

Oral History Interview
with
GOULD LINCOLN

Reporter and columnist for the Washington, D.C. *Evening Star* since 1909.

Washington, D.C.
August 10, 1967

by Jerry N. Hess, Harry S. Truman Library

The Harry S. Truman Library
Independence, Missouri
January 1968

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HESS: Mr. Lincoln, since you have been an active newspaperman in Washington for a good many years, I'd like to ask you a few questions about former President Harry Truman. What were your earliest recollections of Mr. Truman?

LINCOLN: I never met Harry Truman until he came to the Senate as a Senator. I got to know him quite well. He first came into prominence as a Senator when he was head of the committee investigating certain aspects of the conduct of the Second World War. I think he did a very good job. Before that I'd known him.

HESS: You had known him before that?

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LINCOLN: Well, I had known him before he was head of that committee; I knew him when he became Senator.

HESS: He was elected in '34 and came to Washington in '35.

LINCOLN: And I'd seen quite a little of him. It's a funny thing, I don't know whether you've ever heard of the Moral Rearmament movement. It was a movement headed by Frank Buchman. It was known as -- it has to do with trying to make people better, and changing them and their belief in various -- well, honesty and all kinds of things of that kind. It's been referred to as a religious organization but it isn't. It's not connected with any particular church. Well, I became interested because my son went to college and he told some of these people to come and see me when they came to Washington. I met Mr. Buchman but I never became a member of the organization, but I was interested in what they had to say.

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For some reason or another Mr. Truman was interested in their point of view. He never did anything particularly for them. I took some of them to see him. Mr. Truman is a very human person and a very likeable person, and I remember very well -- President Roosevelt was running for his fourth term, wasn't it...

HESS: In 1944.

LINCOLN: ...when Truman became Vice President -- I was at the convention of course, and at that time there was a great deal of discussion as to who Roosevelt wanted for a Vice President. Of course, Henry Wallace wanted to be renominated, but there were others who wanted the nomination -- let's see -- Wallace was Vice President at the time -- and Roosevelt wrote him a letter saying that, in effect, if he were a member of the convention, "I would support you," or something like that, but he also wrote a letter to the Democratic National chairman, who was from Missouri, saying

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that if there should be any doubt about Mr. Wallace's being nominated, Mr. Truman was one man acceptable and I think William O. Douglas was the other one he mentioned. When Mr. Truman got off the train, I was there to see him. He was on his way to see Roy Roberts, the publisher of the *Kansas City Star*. I said, "Senator, you're going to be nominated for Vice President."

"Oh," he said, "forget it. I'm out here to nominate Jimmy Byrnes."

I said, "Well, that's what I think." He went on his way.

There were others there who thought they were going to get the nomination -- Senator Barkley of Kentucky was one of them, and Jimmy Byrnes of South Carolina.

HESS: Do you recall offhand why you thought Mr. Truman was going to receive it at that time?

LINCOLN: Yes, I thought that he was from the right

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part of the country; I thought that he would help, if Mr. Roosevelt needed any help. It didn't appear that he would need too much help to me, but then I had seen Roosevelt win three times. The fourth time seemed a little bit many. The people might have been tired of it and furthermore they were mixed up in a war. I thought Truman just fitted the bill, so to speak. I didn't think that Mr. Roosevelt was going to take that dreamer Wallace, and what a terrible situation this country would have been in if he had. So I was delighted when Mr. Truman was nominated, and when he was elected. A lot of my friends wondered why I thought Mr. Truman was a good man. They said, "That fellow who was just a handyman for Pendergast out there in Missouri?"

I said, "I don't care what you say about Mr. Truman, I think he is a very good man and if he should happen to become President -- if something should happen to the President, he would

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make a good President;" and that was my attitude I had a lot of friends who didn't feel that way about it, especially among the Republicans. They thought, shucks, he's just another cheap politician. Mr. Truman was anything but a cheap politician. He was a man who really believed that he would do the very best he could for the American people.

HESS: Do you recall what Mr. Truman had done that you formed this opinion of him at this time?

LINCOLN: Well, just from my personal relations with him. I was confident that he was an A-1 citizen.

HESS: Did the job that he did as chairman of the Truman Committee...

