

Oral History Interview
with
CHARLES J. GREENE

Reporter for various publications prior to working for the Washington bureau of *Time* magazine as a reporter (1941-42), and the New York *Daily News*, 1946-69. Chief of the Washington bureau of the New York *Daily News*, 1969 to the present.

Washington, D.C.
February 9, 1971

by Jerry N. Hess, Harry S. Truman Library

The Harry S. Truman Library
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NOTICE

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[1]

HESS: To begin this morning Mr. Greene, would you give me a little of your personal background; where were you born, where were you educated, raised, and what are a few of the positions you've held.

GREENE: I'll do what I can. My name is Charles J. Greene, Jr., I've been writing under the name of Jerry Greene for newspapers since about 1930. I was born in Conway, Arkansas October 6, 1910, educated in the local schools and in Hendrix College. I worked for a year after graduation in Little Rock in an advertising agency and then with the *Arkansas Gazette* from 1930

till '35 and I came to Washington and joined the Associated Press. After a couple of years I went to Chicago, the *Chicago Daily News* for three years, and then to New York with Fawcett Publications for a year and a half, and then back to Washington in the spring of 1941 with the *Time* Magazine as a reporter in the Washington bureau.

[2]

I went on military leave in 1942 for service in the Marine Corps and on return to inactive duty from the Marines in December 1945, I went to work for the New York *Daily News*, and I was made chief of the Washington bureau of the *Daily News* two years ago.

HESS: The position you still hold.

GREENE: Yes.

HESS: What are your earliest recollections of Mr. Truman, sir?

GREENE: I first met Mr. Truman very casually, one time I believe, in either 1941 or the early spring of '42 when he was head of what later became known as the Truman Committee investigating military camp construction; the waste in military camp construction.

Walter Hehmeyer, who was on the staff of the Committee helped me obtain a copy of the Truman Committee's first report a couple of days before it was made public, which enabled *Time* Magazine to break the story, I believe either on the public release day or the day before. And *Time*, if memory is correct, carried two full columns on the report. And this, I believe, was the first national attention that was ever given to Harry Truman, and he picked up a head of steam with his war investigation operations very promptly after

[3]

that report came out.

HESS: Did you, or did you not, feel that Walter Hehmeyer and the staff of the Truman Committee had somewhat better understanding of the value of publicity than a few of the other committees operating on the Hill?

GREENE: I don't know that they had a better understanding than other committees, because there had been some other committees with very able press-minded people, but I had the feeling that Hehmeyer had a much keener sense of the value, publicity value, and the merit in what the Truman Committee was doing than the chairman himself did.

Truman impressed me as a man who saw a job that needed doing and he went out to do it without any regard for publicity at all. He had never had much publicity around here. And as I said, I met him only once casually and he indicated no particular interest in personal publicity at all at that time.

HESS: After that date did you ever attend any of the hearings of the Committee?

GREENE: I don't believe I did, I may have.

HESS: Do you recall anything in particular about some of the other staff members of the Truman Committee; Hugh Fulton, Charles Patrick Clark?

[4]

GREENE: I came to know Hugh Fulton quite well and continued the usual casual, professional friendship with Hugh until he came a cropper in his relations here in Washington some years later. I can't even remember how that came about.

HESS: Did you know him at the time that he was Chief Counsel for the Committee?

GREENE: Yes, I met him somewhere during this release time and I must have covered some of the Committee hearings, and followed up on this thing, because I did develop an acquaintance and a very happy professional relationship with Hugh.

HESS: Do you recall anything about Charles Patrick Clark who was on the Committee staff?

GREENE: Only that I met him.

HESS: Matthew Connelly?

GREENE: Oh, I knew Matt Connelly, not too well on the Committee, although he remembered me later when he got to the White House as having been one of the first to pay some attention to what they were doing.

HESS: What do you recall about the events of 1944 and Mr. Truman's selection as the vice-presidential candidate on the Democratic ticket?

GREENE: Nothing, because I was in the Central Pacific

[5]

in the Marine Corps at that time. However, I won an election bet with my commanding general on that election.

HESS: On the outcome of the...

GREENE: On the outcome of the...

HESS: ...November election?

GREENE: Yes.

HESS: Where were you when you heard of the death of President Roosevelt?

GREENE: I was back in Washington attached to Headquarters Marine Corps Division of Aviation.

HESS: What were your impressions at that time, and just what kind of a job did you think that this new man coming into office was going to do?

GREENE: That's a little difficult to answer because my attention was much more focused on the military operation than on politics. I felt a sense of shock and of tragedy that anyone would feel at the loss, sudden loss of a President. But somehow, since I was not particularly an ardent Roosevelt supporter, I didn't feel that the country would go down the drain. And I didn't know much about Truman except that he impressed me as being a pretty honest politician. And for a good many years I've labored under the impression, or

[6]

illusion, that the country was bigger than any of the politicians that were elected to run it. And I had no particular concern that the country would come apart.

HESS: During Mr. Truman's administration did you attend his weekly news conferences?

GREENE: Some of them, with no regular pattern. I was assigned to cover the White House for a time, several months, but until perhaps the last ten years or so...no, fifteen years, the *Daily News* did not have one man who did the White House and nothing else. And the daily coverage is pretty largely routine, and most of the people in our bureau would go to presidential press conferences as a matter of course in connection with the particular angle, or particular area they were covering. Usually there would be something coming out of a press conference which would relate either to foreign affairs, military affairs, and during that time I was concentrating on coverage of military affairs.

HESS: In general, how skillful did you think that Mr. Truman was in fielding questions at his press conferences?

GREENE: There again, you raise a difficult question, because it implies a comparison. And I never had the feeling that Truman used any skill at all in handling

[7]

his press conferences. He simply handled them like he did everything else, very directly, very bluntly. And you had the impression that when Truman got on his feet and talked to the press he was ready and willing to answer almost any question that was thrown at him. As a result, I think he was probably much more skillful than some of the Presidents we've had that attempted to manipulate the conferences; more so.

I particularly remember in those days the President presided at the annual budget seminar, a practice that's disappeared since. And I handled the annual budget for the office, I think for 25 years, 24 years. And Truman seemed to take a great deal of pleasure out of presiding at the budget seminar for the press, held in advance of the release of the submission of the budget to the Congress. And he handled his seminars as he did his press, any other type of press

conferences, very crisply. And I first became impressed with Truman because of the detailed and intimate knowledge of the budget he displayed at the seminars. He always spoke with a twinkle in his voice and he was very impatient with reporters who questioned him who obviously hadn't read the message carefully. And when somebody would ask him a stupid question he would say, "It's right

[8]

there in the budget. You will find it on page so and so." And for a man who was supposed to have no particular educational background and a big business failure and that sort of thing, Truman had a very keen knowledge and grasp of the budget as a whole, and of amazingly detailed particulars within the budget. And his budget seminars were to be well remembered, I think always will be by those who attended.

