

Oral Memoir
of
ANNA LORD STRAUSS

President, League of Women Voters of the United States, 1944-50; member of the U.S. delegation, Conference of the Food and Agricultural Organization, Quebec, Canada, 1945; member of the President's Famine Emergency Committee, 1946; member, U.S. delegation to the United Nations General Assembly, Paris, France, 1951-52; and vice chairman, President's Commission on Internal Security and Individual Rights, 1951.

New York, New York
January 22, 1973
by Richard D. McKinzie, Harry S. Truman Library

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MCKINZIE: Miss Strauss, I wonder if you recall the first Presidential appointment you had during the Second World War, and how you came to serve in such a long line of Presidential special committees and on various commissions established by the Department of State?

STRAUSS: Well, the first reason was, I believe, because I was National President of the League of Women Voters, and the subjects that we were interested in. We were in touch with the

Government people and others who were interested in those subjects. So that when they were setting up a committee or commission the League of Women

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Voters would have been sought out in connection with certain subjects. I was National President. I suppose that the higher the title the more likely you are to be asked to participate.

MCKINZIE: Do you recall the circumstances of your appointment to the Food and Agricultural Organization Conference in Quebec in 1945? With what feelings did you receive that appointment? What expertise did you think you had to bring to that, and what you did when you went to Quebec?

STRAUSS: That is quite a long story in that the League of Women Voters had certain topics that the members themselves at a convention chose to make their major interest and activity. One that we had at that time was to see that we got more food to the European countries, because it was the time when there was famine over there in certain parts. It was under the Secretary of Agriculture's authority that the decision was

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made as to how much food was sent. The three staples that might be considered as the best food to ship, and that the people receiving them would know how to handle, were wheat, and potatoes, and rice. Well, we are not a rice-growing country; potatoes don't travel well; but wheat is a common food that all the European countries had as staple. We looked into the matter, and felt that the Secretary of Agriculture was not sending as much wheat overseas as was needed and that we could well afford to get along without in this country. So, I tried to see the Secretary of Agriculture on the basis of this and he was not interested. Then, since he wasn't interested, the way the League works, we decided we had to make him interested, because we felt this was important. We had all of our local leagues throughout the country, and this turned out to be something that they felt strongly about; it was something in which you could interest people who didn't have

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a great deal of background but had a sympathy for what was happening in Europe -- they needed more food. The local leagues throughout the country became very active in educating the country as a whole on the fact that we could use substitutes here and send more food to our Allies through this way. One of the imaginative things took place in Virginia. One of the things that our people had been saying was that there was a great waste of food in this country and that more should go overseas. To prove this point -- in Arlington or Alexandria, I'm not quite sure -- but one of the towns near Washington decided that they would go through the garbage cans that were sitting outside and pick out the breads that had been thrown away because people thought it was stale or whatnot. It just so happened that at this place they were picking over the garbage cans -- which took a good deal of nerve to think of and to want to do -- they put the bread down next to the garbage can, and

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a photographer just happened along; and he took a picture of all this bread that was being wasted and people were starving overseas. This caught on very easily. This was only one device, but it was the kind of imaginative thing that people think of when they are trying to get an idea across. This, and other ideas that people had, got newspaper publicity and made people realize that they were throwing away food that was vital to the existence of people in Europe and not realizing it.

I had gone south on a trip for the League of Women Voters and when I came back I'd barely gotten my foot across the threshold of the office when they said, "The Secretary of Agriculture wants to speak to you, will you call him?" And some of our friends in the State Department were wanting to talk with me.

I said, "What in the world is up?", because we had not had close contact with the Secretary

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of Agriculture.

They said, "Well, you'll hear soon enough." Well, the gist was that the Secretary of Agriculture was hearing from all over the country, "Send more wheat abroad," and he was quite upset by this fact.

He said, "Well, why didn't you let us know?"

I said, "Well, I did, Mr. Secretary, but it seemed that you were too busy ever to return my calls," and so forth and so on. After this conversation he ended it by saying, "Well, now, anytime you have anything on your mind just pick up the telephone and I'll be delighted to hear from you." So I thanked him very much. Actually it did turn the tide. He made a decision that more wheat should go overseas, which was our objective. The next time I heard from him was an invitation to be a member of the U.S. delegation to the Food and Agriculture meeting in Quebec. I

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told him at that time that I had very little background on this. It was the overall philosophy that we were interested in, getting the food over, and that I was not a specialist on food matters and so forth, but he insisted. I think I was one of the first people to be invited, because I did explain how the U.S. system worked, and the people had a right to be in touch with their officials and so on. Therefore, it was because of the action of the League of Women Voters as a whole all over the country that this came about. It's on this basis that the League of Women Voters work -- education for the Secretary of Agriculture.

