

Oral History Interview

With

MILTON S. KRONHEIM, SR.

Washington, D.C. businessman and a longtime personal friend of Harry S. Truman.

Washington, D.C.

July 29, 1968

by Jerry N. Hess, Harry S. Truman Library

The Harry S. Truman Library

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HESS: Mr. Kronheim, of primary interest in our interview will be your relationship to former President Truman. What was that relationship and when did it begin?

KRONHEIM: Well, I first met Mr. Truman, and became acquainted with him when he was in the United States Senate. The first time that I saw him I'll never forget. He came to a dinner at the Mayflower Hotel, and he was late and was standing in the doorway. I had never met him and

he had never met me, but he was standing there and no one paid any attention to him. I went over to him. I said, "Mr. Truman, have you got a seat?"

He said, "No, I haven't."

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So I called the maitre d', or the headwaiter, and said, "You know, that's Senator Truman. I wish that you would see that he gets properly seated." And he was seated and Mr. Truman appreciated it.

I later saw Mr. Truman in the Senate. As a matter of fact, he introduced a bill in the Senate. At my request he introduced a bill to provide for a fair trade law. It didn't pass, but he tried. After that, I met him on many occasions. For instance, I never will forget, he went with his family to New York to the dedication of the battleship *Missouri*. It was on a Saturday, and he wanted to have his party go to see *Oklahoma*, which at that time was the big theatrical hit in New York, and they couldn't get seats for his party. Someone came to me and asked me if I could be helpful and I was. From that time on Mr. Truman and I were on a very friendly basis.

I always admired him. He was a simple man, and so am I. So, we got to be fairly good friends from the outset. I tried to be of some service to him in little ways that might help him in the Senate,

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from some purely personal angles here in Washington. Being an old Washington resident I had opportunities to do things for people who came to town that perhaps they could not otherwise do.

HESS: How did President Truman impress you as a man, during those early days?

KRONHEIM: I admired Mr. Truman from the beginning. Men who come to the Senate, as a rule, have a certain amount of ego and tend to become a little pompous as men who have been elected to the United States Senate have a right to be. But Mr. Truman never acquired that attitude. He was always a very simple, decent man for whom I had nothing but admiration from the beginning. He never changed his human qualities from the time he was a simple justice of the peace in Missouri to the time he became Senator. The transition for Mr. Truman was very easy. When he became Vice President, I was in New York. While there I read in the paper that he attended the funeral of Mr. Pendergast, That night I was so impressed with the fact that here's a man in high position who

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didn't change towards his friends. When he went to the funeral I wrote and told him just that. I'll never forget. It was at midnight on Sunday night that I wrote him and told him that I thought it was wonderful to see that a man in high places didn't forget the men in low places when he got into a position of power. And I think Mr. Truman appreciated it.

HESS: I understand that you were a delegate to the convention in Philadelphia in 1948. Could you tell me what you recall about those days?

KRONHEIM: Well, I went to the convention and, of course, I always have been a Democrat. I was more of an observer there than I was a delegate. It was my first experience and I remember Mr. Truman around the convention. He was there, but I don't think he remained for the whole convention. I think he came later than the time that he was supposed to be there to make the acceptance speech, and I don't recall too much about that particular convention.

HESS: Were you there when he gave his acceptance speech?

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KRONHEIM: Yes. I never will forget -- talking about the acceptance speech -- when he made the speech at the electoral college dinner at the Mayflower Hotel after he was inaugurated as President, when he imitated Kaltenborn, I was there that night. I'll never forget it. He was a true mimic. He was wonderful. Of course, that became a famous evening after that.

I'll never forget also, at a dinner that was given by the Young Democrats before the election. At that time, of course, there was grave doubt about Mr. Truman being re-elected.

HESS: Or even receiving the nomination.

KRONHEIM: Yes. But I'll never forget that night at the Young Democratic dinner when he said, "The next President of the United States will be a Democrat: You're looking at him. And that's me." I'll never forget the way he said that. My son happened to be one of the co-chairmen of that dinner.

After my son was appointed to the bench by Mr. Truman, about a month or so afterwards, I happened to see Mr. Truman, and to show how simple a

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man he is, how human he is, I went up to the head table to speak to him and thank him for appointing my son. And I said, "I hope he'll make a good judge."

He said, "There's no reason why he shouldn't. He's got a good mammy and a good pappy, and I think he will be." I mean the language he used shows the simplicity of the man.