HESS: Did you feel that Mr. Truman made use of the press conference in the most effective and efficient manner in the area of educating the public, informing the public, or influencing Congressional action? Were there other ways that he could have handled the press conference more effectively.

GREENE: I don't think so. I don't think so. In retrospect, it seems to me that Truman handled his press conferences, or held press conferences, simply because Roosevelt had and it was something that was a part of the job and he was expected to do. He seemed to enjoy them. Truman always seemed to enjoy everything he did, except when people were getting a little too pushy.

HESS: Mr. Roosevelt had held two press conferences a week, Mr. Truman cut that number back to one. Do you recall very much opposition on the part of press

[9]

members to that cutback?

GREENE: I don't recall it at all, but I'm sure there was a great deal of it, because there's a large amount of squawking by the press every time the President does anything; up, down, good, bad, backwards or forwards, just as there is today.

HESS: The President's news conferences were held in the Oval Room until April of 1950 and then they were moved over to the Indian Treaty Room of the Executive Office Building. Which location was your favorite?

GREENE: Oh, the Oval Office. It's my own opinion that the presidential press conferences have never been the same. Now I grant you that the Oval Office was a pretty lousy place and it got worse as the number of reporters grew and it became impossibly crowded. And it was an awful nuisance and a jam and a mess. I assume that's one reason he moved it, but there was an intimacy there and a feeling of spontaneity that disappeared from the press conference, and as far as I'm concerned it's never been recaptured.

HESS: What is your estimation of the effectiveness of Mr. Truman's two principal Press Secretaries? Now Charles Ross was Press Secretary from early in the

[10]

administration until his death in December 1950, and then he was succeeded by Joseph Short. First Mr. Greene; just what was your opinion of Charles Ross as a Press Secretary?

GREENE: There again, you get into the matter of comparison of personalities, and I think that people would do well to remember that as a President's Press Secretary, whoever he might be, does exactly what the President wants him to do or he isn't Secretary very long. And if Charlie Ross satisfied Truman, that was his principal aim in life as Press Secretary. Charlie was an able and a very highly respected, and extremely popular newspaperman. He understood the business as well as any of us, and more, better than most of us who are some younger. And I think probably every newspaperman thinks he can do anything, in any direction, a lot better than anybody else, but they all have weaknesses and there were some areas that Charlie probably wasn't as adept in as others.

HESS: What areas would those be?

GREENE: Oh, it's hard to recall, possibly in organization of trips and attention to some of the little picky details that make for ease of living, the mechanical

[11]

sort of things that some people get absorbed with that make it comfortable.

I don't know, Steve Early was a very dynamic man, and a very positive force around the White House. Charlie never tried to be that, but I'm quite sure he was a counselor to Truman as well as a Press Secretary. They were entirely different types and served different purposes.

HESS: Mr. Ross had an assistant by the name of Eben Ayers. Did you know Mr. Ayers?

GREENE: Oh yes. I knew Eben Ayers quite well. And he was an old friend of mine and I liked him very much. One wondered from time to time how much Eben knew about what was going on or how much he cared. Again, I have a feeling there's a lot of these people are much more aware of what the situation is than some of us who have only official contacts with them.

HESS: And then after Mr. Ross' death, Mr. Short took over.

GREENE: Well, Joe Short had been a friend of mine and a colleague in the Associated Press back in 1935, and I had a great deal of respect for Joe as a newspaperman. And Joe was a much more aggressive man than Charlie Ross was for example. It's a matter of their personalities.

[12]

Joe was quite efficient, quite knowledgeable, and much more protective (that's not a particularly good word to use), of Truman than Charlie was. Charlie didn't seem to feel that there was any

particular need of it. Charlie was as loyal as any old friend could be and Joe was almost fiercely loyal to Truman. He was devoted to him personally.

HESS: And after his death, the two men that had been his Assistant Press Secretaries took over: Roger Tubby and Irving Perlmeter.

GREENE: Both friends of mine and quite competent, able newspapermen, and as far as I can see, or I'm concerned, did exactly what they were hired to do and did it quite well.

HESS: As a personal opinion, who would you select as the best Press Secretary, presidential Press Secretary that you have known?

GREENE: Again you're asking me to run a rating on people who, generally speaking, have been friends of mine, and are, those who are alive, which is quite difficult to do. They are too wide a cast of characters. I would have to say from the standpoint of efficiency, and probably knowledge of the inner workings of what was

[13]

going on, that Jim Hagerty, Eisenhower's Secretary would probably rate number one.

HESS: And as another personal opinion, what is your opinion of the seeming reduction in the number of press conferences that we have had? Just for a few figures, Mr. Roosevelt had 998, Mr. Truman had 324, Mr. Eisenhower had 193, Mr. Kennedy in his shortened administration had 64, Lyndon Johnson had 135, and on the 12th of December last, Mr. Nixon had his 12th news conference. Just what is your personal opinion about the reduction in the number of press conferences?

GREENE: In that regard I am probably the minority of one in a thousand that differ from most of my colleagues in this racket, in my viewpoint of the press conferences. I personally don't like press conferences. So far as the presidential press conference is concerned, I never believed that it serves the purpose of communications between the public and the press that most of the reporters seem to think it does.

HESS: Why doesn't it, where does it fail?

GREENE: It isn't a matter of failure, it's -- I don't think

[14]

anybody has any particular doubt of what Nixon's views are on practically everything, if they do they haven't been listening or reading. And I don't see that going over and listening to ten widely varying questions which serve as an excuse to give him unlimited time to answer each of them, adds to the reporters knowledge of the man or subject. And as I see the presidential press conference, certainly as Roosevelt used it, and as Jack Kennedy very quickly learned to use it, that is a tool of the Presidency, to be used -- certainly is dominated by the President and is to be used for whatever purpose he chooses to use it for. And sometimes it can be even on the venal side, and the communications media has changed so radically since Roosevelt's day that it's

difficult to draw an adequate, or a decent comparison between even ten year periods. What television has done is incredible. I don't think that the press or the TV people themselves understand it totally yet. Nixon has perhaps a greater grasp of it than any preceding politician. He ought to, it did enough to him and for him. But I don't know what Roosevelt would have -- how many press conferences Roosevelt would have

[15]

held if there had been television. But I don't know how many of them he would have permitted to be televised.

