

Oral History Interview

with

RALPH BLOCK

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Washington, D.C.
July 8, 1966

by Jerry N. Hess, Harry S. Truman Library

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[1]

HESS: Mr. Block, would you, for the record, give me a brief run-down on your background, where you were born, your education and a brief resume of your career?

BLOCK: I am a first generation American. My father was born in what is now called Czechoslovakia and my mother was born in Poland. As a matter of fact I went back to Poland, German Poland, with her when I was eleven years old. I was born in Cherokee, Iowa in 1889, June 21st. The town had been settled about forty years before, and moved from one area to another when the railroad came in. The Indians had left there, some twenty-five years before, although Sitting Bull died after I was

[2]

born. Actually this background occupies a full chapter in an autobiographical record which is now being reviewed by a publisher for possible publication (not accepted). I graduated from the local high school and while I wanted to go to Harvard, which was at that time the aim of all aspiring young men, my father said, "No, your mother isn't well." As a matter of fact, she outlived him by some twenty years or more. So we compromised on Ann Arbor.

I've never discovered the basis of the name Cherokee; the Cherokee Indians were much further south. Originally the town had been settled by the New Milford Settlement Company of New England. Most young men in Cherokee went to Ames or Iowa City or even Madison, Wisconsin, but few had gone to Ann Arbor. I remember that my father took me to Chicago and we talked to the Pullman porter about Ann Arbor. He said to me, "Now if you want to change your mind, even now, and come back and go into business with me, you can, and nobody will think any the worse of you." I realized then that

[3]

I was already older than my father.

I graduated at Ann Arbor with a Phi Beta Kappa key, etc., etc. I majored in philosophy, which was unusual in those days. I was going to Harvard for a graduate year and then into law. A graduate student convinced me that law was business. I didn't know anything about business, he said, and I cancelled the Harvard acceptance. My father had retired and had moved sixty miles further west to Sioux City. I went home, to the public library there and looked at the newspaper rack. I had heard of Henry Watterson, and I wrote him a letter, saying that I was a brilliant young man and I would make a fine editorial writer. On copy paper, with green ink, he wrote, "We have no jobs, but if you want to work for nothing, come ahead." I was in Louisville many years later and they interviewed me and quoted it. I went to the *Courier-Journal* and worked for nothing. But one day I wrote a funny story about an Indian medicine man who had a big car with his name on it. He had been in a wreck in a fashionable district; but nobody

[4]

had been hurt. The story was printed on the front page. The next day I was put on salary at \$12.50 a week.

I went from Louisville to Detroit, the morning *Detroit News*. But Detroit, which was a city of about a half million then, and was bustling with all the fever of motor car manufacture, was too much for me; I didn't stay very long. I went home, worked briefly on a local newspaper, the *News*, owned by a man who later headed the Liberty Loan, named Wilson. Then I went to

Kansas City to the *Star*, morning issue, the *Times*, and then later the *Star*, the afternoon issue. I really got my education in journalism then. Toward the end of my stay there, I was associate news editor, sat on the desk at noon, ran either the city desk or the telegraph desk Saturday night, and I wrote a weekly column on art. In those days the Post Impressionists were just beginning to be known in America, Degas, Monet, etc.

HESS: What years...

[5]

BLOCK: That was about 1916. I was also drama critic, all at \$35 a week. When I said that in a month from then I was going to New York the city editor went to the managing editor, came back and said, "Fifty?", and I said, "No." My wife who had been a graduate of the University of Michigan, went to business college and took a job so that I could go East.

I had a letter from an aunt of Alexander Woollcott, then the drama critic of the *New York Times*. I also had a letter to Arthur Hopkins, then the chief dramatic producer in New York. One of his assistants was Ruth Hale, later to become the wife of Heywood Broun, first of the *New York Tribune*, and then of the *World*. In a way Broun and Woollcott became my godfathers. I remember Woollcott saying, "Anytime you want to come down and see me, I'll take you over to the Astor and we'll have a chocolate ice cream soda." I was on the *Tribune* first as a very insignificant worker with the art editor, covering art auctions, on space which paid \$12 a column. I went from there to the *Evening Sun*. I

[6]

used to get down at five in the morning and write the whole front page for the street edition. From there I went back to the *Tribune* as the day assignment editor. Then the war came along and because the *Star* had a reputation for "miscellany," -- I used to cull all the foreign newspapers. One day I had a letter from Ruth Hale saying, "When you read this, Heywood and I will be on the sea bound for France."

