

Oral History Interview
with
DONALD S. DAWSON

General Dawson was the personnel officer in the White House during the Truman administration. He was also a campaign advance man for Mr. Truman during the 1948 campaign,

Washington, D.C.,

March 16, 1976

by William D. Stilley and Jerald L. Hill, William Jewell College

Harry S. Truman Library

Independence, Missouri
July, 1985

NOTICE

This interview was conducted by William D. Stilley and Jerald L. Hill as part of a winterim and independent study project at William Jewell College in March 1976, under the direction of the Political Science Department of William Jewell College.

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STILLEY: Mr. Dawson, when were you first employed by President Truman in the White House?

DAWSON: August 6, 1947.

STILLEY: Were you working with a Federal agency at that time?

DAWSON: I was.

STILLEY: Was it Reconstruction Finance?

DAWSON: It was the Reconstruction Finance Corporation.

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STILLEY: And when did you first start work with them?

DAWSON: April 27, 1933.

STILLEY: What were the circumstances, or how did President Truman employ you in the White House?

DAWSON: I was called to the Chairman of the Board's office of the RFC and told that the President wanted me to come over there and talk with him.

STILLEY: And from there did he just say, " I want you to be my personnel expert," or . . .

DAWSON: No, it was substantially what you say. I went over and talked with the President. George Schoeneman, who had been the President's Special Executive Assistant, was leaving to take another post as Commissioner of Internal Revenue Service and he wanted me to take that position over, which consisted of many facets, many duties, including personnel, but a lot of other dignities.

STILLEY: Were there any particular qualities the President asked you to look for when you were employing,

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or checking out people for positions in the White House?

DAWSON: No, he did not give me instructions as to standards or guidelines. He left it up to me.

STILLEY: You were involved in the '48 campaign, were you not?

DAWSON: I was.

STILLEY: Were you an advance man or what was your position?

DAWSON: I handled all of the advance work after September 1, and from that point on during the President's tenure of office in his second term.

STILLEY: I understand that you helped with the Dallas rally, that was an integrated rally in Dallas, Texas.

DAWSON: That's true, but all of our rallies were integrated from the standpoint that we welcomed the participation of everybody, and discriminated against nobody.

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STILLEY: Was there a specific approach to make sure that this was integrated more than the others were?

DAWSON: We had a very active black faction in Dallas that wanted to take part. From that standpoint we made special arrangements, not in the sense that they were special, but that we wanted to be sure that they had every opportunity to take a part.

STILLEY: Okay, let's go back to when you were first employed at the White House. When you first met the President what was your general first impression of him?

DAWSON: Well, I first met the President in 1935 when he became a Senator. I thought he was a very warm, personable sort of an individual, nice man to be with, a man's man, a person you could put your trust and confidence in, and nice to be around.

HILL: How much contact did you have with President Truman?

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DAWSON: Not a great deal of contact. We would meet occasionally at social functions. His personal secretary, Victor Messall, was a longtime friend of mine. I would see him on occasion, and he would want me to say hello to the Senator when I would come to the office, and I did. There were other Missourians that would come to town, and would want to see the Senator, and I was frequently with them and so I saw him always in a social capacity.

HILL: What type of man was President Truman to work for in the White House?

DAWSON: A very wonderful man to work for; he was wonderful in every way that I knew him. Easy to work with, he gave you full responsibility to do a job, expected you to do it with a minimum of instruction, and held you responsible. Couldn't find a better relationship.

STILLEY: Were there times when you recommended someone for employment and then President Truman said,

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"No, I'm not going to hire him?" Were there any times of, maybe, some conflict in hiring somebody?

DAWSON: I don't recall any, I wouldn't be surprised if there were, because he had his own independent judgment; but I ordinarily would have a panel of two or three people that he could make a choice from, so it wasn't a black or white situation in that sense of the word, although there were occasions like that. If there had been an occasion that he did not agree with my selection, he wouldn't have said, "No, we're not going to hire him." He would have approached it in a much more diplomatic way. He would have said, "Well, let's look a little further," or "I don't believe this individual has what we're looking for," or an approach along that line.

