

Oral History interview
with
HENRY F. NICHOL

Administrative Assistant, Farm Security Administration, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1937-46; Foreign Affairs Specialist, U.S. Department of State, 1946-63.

Potomac, Maryland
March 15, 1973

by Richard D. McKinzie, Harry S. Truman Library

The Harry S. Truman Library
Independence, Missouri
February, 1978

NOTICE

This is a transcript of a tape-recorded interview conducted for the Harry S. Truman Library. A draft of this transcript was edited by the interviewee but only minor emendations were made; therefore, the reader should remember that this is essentially a transcript of the spoken, rather than the written, word.

RESTRICTIONS

This oral history transcript may be read, quoted from, cited, and reproduced for purposes of research. It may not be published in full except by permission of the Harry S. Truman Library.

Oral History Interview
with
HENRY F. NICHOL

Potomac, Maryland
March 15, 1973 by Richard D. McKinzie, Harry S. Truman Library

[1]

MCKINZIE: I'd like to ask, Mr. Nichol, how you decided to choose a career in Government in the first place?

NICHOL: I was born in Charleston, South Carolina and was raised in Wilmington, North Carolina. I went to Davidson College in North Carolina. After finishing college I didn't have a job. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. So I landed in Washington in 1933 during the depression, and just happened to get a Government

[2]

job in the Home Owners' Loan Corporation.

MCKINZIE: Did you think at that time you'd make it a career?

NICHOL: No. I wasn't quite sure at that time. I was undecided as to just what I wanted to do, and I took the Government career because that happened to be the first thing available that looked fairly promising.

MCKINZIE: How did you happen to get out of the Home Owners' Loan Corporation? I understand you transferred jobs in about 1937.

NICHOL: Well after being there about three or four years I was offered a better job in the Department of Agriculture -- the Farm Security Administration.

MCKINZIE: Did you have any particular background for that job?

[3]

NICHOL: No. I just think I happened to do a fairly good job for the person I was working with in the Home Owners' Loan Corporation. He transferred to the Farm Security Administration and later asked me to come over there with him.

MCKINZIE: Well, then, you kept that all through the war?

NICHOL: I was in the Navy most of the time during the war and was assigned to the Office of Naval Intelligence.

MCKINZIE: None of your work in the Farm Security Administration had any bearing on matters which would have concerned the State Department, and therefore, that was not an entree into the State Department in 1946?

NICHOL: That's right. The Farm Security work was dealing with farmers -- helping them out from a

[4]

financial standpoint, and it was entirely domestic.

MCKINZIE: It must have been a major career decision, then, to go over to the State Department in 1946, was it not, or did you just consider it an adventure?

NICHOL: I'd say it was a major decision at that time: I had been interested all through my college career in international affairs, and I would say the State Department work was more in line with what I'd always wanted than the Home Owners' Loan Corporation or the Department of Agriculture.

MCKINZIE: When you started in, you obviously had to start at a fairly lowish level in the Department of State. What kind of duties did you have when you first went there? Do you recall getting used to the new job?

[5]

NICHOL: Yes, my duties were essentially the same at the beginning as they were during the succeeding years, although of course, my responsibilities were increased. As a foreign affairs officer I planned and coordinated U.S. participation in international conferences, advised on size and composition of U.S. delegations, and prepared positions with respect to the items on the agenda of the meeting. A few years later I was head of one of the sections there in the Division of International Conferences.

MCKINZIE: Do you happen to recall the very first one you had to work on?

NICHOL: The first conference I believe was a meeting on -- it's hard for me to remember the name -- I believe it was the International Meeting on Marine Radio Aids to Navigation in New London, Connecticut. That was when radar was just beginning. I remember there was a lot of

6

discussion about the use of radar and its international implications.

MCKINZIE: How does one begin to arrange a delegation for an international conference? Is there a procedure that the State Department had at that time which they more or less kept through these Truman years? That is to say were the arrangements for all of them about the same only with a different subject sort of plugged in to them?

NICHOL: Yes. There was a definite procedure that we followed in arranging for conferences. My job was mainly to get the delegation together, and to do that I had to contact the various other offices in the Department of State and other agencies throughout the whole Government who were interested in the subject matter of the conferences. They would usually nominate delegates, one or

[7]

more. One of my jobs was to cut down the number to a reasonable number, because we had a very limited budget which restricted the number that we could send to a conference. Then in addition to the Government delegates I frequently had to go to organizations outside the Government to arrange for representation. The labor unions, the chambers of commerce, big business -- the whole range of nongovernmental interests had to be contacted sometimes, to arrange for proper representation from the United States.