The managing editor said, "You know something about the theater, so take charge."

George S. Kaufman was my assistant. "F.P.A.", Franklin P. Adams said, "Kaufman should have had the job."

And I said, "Yes, he probably should have, but I have it." George S. Kaufman went to the *Times*; a fine and able man, later to become famous as a playwright.

The war bothered me. After a brief stint on the *New Republic* the managing editor of the *New York Tribune* said, "Washington is more of a theater

[7]

than Broadway. You'd better go down there and be attached to the bureau. I'll print all your stuff on the editorial page."

Here on the wall is a piece about FDR; four books have quoted it. He was then Assistant Secretary of the Navy. The last paragraph is the one that attracted attention. That was June, 1918. I wrote in the column "He isn't hidden nor inconspicuous, but he is a man whose obvious powers are such as to make you wonder how a Democracy of opportunity can afford to leave him subordinated now, when the need is not so much for measures, of which there have been, heaven knows, enough, but for men."

At the end of the war I went back to New York as editor of one of the *Tribune* Sunday magazines, *The Review*. In a way it was a precursor of *Time*. Then I had a quarrel with the managing editor and I quit. I was going out in the country to write fiction, and somebody said, "Look, there's a movie job open." Movies at that time were pretty low. But my wife said, "Well, look into it, at least."

[8]

I became the director of publicity for Samuel Goldwyn and a few months later my salary was doubled, as the head of publicity, exploitation, and advertising. Howard Dietz, who later became vice president of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, was my assistant.

In 1920, I went out to the coast, came back, went to England, and in 1922 I moved over to Paramount. I had a long history in Hollywood of more than twenty years as a producer and writer, and towards the end of it I was active politically. I ran the local campaign for FDR in 1940, in Hollywood. I was asked to run for Congress from the Sixteenth District, which is next to the district in which Helen Gahagan was defeated, by Nixon, but rejected the idea.

When the war came in 1941, I was asked to become Assistant Regional Director of Civil Defense for the eight Western states, the Federal district. During that year, 1942, the Office of War Information was born, and I was asked to head the office on the west coast. I couldn't tell them why I

[9]

couldn't do it, that there was a Japanese task force threatening the coast. After the Battle of Midway, I wrote to Elmer Davis that I was now free and I was asked to go to India.

I spent four years in India. I was special assistant to Ambassador [William] Phillips, the personal representative of the President and Special Assistant to the United States Commissioner after Phillips resigned. But my real job was as head of the Office of War Information in South Asia. I had 150 men doing psychological warfare up near the Burma line. After the war ended the State Department asked me to stay another year as the Public Affairs Officer of the American Mission, which was quasi-diplomatic, at that time because India was still under the British Government. Toward the end of that period, in 1946, there were just enough troops left to take care of the piles of war materiel. A U. S. Colonel came to my office and said, "I have been asked to decorate you. I haven't got any troops. The medal you're supposed to get is the Medal of Freedom, but

[10]

I've never seen the goddamned thing."

I said, "Please don't be so hot under the collar about it."

He replied, "When you go home call the Adjutant General of the district. He'll have the decoration for you."

My successor was due in November of '46. I'd gotten a house for the imminent arrival of my wife and daughter. They went by freighter to Manila, and the Army flew them to Calcutta, where I met them.

That year, when I came home, a colonel came over from the Adjutant General's office and said, "You're to be decorated. Where do you want it?"

I said, "Well, I've never been baptized that way before so I'd rather have it over there at the Pentagon."

