

Oral History Interview
with
J. WILLIAM THEIS

Worked for the International News Service in its Pittsburgh bureau, 1933-35, and its Harrisburg (PA) bureau as legislative correspondent and later bureau manager, 1935-39. Became Pennsylvania state manager for INS in 1939 until transferred to the Washington (D.C.) bureau as a reporter in May 1942. Washington correspondent for INS, 1942-58, and chief of the INS Senate staff, 1945-58, and of the United Press International Senate staff, 1958-68. Bureau chief of the Hearst Newspapers, 1968 to the present.

Washington, D.C.
February 8, 1971

by Jerry N. Hess, Harry S. Truman Library

The Harry S. Truman Library
Independence, Missouri
February, 1972

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HESS: To begin Mr. Theis, will you give me a little of your personal background; where were you born, where were you educated and what positions have you held?

THEIS: Well, I was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, educated in the public schools there, except for a period when at junior high school age, I lived for about two years in a small town north of Pittsburgh, called Zelienople, which is a name of its own. Graduated from high school in

Pittsburgh, attended the University of Pittsburgh after a year of working to try to accumulate the first year expenses.

I got my first newspaper experience while in school. I was editor of the Pitt newspaper in my senior year, and during my last three summers while a student, worked for International News Service in the

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Pittsburgh bureau. After graduation in 1933 I was able to go to work for INS in the Pittsburgh bureau, and in 1935 was transferred to Harrisburg, where I became the legislative correspondent, and shortly thereafter, the bureau manager. Then returned to Pittsburgh in January 1939 as the state manager of International News Service, and was in that position directing the news coverage for INS in Pennsylvania until the late spring of 1942, when I requested a transfer to Washington so I could get back to the business of being essentially a reporter rather than a bureau manager with all the little executive chores that take your time away from the news, and came to Washington in May of 1942.

My first assignment was to take charge of the House of Representatives' news staff for INS, and except for periods, brief periods, downtown covering the White House, the Navy Department, occasionally the State Department, and for a short period of being a desk editor, I spent most of the ensuing three years from 1942 through the summer of 1945 covering the House of Representatives and running the INS staff there.

In September of '45, after having been out at the United Nations charter conference at San Francisco,

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where I spent a great deal of time covering members of the Senate who were on the delegation, I went over to the Senate side and took charge of the INS Senate staff.

My contacts with Mr. Truman during that period were at some distance. I really had no direct contacts with him except more or less by observation, with the possible exception of the United Nations Conference activity in San Francisco. And even there, of course, he was at some distance because he came out there for the conference right after he had become President. But when I returned I saw a great deal more of him by reason of his Senate relationship and his contacts through Leslie Biffle, who was his principal contact with the Senate after he left the Senate -- left the vice-presidency.

I must backtrack a moment, to recall (this is a sidelight of this period), that while I was on the House staff or in the House press gallery, the day that Franklin Roosevelt died, Mr. Truman had been with Speaker [Sam] Rayburn that afternoon until he received the now well-known telephone call to, "Please come to the White House."

When I got the information that President Roosevelt

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had died (that came in a call from my bureau chief, the late William K. Hutchinson), my first move was to try to locate Mr. Truman. I called the Senate side and found that he had been with the Speaker. And I called the Speaker's office, found through one of the staff members that Mr. Truman had left, and then tried to reach the Speaker. I did manage to get Mr. Rayburn to the telephone. He and Mr. Truman had been down in his private hideaway, which is so affectionately known as the "Board of Education," and I told the Speaker that the word had come of Mr. Roosevelt's death. And there was merely a small groan from the other end of the phone. I have reason to believe that this was the first word that he had of what actually had transpired, because it was a matter of minutes after the flash was sent on the wires with the announcement from the White House that this took place.

Then to go back, my contacts with President Truman were intermittent, except through press conferences, in which I was merely one of many asking questions as he held his press conferences. Occasionally he would come back to the Senate, and always go through Biffle's office, perhaps be up there for lunch on several occasions when on the floor of the Senate. But his

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relationship with Les Biffle was most unique for a President, because Les Biffle talked to Mr. Truman with great frequency. I'm sure he was on the phone every day. The President felt that he had here, I believe, someone whom he could trust, whose judgment about things in the Senate, in particular he valued, and perhaps on other things. They were close friends and I know the relationship flourished during that period.

And as reporters, those of us who had been around there any length of time knew Les Biffle well, and who could, he thought, be trusted with information, he talked with most freely. And when we wanted to know what was happening downtown, particularly if we had a story to check, as to what might be going on either in the White House or a matter which had meaning both in the White House or in Congress, Biffle was most helpful. I think there may have been times when we might have overvalued his knowledge of what was going on, but that, if anything, might have been a matter of poor judgment on our part. We may have tended, because of his unique relationship, perhaps at times to put more importance in the information we got from him than an actual instance

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might have justified.

But I think across the board, overall, I know he was a most invaluable news source, and I think generally gave a most accurate reflection of what he knew to be going on or what he thought was going on. There may well have been times when his judgment on some things, or his information, might not have been as complete as he thought.

HESS: In the matter of White House-congressional liaison just what role did Mr. Biffle play? Was he more or less a head counter for the President to go around and find out what people were thinking, or did he take messages from the President and go to the Senators and try to influence votes?

