

Oral History Interview
with
BENJAMIN M. HULLEY

United States Foreign Service officer, 1924-54. Served as 2nd secretary and consul, Reykjavik, Iceland, 1944-45; 1st secretary and consul, Helsinki, Finland, 1945-47; chief, Division of Northern European Affairs, U.S. Dept of State, 1947-51; and 1st secretary and consul, London, 1951-54.

Hyannis, Massachusetts
July 5, 1974
by Richard D. McKinzie, Harry S. Truman Library

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MCKINZIE: Mr. Hulley, I wonder if we could begin by asking you how you happened to go into the Foreign Service in the first place?

HULLEY: Yes, well, I can answer that. I will preface it by saying that I've been out of it for twenty years last week, so, what I remember may be somewhat sketchy.

Well, I went into it in 1924. I finished my formal education in '22 and taught for two years, and I was looking for something that was more congenial to me, and I suppose the Foreign

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Service is romantic, or was in those days, and I was in the first group that came in under the Rogers Act in 1924. Examinations were in June and we were sworn in about November, and I was sent to Stockholm, my first post. I don't think I can say much more.

MCKINZIE: How did you happen to end up with so many European assignments?

HULLEY: Well, on my card, where it said, "What countries do you want?" I wrote "Northern Europe," and that has been on my record all of my life. So I got Stockholm first, and then later Ireland, later Iceland, and later Finland; and I was on the Northern European desk in the State Department in '47 to '51. How one gets assignments I have never found out. They find they need somebody, and they find somebody that has been long enough somewhere and they move him.

MCKINZIE: I wonder if you could talk a little bit

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about the period you spent in the State Department, 1940 to 1944?

HULLEY: Yes.

MCKINZIE: Many things were going on, including planning for the peace.

HULLEY: Yes, well, I was not in any of that. I was in the Visa Division, which approved visas for people in Europe, and elsewhere. The visa work is quite a distinct job, with little to do with foreign affairs in general, and my whole time on that assignment was in that work.

MCKINZIE: Did you find that there was a great deal of pressure on the part of people wanting to go?

HULLEY: Oh, yes, always. Always.

MCKINZIE: Is it possible to say that any particular type, or any particular groups of people, wanted to come here?

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HULLEY: Well, I think Jewish was the largest, because they were being oppressed, and a lot of them were out of Germany and its area, and then they wanted to come to a better place.

MCKINZIE: From the desk where you were, did you feel any of the pressure from groups in the United States to open it up a little bit more?

HULLEY: Yes, always, particularly from Congress, because the relatives here would write to their Congressmen and that would be turned over to us, and the pressure was continuous. Also from various societies here, which wanted to help these war refugees.

MCKINZIE: There was really nothing you could do except quote the law to them on that.

HULLEY: That's right.

MCKINZIE: Did you have anything to do with the bringing of the Yugoslav refugees to New York in

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late '44 and early '45?

HULLEY: No, I'd left in '43 and was sent to Iceland.

MCKINZIE: Would you consider that an active wartime post by 1945?

HULLEY: Forty-three to '44 I think were my years there, I was there just one year. It was an active post, indeed. We had American Army and Navy, and British Navy and Air Force. It was active.

MCKINZIE: There is a kind of myth, justified or not, that the Icelandic people feel that American, and maybe British, presence in Iceland was a kind of a heavy burden for their society to have to bear. Did you feel that when you were there?

HULLEY: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, that was true all the time; it is still true I'm sure. They didn't like foreign occupation, which is about what it amounted to, and we had to refute it on the ground that we were protecting it, and maybe we were.

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MCKINZIE: After you left Reykjavik you went to Helsinki.

HULLEY: Yes, I may have given you the wrong year there, I think I went to Reykjavik in '44, in March, and left in March '45, and then came home on transfer to Finland. And it was about April when I set out for Finland. I flew through England and the war was still on, and while I was waiting for the plane to go on to Finland, President Roosevelt died and that was quite a shock. That's when, of course, Harry Truman took over. The flight was from Washington to England and in England you waited for three or four days. Planes could only go by special routes by night up over the top of Norway and then down to Stockholm -- it wasn't a safe journey, but we had no trouble -- and then from Sweden over.

MCKINZIE: What did you find conditions like? What were the conditions of the morale of the people when you first arrived?

