I stopped.

55:00

Applause...

Thank you very much. One of the pleasures of having these lights here and the television cameras on is that I get to see your faces. If anybody would like to ask a question or two, I will do my best.

Question: How do you feel about television's influence on the kind of person who would be president henceforth?

DMc: Well Mr. Truman was the first television president. I think John Kennedy used the medium best, Ronald Reagan is the first president we've had for whom that has been his profession. He is spoken of as an old movie actor but he really was a television host and his preparation for the office wasn't the law or statesmanship or politics in the national arena or the academic world or some of the other fields from which our presidents have come, or the military, but performing for these devices we have I think reached the point where the presidency is done largely with mirrors. We have a president for whom his speeches are written, and we know it, he isn't saying his words, he is saying somebody else's words, and he is saying them as a trained announcer...he is our national announcer and imagine what the founding fathers would have thought of that. I think it is a serious situation now I also think that we may find that the country rejects that. We may have somebody soon or in the next ten or twenty years who is entirely different from that. I think the public is turning away from television...we are turning away from television. There's a lot going on in how we ...how much we are willing to tolerate this intrusion into our lives...not just

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into presidential politics...but everything in our lives...it is a very serious problem in my view. Do you know that the average high school student today ..when he or she finishes school, they've spent more time watching television than they have in the classroom! Very sad situation. Children now are watching four hours of television a day. And there's less programming for children and the programming for children that there is, is less good than it used to be, but that's a whole other subject. We'll be a long time understanding the historical impact of television, not only on our country and our culture, but on the world. It may be the most important event of our time. In some cases it has been good... the Civil Rights movement certainly was spurred to much faster progress because of television, don't you think Mrs. Johnson? Seeing those films at night on television had a decided effect on how the country felt.

Question: (Wilbur Cohen) -- You pointed out the importance of women...yet when it came to this important and distinguished group of Cabinet members...yet Mr. Truman let Frances Perkins go right in the beginning...whose whole point of view was exactly related to what he wanted to do in his famous messages of 1945 and 1946 and I find it somewhat inexplicable. Have you explored that particular point?

DMc: Well I think that he was a human being and he made some mistakes and he would get very upset with people and he fired some very good people, indeed he did. And he also had some of his poker-playing pals around him who were not exactly looming historical figures. Now Harry Vaughn for example is the one that lots of us remember...Harry Vaughn is much like a character out of Shakespeare. And in reading Harry Vaughn's oral histories at the Truman Library, these aren't the recollections of a fool. And David Acheson (Dean Acheson's son) has told me -- who knew Harry Vaughn, and of course, heard what his father would say, that he thinks Mr. Truman kept Harry Vaughn around in the old sense of the fool, the fool who speaks wisdom...Missouri fashion. I think his handling of the firing of Henry Wallace was very shabby, his treatment of criticism in the press was pretty thin-skin...and he was touchy. I think there was an element of insecurity in it. But who could blame him, particularly those first years...his first year was very difficult...remember he was going to draft all the coalminers into the Army, they were all on strike. Even Robert A. Taft who was not exactly a great champion of union ambitions felt that that was a disgrace more than just unconstitutional against everything we believe in as Americans and people who believe in fair play.

Question: Do you have any sense of Truman's attitude and feelings toward his predecessor Franklin Roosevelt?

DMc: That's a very interesting question. An extremely interesting question.

I think -- this is my own hunch -- that he didn't like Franklin Roosevelt very much but he never ever would have said so because he was his Commander-in-Chief, he was the President of the United States and the leader of his party. So there is never a word ...at one point he refers to all the Roosevelts as fakers ...but there's no word of real praise ever for Franklin Roosevelt in what he wrote, in what he wrote privately is what I'm talking about.

I keep coming back to the personal side of the man's life because I think that's where you really do begin to understand the national historic figure. He lived in his mother-in-law's house all of his life and his mother-in-law never had a good word for him...never. She thought that Bess had married beneath her and she never let Harry Truman forget it, including the years when he was President of the United States. And Mr. Truman was never heard to utter a single critical word about her, ever. Because it would have been disrespectful to his wife so I think there's some of that same combination of values at work in his reluctance to ever saying anything derogatory about Franklin Roosevelt. In a sense Franklin Roosevelt played a terrible trick on him. He didn't tell him anything! He never brought him into the White House, he never confided in him, he was never included in any meetings of any consequence ever. They posed for some pictures in the Rose Garden and of course they knew that Franklin Roosevelt was dying..... I must say that's one of the things that has certainly come through in my research ...they all knew it, including Harry Truman but he liked to think it was really never going to happen just yet.

Let's have one more -- if there is one...

Question: Was Harry a good poker player?

DMc: I asked that question to several of the people that he played with..or with whom he played...and they said....no. And I said -- what was wrong with his game? And I think this is so nicethey said "he was too curious." He wanted to know what the next cards were going to be...or what the other fellow had in his hand! He liked the comraderie of the poker game, he liked to be with the boys. They had an organization called the "Harpie Club" in Independence which was over the store on Independence Square, they'd go up there and eat sandwiches and drink their bourbon, Wild Turkey, and play poker and just kind of small town good friendship. But you wonder why didn't Harry Truman with all of that background turn out to be Warren G. Harding? We mustn't sentimentalize small-town life. Small towns have produced in American some pretty dreadful characters...what was it that made it possible for him to stay his course to maintain his values, to know the difference between right and wrong, to have this profound sense

that he must play his part in life properly and then return to his old life without having let it make his head oversize.

I'll stop with one great line of Harry Truman. He said the only new thing in the world is the history you don't know.

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