THEIS: Well, I think it was some of both, inevitably. Leslie I don't think was -- I don't think he was regarded by Senators as a policymaker. I think he was regarded more as a conduit of thinking downtown, thinking of Mr. Truman's and other people around the President, but he certainly was a head counter. He certainly was, to put it bluntly, he was an errand boy for the President in many instances, but that's not necessarily as the meaning of it might sound because he was, many times, carrying out what would be regarded as important errands.

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I think he had Mr. Truman's complete confidence, and I suspect that was based on the President's knowledge that Les Biffle really didn't aspire for anything higher than what he already had. I think he felt he had the best job he ever could have gotten in Washington being Secretary of the Senate. And the degree to which he might have influenced policy, or thought he was influencing policy, is something that would be hard to judge at this point.

HESS: At the time that Mr. Truman became President, there was some speculation in town that Mr. Biffle might come down to the White House and join the White House staff. Do you recall hearing anything of that nature?

THEIS: I don't recall specifically, but I have -- I just have a vague feeling that this automatically came up, but some people may have assumed that because of their close personal relationship, that this might have been an automatic thing, that perhaps Les might have come down to be a sort of Sherman Adams or something like that, or perhaps something of a lower level. But it never, to my recollection, it never proceeded beyond brief speculation, because I don't think Leslie Biffle wanted to leave the Senate for anything.

HESS: To go back in time just a bit to the time when Mr.

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Truman was in the Senate, did you attend any of the hearings of the so-called Truman Committee, the National Defense Committee?

THEIS: No, I think I stuck my head in there a time or two, but...

HESS: You were busy on the House side.

THEIS: I was on the House side during that period and there was a (as you might imagine), a great shortage of reporter personnel. There was an awful lot of news going on and we had our share on the House side. We had other people covering the Senate at that point so I didn't have occasion to.

HESS: What seemed to be the general relationship between Mr. Truman and the other members of the Senate at this time, as you recall?

THEIS: Well, again, I'm not the best witness on that, because I wasn't observing it every day. I was not covering the Senate and I'd hesitate to say. There are other people who I'm sure have a good judgment on that.

HESS: What do you recall about the events of 1944 and Mr. Truman's selection as vice-presidential candidate on the Democratic Party ticket? Did you go to the convention in Chicago that year?

THEIS: Yes, I was there. And I'm trying to recall any

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specific...

HESS: Well, there were several people who wanted the second spot; James F. Byrnes for one, Henry Wallace for another. Do you recall anything in particular...

THEIS: Yes.

HESS: Were you surprised when the convention accepted Mr. Truman?

THEIS: Well, there wasn't any question about accepting the presidential choice at that point. It was just a matter of who was wanted by the President, by Mr. Roosevelt. And I don't think there was any terrible problem about acceptance of Mr. Truman as such, it just came as a surprise.

HESS: Did you travel on any of the campaigns in 1944?

THEIS: No I did not. The first one I was on for the whole campaign was the '48 campaign and, sad to relate, I spent that entire campaign on the so-called "Dewey Victory Special." We had -- the INS at that particular time had the theory of keeping the same reporter with the candidate through the entire campaign for continuity reasons, rather than switching back and forth.

HESS: Did the other two news services switch their men so they could have a more balanced view?

THEIS: No, I'm trying to recall. We didn't. You see the

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assumption was made by most everyone that Mr. Truman was such an underdog that, as I remember, that when Merriman Smith came up to Albany -- he had been the UP White House correspondent from several years before Roosevelt's death -- to cover [Thomas E.] Dewey, to go on the Dewey campaign train, it was kind of a joke, you know, the UP was putting its White House correspondent with a man that it expected to be elected. And that feeling pretty well carried all the way through the campaign.

HESS: Did Mr. Robert G. Nixon of INS stay with President Truman?

THEIS: He stayed with Truman through the campaign; I stayed with Dewey through the campaign, right through, up through the election day in New York.

And I can remember at the time that to those of us traveling with Dewey, it was such a dull campaign. He was saying so little; he got carried away and really caught fire only at one point that I can recall. That was when the train stopped in Erie and he spoke to a group of General Electric workers in the train yard outside of the G.E. plant. And he was giving them this set speech which he had been giving everywhere -- a lot of platitudes, that didn't really "go" since he was

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campaigning to preserve his position. Someone in the crowd yelled, "What about the Taft-Hartley law?"

And Dewey said, "Well, I'll tell you about the Taft-Hartley law." He was himself, and he made a good speech.

HESS: He unbent a little bit.

THEIS: He unbent and he knew, he knew this was effective, but his advisers were telling him, "Don't do anything to upset your lead. Don't get drawn into any quarrels or fights with this man."

Those of us on the Dewey train could tell by the reports and whatnot that Truman was gaining on him, but everybody thought that the Truman climb would reach the winning point about two weeks after the election. And it didn't work that way. It was a surprise, but it wasn't as much of a surprise for those of us who traveled with Dewey, because his whole campaign was very stagnant.

HESS: How did the majority of the crowds receive Governor Dewey's speeches? You've mentioned the instance about the Taft-Hartley law, but what seemed to be the general atmosphere, the general nature of the reception that Mr. Dewey would receive when he would go into a town and make a speech?

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THEIS: Crowds were more important then than they are now, I think, because now the impact comes so much more through television. Crowds then meant more than they do now, because it was a train campaign, a whistlestop campaign. You had crowds behind the train, and then you got off the train and went to an auditorium and so forth. And you can always produce a big crowd for a presidential, or a presidential candidate's, appearance.