So, this is a developing thing, it is constantly changing, it changes according to the personality of the man. I'm sure that Eisenhower held press conferences only because he thought he had to. I don't know any man who ever seemed to like them less. Kennedy used them as adroitly as a circus ringmaster. Nixon stages them and exploits them for his own purposes. Well, if you've got a man doing that sort of thing, why become a patsy, why be a part of his show?

HESS: Does it reduce the value of a press conference to not to be able to ask follow-up questions. It seems that in the latest news conferences a reporter stands up, asks one question, sits down and that's it, and he does not have an opportunity after the President's statement to probe further.

GREENE: Well, there again, you get into the -- some reporters aren't capable of probing further. Others would probe endlessly for a minute detail that's of no consequence to anybody.

[16]

We have this lady who's utilized a good deal of time, television time, at press conferences asking questions that pertained to one small segment of the population in one small area of a very large state. Now, what the hell purpose is served of explaining the Presidency to the nation by taking up time that would have cost thousands of dollars on a commercial basis, to call attention to something that's happening on some two-bit river in the wastelands of Texas? Now, those are the sort of questions that...

HESS: Referring to Sarah McClendon, sir?

GREENE: I'll let you call names.

HESS: Well, when you said a big state, I thought that...

GREENE: Well, it isn't just Sarah, there are a lot of people. And there are a lot of reporters who are intensely interested in one particular area that will have very little interest to the people generally and contribute almost nothing to an understanding of the Presidency or the man. Certainly you need follow-up, certainly you need discussion, certainly you need to pick at a subject until you've exhausted all that you think whatever story you're working on needs. That's one reason I don't like press conferences, you simply

[17]

do not have, and to my knowledge never did have that opportunity.

Now, if you're satisfied with the surface brush of one or two questions, my God, if there is anything that has been expounded and come apart at the seams and been overflowing with words, it's this current operation in Laos. You've had people jumping up and down for days over a news embargo. Well, what's been proved by it? And the Administration has wasted thousands of words.

I got a packet from the White House this morning with about ten pages of paper in there explaining Laos to me. Now, what more, what purpose would be served by going to a Nixon press conference this afternoon and ask the President a needling question about whether he thought the embargo had served a useful purpose, or why was it necessary to deceive the American people, or why did we have to get our news about Laos from [Alexei] Kosygin and the Kremlin? I don't see that that sort of thing contributes knowledge of the inner workings of the Presidency.

HESS: Anything else to add on presidential press conferences?

GREENE: No, except I don't like them.

HESS: All right. What do you recall of the events in 1948

[18]

surrounding the convention, and the campaign, and the election? Mr. Truman took a trip in June 1948, did you go along on that?

GREENE: I don't believe I did. Was that the one that included the famous empty hall in Omaha?

HESS: That's right sir.

GREENE: No.

HESS: All right, so you weren't on that trip?

GREENE: No, I didn't make that trip.

HESS: Okay, Did you go to the convention in Philadelphia that year?

GREENE: Indeed I did. I went up several days early, as has been our custom, and...

HESS: Did you go to the Republican convention...

GREENE: Yes.

HESS: ...that was held in that hall...

GREENE: Yes.

HESS: ...about two weeks earlier I believe.

GREENE: Yes. Yes, I have covered all of the conventions, all of the national conventions; Republican, Democrat and the Henry Wallace thing.

HESS: That was in the same hall...

GREENE: In the same hall.

[19]

HESS: ...a few weeks later.

GREENE: That's right. That's in 1948.

HESS: How would you compare the mood between the Republican convention and the Democratic convention that year?

GREENE: I couldn't recall any precise difference in mood between the party conventions that year and any other year, they are always different. The Republicans are always pretty well organized, pretty orderly, got their ducks in a row, and the Democrats normally put on a much better show and take a good deal of delight in tearing each other apart. And as I recall this thing was pretty much in the same atmosphere.

HESS: Do you recall anything in particular about the efforts that were made that year to secure someone else other than Mr. Truman as the standard-bearer on the Democratic ticket in 1948?

GREENE: I'm trying to think. I know that there was -- the Democrats were in an extremely foul mood. Perhaps if my memory were refreshed a little bit I could respond more directly to your question, but Truman was about as unpopular at that time as one man could be and hold public office. And I didn't have any feeling

[20]

at all that there was anybody at the convention who, other than his personal friends, who had any interest in seeing him the nominee.

The civil rights thing was very hot. Hubert Humphrey was coming up with that famous fight he made on the civil rights plank. The southerners were intensely angry, and in an atmosphere of that sort you've got a lot of tension building up. At the same time if I recall, without any retrospect to anything I wrote at that time, I don't think there was any feeling at all that there could be any serious or successful effort to unload Truman. Truman was always talking about the "Boss" usually referring to his wife, but there wasn't any question about Who was the boss no matter how much they disliked him.

HESS: Were you present when Mr. Truman, early that morning, in his address accepted the nomination, about 2 in the morning I believe it was.

GREENE: I was present, but not available. I got out in the hall that morning, oh, 10 o'clock I guess, and started writing the running story of the convention. And I didn't leave the typewriter except for about thirty minutes to get a sandwich and a beer up in the railroad lounge or someplace. And about 11 o'clock that night

[21]

I collapsed or something, from the heat, exhaustion. And at the time Truman spoke I was in the Red Cross room on the first floor of the convention hall and in a bed with a nurse rubbing ice on my head. I heard the noise.

HESS: Well, as you know, Mr. Truman concluded his acceptance speech by calling Congress back into session, the so-called Turnip Day Session.

GREENE: Oh yes.

HESS: And that has been pointed out by many historians as an effort to set up an opponent for himself during the campaign, and to run against what he considered the "do-nothing 80th Congress." But still the do-nothing 80th Congress had passed a Greek-Turkish Aid Bill, they had passed the Marshall plan, several of the things that he had wanted in the foreign field. Now does it seem to you that elections are run more on domestic matters than on foreign matters?

GREENE: I don't know, except for money, and by money I mean good times and bad times...

HESS: The economic measures.

GREENE: ...economic measures, I have a personal feeling that elections are run more on personalities than they

[22]

are on issues. There aren't too many issues that really split a country or a people. The Vietnam thing has, and I've got some ideas about the reasons for that. But I don't believe, I don't know that I ever discussed this with any of the Truman people, but I don't believe that Truman is devious enough a man to have called a session of Congress expecting it to do nothing so that he would have something to run against. I am of the impression, mistakenly perhaps, but I am of the impression that Truman was simply furious that this Congress had not done some of the things that he thought needed doing, and he thought they had ought to come back and do them. And I think that he was so angry about it that he was determined to make whatever last effort he could to get action. And I think that he thought that the Congress had failed the country, for many reasons, when they got through with the Turnip Day Session and he set out to tell the people about it.