MCKINZIE: Do you recall much about the conference itself, in Quebec? Some local color, some of the delegates, some of the hope or frustration you had about the possibility of using the United Nations as a vehicle.

STRAUSS: It had all the advantages of interest. It

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was the first official meeting of any U.N. group, and that made it very interesting because there was absolutely no precedent. The League of Nations wasn't as much a citizen interest. It was more in government to government, and with the U.N. having in its charter much more reference to citizens and so forth, it made it very interesting. Very little material was sent out ahead because there was no pattern for doing it. Everybody was just playing it by ear.

When we got there the Secretary of Agriculture asked me to be chairman of our delegation to the organization and financing of the work. That was an appropriate place for me if he was going to ask me to be chairman of anything. I told him I didn't know enough to be chairman, but he insisted upon it; and administration and government has always been a special interest of mine. Of our delegation there were four of us in the field of administration, of financing, of personnel, and

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so forth. The others, I think about six or seven, were specialists on food, the growing of it, and the supply, and so forth. So we four U.S. people met together, either early in the morning or late afternoon, to exchange what had been going on in various committees, and to decide what the U.S. position should be on what we thought would be the next subject to come up. There was one man from the State Department that had been in Government service in the State Department for, I think, about two years. Of the other two men, one had been in one month and one three months, as far as I remember. So that we were all of us neophytes as far as food went or agriculture. We knew nothing about that. That had never been our specialty. So that when we discussed things we would each report as to what had happened in the committee, to keep the other members up to date. Then we would say what we thought would be the next subject coming up or the next angle and we would

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discuss it. I remember we would turn to our one man who had (let's see, I guess he was from the State Department) been there longest and say, "Well, what is the U.S. position on this?" And the answer generally was, "The U.S. has no position. We have to play it by ear." That was the way all our activity took place. This was the development of the U.S. positions on international subjects, subjects we would be following through. We occasionally cleared something with the Secretary of Agriculture, but this angle of what was going on was of less interest to him than food and agriculture per se. So that, even when we asked for more advice, he had very little to give, because it was just outside his specialty.

MCKINZIE: Were you heartened by that experience about the potential of international action through the U.N.?

STRAUSS: Oh, yes, very much so, because at least there

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were all of these people sitting around and putting their minds on the same subject. Now, of course, they varied tremendously in their own background and many of their governments had no position. They'd never been in international conferences, either; so we were all feeling our way. There was the highly partisan political angle of a special nature that I wasn't as accustomed

to. In some of the other angles, I had to learn all the political undercurrents that were motivating them. We had a delegate from one of the Asian countries, who was elected as chairman of our group, and that was because the U.S. did not want any of our people to be chairmen. The chairmanship had to be spread all around, because otherwise those that didn't have the background got their feelings hurt. So when we were discussing who was to be chairman, the delegates from all over the country had decided that I should be in my committee. That was because they really had never had this kind

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of technical consideration in most of the countries. Now, of course, there were great exceptions: the Britisher had been in this kind of work since he was in knee breeches, and he pulled this kind of position on us when he wanted something. It was very interesting, and in a way amusing, but in a way sad, because it showed how little background we in this country had had in the international field. He'd been in it all his life, and they could afford to have somebody as knowledgeable as that in that committee. Some of the other countries had even less experience than we had had. But the other countries that didn't know so much were so pleased to have somebody that had an overall point of view as we in the United States had, and not just a personal point of view, and that sort of endeared us to them. I remember there was an Asian that we did elect, and he was so lost in all of this. His country had had so few representatives in these subjects that he frankly turned to me (I had

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sympathy with him and had a little more experience), and asked for help all along. So, they were a very informal kind of committee meetings and all, as compared to what the much more sophisticated meetings of today are. We were really trying to get at the right thing to do and to set it up as well as possible. One or two people stood out as just sort of wanting everything and not knowing what they really wanted. But it was education for all of us, and this is a very interesting atmosphere to be in when you have a subject that is going to deal with the world as a whole. Excepting for the League of Nations there had never been any pattern of this kind before.

MCKINZIE: Did you feel that the flow of food -- extenuating circumstances not intervening -- might be speeded up as a result of this conference when you left it?