HULLEY: In Helsinki?

MCKINZIE: In Helsinki, yes.

HULLEY: They had lost the war and they were a defeated country, occupied by the Soviet and British Control Commission, and they were in a bad way. Food was inadequate, and they

couldn't import things. They had to get along with wood products, which was just about their main production; but they are tough people and they came through, of course.

MCKINZIE: What were the kinds of things with which you concerned yourself when you first arrived? Do you recall the assignments to you?

HULLEY: General legation work, I was in the legation then. I was second in command. Max [Maxwell McGaughey] Hamilton was there and he kindly went on leave for six months, so I was left in charge for that time, and that was just one of the big moments of my career.

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I don't recall any important incidents, except that the Finns very badly wanted a loan, and I remember how happy these government people were when I was able to inform them of a telegram saying that they could have it.

MCKINZIE: In 1945 and '46 how did you see, and was it consistent with the way that the Finns saw, their place in the future of Europe? You know, everyone was talking so much at the end of the war about what was going to happen next, and whether there was going to be a kind of integrated Europe or whether there was going to be a neutral bloc, or whether there were going to be blocs at all.

HULLEY: Well, anything they do is with an eye on Russia and what will its reaction be, and they had to walk a careful tight wire there all the time, with all their relations. They would have liked to be in NATO, as you may remember, but they were quickly told "you can't," and so they jumped right out of the possibility of being a

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part of that.

MCKINZIE: Then in 1945 and 1946, the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union deteriorated from what it had been during the war.

HULLEY: Quite true.

MCKINZIE: Did this make your job more difficult then in Helsinki where your clients, in a sense, had to keep such a sensitive ear to the Soviet Union?

HULLEY: I don't think it did, no. We didn't feel that deterioration so much as you did back home here, but we were on friendly relations with the Soviet representatives there, social relations. We never got much information out of them.

MCKINZIE: But so far as the day-to-day work that you were involved in you didn't feel that?

HULLEY: Didn't feel that, no.

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MCKINZIE: This large tension.

HULLEY: No.

MCKINZIE: Most of the countries, whether they were defeated or whether they were European countries that were victorious, had huge financial problems at the end of the war and they expected -- maybe that's too strong a word -- they certainly hoped for U.S. aid. You mentioned that the Finns had in fact applied for and received aid.

HULLEY: Yes, and they got strong support back in this country. The State Department said give it to them and I don't know what was the background of all of that, but that was how it happened. We'd get pressure from Helsinki.

MCKINZIE: As you look back on that now, and in talking to Finns, what did they expect to happen in the next few years? Did they expect to be more oriented toward the other Scandinavian countries, or towards Central Europe, or to Western Europe, or were they willing to maintain economic and close political ties with the Soviet Union?

HULLEY: They had to do the latter. I think they would have liked to be in the Scandinavian bloc, but they had one eye on Russia all the time and they could only do what would go down in Moscow.

One little detail is that they always felt they were smarter than the Russians and they could outwit them. I don't know if that was true or not; sometimes they did.

MCKINZIE: You don't recall any incidents where they claimed they had?

HULLEY: They didn't claim.

MCKINZIE: They didn't make claims, okay.

The rest of Europe didn't recover very much between 1945 and 1947, indeed their balance of payments got into such bad shape that when Will Clayton went to Geneva in the spring of 1947 he found that the Western European nations were

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going to be absolutely bankrupt by the end of 1947, perhaps by early 1948, for a whole series of complex reasons. Did you believe that Finland was recovering from war, economically and psychologically, in good time, or in good form?

HULLEY: Well, I believed that it would, and they believed that it would. They had a large load of reparations to pay to Russia, and they accepted this as a sort of a debt, and they were determined to pay it. They were willing to make the necessary sacrifices. It was a very slow process, of course; for several years they were on half rations or something like that.

MCKINZIE: To what extent did the Finns put hope in the United Nations? Do you recall if that was a very important thing or not? Some countries did think that the U.N. was going to be the salvation for national problems.

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HULLEY: I don't think that they had that feeling. They thought the United States would help out, and which we did. I think they wanted to be in the United Nations way back -- now my memory's not very clear on this -- but they did join it sometime after that, and I think they would have liked to do so earlier, but they had to wait until Russia said it was all right.