I brought my wife and daughter down from New York where they were visiting and we went to the Pentagon. Much to my pleasure I found that all the old India hands had gathered there, including Dean Rusk, now Secretary of State, who had been Deputy

[11]

Chief of Staff of the American command in Delhi. I was decorated with the Medal of Freedom, by order of President Truman.

I found that I couldn't go back to Hollywood. Hollywood had changed; I had changed; I had been spending time in a cause that was other than selfish. I was asked to head a secret office of one of the divisions of the State Department that had to do with U. S. occupied areas of the world.

An Army colonel, an Air Force colonel, a Navy captain and a CIA man were on my staff, with special quarters for them. Then the whole information process changed and I became the head of the foreign information policy staff of the State Department. I finally changed from Foreign Service Reserve to Civil Service so I could stay on until I was seventy. Even then they kept me on an extra year. That's the general background.

I want to tell you about President Truman. I received a decoration "by order of the President," although I'm sure he never knew about it. It came from the old War Department which was the

[12]

predecessor of the Department of Defense. I never knew Harry Truman in Kansas City. The haberdashery shop came after I left.

The only member of the governing body of the county that I knew was Judge Porterfield, then chief of the Jackson County board of supervisors. When I came into the Kansas City *Star* office one Saturday morning, the city editor's desk said, "The Colonel," [William Rockhill Nelson] "wants a story about macadam roads, and he wants to get it from Judge Porterfield."

I called Judge Porterfield but couldn't reach him. I tried all day and finally, at a quarter of twelve that night, I got him somewhere out in Sni-A-Bar township. I told him that the Colonel wanted him to give me a story on macadam roads.

He said, "You know as much about it as I do. You write it and I'll stand for it."

So I wrote a long story about Judge Porterfield's opinion of macadam roads and it appeared on the front pages of the *Star* the next morning.

I met Miss Margaret Truman after she was

[13]

married, when she attended an Elmer Davis commemoration at Columbia University, and I told her that her father had once given me a decoration.

I liked Harry Truman. My daughter, who went to Woodrow Wilson High School, a hotbed of Republicanism, stood staunchly for Harry Truman in 1946. He had quality. After all, that middle country was my country. I understood him, and I've always had that feeling about him.

HESS: Do you remember anything about the general political situation?

BLOCK: Yes, I do. Our first house was in Westport, near Kansas City, a bungalow -- Sunset Hill was already fashionable, further out. Then we moved to a bungalow, a very pleasant place one door away from the Paseo. On the corner was the house of a secretary of the Commerce Trust Company, Mr. [Henry C.] Schwitzgebel. As a reporter at that time I always came home pretty tired. I had one palm beach suit which I washed and ironed myself.

After the Fourth of July in 1913, in the front

[14]

room I was already asleep, but my wife was still reading. Suddenly in my dream I heard a sound, like firecrackers. I woke, and she said, "Turn out the lights quickly. Somebody's shooting." I had no gun and I got a stick and went out. Schwitzgebel's son had come to the window fronting on our place, and he had said, "Come out of there or I'll shoot." The man fired at him and he fired back, and then the man disappeared. We hired a Pinkerton man after that.

The town was split at that time between the "Goats" and the "Rabbits." Shannon (the Congressman) was the Rabbit and the man who later went to prison, with the police reporter of the *Star* who later became police commissioner (Higgins), was the Goat. Shannon's brother was prosecuting a case in police court. I don't remember what the case was, but I know something about it and I was annoyed at the injustice that was being done. I said to the city editor, "Let me handle this," I went down to the police court and I raised Cain with Shannon. I told him where to get off. I read

[15]

him, as my father would say, the "riot act."

Where we lived was an area where there were houses alike, built by one contractor. In the same spot two blocks over, a young man, about my height -- I can't remember who he was -- came out of his house one morning and was killed.

HESS: Maybe they were shooting at you.

BLOCK: That's pure conjecture, but Kansas City was a tough town. My father, who came to this country after the Civil War, at age sixteen, in the steerage, used to tell me about earning his first dollar in New York in a button factory on Maiden Lane. Later when I was a drama critic for the *Tribune* down near Park row, I could look down on Maiden Lane. He used to stop in a doorway, take out the dollar and look at it. He had earned a dollar. From New York, my father went to an uncle, a plantation owner in Arkansas, near Camden and Pine Bluff. His first name was Solomon and my father's name was Sigfried. Apparently the "S" bothered his uncle because of the "S" on the cotton bales.