STRAUSS: Yes. Because people were talking to each other, and I think that's one of the basic parts

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of international meetings. They are terribly slow, and there's a lot of misunderstanding because of language and so forth; but the fact that you sit down, and you talk, and you become friends, and you find that they are not out to get you, or whatever is the block people have had, I think is a very, very important part of these meetings. The Chairman was truly wanting to know; and he came to it with the overall point of view, which is, I think, the right way to come to any meeting of this kind. What is the best for everybody, because what's best for everybody will be best for the individual also in the long run.

MCKINZIE: I might ask if you remember Henry G. Bennett of Oklahoma State University, who attended as one of the delegates? He later became the Director of the Point IV program, and was highly concerned with food, too. He perhaps was on the

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other committees?

STRAUSS: He was on the other committees. I do remember him, but I am interested in the fact that he continued so much in that line, yes. It was a variety of people that made up ours, and in a way you can say that my appointment was a political one to get the League of Women Voters "off the back" of the Department of Agriculture. The political part was that part -- also there was respect for the fact that we could get the citizenry involved on a topic and that the voters cared.

MCKINZIE: I take it it wasn't much after that that you heard again from the executive branch on matters of food with the President's Famine Emergency Committee in 1946. Is that directly tied to this same League of Women Voters' position and interest?

STRAUSS: Yes, it certainly was, because this had never been a specialty of ours at all. We couldn't in

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the normal course of events have been invited to this kind of a conference; but while the Secretary of Agriculture was in office I think the first person he thought of when he was appointing anything was, "Will the League of Women Voters be interested in this, and if so, we'd better have somebody on." Not only in this field, but that certainly, was, as you suggest, the reason I was appointed to the Famine Emergency Committee, too.

MCKINZIE: Is it a fair question to ask if the Famine Emergency Committee did have any effect on public consciousness of the European food problems?

STRAUSS: Yes. I think it did. That was a larger group and on the Famine Emergency Committee we had people that produced food in this country, that handled large amounts of food. It was very interesting on that committee to see how some of the special interests came and said, "Nothing can

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be done. These are patterns that can't be changed." For instance, the Committee asked why the food producing people didn't put out smaller loaves of bread, because the waste of bread turning stale was one of the things that made us in these times of starvation in Europe just seem like hard-hearted people who didn't care what happened to the rest of the world. At the beginning of those meetings some of the food manufacturers that used large amounts of wheat and other products said, "No, it couldn't be changed," and gave us long reasons, full of statistics, why it couldn't; but by the end of our meetings they changed their minds. "Well, we might try this, if the public really has done this in the past perhaps we weren't aware of how many people were behind it." They did change their points of view and we did get smaller loaves of bread. They said that couldn't take place because the machinery wasn't set up for it,

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and all kinds of reasons; but we did make an impression on the producers, as well as on the public. I think many times at meetings such as the Famine Emergency Committee you have the background to go into a subject that the news media won't handle, unless there's a particular current angle for them to get their "hooks" into.

MCKINZIE: Would you say that the appointment of ex-President [Herbert] Hoover as the honorary chairman of that committee was simply an attention getting device or did it have political overtones at the time? Do you recall?

STRAUSS: Well, I think it had good political overtones, because I think food and Hoover at that time were almost synonymous because of what he had done. That to have his blessing then, by this acceptance, did help greatly in having people realize that this wasn't something somebody was doing for their

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own advantage, it really was to get food to Europe; and he had done more than anybody else in getting food sent over and distributed in Europe.

MCKINZIE: Were the members of that committee, as you recall, ever very divided over any particular recommendation that they considered making to the President? They did make a number of recommendations.

STRAUSS: Yes. I'm a little bit vague now as to what the recommendations were, but I think that the strength of it was that they didn't sound very patriotic when they said, "We can't do this," or "It won't be enough," or "The public won't agree," or things like that. That's why they changed their stance, and then gave orders in the production of whatever their products were, to change it. That, of course, was because the public media had picked it up and were running

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articles, and they didn't want to sound as though they didn't care that people were starving in Europe.

MCKINZIE: One of the points made in the final report, which was filed by Chester Davis says that, while very little food was probably saved by citizens, that the Famine Emergency Committee created a kind of "moral climate," in which the President through Executive order, and the Secretary of Agriculture through his orders, could make the kinds of changes that would result in more wheat being available for shipment to Europe. At the time did you conceive that to be your mission, to create a kind of "moral climate" or "national mood," which would allow then Executive action in shipping wheat?