HESS: What do you recall about the campaign that year? Did you travel on both campaigns?

GREENE: Oh, that was a lovely campaign. It was the last campaign I really enjoyed I think. Yes, I traveled

[23]

with both Truman and [Thomas E.] Dewey. I can't remember exactly how much time I spent, I think probably two weeks with Dewey and three weeks with Truman, and wound up the campaign with Truman.

HESS: Where did you go with Mr. Dewey, which section of the country, do you recall?

GREENE: No, I'm fuzzy about that because I'd traveled with Dewey fairly extensively during his campaign in the spring for the primaries for delegates, and I tend to overlap, but I made one of the big swings with Dewey; I think perhaps the Midwest.

HESS: How would you characterize the reaction of the crowds that Governor Dewey was drawing, were they...

GREENE: Well, you're asking me to think a long way back. I was impressed with the crowds that Truman was drawing more than Dewey. Dewey had good enough crowds, good Republican crowds.

HESS: At the times you would stop for a whistle stop speech either with Truman or Dewey, or for a major address, would you go out to interview various members of the crowd to find out what they were thinking, sort of take the temperature of the crowd, so to speak?

GREENE: In most of these places, not much at whistle stops,

[24]

but certainly at overnights, and at any extended stops where he left the train, I always tried to talk to the local newspapermen, I tried to talk to cab drivers, I tried to talk to bartenders, or anybody else that I met. I never went around doing much of this interviewing strangers because I don't think you got an honest answer from them when you do that anyhow. But you spend a buck with a man over a bar and he'll talk to you. You ride in a cab and he'll talk. Sometimes a cop will talk or a fireman, and you meet the local politicians and you get a sense from them of intensity of feeling. And I felt continually while traveling with Dewey, they accepted Dewey, people thought, "Well, he's going to be elected we might as well show the flag." With Truman I had a feeling that there was a building of intensity steadily through the campaign, and there was a crowd that came out to see Truman because the word got around that Truman was going to give them hell and he did. And not in a personal way, and yet in Harry Truman's own personal way.

He was one of the world's worst public speakers from a standpoint of polish and performance, but he

[25]

got to the people and he talked to them about what they were interested in. I could see this thing and I believed in it, and I made and won eight relatively small bets on the election.

HESS: You thought Mr. Truman was going to win.

GREENE: I thought Truman was going to win. I thought so from, oh, perhaps early in October. I didn't get any feel from the Dewey crowds. They were accepting Dewey and they were pushing Truman.

HESS: What were a few of the major stops and the major addresses of Mr. Truman at which you were present? Were you in New York when he spoke at Madison Square Garden?

GREENE: Yes. Yes, I should say I was! Coming into New York on the special train, if I recall, Truman spoke on a Friday night in Brooklyn in the Music Hall and...

HESS: That's right.

GREENE: ...Saturday night at Madison Square Garden. And I think we had had copies of both texts in advance and I can't remember what the Garden speech was about, but I know that he had, I believe, a foreign policy speech of some significance for Brooklyn. And I got

[26]

highly indignant about that. Why in the hell he'd waste a good meaty foreign policy speech on a Friday night in Brooklyn for a Saturday morning paper when he could turn that loose at the Garden on a Saturday night and make the Sunday paper with it. To me it just seemed to be stupid public relations.

Well, I got hold of Matt Connelly, and said, "Look, I've got to write them both, it makes no difference to me, I'm going to be there, but if you want to do your hero some good why don't you get him to switch these speeches?"

Well, Matt and I talked it over a bottle in his compartment, and he thought that that was a fine idea. So, he went and put it before Clark Clifford and they had quite some considerable discussion about it, lasted long enough for me to consume more of Matt's bottle than I should. And finally, I assume an hour or so later, Matt was summoned up to the throne. Clifford or somebody had said no they would go with the foreign policy in Brooklyn.

HESS: Did they give a good reason?

GREENE: No, you don't -- I mean in politics you don't have to give a reason to the small fry.

[27]

HESS: On that same day, I believe at the speech at Brooklyn and Madison Square Garden, he had gone out to Harlem to speak at Dorrance Brooks Square before a predominately Negro crowd. Did you go along on that trip? He was driving through New York.

GREENE: I may have and I may not have. I don't remember, because normally when we in the Washington bureau traveling with the President and move into the New York area, the city side

turns up with lots of help to cover things like that and if I were busy or tied up writing the main speech or something of that sort they would detach somebody. I don't recall that so that may have -- I may not have been there.

HESS: Do you recall any of the other major addresses, anything of interest about some of the major addresses?

GREENE: No.

HESS: Now his last major address was given in Kiel Auditorium in St. Louis, did you go to Kansas City?

GREENE: No. I stayed in New York to write the congressional story in the election. And another man, I believe Frank Holman, went out and covered that St. Louis speech and we went on to Independence for the election night with Truman.

[28]

HESS: Do you recall anything of interest about the campaigns of Henry Wallace and J. Strom Thurmond?

GREENE: No, I did not travel with either one of those people. I covered the Henry Wallace convention. I knew all of those, I knew Henry and I knew Rex [Rexford Guy] Tugwell extremely well. I had met both in 1935 when I was with the Associated Press here, and so I had a speaking acquaintance with them.

HESS: What affect did you think that the efforts of those two campaigns, Wallace's and Thurmond's, would have on the eventual outcome?

GREENE: I didn't think that they would influence -- I didn't think Henry Wallace would amount to much at all, which he did not. And I thought that probably Truman would lose the southern states because I knew, coming out of the South, I knew something about the intense dislike of Truman down there. But I still thought Truman would win the election. The crowds that I saw Truman gather were not in the South, they were in the rest of the country.

HESS: Mr. Truman made one swing into the South. He went down to North Carolina, were you along on that trip?

GREENE: I don't believe so, I don't remember.

[29]

HESS: Where were you on election night, New York City?

GREENE: I was in New York City.

HESS: What do you recall of that evening? Perhaps the surprise on the part of some of the other newsmen.

GREENE: Oh, just a great incredulity on the part of experienced and veteran newspapermen as the returns began to indicate the trends. I'll have to go back and check the files, but my offhand recollection is that our people at the *Daily News* were among the first to spot the trend, and that was reflected in our successive editions.

HESS: All right. Anything else on Mr. Truman in '48?

GREENE: No, not that I can think of.

