

Oral History Interview
with
CARLETON KENT

Newspaper correspondent with the Chicago *Times* (now *Sun-Times*), 1939-71; war correspondent, Pacific and European theaters, 1942-44; Washington correspondent, 1945-71; and president of the White House Correspondents Association, 1950-51.

Washington, D.C.
December 21 and 29, 1970

by Jerry N. Hess, Harry S. Truman Library

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HESS: To begin this morning, Mr. Kent, would you give me a little of your personal background?

KENT: Well, let's see. To start at the beginning, I was born June 13, 1909 in Northfield, Minnesota, where my father was a physics instructor at Carleton College. Then we moved to Ann Arbor, where he was again in the Physics Department at the University of Michigan. And then to Lawrence, Kansas, where he was, by this time, a full professor of physics at the University of Kansas.

In 1932, on graduation from the University of Kansas, I went to work for the Lawrence,

[2]

Kansas *Daily Journal World*. And after about a year and a half of spectacular work as a very green reporter (I had never taken any journalism courses), I got a job on the *Daily Oklahoman*, which to me was real metropolitan newspaper.

And then after a couple of years there, I went to the Kansas City *Star* for a year or so and then returned to Oklahoma City and the *Times*, which was the afternoon edition of the *Daily Oklahoman*. In April of 1939 I moved to the Chicago *Daily Times*, which was a precursor of the *Sun-Times*, and have been there every since. During the war I was a gallant war correspondent for about three years.

HESS: Which theaters of operation?

KENT: First in the Pacific in Australia, New Guinea, and Guadalcanal, and then they sent me to Turkey in 1943. Somebody had the weird idea that the war finally was going to be fought on the upper

[3]
reaches of the Mediterranean. In other words, a foreign editor had bought the Churchill plan for attacking...

HESS: The "soft underbelly of Europe."

KENT: ...the soft underbelly (exactly), the great old cliché, but nothing ever happened. And I began to bellyache (speaking of underbellies), to get back and cover the war. I can't imagine now why I did this, why I didn't keep still, but they let me get back in and got shot at some more in Italy and Southern France, and I finally wound up in Belgium, and got a cable to come home and go to work in Washington as the Bureau Chief. And, in fact, the whole bureau, for it was a one man bureau then. This was just days before the Germans launched their Battle of the Bulge, which would have run me out of Spa. And thank God, I didn't know anything about it, or I suppose I would have felt honor-bound to stay there and to

[4]
get run out of town. And here I've been ever since.

HESS: Did you take place in any of the major invasions?

KENT: Yes, if you want to call the invasion from Italy into Southern France a major one; it seemed major to us at the time.

HESS: At the time, when you're getting shot at I expect they seem major don't they?

KENT: Right.

HESS: When did you first meet Mr. Truman, or what are your earliest recollections of Mr. Truman?

KENT: Well, I came to Washington as the Chicago *Daily Times*' correspondent, January 2, of 1945. This meant that I attended, and covered, Franklin D. Roosevelt's fourth inauguration, which was held on the back porch at the White House, in the slushy snow.

[5]
HESS: I understand it was a rather cold day.

KENT: A rather cold, raw, nasty day, and he didn't look well, and nobody felt good about it. By that time, I suppose, although it was my first inaugural, most of the newspapermen and other people there were getting to regard Roosevelt's inaugurals as...

HESS: Standard Operating Procedure.

KENT: ...something less than exactly new.

I don't really recollect anything much about Mr. Truman personally, except knowing that he was Vice President, and had been chairman of the War Investigation Committee which made a considerable name for itself; until Mr. Roosevelt's death, when the sun and the moon and the stars all landed on Mr. Truman all at once.

HESS: He was more or less an unknown quantity then?

KENT: He was to me. I suppose a number of my colleagues

[6]
who had been covering Capitol Hill knew him, but I didn't. Of course, I was a brand new boy in town.

HESS: Did you attend the Joint Session of Congress when Mr. Roosevelt made the report to Congress after the Yalta...

KENT: Yes, I did.

HESS: What do you recall about that, anything in particular?

KENT: Mostly I recall how wretchedly ill he looked, drawn, and pale. I had seen him a number of times as he went across the country after his first election in 1932, and I was prepared for a pretty robust looking man. And he looked drawn and distinctly ill, I thought. But it is a curious thing, most of the people I talked to in those days were not saying this, were not saying that he was ill, or if they said he looked down, they would always add, "Yes, but

[7]
he always comes back from these things." People didn't want to say, to admit, that he was, they thought, a goner.

HESS: And over the years he had exhibited remarkable recuperative powers.

KENT: Oh, of course. Of course.

HESS: I believe it was in March that Mr. Roosevelt attended the White House correspondents dinner.

KENT: That's the last time I saw him, as they wheeled him off the dais.

HESS: Was that at the Statler Hotel, do you recall?

KENT: Yes.

HESS: Do you recall anything else about that dinner? Recall anything of interest?

KENT: No, nothing particularly. I remember his waving as they wheeled him off, and realizing later, of course, that this was my last view of

[8]
him.

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

KENT: I suppose I was in my office here in the Press Building.

HESS: What were your impressions at the time? What were your thoughts?

KENT: Oh, shocked: Even though as we were just saying, he looked ill and everybody subconsciously at least, realized that he was in bad shape, I don't think anybody expected the blow to fall when it did.

I remember a scramble of a number of reporter friends of mine to go down to Warm Springs, Georgia. I didn't go. And I remember that funeral weekend; a number of things about it. I remember standing in the front lawn of the White House, right behind Mrs. Roosevelt, as they brought the body back up Pennsylvania Avenue, and being very

[9]
impressed with how firm and resolute and dry-eyed she was as she stood there. It was a very moving moment for me. I was near tears and I'm sure that if she had shown tear one I would have broken down. But she didn't.

HESS: What are your recollections of Mr. Truman shortly after he took office, anything in particular?

KENT: I remember the bird walks that ensued right after he became President. I remember Tony [Ernest B.] Vaccaro of the AP, and Merriman Smith of the UP, and Bob [Robert G.] Nixon of INS (I'm not sure Nixon was on the scene that promptly), were the customary bird walkers along with the Secret Service men.

HESS: And by bird walks you mean this early morning walks, or...

KENT: Yes, around the neighborhood. I think he had the idea for some time that it was pretty easy

[10]
for a President to circulate around the streets, and it probably was, in the sense of his security. I suppose that the Secret Service was always a bit unhappy about the carefree way that he liked to walk around, but it wasn't the production in those days that it became later; I mean security measures surrounding presidential promenades.

HESS: What are your memories of the press conferences that Mr. Truman held during his years, say, both the location of the press conferences, perhaps, and Mr. Truman's handling of them? Do you think that he handled his press conferences in an efficient manner, as well as could be handled?

KENT: Well, my recollection is that -- I don't know what you mean by the word "efficient." He was plain-spoken in ways that succeeding Presidents learned to avoid, it seemed to me. He was...

HESS: Would it have been best if he had avoided being

[11]
so plain-spoken?

KENT: I think so, on occasion. Actually one of the things that occurs to me about his press conferences is a meeting I had with Matt Connelly, his private secretary and Ed McKim, the Omaha insurance man who was briefly a presidential adviser. I've forgotten his exact title.

McKim knew me very casually through Russ Stewart, who at that time was managing editor of the Chicago *Daily Times*, and who knew Mr. Truman quite well through Mr. Truman's chairmanship of the Senate War Investigating Committee during the war. Stewart used to come down here to try to squeeze a little more newsprint out of the Government for the paper. And they became friends and worked on trains and planes back and forth between here and Chicago. It must have been some reason like this that provoked Mr. McKim to ask me to come see him and Matt at the Statler Hotel as I recollect it, because I

[12]
had only been here three or four months. I knew almost nothing about Washington newspaper coverage, but I remember one question they asked me: Could they go back in terms of press conferences, presidential press conferences, to the written questions as Herbert Hoover had? And on this, although a greenhorn, I was pretty sure of my ground and I said, "No, they couldn't possibly do this after so many terms of Mr. Roosevelt's opening the door twice a week to all sorts of ad-lib questions and answers."

HESS: Did it seem...

KENT: If they took my advice, it was only because it was inevitable anyway, and they could soon see this on their own.

HESS: Did they say anything at the time that might lead to your thinking that this was a general idea in the -- among the White House staff members at this time, that Mr. Truman should go back to -- that Mr. Truman might not be capable of the open

[13]
press conference, and that he should have written questions?

KENT: Well, I can only say that it was my impression, that somebody in the White House inner circle felt this way, and I presumed one or both of them were worried.

HESS: At least those two.

KENT: They were worried about Mr. Truman's ability to handle the open off-the-cuff question and answer session. If I had -- I didn't know Mr. Truman at the time, but if I had had to rationalize my feeling, farther than to say that reporters would have been very outspoken of the written question idea, it would have been to suggest that Mr. Truman, after a certain amount of time in the Senate, and in public life, would probably be able to handle himself a little better than an Omaha insurance man or even Matt Connelly who had been with him in his committee,

[14]
apparently assumed.

HESS: Do you know if they spoke to any other newsmen about this subject?

KENT: I don't know.

HESS: All right. And Mr. Truman's press conferences were held in the Oval Room until about 1950 and then they switched over to the Indian Treaty Room.

KENT: Yes.

HESS: Which did you prefer? Which location?

KENT: I liked the Oval Room, it seemed more intimate. Well, it certainly was more intimate, we were jammed in elbow to elbow, but there was an instant quality about it that was lacking when we got over to the Indian Treaty Room. It didn't matter so much though, where they were held, as long as they were held as frequently as Mr. Truman did.

HESS: Well, one question on that: Mr. Roosevelt

[15]
had held two a week...

KENT: Yes.

HESS: ...Mr. Truman reduced them to one a week.

KENT: Yes.

HESS: Do you think that he should have held them at two a week?

KENT: I hadn't been there during the Roosevelt years, except for the last three months of his life, but I would say that one a week would be entirely adequate. I've been told that many of the Roosevelt press conferences were of only a few minutes duration, and I can understand why. The daily, weekly, bi-weekly questioning of a man tends to reduce the number of...

HESS: Questions that you can come up with.

KENT: ...questions that you need to know the answers to.

[16]
HESS: When you were in the Oval Room could you hear as well or better, or not as well, as in the Indian Treaty Room?

KENT: Well, as things went along in the Indian Treaty Room, of course, they developed a public address, wiring for sound, and microphones, so that took care of itself. I think what you're referring to is the matter of the peculiar acoustics in the Oval Room. I found them to be such that to hear well you either had to line up early and get as close to the President's desk as possible, in the front row, or else you could go way back to the back well. Something about the construction of that room threw the sounds back there so it was very good auditing indeed. In the middle ground it was pretty poor.