HILL: How close did President Truman work with his Cabinet? Would you say pretty involved?

DAWSON: He did not work with the Cabinet as a body, very much; he worked with individual members of

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the Cabinet a great deal, and saw them whenever they wanted to see him, and frequently called them in for their advice.

HILL: But there weren't a lot of Cabinet meetings?

DAWSON: No.

HILL: What program during his administration do you think President Truman thought was the most important, the one that really . . .

DAMSON: I think he believed the social programs affecting the everyday life of the people on the domestic front were the most important, and he believed in strong national security and defense. He believed strongly in the educational programs that were emerging at that point. Social Security was a great interest of his. Medical care was very close to his heart. But I would generally say that his main interests were people interests.

STILLEY: Did the President have problems with White House leaks?

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DAWSON: I don't recall any problems that we had. I think there was always a certain amount of curiosity as to how certain columnists got their information, but it was never of a serious national security character that we have today. Although I suppose if I had more time to reflect I could dig up a few instances like that. But it does not impress me now looking back over a period of a number of years that it was a great problem.

HILL: How confident was the President and his staff during the '48 election? Were they pretty confident the whole way, or was there times . . .

DAWSON: Well, I can't speak for the staff, each member will have to give his own impressions. The President, as far as I could see, had great confidence that if the people saw him, enough people saw him and heard him, found out what kind of a fellow he was, he would be elected. I remember after the convention, he called everybody that was concerned, and that meant the National Chairman Howard McGrath, and certain

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Cabinet officers, certain political leaders, into the State Dining Room of the White House; and the principal burden of that meeting was that he wanted to go into every county in the United States and make a campaign so that the people could get acquainted with him, know what kind of a fellow he was, and, as he used to say, so that they would see I didn't have horns and a spiked tail. That was the premise that he started the campaign on. Of course, it was impossible to go into every county in the United States. I think there were some 15,000 counties then and not all of them fully accessible. Time just wouldn't permit it, but that was his faith in the electorate.

STILLEY: After the president was nominated at the convention, were you yourself personally confident he would go all the way and win reelection, or did you have your doubts along with many of the rest of Americans?

DAWSON: I won't say that I had doubts. I was never certain that he was going to win in the period

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you described immediately after the convention, because that was a time of great unrest in the Democratic Party; we had had the walk-out of the Southern states, the formation of the Dixiecrat Party. Former Vice President Wallace was running on the Progressive ticket, and Tom Dewey was a strong Republican candidate. The feeling of confidence did not generate, as far as I was concerned, until after we got into the campaign, and we saw how the crowds of people were turning out and responding to President Truman.

STILLEY: What were, say your reactions or so when you opened up Newsweek and I believe there was a column that 50 experts predict a Dewey victory? Did that do anything to the morale of the campaign train, the Truman Special?

DAWSON: I don't think it had a big effect. We were used to that sort of thing everyday in the week, morning, noon and night, so finally it just got so that it rolled off your back like water off a duck's back. It was inconsequential as far as

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morale was concerned. If anything, it made us work a little bit harder.

HILL: By election night was the Truman camp pretty confident of victory even though the polls were...

DAWSON: Yes, we felt we were going to win.

HILL: I've read an account in a couple of books about his decision not to run in '52. Did he ever discuss that with you?

DAWSON: Yes, he did. He told me at Key West when I came down a little bit after he had arrived there; he called me over to the seawall at Truman Beach there one morning, and said, "Don, I'm not going to run for reelection."

HILL: What was his basic reason for deciding not to run?

DAWSON: Well, I would have to think back a little bit more before I could give you an answer on that.

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HILL: Was there ever any consideration of him--some people thought Truman would enjoy being in the Senate again, did he ever give serious consideration to that?

DAWSON: Not to my knowledge, he never thought about running for the Senate. He always advocated the idea that former Presidents, ex.-Presidents should have the freedom of the floor of the Senate and be called upon for advice and counsel., which I think is a good idea, but has never been taken up.

STILLEY: Mentioning Key West, did you travel, with the President when he would relax at Key West, Florida?