The crowd reactions were not what you would call overly enthusiastic; because they were seeing a presidential candidate, they responded. They always do, but then there was nothing to give them a real lift. It was a typical organized kind of controlled reaction, the kind of enthusiasm you get from people who are committed before they get there.

Now, I didn't see Truman's crowds, but I was reading that he was getting, of course, a much warmer reaction than Dewey. And Dewey knew this, but they just couldn't bring themselves to change their styles late in the campaign.

HESS: Do you recall the comments that may have been made by any of the newsmen who did shift from train to train and perhaps came from the Truman train?

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THEIS: We had people who had gone -- a few people had gone over and come back.

HESS: What did they seem to think?

THEIS: Well, they thought Truman was doing very well, was gaining. He obviously was coming up. It was obvious to all of us that Truman was gaining.

The misjudgment was, I think, of course, that we were just guessing because most of us hadn't been with Truman. Some of the others had. We knew how poor the Dewey campaign was, and it was almost a case where anybody who would get out and make a little fuss was bound to do better than this. But of course, everybody was proceeding from the basic assumption that Dewey was automatically so far ahead that he couldn't be overtaken, which was a misjudgment on everyone's part.

HESS: As a reporter, when the train would stop for a whistlestop speech, or perhaps a major speech, would you go around and talk to people in the crowd, sort of interview people in the crowd to take the temperature and the tenor of the crowd, to see what they thought?

THEIS: As I recall now, it's been a long time ago, you did as much of that as you could, but part of the problem was that you had to cover the speech. I was

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working for a wire service, and my first -- my first responsibility was to cover the candidate's speech in case he said something that he hadn't -- that wasn't in a prepared speech, and also to watch for any incidents. And there were a couple of these -- including the now famous one where the train backed up slightly toward the crowd and started to go into the crowd, and Dewey made his remark about the engineer.

HESS: Where were you at the time? Were you in the crowd?

THEIS: I was in the crowd.

HESS: Were you in any danger of getting run over by the train?

THEIS: Well, yes, because if the train going back -- this just moved a few feet steadily -- had gone back with any kind of a sudden lunge, some people might possibly have gotten bowled over. But Dewey was extremely embarrassed by the incident, because he had just finished saying something to the effect that, "I'll tell you how they operate. They pull the train up this way," and

he had just finished explaining how the engineer runs the train, when the engineer undid his careful explanation, and Dewey just had a burst of temper. At another time a couple of eggs were thrown at the train, but these are minor things, the sort that happen on a

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campaign.

But all in all, the Dewey campaign was a very dull experience and I really envied the reporters who were covering Truman in that campaign.

HESS: What are your earliest recollections of political events in 1948? Mr. Truman took a trip to the West in June.

THEIS: Yes, I didn't go on that trip. I was tied up covering the Senate and it was Bob Nixon, as I recall, who made that trip. He was our White House correspondent. I didn't make that trip and my recollection of that is just more or less what I was reading in our own wire reports; what I was reading in the paper.

HESS: Do you recall anything in particular about some efforts that were made to get someone other than Mr. Truman on the Democratic ticket in 1948? This is during the pre-convention days?

THEIS: Are you referring to the Eisenhower business?

HESS: Yes.

THEIS: So I recall. I recall that in a general way, but Truman himself has confirmed that, and I really don't recall anything that would shed any new light on that.

HESS: All right, what do you recall about the convention in Philadelphia that year? What stands out in your memory

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about that convention?

THEIS: Let's see, there were two conventions in Philadelphia that year.

HESS: Actually there were three.

THEIS: There were three. I covered the two major party conventions. There were two big stories in the Democratic convention. The civil rights plank fight, the Dixie walk-out, provided the one display which everybody made news. And, of course, the other was the vice-presidential selection, and Truman's very dramatic climax in calling Congress back.

HESS: What do you recall about that speech?

THEIS: His speech?

HESS: And his announcement about calling Congress back?

THEIS: Well, it all happened at 2 o'clock in the morning.

The problem for me as a reporter was that our night cycle wire was closing, and our dayside wire was opening right at 2 o'clock. We were right on the change point when you had to start a whole new story when this all happened. And of course, everyone was just about drained of strength and patience at that point. I had been there writing the running story since early that previous morning, something like 10 o'clock, and writing pretty steadily, beating a

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typewriter as other people were. We worked right straight through except for a break for a bit to eat.

So, it was a very dramatic thing and it came at a time when people were somewhat jaded, but we were terribly lifted by the news at hand. And I think this made it all the more memorable as a journalistic thing.

But on his speech I, and some others, got a little bit of advance warning from Les Biffle, who was on the platform, that Mr. Truman was going to call Congress back into special session, and that this was coming in his speech.

As I recall, I had been trying to catch Biffle's eyes. I was sitting down in about the second row of the press section below the platform, when he nodded to me and I got up to the rail beside him where he very quietly passed the word about this. I assumed that that decision may have been reached a little bit earlier, but it had been transmitted, I think, to Biffle just a matter of a few moments before that. It was so close to the event that it really didn't make any difference whether he told anybody about it or not, because there wasn't very much time. As I recall it was something like five minutes before the

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President started his speech.

HESS: What is your opinion, do you think that the decision to call that special session of Congress had been cleared, or even discussed, with Mr. Biffle and the elected leaders of the Democratic Party in Congress?