HESS: If you spoke up from the back row to ask a question, could he also hear you very well, better than he could in the middle?

[17]

KENT: I don't know, because I never sat in his desk, but I assumed so, especially if you sang out, and the reporters had to learn to do that.

HESS: Did you ask a good number of questions yourself?

KENT: Oh, I think so. I recollect doing this, yes.

HESS: Do you...

KENT: Another thing I liked (while we're at the subject of press conferences), he had a nice way of handling the situation when you had a visitor. An editor from Chicago was always very fond of going to a presidential press conference, and it was customary before the sessions to speak to Charlie Ross, the President's press secretary, and say that you had an editor or a visitor, and that you would like to introduce him to the President. And Charlie was always very friendly and courteous about this and would say, "Well, of course, why don't you introduce

[18]
him yourself afterwards?"

So, you would line up with your VIP after the show, and the President always had some comforting little word for you to indicate to this editor that you and he were indeed very close.

I remember one time an editor of mine, came out with his eyes out on his cheekbones, because I introduced him to the President and said, "Mr. President, you look fine. How are you feeling?"

And he said, "There's nothing wrong with me, Kent, that a drink of bourbon can't cure."

Now, to the editor it sounded as if I was frequently over there having a late afternoon nip with the President, and indeed, that's what this kindly man meant him to feel. Although, in fact, we very rarely bent an elbow together.

HESS: Were there occasions that you did?

KENT: Yes, oh yes.

[19]
HESS: What do you recall about those?

KENT: I had been here about a month when somebody organized a trip on the presidential yacht, the *Williamsburg*, down the Potomac, and how I got included on that I don't know because I was so new to the Washington scene. And this was the first time when I had, let's say, socialized with the President in a very informal session in which a couple of dozen of us gathered around him. We had a couple of drinks and we talked about the issues of the day.

HESS: Do you recall what he said?

KENT: No.

HESS: Now, about a month after he took over?

KENT: It was in the winter of 1945, so it was -- oh, no. It would be the following winter, naturally, 1946.

HESS: Yes, because President Roosevelt died April

[20]
the 12th of '45.

KENT: So, it would be January or February of 1946, and I have forgotten what it was about. I recollect that afterwards very few notes were taken, and it was understood that this was to be some degree of deep, background approaching off-the-record, but we got together afterwards and pieced out what he had said according to our best recollection, and I suppose that some people used this later and some didn't.

HESS: Do you recall if the subject was on one major topic?

KENT: No.

HESS: Or on a number of them?

KENT: No, I don't think it was.

HESS: Did Mr. Truman...

KENT: You've interested me now on that, and I'm going

[21]
to go back and see if I can find...

HESS: What the subject was.

KENT: I hadn't recollected this, I hadn't thought about it for a long, long time.

HESS: Did Mr. Truman do this often, have a group of reporters in, in an informal session like this as a backgrounder?

KENT: This is the last time that I knew about, the first and last time.

HESS: Do you think that he would have been somewhat more effective in educating the public through the press had he had more sessions like this?

KENT: I think so. I'm a firm believer in as much contact and communication with the -- the only elected officer of all the people, as the newspaper reporters can manage.

HESS: What is your opinion? Just in assumption,

[22]
why didn't the White House do this more often with Mr. Truman? If this was an effective way for him to meet the press, why wasn't this done after the winter of '46?

KENT: I'll make another assumption now, which is, as is so often the case, that some reporters, or columnists, who were aboard that cruise down the Potomac, didn't handle it the way he wanted it handled. In other words, they didn't treat it as deep background or off-the-record, and in some way or another things were attributed to him that he didn't want attributed to him. This happens so often. In my eight thousand years in Washington, time and again, the rules get lost sight of or misinterpreted, or ignored.

HESS: Could Mr. Truman have used the press conferences to greater effectiveness to educate the public, or to perhaps to present his views to Congress? The press is such a wide forum, and can be used for so many things. Could he have used it more

[23]
effectively?

KENT: I suppose so. I say that because I think that any President always could use them more effectively. I don't recollect now that there was any great deficiency in communication during the Truman years. We've already mentioned that he had a press conference at least once a week (or on the average once a week), and that, plus messages, speeches, certainly constituted a higher degree of communication than we're now getting under President [Richard M.] Nixon.

HESS: Jumping ahead just a bit, but I'd like to do this, and this is just purely an assumption, but the Presidents of late have not had near as many press conferences as even Mr. Truman had. Mr. Roosevelt had nine hundred and ninety-eight in his twelve years and three months; Mr. Truman I believe had three hundred and twenty-three, something like that. And now Mr. Nixon has not

[24]
had very many. Well, just as an assumption, what effect do you think it would have had on the reporters and on the press if Mr. Truman had more or less gone into a shell, such as Presidents of late have done, and failed to communicate with the press?

KENT: I think in those days there would have been an instant and prolonged uproar in the communications media amongst them, mostly because they had developed a habit of having two a week, twice a week press conferences under FDR. And, although I can't say that I recollect this, I suppose that there was some resentment when Mr. Truman cut those down to one a week. I think if he had reduced it to the number that Mr. Nixon now has, that there would have been a revolution in the ranks of the reporters. What good a revolution amongst reporters does, I'll never know.

HESS: Well, just a question on the current day: But

[25]
why do you think Mr. Nixon has reduced the number of press conferences so drastically?

KENT: I think that this goes to the foundation of relationships between the press and the President. There is bound to be a disagreement between the two of them. It's very simple. The press wants to put in the paper what the President very often doesn't want them to put in the paper. Mr. Nixon, obviously, feels that the fewer times that he faces reporters questions, the less chance there is of their putting him in a light that he doesn't like in the public view. As long as he can make a television speech, or report to the nation, and not be questioned about it, he's relatively pleased with the results. He has to be, because he has total control of what he says.

HESS: Can't a failure to face the press create a backlash though? The press will think, "Well, now, there's something here that he doesn't want

[26]

out, therefore, I will work extra hard and dig it up and put it in the paper."

KENT: I think this does have an effect, and I think that is the case. I have never quite understood why Mr. Nixon has taken this tack, because in the first place, it seems to me the reporters' questions, by and large, have been quite benign. And in the second place, he has handled himself very well indeed with his answers, he's been exceedingly well-prepared, and seems to like the format of the give and take, at least as long as the questions are mild enough. So, I don't understand, really, why he shies away, except that total control is better than partial control.

HESS: Now, back in Mr. Truman's day, a reporter was given an opportunity to follow up once he had asked his original question, was he not? He could ask his question of the President and then if the President's answer gave rise to

[27]

further discussion, could that same reporter ask further questions of the President and try to dig deeper into it?

KENT: I don't know that there was any particular rule or even practice about it, but it does seem to me that this could be done more easily then. Perhaps it could be done more easily because there were more press conferences.

HESS: Whereas now, one man stands up and asks his question and sits down, the President giving his answer...

KENT: A reporter most often goes in there with his question memorized. He is not listening to the flow of other questions and answers and he is beady-eyed and determined to get his question in, regardless of its relationship, which might be intimate with other questions and answers beforehand. You never know, when you're judging the question of one of your colleagues, exactly what his editor might have said to him about that

[28]

question, too. He may have been told, "Ask this particular question this particular way;" or he may have some special, let's say guidance, like that. But there is no flow of follow up questions, and almost all reporters agree there should be. How you manage it is another question.

HESS: Well, back to Mr. Truman: Do you think that he tried to give an honest, forthright answer to the questions that he was asked?

KENT: I expect he did about as well as any President could, and perhaps better than most. I think, as I've said earlier, there are times when a President doesn't want to put something in the paper that a reporter does want to put in the paper. And there are going to be times (and I'm sure there were in Mr. Truman's case), when there are going to be certain circumlocutions and various dodges used to keep from answering the question directly, the way the reporter would like to have it answered anyhow.

[29]

HESS: A forthright answer may not suit the President's need at the moment.

KENT: I should think that would be -- you stated that very well, and I think you should be a member of the diplomatic corps.

HESS: Now, how about that?

I'd like to ask a few questions about the men who served as press correspondents, both for -- now you were here four months or so under Mr. Roosevelt, do you recall anything about Steve Early as Press correspondent -- Press Secretary?

KENT: Very little, except that his reputation had preceded him in my case. I had heard about Steve Early all during the FDR years at the White House, and certainly I was prepared for what I saw; an able, somewhat irascible man...

HESS: Now he was...

KENT: ...who was the final authority.

[30]

HESS: Now, he was Press Secretary until the time of General Edwin M. Watson's death on the way back from Yalta, and then he was made a Secretary, Administrative Assistant. He was made Administrative Assistant, I believe, and then Jonathan Daniels was made Press Secretary in his place.

KENT: I had forgotten that circumstance. I'd forgotten the dates there. Yes, that's right.

HESS: And then Mr. Daniels was Press Secretary through the remainder of the Roosevelt period, through April the 12th.

KENT: That's right. That's right.

HESS: Do you recall anything about Mr. Daniels' handling of the office?

KENT: Very little, very little really. I was so busy just getting my feet on the ground as a brand new boy in Washington, that...

HESS: Do you recall if on April the 12th, 1945, at

[31]

the time of Roosevelt's death, did you go over to the White House that evening, to the press room? Were you there at the time of the announcement?

KENT: That's curious, I can't remember. I was over at the White House many times that weekend, and I simply have forgotten whether I was there or not, and if I was, as you can see, nothing stood out about it.

HESS: Now, when Mr. Truman first came in, there was a young man by the name of J. Leonard Reinsch, who was around for a little while.

KENT: Yes.

HESS: A few weeks. Do you recall anything about Mr. Reinsch offhand? Do you recall why he was there for only such a short time?

KENT: No I don't. I've known Leonard for a long time and, because of his connection with the White

[32]
House, which certainly did not end with Mr. Truman's administration, I don't know why he was there for such a short time. He was, I thought at the time, some sort of an adviser on radio (that part of the media), and that's about all I know,

HESS: Now, that is the position that he kept after he left the White House at this particular time, and as I understand, he was not really officially Press Secretary, he had been -- it had been announced that he would be around to help with press matters. There's some difference in there. But after Mr. Cox requested that he come back to Atlanta to the radio station, he did come back throughout the administration to help on radio matters and work with Mr. Truman on speeches.

KENT: Yes.

HESS: Do you recall seeing him during the Truman administration and perhaps...

[33]
KENT: Yes, from time to time.

HESS: And perhaps in that capacity?

KENT: From time to time, and I always thought it was a sort of an extracurricular assistance that he was providing; I never quite knew what the table of organization was.