MCKINZIE: They didn't see it as a potential cure-all for their problems?

HULLEY: No, I don't think so. They were very self-sufficient and they said they could get out of this on their own strength, though it would be long in payment; and that's what they did.

MCKINZIE: While you were serving there in 1945 to 1947, did you ever receive instructions from the State Department which you found difficult to carry out? That is, I'm trying to get out at how well your backstopping was during that

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period?

HULLEY: I don't remember any such incident, no. We were well backstopped by the Department.

MCKINZIE: What was diplomatic life like there during those years?

HULLEY: It was very good; it was a very pleasant little group of congenial people whose business it was to get along well with each other, and we did, including the Russians.

MCKINZIE: At the beginning were there difficult adjustments because of the war? That is to say, did you have adequate housing and...

HULLEY: I had adequate housing. The reason was that the Finns with houses of some value were happy to have American representatives in them, because it was a protection to the house. They had this system of assigning people to live in unoccupied houses or rooms, so of course, if Finns owned

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a nice flat (which is what we got), they were very happy to have an American in there, and then the authorities couldn't fill it with a bunch of people who would ruin it. So, that was not a problem.

Also, we had an American legation that our Government built, and for six months I lived in that, with great pleasure. No, that wasn't a problem.

Food was a problem, not so much to us because we could import from Stockholm anything we wanted, and we did; but for the ordinary Finn it was. Most of them had relatives on farms and they could get things from there, but it wasn't easy.

MCKINZIE: But in comparison with what was going on in a lot of other European countries, it must have been fairly pleasant?

HULLEY: Well, diplomatic life is pleasant, yes.

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MCKINZIE: When you were called back to the Department of State in 1947, you soon became Chief of the Northern European Division, a considerably larger responsibility.

HULLEY: That's right.

MCKINZIE: When you came then back to Washington, do you recall dealings you might have had with any of the Northern European countries about getting into the Marshall plan and what the Marshall plan was going to mean for them?

HULLEY: No, I don't recall anything of that.

MCKINZIE: I gather that they were holding up better than, say, France or Italy or West Germany certainly.

HULLEY: Yes. Certainly Sweden was always holding up; it was a rich country during the war. Norway and Denmark had been hit by the war, of course, but the recovery was reasonable in those countries.

MCKINZIE: What about the problem of reestablishing a lot of trade? Will Clayton in the State Department and Dean Acheson (he was Under Secretary), had hoped that there wouldn't be so many tariff barriers and that there would be more free exchange of products and that somehow the economies of not only Europe, but that Europe and the U.S. would dovetail and be integrated, and that that would have politically beneficial effects as well. And yet, Sweden is very strongly neutral.

HULLEY: Very strong, yes.

MCKINZIE: Did this consume much of your time, as you recall?

HULLEY: No.

MCKINZIE: You were just convinced that they were going to be controlled?

HULLEY: Well, there was a certain amount of pressure on Sweden to get off of the fence and it was not

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successful; and I don't know who, it was somewhere in the State Department though. I don't know where it came from.

MCKINZIE: But Norway was considerably more amenable.

HULLEY: Oh, Norway was a staunch friend all the time.

MCKINZIE: Then I guess the problems that Norway had with Sweden were really Norway's problems, rather than...

HULLEY: Than anything else, that's right.

MCKINZIE: As the planning for NATO took place, which as I understand it, was going on here in 1948, and on into '49, were you at all involved or were you aware that those plans were going on to create a military alliance?

HULLEY: I was involved, I was quite aware of it. The Northern European countries, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland were in NATO.

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MCKINZIE: The question is, did they want in? Jack Hickerson told me one time that they had to do some arm twisting.

HULLEY: Whatever Jack says is true. He was my chief there, and he's a great fellow. I think, so far as I knew, Norway was in favor; certainly the Ambassador was, and I think Denmark likewise. But whatever Jack says I support.

MCKINZIE: When they were planning for NATO they were really writing a treaty, not creating a military force.

HULLEY: Yes.

MCKINZIE: At that time, do you recall thinking that the mere announcement that any case of aggression would be met by collective response would be enough, or did you believe that there would have to be a military backup other than the forces of the United States.

HULLEY: I don't know the answer to that.