[16]

He made my father take an extra initial, "E"; and he was always known thereafter as E. S. Block. Finally E. S. went to New Orleans, walking from Pine Bluff to New Orleans, where he had yellow fever.

He used to tell me about scrubbing floors in a charity hospital. I crossed Africa three times during the World War II and each time I had to take yellow fever shots. E. S. B. worked his way up north doing odd jobs for troops in the war. Then he went West, became a cowboy. Finally he came back into Nebraska and worked in a general store at Tecumseh. Then he went to Nebraska City and went into business for himself. At one time he had two stores, in Nebraska City and Cherokee.

My father was a fine man. He was untutored in the conventional way, but he held his own. He was a member of the school board and wrote a fine script that he learned in night school in New York. My mother was more sophisticated.

HESS: Do you remember anything about Mr. Pendergast in Kansas City?

[17]

BLOCK: Many years later, when I was in Hollywood, I received an invitation from Otto Higgins, who I knew as a police reporter, who had become the police commissioner. They were opening a new police headquarters and they were asking all the old *Star* men to come. A man that I knew did go and came back and told me about it. He said that Kansas City was wide open.

On Saturday nights I used to go home at about one o'clock on the 18th Street car line, with a transfer to the Troost Avenue car line. I always was afraid that something was going to happen. My father had once been in Kansas City and he said that after the Civil War it was called "the jumping off place."

HESS: Getting into your job, the post that you held during the Truman administration...

BLOCK: When I came back from India, I mentioned the fact that I couldn't go back to Hollywood. I became head of a committee to plan psychological warfare for future purposes.

[18]

I might interject that when General Maxwell Taylor went to Vietnam, as Ambassador, I called his attention to the fact that I had a two hundred page report of psychological warfare activities in Burma. While the means had changed, the principle was still the same. A few days later I got a call from a colonel asking for a copy, which I had had declassified before I had left the Government.

At the time of the Eisenhower administration I was the head of certain activities that had to do with Russia and the Communist countries. When it became the U. S. Information Agency, under Eisenhower, I became the advisor to the head of the Information Center process. This has to do with the foreign libraries, and exhibits. After that, I became the head of the bibliographic division. And at that time, the officer who had been the Assistant Secretary of Public Affairs when I first came back, became the head of the U. S. Information Agency. He used to call me on the telephone and ask for my advice.

[19]

As you approach seventy, your energy begins to flag a little.

When I reached seventy, which is the age at which one retires from the Civil Service, I was asked to stay on for another year. Since then I have written my autobiography, have revised, and rewritten a novel which I had started before the war, and I have now completed a 90,000 word novel which I am now revising.

HESS: Since you served in the Department of State through the full time Mr. Truman was President, could you give me your impressions of the four men that served as Secretary of State: Stettinius, Byrnes, Marshall, and Acheson. What kind of men do you think they were? What kind of a job do you think they did?

BLOCK: I didn't think much of Stettinius. I thought he was sort of a -- what is the German word I'm trying to think of -- ersatz, a substitute. Who is the next man?

[20]

HESS: Jimmy Byrnes.

BLOCK: Byrnes I didn't know at all. I have no recollection of him, except that he was a fiery southerner. He probably believed in secession. I think he was a man of talent who somehow was held by his prejudices away from the main line of development. The next man was Marshall? I didn't know Marshall.

One day in New Delhi I was advised that a former Secretary of War, Patrick J. Hurley, an Indian fighter from Oklahoma, later ambassador to China, was coming through New Delhi.