HESS: Well, he retained his job with Cox Broadcasting and would just come up to assist, and to help out on that. And then Mr. Truman's boyhood friend, Charles Ross, was made Press Secretary. How effective was Charles Ross as a Press Secretary?

KENT: I don't think that Charlie was the world's greatest Press Secretary from the point of view of the everyday press corps, the corps that is permanently situated at the White House. I don't believe that Charlie was ever quite aware of the needs of the strident wire services, for example. His experience on the *Post-Dispatch*

[34]
as a sort of an editorial page, feature and "situation" piece writer, was quite different from the screaming, competitive, hurdle the wounded, and trample the dead attitude of the wire services, and of a lot of other daily reporters. And he never quite understood what they were screaming about. He was a nice, thoroughly gentle man who tried his best, but who I don't think was as effective, as for example, Steve Early had been.

HESS: Now, I have read when Mr. Early thought that President Roosevelt needed some information, perhaps needed some guidance, he would give it in a forthright manner. Do you think that Mr. Ross felt that he could use the same type of language perhaps, the same type of methods with Mr. Truman, or that perhaps he was more reserved?

KENT: I think that Charlie naturally was a more reserved man, that's my impression. Charlie

[35]

was quite kind to me and I can recollect going over and seeing him at lunch time a number of times at the White House, when he stayed in his office and helped me enormously by supplying answers to queries I would get on policy and other matters from Chicago. So, I know he was helpful, but I am saying to you that he was helpful to me, and perhaps was a little less efficient in handling the more urgent needs of the press generally, and especially the wire services.

HESS: And Mr. Ross died on December the 5th of 1950, died at his desk in the White House. And then for a few days Steven Early -- well, Steve Early was called back for just a short while...

KENT: I remember this.

HESS: ...to help run the White House, and then the next man brought in was Joseph Short. Do you know why Mr. Short of the Baltimore *Sun* was selected as the next Press Secretary?

[36]

KENT: No, I don't exactly, except that Mr. Truman obviously had some confidence in him and had a long friendship.

HESS: One item that I would like to ask about that occurred about this time: Also on the same evening, December the 5th of 1950, Margaret Truman sang at Constitution Hall, and the next morning Paul Hume had an article in the newspaper, in the *Washington Post* somewhat critical of Margaret's singing. Do you recall anything about that incident?

KENT: Oh, I certainly do, and I recall the President's reaction. He never wanted anything derogatory said about Miss Margaret. And however professional the criticism and however rich or thin her voice might have been, to him it was the finest voice from the finest girl in the world, and Mr. Hume was a bad man for suggesting that it was not a top drawer voice.

[37]

HESS: One other point too, the month before, on November the 1st of 1950, was when the Puerto Ricans took some shots around the front of the Blair House, killed one of the White House guards and injured two.

KENT: Yes.

HESS: One of them -- one of the assassins was slain and then one was wounded. Do you recall anything about that? Where were you, do you recall that?

KENT: I was in a lawyer's office on Vermont Avenue about two blocks or three blocks away, and I was taking notes off some galley proofs. A Washington lawyer was grinding an axe for some kind of congressional action and agreed to let me look at the proofs of a certain publication. And he came into the room where I was taking my notes and said, "I just heard something crazy on the radio; that somebody tried to invade Blair House where the President was, and there

[38]

were some shots." He said it didn't make any sense to him.

And I said, "Good-bye," and ran out the door and ran all the way to the White House; and happened to get there just at the time that U.E. Baughman, then the chief of the Secret Service came out of the -- I believe it was the

Press Secretary's office -- and gave us the first account of the attempt on the President's life. Yes, I recall that vividly.

HESS: All right, and moving on to Mr. Short, what kind of a -- how effective was Mr. Short as Press Secretary?

KENT: Well, Joe was a personal friend of mine and so perhaps my judgments about his operation would be a little bit colored. I thought he was a good one. I must in all honesty say that all reporters tend to become critical of all Press Secretaries. And I recall hearing comments (which I heard before concerning Mr. Ross and

[39]

Jon Daniels and others), that the fact that a man has been a newspaper reporter doesn't necessarily make him effective as a Press Secretary in handling news affairs for the President. The feeling amongst reporters always is that the Press Secretary should operate on a two-way street. That is, he should naturally represent the President to the press; but he should also represent the reporters to the President. And it has been curious to see that more often than not, the former reporter forgets the second half of that two-way street and represents the President in a one-dimensional way instead of remembering that his old buddies in the press corps are supposed to be his clients too.

HESS: Now, using that yardstick, which Press Secretary during your experience here in Washington would fill the bill the best? Who represented the press to the President as well as the President to the press?

[40]

KENT: A great many of my colleagues will say that Jim Hagerty was the best Press Secretary who has operated here in a long, long time. And I have no great quarrel with that. I think he was very able, but I thought that he sold Ike to us a little bit more than the other -- a whole lot more, than the other way around. (I mean he sold Ike to us much more than he sold us and the solution of our problems to Ike.)

I liked the press secretary operation in the closing months of the Truman administration about as good as any in my experience; Roger Tubby and Irv Perlmeter. I thought that the two of them were a fine team; and they came about as close as they possibly could, to putting our best foot forward as well as the President's.

HESS: Now they had been Assistant Press Secretaries to Mr. Short after he took over.

KENT: That's right.

[41]

HESS: I think that his date that he took over was December the 18th of 1950, and both Roger Tubby and Irving Perlmeter had been assistants. Were they helpful at the time that they were working with Mr. Short?

KENT: Oh yes.

HESS: Did you know them at that time?

KENT: Oh yes, sure. I recollect, in particular, Roger Tubby because I admired the way he operated at the State Department when he became a press assistant there. Nobody invited him to go upstairs, for example, to policy meetings in the mornings, so he took it on himself to go up and join the party; and as long as he wasn't closed out from attending, he sat there and absorbed what was going on, so that he could more objectively (and

subjectively too) answer reporters' questions afterwards on foreign policy and tactics in the State Department. I thought it was a very good operation, and he did the same thing at the White

[42]
House.

HESS: Now they took over as Acting Press Secretaries on September the 18th, 1952 when Mr. Short died.

KENT: Yes.

HESS: And then they were both Acting Press Secretaries until sometime in December. Mr. Perlmeter had a heart attack, I believe in Seattle, during the campaign.

KENT: Yes. I was talking to Roger Tubby about this not long ago. I had forgotten that, although I had been on that trip I believe.

HESS: And then Mr. Tubby took over as Press Secretary with the full title sometime in December.

KENT: Yes, he was only there for a few weeks.

HESS: Now Mr. Ross had had an assistant also, Mr. Eben Ayers. Do you recall Mr. Ayers?

KENT: Yes, I recall Eben and you used to see him

[43]
around in the Press Club, here in the building, and around on the streets occasionally. I've not seen him for some months now. Eben, I would say was, although a pleasant man, less effective as Assistant Secretary than either, for example, Perlmeter or Roger Tubby.

HESS: Why? In what way did his effectiveness -- or lack of effectiveness exhibit themselves?

KENT: I don't know, it may be no more than an impression. My judgment is that he was unable to help as much as some of the others. Or, if he was able to, at least he didn't, one way or another.

HESS: One brief comparison between Charles Ross and Joseph Short. Now, Charles Ross had been a boyhood friend of Mr. Truman's.

KENT: Yes.

HESS: Mr. Short was an acquaintance of much later

[44]
years.

KENT: Yes.

HESS: Did you feel that Mr. Short had somewhat less rapport, or entree with Mr. Truman than Charles Ross had had, or not?

KENT: I would assume, in the beginning, that he did have less. But my own feeling is that a man can rapidly make up, gain the ground that he was penalized in the beginning simply by not having not been an old schoolmate, and I think Joe did.

HESS: All right. Did you have any dealings that you -- do you recall anything particular about any of the staff members, people who were not on the White House press staff at that time, but who held high positions in the White House; Mr. Clark Clifford for instance? Were there any times that you worked -- went to Mr. Clifford for inside information or...

[45]

KENT: No, I don't recollect this at all. And I recollect Clark's tenure at the White House, I think, practically from the beginning, when he was still in uniform as a Navy officer.

HESS: He went there as Assistant Naval Aide just about the time of Potsdam.

KENT: And a fine young man he was too; blond and beautiful.

HESS: The golden boy.

KENT: Yes, he was. And more than that too, his brainpower was up to the image, the physical image, but I must say, at the time I was not aware of this.

HESS: Did you try to develop any inside news sources at the White House with people who were on the staff other than the press office?

KENT: It was easier in those days to talk to people in the White House through the press office. They would set up engagements for you to see people.

[46]

And I can't recall offhand anybody who -- with whom I was on intimate terms, but it was possible to talk to people over there more, I would say, than it is nowadays. But I've never quite bought the idea that the lid is on so tight that you can't talk to people even now, or even during Lyndon Johnson's latter days in office when the lid supposedly also was on tight. You can always see them if you can wait, and if you're persistent enough.

HESS: Were there any particular staff members during the Truman administration that might have been good for an occasional news tip? But what about Mr. Matthew Connelly, did you ever -- since you had talked to him this time, early in the administration, did you ever go back to Mr. Connelly to talk and find out what might have been the inside story, the inside truth to a story?

KENT: I don't know if I did or not. Generally I had the feeling, perhaps I was wrong about this,

[47]

that the President's private secretary would indeed remain private and that there was little use in trying to get him to talk about things that he had learned from his special relationship with the President. I never did this with other private secretaries of other Presidents either, and perhaps I should have.

HESS: Okay.

KENT: I always liked Matt and we were on a friendly basis, but it was always casual.

HESS: When General Harry Vaughan was there through the administration...

KENT: Yes.

HESS: Do you recall anything about General Vaughan?

KENT: I still see Harry now and then, and oddly enough I most often see him just when I'm coming out of the gates of the White House. It always makes both of us laugh a little bit.

[48]
Yes, I remember Harry very well indeed, and I always thought he was maligned by a certain segment of my trade, I guess. If Harry was the weed in the President's garden, he was a small and amusing weed, and the greatest thing that I recollect that they ever hung on Harry was a deal, so to speak, involving a few refrigerators, deep freezes.

HESS: Deep freezes, yes.

KENT: This came to pale into utter insignificance later in the Eisenhower days when, one after another of his rich colleagues so generously endowed his farm in Gettysburg, that it makes you laugh thinking about these so-called Truman scandals.

HESS: One other member of the White House staff, too, that I would like to ask about was Mr. George Elsey. Do you recall anything?

KENT: I see George once in a while now. I don't know

[49]
what he's up to. I remember George...

HESS: President of the American Red Cross now.

KENT: That's right.

HESS: One question on Mr. Elsey: Now, all I have here are the notes that I took off of a clipping that is out at the Library, but it's an article that you wrote in the Chicago *Sun-Times* on November the 25th of 1951.