HESS: Okay. Did you ever go to Key West with the President or aboard the *Williamsburg*?

GREENE: Yes, I made one trip to Key West down there for about ten days. And that was...

HESS: What do you recall of that trip?

GREENE: Well, what I recall of that trip had nothing to do with the President personally. It was a purely vacation trip and made almost no news.

HESS: Did he hold any news conferences though at that time?

GREENE: No, he went over to -- we flew over to -- from Key

[30]

West to Naples and then drove to Everglades, that was when he dedicated the Everglades National Park. The reason I remember it is because I was on a press bus that got stuck in the Everglades, and they put us in State Police cars to catch up with the plane, and we're running along those little narrow roads with those deep canals on both sides, a hundred and five miles an hour in a police car. And I don't care for that on those Florida roads, or any other.

HESS: Where did you stay when you were at the...

GREENE: We stayed downtown at a hotel, I can't remember the name of it, the La Concha it seems to me.

HESS: But you didn't see Mr. Truman very much on that

GREENE: No, we saw almost nothing of him on that trip.

On the *Williamsburg* I made, I think this was probably the spring of '47, it was the year that some Supreme Court justice died, I can't even remember which one. But Truman set out for a week's vacation cruise on the *Williamsburg* down the Potomac. He made an overnight run to Norfolk and then he went out aboard an aircraft carrier and I was told, I believe, that that was the first time he had been aboard

[31]

a carrier, and the press was on a separate carrier.

The press had chartered a yacht, sort of a freebee deal I think it was with Walter Chrysler, Jr., to follow him. And there were, oh, ten to twelve of us on that yacht, and it was in the early spring, and the weather was miserably rainy and cold. And Truman brought the *Williamsburg* back up to Quantico and anchored out in the stream and stayed there for about four days and we had our yacht tied up at the dock. And he interrupted the trip to come up to the funeral of this Supreme Court justice, and then drove right back to Quantico and back out aboard his yacht in the rain and misery. And during the trip, one day when the weather had improved, toward the tail end of the trip, he had a press party aboard the *Williamsburg*, and had us over there for drinks and it was very, very pleasant. He was always pleasant around the press on these informal occasions.

HESS: Do you recall what members of the White House staff were present at that time?
Matthew Connelly?

GREENE: I don't recall that. Charlie Ross was there.

I recall one story that Truman told us. We were standing out on the back of the -- back of the -- well,

[32]

the fantail of the yacht having a drink and the conversation, I think this was during the period when there had been some criticism of Margaret Truman's singing and -- the famous Truman letter and it may have been before that. But, however the subject came up, Drew Pearson had had a column that had some unflattering comment about Margaret. And the President told us that Drew had shown up at the White House with some petition to bring the boys home from overseas or some stupid petition. And somewhat to the surprise of the staff, Truman told them to send Drew in.

And he came in with this petition, and Truman ignored the petition, said he didn't want, had no interest in that, but he wanted to see Pearson on another matter. And he said, "You've been writing some nasty things about my family." And he said, "I want you to know that down in Missouri we put our women on a pedestal, and my women are on a pedestal, and I'm going to keep them there." And he said, "Over in that desk I've got a gold plated automatic pistol that was given to me for a present, and you son of a bitch, if you write one more line derogatory

[33]

about my women, I'm going to take that pistol and use it on you." And I think he meant it.

That was the one anecdote that I heard that Truman -- I made one trip with...

HESS: Did Mr. Truman say that?

GREENE: That was Truman I was quoting. Truman said he told Drew Pearson, "You son of a bitch, you write one more derogatory word about my women and I'm going to use that pistol."

And I recall another trip I made with Truman, I can't remember the date. They went to Ottawa, and Mrs. Truman was with him on a special train, and that would have been in '47 or '48, '49 someplace there.

HESS: What was the occasion?

GREENE: And I can't remember the occasion, but I think it was perhaps the only trip during the period that he made to Canada, so that might help fix the date. And Truman usually came into the press car, or the dining car where the press was, and we were sitting there and got word the President was coming through. And I was sitting at the table with Tony, [Ernest B.] Vaccaro of the AP, and I believe Joe Short, and drinking. And

[34]

the President came up, we were playing cards, and Vaccaro invited him to have a hand at a poker game. No he didn't think he had the time for it. And he said, "Well, Mr. President will you have a scotch?"

And Truman looked at him, he said, "No, I don't think I will, but I'll be glad to have a bourbon."

Whereupon the Secret Service ran around pulling down the shades and we ordered him up a bourbon. And he stood there and had a bourbon and soda with us, bourbon and water, I don't know which, drank with us. He was a very friendly man, very ostentatious, and yet with a tremendous amount of dignity. There was never any question about the dignity of the Presidency, when Truman was in.

HESS: I believe you were on one other trip with President Truman, the famous trip to Wake Island, correct?

GREENE: Yes.

HESS: What can you tell me about that? When did you first get news that you were going, that there was something up?

GREENE: Oh, I don't know. I never seemed to get much advance notice on these trips.

[35]

HESS: Do you have to keep a bag packed or something?

GREENE: Well, as a matter of course, I keep a little kit bag packed at all times, and I've made some rather extended trips on very short notice.

HESS: What do you recall about the trip to Wake Island?

GREENE: Well, I had obviously been involved in the preliminaries that preceded the trip because I was writing military stuff out of the Pentagon at the time and was thoroughly familiar with the acrimony, and the general opinion, and the developments of the trouble, and that sort of

thing. And it was natural that under those circumstances I be assigned to the trip. And we flew out in (the press), in a Boeing stratocruiser. And to my knowledge I don't think the press saw Truman to talk to at all on the trip. And it was a very hasty deal. There may have -- I'm sure there were some words exchanged.

I recall MacArthur was careful to let him get there first so he would be there to receive him, and we were all down at the plane when MacArthur came in. We were all down at the plane together when MacArthur departed. And Truman was as gracious as any man could be. I think he was extremely gracious to

[36]

have gone to Wake Island in the first place, it would probably have been a mess to have brought MacArthur back here.

My impression of that trip was that both out of his respect for a military hero, whether he liked him or had much use for him or not, but out of respect for a man who had a distinguished record of military accomplishments, Truman leaned as far over backwards as was humanly possible to keep from having to fire MacArthur. I think he came away from Wake Island having made that clear to MacArthur that he was the boss, and that he not only could not, he would not tolerate this sort of thing. It had to stop, the messages MacArthur was sending back, and the intrusions MacArthur was making into policy matters. I think Truman bent his knee harder, further toward MacArthur in making that trip in the first place, to save him from himself, thinking all the time that he much preferred to have fired him out of hand. And I think he had the feeling that maybe he had succeeded, and that MacArthur was a smart man, understood the gravity of the situation when he came back. That feeling was not shared by some of those around Truman.