THEIS: I'd be guessing because I don't honestly know and I don't recall if I knew at the time, or the next day or anything like that. I assume that by reason of his close relationship with the congressional leaders, the Democrats, that he probably discussed it, if only backstage of the convention hall, with Sam Rayburn and others.

Everybody knew that Mr. Truman was in a rather desperate political situation. Almost anything that he did that might enliven the campaign I would have thought would have been well-received

even though they might have questioned whether much good would come out of a session of Congress.

That wasn't the point. He was taking the offensive and kind of captured the imagination of a lot of people by doing it. It helped to break the shell of defeatism that even pursued him through the campaign.

HESS: It has been pointed out by several historians that Mr. Truman in all likelihood, called that special session

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to build a case against the Congress, and then run against them, the so-called "do-nothing 80th Congress," in the convention. But still, the 80th Congress is the one that passed the Greek-Turkish aid bill, it passed the Marshall plan; things that he wanted in the foreign field. Do you feel that elections, when there is no shooting war, are run more on domestic matters than foreign matters?

THEIS: Well, there's the old story that you have right now, looking toward 1972. It's quite clear that the Nixon administration has perhaps belatedly become quite concerned about the economic issue, the old pocketbook issue, and I think this is exactly what happened in 1948. Mr. Truman was running on that issue, and he was making the Congress a foil, and it didn't necessarily matter whether everything he said made too much sense. It attracted attention to him and it created an aura of action and so on.

The farm vote of course, was terribly important in '48 and he went after them on that and the Republicans never really recovered from that in the campaign. That's my recollection at least, of the factors that made a big difference.

HESS: Do you recall why Mr. Truman was so successful in

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getting the farm vote? Iowa, a heavily Republican state, voted for him that year.

THEIS: Yes.

HESS: Do you recall any of the reasons why the farm vote went for Mr. Truman?

THEIS: Well, it was the whole matter of farm economics, that farmers felt they weren't getting their share and he was pounding that issue. We had just a little bit of it in this last election when the Republicans took their heaviest losses in the farm states and again the dissatisfaction was there with the economic state, the farm prices and so forth.

HESS: All right. After the Turnip Day session started and the Senators and the Representatives were back here in town, in that special session, just what seemed to be the attitude of the Congressmen? Were they angered that they had been called back? Did they think this was a political move? What seemed to be their attitude?

THEIS: My recollection of that is too hazy to venture a judgment except that Congress is never happy when it's called back into session by a President, especially when they know that it is a political ploy, and my recollection is that there was a general antipathy and

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bad reaction.

HESS: Do you recall if Leslie Biffle may have taken any action at the convention to try to secure the vice-presidential nomination or even the top spot on the ticket for Senator [Alben] Barkley?

THEIS: Well, it seemed to me he did, but again, I'm -- I don't trust my recollection of that.

HESS: Did you or did you not notice any lessening of influence on Mr. Biffle's part in the second Truman term over what he may have had in the first term? Was he still used the same way, still as influential, in your opinion?

THEIS: I think it slacked off toward the end.

HESS: Do you know why?

THEIS: I don't recall that there's any specific reason for it except those things sometimes, you know, will tend to go downhill. There wasn't any great dramatic change, but I think that over the years that Les' role as a prognosticator and a conduit of information tended to become less important. It might have become overrated, I don't know.

HESS: Shortly before the election Mr. Biffle took a trip in which he dressed up as a chicken farmer, I understand. Did you ever talk to him about that trip?

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THEIS: Oh yes.

HESS: Do you recall any observations he may have made?

THEIS: Yes, he talked to us about that. He slipped away quietly and bought an old beaten up truck and several dozen hens and roosters, I guess, in crates, and went putting down through Arkansas and other parts of the Middle West. He kind of chuckled about it, and told us about it when he came back.

I think it was a very savvy thing to do, and it was the kind of thing that I suspect provided the kind of information that Truman put some stock in. He was pretty much a country boy himself and would tend to be a little bit guided by that.

HESS: Where were you on election night?

THEIS: '48?

HESS: Yes.

THEIS: I was in the INS New York bureau. And I remember (we're talking about Biffle), the first sure indications of the result that I had as the returns came in early in the evening, I called Les Biffle two or three times in Washington from our New York bureau as he was getting the early reports.

He was, of course, on the phone calling around the country getting reports on what was happening in significant

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areas. He gave me information several times during the evening to indicate that something was really moving and that Truman was going to do a lot better than anybody had believed. I fed that into our stories at the time, but even so it still came as a big surprise when it wound up the way it did.

HESS: Who did you think was going to win?

THEIS: I thought Dewey was going to win because there was such an overwhelming amount of evidence in that direction, at least we thought it was evidence. I was surprised because I assumed Dewey was not going to be caught. I knew Truman was coming up. I had had the feeling in my own mind that if the campaign had gone another two weeks Truman probably would have passed him, but I didn't think he had come up that far yet. That was About my feeling on it then.

HESS: There were two other candidates in the election of more than passing interest; Henry Wallace of the Progressive Party.

THEIS: Yes.

HESS: And J. Strom Thurmond of the State's Rights Party.

What role did you ascribe to them in the election? Just how did you think that their being in the campaign and election was going to influence the outcome?

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THEIS: I never felt that Wallace was going to be much of a threat, and my own feeling was that, of course, the race was between Truman and Dewey. I don't recall having any serious feeling that the other two candidates were going to decide the election, as such.

HESS: Unless they threw it into the House of Representatives?

THEIS: Yes.