KENT: You've been doing your homework, haven't you?

HESS: Now how about that? Now, Mr. Elsey left the White House staff and went over to be Averell Harriman's assistant at Mutual Security and you mentioned at that time that it was -- I'll just read it:

Vinson's friends who insist this reluctance of both their man and President Truman, is a real problem for the Democratic Party to cope with, don't pretend to know what the solution is, if neither Truman nor Mr. Vinson will stand for the Presidency. The speculation

[50]
has become pretty wild in fact, and W. Averell Harriman, the Truman gold-braid Jack of all trades, is mentioned as the man who. Basis for this bit of guessing is that Mr. Truman last week

agreed to let Harriman have young George Elsey, one of the White House Administrative Assistants, for his new Mutual European Defense setup. Elsey wrote a lot of the so successful Truman whistle stop speeches in 1948, and is thus figured to be a builder-upper of presidential candidates, although that is not the case in this new job with Harriman.

Do you recall that article by chance?

KENT: Not at all.

HESS: It's a long, long time ago?

KENT: Not at all. I would say that whoever wrote that is covering himself at every angle, too. First he sets up the possibility that this is precisely what Elsey is doing for Governor Harriman, and then flatly denies it. I would say that that was pretty clever, but I don't know how the journalism is.

HESS: All right, any other of the members of the

[51]

White House staff come to mind? Anything else of interest about some of the other members?

KENT: I should have been doing some thinking about this when we first set up this date. All I thought about was Mr. Truman, and as of now, my mind is comfortably blank.

HESS: All right, what do you recall about the events of 1948, concerning the convention, the campaign, and the election of that year?

KENT: Well, I recall...

HESS: That was in Philadelphia.

KENT: Yes.

HESS: The convention was in Philadelphia. Did you go down there that year?

KENT: Yes, I was in Philadelphia interminably that year, all three conventions I believe were there.

[52]

HESS: All three the same spot, weren't they?

KENT: All three. And apparently air-conditioning hadn't been invented.

HESS: I think all they had were those big fans up in the top or something.

KENT: At least Philadelphia had not chanced to recognize air-conditioning; it was horrible.

Well, of course, I remember. 1948 was a high point for all of us Washington reporters. We were so unanimously wrong that it was tragic. Of course .I remember Mr. Truman's Turnip Day speech, which really turned that convention around and put some enthusiasm into what had been a rather dismal performance up until that point. And then I recollect in the later stages of the campaign, as the number three or number four man

in the office -- by that time the Chicago *Daily Times* had merged with the Chicago *Sun*, so we were the *Sun-Times*, and...

[53]

HESS: When did that merger come about?

KENT: It was in 1947, the late summer of 1947.

Naturally they put their number one man, number one political writer, Tom Reynolds, to cover the next President of the United States; namely Thomas E. Dewey, and I was put on the Truman train, mostly to go out to cover the last weeks of his feeble efforts, and to be there when the roof caved in on him. So, it was sort of, it was fun to find out that the roof was not going to fall after all.

HESS: Did you go along on the so-called non-political trip that Mr. Truman took the previous June?

KENT: No, Tom Reynolds was on that one trip to Berkeley.

HESS: Yes, that's right, he went out through Omaha and then through Sun Valley and Carey, Idaho where he dedicated the airfield to the wrong person.

KENT: "They can't prove nothing, they ain't got a thing

[54]

on me, I'm going down to Berkeley to get me a degree."

HESS: That's right.

KENT: That was the refrain. I've got copies of that song that the nasty newspaper reporters made up, and there must be fifty or sixty verses.

HESS: They had nothing else to do they would sit around and make up songs.

KENT: It doesn't take very much. And the nice thing about reporters is that it doesn't matter whether you -- even whether you like a President or not, pretty soon you get raucous in your comments about him.

HESS: What do you recall about the campaign of 1948 and the trip that you made?

KENT: Well, the thing that I recollect now is how stupid I was not to have seen what was happening. I recall a day when we went down through the back country of Wisconsin...

[55]

HESS: Did you want to get over to the White House at eleven?

KENT: Pretty soon. Pretty soon, we'll go for another five or ten minutes.

HESS: Okay, fine.

KENT: And this was in a region of small towns and thin soil, poor crops I would say. The crowds were outstanding at every stop, and we were so dumb that we stood there and watched this happening and didn't

believe it. We thought that it was a case of curiosity: the old, old story, that people in small towns come out to see the Presidents merely so that they can tell their children "you saw the President," and then go on and vote another way. And it was not the case.

HESS: Do you recall the Dexter, Iowa National Plowing Match for instance?

KENT: Yes, I do.

[56]
HESS: That was in September. That was early in the campaign. Now, one of the things that Mr. Truman mentioned in there, he recalled to the crowd the fact that the Congress had recently rewritten the charter of the Commodity Credit Corporation and had omitted the provision for providing Government storage for crops.

KENT: Yes, I recall that.

HESS: Do you recall how big of an impact this made on the agricultural sections of the country in the 1948 election?

KENT: Yes, we weren't aware of it at Dexter that day, naturally, and I don't think there was a great instant impact, but I recollect that every time Mr. Truman's train cut across Illinois (and most trains in those days pretty nearly had to go across Illinois going from East to West or vice versa), Senator Scott Lucas would jump aboard the train and tell President Truman,

[57]
"Pour it on them on those Commodity storage bins, it's having an effect, it's working." I didn't believe it when Scott Lucas said it.

Another instance of not being aware, at the time, and really we all misread it; we didn't realize how important that was as an issue in states which are normally Republican, and which Mr. Truman carried.

HESS: Iowa for one.

KENT: Iowa, certainly.

HESS: One question on Mr. Reynolds, were there any times during the campaign when perhaps over the telephone you might discuss with Mr. Reynolds his view of how crowds were reacting to the Dewey train?

KENT: Well, let's put it this way, Mr. Reynolds had about as mean an opinion of Governor Dewey as it was possible to have. I don't think...

HESS: How come, why? Do you know?

[58]
KENT: I think that Mr. Dewey just set a lot of reporters' teeth on edge. I don't mean that Mr. Reynolds let it chill in his coffee, but he...

HESS: He was objective in his reporting, but then this was a personal feeling.

KENT: He personally hoped that Mr. Dewey would get a licking and didn't believe he would. So, it was probably a pretty poor fall for him. But he got his own back. The night of the election I remember he wrote a lead out of New York City when it became apparent that Mr. Truman was ahead, and probably was going to stay ahead. The lead said something about the Republicans spread the safety nets below their headquarters and offices, and that...

HESS: Waiting for Mr. Dewey to land. Shall we shut it off for today?

KENT: Fine, lets do it.

HESS: Fine.

[59]
Second Oral History Interview with Carleton Kent, Washington, D.C. on December 29, 1970. By Jerry N. Hess, Harry S. Truman Library.

HESS: All right, Mr. Kent, we were discussing the campaign of 1948, and I'd like to ask a few questions about that. At the time that you were there and Mr. Truman would stop at a whistle stop, would you get off the train and talk to the people that were there to find out how they were receiving what the President had to say?

KENT: Oh, yes, very often. It was customary to jump off the press car, run back to the observation car, and watch the President and watch the people watching the President, and talk to them a little bit if you could. It was mostly a case of observing them as I remember, because they wanted to listen to the President and didn't want to stop and have somebody cross-examine them. At least I felt that way.

HESS: At the time that you were off of the train at

[60]
the whistle stops, did you notice any of the White House staff members, say, Charles Murphy or Matthew Connelly, Dave Stowe, any of the gentlemen like that, were they off taking the pulse of the crowd?

KENT: Well, frankly I just don't recall. I would assume that they were because they were pretty astute and I also assume that they knew more than I did about what was going on in that campaign. But I can't recollect that I saw them doing this as a steady thing.

HESS: At the times that you would get off and go back to the rear platform, were you ever in danger of being left, were there ever any times that the train was going to pull out and leave you standing?

KENT: Oh, yes, many times. I remember one occasion. The train stopped at a crossroads in Indiana and there was sort of a defile, a very narrow right of way, and I must have been talking to somebody

[61]
that day because all of a sudden the whistle sounded and I didn't have time to get back to the press car. So, I said to a Secret Service man who was standing there, "What do I do?"

And he said, "Well, I can't put you on board, but I'll turn my back, and it's up to the President, if he wants you to climb up on board you can."

So, I appealed to Mr. Truman and he leaned down over the railing and grabbed me by the hand and yanked me aboard and said, "Oh, you're all right, it's your editors that I have my problems with."

I must say that this tickled me. It related, in particular, I thought, to my editors. An editor and a publisher of mine a year before that had gone out to Fort Sheridan to try to persuade General [Dwight D.] Eisenhower to run for President on the Democratic ticket in 1948. And then somewhat later, they had endeared themselves to Mr. Truman by suggesting editorially

[62]
that he resign from the Presidency. So, he was being more than somewhat forbearing when he pulled me up into his private car and let me get aboard; and forgave me for the sins of my editor and publisher.

HESS: He did let you know there was distinction between you...

KENT: He let me know.

HESS: ...and your job, and what they were trying to do.

KENT: He let me know. I'm glad that he made that distinction, otherwise I'd still be standing there in Indiana perhaps.

HESS: I believe that the time that Mr. Truman was asked to resign, wasn't that something that was put forward by Senator Fulbright?

KENT: Well, I don't think it was -- it's possible that the Chicago *Sun-Times* was commenting on a

[63]
suggestion by Senator Fulbright. I had forgotten that, but I do remember that Fulbright made such a suggestion. I don't remember the timing of our editorial. It isn't important anyway. We seized on the idea, and that didn't help my relationships at the White House a great deal.

HESS: Who did the *Sun-Times* support in the 1948 campaign?

KENT: I think they finally supported Mr. Truman.

HESS: Did you have very many opportunities to speak to President Truman aboard the train?

KENT: Well, there were a lot of goings and comings. No, you really didn't. Once in a while on the long trips he would make a sort of an inspection tour of the train, and walk through the press car, and the working car, and the press lounge. And I remember on one occasion he held a press conference in there. This was on our way back from somewhere and it was between Clifton, West

[64]
Virginia and here in Washington. But you always knew he was in the back car doing his job and you saw him at every stop if you wanted to, and could jump out and exchange a few words with him while they were getting ready to start the meeting, or to end the meeting. He was always very friendly and approachable.

HESS: What is life like for a reporter on a campaign train? Just what are -- and how do you conduct your duties, is it a fun thing or not?