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MCKINZIE: The question is prompted by the fact that this was time of rebuilding after the war, and there were a lot of economic demands on those countries at that time, and to require then armies on top of that for defense, could have caused some economic dislocation and knocked all those economic plans askew.

HULLEY: A country like Iceland couldn't mount any military defense whatever, except to supply a base; they couldn't have any armed forces. I don't know about Norway and Denmark, I expect that they were willing to put up token contributions to the defense force, but only token.

MCKINZIE: Were you involved in any of those meetings in the summer of '48 where they were beginning to draft a treaty?

HULLEY: Yes. And of course, Acheson was the spearhead of all this. And Jack Hickerson spoke for all of Europe. I was only secondarily in it.

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MCKINZIE: The people who write about that period say that this was a "Europe first" period of American foreign policy. Did you feel that your work and that of your compatriots was really given first priority? And should it have been?

HULLEY: No. No, I didn't feel that, but I think it should have been.

MCKINZIE: You think it should have been?

HULLEY: Yes, should have first priority.

MCKINZIE: Would you mind saying why?

HULLEY: Well, I suppose my service in Europe made me think that it was more important than some of the other areas of the world. I'm still of that opinion.

MCKINZIE: Some people who probably were born after NATO was formed, have said that there was really no military threat, that NATO was necessary for

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political reasons to weld together, in another way, an unwieldy group of nations with interests which were not very compatible.

HULLEY: Well, I guess it was necessary to bind them somewhat together, and I think it was a good thing and I still do.

MCKINZIE: But if I could pursue that a little bit, the announced purpose of NATO was to deter any further Soviet push or subversion in Europe, that any aggression would be met by collective response, and some of the writers argued that perhaps that great a need for a military force was not real, and that what the real need was was for cohesion of those countries.

HULLEY: Well, I think they needed both.

MCKINZIE: Did it provide it?

HULLEY: Well, I thought that it did at the time. It seems to have run downhill since, but I thought it was very necessary and valuable.

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MCKINZIE: Even at the time you thought it brought Iceland a little closer to the interests of the rest of us?

HULLEY: Yes.

MCKINZIE: How did the Korean war affect your work?

HULLEY: Not at all.

MCKINZIE: The routine work of the division was not affected?

HULLEY: Was not influenced by the Korean war. Now, let's see, I forget the date of the war, was it '51?

MCKINZIE: It began in June of 1950.

HULLEY: In June of 1950 I was still in the State Department.

MCKINZIE: Yes.

HULLEY: No, it didn't affect my work.

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MCKINZIE: Not even the attempt to get troop contributions to the NATO force?

HULLEY: I don't remember anything about that.

MCKINZIE: When in 1951 you went to London, on another assignment, was the Korean war at all a part of that work?

HULLEY: It wasn't a part of the work, no. I knew about it in the press, that's all.

MCKINZIE: Could you discuss the problems that confronted you and the work you did in London?

HULLEY: Yes, I was put on the political desk for British politics, and particularly the Conservative Party. Another officer was following the Labor Party. And that was my main interest throughout my three years in London. It was a very interesting one. I knew leaders of the Conservative Party, and whenever they had an election it was an interest to guess how it was going to go, and to report what happened. And

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I had a few of those miscellaneous things such as the political unity of Europe. I don't know what they called it then. Strasbourg was the center for it and I used to come to the meetings there.

MCKINZIE: Was that ever a real possibility?

HULLEY: I did not think so, no; I thought it was window dressing. Maybe it is, though.

MCKINZIE: Well, that's an interesting observation. It hasn't come about and it doesn't look too likely; but what caused that in the first place? Was that due to U.S. push?

HULLEY: Somewhat. Somewhat. We let the Europeans know we thought it was a good idea and they had better get on with it, but it wasn't as easy as we at first thought.

MCKINZIE: What do you think was the main sticking point on that?

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HULLEY: Oh, independence, none of them wanted to give up any of their sovereignty to any other body of that kind.

MCKINZIE: You don't think that any of the British officials with whom you dealt ever thought that it was an evolutionary possibility?

HULLEY: I doubt it very much. I think they put up the appearance of playing ball, and that was about it.

MCKINZIE: Well, there were other Europeans who were quite committed to that idea, I guess?

HULLEY: Yes, I think in Belgium and France.