Years after, I became better acquainted with him, and I made him a member of the Old Granddad Club, of which I am the founder. We had a picture taken presenting him with a certificate. The photograph turned out so well that I asked him if I could use it publicly, I enjoyed it so. And he wrote me a letter saying, "You can use it any way you want to, because it is the first organization that I ever joined that wasn't controversial."

HESS: If you will recall back during the days before the convention, which we've already mentioned, when other people were being proposed for the Democratic spot, there were some rather influential people across the nation that were trying to get President

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Eisenhower to run. And I believe that Mr. Jacob Arvey of Chicago was one of the leaders of the movement to try to get someone other than Mr. Truman as the Democratic nominee. Isn't that correct?

KRONHEIM: Well, I think that Mr. Arvey wasn't particularly interested in getting someone else, except Eisenhower. If he could have gotten Eisenhower as a candidate, I think he would have preferred it at that time. But I don't think it was a choice between Mr. Truman and any other candidate, or any other person. Colonel Arvey is a very devoted military man and he's as proud of his military service as anything in his life, and I think that was more particularly his interest in Eisenhower than anything else. I don't think that he was anti-Truman a bit.

HESS: He was pro-Eisenhower.

KRONHEIM: He was just pro-military. I'll put it that way. Of course, when Mr. Eisenhower did not accept the invitation, he was a staunch Truman advocate after that. There's no question about it. So, I

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don't think there's any question about his loyalty to Mr. Truman, and particularly in the after years. I know that he loved Mr. Truman and was very much in his corner, very much so.

HESS: As a delegate from the District of Columbia, and interested in Democratic politics here in the city at that time, what was the attitude of those in Democratic circles at that time? Would they have preferred to have someone else other than Mr. Truman as the party standard-bearer?

KRONHEIM: No, I think that after the Eisenhower suggestion died, there wasn't any movement at all for any other candidate. I think, as I said, and I repeat, the only other man they thought about was Eisenhower. When Eisenhower passed out of the picture, I think that all the sentiment was for Truman. I don't think there was any question about it.

HESS: Even the Americans for Democratic Action were trying to get General Eisenhower at that time.

KRONHEIM: He was a glamour boy and they thought that was a sure way to win an election. That turned

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out later to be true. No one could have beaten Eisenhower in the next election, so it probably was true. He was a national hero, and he probably would have won in '48.

HESS: After Mr. Truman received the nomination, in Philadelphia that year, and started out on his campaign, do you recall anything in particular, anything come to mind dealing with the 1948 campaign, the days between the convention and the election?

KRONHEIM: There was one incident that stands out in my mind: At a luncheon I was giving, there were about twelve people, among them a Congressman by the name of Paul Shafer who

served on the Armed Services Committee. Mr. Truman, of course, was on the Senate Armed Services Committee. And they had taken several inspection trips together and they had become very close friends. At this luncheon I asked Congressman Shafer, who was a good friend of mine, to tell me the truth of what he thought of Truman's chances, because he had just completed a trip through the West and Midwest and I wanted to know what he thought about the election, what

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his forecast was. And he said, "Milton, I'll tell you" (and this was two months before when the odds were fifty to one against Mr. Truman), he said, "I'll tell you, Mr. Truman is going to win this election and nobody can beat him." And he was a very staunch, Republican Congressman.

HESS: What was your opinion at this time. Did you think Mr. Truman could win that election?

KRONHEIM: Yes, I sure did. And when I heard that particularly I felt confident, and from then on I worked very, very hard.

HESS: Where were you on election night?

KRONHEIM: I was probably in the Democratic Committee room here.

HESS: Do you recall anything about the events of that evening?

KRONHEIM: Well, one thing that stands out in my mind is the thing that Mr. Truman mimicked later on. It must have been about midnight when Mr. Kaltenborn

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came on the radio and said, "While it looks like Mr. Truman is in the lead, we haven't heard from the farm country. When those returns come in, we'll probably have the answer." And that was the broadcast that Mr. Truman later mimicked. That stands out in my mind as the most momentous thing that happened before the election on that particular night.

HESS: In that same year, 1948, on May 14th, the State of Israel declared their independence. And as you know, just a few minutes after that declaration was made the United States Government extended recognition to the State of Israel. What do you recall of the background to the recognition, and why do you think Mr. Truman would extend that recognition so quickly. What was there in Mr. Truman's background to influence him in a decision of that nature?

KRONHEIM: Well, in the first place, he had been associated in business with Jacobson, and he had been exposed to the Jewish people and through him to the

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Jewish organizations. I think Mr. Truman at heart -- not that he wanted to do something for Jacobson, but I think that he was whole-heartedly in favor of the establishment of a Jewish home. He knew more about Jewish history than a lot of people will ever know. As a matter of fact, to prove that, I went to the White House sometime later with a group to invite him to a Jewish affair

and before we left the White House he gave us a talk on Jewish history that astounded those who were there who knew Jewish history, not that I did, but they did. And when he rolled off the facts of Jewish history, it was astounding.