LINCOLN: Well, that gave him a lift, of course, and I knew about that, but I had known him before that and I liked him -- personally liked him, I thought he had -- well, he had a lot of character.

HESS: Before he worked on that committee, he worked

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for the Interstate Commerce Committee -- it was the Committee on Interstate Commerce, I believe, at that time. Did you know him back in those days, too?

LINCOLN: Well, I knew him from the time he got there. I don't remember anything connected with his work there with that committee.

I remember after he became President -- of course, Mr. Roosevelt had done less for him than anybody in the world. In fact, Mr. Roosevelt very rarely thought much of his Vice Presidents. Roosevelt -- I don't know just exactly the word for Franklin Roosevelt except that he was it.

HESS: He didn't like to delegate authority, is that right?

LINCOLN: He thought he would do what he wanted to, and he did in a great many respects, after he became President. He was one of the most able men in the White House in a good many ways, but

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he didn't rely on Truman, he didn't give Jack Garner anything to do, and certainly I don't think he gave a damn about Mr. Wallace. He took Wallace because he came from a farm state, and he felt he might have trouble running for a third term, but Wallace didn't help him, Mr. Willkie helped him more than any body, but he didn't need it. There was never any doubt in my mind after he got going that he was going to get the third term.

I remember very well the first press conference that Truman had that I attended at the White House. There was some question -- I was trying to remember the details of it -- that came up about the Russians and what he was going to do -- whether he was going to see the Russians or they were going to see him, and Mr. Truman didn't leave any doubt in the world about the fact that if the Russians wanted to talk to him they'd have to come to him. I was delighted. That was his attitude right from the start.

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HESS: No equivocation -- a good strong statement.

LINCOLN: I've forgotten the exact words he used but that was it, and when Mr. Truman did make a statement at the White House, he said it in his own language, and in his own way, and you never had any doubt as to what he was driving at. I think that Mr. Truman, in the various crises that arose, showed himself a good, strong man.

I remember, of course, he had to take over the United Nations conference out there in San Francisco, and I had to cover that conference. Mr. Truman didn't make any bones about it, he was going to get the best thing he could out of the United Nations, and he worked hard at it. He finally came out and talked to them, I was out there for a couple of months. And, of course, you've got to remember the Marshall Plan and you've got to remember the Truman Doctrine when he stepped in and saved Greece and Turkey, and you've got to

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remember how he handled the railroad workers when they threatened to strike, he was going to put them in the Army,

HESS: When he and Mr. A. F. Whitney fell out.

LINCOLN: Yes. You've got to remember a lot of things about Harry Truman because the more you think about his record, the better it seems. He'll go down as one of our strong Presidents. I don't know as I have much else to tell you about him -- oh, yes, I was much attracted by the modesty of the Truman's in the White House. Mrs. Truman was a wonderful person. And Mr.

Truman's affection for his daughter, you know perfectly well how he went to town for her -- what was her first name?

HESS: Margaret.

LINCOLN: Margaret Truman. Well, when she went on the air to sing for the first time, it was announced that Margaret Truman -- nothing about the White

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House, nothing about the President -- the Margaret Truman was going to sing. It just made me feel fine to have people like that in the White House. We'd just had the Roosevelts there and every time that anyone of them did anything, why, shucks, it was magnified to the nth degree. Here was a family in the White House with just as much power as the Roosevelts' had, and they were so modest.

HESS: In the spring and summer of 1948, before a Democratic convention was held that year, did you think that there was any possibility that the party might not give Mr. Truman the nomination?

LINCOLN: Well, there had been a lot of talk about it. The people from California were coming with blood in their eye, and other people, and they flattened out when they got there -- nobody tackled Harry Truman -- so it just died out.

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HESS: Do you recall anything in particular about the campaign?