MCKINZIE: Was it clear to you who made the designation for these outside people, that is, within the State Department somebody had to say that you were going to have a representative from labor, or from civic organizations? Who made those kinds of decisions -- one of the Assistant Secretaries?

[8]

NICHOL: They'd be made by the office in the State Department that was responsible for the subject matter of the conference in collaboration with the Office of International Conferences in which I worked. And then that framework or general pattern of the delegation would usually be

approved by an Assistant Secretary of State. The actual membership on the delegation would always be approved by an Assistant Secretary of State. For the more important conferences the delegation would be approved by the Secretary and sometimes by the President himself -- President Truman.

MCKINZIE: It was you who went out to the AFL or the League of Women Voters, or whatever organization, and actually worked with them in getting someone to attend the conferences that were set up.

NICHOL: Yes. The job brought me in contact with the whole range of Government offices and, as I say,

[9]

outside the government, too. So, it was a very interesting job from that standpoint. I met a lot of people.

MCKINZIE: From 1946, when you started that sort of thing, and through, say 1952, the end of the Truman administration, could you as sort of frequent attender of these conferences note any difference in the tone of them as events unfolded. When you'd go to these conferences did you remember them being sort of a mirror of international affairs or were these conferences pretty much removed, as far as you were impressed at the time, from the course of the cold war?

NICHOL: Well, I would say the conferences in which I participated were more or less removed from the course of the cold war. The conferences that I was involved in were the economic, scientific, and cultural conferences. It wasn't until

[10]

after I had been in Geneva for about a year that I became involved in some of the political conferences.

Now, of course, the nonpolitical conferences mirrored to a certain extent the progress of events and the history of the times. Any international meeting can be influenced by the political events that are going on. Scientific conferences, for example, sometimes have some real hot political issues. Representation from the Communists countries, can become a very hot issue. So you can't remove international politics from a conference regardless of the subject.

MCKINZIE: Once you got these delegation lists put together were you then responsible for getting that delegation to the meeting site, and at what point did you give up your responsibility to the committee which was responsible for the agenda of the meeting and that sort of thing?

[11]

NICHOL: Well, I would work all along with the substantive office in the State Department which had responsibility for the conference. One of my assignments was to prepare a letter of instructions signed by the Secretary of State to the chairman of the delegation. Those instructions had a lot of standard paragraphs in them, but they were also different for each conference. The actual job of getting the delegates to the conference was mostly the job of the

administrative division. Sometimes I helped out on that and when serving as Secretary of the delegation would accompany the delegation to the conference.

MCKINZIE: How did it happen that you were so frequently appointed as Secretary of the delegation?

NICHOL: Well, that was one of the responsibilities of the Office of International Conferences -- to provide a Secretary of Delegation on the larger

[12]

or more important conferences. Sometimes the Secretary would be appointed from other parts of the State Department, but in most cases from the Office of International Conferences.

MCKINZIE: In the course of dealing with all of these agencies of Government, and I assume sooner or later you dealt with most of them, were State Department relations with other departments reflected in their cooperation with you? For a while, for example, I understand the Interior Department and the State Department had their little troubles, and a number of other departments would be at various times a little bit protective. Were any of the departments particularly easy, or particularly difficult to deal with?

NICHOL: Yes. Some Government departments were a little difficult. There was always the

[13]

possibility of friction between the State Department and other agencies. For example, some of them felt that they should have the top spot on the delegation, whereas, the State Department felt that it should have the top spot. There was frequently considerable discussion as to how many representatives another department should have, how many should go at state expense and how many should go at the expense of the other department.

The Department of Agriculture would take the lead, for example, preparing for the conference of the Food and Agriculture Organization, which started in Washington and was later transferred to Rome. The State Department also had a great interest in that conference, and so there was some maneuvering back and forth to see who would take the dominant role in preparing for the substantive part of the conference, the chairmanship of the delegation, and other members of the delegation.

[14]

MCKINZIE: Were you then in a position of intermediary?

NICHOL: Yes, to a certain extent. My job was to represent the State Department in these matters and to coordinate the participation of other departments. We usually got along pretty well, although sometimes problems would arise.