HESS: What group was that, do you recall?

KRONHEIM: Well, I have a picture on the wall here of the group. It was the Jewish National Fund, which was a group organized to buy land in Israel for the State. This land had to be bought, and it was all bought through the Jewish National Fund, an organization that had been in existence for many, many years. I daresay that Jacobson had been an active

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member of that too. We went to Mr. Truman that time to invite him to come to a dinner in his honor, sponsored by the Jewish National Fund. As I say, at this meeting, when we went to him for the purpose of inviting him to be the recipient of the honor, he gave us an exposition of his knowledge of Jewish history that was really astounding.

HESS: I believe that one of the villages in Israel was named for Mr. Truman, Kfar Truman.

KRONHEIM: Kfar Truman. I was the chairman of that dinner. And I worked on that particular dinner for many, many months. The night I was supposed to preside at the dinner, I was taken sick. So I told my son, I said, "You go down and preside." I believe at six o'clock that night, I thought I could get out, and I had to go to the hospital that day, I thought I would be able to get up and go down there. I was fighting it, but the doctor said that "You've got your own responsibilities." So I told my son about half past six that day to go down and preside and to act like nothing had happened.

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And he did, and that night, he made an error. Alben Barkley was there and he had spoken to Alben W. Barkley several times so when he introduced the President he said, "The President, Harry W. Truman." Well, everybody roared. And later, the entertainer that evening was Victor Borge. And Victor Borge got up to speak and said, "I am Victor W. Borge." The result was that the whole evening got a pleasant atmosphere, and instead of being a mistake that could hurt, it was a mistake that helped the whole evening. It was a pleasantry. But the classic of it all is, I have a letter on my wall, that I think demonstrates above everything else the humbleness, the humility of President Truman, The next day, he wrote me a letter and said, "I'm sorry you were ill last evening, and your son presided. I enjoyed all the speeches very much, except one, mine. And don't let your son feel badly about the mistake he made, because we all make them. The other day I was introducing some big shots, and I introduced Admiral [William M.] Fechteler as General Fechteler. So, we all make mistakes."

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But think of the President of the United States saying that he was introducing the big shots. Now, how a President of the United States can find big shots to introduce is a mystery to me, But I think it just shows the character of the man, more than anything else I've ever known. I have that letter and I have it on my wall, in which he says he was introducing big shots. Now how can the

President of the United States find anybody bigger than the President of the United States that he thinks are big shots.

HESS: One man I'd like to ask about is David Niles. He was in the White House during the Roosevelt administration, and he stayed on under Mr. Truman. He was administrative assistant in charge of matters pertaining to minority affairs. How influential on Mr. Truman's thinking, in your opinion, was David Niles?

KRONHEIM: He, of course, knew David Niles from the time he was with Roosevelt, and they probably developed a friendship and an association with each

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other. And his being exposed to Dave Niles made him cognizant of Jewish affairs. Dave Niles was certainly a man to make the most of his position, representing minorities, and I daresay that he did have quite a bit of influence on Mr. Truman's thinking.

HESS: What would be your estimation, your evaluation, of Mr. Truman's commitment towards civil rights in general?

KRONHEIM: Well, as I said to you before, I think that Mr. Truman's life itself, a man who had led a very normal existence in a small town, and knew what it meant to make a living, and also his military service during the war where he had a close association with all types of people, gave him the character that he displayed, and I think that made him a genuine, a genuine advocate of civil rights, of poor people, of humble people. I think he felt he was one of them. I don't think that was the case with some of our other Presidents, some of our other leaders, who thought it was expedient to expound

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civil rights causes. I think that with Mr. Truman it was genuine.

HESS: How would you compare the view on civil rights between President Roosevelt and President Truman?

KRONHEIM: Well, I think that Mr. Roosevelt -- of course, this is my own humble opinion, I think that Mr. Roosevelt adopted the civil rights movement and social reform movements because it was good politics -- for Mr. Roosevelt. Mr. Roosevelt was an aristocrat, and I don't think he was exposed to the problems of the poor people and the more humble people like Mr. Truman, and I think one was political, in my opinion, and the other was genuine. Not that Mr. Truman wasn't a politician, but I think his views and his philosophy happened to be the best politics for him, not because he viewed it as a political situation but because he believed in civil rights and social reform.