LINCOLN: Oh, yes, I traveled around in that campaign, and I was certain that Truman was going to get beaten. I should have had sense enough to know, because I had covered a lot of these presidential campaigns -- going all over the country as I did, covered twenty odd states -- every time they had a presidential campaign from 1920 on, and I knew a lot of people and I went to the people I knew, one of the last states I went to was Ohio -- I was coming back from the West. And I knew Murray Lincoln who was the power in the Farm Bureau Federation. They got together half a dozen men from different parts of Ohio and I went in and talked to them one morning and I asked, what's going to happen with the farmers out here, and they said they're going to support the Republicans. Well, it could be, and everybody was mixed up on the thing. What makes me criticize myself for

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not knowing what was going on in the country was -- I was in Connecticut, I wasn't with Mr. Truman, but he was coming to Connecticut -- and I just happened to go by and saw the crowd that gathered to listen to Harry Truman in Connecticut, and they gave him a great hand on that campaign tour -- that whistlestop tour -- and I should have known. Furthermore, I went to the final Dewey meeting in New York. He came to Madison Square Garden to make his windup speech just before the election. They gave him a great hand and he made a pretty good speech -- Dewey could always make a good speech -- but there were not enough people in overalls -- they were all well-to-do people, you know! I could just kick myself around the lot for not knowing

what was going to happen because I should have had sense enough -- although I remember wiring Bill Evjue, who runs the *Capital Times* in Madison, Wisconsin. He was a good reporter and an ardent Roosevelt man and an ardent Democrat

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and I wired him just two days before the election -- I had been out there four weeks before, in Wisconsin, they all told me that Dewey was going to win, and I wired Bill and said, "What's going to happen?"

He wired me back, "Dewey's going to win."

HESS: So you weren't the only one who thought so?

LINCOLN: I was vexed with myself afterwards for not knowing what was going to happen. I should have taken my own judgement rather than somebody else's.

HESS: During the time that Mr. Truman was in the White House, did you go to any of the press conferences other than the one that you mentioned?

LINCOLN: Oh, yes, I went to many of the press conferences.

HESS: Do you recall anything in particular, any instances...

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LINCOLN: No, because I wasn't up there the day he was asked about the "red herring". That was one I didn't go to, but I went to a number of his press conferences. They were always interesting because he had a way with answering questions -- said what he thought. He didn't leave you in any doubt about what he was talking about. If he didn't know, he didn't say.

HESS: In 1952 at the Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner in March, he announced that he was not going to be a candidate for reelection. Were you surprised at that decision?

LINCOLN: No, I wasn't entirely surprised. That was in March -- I had been up there in New Hampshire? I think, for the primary -- they hold the first presidential primary, and I think -- was that before the New Hampshire primary?

HESS: I'm not sure.

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LINCOLN: I think he let them know before that primary that he wasn't going to run, I wasn't terribly surprised, but I must tell you one thing; after he announced that he wasn't going to run, I was traveling around in several states, and got out in Illinois -- and I had known Adlai Stevenson before. I first met him when he was down here with Frank Knox -- Frank Knox was Secretary of the Navy -- and I'd known him out there in San Francisco in '45 because he was the contact man for the press out there for the American delegation to the U.N.. I used to see him almost every day, and I knew Adlai Stevenson pretty well. I was in Chicago and I called up Adlai Stevenson -

- his name was being mentioned as a possibility for President. He was then Governor of Illinois -- and I got him down in Springfield and I said, "Governor, what do you think, are you going to run?"

"Oh," he said, "I want to run for Governor

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again, I don't want to run for President."

I said, "Well, Mr. Truman isn't going to run, and your name is going to be mentioned more and more."

"Well," he said, "I'm going to ask you a question. You've been traveling around this country, do you think anybody can beat Eisenhower?"

"Well," I said, "Governor, I don't believe anybody can."

HESS: What did he say to that?

LINCOLN: "Well," he said, "that's what I think." He said, "Nobody can beat Eisenhower." He said, "I don't want to run," And he really didn't want to run -- that I know. I told him so since.

HESS: What time was that?

LINCOLN: Well, that was -- oh, I'd been to Wisconsin and Illinois -- it was quite a while before the national

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convention, and they just made him run, that's all. He didn't want to run. I think he made one of the best acceptance speeches I ever listened to.

HESS: Before we go on here a minute, who do you think Mr. Truman preferred -- for the Democratic nomination in '52?

LINCOLN: Well, he supported Harriman. There's no question about that. He said right there at a press conference -- I was there. I guess it was in Chicago wasn't it -- yes.