[37]

Yes, I remember that trip quite well, because we had very limited cable facilities out of there and I was picked by the president of the White House Correspondents Association to be the rewrite man, the typewriter man, with the dozen other reporters coming in and dictating to me.

HESS: Writing a pool story.

GREENE: I wrote the pool story. I had about a dozen of the finest type leg men that anybody ever had feeding them a story on that trip. I don't think very much of it got in print back here, we ran into so much communication problems.

HESS: One point we should cover before we move on is the -- since you were writing out of the Pentagon at this time

GREENE: Yes. Pentagon and politics in general, and the Hill where military matters moved to the Hill.

HESS: The previous month, in September of 1950, Louis Johnson had been replaced by General [George C.] Marshall. What do you recall about the necessity, why was that move made? Did you see the necessity of this move?

GREENE: I saw the necessity of that move before Louie Johnson got the job.

[38]

HESS: Why did he get the job?

GREENE: Well, to the best of my knowledge it was politics and political pressure. Johnson was very high on the Democratic circles.

I did not like Johnson, I did not trust him. I had one personal session with him that was a little distasteful. I was of the opinion that Johnson wanted very badly to be Secretary of Defense and whether he moved personally to dump [James V.] Forrestal or merely waited while other events took their course, I don't know. People never know about those things in politics, or if they do know, they know one side of it and somebody else gets a different version. But it was my opinion that Johnson wanted the job, that Johnson was ruthless in getting the job and that Johnson had no business with the job, and practically his short time over there was catastrophic and....

HESS: What were the major mistakes he made?

GREENE: I can't think of anything he did to my judgment at the time that wasn't a major mistake. His whole attitude toward the military, his paring the budget, I assume under presidential direction, to the bone.

[39]

I think it went down to what, an eleven or a thirteen billion dollar budget. I think...

HESS: In these reductions, wasn't he just carrying out President Truman's general budget...

GREENE: I was just going to . . .

HESS: Or was he really an active party in that decision?

GREENE: He had to be carrying out presidential instructions, but on the other hand, he did it in such a manner that he was taking great personal credit even for that. He was paring the -- trimming the fat only.

I think in retrospect, if I had to criticize Truman, I would say that his greatest mistake -- he did some very great things, but his greatest mistake was either in permitting, without realization of what he was doing, or directing, or both, the almost total dissolution of the country's military strength in a period between 1945 and the start of the Korean war. I don't know whether he could have stopped it. Certainly the people were sick of war, and sick of the money it had cost and all that, but the pendulum was so far that when the Korean thing broke it was disaster. We had nothing, the military, the world's greatest military machines turned into a shambles overnight

[40]

during this period.

Although, out of it Truman certainly was -- I could never understand, he was pretty effective in promoting this service unification, which still isn't what it should be, but in my judgment was a step in the right direction. And he pushed and got that through Congress, the National Defense Act of 1947, it's a monumental job.

It will take another generation perhaps to refine it properly, but that was a magnificent accomplishment at the same time to let the services themselves go to pot while he was doing this, was something I never could understand. And I gave Louie Johnson the credit, or blame, for permitting this wreckage of the military forces at this particular time.

HESS: I believe that Steve Early was at the Pentagon with Mr. Johnson at this time, was he not?

GREENE: Yes, I think so, for a relatively short time, but I knew Steve over there, but I had the impression that Steve had not much knowledge of the Pentagon and practically no interest.

HESS: How capable was General Marshall in running the

[41]

Department of Defense in the short time he was there? He was there for one year.

GREENE: Well, General Marshall was capable in whatever I ever heard of him doing. I wouldn't sell you too much on some of his China advice, but the whole thing, the whole defense system was in a period of transition at that time, and Forrestal had been such a strong man at that time, had such a sense of direction there that I don't know, I'd pass over Secretaries of Defense. Lovett was in there, I can't remember, he was an Under Secretary I believe. Lovett was an extremely able man. I can't even remember the other Secretaries until Tom Gates came along who had sense of what was needed and a sense of direction, organization. A very strong man in my judgment.

HESS: In November of 1950 the Chinese Communists entered the fighting in Korea. Was that a surprise to you? Do you recall?

GREENE: Oh yes. Yes, that was not only a surprise, a great shock, a calamity. I think Truman handled the Korean war after we got into it in an extremely able manner. He was very quick to get the UN backing.

[42]

It was a facade, of course, but it was a facade which if Lyndon Johnson had had might have salvaged some of his career from the Viet mess. And Truman was able to make it stick as a UN operation, at least on the surface officially. And I think he was wise at the time in not calling for a declaration of war, with this rather ridiculous label of "police action" that brought him so much criticism, but there are many reasons for not having a declared war.

Well, let's go back a minute on the Korean situation. To put that into proper perspective, I think it must be remembered that the rivalry between the armed services probably was at an all time peak. Certainly not in my lifetime have I seen such bitterness and open enmity between the Army, the Navy and Air Force. It had begun during the fight over unification, and it was still going.

As I recall it was in 1949 they had the so-called revolt of the admirals when Carl Vinson held the hearings (I've forgotten what the label of the hearings), but rather exhaustive hearings, where the Navy presented its case against the B-36 bomber. And Curtis LeMay challenged the Navy to an air duel with live ammunition, one of their fighters against his bomber.

[43]

I was rather intimately involved in coverage of that and I was quite familiar with the planning and the maneuvering that went along to bring this about. This was part of the period of adjustment, and a fight for money and preferred position, and a belief in their own importance.

These are pretty sincere people, pretty dedicated people, and I cannot, I could not then, and I cannot now, and I will never be able to understand the extreme hatred of the liberals of this country .for a bunch of other American citizens who are in the military, dedicated to trying to protect the country. They might just as well be out as some of them are, devoting their time to hating cops. And these are pretty serious minded people and they make a lot of mistakes. I haven't seen the liberals totally free of mistakes yet. But the service situation was at its absolute worst at the time the Korean war broke. The bitterness continued during, and after, the war.

You remember that General Omar Bradley at one point said of the Korean war (I believe this was in some testimony up on the Hill), "The wrong war, and the wrong time, and the wrong place."

[44]

General Carl Spaatz, "Tooey" Spaatz had by then retired as Chief of Staff of the Air Force and was then writing a news column for *Newsweek* Magazine. He wrote a column, I believe he started writing it in my home, for *Newsweek* in which he said it was the right war, and the right time, and the right place, and we just were a little stupid for not recognizing it. This could have come a little afterwards. I don't recall the timing of that, but I do recall the Bradley and the Spaatz opposing views.