STRAUSS: I would agree with what you say, excepting I think I would put it a little bit more strongly

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than "allow them." I think we pushed them. Because people that are producing, or doing anything, just continue doing the same way and need quite a push to get out of the rut. I think that with a lot of people, and a lot of stories appearing, a person is likely to think, "Well, perhaps I could make a change. I thought I couldn't, but if so many people feel this way I could." So I do agree with what Chester Davis said that it made it much easier to bring about the technical changes that were the ones that really opened the gates and got more wheat flowing.

MCKINZIE: Did you expect that that would be the end of your official connection with the food problem when the Famine Emergency Committee disbanded in middle 1946?

STRAUSS: Yes, yes. We had a variety of subjects on

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our program. Well, we're like the others, we didn't get pushed excepting by the need. So having had an opportunity for the League of Women Voters to be heard both in Quebec and in the Famine Emergency Committee I did think that was probably the end of our food activity.

MCKINZIE: But then, of course, it was not. The Citizens Food Committee came up then in 1947 and I believe you served in the Consumers Division of that. This was Charles Luckman's organization. Do you recall your involvement with any of that? It was short-lived.

STRAUSS: Yes. It was short, and I don't remember it as well, but the reason being is it was sort of the follow-through on the other activities, and therefore, it wasn't a new one. You don't always get quite the kick out of doing more of more or less the same, as compared to getting in there and having to think out everything through from the

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beginning.

MCKINZIE: You didn't feel then that the Citizens Food Committee was any entirely new approach, or that it was, in a sense, going to achieve much more than the Famine Emergency Committee.

STRAUSS: Well, I think that different groups have access to different types of people, with different interests, and all of them are necessary. Although, we thought we did a pretty good job in the League of Women Voters, after all it only touched a comparatively few people. It was only when we got the cooperation of the press and the media that we could touch more. And of course, there were an infinite number of avenues to make an impression on other people that hadn't heard anything about what we did. So that I think that, although we were less active in it and I remember less about the latter ones, I think they were important in doing the job as a whole;

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and the education of the citizenry, and at that time, the education of the League of Women Voters.

MCKINZIE: You mentioned that this was an education of the citizenry and getting the media to pick up some ideas that your groups may have espoused, which leads me to note that both the Famine Emergency Committee and the Citizens Food Committee were what one might call blue-ribbon committees, that is to say, made up of very eminent people, yourself as representative of the League of Women Voters, leaders of industry and the opinion-making media. Looking back, do you think that it's fair to say that the age of the common man had not yet arrived, and that these blue-ribbon names on Presidential commissions had more influence than they later had, or than they have now?

STRAUSS: I think that then there was more need for

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the title that went along with the person. I think even now there has to be a combination to carry weight. I think now we get more of a combination of those who have done something individually and haven't been known, whereas in the early days you had to have more names that would stop people enough to read or notice what's going on. I do think that there's quite a difference now. Nowadays you get more of a demand for a cross-section of the people in the country -- youth, black, and the farm element. They were less capitalized in the days we were speaking of.

MCKINZIE: Did you have Government appointments between the end of the Citizen Food Committee and the Commission on Internal Security and Individual Rights?

STRAUSS: I'd have to check that. Once I've stopped one thing I lose track, and to me the important thing has always been is there something to which

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you can contribute, and not how many I had or who made them, and so forth. I just honestly don't remember.

MCKINZIE: But, of course, a very important committee you did accept a position on was this Commission on Internal Security and Individual Rights. It had a huge charge from the President, and I wonder if you could simply relate how you came to be appointed and what happened thereafter?

STRAUSS: Well, of course it all came back to my position as National President of the League of Women Voters. But by that time I had really become personally friendly with the President. President Truman had changed a great deal from the days he came into office to that time. He came into office -- well, I don't suppose it's entirely respectful -- but I think he always reminded me of a "scared rabbit." Circumstances thrust him into that position, and

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even though you know you are in a position but you think you never are going to have to act in that role -- it's two very different things.

When he first came in he was just looking for people who didn't have axes to grind and had the public interest at heart the way he had. At that time, it was comparatively easy to -- well he made it that way -- to get an appointment with the President. You had to say what you wanted to speak to him about, and whether it was a housing matter, or a food matter, or court, or whatever it may be. And that was fair enough; and he was briefed on whatever it was. It wasn't too hard to get an appointment either; you could often get it within three or four days of the time you asked for it. And he welcomed us because he knew we were a public interest group. We didn't have private axes to grind, and he wanted to know what we thought, and I think I'm not out of order when I say he had respect for the League of Women