HESS: Now, that was '56, wasn't it?

LINCOLN: This was in '56, yes, I think they held both of them in Chicago.

HESS: But in '52 who do you think President Truman backed?

LINCOLN: Well, '52, oh, I think I've got it mixed up,

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I think -- I may have said '56 -- but what I meant when Stevenson was nominated the first time. Oh, yes, I was talking about '56 when he was nominated the second time and Mr. Truman was violently opposed.

HESS: That's right. Mr. Truman came out for Mr. Harriman in '56.

LINCOLN: Yes, but in '52 Mr. Truman had said at that time that he was...

HESS: There are various stories. Some people say he strongly supported Stevenson, other people say it wasn't so strong that he would really have liked to have had Fred Vinson, for instance, or Mr. Barkley.

LINCOLN: My recollection was that unless the President did something behind the scenes, he wasn't doing anything much for anybody at the time. He was letting the Democratic convention make the nomination,

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but I think he probably gave the O.K. to Stevenson, because Stevenson was nominated. Of course, Kefauver was in that race; he came there with more delegates than anybody.

HESS: Now was this in '52 when Stevenson asked your opinion if Eisenhower could be beaten? Was that his first or his second race?

LINCOLN: That was his first race. It was after Truman announced he wasn't going to run himself.

HESS: Adlai Stevenson was beaten by Eisenhower twice -- in '52 and '56.

LINCOLN: Adlai was a candidate in '56, there's no bones about it, in '56 he was an active candidate. He announced his candidacy, and went and fought in the primaries for it. He beat Kefauver in several of them. Kefauver won in Minnesota or some other place, I remember going down to Florida when they were both running down, there. Kefauver gave up when the California primary was

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over -- after California he said that he was through, and he expected to get the vice presidential nomination.

HESS: In 1952 Governor Stevenson did not move his campaign headquarters to Washington or New York, he had it in Springfield, Illinois. Do you think, or don't you, that that might have been a way to disassociate himself, to a degree, with Mr. Truman?

LINCOLN: Well, people said so, but I have no way of knowing. It was called the "mess in Washington" at that time, as you recall. Everyone was attacking Mr. Truman because of favors he'd done for friends, or something or other, but they were so darn minor that this irritates me

when people talk about it. It was known as the "mess in Washington". That's one of the reasons everybody thought that Mr. Truman was not going to run.

HESS: Along about that time, Mr. Truman's standing

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in the polls -- which he never paid much attention to -- dropped somewhat, and you have mentioned a few of the things that might have caused that,, but what caused the downturn in Mr. Truman's popularity at that time, or during the time when he was in the White House?

LINCOLN: Well, let's see now. I've got to think back. Well, the anti-Communist thing was pretty strong and there were charges, of course, that Truman was not being as positive in dealing with the Communists as he should be.

HESS: It was about 1950 when Joe McCarthy...

LINCOLN: That was Joe McCarthy. He was making all the charges and then this fellow Chambers came along.

HESS: In 1948 when Clambers and Hiss and Elizabeth Bentley and all that...

LINCOLN: Yes, that stuff wasn't helping Truman at all,

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and another thing was the Korean war, and that was a very unpopular war, as you know, and just as unpopular as this Vietnam war is now, or even more so. It was thought that Truman should have gone along with McArthur and done various things, and the whole thing together was calculated to lower Mr. Truman's popularity. There's no doubt about it that the Korean war was a very definite handicap to the Democrats at that time.

HESS: Mr. Lincoln, where would you place Mr. Truman on the scale from a liberal to a conservative?

LINCOLN: Mr. Truman, as you may remember, went to town for civil rights, as well as Lyndon Johnson.

HESS: With somewhat less success than Mr. Johnson.

LINCOLN: Yes, but it hadn't progressed as far in those days. Mr. Roosevelt and Mrs. Roosevelt had done something for that, and Franklin Roosevelt had won the Negroes over because he fed them all, and the Negro vote went out-and-out

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for Franklin Roosevelt. But I remember when at the convention which Truman was nominated, they had brought in a very namby-pamby kind of a plank on civil rights -- it was Hubert Humphrey who brought in a minority report -- and Truman went to town for the minority report,

and the convention adopted the minority report, and some of the southern Democrats were so enraged they walked out. Of course, that Truman election in '48 was complicated by this Dixiecrat business...