KENT: Well, I think that most of us who have grown old and gray in the service and have been around the campaign track a lot of times, now realize that there is no substitute for the campaign train. It was an infinitely superior vehicle to the present system of airplanes, jet planes and busses, far superior to it. It was great. They always had a press lounge where you could relax and drink non-alcoholic beverages, and sometimes alcoholic beverages with another car

[65]
that was the work car with a number of desks on which you could set up your typewriters and operate. And as the campaign train became more sophisticated, just before its death, technicians had wired it well for sound so that you didn't have to go out to the back platform if you didn't want to. If you wanted to go out and see the crowds, and watch his reaction to the candidate, well and good. If you didn't want to, if you were pressed for time, for instance, and wanted to get off an extra two or three paragraphs at that stop, you could stay in and hear what the President, or the candidate, had to say without moving from your seat. But it was fun.

I don't know that at my age I would regard it as fun very much, very long, anymore, but I did then. We used to wear what we used to call thousand mile shirts that wouldn't show the traces of long wear, and we were probably pretty gamy. I can remember Charlie Ross talking about

[66]
the swamp-like smell of the press car on occasion, but I'm sure he didn't really mean that. It was very -- it was an enjoyable and crazy way of life for a period in the fall every two or four years.

HESS: How did you file your stories? Did they have a Western Union man along that would handle that?

KENT: Yes. And generally a very good one. In addition to the Western Union man who was usually Carroll S. Links, a veteran and an exceedingly good one, the White House communications man, Dewey Long, was himself an old Western Union operator, and between the two of them they knew every -- I suppose, every foot of Western Union telegraph wire in the country, and knew where the best outlets were for you, and could give you advice ahead of time so that you could correlate your filing of copy with your deadline. Sometimes some bad mistakes were made and they would dump off -- because of the exigencies of the situation, they'd

[67]
dump off many thousands of words at a little station where the man knew -- there was only one operator, and...

HESS: One man with one key.

KENT: One man with one key. And the favorite remark used to be that he didn't start sending it until he took it home and read all the copy out loud to his wife, and she laughed awhile about it and said, "Oh, those crazy reporters." And then he finally sent it and, it would generally happen that it would get into the paper too late for your edition times. But mostly, mostly it worked quite well.

HESS: What do you recall of the events of election night, 1948?

KENT: Well, I think it's fair to say that those of us of the press corps who were in Kansas City, were there to see the roof fall in on Mr. Truman. I think that most of us agreed secretly,

[68]

although maybe we didn't show it in what we wrote, or in what we said, that we agreed with the pollsters and all the experts who thought that Mr. Dewey was the next President of the United States. It was a rather sober bunch of us that put up in the Muehlebach Hotel, and Mr. Truman went off that night and we didn't know for a long time where he had gone. But during the night, as the returns came in, very much to everybody's surprise showing him steadily leading Mr. Dewey, we became more and more interested in finding the President. And it finally developed, as you know, that he was at Excelsior Springs overnight..

I remember having dinner that night with a good friend of mine who worked for the Coles papers, and who later was the press attaché I guess you would call him, for the Republican National Committee here, Bill Mylander. And the restaurant, Pusateri's, which is near -- then was near the Muehlebach, had obliged the customers

[69]
on election night by having the radio turned on, piped through the dining rooms. And the early returns kept showing Mr. Truman ahead, and Mylander kept assuring those of us at the table, "That doesn't mean a thing. Wait until the farm vote comes in." Well, of course, as you know, when the farm vote came in, that is what to the minds of many people, really assured Mr. Truman his victory.

It was an exciting night, and it became more and more exciting as it wore on; and as I recollect it now, the last key state was Ohio. And when it finally developed that Mr. Truman was going to take Ohio, there was pandemonium. Nobody was in bed, everybody who had been had gotten up. Everybody called everybody. We had the brother-in-law system in those days. To make sure that nobody missed anything, each of us would call three or four -- by agreement, three or four other reporters, and you might get three or four calls, but you were sure you'd get up.

[70]
So, we were milling around in the hallway outside the President's suite at the Muehlebach when he showed up, looking pretty pleased and peppery at some ungodly hour of the morning. I've forgotten exactly when it was. I think he got up at 5:30 or something like that, or maybe earlier. I don't know that it was daybreak.

HESS: Do you recall anything that he may have said when he first got back to the Muehlebach?

KENT: I don't remember anything except the swirl of activity as he came parading down the hallway where we were all waiting for him.

HESS: But he did look pretty happy at that time.

KENT: He looked pretty cheerful.

HESS: More or less on a...

KENT: And as a matter of fact, so did most of us feel cheerful. I had -- I remember after the election, I was writing a column at that time as well as

[71]
news stories, and I remember for two or three days after the election, I was writing a column at that time as well as news stories, and I remember for two or three days after the election writing pieces sort of trying to explain away why I had not believed Mr. Truman would win, and having an apologetic edge to them. And finally an editor called me and said, "What are you apologizing about? None of this ever showed in your copy." And then I realized I had a guilt complex. I felt always he was going to lose, but I -- apparently I never said so.

HESS: What were the reasons that you thought that he was going to be defeated? Any different than the prevailing reasons at the time?

KENT: No, I suppose the primary reason was that everybody said he was going to be defeated, all the pollsters, the experts. This was the first, I think, great failure of the pollsters.

HESS: As you know, there was criticism made of the

[72]

press at that time that instead of getting out, as you say that you did, and speak to people, that they spent their time in the club car interviewing each other, and they all had a negative attitude.

KENT: Well, there was a great deal of that. We saw these enormous crowds, and apparently friendly crowds, and we obviously should have been out circulating amongst them and saying, "Are you going to vote for this man, or are you out here merely for curiosity and to show your kids that the President of the United States once came through your town?" If we had just asked that question we would have known more than we did. We saw those crowds, we should have known from where the crowds were occurring, in normally Republican country, the Middle west, that something was happening that the experts didn't know about back East. But we were awfully slow to catch on.

HESS: Any further thoughts on Mr. Truman's campaign and election of 1948?

KENT: Well, it was -- actually, I think that the campaign must have pleased even people who didn't vote for him, or who didn't like him very much, because I think that there's a great American disposition to applaud the underdog when he keeps on fighting against what are thought to be hopeless odds. And people admired him for going on day after day, when they thought he had no chance whatsoever. And this was the attitude of a great many people on the train, although, I'm sure Mr. Truman never once showed he felt he was behind. He never did in public and he never did in any conversations with any newspaper people. And I've been told by friends on his staff that he never gave the slightest hint in his private conversations that he thought that he was a loser; that he always showed the greatest confidence. He may have had private doubts, but he

[74]

handled those doubts when he was alone.

HESS: Do you recall what speeches of Mr. Truman's you thought might be more effective than some of the others? Now, what I'm driving at here, many people have said that his final speech in Kiel Auditorium in St. Louis was one of the high points of the campaign. Were you there at Kiel

KENT: I was. It was a great performance.

HESS: He threw away the text that night.

KENT: He threw away the text. They had been writing it all across Indiana and Illinois that day as the train rolled on to St. Louis. We got to St. Louis and there was a cold, nasty rain falling, but Kiel Auditorium was jammed to the gunnels. And the response was just absolutely electric and thunderous (went with the rain), they were wild with, I don't know whether it was state pride for a local candidate or what he'd

[75]

said. And I don't recall the theme of his speech except it was a summation of all his give them hell, underdog, fighting qualities. It seemed to catch the auditorium.

And actually, as a matter of fact, by throwing away that speech that he prepared, and which weld used as a basis for our Sunday stories, most of the newspapers in the country never knew what he said at Kiel Auditorium anyway. By the time he got around to speaking, so many Sunday editions, which go in early, had rolled off the presses based on the speech that he destroyed that there was no time to start over again. This happens very often. But I liked to think, although I certainly couldn't prove it, that what happened in Kiel Auditorium sparked something that took place on the next Tuesday. In some intangible way, it was happening, and that night some of us first began thinking, "My God, if he had started sooner, if he had just got this response earlier he might have possibly have made it." We were

[76]

a pretty agonizing bunch in those days, and pretty slow to catch on, as I said earlier.

HESS: All right, and on the subject of Mr. Truman's trip to Key West, on the trip that he took just a few days after he was elected, he spent from the 7th to the 21st of November of 1948 in Key West, and according to William Rigdon's logs, you were along, is that correct?

KENT: I was. I was there.

HESS: Can you tell me about that time and about Key West and about how things were run at Key West?

KENT: Well, it was a -- you must have talked to other people about this. You're looking for my own observation of variations, I suppose, from the norm.

HESS: Yes.

KENT: What I recollect about Key West was that it was a wide-open community in those days. On the one hand there was the submarine base that provided all the security that the President needed, plus nice quarters. And on the other hand, they had DuVall Street which consisted of an inordinate number of gambling halls and saloons where you could get practically any kind of action, and at all hours, from dog racing, bets on the jai alai, you name it and you could get your action. But in some ways, the Key West place was ideal for President's vacation spot. As I have mentioned, there was that security, which always interests Secret Service. And it was warm, and it was a relaxed sort of a place. I can't remember, for instance, ever going swimming with any other President, but the whole press corps went swimming with Harry Truman while he dog-paddled around in his original Missouri style one day, and the Secret Service went crazy.

HESS: Did they?

[78]

KENT: They thought that -- I found out later that they had seen or heard that some barracuda were swimming in the area, and while they had carefully marked off the spot where Mr. Truman and the White House party were going to swim, they had forgotten to tell the barracuda to stay away.

HESS: They didn't put up nets or anything like that?

KENT: They didn't have nets. So, what they did, was station some agents out at the outer perimeter with rowboats and swimming to sort of....

HESS: Did they have to take volunteers for those swimmers?

KENT: They were a kind of a strange looking bunch, and if we had known at the time what they were worrying about, I'm not so sure that so many of us would have been in that water, or that the President of the United States would have

[79]
been either. In any event, it was a relaxed time. We used to see Mr. Truman quite frequently and we'd be invited onto the grounds and go over and have a very impromptu press conference out on the lawn.

HESS: Sometimes down there they were held on the lawn, sometimes in the Bachelor Officers' Quarters.

KENT: Yes.

HESS: Did you feel that there was usually any hard news that was likely to come out of a Key West news conference, or were things down there usually pretty relaxed and -- a vacation for the newsmen as well as for the President?

KENT: Yes, I had the feeling wherever I traveled with the President, that big news was always possible, because he was always where it's at. At the same time, I don't recollect that we shook the earth with our news. I simply have forgotten over a

[80]
period of eight thousand years what the major news events of the time were, but I presume that we kept our editors busy and put enough in the papers to justify our being down there.

HESS: What was Mr. Truman's attitude at this time, just after his big win, extra-elated, or could you tell any difference?

KENT: Well, he was a good winner, I'd put it that way. I don't recall that he gloated, as he might well have. The only time I saw him put on a minor gloat was at the railroad station in St. Louis when we were on our way back to Washington from Kansas City after the election and he held up that famous copy of the -- bulldog edition of the Chicago *Tribune*.