HESS: All right, a few brief questions about Mr. Truman's legislative program: Just how did it seem to you, as an observer on the Hill, that the Truman administration tried to see that its legislative program was implemented? Just what methods did they use?

I'm thinking about such things as the meetings of the Big Four at the White House each Monday morning. Perhaps testimony by members of the departments and not the White House staff. Still the administration but the departments. Perhaps calls from Mr. Truman to individual members. Calls or visits to individual members by the White House staff. Of course, they had a legislative program that they would have liked to have seen passed, but what did they do to try to get it passed?

THEIS: Your record's better than my recollection. In any

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event, the Truman liaison work didn't compare with the kind of thing that came later under [Dwight D.] Eisenhower, [Lyndon B.] Johnson, [John F.] Kennedy and [Richard M.] Nixon of course, because the state of the lobbying art, through the White House, had not been advanced as much. But in the Senate, as I recall it, the Senate secretary's office was a focal point (as far as the Senate side was concerned), of that kind of activity. And Truman, having been a Senator, was in a better position, as Senators always are. Johnson was, too, if he wanted to have something done he could pick up the phone and call one of his buddies and say, "Do this for me." The extent that Truman did that I don't actually remember.

HESS: Did you often see members of the White House staff on the Hill carrying out legislative liaison functions; Matthew J. Connelly, who was Appointments Secretary; Clark Clifford, who was Special Counsel; and then later he was followed by Charles Murphy. Were these men in evidence?

THEIS: I recall seeing Charley Murphy on the Hill a good deal, but I don't remember -- the time frame is vague. I couldn't pinpoint a period -- the period when it might have meaning to what you're looking into.

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I don't recall having seen Clark Clifford working on the Hill during that period. He may well have been coming up, slipping in to see Senators in their offices, which was the sort of thing that happened. Once you have the established liaison machinery set up it's a lot more open than it may have been then. I don't recall being impressed in any way by the degree of this kind of thing by people outside the Biffle operation. There may well have been more of it going on there than I was aware of.

HESS: Joseph Feeney was on the Senate side. Was he much in evidence? Do you recall Mr. Feeney?

THEIS: No, I don't recall much activity of his at all, and as I say, he may have been operating, but I don't recall it.

HESS: As an observer on the scene, how would you evaluate the success or failure of Mr. Truman's legislative program?

THEIS: Well, as you have mentioned, the foreign policy things were substantial and dramatic and they came at a time when there was a big movement in our history. The whole foreign aid program, Greek-Turkish loan, so on and so forth. These required a great degree of bipartisan support of course, and a lot of effort went into that.

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I think these things tend, in looking back on the Truman administration, to cloud or dominate the picture of that period. I'm trying to recall the domestic issues.

HESS: Civil rights was one, and trying to implement the FEPC. Mr. Truman was always interested in what we call Medicare at the present time.

THEIS: Yes. The civil rights thing was stymied so long, until the Johnson -- well, the Eisenhower period, but really until the '60s with really meaningful legislation. FEPC, as I recall, was always such a scare item for many members of Congress and was being espoused by the liberals, so it was hard to capture any middle ground for such issues.

HESS: Do you recall any incidents that might point out Mr. Truman's handling of a particular Senator and his (while he was President), and his skill, or lack of skill, in such matters? Perhaps Senator [Arthur H.] Vandenberg, or Senator [Robert A.] Taft, Senator [Richard] Russell, Senator [William E.] Jenner?

THEIS: Taft and Truman, of course, were at odds at times in the labor business. I recall Taft taking to the radio on the Taft-Hartley issue, on Truman's action. The Vandenberg relationship was a different kind of thing.

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The Vandenberg relationship goes back really to the United Nations charter conference which was initiated before Truman became President. There was a reasonable relationship between Vandenberg and the White House, as long as Vandenberg knew he was getting the consultation he wanted. Vandenberg's problem was really more with his own party than with the Democrats. And I think they had a healthy respect for each other for different reasons. I'm sure Vandenberg thought that he was by far the greater intellect and wordsmith. But on those foreign policy matters, they were moving toward a common objective.

HESS: One item about Mr. Taft that is of interest, is when matters of the Taft-Hartley Act were being discussed, of course he and Mr. Truman were at odds, but the Taft-Ellender-Wagner Housing Bill was something that Mr. Truman would like to have seen passed.

THEIS: Oh, you know Taft always maintained that he was a true liberal, particularly on such things as housing, and he could make a fair case for that, because he was for some of these things before their time. I didn't personally cover much of the labor legislation except to get into its political aspects during that period. I had somebody else doing it. But I do

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remember his emphasis on that, as I traveled extensively with Taft when he made a trip around the country for about three and a half weeks in 1947, ostensibly to feel the pulse of the country and see if the people really wanted him to get into the presidential race.

HESS: Was that when he decided to run?

THEIS: I think it was already decided, but he was going through the exercise at least.

It was a slow pace, an informal whistlestop tour. It started out in California, went through the West, and Northwest and back through the Middle West.

I remember one of the last speeches he made on that trip, in Omaha, Nebraska. That was one of his speeches in which part of his theme was that he was the real -- he was the true -- he was the real liberal on this business of liberal-conservative matters.

HESS: You mentioned that you had attended many of the President's press conferences. In general, how skillful did you think President Truman was in fielding questions at a press conference?

THEIS: Well, I thought he did pretty well considering he (again I'm not recalling any specific instances or

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incidents), he had the ability to answer directly and not waste a lot of words. And if he didn't want to say anything about it, he wouldn't give you four yards of rhetorical toe dancing, he would just say, "No," or "No comment," or go on to something else.