It was difficult to entertain in those days. I had a quasi-diplomatic position, sometimes in uniform, sometimes in civies. I had planned to have a number of people come into the office for cocktails, then we were going to see a movie. You were limited by the Delhi government as to the number of people you could entertain, because food was scarce. A colonel came over and wanted 10 places for the Hurley party, and, I said, "I'm sorry, but by stretching it, I can give you three." I had met Hurley once on a transcontinental trip, he was a fine looking

[21]

man, married to a woman with money, I think. Well, he went to Chungking as American Ambassador. At that time the Chinese government was in Chungking. Hurley also had the rank of major general. When he was presented to Chiang Kai-shek he should have been presented in diplomatic clothes, but he presented himself as a major general.

HESS: What do you think of John Davies?

BLOCK: A fine man.

HESS: What dealings have you had with him?

BLOCK: Very close. When I was in training for the India job, I was to go out as the administrative head, not as the chief. The chief was a former Rhodes scholar, Robert Aura Smith, whose knowledge was chiefly of the Far East, and a triple bourbon man at lunch.

One day I learned that John Davies, whom I didn't know, the political adviser to General Stilwell, was in town. So, I said I wanted to meet him, and the people at OWI said, "Why do you want

[22]

to talk to him?"

I said, "I'm going to have something to do with him in India."

Jim Linen, who is now the president of *Time*, then head of the Outpost Service Bureau, said, "I'll go with you."

We went over to State, but Davies was careful not to say much. He was rather cool, but he asked one question. He said, "What about the other man, Robert Aura Smith?"

Linen said (which was news to me), that Smith was to be the head of psychological warfare, but I was to run the operation.

And Davies said, "Well, that's too bad because he's persona non grata to Stilwell."

When we left I said to Linen, "You can handle this. I bow out. I don't know anything about it." A few days later I was called in by Elmer Davis, and by the OWI Board, and asked to take over the whole business. Smith would be recalled. I said, "Of course, you must have a policy for an

informational operation." (We had two jobs: One was psychological warfare against the enemy with the American forces; the other was information inside India, Gandhi having practically invited the Japanese to come in,) The OWI Board said, "Well, you write one." I thought, "My goodness, this is a bunch of amateurs."

Finally, I wrote, after a good deal of care and study what I called "Notes on India," that later became the guiding policy. It was cleared by the State Department with some changes, but not until I'd gotten to Cairo.

HESS: That was the first time you'd met Davies?

BLOCK: Yes. When I got to India, the first thing I wanted to do was to get hold of Davies, and I found that he had flown to Chungking; the plane had fallen in the Naga country, the head-hunting country.

HESS: It went down?

BLOCK: Yes. Among the people on the plane was a commentator for CBS, Eric Sevareid. He's on every night at seven o'clock on CBS here, with Walter Cronkite. The story Davies told me later was that

[24]

there was a Chinese general on the plane with him. When they took to the silk, they all came down in different areas. When they were finally rounded up, the Chinese general said, "Very interesting, very interesting. Now, what do you do in New York to avoid those tall buildings?" He thought that's how they got out of planes in New York.

In November of '43, we were called to the American mission. Davies was among those who were called; also the head of OSS in New Delhi. A Foreign Office man, named [Sir Maberly Esler] Dening, who I think later became the British Ambassador to Japan, a large, able, fast-thinking man, said that the Supreme Commander, Lord Mountbatten, established as the Supreme Commander of Southeast Asia at a meeting at Quebec, wished to integrate all forces. Well, we couldn't be integrated, because that meant we would be backing British policy in Asia. So, we didn't integrate.

I had in the meantime gotten certain language people from the local British Ministry of Information Office. There were some nice guys in the

[25]

office, a couple of Australians, and a Foreign Office man, whom I met many years later in Philadelphia. For dropping leaflets, we didn't have type fonts. We had to have it all hand-lettered in the native language, and then the leaflet would be photographed -- an offset process. Suddenly, these people were withdrawn from us. I got very angry, in the Hollywood manner. And I called the M.O.I. men. I had already had sufficient irritation with the British. I asked them to come down to my office. They came in very calmly and I took them into the dining room, which was off of my office. As I looked at them, I realized that they were under orders; it wasn't

their fault. And I started to laugh. I ordered drinks, didn't say a word about what was on my mind. They laughed rather uncomfortably, we joked with each other and then they went home.