MCKINZIE: Well, that was the next question I was going to ask. I know you did work with Food and Agriculture Organization conferences at least twice, in 1950 and the previous one.

NICHOL: Yes, there were several conferences held in Washington. One was at the Shoreham Hotel, The Secretary of Agriculture, Charles Brannan, was Chairman of that delegation. I remember very well President Truman came to the reception we had for the Conference at the Shoreham Hotel.

MCKINZIE: I noticed too that the Agriculture Department at that time thought it ought to have a kind of a loud voice in making foreign agricultural policy, and the State Department had obviously a stake in the matter, too; and I was wondering if, when all of that came together.

NICHOL: Sometimes problems did arise along that line, and then you might say I was caught in the middle. But we usually worked things out without too much difficulty. I found Agriculture a very fine organization to deal with. I had had previous experience in that Department, which certainly helped. We usually came to an agreement, but if not we carried it up to higher levels for decision.

MCKINZIE: In a very short period of time you served under three Secretaries of State. I believe Secretary James F. Byrnes was Secretary of

[16]

State when you took over, and then [General George] Marshall, and then [Dean] Acheson.

NICHOL: [Edward R., Jr.] Stettinius I believe was Secretary, too, for a short time.

MCKINZIE: Well, he was at the end of the war. I didn't know whether or not he was still in when you began your work there.

They each had different ideas about administration. Could you feel, since your job was in administration to a large degree, the difference when the Secretaryship would change?

NICHOL: Not to any real extent. My job was quite a ways down the line from the Secretary of State. So it really didn't make too much difference at that time in my job.

MCKINZIE: What about morale in the Department? Lots of people talk about morale in the State

[17]

Department at the end of the war, about whether it was on its way up?

NICHOL: Well, it probably was on its way up after the war. I always thought the morale in the State Department was pretty good when I was there. It was certainly better during the days when I worked in Washington in the State Department than it was when I came back after ten years in the Foreign Service. And that's because the State Department, during the early years of my service, was in the process of expanding; whereas, later the Department had the opposite problem. There were too many Foreign Service Officers and only a comparatively small number of assignments for them.

MCKINZIE: You yourself, did not become a Foreign Service Officer until after the Truman administration.

[18]

NICHOL: That's correct. At the end of the Truman administration I was sent to Geneva on a Foreign Service Reserve appointment and a year or two later I was integrated into the regular Foreign Service.

MCKINZIE: Perhaps you can tell me a little bit about this transfer to Geneva? Was that something you sought?

NICHOL: I really didn't go after the job. But when it was offered to me, I grabbed hold of it without any hesitation, because it was something that was considered a pretty good assignment at that time and still is. Geneva is one of the best locations in the world and a place where I always wanted to be stationed. So I was very happy when I was offered the job.

MCKINZIE: Were the duties fairly much the same kind of thing -- arrangement for conferences in which

[19]

there would be international delegations?

NICHOL: That's right. It was an extension, in a way, of the work that I was doing in Washington -- making arrangements and assisting in the operation of the delegations. Of course, it was also quite different, but always closely related to the work that I was doing in Washington.

Actually conference work was only one part of my work in Geneva. The other part was serving as liaison for the U.S. Government with some of the international organizations such as the World Health Organization, the International Labor Organization, the International Telecommunications Union, World Meteorological Organization, and the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees.

MCKINZIE: The State Department in many ways is supposed to be nonpolitical, but did you have the feeling that the State Department respected the leadership of President Truman during that period.

[20]

I ask a lot of people that question. What they thought about Truman -- how he himself affected the attitude of the State Department? Did you have any sense at the level you were working then that he was helping or hindering the operations in the Department?

NICHOL: I was very much impressed with the way President Truman handled the administration when I was working for the State Department. I felt that he backed up the State Department, and that there was a very good relation between the Department and the White House. My only contact with the White House was the submission of certain delegation lists that I prepared to the President for approval. This happened quite frequently, so I would sometimes

call the White House to see what had happened or when we could expect approval. I was on fairly good terms with some of the assistants under President

[21]

Truman and always received a prompt response and fine cooperation.

MCKINZIE: Did it complicate your job when the President decided to appear at one of these international conferences?

NICHOL: Yes, I would say that a Presidential appearance does lead to a lot of extra work and complications.

MCKINZIE: In what way? What kinds of specific things, really, are involved when a President decides to show up? I know there must be all kinds of things.