HESS: Did you attend Franklin Roosevelt's press conferences?

THEIS: Yes, some.

HESS: How would you compare the handling of press conferences by those two men?

THEIS: Well, they were totally different. Roosevelt's -- of course he was a past master at, if not actually evading something he didn't want to answer, at turning it into an entertaining aside, or maybe even ridiculing the reporter if it was a matter of getting away from an answer. He would get around an unhappy question if it was too direct and he didn't want to handle it.

HESS: Do you think that Mr. Truman made effective and efficient use of the press conferences, to, as they can be used, to inform the public and to influence congressional action?

THEIS: I think he did pretty well for this time. He, as I mentioned, could be very direct, and this also can lead to trouble, as it did when he got into difficulty with his famous red herring remark about the Communist

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thing on the Hill. This is the kind of thing which someone who is a little more adroit might have avoided.

But he would speak his mind and he was by no means, you know, the extremely gifted communicator, if you measure in today's terms. He was essentially direct, and there's a certain healthy attribute about this, but it can cause a President difficulties.

HESS: The press conferences were held in the Oval Room, the same place that Mr. Roosevelt had held the majority of his, until April the 27th of 1950 and then they were moved to the Indian Treaty Room in the Executive Office Building.

THEIS: Yes.

HESS: Which location did you prefer and why?

THEIS: Well, the Indian Treaty Room was a little more comfortable because you could get more people in and they could be seated. The conferences didn't become quite the spectacle they did until Jim [James] Hagerty, in the Eisenhower administration, introduced television.

But there was an informality and an environment about the other, which, considering the fact that in the Roosevelt period you had two press conferences a

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week, was important. I can't recall when that schedule ceased actually, whether Truman at the outset continued that or not. It seemed to me he did, but I've forgotten now.

HESS: No, sir, he...

THEIS: But I wasn't covering the White House as such in those days.

HESS: He was the one who changed it from two a week to one a week.

THEIS: That's right. That's right.

HESS: What did you think, what's your opinion of that?

THEIS: I didn't come down for all the conferences. I was on the Hill you see. But I think most of us favored two a week.

HESS: What is your opinion of Mr. Truman's reduction of the number of press conferences? Do you think that he should have kept it at two a week as Roosevelt had?

THEIS: I don't think necessarily for himself, because Roosevelt enjoyed them. FDR was a bit of an actor himself, he enjoyed the give and take. It gave him a chance to get something back, perhaps subconsciously, because for so long he had been confined.

When you talk about isolation of Presidents (which perhaps is an overstatement), he was even more

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confined than the average, because of his having been crippled. He just couldn't get up and move around as readily as some others might. For that reason perhaps, and because he was a pretty outgoing person, he enjoyed the chance to show off and perform. I don't think this entered into Truman's view of a press conference at all.

HESS: Do you think Mr. Truman enjoyed a press conference or just tolerated it?

THEIS: Oh, I think he liked reporters generally. He played poker with the White House reporters, the regulars over there a great deal, and all that sort of thing. I think he enjoyed mixing.

HESS: He may have enjoyed the reporters, but what do you think his view was of the conference itself?

THEIS: I honestly don't know. I probably have wondered about that myself. As I say, I was on the Hill and I wasn't going to all of the Truman press conferences, but I would come down occasionally.

HESS: Did you find the Oval Room a bit crowded through the last few years that it was used for press conferences?

THEIS: Yes, it was, even during the Roosevelt days it could get pretty bad -- it wouldn't be filled up

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completely, but on a big story this place would be jammed, and you'd be trying to write standing up, squeezing in. It was a very bad arrangement. It's a fine arrangement for a small group.

Now Nixon occasionally has the quickly called informal ones in there. And that's fine when you're not laboring under a "sardine can" condition, but to try and get as many people as now would like to be at a presidential press conference, you just can't do it any more.

HESS: Well, Steve Early was Mr. Roosevelt's principal Press Secretary, and in the last few months, Jonathan Daniels was his Press Secretary. How would you evaluate the effectiveness of those two men. Were they effective Press Secretaries?

THEIS: You're talking about the Roosevelt period?

HESS: Yes, Steve Early.

THEIS: Oh, I always thought Steve Early was a very effective Press Secretary. But I only knew him the last three years, really, of the Roosevelt term.

And the reason for that was he, like Jim Hagerty for different reasons, had the confidence of the President. Steve had been with the President for a long time, and he was -- he could make judgments about

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things which I think Roosevelt respected, and that President Eisenhower for the same reason respected Hagerty.

Eisenhower didn't pretend to know a lot about the workings of the press, although he had had dealings with the press as a military commander. He leaned very heavily on Hagerty's judgment on how things should be conducted and how they should be done. I think Hagerty had his respect, and this is awfully important in a Press Secretary.

HESS: How capable was James Hagerty as a Press Secretary?

THEIS: I thought he was very capable, and again, part of that is because of his relationship with the President.

HESS: Who would you rate as the best Press Secretary that you have known since you have been here in Washington?

THEIS: Well, I think it would be, talking about presidential press secretaries, I think it would be Early, Steve Early and Jim Hagerty.

They were real pros, and for different reasons. Jim came into the job after having spent time in the newspaper business and then having been Dewey's man in Albany, when Dewey was running for President every

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four years. Hagerty was dealing with many of the same reporters in Albany during these campaign years that later he was dealing with at the White House when he came down here with Eisenhower. So, he didn't have to start running. He had been on the track for a long time.