HESS: The "Dewey Defeats Truman."

KENT: "Dewey Defeats Truman."

HESS: You were there at the time when he had that?

[81]
KENT: Oh, yes. And I must say it was a special delight to me to see that because, of course, the *Tribune* was our opposition, or we were its opposition I believe they would put it.

But he was -- obviously he must have been enjoying himself. But Mr. Truman always had a relaxed way of talking to you, so that he showed in his relationships with the press, under a lot of different circumstances, and on trains, planes, battleships, he showed little of the signs of tension of office, which must have been there. He had an ability to crack the joke that made everybody feel good and laugh.

HESS: What did you personally like to do down at Key West? How did you spend a great deal of your time, the majority of your time?

KENT: Well, you could go deep-sea fishing if you wanted to, and the submarine base had a couple or three boats with chief petty officers, who liked to fish, who would take a boatload of

[82]
reporters out any time they wanted to fish. You could go swimming, you could get the action on DuVall Street. There wasn't a great deal to do.

HESS: Did you enjoy it down there?

KENT: I did, very much. I'm trying to think why, now, after having just told you that there wasn't a great deal to do.

HESS: Well, maybe that's what you enjoy, the...

KENT: Well, we had a long campaign, too, as a matter of fact, just as long as Mr. Truman had. And so...

HESS: I think you needed a rest just like he did.

KENT: ...it was a time to take your shoes off and relax, and we relaxed pretty well.

HESS: According to Rigdon's logs you were also along the following year in November and December

[83]
of 1949. Anything in particular stand out about the other trip?

KENT: It doesn't, no. I know that I was there at least twice with Mr. Truman, and perhaps oftener than that. I don't recollect anything much. I know that we made news now and then because things flash through my mind, recollections of writing in a hurry in the Bachelor Officers' Headquarters press room.

HESS: Where did you stay, did you stay in the BOQ?

KENT: Yes, as did almost everybody. No. One time I stayed at the La Concha Hotel. I recollect rooming next door to Joe Short who subsequently became Mr. Truman's Press Secretary.

HESS: And according to Mr. Rigdon's log, on the trip just after the election, there was another *Sun-Times* man along, Tom Reynolds.

KENT: Yes.

[84]
HESS: Just what was the relationship between Mr. Reynolds and Mr. Truman?

KENT: Well, I suppose that the way to put it is that Mr. Reynolds couldn't forgive Mr. Truman for not being Mr. Roosevelt. He had been the number one White House correspondent during the early days of the New Deal for the United Press before he went to the Chicago *Sun*, and as a member of the Washington Bureau of the *Sun*,

he admired FDR extravagantly, and it was sort of a common attitude in those days. I also observed this same devotion to a predecessor after President Kennedy's death. People who admired him showed their grief sometimes by sort of resenting his successor. And I think that was Tom Reynolds' attitude. He didn't -- I don't recollect that he had anything against Mr. Truman except that.

We were down there, as a matter of fact, together to write a series on Mr. Truman. Now that our editor and publisher had confessed that he was wrong, and that Mr. Truman had shown that

[85]
he could get elected in his own right, we were going to do the handsome thing and write a series which Tom and I always called, "Truman the Human." An odd thing is that we never got it written. For one reason or another it never got put on paper. We'd get a start, and then something would happen. So, I have to conclude in answer to your earlier question, that we made more news, wrote more news, in Key West then than I can remember about.

HESS: And we mentioned last week that you had been on the *Williamsburg* that year...

KENT: Yes.

HESS: ...in the winter.

KENT: Yes.

HESS: Were there other times that you went along with the President when he was sort of off duty and relaxing? Did you ever go to Shangri-La, which

[86]
is now Camp David?

KENT: No. No.

HESS: Were there other times that you were on the *Williamsburg*? Now, these were the -- that was the three main things that Mr. Truman used for relaxation...

KENT: Yes.

HESS: Key West, the *Williamsburg* and Shangri-La.

KENT: Yes.

I went on the *Williamsburg* a couple of times (I'm trying to remember the occasion, excuse the long pauses), but only as a working reporter. And it may have been in a pool, or -- as one of the pool men, although they didn't do much of that in those days.

HESS: Do you recall the occasion?

KENT: I don't. I do not. It's funny. No, I can't recall -- nothing stands out in my mind except getting aboard and getting off. And...

HESS: Did you go down the Potomac?

KENT: Yes, and walking around aboard. It was an old wallower, you know.

HESS: That's what I understand. It wasn't too seaworthy.

KENT: Nobody really cared about taking the long trip.

HESS: Wouldn't want to be out in the deep ocean with that.

KENT: Well, they used to bring it down to Florida, and nobody was very anxious to take the whole trip. She was always top heavy, I guess, or at least that was the explanation that the Navy people gave us.

HESS: All right, on -- moving on, on February the 14th of 1950 the President granted an exclusive interview to Arthur Krock of the *New York Times*.

[88]

Do you recall that episode?

KENT: Yes.

HESS: Did that cause you any particular problems being a member of the working press, to have the President granting an exclusive interview, if I'm not mistaken, I believe this was the only time in his administration when he had done that.

KENT: No, that's not true.

HESS: Can you tell us why?

KENT: Because toward the end he gave a whole...

HESS: Oh, that's right.

KENT: But it's almost true.

HESS: That's right, you're correct.

KENT: Yes. Well...

HESS: There were several along towards the end.

KENT: Yes. One of them was mine, but by that time

[89]

it was to the point of there not being very much exclusivity left, and you were mostly paying your respects and asking him to sum up in his own words.

I had had some experience, as most reporters in Washington have, with the ability of the *New York Times* one way or another to open doors that are not open to other papers. Bear in mind that the first Chicago paper I

worked for was the *Chicago Daily Times*. And I spent several years overseas as a war correspondent, and as a foreign correspondent, and quite often I got doors opened simply because various foreign officials thought that the *Chicago Daily Times* was affiliated with the *New York Times*. So, I was not unprepared for this, although, of course, I didn't like it. Nobody would like to have somebody else get an exclusive interview that you knew you couldn't have a bite of.

But Mr. Krock I must say, had had many such exclusive interviews with many Presidents, as we

[90]
all knew, and as the closest thing we had to a dean of Washington correspondents, I suppose that the resentment was held to a real minimum in his case.

HESS: How did you go about setting up your interview with him at that time, towards the end of the administration? Do you recall?

KENT: Well, I suppose...

HESS: Was it a request that you made to either -- was it Roger Tubby at that time?

KENT: It was Roger Tubby. Roger sat in with us I remember that, and I suppose that -- funny, I haven't looked at that -- I must find that piece sometime. I suppose that I told him what I wanted and he said, "Fine," there had been several others. So, I wasn't showing tremendous resource in asking for it, or great drive either. But we thought there was some value in having the President's own summation of this time in the

[91]
White House. And as I say, I must look it up and find out what it amounted to.

HESS: One of the major events of the Truman administration, was the attack of North Korea on South Korea. This took place in June of 1950.

KENT: Yes.

HESS: Do you recall now where you were when you first heard of the invasion?

KENT: No, I don't precisely. I remember that period, but I remember things only in flashes. I remember, for instance, a story in one of the local papers about a meeting at Blair House, where the Trumans were living at that time, at which Mr. Truman apparently told the congressional leadership what he was about to do. And I remember being provoked and somewhat scornful because the reporter, who didn't know more than anybody else, was reduced to suggesting actions, or at least developments, by describing their facial

[92]
expressions, grim, drawn, concerned, anxious, as they came out of Blair House. I felt at the time, and I still feel now, that such "reporting" is not a real substitute for news. But that's a complete sidelight.

I don't remember precisely where I was in the circumstances, but I will bet that I wasn't very far away from the White House.

HESS: And in September, the following September, Louis Johnson was replaced as Secretary of Defense by General Marshall. Do you recall anything in particular about that switch in the Department of Defense?

KENT: No.

HESS: Do you know why -- what is your opinion, why was Mr. Johnson in there in the first place? Why had he been made Secretary of Defense?

KENT: I've always had a feeling, which I couldn't prove, that Mr. Johnson had raised a lot of

[93]
campaign funds or performed some other important service for the President at a time when he needed campaign funds and support. And under the traditional procedures of politics, as she is played, he was offered a Cabinet post. Mr. Johnson was pretty fast afoot. We were in Little Rock one day with Mr. Truman celebrating the reunion of his company D -- I mean Battery D.

HESS: The 35th Division Association.

KENT: It was the first 35th Division Association, that's right.

HESS: Of which Battery D was part.

KENT: Of which Battery D was part. It was a very, very hot day. You've probably been told this by many people. We had a parade down the center of Little Rock, a very sweaty day, but the President looked very jaunty, as if he had no sweat glands or pores at all. I never knew how he did it. Mr. Louis Johnson started the parade,

[94]
definitely in the rear rank as an honorary member of Battery D. And at the end of two or three blocks, long before the parade had finished, Mr. Johnson had promoted himself and was up at the President's left or right hand taking the crowd salutes along with the President. It always tickled me.

HESS: He received some rapid promotions there.

KENT: He did:

HESS: All right. And in October of 1950 the President went to Wake Island to confer with General MacArthur.

KENT: Yes.

HESS: And I believe you went along. Is that right?

KENT: Yes, I did.

HESS: What can you tell me about this trip, what do you recall?

[95]
KENT: Well, I recall the Navy failing us utterly, in terms of communication ships, which they said would ring the island; and for us not to worry about getting our copy out. No ship showed up at all during our entire stay there, which was not very long. So, there were only two sixty word-a-minute teletype machines at the other end

of the island, and that was what the entire press corps had to rely on to get the stories out. But that's less than an historical observation.

HESS: Did you write a pool story, do you recall, or did everybody try to get their stories out?

KENT: No, we wrote a pool story. We divided up into two teams, the wire service in one team and the "specials," those who worked for individual newspapers, were another team.

I remember, first of all, the welcome (if that's what you want to call it), wondering where General MacArthur was as Mr. Truman's plane came

[96]

to a stop, when the stairs were put up and there was still, no sign of MacArthur.

HESS: Did the press plane fly in first as it is usually done? When the President is going to arrive at an airport the press airplane usually arrives first.

KENT: Yes. Yes.

HESS: So, the press can be there to cover the events.

KENT: Yes. And unless you prove me wrong, I'm going to say we did that time too.

HESS: I don't know.

KENT: Otherwise, we wouldn't have seen...

HESS: Wouldn't have seen history.

KENT: I was about to say, there was no MacArthur until, as if by magic, he appeared at the bottom of the ramp and I never knew where he came from.