The Spaatz view, which was held by a large number of military people, was that we had the Koreans, and the Chinese Communists stopped, and this was the time to have whatever showdown was necessary either with the Chinese or the Russians, who at that time had only the faintest rudiments of nuclear weapons, if they had them. I've forgotten the dates, but they certainly had no delivery system. And that was the last time when a superior American nuclear threat would have been of any practical use in the minds of a lot of these people. I am inclined to agree with them.

But it was an awful mess, as you well know,

[45]

and then all of this situation was at hand. This was the condition of the two that Truman had worked with. This is one of the miracles of this country, in my judgment, that it responded as well as we did.

You don't want any -- have neither time nor space here for any critique of the MacArthur approach, MacArthur actions, the military end of it. This much I believe -- I'll start that over again.

I got to, during the Truman years became quite a good friend of Admiral Sidney Souers, a St. Louis businessman, maybe you know him. And saw quite a bit of him during the time when he was forming the stopgap central intelligence group, and developing the Central Intelligence Agency, which I believe was written into that Defense Act of '47. And the Admiral and I used to talk politics on situations candidly from time to time. And years later, many years later, Souers told me, and someone else I can't remember who else, concerning the settlement, the armistice in Korea that was finally reached after Eisenhower was elected. Said, "My God, we could have signed that sort of an armistice any day we wanted to long before with the Koreans, but Truman had arrived at a strong defense

[46]

line and could hold it indefinitely with almost no loss, and he wasn't about to give in. He thought he could eventually effect a better agreement than had been reached."

As a matter of fact, there is no peace reached yet, the armistice, so-called, is still in effect, and there are two armed camps opposing each other, which was not the way Truman had in mind as the proper way to end the war.

HESS: General MacArthur was dismissed in April of 1951. Did you think that was necessary, or did you think it could have been handled in a different way?

GREENE: Well, you're again asking the opinion of a newspaper reporter about politics and military, tactical military matters. All I can tell you, had I been in that circumstance, I would have fired him sooner. I think the way Truman handled it was the only way to have handled it.

I covered -- I was called to the White House the night that he was fired and I wrote the story of his dismissal of MacArthur, and I subsequently wrote of the hearings that Senator [Richard] Russell conducted with great wisdom in my judgment. Russell handled

[47]

that masterfully and cooled off a good deal of the animosity against Truman that resulted from his dismissal of MacArthur. I covered the MacArthur appearance here before the Congress, and subsequently, spent a week covering his funeral.

No, I don't think MacArthur left Truman any out. You had a military man who was speaking in matters of policy and he was told to shut up and the President went halfway across the world to almost plead with him to mind his own business. And when he didn't, you could do one of two,

things, you let him run the show or you could have fired him. I don't see that Truman had any alternative at all.

HESS: Before we move on to the events of 1952, do you have anything to add on the Korean war, or the military situation at that time?

GREENE: Well, only personal opinions of the military situation, nothing pertaining to the President that I can think of.

HESS: What are your opinions of the military situation?

GREENE: Well, I'm inclined to agree with General Spaatz. I don't think that it would have been necessary to have used the nuclear weapons, I certainly hope not.

[48]

But I think that was the time to -- certainly it was a time to find out whether air power would work, and it might have -- the things that MacArthur and the military had in mind, regarding the rear bases, the Manchurian bases, might have cooled things off over there for a bit longer than the bomb. I do not believe Russia would have entered. I think the nuclear threat would have kept Russia out of it, at that time.

HESS: When did you first become aware that Mr. Truman didn't intend to run for re-election in 1952?

GREENE: I suppose when he announced it.

HESS: Were you there that night at the National Guard Armory? It was the Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner, March 29th of '52.

GREENE: I don't recall, but I don't think so. I'm not sure about that. I don't believe I was. I never expected him to run.

HESS: Why?

GREENE: I just had a feeling. He had had almost two full terms, and he had very positive thoughts about the Presidency. He had as much knowledge of, and regard for, the office of the Presidency as any I've seen

[49]

in it. And I don't think that he was -- he, or anybody else, is particularly happy with three and four terms for Roosevelt. I think when he put in seven and two-thirds years, and just the feeling I had about Truman was a gut feeling. It never occurred to me that the man would try for another term after that.

HESS: After he took himself out of the picture, who did you personally see as the best man for the Democrats to put up that year?

GREENE: Oh, I didn't think it mattered a great deal who they put up.

HESS: You didn't think they could win?

GREENE: Not against Eisenhower. I had watched the development of the machinery that put Eisenhower in as the nominee, and they had some pretty solid professionals at work at it. And the people had had years and years and years and years of turmoil, and the father figure that promised them peace looked awfully good.

I think that in retrospect, that people are going to regard Nixon a little more kindly as giving them a relatively quiet period after the '60s. If he serves no other purpose and no longer than one term,

[50]

it would have been a tension-easing period. And I think that was necessary.

HESS: Did you go to both conventions that year, Republican and Democrat?

GREENE: Yes.

HESS: Do you recall anything in particular about Robert Taft's efforts to try to secure the nomination?

GREENE: Oh, I was aware of that from the very beginning, because I traveled with Taft extensively during the current primaries. I traveled with -- who else was involved in those primaries? But I was...

HESS: Harold Stassen.

GREENE: No. I ran into Stassen once, and that was too much. No, but I was very fond of Taft as a person, and I had made a -- I had done a lot of traveling with him in the early primaries. Made one trip, there were only three reporters, two or three, went out to the West Coast with him in the middle of the winter and down the West Coast; Dave Engles and Taft and two or three of us, Dick [Richard L.] Strout was one, and I think Glenn Thompson, three of us. So, I got to know him quite well.

HESS: What kind of a man was Robert Taft?

[51]

GREENE: A highly intelligent man, a brilliant man, a very intense man, I think an honorable man. He didn't have much sex appeal. But I was thoroughly familiar with the so-called Texas steal, and the delegate fights, as a matter of fact, I covered the credentials committees at both conventions, and I knew a good many of them from my days with the Dewey campaign, [Herbert] Brownell, and Bill [William P.] Rogers. Bill Rogers had been a friend of mine for

several years. And so I was aware of, and writing about, in as much detail as I could get, the delegate manipulation that cost Taft, if any one thing did, that cost Taft the nomination.

HESS: Did you travel with the campaigns trains during that campaign?

GREENE: Yes. I spent some time with Stevenson, but more with Eisenhower.