HESS: Mr. Truman's first Press Secretary was Charles G. Ross, what is your estimation and opinion on his effectiveness and capability?

THEIS: Well, Charlie Ross was not cut out for that job. He was a fine person, a good journalist. I never knew him well, because I really hadn't known him much at all before he came into the White House. He was more or less an editorial columnist type.

But Truman trusted him and therefore I think that he did it as well as he could, but I would never rate him with these others, because he had never had that kind of grounding, he never wanted that kind of thing. The only reason he did it was because Truman asked him.

HESS: And he died in December of 1950, and his replacement was Joseph Short. What do you recall about Joseph Short?

THEIS: Joe was a good friend of mine. He was another good reporter. And Joe...I'm trying to recall how

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long Joe was in. Do you...

HESS: He died on September the 18th of 1952, so he served less than two years.

THEIS: Less than two years. And again, I don't think Joe was an extremely effective Press Secretary.

HESS: Why wasn't he effective? What seemed to stand in his way?

THEIS: Well, again, I wasn't there on a daily basis, so I hesitate to pass judgment. I have known a lot of press secretaries, who were awfully good reporters and newspapermen, but who didn't make the best press secretaries because sometimes they (I'm not saying this of Joe, but I've known others), they tended to become more protective of their man than a press secretary who had had far less newspaper experience would. It's a matter of leaning over too far backwards sometimes. I don't say that in criticism of Joe because my contacts with Joe as Press Secretary were really remote.

I was not covering the White House on a daily basis. This is a real test. You run into these daily small problems that very quickly give you a measure of how a man is doing.

I think Joe was more effective than Charlie Ross,

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but they were both people who were brought into a situation that I don't think they ever had the desire to enter.

HESS: And in the last few months of the Truman administration, two men who had been Assistant Secretaries to Mr. Short, Roger Tubby and Irving Perlmeter, took over the press office. Do you recall anything in particular about Roger Tubby or Irving Perlmeter?

THEIS: I knew both of them. They were both good craftsmen, both had been around Washington. Roger, as I recall, came in before that. He had been in and out of the State Department, had he not?

HESS: That's right.

THEIS: That's my recollection, and I got to know him a little there. And my recollection is that they both did very well.

But again, these were such interim kinds of assignments that I never regarded them as being in the same category as say Early or Hagerty. Anytime I needed anything from any of these, particularly the latter two, they would go out of their way to be helpful.

This is the real test -- are they working only for the Boss or are they really trying to do the other

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side of the job thoroughly to meet the reporters' requirements? And they all try to do that, it's a matter of degree. Now, I've lost track of Roger, but Irving is still in town, he's...

HESS: Mr. Tubby is associated with the Foreign Service Institute of the State Department, in Rosslyn.

Were you ever with Mr. Truman in some of his more relaxed moments at Key West and aboard the *Williamsburg*, Shangri-La or at the White House?

THEIS: No. No, I wasn't covering the White House regularly, so I wasn't traveling with him.

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

THEIS: The night he announced it.

HESS: Were you there at the National Guard Armory at the Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner?

THEIS: I was. I was.

HESS: Did that come as a surprise?

THEIS: I was about four feet away, below him, without a telephone within my reach. It came as a surprise.

HESS: All right. After Mr. Truman took himself out of the race, who in your opinion was the best standard-bearer for the Democrats to put up that year?

THEIS: Well, I can recall thinking at the time that it was

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[Adlai] Stevenson -- I mean I had a high regard for Stevenson. It really didn't make any difference who they put up, nobody was going to beat Eisenhower and everybody knew it. And there wasn't anybody -- people were pre-conditioned I think on that, and that was my own

feeling. I didn't think Stevenson had a chance of beating Ike, but I had, as far as I personally felt, I thought Stevenson was the strongest.

HESS: Did you know very much about Governor Stevenson at this time, other than the fact that he had been Governor of Illinois?

THEIS: I had met Adlai, strangely enough, as far back as the U.N. Conference in San Francisco. As you probably recall, he was sent out there to be of some use to the American press covering the conference.

The Russians and the French and the British were all leaking information to their reporters on what was going on in the closed sessions and we were getting very little. So Adlai came out there, I believe he was an Assistant Secretary at that point, with Eddie Miller, who is now dead. Eddie was then in the State Department as a practicing attorney, and he and Adlai organized what we called "leak sessions" for the American press.

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They would meet with us after each session and give us as much information as they could, compatible with security and so on and so forth. So, that's when I first met him and I had seen him from time to time after that.

One occasion was when he was Governor of Illinois, and was at the Governors' conference in Houston just before the 1952 Republican convention.

I remember late one night I was in his room with him at the Shamrock Hotel just talking about what was going to happen, what his attitude was about the Democratic nomination. He was sitting in his underwear, and the phone kept ringing and he said, "I'm not going to answer that. I know who that is and it's Jake [Jacob M.] Arvey and he wants to talk to me about the presidential nomination, and I'm not going to talk to him because I don't want it." He said, "I think they ought to nominate Averell Harriman. I think that he would be a better man." He gave, you know, all these arguments for somebody else.

HESS: Of course, at that time there had been a great deal of pressure put on Mr. Stevenson to run. Did he at that time enumerate the reasons to you why he did not want to run or why he thought he shouldn't run?