I must have turned my head away for a couple or

[97]

three seconds. I read later that he had been waiting in a hanger or some outbuilding like that near by. And I have also read that for his part, Mr. Truman looking out of the window and seeing the situation said that, well, he wasn't going to leave the plane until MacArthur showed up. In other words, he was not going to be upstaged by the General. I did not know about this job of jockeying at the time, but I do know that MacArthur delayed his dramatic appearance a long time.

I remember also as they walked away, General MacArthur and Mr. Truman got into an old sedan of some kind, a Plymouth or a Chevrolet, a beaten-up job, and went off to their meeting place. And I remember suddenly seeing General Omar Bradley, who after all was only chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and a World War II hero in his own right in considerable proportion, wandering around unattended. Apparently nobody had (immediately at any rate), nobody had planned

[98]

things to the extent of saying, "When we land the following will happen, and one of the following items will be that so-and-so will take care to see that General Bradley is given accommodations and so on." It struck me as weird to see this famous man sort of wandering around with a dazed look, I thought, not knowing where to go and what to do.

HESS: Did you think that it was unusual that President Truman would agree to fly all this distance and meet General MacArthur in the middle of the Pacific Ocean rather than if he wanted to discuss something with him, have him return to Washington and have the discussion here in town?

KENT: It was most unusual, there was no question about that. There were good reasons for it, I thought at any rate. One was that he wanted to get the General acquainted with him. I've always felt that he wanted MacArthur who was a somewhat flamboyant, melodramatic type, to know that he had

[99]

a superior, and that his superior was a tough-minded, little former National Guard artillery officer.

Also I always supposed that he agreed to come more than half way because he didn't want to keep the General out of his theater of war any longer than necessary. And perhaps he wanted to dramatize it a little bit.

HESS: Do you think that General MacArthur really looked upon President Truman as a superior? This is just an assumption on your part.

KENT: It certainly is an assumption. I think that history will probably show that he didn't at all times, and that this was one of the reasons why he got fired; in fact a major reason.

HESS: He was fired in April of 1951. What do you recall about the events surrounding that, and the announcement thereof?

KENT: Well, I remember being called by the White

[100]

House at some ungodly hour, like about midnight, and told that there was news of paramount importance.

HESS: Who called you, do you recall?

KENT: Somebody from the press office, I couldn't recall now. I had time to get down there, and to find that so did nearly every other newspaperman in town. It certainly was of paramount importance, it really shook up this town and country.

HESS: Did you think that that was improperly handled, or properly handled? Do you think that it could have been done in some other manner? Do you think that it was necessary to do in the first place?

KENT: No, I was convinced that MacArthur had to go, and I found no fault with the way it was handled.

HESS: All right, now moving on, when did you first become aware that Mr. Truman did not intend to

[101]

run for reelection in 1952?

KENT: That's a very good question. I was covering a speech he made at the National Guard Armory here. I believe it was a Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner in...

HESS: March the 29th.

KENT: Oh, was it March 29 of '52?

HESS: Had you had any inkling that he might make this decision before this time?

KENT: There had been speculation, but certainly nobody expected it that night. I recall having written my story earlier, on the basis of his text, which was given to us on a "hold for release" basis, and...

HESS: No announcement in that advance text.

KENT: There was nothing in the advance text. As he neared the end of the mimeographed text, I

[102]

remember walking out of the big hall with Bill Lawrence, then of the *New York Times*, and seeing George Carvalho of the San Francisco *Chronicle* run past us, into the press room, hand in his copy based on the President's early text, and vanish into the night.

Well, Mr. Lawrence and I took the precaution of continuing to read the President's text and to follow it as he read it on our way out, and so we were in pretty good position. When he added a paragraph or two at the end to the effect, "Therefore, I have concluded not to run for reelection in '52," Mr. Lawrence was in great shape, because he immediately sprinted into the press room and grabbed one of the Western Union operators and nailed that machine down for himself and I ran into one of the very few telephone booths in the Armory and shut the door and began dictating. So, we were in good shape. Good object lesson: Never leave the hall while the President is still speaking. About Mr.

[103]

Carvalho of the San Francisco *Chronicle*: his office finally caught up with him two or three hours later, and George still didn't know what had happened, a rather sad case.

HESS: He had left early.

KENT: He had left just about a paragraph too early.

HESS: By following along on the text that has been handed out while a man is speaking to see if there have been any changes, is this standard procedure, is this the way you do?

KENT: You bet. You bet.

HESS: And then if you have already filed your story, you hope that he doesn't throw you a curve, or...

KENT: Well, you...

HESS: Do you file stories before?

KENT: Oh, yes. You have to. You very often -- well,

[104]

it depends on your edition times. But you file a story, "hold for release" or you'll see very often in news stories, "the President said in prepared remarks." Then after he has made his speech, you knock off the "in prepared remarks" and you write a new lead. And as was the case in that armory speech that we were just talking about, you recast it considerably, because the last two paragraphs are the whole story.

HESS: That's right.

According to his *Memoirs*, he had told a number of his staff members that that would be his decision, but he gave strict instructions that there was to be no leaks on that particular...

KENT: No, I don't recall that there was a leak, but there was some speculation. There is -- I suppose that there is always speculation.

HESS: Yes, the normal things, wondering if the man is going to run again.

[105]

KENT: Yes.

HESS: After Mr. Truman removed himself from the race, this would be the last of March and early April, and at that particular time in 1952 who did you personally think would make the best standard-bearer for the Democratic Party, just after Mr. Truman had removed himself?

KENT: Well, we in Chicago were particularly interested in the Governor of Illinois, Adlai Stevenson; and it was speculation about him right from the beginning, because he had come in with an enormous (for that time), an enormous majority in 1948, the Truman upset year. And because for a variety of reasons, he looked like hot property. He seemed liberal, he was from the Middle west, he was from a big population state which was a swing state. There was also, we had heard, a report that Mr. Truman was interested in interesting Governor Stevenson and in offering to help him. But I must say Stevenson in those days

[106]

was awfully cagey about verifying this, and the White House never said anything publicly about it.

HESS: Now, according to the *Memoirs*, and to a good deal that had been written, Mr. Truman had a good deal of difficulty in interesting Mr. Stevenson in taking the...

KENT: I think that's the case.

HESS: ...in taking this position.

KENT: I had a long talk with Mr. Stevenson early in the spring, at about the time that there was -- that I have since learned that Mr. Truman was trying to talk about it. And I wound up with the feeling that I ought to write a story which suggested that he was not saying no to the possibility that he would be a candidate, and yet I could never find anywhere in the long, long conversation that he positively showed any real interest in it. He always showed doubt

[107]

of various degrees, and yet I wound up with a feeling that he hadn't shut the door.

HESS: In speaking with him, what seemed to be the main areas for his reluctance? The main reasons for his reluctance?

KENT: I've always felt that one of his reasons was that he felt that the Truman administration -- let's see how to put this -- I hate to use a phrase out of time sequence, like "credibility gap," but in effect he felt that the Truman administration, in its last days, was having some trouble with its credibility. I think he felt that commentators overemphasized that.

HESS: There was an expression at that time, an expression that Mr. Stevenson also used somewhat later, "The Mess in Washington."

KENT: Yes. Well, Stevenson picked that up from the Republicans, and to that extent was their tool, I thought. The mess in Washington really wasn't

[108]

of major proportions, and if I had been a Democratic governor, I believe I'd have been a little more careful about that, although Mr. Stevenson was pretty careful with his language. But I think this was a major part of his concern.

HESS: What was your personal opinion of Governor Stevenson and his ability. Do you think that he would have made a good President?

KENT: I don't know. I really don't know. I don't know how decisive he would have been, how firmly he would have grasped the old nettle. And if I don't know twenty years after watching him campaign, I submit that he's somewhat of a puzzle still. He was, by all accounts, he was a pretty good Governor, a pretty good one-term Governor, given the fact that Illinois is a very much of a swing state, perhaps a little more Republican than not. In other words, the legislature is normally Republican. But during

[109]

his two campaigns, he showed a sort of indecisiveness that at times jarred even his greatest admirers, I thought.

HESS: At the time that you were speaking to him, did he say anything about wanting to stay on as Governor of Illinois, but did he give that as sort of his reasons for his sort of reluctance to accept?

KENT: I don't recollect this. I wish I had looked that story up. I should have done my homework, Jerry, a little better before I submitted to you and your ghastly machine, but I didn't.

HESS: After Mr. Stevenson received the nomination, did you ever speak to him about his relationship with Mr. Truman?

KENT: No. No, I don't think so.

HESS: Did you -- which of the campaign trains did you travel on in 1952?

[110]

KENT: Well, I switched. We would...

HESS: Do you have to get over to the White House?

KENT: Pretty soon.

We would take one candidate for as long as we could think that we could stand it, and then switch at some convenient point.

HESS: Mr. Truman took several trips in 1952.

KENT: Yes.

HESS: Did you travel with Mr. Truman?

KENT: No, I didn't. I was with either General Eisenhower or Stevenson all the way.

HESS: When you were with the Stevenson campaign, did you notice any lack of cooperation, or abundance of cooperation between the Truman White House and the Democratic National Committee, and the Stevenson efforts?

KENT: Well, I think there were difficulties. I

[111]

don't think there's any question about that, but they were more or less to my mind, in those days, immediately smothered by the difficulties that Mr. Stevenson's own staff had. We didn't feel that his press secretary and his public relations staff were handling his relationships with the press terribly well. And of course, the candidate himself made it rather difficult, because he had a habit of rewriting his speech, and writing it right up until the last minute before he delivered it, and then of changing it at every stop. We could never make one single story stand up for one single day as the major thrust of what he said.

HESS: Who were the members of his press office that you were having some difficulty with? Now, a few of the people who worked there were Clayton Fritchey...

KENT: That was his second campaign I believe,

[112]

Clayton. I'm talking about the first one.

HESS: Yeah, he headed it in '56, but he was there in '52, and then there was a gentleman by the name of Bill Flanagan.

KENT: Bill Flanagan I remember, and Bill Flanagan had a subordinate named Murray Flanders, and probably the press corps' beefs were all out of proportion to the injury that was done them, but still we didn't think they measured up to the treatment we had gotten from the White House, or from the highly professional Eisenhower staff that Jim Hagerty...

HESS: Jim Hagerty was running that at that time.

KENT: Yes.

HESS: Traveling on both of the campaigns, what was your -- who do you think was hitting the marks the closest? Who did the public seem to be paying more attention to when you would go out?

[113]

KENT: Well, of course, this is always, you have to bear in mind that my answer's going to be done in retrospect with that perfect 20-20 hindsight that Brian McMahon used to talk about. It's perfectly obvious now...

HESS: That does help, doesn't it?