DAWSON: Oh, yes, all the time.

STILLEY: Was business conducted very much through that time, or just pretty much relaxation?

DAWSON: No, business was conducted every day on a scheduled basis. He kept the same general type of organization of the day that he did in Wash-

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ington. We'd have our scheduled meetings beginning early in the morning, running through to, oh, 11 o'clock, I suppose, and dispose of the current business. Then we would take a walk down to Truman Beach, take a swim before lunch, and walk back, have lunch. The afternoon was given over to business until about 5 o'clock, and from that point on the business day was over, although the President is never free from business worries and things that he has to do, because people want to see him, people want to talk to him on the phone; he has to be sure that the machinery of Government, insofar as he's concerned, doesn't stop.

STILLEY: Do you believe that these trips helped completely relax him, and helped him with, maybe, the outlook on problems facing the nation?

DAWSON: Yes, they were exceedingly beneficial to the President. He was a man that could relax when he had the opportunity and going to Key West completely shut off from the hustle and bustle of Washington, and of the great number of people that were demand-

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ing his time in Washington. He could play a little poker, didn't have to dress formally (he wore sport clothes), and just generally enjoyed himself with the group that was around him, which was very congenial. Generally at night we would have a movie of some sort in addition to playing a little poker, which was always a friendly game; it was never a gambling game as far as he was concerned with the staff. You couldn't lose more than \$100 under the rules that we played during the whole course of the stay, because when you went broke, if you did, you could dip into the kitty and take out enough chips to keep you going.

STILLEY: If someone desired not to--you know, they played maybe one hand in a poker game and they decided they didn't want to play anymore, would the President say stay and play, or . . .

DAWSON: It was very possible that he would have said that to somebody that was a very good poker player, that he enjoyed because of their storytelling or their personality; but it was a rather rigid play-

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ing poker, because he wanted to play, it gave him relaxation and it took about eight to make a good game.

STILLEY: Dr. [Wallace] Graham was saying that some of these poker games were used to kind of test a prospective person being employed with the White House to see how they stood up to certain reactions. Was this your impression of some of the poker games, that they were used as tests?

DAWSON: Not in my experience.

STILLEY: Then would the President have any other type of test that he'd want you to give on another person that might be a possible . . .

DAWSON: No, we never went through that sort of an operation. The President was a good judge of character. We always insisted that he see the individual if he didn't already know him, or her, before any commitment of any sort was made, so that the President would have a chance to sit down and talk a little bit and sound out the person,

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just as were sitting here together today. He could make up his mind in that period, and in addition many times he knew the person. In addition, I'd also brief him thoroughly on what the FBI reports had said, what our investigations had said, what people that he knew had said about the prospective appointee.

STILLEY: I believe there was one press conference or something and they asked him something about telephone or wiretaps and he said it was a direct violation of the Constitution, and then through, oh, within the last couple of months, they've come up with saying President Truman used the FBI for certain political reports. Did you have any knowledge of this?

DAWSON: I have no knowledge of that whatsoever. I was the liaison with the FBI. All the reports that I know of from the FBI came to my desk. I made all of the principal contacts with the FBI, part of my job. I'm not saying that contacts could not have been made that I didn't know about, but I certainly

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was aware of none at all for political, reasons in any manner, shape or form.

STILLEY: During Korea was there a lot of pressure inside the White House? Did the President seem a little bit more irritable or upset?

DAWSON: I never saw the President irritable; I never saw hint upset,

STILLEY: Did you see the play "Give 'em Hell Harry?"

DAWSON: Yes, I did.

STILLEY: Do you believe that this is an accurate portrayal of, let's say, his language used in the White House?

DAWSON: So far as the script is concerned, it was very accurate.

STILLEY: Some of his friends have said that he didn't use the language that they portrayed in this.

DAWSON: Well, the mannerisms and some of the language may have been uncharacteristic, but insofar as the

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basic script is concerned it was very accurate. I found no inaccuracies as a matter of fact. However, you must realize that to sustain a dramatic production, you have to get a little more action and drama into the situation than you would expect in normal everyday life.