HESS: And the Wallaceites at the same time.

LINCOLN: And the Wallaceites, yes, and the Wallaceites didn't get half the vote they thought they were going to get. And Mr. [J. Strom] Thurmond didn't get all the states in the South that he thought he was going to get either, so Mr. Truman came in with a pretty good vote in the electoral college. Mr. Truman was not an extremist on conservatism or on liberalism, but he was a liberal, there's no question about that in my mind.

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HESS: How would you characterize Mr. Truman as a man? We fairly well covered Mr. Truman as President. What kind of a man was Mr. Truman?

LINCOLN: Well, I have already told you -- I think I did. He was a man of character, and he was strong man for his friends. I mean, he was a good friend. He went out to Pendergast's funeral, you may recall.

HESS: When he was Vice President.

LINCOLN: And Pendergast had been a friend of his and Truman didn't care whether he'd been in jail or not. That's what I say about him, his friendships were very strong.

HESS: As a newspaperman, I'd like to ask your opinion about a few of the men who worked in the White House with Mr. Truman and particularly the press office. What did you think of Charlie Ross as Press Secretary?

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LINCOLN: Charlie Ross was one of my very good friends. He and I were members of the Gridiron Club together here, I'd known Charlie Ross ever since he came here as a correspondent and, of course, he was a great friend of Truman's and Truman was naturally a friend of Charlie's. Charlie didn't want the job. He much preferred doing what he was doing, but he was a friend of Truman's and, of course, when the President of the United States asks you to do something, you do it, as a rule. Charlie was really a wonderful newspaperman.

HESS: Did he do a pretty good job as press officer?

LINCOLN: Yes, I think he did in a way. Charlie was one of those fellows who wasn't going to tell anybody anything that he thought he shouldn't tell him. I thought he was pretty frank with them, and I think Truman had Joe Short in there afterwards, wasn't it?

HESS: Yes, after Charlie Ross died.

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LINCOLN: And Joe Short was a very good press officer.

HESS: Did they operate the office in any noticeably different manner?

LINCOLN: You mean between Charlie Ross and Joe? No, I couldn't tell you that. That's a detail I wouldn't know anything about.

HESS: Charlie Ross had an assistant, Eben Ayers. Did you have any occasion to work with Eben Ayers?

LINCOLN: No.

HESS: And Joe Short had two; Roger Tubby and Irving Perlmeter. Did you work with them?

LINCOLN: Roger Tubby, I remember -- Tubby was quite a character -- but I don't remember very much other than that I liked him.

HESS: Did you have any dealings with any of the people in the White House; Matthew Connolly, the

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Appointments Secretary, for instance, Harry Vaughan?

LINCOLN: Well, I just met them. I went up to the press conference, if I had anything to ask, I asked Truman, I didn't ask the White House staff members. But Charlie Ross was, as I say, a friend of mine. But I went to press conferences when I wanted to, and I didn't when I didn't.

HESS: Is there anything else you want to add on President Truman or the Truman administration?

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LINCOLN: No, I have told you a lot of things that I thought about Mr. Truman, and I think very well of him still. The last time I saw him was when he came here for a Gridiron dinner -- I was just trying to remember when it was -- two or three years ago. He never would come if he thought Eisenhower was going to be there. He didn't like Mr. Eisenhower.

HESS: They didn't get along too well.

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LINCOLN: When he finally came to a Gridiron dinner, it wasn't too long ago but these years go by and I get confused with some of them.

HESS: What caused the trouble between Mr. Truman and Mr. Eisenhower?

LINCOLN: Well, Mr. Truman thought that Eisenhower had been -- he didn't like the way Eisenhower acted when he had been elected, and Eisenhower just paid no attention to him at all when he came to Washington. He thought that Eisenhower had called him a liar, too.

HESS: During the campaign?

LINCOLN: Yes. Truman thought that the accusations that were made by Nixon had been very derogatory, and that Eisenhower had backed him up, and that kind of thing. Of course, as I say, Mr. Truman was a very positive character.

HESS: Thank you very much, sir.

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