MCKINZIE: Yes, some French.

HULLEY: And West Germany.

MCKINZIE: It would have created all kinds of problems for the British Commonwealth.

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HULLEY: That's right, as we've had since.

MCKINZIE: Did you get a chance to discuss with any of the Britishers the problem of how the Commonwealth might fit into such a plan?

HULLEY: Oh, I think so. I don't remember definitely, but it was an obvious thing to do.

MCKINZIE: How willing were Conservative Party leaders to talk to an official of a foreign government about their in-house problems?

HULLEY: Well, I really don't know. I don't think I have any opinion on that.

MCKINZIE: Did you feel that you were able to accurately assess the situation in the Conservative Party? Did you have good intelligence on which to base your reports on the Conservative Party?

HULLEY: Yes, I think I did, I knew a good many of the MPs and the organization that ran the Party. Yes, I think that our contacts were good.

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MCKINZIE: Who received your reports, and then what happened to your reports after they were filed?

HULLEY: Well, the British desk (I don't know what it was called) the United Kingdom, I guess, in the State Department. Your reports go in there and that's the end of it.

MCKINZIE: I wonder if I could ask you to talk a little about diplomatic life in London as it compared with other posts that you've held?

HULLEY: Well, it was too big to be compared with what we had in Helsinki, for instance; all the countries, I guess, were represented. When you first got there you went through the formalities of leaving cards at all the embassies and that was just about it. They were not the same "family group" that we had in Finland, couldn't be, it was too big.

MCKINZIE: Did you find that by that time the cold war had made a difference on the social life

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of those people in the diplomatic service? That is to say, was it possible in 1951 to have a social relationship with someone from Poland?

HULLEY: I don't know, I was not in touch with the Eastern European embassies at all, it wasn't my bailiwick, and there wasn't any reason for me to. Someone else, I don't remember who, must have been assigned to those connections, and I wasn't in that at all.

MCKINZIE: Was there any change at all in your work at the end of the Truman administration and the beginning of the Eisenhower years?

HULLEY: Well, give me a date.

MCKINZIE: Well, Ike was inaugurated in '53.

HULLEY: No, not in my work. You run into prejudices pretty soon. You have a new Secretary of State, and we never liked him, I must say; I'm speaking for myself. He did come to London shortly after he was named to the post and his attitude was

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one of, "I want to learn," and, "I want to be helpful," and that was all right, but he just didn't win the hearts of anybody. But Eisenhower was above all -- I mean we didn't get anything from him.

MCKINZIE: Dean Acheson used to come to London once in a while in his...

HULLEY: After he retired you mean?

MCKINZIE: No, when he was Secretary, I'm going back in time now.

HULLEY: Oh, I see, I don't remember.

MCKINZIE: I think he came there for NATO meetings and that kind of thing, and I just wondered whether he ever came into the...

HULLEY: No, I was more in his presence while NATO was being formulated in the Department. Afterwards in London I don't remember his being there.

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MCKINZIE: During this period from 1951 when you went to England, England was still having terrible economic problems.

HULLEY: Yes, it was.

MCKINZIE: Were you concerned -- you were on the political desk, but nonetheless those things do get tangled up -- with economics and politics? The British would always ask for a certain amount of money and the United States would always respond with a somewhat different amount, and somebody in the first place has to determine how much money is required to do what is needed to be done in Great Britain. Were you ever involved in any of those kind of discussions, how much Great Britain was going to need or what?

HULLEY: Not at all.

MCKINZIE: This is a political question. How sensitive were the British about having to get U.S. loans?

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HULLEY: Well, I suppose it was a mixed reaction. They didn't like having to come with hat in hand, but they needed it. I didn't know anything about this part of the work.

MCKINZIE: When you were in London, then, what were your major responsibilities other than the Conservative Party?

HULLEY: That was the main one.

MCKINZIE: That was it. Did this ever involve going down and listening to the Parliament in session?

HULLEY: Yes, very often. I think at one time I was going about once a week; and I enjoyed it very much, including the House of Lords, a body of very intelligent people.

MCKINZIE: Hopefully they last. I see someone has just put a resolution in to abolish that.

HULLEY: Well, that was Labor for you. We won't certainly go into that.

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MCKINZIE: Fine, thank you very much

HULLEY: It has been a pleasure.

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