KENT: Yes, it does, It's perfectly obvious now that Governor Stevenson's elegance with the language, and his cleverness, and his hitting the mark, were not as important to the American electorate as was the hero image of General Eisenhower. General Eisenhower's speeches were pretty puny for the most part compared to Stevenson's, and it was a common thing amongst newspapermen to notice that they'd only applaud him twice; usually when he began and when he ended. Well, with Stevenson, a lot of his bright cracks were obviously appreciated, the applause was rather constant, and yet they voted rather overwhelmingly for the General.

[114]

So, a great deal of what Stevenson went through was an exercise in futility, and I think he felt that way.

HESS: Did he ever say anything to you about that?

KENT: No.

HESS: Did you ever speak to him about his chances?

KENT: No, I don't think so, but in terms of attitudes, his attitude was a considerably different one from that of Mr. Truman on the campaign trail. And in point of fact, the press corps thought on both occasions -- the Truman and Stevenson campaigns -- that the Democratic candidate was going to be a heavy loser. We batted five hundred percent.

HESS: Right once and wrong the other.

KENT: Right once and wrong as hell one time.

HESS: All right, moving to some general questions:

[115]

What do you see as Mr. Truman's major accomplishment during his administration?

KENT: Oh, boy. Well, I think that the Marshall plan was a tremendous thing. I mean the recovery of Europe, and I think that any European official, or student of that generation, would submit that that's a major monument to him.

I don't know that you call this another monument, he certainly called attention to the atom bomb.

HESS: What's your view of that? Do you think that bomb needed to have been then dropped at that time?

KENT: Mr. Truman was never in any doubt about that. You have to admire his command, that willingness to take the rap for it. I noticed in the papers a few days ago that Dr. Edward Teller, who was embroiled in an argument at the American Academy for the Advancement of Science, or whatever its formal

[116]
title is...

HESS: Being held in Chicago.

KENT: Yes. And after being baited by some young scientists for his part in the development of the hydrogen bomb, he said he had wanted the Government to ask the Japanese to attend a demonstration of the violence of the explosion, and that Dr. Oppenheimer had talked him out of it. I suppose certainly a lot of lives would have been saved if we had had a demonstration instead of exploding it over two cities. I don't recall reading anywhere that Mr. Truman was given that alternative at the time, perhaps he was. It might have been somewhat difficult to set up.

HESS: What is your estimation of Mr. Truman's place in history?

KENT: I think that American history is -- well world history, is going to show him as a very good

[117]
President. I wouldn't know how to rank him by the numbers, but I would say that ultimately he will rank very high, one of the more effective, courageous Presidents of our time.

HESS: Do you have anything else to add on Mr. Truman or on your duties as a newsman during those very eventful days?

KENT: I'm not sure what you're fishing for, Jerry, what do you want me to say?

HESS: This is my tail end question.

KENT: Oh.

HESS: This is if you've got anything else you want to put down, or little gems of wisdom we might otherwise miss.

KENT: Oh, yes, I remember a little thing. We were coming back from Rio on the battleship *Missouri*, and three reporters, Merriman Smith of the UP, and Tony Vaccaro of the AP and I were talking to

[118]
Mr. Truman at the rail one day after he interrupted the so-called bird walk to say hello to me, really. And we fell to talking about Senator [Theodore G.] Bilbo, the man from Mississippi who had been pretty obstreperous about some civil rights legislation. And Mr. Truman told us that Bilbo had been a seatmate of his in the Senate, and that he could always rely on him to back him up, and generally had been a pretty good Senator. He told us how he had telephoned him once when Bilbo was blocking some legislation. This was after Mr. Truman went to the White House, and he said to the Senator, "Bilbo, what the hell are you doing to me?"

And the Senator said, "Mr. President do you want that legislation passed?"

And Mr. Truman said, "Yes, I want a vote on it." And Mr. Bilbo removed his objection and there was a vote. The point, though, of the anecdote is that during the conversation he said something about Bilbo's being "all right

[119]

until he developed that silly Negro business." I've raised this point only because this is the first time I realized that Harry Truman, despite his southern upbringing, and his mother's dislike for blue uniforms and the rest of the mythology, was truly concerned about equality, and about the lot of the Negroes and equal rights. I thought it was a little illuminating flash.

HESS: That's very good. Did you ever hear him say anything else at other times about his views on civil rights, other than at a press conference or during a speech.

KENT: I don't think of anything private like this, but he certainly spoke out publicly.

I remember filing a story one time in Key West about a, I believe it was a housing project in Savannah, Georgia, in which he had approved an order requiring that it be integrated. Savannah is pretty deep in the South, and this stuck in my mind because that is the first time I remember

[120]

his doing that. And it was more than just a coincidence, I think, that he waited until he got down in the deep South like Key West to issue this order.

I remember writing a lead that said something about President Truman put the Fair Deal stamp of approval on integration of housing projects in the South, and I was pretty pleased with that lead because that was the first time I recollect it happening.

HESS: All right, anything else to add?

KENT: No, do you want to go over to the White House with me and ask President Nixon what he thinks about President Truman?

HESS: Well, we might get some interesting answers I think.

[121]

INDEX

Atomic bomb (Hiroshima), 115

Ayers, Eben A., 42, 43

Baltimore Sun, 35

Battery "D", 93, 94

Baughman, U. E., 38

Bilbo, Theodore G., 118, 119

Blair House, assassination attempt at, 37-38

Bradley, Omar N., 97, 98

Carleton College, 1

Carvalho, George, 102, 103
Chicago Daily Times, 2, 4, 11, 52, 89
Chicago Sun, 84
Chicago Sun-Times, 2, 49, 52, 62, 63, 83
Chicago Tribune, 80, 81
Civil rights, 119, 120
Clifford, Clark M., 44, 45
Commodity Credit Corporation, 56, 57
Connelly, Matthew J., 11, 13, 46, 47

Daily Oklahoman, 2
Daniels, Jonathan, 30
Defense Department, U.S., 92
Democratic National Convention of 1948, 51, 52
Dewey, Thomas E., 53, 57, 58, 68
Dexter, Iowa, 55, 56

Early, Stephen T., 29, 30, 34, 35
Eisenhower, Dwight D., 40, 48, 61, 110, 113
Else, George M., 48-50

Flanagan, William, 112
Flanders, Murray, 112
Fritchey, Clayton, 111, 112
Fulbright, J. William, 62, 63

Hagerty, James C., 40, 112
Harriman, Averell, 49, 50
Hoover, Herbert, 12
Hume, Paul, 36

Illinois, 1948 election, 56, 57
Indian Treaty Room, 14, 16
Iowa, 1948 election, 55-57

Japan, atomic bombing of, 116
Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner (1952), 101-104
Johnson, Louis A., 92-94
Johnson, Lyndon B., 46

Kansas City Star, 2
Kent, Carleton, personal background, 1-4
Key West, Florida, 76-85
Kiel Auditorium, St. Louis, Mo., 74, 75
Korean War, 91, 92, 94-100
Krock, Arthur, 87-89

Lawrence, *Kansas Daily Journal World*, 2
Lawrence, William, 102

Linkins, Carroll S., 66
Little Rock, Arkansas, 93, 94
Long, Dewey, 66
Lucas, Scott W., 56, 57

MacArthur, Douglas, 94-100
McKim, Edward, 11, 13
Marshall Plan, 115
Muehlebach Hotel, Kansas City, Mo., 68, 70
Mylander, William, 68, 69

National Plowing Match (1948), 55, 56
New York Times, 87, 102
Nixon, Richard M., 23-26
Nixon, Robert G., 9
Northfield, Minnesota, 1

Ohio, 1948 election, 69
Oklahoma City Times, 2
Oppenheimer, J. Robert, 116
Oval Office, White House, 14, 16

Perlmeter, Irving, 40, 41, 42, 43
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 51, 52
Presidential election, 1948:
 analysis of, 71-75
 election night results, 67-70
 farm vote, 56, 57
 general, 51-75
 Kiel Auditorium (St. Louis) speech by President Truman, 74, 75
 whistle stop campaign, 55-65
Presidential election, 1952, 101-114
Press conferences, Presidential, 10-18, 22-28
Press secretaries, Presidential, 29-35, 38-44

Reinsch, J. Leonard, 31, 32, 33
Reynolds, Thomas, 53, 57, 58, 83, 84, 85
Roosevelt, Eleanor, 8, 9
Roosevelt, Franklin D., 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12, 14, 15, 23, 24, 29, 31, 34, 84
Ross, Charles G., 17, 33-35, 42-44, 65, 66

St. Louis, Missouri, 74
St. Louis Post Dispatch, 33, 34
San Francisco Chronicle, 102, 103
Savannah, Georgia, 119
Secret Service, U.S., 9, 10, 38, 61, 77
Short, Joseph, 35, 36, 38, 40, 41, 43, 44
Smith, Merriman, 9, 117
State Department, U.S., 41

Statler Hotel, Washington, D.C., 7, 11
Stevenson, Adlai E., 105-111, 113, 114
Stewart, Russell, 11

Teller, Edward, 115, 116
Thirty-Fifth Division Association Reunion (1949), 93, 94
Truman, Harry S.:

- accomplishments as President, 115-117
- assassination attempt on, 37, 38
- Bilbo, Theodore G., relationship with, 118, 119
- civil rights, and, 119, 120
- Democratic National Convention of 1948, address to, 52
- election night results, 1948, 67-70
- Hume, Paul, article on Margaret Truman, reaction to, 36
- Kent, Carleton, first acquaintance with, 4-6
- Kent, Carleton, relationship with, 18, 19
- Key West, Florida, vacations in, 76-85
- Kiel Auditorium, St. Louis, Mo., 1948 election eve speech in, 74, 75
- President, announces he is not a candidate for 1952, 102-104
- Presidential election of 1948, confidence of victory in, 73
- Press conferences, 10-18, 22-28
- Press corps, relationship with the White House, 19-22
- Stevenson, Adlai, political support of, 105-107
- Wake Island conference with General MacArthur, 94-99
- walks, early morning, 9, 10
- Western trip, June, 1948, 53
- whistle stop campaign of 1948, 59-65
- White House staff, 44-50

Truman, Margaret, 36
Truman *Memoirs*, 104, 106
Tubby, Roger, 40, 41, 42, 43, 90
"Turnip Day" speech, 1948, 22

University of Kansas, 1
University of Michigan, 1

Vaccaro, Ernest B. (Tony), 9, 117
Vaughan, Harry H., 47, 48
Vinson, Fred M., 49

Wake Island conference, 94-99
Warm Springs, Georgia, 8
Washington Post, 36
Watson, Edwin M., 30
Western Union, 66
White House staff, 44-50
Williamsburg, U.S.S., 19, 85-87
Wisconsin, 1948 election, 55