HILL: Did you see President Truman very much after he went back to.. .

DAWSON: Yes, I saw him a good deal. Had the pleasure of going out on September 7, 1974, as a former president of the Reserve Officer's Association, visiting with Mrs. Truman and then dedicating the two fountains on either side of the entrance, which the Reserve Officer's Association had given to the Library. I made a speech of dedication then to the great crowd, and it was a fine, beautiful afternoon.

HILL: Did President Truman seem to enjoy his retirement; was he able to relax and adjust back to not having, I guess, the power of being in the White House?

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DAWSON: I would think so. I think he made a perfect adjustment. I think the story that is told about a young lady reporter asking him what was the first thing he did when he came back home to Independence after being president, he said, "I took the suitcases up to the attic." He had no problem getting back into the routine of Independence, and being a private citizen again. He liked to write, he liked to talk to young people, he liked to teach school, so to speak, and see his old friends, and renew the friends that he had had in Kansas City and Jackson County. He had no problems with adjustment ever.

STILLEY: Were you involved with him in planning his Library in Independence?

DAWSON: Not to any considerable degree, no.

STTLLE: Did he ask you for any advice on the planning? Maybe where it was going to be, or establishment?

DAWSON: No. I can remember that there were general discussions as to where it should be. Whether it should be in Kansas City, whether it should be at

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the University of Missouri, or Independence, or elsewhere; but they were in the nature of general discussions. He wasn't asking my specific advice.

STILLEY: What, maybe, one quality, or several qualities, do you see in President Truman that has made him a great President?

DAWSON: Absolute integrity, humility, and down-to-earth qualities that we appreciate in Americans.

HILL: What accomplishments do you feel were his most outstanding things while he was President?

DAWSON: Well, Winston Churchill, said that President Truman more than any other man was responsible for saving Western civilization. I think that his program of foreign assistance after the war probably saved the world for freedom as we know it today. I think great advances were made in civil rights under his administration. He integrated the armed forces; he made great advances in integration; he began to use women more in public office than his predecessors had. His

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social, programs within the country I don't think are subject to any criticism whatsoever. The Point IV program of technical assistance abroad was again something that probably saved the world as we know it today. Further than that, everybody understood what he said when he said it, there was no doubt in the mind of the people as to where we were going. They didn't always agree with him. Most of the time they perhaps didn't agree with him, but they knew that he was a man of character that was going to see it through and they knew how to grapple with that kind of a situation, so that there was faith in Government.

STILLEY: I hate to keep jumping around, but on the 1948 election was there a political board per se? Was it called the Political Liaison Board or something?

DAWSON: No.

STILLEY: Did he have certain staff members that might not have actually been involved with the campaign directly, but asked their advice on campaign matters?

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DAWSON: In the sense that I think you're asking, no. Although there was general give and take in his method of operation, so that he could have asked any individual some question or other. But I don't believe that the answer, as you put the question, would be "yes." He had no political strategy board of that sort.

STILLEY: Would he seem to make decisions fast or would he like to maybe leave the impression that he made it fast, but actually studied the situation?

DAWSON: Are you speaking about the campaign of '48 now?

STILLEY: Just general overall in his administration, if that's possible.

DAWSON: He was generally quick to make decisions. He didn't take a long time. However, he was a man that sought advice, wanted to know all the facts, wanted to know both sides of any question, and if it took him a while to get it, he insisted on taking that time. For example, in the MacArthur removal, he

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called in all of the individuals concerned to Blair House, had a thorough discussion of the question back and forth across the table. Everybody had a chance to say what they wanted to say. He admired MacArthur as a military man greatly, and he knew that the step that he might have to take in removing the general was very serious, so he was sure he got the facts, and he didn't decide immediately. He slept on it overnight after everything had been in over a period of time.

STILLEY: Were there any major decisions or maybe even minor decisions that he really regretted that he made?

DAWSON: Well, I can't answer that because he never told me whether he regretted anything or not.

STILLEY: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Dawson.

DAWSON: A pleasure, glad that you're doing this work. I think it's in the interest of good government and history.

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