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Voters as an organization and as a public interest organization. So that discussions with him were always extremely interesting, and one in which he wanted to learn more about what others were thinking that didn't have a special interest concern. He learned remarkably quickly. I mean if you told him you wanted something, about a court situation or whatever it might be, he was well briefed, and he asked good questions, and he was very informal about it. He wasn't on the defensive or full of his position or anything. So that we had a very pleasant relationship and he would often say, "Well now, if you learn more about this be sure you let me know. I'd be glad to see you all again if something happened." During this period I don't believe anybody learned as much as he did. The Vice President really wasn't brought in as much in those days as the Vice President is now. He changed

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greatly. Not in his welcome, because he was always very cordial and he would even say, "If you have other things on your mind" -- aside from what we had asked to see him about -- "I'm always glad to hear your point of view." So that, from his "scared rabbit" - he didn't act that way, but you had the feeling of it in those days -- his change to assurance in these matters was remarkable to see, I think -- that anybody would have been as frank in what he didn't know and glad to know what other people thought. So that, there was a feeling at that period that the public interest was well taken care of by him, that he really cared what went on. I think that it was along in these lines when a new commission was being set up that I got involved. I, frankly, at that point, was very naive; I didn't realize what a highly, highly political situation we were going to get into then. The Congress didn't want the administration getting into what they thought

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was their preserve, and when the really skilled politicians get going, a committee as comparatively naive as we were didn't have much of a chance. All the stops that they pulled out to undermine that commission were just incredible.

MCKINZIR: The first meetings of your commission I take it were fairly routine? That you began a meeting or two without any difficulties, is that correct?

STRAUSS: Yes, that is correct. The other members of the Commission were almost as naive as I was from a highly political and long-range place, because we were threatening those people who had set everything up to be able to run things their own way. Therefore, a commission set up that was going to look into why some of the things had happened, threatened them in a very

serious way. When you have people, against you, that have spent their lives politicking -- and on our

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commission we just didn't have that ilk at all. If we hadn't finally resigned, they would have taken it to court and carried the fight on. They must have put a lot of people to work to look up our background -- know where they could attack us, and, actually, even the church representatives had a way of being attacked. It was incredible what happened. I can't remember all the details, but they looked into, I guess, every one of us, found any place that they could have attacked us. I don't mean on a personal basis; but, for instance, saying, to one of the lawyers, "You represented a case that had to do with such and such people. Now that wasn't in the public interest. That was in private interest." They had the best lawyers out to make every member of the Commission feel that they would jeopardize what they had worked on for years by continuing. I know we had one person of the church, and I think we had two, and they said, "Well, I can't bring the church into this kind of

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a political hassle. We couldn't get enough on the other side to get into just a political fight. We wouldn't have been able to do what we'd been set up to do.

MCKINZIE: When did you first have the feeling that this was going to become embroiled in a political problem on Capitol Hill?

STRAUSS: Well, not right away, but then I'm very politically naive. So it never occurred to me that they would go after the church. And frankly, it never occurred to me that Russell Leffingwell wouldn't stand up to what they might do, because he was an honorable person and certainly had an honest record behind him. They had just dug out things that you would have forgotten about entirely if there hadn't been an attack. They were trying to prove that you were not nonpartisan, and you were not in the public

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interest and so forth.

MCKINZIE: This all hinged around the conflict of interest statutes, is that correct?

STRAUSS: Yes, that's right.

MCKINZIE: Some members of the committee had business in which they dealt with the Federal Government and the conflict of interest statute prohibited them from receiving Government compensation if they were at the same time engaged in business with the Government. How is it that the Hoover Committee and the [Senator Estes] Kefauver Committee investigating crime had been granted exemptions from those laws, which Congress could do? What rationale was given you as to why those were exempted and your committee was not?

STRAUSS: I frankly don't remember all the ins and

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outs. It became very technical. There was no group that was already set up to do this. Kefauver and the others in their positions, they knew who the people were, they knew politically how to keep themselves as free as they did. And then, also, the timing of it was the timing of the Communists and the "influence" other than public interest was ripe, and when people were doubting each other. And that kind of an overall atmosphere makes it much more difficult to go ahead with an organization that had never worked together. When we were looking for staff people, before this all broke, there was difficulty of getting anybody who was knowledgeable, who would do an unbiased job, because these other groups had been in it -- knew their people and so forth. We were starting out anew, and people just didn't want to get involved in anything as touchy as the -- what they might do to reputations.

MCKINZIE: When you began the work, before the Congress

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began to make trouble, and learned that you were to, on the one hand review the statutes which dealt with internal security, and on the other, look at the question of violated individual rights, did you have the feeling that this was just another commission or that this was something that somehow the President himself had put a great deal of emphasis upon? There are some statements made by him that this was one of the most important things he had going at that time.