NICHOL: You have to make sure that everything is timed perfectly for his appearance, that everything is in order, and that every little detail of his schedule is carefully planned.

MCKINZIE: How does the arranger of conference

[22]

provide security and that kind of thing?

NICHOL: Security is handled by the Security Division of the State Department, but there are a lot of little details that have to be coordinated. If he's going to appear on the program that certainly involves quite a few details that have to be worked out. If he appears at a reception then there are other kind of details. But anywhere a President goes it always makes things more complicated.

MCKINZIE: How did this experience as an arranger of international conferences affect your later career when you went to Great Britain as Consul? Is all of that applicable to a career in Foreign Service, or are these disconnected pieces, or have you considered that they all built one on the other?

NICHOL: I think the work in Geneva helped

[23]

substantially in my later career in the Foreign Service. Also the previous background that I'd had in international relations and having contact with about all the branches of the Government, was very helpful in my work in Liverpool where I served as a consul doing consular work across the board. It always helps to have contacts and know people, and to know how the Government operates. And it helped, I think quite a bit, in my later work in the Department of Agriculture after I left the Foreign Service.

MCKINZIE: Let me ask one other question. Do conferences do any good?

NICHOL: Oh, they not only do good, but they are absolutely essential, I think. Now, they do waste a lot of time. There's a lot of spinning the wheels, and a lot of unnecessary talk that goes on in conferences, but I don't believe we could get along without them. I think they are

[24]
absolutely essential.

MCKINZIE: Could you elaborate on that? Why couldn't two -- to play the devil's advocate for a moment -- why couldn't two people sit down and say, "Here are the issues and here are the interests involved, and now we'll just compromise them in the way it has to be compromised." That's much more efficient it would seem.

NICHOL: Well, it's not very democratic for two people to get together and try and work out issues that involve a large number of people -- a large number of different groups. International conferences are necessary because it brings the countries together -- the various countries of the world. And I think the only way you can bring countries together is through actually getting together. It is true that a lot of things can be worked out through bilateral discussions, but

[25]
I think there are many problems which can be solved only by multilateral discussions or international conferences. Both bilateral meetings and multilateral meetings are necessary.

[26]
INDEX

Acheson, Dean, 16
Agriculture, Department of, 2, 13, 14-15, 23
 State Department, friction with over control of foreign agricultural policy, 15

Brannan, Charles F., 14
Byrnes, James F., 15

Farm Security Administration, 2-3
Food and Agricultural Organization conference, 13-14
Foreign Service, Department of State, 18

Geneva, Switzerland, 18, 19, 22
Great Britain, 22-23

High Commissioner for Refugees, Office of, 19
Home Owners' Loan Corporation, 2, 3, 4

International Telecommunications Union, 19

Liverpool, England, 23

Marine Radio Aids to Navigation, International Meeting on, 5-6
Marshall, George C., 16

Naval Intelligence, Office of, 3

Nichol, Henry F.:

- biographical information, 1-2

- conferences:

 - comments on importance of, 23-25

 - Government departments, friction over control of international conferences, 12-14

 - nonpolitical and political, discussed, 9-10

 - Presidents' attendance, complications of, 21-22

 - responsibility at, 11

 - secretary of the delegation, as, 11-12

- consul, assigned to Great Britain, as, 22-23

- Division of International Conferences, appointed as a section head of, 5

- Farm Security Administration, work for, 2-3

- Foreign Service officer, appointed, 18

- Geneva, Switzerland, assigned to, 18-19

- Home Owners' Land Corporation, work in, 2, 3, 4

- Marine Radio Aids to Navigation, International Meeting on, attends, 5-6

- Naval Intelligence, assigned to the Office of, 3

- State Department:

 - delegates selected by to attend conferences, 6-9

 - duties in, 5

 - morale, discussion of, 16-17

 - transfers to, 4

 - Truman, Harry S., relationship with, 20-21

 - Security Division of the State Department, 22

State, Department of:

- Agriculture Department, friction with, 15

- conferences:

 - delegates selections, 6-8

 - government departments, friction with other, concerning control of, 12-14

 - President's attendance at, complications of, 21-22

 - secretaries of delegation, appointment of, 11-12

- morale at, 16-17

- Security Division of, 22

- Truman, Harry S., relationship with, 20-21

Stettinius, Edward R., Jr., 16

Truman, Harry S., 8, 14, 18

- State Department, relationship with, 20-21

World Health Organization, 19

World Meteorological Organization, 19