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THEIS: It was the attitude of a man who just -- who was honestly I think, in awe of the office and the problems, and who felt, as he said later in his speech to the convention, that the cup ought to pass to someone else.

HESS: Did he say anything that night about the difficulty of beating the Republican nominee?

THEIS: I don't recall that he said anything specifically about that. Of course, at that point it wasn't really known who the Republican nominee was going to be.

HESS: It was a pretty hot fight between Taft and Eisenhower.

THEIS: It was at the Governors' conference, that same conference in Houston, that Sherman Adams and the other liberal progressive Republicans organized the Declaration of Conscience thing and accused the Taft people of trying to steal the Texas delegates. And that was the biggest single factor that helped Ike get the nomination, because his people were having a hard time, even though people outside the party thought Eisenhower would be a terrific political candidate, they had to get him nominated. This was the big hurdle because the Taft strength in the convention was considerable.

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HESS: Did you go to the convention in Chicago that year?

THEIS: Yes.

HESS: Do you have any particular recollections, memories about that convention? Did you go to the Republican one that year also?

THEIS: Yes. You're talking about...

HESS: '52.

THEIS: Yes, I went to all of the conventions after that. I went to the Democratic convention in 1940 in Chicago; that's the first one I attended. I didn't get to the Republican that year, but I went to all of the others, except the Progressive one in Philadelphia.

HESS: Anything stand out in your memory about the Democratic convention that selected Adlai Stevenson in 1952?

THEIS: Well, of course, the [Estes] Kefauver thing.

HESS: Well, there were several people who wanted the nomination also; Alben Barkley, we mentioned Mr. Harriman.

THEIS: Yes.

HESS: There was some support for Chief Justice [Fred M.] Vinson.

THEIS: Votes for whom?

HESS: Chief Justice Fred Vinson.

THEIS: Yes, yes.

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HESS: I believe you've already answered this, but is there anything that the Democrats could have done to have won in 1952?

THEIS: I don't think so, no. I think the Eisenhower image, and the whole hero, military hero vision, all of this was too great to overcome. Plus the thing was, any Democratic nominee had to inherit the so-called "Truman scandals" business you know; the Harry Vaughan atmosphere and all that sort of thing, and this "time for a change" argument is very important.

HESS: Did you know General Vaughan?

THEIS: Only distantly. I really never had much -- except at times see him socially or something, or see him around the White House. I really didn't know him well.

HESS: All right. What in your opinion were Mr. Truman's major accomplishments during his administration?

THEIS: Well, of course, primarily his foreign policy. He had the courage to do things that needed to be done; foreign aid, push the Marshall plan. Of course, the Korean situation was a very difficult time, but he didn't have much option on that, and it came near the end. There will always be, I suppose, a historical debate about his decision on the atomic bomb right after he became President.

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HESS: What's your opinion on that? Do you think he should have dropped the bomb?

THEIS: Well, you'd like to think that it might have been done in a different way, that it might have been dropped in a demonstration way or something like that.

Hindsight is a wonderful device. I think it had to be used in some way. It might well have been demonstrated in some other way which would have ended the war -- like that. A lot of innocent people might have been spared. I have always felt that it would have had a similar effect because the real factor at that point in the war, was the influence of the Emperor.

But our military people were confronted with the expectation that there were going to be a lot of American lives lost if they had to invade the island of Japan. That had to become a presidential decision, that option they had. We would have all felt a lot better if the bomb hadn't been used the way it was initially.

HESS: What do you see as Mr. Truman's place in history. Two or three hundred years from now (if the world lasts), how will Mr. Truman be viewed?

THEIS: Oh, I think he will inevitably be viewed as a strong President who met problems which many people would have thought would be beyond his ability perhaps

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to resolve, and made the right decision at a time when big terrible decisions had to be made, overall.

I don't know whether -- there is always a measure of what's great, and what is something less than that. I've always had a very high regard for Mr. Truman in handling his job. So, it was probably very easy to think that it might have been done differently.

The President today has access to a lot more information, and a lot more assistance in reaching those decisions. It's hard to say the things are more complicated. They are more complicated, but they are not as grave perhaps as they were in postwar problems which were tremendous.

I'm just reading -- in the middle of reading James MacGregor Burns second book on Roosevelt, and reliving some of that World War II period. And looking back on it now it makes you wonder how we all got through it and how people kept their sanity, and how they were able to reach rational judgment when the choices were awful. Truman had some of these problems; he had the wreckage to try to pull together and do something about. He had a lot of help certainly from George Marshall, who I think history will show was a great man -- it already shows that. But for what most of us

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would regard as a little man in a very big job, he did tremendously well.

HESS: Have you anything else to add on Mr. Truman, the Truman administration, your job at the House and Senate?

THEIS: No, I really don't think so. I apologize for not having tried to refresh my recollection a bit more before you came in here because I realize how many gaps there are now.

Again, I want to emphasize that during this period I was not covering the White House on a day to day basis, so I didn't have the advantage that some of my colleagues did who were covering, particularly Truman, as President.

Tony Vaccaro was with the AP then and switched from the Senate down to the White House the day Truman became President. He is now retired and living in Memphis, Tennessee. And Merriman Smith, unfortunately is no longer with us. He was there during that whole period and had good perspective and he has written a lot of it in books that you have access to. Also Bob Nixon, of INS, people in that category have a much better impression of internal matters, I would say.

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HESS: Thank you very much sir.

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