STRAUSS: Yes. We did have the feeling, and when I was asked I said I wasn't a lawyer. This was not my field and I thought that I should not be in on it. I remember the answer was, "We want people that are not specialized. We want people with general backgrounds, the citizenry, represented." I would have had to count very heavily on the staff to give me the background and catch me up on all this, but I wasn't the only one. We were chosen as

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non-specialists on the basis of staff. It certainly was a very, very complicated field to get into in any detail.

MCKINZIE: Did you have any direct dealings with the Senate Judiciary Committee? The committee which blocked the exemption request.

STRAUSS: Not personally, no.

MCKINZIE: I see. You attended some meetings, I gather, before Admiral [Chester] Nimitz on May 8th offered mass resignation of the committee. Do you recall any of the discussions of the people on the committee?

STRAUSS: Well, we had had some in general before, for those who felt that they didn't want to get involved. Actually, I wasn't at the meeting that took place in which there was the mass resignation, because I was in Texas doing field work, and it was set up long before.

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An amusing aspect of it was when they did take the action I was not there, therefore, my name wasn't signed to it at the time. I was on my way back to Washington at the time, and since I couldn't sign what I hadn't read, I had to make my own statement.

I got into Washington in the evening and I had it written out then, and I was being met by the Vice President of the League of Women Voters, and I said, "I have my statement and I want to get it in," because the resignation had not hit the press and I wanted to get it in before it came out, so that I didn't look like a standout or something else -- that pressure had been brought and so forth. So, the friend that met me said, "Oh, all right. Then we'll drive round and leave it at the White House before we go on," and nobody would accept it. The guards said I couldn't get in and they had no authority to accept it. We spent a couple of hours before we got somebody

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of sufficient stature to say that a letter from me to the President that needed to be acted on immediately could be accepted into the White House. We went from gate to gate there. Luckily the friend that met me knew her way around Washington. What we had to do was to go to a telephone and get a friend with White House entree to okay it at a certain gate, at a certain time, and we did it. I don't know whether that ever happened before, but I think it shows the touchiness of the subject. Whether that's a normal procedure that nothing will be received in, I don't know. I remember it was very late and we were afraid we'd missed the press announcement. Well, we finally did get it in, but I think the partisan political point of view whatever it was -- by that time people knew it was politically a "hot potato." When the clergy wouldn't go along with us on the Committee in the earlier days -- I mean before it became so hot, because they said, "Well, they had contacts that

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could be called political," and so forth and so on -- it was evident that the President wasn't going to be able to get a committee that had the strength of character to stand up to it, and, at the same time had the stature to carry weight in the Committee.

MCKINZIE: I take it was not just Senator [Joseph R.] McCarthy, who was creating problems for the Committee.

STRAUSS: Oh, no. It wasn't he. My interpretation was that they had questionable actions that they themselves had taken -- the Judiciary Committee members. And they didn't want them looked into, and the best was to kill off the Commission before it got into being. That's just my personal reaction to it, but the power that was behind it and the legwork that some of the people had done on those of us that had been appointed to the Commission was just no casual -- "Oh, tomorrow or the

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next day will do." You had the feeling that they really...

MCKINZIE: In short they did a much more thorough, thorough to the point of being unnecessary, investigation of the Committee appointees?

STRAUSS: Any place that we might be said to be prejudiced on the subject that we were looking up -- that we were not unprejudiced, and therefore, we were not people to be on the Commission. But that was just to lay the groundwork in case we came out with recommendations, that they could say they were not in the public interest. We all had done things that we would not want to have come into the open.

MCKINZIE: You wrote to President Truman, saying to him that you thought that your continued presence on the Committee might not be appropriate, since you had made a contribution to the defense fund

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of Alger Hiss. How did you happen to know that they had this kind of information about you?

STRAUSS: Well, in that field things were awfully touchy in Washington, and those who would speak out were immediately taped, you see, in files that showed whether you had a liberal point of view or whether you believed that the Communists were about to take us over. So, it was a very tense time as far as anything in those fields went, as you well remember. So that, you thought of things in that light or activity that had never occurred to you in that light before, because you were doing it from an honest point of view and believing in freedom of the individual unless proven otherwise. So that atmosphere just affected anything that came anywhere near being something with which they could threaten you, whoever the "they" were.

MCKINZIE: This often wasn't clear I take it?