HESS: There are those that say his actions in the field of civil rights were not carried out with the same

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strength as his words and his pronouncements, that in other words, his actions did not speak as loud as his words or his pronouncements. What would you say to that?

KRONHEIM: Well, I would say the reason for that was that the atmosphere was not ready for it, the times were not ready for it, and I think Mr. Truman acted with good political sense and went along with the times, a little bit. It just wasn't right for him to take the dramatic stand that came a little later.

HESS: You were a delegate in the 1952 convention in Chicago. Isn't that right?

KRONHEIM: Yes.

HESS: Starting back a little earlier that year, when did you first become aware that Mr. Truman did not intend to run for re-election?

KRONHEIM: I just don't recall that.

HESS: He made that announcement, to the general public, on March 29th of 1952, at the National Guard Armory

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at the Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner.

KRONHEIM: Well, I was there. I went to every Jackson Day dinner they had during those years, so I was there.

HESS: When the President made the announcement that night was it news to you? Did you know anything about this before that time?

KRONHEIM: No, I did not. That was news to me, although I had been to the White House frequently, not always to see him, but to see General [Harry] Vaughan, and General [Cornelius J.] Mara, who was General Vaughan's assistant. I was there many times but I did not know it until he made the public announcement.

HESS: Now, there is some discussion as to whom President Truman actually thought would be the best standard-bearer for the Democratic Party during that year, during the year that Adlai Stevenson actually did win the nomination. What do you recall about that matter?

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KRONHEIM: Well, I think if I remember correctly, I think he was for Alben Barkley, I think he was. I don't think he was too much of a staunch believer in Adlai Stevenson.

HESS: What seemed to cause that attitude, do you know why he wasn't?

KRONHEIM: No, I don't know why. I don't. If I recall correctly I think he was more particularly -- I think he loved Alben Barkley and I think he believed in him. I think Alben Barkley was the most articulate man in the Democratic Party at that time.

HESS: As I understand, Mr. Barkley did not receive the endorsement of labor at the convention.

KRONHEIM: That's right. He was the most disappointed man in history, I think, at that time.

HESS: Did you talk to him in Chicago?

KRONHEIM: I was there and I recall the incidents surrounding that, and he was a very, very bitter man when labor went against him.

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HESS: What else comes to mind when you look back on the days of the '52 convention in Chicago?

KRONHEIM: Well, there were many things, of course. It's hard to recall at this time. But I recall Maurice Tobin, who was Secretary of Labor, who led the march around the hall for Barkley. He was very much for him. It's awful hard to go back and look at these various things that happened, without being confused about one convention and the other.

HESS: That's right. When you've been to several, I expect that's quite true.

KRONHEIM: I expect it's hard to pick out -- now, what I said about Barkley could have happened in the next convention, I don't know. But I think if I recall, Maurice Tobin was there and led a march around the hall for Barkley.

HESS: After Governor Stevenson received the nomination and the campaign got underway, as you will recall, President Truman had a rather energetic campaign of his own that year trying to see that Governor

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Stevenson was elected. Do you recall anything particular about Mr. Truman's efforts in 1952?

KRONHEIM: No, I don't. Of course, at that time, I went along with it. As a matter of fact, whatever Mr. Truman did at that time I would go along with, and from that time until I pass out of the picture, I will always. For instance, he has endorsed Mr. Humphrey. Well, if I wasn't for Mr. Humphrey, I'd have to be if Mr. Truman endorsed him, believe me. But at that time I set up a fund-raising dinner for Mr. Stevenson, so it must have been that Mr. Truman was for him.

HESS: Well, we've reached 1952 and getting pretty close to the end of the Truman administration. I'd like to ask a few questions about the members of the White House staff.

What members of the White House staff were you more familiar with?

KRONHEIM: Well, I was very friendly with General Vaughan, General Mara, and Matt Connelly. Of course, I knew Don Dawson at that time, and Joe Feeney.

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HESS: What do you recall about a few of these men, any particular incidents that might portray them in a historical significance?

KRONHEIM: No, they all played their own part in their own way, but I don't think any of them did anything of a historical nature. I think they were all loyal to their Chief.

HESS: One question about General Vaughan: He was often pointed out by the press as evidence of the existence of mediocrity and cronyism on the White House staff. There was a good deal of talk about a "Missouri gang." Why do you think that something like this would arise about General Vaughan more than it would about some of the other members.