HESS: Anything in particular stand out in your mind about those trips, or about the way that the crowds may have reacted to the two men?

GREENE: Stevenson and Eisenhower?

HESS: Yes.

GREENE: Well, you've got -- Eisenhower had that adulation

[52]

that followed him around everywhere he went, from the day he came back here after the war. I had met Eisenhower first when he was a brigadier general. And I covered the Eisenhower's announcement speech at Abilene, Kansas when he came back and stood out there in the rain with his pants rolled up. And he had that popularity wave going. I don't think people paid any attention to what he said.

Stevenson's campaign was about as ineptly handled as you could possibly imagine. Of course, Stevenson was a brilliant man, and a delightful person, and an exquisite speaker, but that had no chance against Eisenhower. And Stevenson I don't think had endeared himself too much when he displayed his enormous reluctance. He went almost too far, but I don't think it would have mattered, I don't think any man was on the horizon who could have touched Ike at that time.

HESS: All right, I have two ending general questions.

GREENE: Yes.

HESS: What were Mr. Truman's major accomplishments during his administration?

GREENE: I'd like to think over a good deal before I gave you snap judgment on the major accomplishments. And

[53]

again, you'd have to draw distinction between decisions and accomplishments. Certainly the decision to drop the atom bomb...

HESS: What's your opinion on that?

GREENE: I was very much in favor of it, then and now, because I had been among those who were ticketed. I had served one tour of duty in the Central Pacific and I was ticketed to go back

to the invasion of Japan and I wanted no part of it. And I think it would, if their estimates were right, it would cost a million casualties.

I think that our high brass were totally wrong in preparing for the invasion. I don't think it would have been necessary, but they were sold on the idea. And I think Japan was badly whipped and looking for a way out and I don't think that they needed the atomic bomb, but if that's what it took to stop it, why, it saved an awful lot of American lives.

HESS: Any other accomplishments, or decisions?

GREENE: Well, that, I don't know that you could certainly call that an accomplishment.

HESS: Just a decision that he had to make.

GREENE: Yes. He -- and his decision to go ahead with the

[54]
hydrogen bomb was a very gutty decision and a proper one.

His reorganization of the Pentagon was an accomplishment, and I think probably one of his greatest accomplishments for which he's never received proper credit and never will. Well, he might some day. There's an order he signed integrating the armed forces. I think that Harry Truman with his signature on an Executive order did more to put solid ground under the civil rights movement than all of the noises that have been made since. Because with the integration of the armed services he opened up an area of equality. It's been slow in coming, but it had to be accepted, and therein through the armed services, and through the money made available and the GI Bill of Rights for the black GIs to go to college. I covered the riot at Oxford, Mississippi when James Meredith entered, and James Meredith was a veteran who was going to school on the Bill of Rights, the GI Bill of Rights.

And I can't remember who was responsible for the GI Bill of Rights, but combine that, the educational opportunities, with Truman's forced integration of the

[55]
armed services. And I had had some personal experience with the problems presented there during the war, and it was shameful. And I think that took a tremendous amount of courage on his part and probably helped pave the way for an eventual resolution of his racial problems to a far greater extent than most people realized or appreciated.

I don't know, I'd have to think. I'd want to check records to talk further about his accomplishments.

HESS: All right.

GREENE: He brought the country to the conclusion of a war, he presided pretty well over a very difficult transition made more difficult by another war. And under the circumstances, left the country in pretty good shape, comparatively speaking.

HESS: What do you see as Mr. Truman's place in history? One or two hundred years from now how will he be regarded by historians and members of the general public?

GREENE: I've never been able to figure out how historians regard anything. Very few of them agree with each other. They spend more time criticizing each others

[56]

work than they do trying to find out more facts. And I don't have a very high regard for most historians that I've read and I've read a good many of them. So, I don't know. In my judgment Truman should go down among the ranks of the excellent Presidents by virtue of the tough decisions that he made if nothing else.

HESS: Do you have anything else to add on Mr. Truman, the Truman administration, or your observations thereof?

GREENE: No, I don't believe so, Jerry. I shudder to think what I've said already, but I don't know that this helps you very much. But it was a very interesting time and a torturous time. But then, except for relatively brief interludes, that's been the whole history of this country. People keep looking back to the good old days and they were looking back to the good old days when I was a child. And we've had a history of moving through a continual series of interconnecting crises with a little breathing space now and then and he took the country in the middle of a -- end of part of a war, and successfully, under the circumstances, brought it through in pretty good

[57]

shape. I don't know what the hell else you could ask of a President.

HESS: Thank you very much.

[58-59]

INDEX

Bradley, General Omar, 43

Brownell, Herbert, 51

Chrysler, Walter, Jr., 31

Clark, Charles Patrick, 3-4

Connelly, Matthew, 4, 26

Democratic National Convention of 1948, 19-20

Dewey, Thomas E., 23

"Do-Nothing 80th congress", 21-22

Early, Stephen, 11, 40
Everglades National Park, dedication of, 30

Fulton, Hugh, 3-4

Greene, Charles J:
Democratic Presidential candidate, in 1952, opinion of, 49-50
Korean War, military situation, opinion of, 47-48
press conferences, opinion of, 8, 13, 17
press secretary, "best", 12-13
and Truman, Harry S, opinion of, 3, 55-56

Hehmeyer, Walter, 2-3
Holman, Frank, 27
Humphrey, Hubert, 20

Johnson, Louis, 38-40

Korean.War, 41-46

LeMay, Curtis, 42

MacArthur, General Douglas, 35-36
dismissal of, 46-47
Marshall, General George C., 37-38, 40-41

Pearson, Drew, and altercation with President Truman, 32-33
Perlmeter, Irving, 12
press conferences, President Truman's, 6-9

Rogers, William P., 51
Ross, Charles, 9-12, 31-32
Russell, Senator Richard, 46-47

Short, Joseph, 10-11, 33-34
Souers, Admiral Sidney, 45
Spaatz, General Carl and Korean War, 44-45
Stassen, Harold, 50

Taft, Robert, 50-51
Thurmond, J Strom, 28
Truman Administration, accomplishments of, 53-55
Truman Committee, 3-4
Truman, Harry S.: Presidency, dignity of, 34
press conferences, 6-7
press secretaries, effectiveness of, 9-10

as public speaker, 24-25
re-election, decision not to seek, 48-49
Tubby, Roger, 12
Tugwell, Rexford Guy, 28
"Turnip-Day" Session, 21

U.S.S. *Williamsburg*, 30-31

Vaccaro, Ernest B.(Tony), 33-34
Vinson, Carl, 42

Wake Island, 34-35
Wallace, Henry, 28