STRAUSS: Yes. Things were put in such a partisan,

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political light. Partisan on the basis of what were the reasons you were doing it, and did you have Communist connections? I remember there was a committee in New York years before when the Communist threat was very new, but I began to be a little suspicious of my confreres on it and attended every meeting. Nothing happened that I had been against, but I didn't think too highly of the people on it, and I resigned with a letter expressing why. You know, that had never been an offense in the U.S. before, that you had to keep your petticoat so clear of anything that could be misunderstood. And I had some friends who had a very difficult time at this, because they were "over-liberal" to the reactionaries, so I very much knew what it meant.

MCKINZIE: Did anyone on that committee, to your knowledge, suggest that you fight it out in a partisan, political way, or that you fight it

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out as a matter of principle with the Senate Judiciary Committee; or was it pretty well unanimously agreed that you not do that?

STRAUSS: It was spoken of, but they found reasons for not doing it on the basis of -- "Well, I would think this would be an important thing to do," somebody would say, "But I can't afford to

because I have my company to look out for or my clients to look out for." And when even the clergy found reasons not to want to fight it out, why, it was evident what we should do.

I was the only one that felt that it was nothing to me personally. Although I realized the League of Women Voters would be involved. But I was no longer National President and, therefore, if I had had any support I was inclined to want to fight it out. But then again,

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I realized that unless you were going to put a lot of money into this, you really didn't have a chance. When the clergy said that they, because of some of their activities, wouldn't, well, I was the only one left then that hadn't said that I couldn't. It seemed to me better that we do resign en masse than have one or two people left that were not experienced enough to handle a very, very difficult subject. Actually, as it happened, I did go into activities to counteract this spirit afterwards.

MCKINZIE: Would you talk about that?

STRAUSS: Well, of course, this made a very deep impression upon me, and I really was shocked that things were so tied up, and that this could happen so comparatively easily, that you could undermine an activity that had barely gotten started -- and that was in the rather early days; it wasn't when McCarthyism got really virulent.

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So, I decided that people that did feel as I did and the League of Voters would -- that our freedom was being jeopardized -- should get together and do what we could. A ridiculous angle of it, but the plan came to me one time when I was walking on Fifth Avenue, and, you know, just the way ideas come to you. My friend used to say afterwards, "Walk on Fifth Avenue more often." But I realized that there were people who didn't know where to turn but wanted to do something about it. I knew that one of the Ford Foundation funds that had been set up was looking for a program in this field. I'd known some of the staff and I knew some of the board members and had talked, not on what could be done, but I knew of their concern. So, the general overall picture that I had was that those people who were worried about what was happening in the country should get together and work in unison. The people I knew were in organizations, because I'd been working with organizations,

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and if we could get a group of organizations of impeccable reputation that would speak out, and would encourage their communities or their contacts wherever they were, to speak out against the McCarthy concept, this would be a very important thing to do. Because I had learned, and it was confirmed after we set up the group, that the quicker you speak out when there is an attack made the easier it is to turn it off. If you speak out right away, you show people there are two sides; but if you wait, and think "Oh, people won't believe this. We don't have to do anything," there are a lot of people who've already been sold on the idea that the Communists are going to try and run the country and so forth. So, the general gist of the activity was that we got together those who would join with us and work in unison, and we called it Freedom Agenda. It was to use our freedoms with the Bill of Rights primarily as a background. We had to have money

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to do this, and so I went to the -- Paul Hoffman was the chairman of it at the time -- the name escapes me at the moment, but I knew a number of the men that were on it. They said, "Well, this might interest us. Draw up a presentation," which we did, and asked for the money to do it. I had been in touch with the staff first, because one of the staff had come to me and said, "This sounds like something up the League of Women Voters' alley" (although I was no longer National President), "why can't you do something?" Their fund staff, was for just such a program and thought that the board would approve it; but the two top staff people weren't for it and the rest were. So that whatever we put in got changed around. It got to be quite a hassle in the Fund for -- I forget the name of that Fund, but anyway...

MCKINZIE: Fund for the Republic.

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STRAUSS: Fund for the Republic, that's it, yes. So we lost one meeting because it wasn't quite what they wanted. We re-did it and Paul Hoffman with whom we were working -- and he was for it, even though his top staff was against it at the time -- thought some changes should be made and we made them; and I had gotten him a copy and he said, "Fine." Then he had a one day strike at the Studebaker Company, and he was on the telephone practically the whole day, and while he was on the telephone it was voted down, as far as the money went. So that lost us another three or four months in which we did work, informally, and perfected this and all. Then the Fund for the Republic did give us a grant.