Some time later, there was a meeting at Mountbatten's rear echelon in New Delhi. He hadn't moved to Ceylon yet, where Kandy was headquarters. At the meeting they would decide what they would do

[26]

about the people I wanted. The British were there with all their medals. [Benjamin G.] Ferris, brigadier at the American headquarters in Delhi, wore a typical Stilwell blouse with nothing on it, and winked at me. Davies was also there. There I met General [Albert Coady] Wedemeyer, who became the American commander at Chungking. In Europe, the Americans were one, the British were two, Eisenhower being number one, the British number two. In Mountbatten's command, the British were number one, the Americans were number two. In other words, Wedemeyer was Deputy Chief of Staff and the Chief of Staff was an English Lieutenant General. I met Wedemeyer, introduced myself, and I said I hoped we could work together.

HESS: What was your impression of him?

BLOCK: Well, I'll tell you that later: A few days later I got a call from his aide, who said, "The General wants to see you." I had planned to go to Bombay the next day to see my staff there. I asked, "Can he wait until after I return from Bombay?"

[27]

"No, he wants to see you right away." So I went up there.

General Wedemeyer said, "What about this coordination business -- integration?"

I said, "Nothing."

He said, "Hasn't Dening called on you?"

I said, "No. I haven't had a word from any of the British."

Then he called General Ferris at American headquarters, and while he was talking, in walked the Chief of Staff of the British. Immediately Wedemeyer hung up.

The English General started to say something which sounded like doubletalk. It was about a plan that had already been cancelled. I said, "General, don't you know that's been eliminated?"

He indulged in some more doubletalk, then walked out. I took an envelope from my pocket and wrote on it, "Your phone is tapped." Obviously the Englishman didn't want Wedemeyer to talk to Ferris. Wedemeyer said, "If that's true, then my position here isn't tenable." When I started to

[28]

say something, he pointed to a big oil portrait on the wall. So I shut up.

HESS: Why, was there a microphone behind the painting?

BLOCK: Probably. Later, I was invited to dinner by Wedemeyer. He and Mountbatten lived in a Delhi house of one of the old Sikh rajahs. There were a lot of those in Delhi. Wedemeyer didn't mention the incident. We had dinner and later saw a Twentieth Century Fox picture in a projection room of the life of then Admiral Mountbatten; but I didn't meet Mountbatten. Actually, I had met Mountbatten in Hollywood, at a dinner given by the young Douglas Fairbanks. But neither one of us indicated that we knew each other until much later. After the War, the Prime Minister of Patiala -- (I had visited Patiala and I liked the Sikhs very much), had a reception at one of the Indian clubs. I and Mrs. Block were there, and he said, "Come on up, come on up to the platform." There was Mountbatten. We shook hands and that was that.

In '44 I used to make daily visits to the G-2

[29]

Colonel at the American headquarters; and sometimes to General Ferris. He said, "I'm going home in a few days."

And I said, "Well, don't rub it in." I was already beginning to feel lonely -- I was in my fifties then. When I got back some hours later to my office, I found there had been a call from the airport -- how much luggage was I going to carry. In other words, I was going to go, too. In those days, it took longer than it does now. We went by way of Ascension Island, where we spent the night. When I got to Washington I had a wire from Sherwood, Robert E. Sherwood, whom I knew, from London, saying, "Don't do anything until you talk to Wedemeyer."

I found Wedemeyer at a temporary office in the old Munitions Building, I said, "Well, what are we doing?"

He said, "We'll work it out with the State Department and the War Department."

General Ferris had called me, saying, "Go on home. Let them work it out here. You take a rest."

[30]

I went out to California, but every day the OWI were on the phone with me. Finally they said, "Come back." So I came back to a meeting chaired by General Wedemeyer and later by Colonel Lincoln, one his men. Others present were Elmer Davis, and David Bowes Lyon of the British Embassy, uncle of the present Queen. We worked out a plan whereby -- we would work with the British on psychological warfare through a committee that would meet alternately in Kandy and in New Delhi.