KRONHEIM: Well, I'll never know a good reason for it. Knowing General Vaughan as I did, and knowing General Vaughan as I do, he has always been a very decent, fine man, who is and was tremendously loyal to the President and the thing that even started the ball rolling in reference to General Vaughan came about, I think, when General Vaughan refused to do

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something for some newspaper people that they wanted him to do. General Vaughan was right because it shouldn't have been done. And because he refused to accede to their request, I think they started a vendetta against him. The thing came to a climax with the securing of the deepfreezes, and he had very little to do with it except as a messenger boy. I think Jake Vardaman, with whom I also was very friendly, who was the Naval aide to the President, suggested that someone wanted a deepfreeze and I think he suggested to General Vaughan to call up a friend of theirs who was in the advertising business in Milwaukee, because he knew that he had four or five old deepfreezes, and they sent them here. One went to General Vaughan, one to Mr. Vinson, one to Mrs. Truman, and I forget who else got one. But they were secondhand deepfreezes that General Vaughan always said cost him more to keep running than it was ever worth. As a result of that it became a nationwide high spot. They always said that General Vaughan was a drinker and he wasn't. He wasn't then and he isn't now. They pictured

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General Vaughan as going to the night spots around town, the late night spots, and I daresay that General Vaughan was never in one in his life, before the White House, during the White House, and since the White House. I can say that truthfully, because I have become, over the years, very close and very intimate with General Vaughan, There is no man for whom I have higher regard and greater respect.

HESS: What in your opinion were Mr. Truman's major contributions during his career?

KRONHEIM: Well, of course, as he said himself -- we were at dinner one night and there were fourteen of us at the Statler Hotel, and we were sitting around this table and he said, the most important decision that he had to make was the dropping of the atom bomb. He said he thought

about it before and he thought about it since. I think that that was his greatest contribution as it saved possibly half a million American lives, and perhaps a couple of million Japanese lives. I think everything stemmed

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from that.

That night everybody at the table sent their placecards over to Mr. Truman to autograph and when they did that, he finally took his -- I was sitting next to him and he said, "Now, pass mine around. I would like for all of you to autograph my card." And we all did. There's a picture of it over there in that corner. And he did that. He was tremendous.

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

KRONHEIM: Well, I don't think the lines were drawn so tightly in those days, I don't think they were. The question of being a liberal, I don't think, has the same connotation as it does now. I don't think so. The term has changed as the years have rolled by. But I think Mr. Truman was a natural liberal. As I said before, I think he was a liberal from within, not from without, in my humble opinion.

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

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in history? How will he be regarded one or two hundred years from now?

KRONHEIM: Well, as Presidents go, and as politicians go, I think that Mr. Truman will stand out as one of the great Presidents of all times, and for the simple reason that in his own simple way he made decisions -- as he said, "The buck stops here," and I think that is a genuine insight into his character, and a genuine insight into all of his activities. When things came before him, large or small, he made decisions. He didn't duck issues. For that reason, I think his administration will stand out as one of the outstanding of all. He didn't know how to straddle issues. There was a right or wrong with him, and if he thought it was right, he made the decision. It looks like history will show that in important matters his insight, his intuition, gave him the ability to make the right decision, the one which was good for our country.

HESS: Does anything else come to mind regarding former President Truman, anything that might

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show him to be the man that you know him to be?

KRONHEIM: Well, his whole conduct as a man, his whole conduct with his family. He was a true patriot. The fact that he stepped down from the Presidency when he could have been elected again, and he was at the height of his glory, you might say, so he put the interest of America first at all times. That was uppermost in his heart and uppermost in his mind. I have nothing but the highest admiration and love for him, because he was a real, honest to God, true American.

HESS: Thank you very much for your time.

ADDED REMARKS BY MR. KRONHEIM

KRONHEIM: I would like to conclude this interview with a brief account of my recent visit with Mr. and Mrs. Truman in Key West, Florida, where they were vacationing at the home of their longtime friend, Mr. Spottswood.

On Friday, March 28th, I flew to Miami, Florida, for the purpose of attending a Sunday night dinner to raise money for the Hebrew Home

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for the Aged. H. Wilbur Cohen, former HEW Secretary, was to be the speaker. While with him and Colonel Jack Arvey on Friday night, Colonel Arvey telephoned Mr. John M. Spottswood and made an appointment for all three of us to see Mr. Truman on Saturday morning, March 29, 1969.

We were met at the door by Mr. and Mrs. Truman and for more than an hour we enjoyed talking about old times and of many incidents from the past which the President seemed to enjoy.

This visit will remain as the high spot in my life. What a real joy it was to see Mr. Truman again after so many years. He was mentally in good shape but it hurt to see how frail he was and to see that the "old bounce" was gone.

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