The way we worked it was, we got out a series of pamphlets on the Bill of Rights. We set up an office and we got about eight or ten organizations that went in with us. We did it all quietly. We didn't want any publicity at this

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time. We wanted to be prepared to answer the attacks. We didn't want to go out and start people taking sides. We had meetings with the board, who were people representing the organizations that came along with us. And I think the reason that we had as much success as we had was that we told anybody they could telephone in and ask for advice. It was just our advice, it wasn't anything official; but how to handle something if it arose in their community. We did it on the quiet side so that nobody really knew we existed, but that we were there to help anybody, an individual or an organization, on any facts that were propounded as facts and were misinformed. We did get a wide coverage and it certainly reconfirmed my belief that under attack get out with the facts immediately, and you can get a great deal more backing than you think you can. The longer you leave any misinformation in the air or on the books that

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hasn't been answered, it is a very difficult thing to catch up with the misinformation and the attacks that have taken place. The people on the committee, through their organizations and through groups in the communities that were told about us and others, I think made a very real contribution in trying to bring a little bit of balance back into the country in those days when there was such havoc being wrought by the name-calling that went on.

MCKINZIE: Is it fair to say, then, that your conception of that latter activity was the direct result of the most unpleasant experience with the Internal Security and Individual Rights appointment?

STRAUSS: Yes. If you haven't been working in these fields before you don't realize how many people there are that are working in the same fields, fighting what is wrong, and they need backing.

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One thing we did was that anybody could telephone us and reverse charges if they wanted advice. Just the fact that you were there to help out made a lot of difference to people. And then who was the radio man who went on at 7 o'clock or 8 o'clock in the evening, and often two or three times a week would be attacking the Fund for the Republic or Freedom Agenda. I got so I didn't go out for dinner until somebody gave me a little portable radio, which were sort of comparatively new then, because -- I don't know how I could forget his name -- he was widely listened to, and if he attacked us I had to know what he said in order to be prepared the next day with advice to whosoever it was needed it. It wasn't always on the national basis, there were a lot of things that happened local or statewide that people wanted to do something about, but didn't know what to do.

MCKINZIE: You didn't think that this was an appropriate

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activity for the League of Women Voters as an organization, then?

STRAUSS: No. The League in those days adopted very specific authority for what they could do and what they couldn't do. I think another thing was we hadn't done enough studying to have all of our people prepared to handle it; and, therefore, people that speak out even on the right side, but don't have the background they should have, don't necessarily help the cause. But it was more that the League was not authorized to do it on the kind of a basis that we would have had to attack, as far as the general overall belief. As far as coming out in the way that happened there we did not have the authority by convention to take the action. Of course, it was known that I was heading it up. I mean the Freedom Agenda program; so that in itself brought the League in pretty much and people realized the close connection, and a lot of

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our people that were not working in the League at the time were all giving guidance. Because there was a lot of guidance of what to do and what not to do, but the League was the most active, although some of the other organizations did come out more specifically in their field. It wasn't in the field as a whole, because they did specialized labor interests and others. But we were in touch with all kinds of people to help them do what they would do. And the broader the background of the different people the better it was.

MCKINZIE: Did you have any other contact with President Truman after the Internal Security and Individual Rights incident? Did you ever discuss with him that whole experience?

STRAUSS: No. I never did. Three or four years ago I was out in Kansas City, and thought of going to stop and see him. I was out there with the United Nations Association, but I thought, well,

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I will call up from Kansas City and see if I can come out and see him, just in a friendly way. But when I got there my schedule was so full there just wasn't time to get out to Independence. I don't believe I ever saw him after his Presidency. But I always had a very, very warm feeling towards him. I mean, a personally warm feeling, because he so honestly wanted to do the right thing, and I think at that time it was very much of an off chance that he would become President. I think one of the remarkable things about him was how much he kept his own beliefs, and worked for them, and stood for them. He certainly had no axe to grind other than doing what he thought was right.

MCKINZIE: Perhaps it's the inevitable question of this age: Did you feel that in these activities that as a woman you were treated with respect due your intellect or that you were condescended to? In short, what was the state of women's rights in

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the Truman administration?

STRAUSS: Well, I would have to distinguish between women's rights in the Truman administration or by the President, because I think there was a differentiation. I think what you had to say, or what you had to contribute, or what you were doing was the thing that affected him. I think in the administration as a whole, or with life as a whole, it does make a lot of difference whether you are a man or a woman, and the acceptance of women's opinion and women's activities has still a long way to go. There's a very strong prejudice. But I think that it was actually minimal as far as my experience went with President Truman.

MCKINZIE: Thank you, Miss Strauss.

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