When we came back to New Delhi, from Washington, John Davies and I went up to Kandy and scouted around. Davies said, "Wedemeyer has a letter from Sherwood saying, 'No, that isn't the way it's going to be done.'"

At this time Sherwood was having a fight with Elmer Davis. Davies said, "You'd better talk to him." Wedemeyer showed me this letter and said, "What about it?"

I said, "That's not it. We made a deal in Washington." He said, "What are you going to do?"

I said, "I'm going back to Delhi and send a

[31]
wire to Elmer Davis."

He said, "You don't have to go back. Send it from here. Colonel Lincoln will take care of it and see that nobody sees it."

I sent a wire, and Davis wired back, saying, "The deal is as it was set up here."

Then, I went back to Delhi. I had had a back difficulty for many years; sometimes in the jungle I had to wear a brace of steel and leather.

HESS: That wouldn't be very comfortable in the jungle, would it?

BLOCK: No, not in that heat? I'm much better now.

When it came time for the settlement meeting, at Kandy, I couldn't go; I was flat on my back, I commissioned Davies to represent me. When the matter was broached, Mountbatten said, "I'm either the Supreme Commander or I'm not the Supreme Commander."

Davies replied: "Then I am commissioned by Mr. Block to say that he will withdraw his psychological warfare forces from the theater." And

[32]
Mountbatten gave in.

Back here in Washington in '44 when I went to see Wedemeyer, his aide came in and said, "Mrs. Wedemeyer on the phone."

I got up from the chair at his desk and walked away. He said, "Hello, dear. Just a minute." He said to me, Ralph, come back. This phone isn't tapped." That was the only reference he ever, made. Wedemeyer later went to Chungking. He became Chief of Staff here after the war and came over once to talk to our group. Wedemeyer had been trained in Germany, that's why I think they sent him to the Asiatic Theater.

HESS: Why? Did they think he might have German sympathies?

BLOCK: I don't know. Anyway, I'm sure he was a true American. I had a feeling that Wedemeyer was able, but perhaps not always adequate.

Going back to Davies, at the time after the war that Davies was a member of the policy staff of the State Department, he had advised (this was

[33]

under Dulles), that certain actions be taken, certain policies be pursued, which seemed alien to the simon-pure Communist haters. It wasn't a policy idea to them. Some State Department people, men that I have known, very able men, confided to me that they didn't like Dulles.

HESS: Why?

BLOCK: He was a lawyer, a corporation lawyer, rather than a statesman. Incidentally, in this list of salon passengers on the *Mauretania* going to England in 1920, including Mrs. Block and myself, I discovered the name of John Foster Dulles.

HESS: He was on the same ship.

BLOCK: In 1920. There wasn't a great deal of difference between our ages -- here it is -- Mr. John Foster Dulles.

He was probably a young man. That was 1920; I was 31.

HESS: Was that about the time you left Kansas City?

BLOCK: No. I left Kansas City in about 1916.

[34]

Well, anyway, Davies was out of the State Department by Dulles' command. He went to Peru and engaged in business there. The book that he published when he came back recently is called "Foreign and Other Affairs."

HESS: Now, when we got onto Davies, we were going to discuss General MacArthur...

BLOCK: General MacArthur?

HESS: General Marshall, my error.

BLOCK: Well, Marshall followed as ambassador to Chungking, the former Secretary of War [Patrick Jay Hurley]. I had a lot to do with the informational side of the Marshall plan, a great idea, historically, that we would set enemy nations up again.

HESS: What was your impression of Dean Acheson?

BLOCK: Acheson was the Secretary of State when I came back from India. There was a man on the staff of

[35]

the State-Army-Navy-Air Force Coordinating Committee, who used to call for me with his car. At that time I lived in Georgetown. One day we passed Dean Acheson and Felix Frankfurter, the Supreme Court Justice, walking. They walked every day, apparently, as great friends. My driver friend stopped and said, "Would you gentlemen like a lift?" They declined courteously.

About Acheson; if you took away all the pretense of his position -- he was married into one of the Canadian liquor families who had money, the little mustaches and all the rest of it -- if you took all that away, what was left was a very earnest, sincere, able, not top man, but near the top, a man who was wise and prudent and had the courage of his convictions -- the way he stood up for Hiss, for instance. He didn't know, he just assumed that the Hiss charge was libelous and he stood up for him. But then, Dulles did too. Dulles was among those who appointed Hiss in New York.

Every man has to have a little pretense about himself, a little sense of what he is, a little

[36]
picture of himself.

HESS: During the time that you were in the State Department, did you personally talk to any of these men? Did you have conferences with them?

BLOCK: No, not with them. I talked to Bohlen [Charles Eustis] "Chip" Bohlen, one day when he was the Counselor of the State Department. I was very much impressed by him. He also had pretenses about himself, allowing his hair to grow on the back of his neck, a la Parisian.

HESS: What were you discussing with him at that time?

BLOCK: Some policy question that I wanted guidance on.

HESS: What was your general impression of him and his ability in the job?

BLOCK: He was extremely knowledgeable about the world we live in -- I knew that his brother-in-law, who is an author now, had been forced out of the State Department. Before we continue with Bohlen, I want to say that I had been much happier in the State

[37]
Department in my experience in India, than I ever was in pictures. In pictures, I always had a feeling that "I'm here by accident -- it's stage money." I did have responsible positions. I produced twelve pictures for Joe Kennedy, father of the President, who must then have been about eleven. Joe Kennedy bought out de Mille.

At Paramount, where I was the managing editor, Jessee Lasky, the producing head, called me one day. His brother-in-law, Hector Turnbull was running the Paramount studio in California. Lasky said, "We want you to go out and hold things together while Hector comes East."

I said, "He won't come."

He said, "Well, we'll see that he comes."

So, Hector met me in Pasadena and said, "What's up?" I told him and he said, "No, I'm not going." Later he disappeared to telephone. When he came back he said, "Well, I'm not going."

So, I wired and said, "Can I come back?" And they said, "No, stay and help Hector, and meet us in Chicago at the convention."

[38]

In the meantime, Walter Wanger (I don't know if the name means anything to you), had become general manager of productions. He was later the husband of Joan Bennett. He wrote me a letter asking "What's the matter with that studio?"

Well, it was obvious to me that the producers were all young scenario writers who hadn't had enough experience. I wrote, "I hear that there are men in the business on Poverty Row, making pictures with a shoestring." I named a few of them.

When I got to Chicago to the convention I found one of them had become the head of the studio. That was Ben Schulberg, the father of the writer, Budd Schulberg.

I was then asked to go back into production. One of the film papers had asked, "Why aren't they making use of Block?"

I elected to go to the Long Island studio, where, among other pictures, I made a movie of *The Great Gatsby*, the Scott Fitzgerald novel.

The Friday executive meeting used to be held

[39]

in my office, which had been the former dressing room of Valentino, a huge room with onyx fireplaces. But they closed the Long Island studio because while we were making good pictures, they cost too much. Schulberg didn't like the competition; he had most of the money and stars in Hollywood. So I had to go to the coast. One day, Lucien Hubbard, who had produced *Wings*, the first big airplane picture, said, "I have it on the inside that your option, my option, and Turnbull's option are not going to be taken up."

So I immediately went over to de Mille, whom I knew. He said, "I'll take over your contract," adding, "Don't bet on me because I may go broke."

I said, "Any way to get out of that place."

Pretty soon, he sold out to Joe Kennedy, who gave me two million dollars to make twenty pictures. That meant a hundred thousand dollars apiece, whereas the big studios were making them for three or four hundred thousand dollars.

HESS: Sort of low budget there.

[40]

BLOCK: Yes. The first picture I made was *Skyscraper*, with Bill Boyd and Alan Hale, the father of the present Hale. This picture cost \$180,000; the next one I made for \$80,000. They were building a dam beyond Pasadena at a place called Pacoima. The simple theory of that story, was that the two men on a construction gang drew a line down Main Street; all the women on one side of the line belonged to one man and then all the women on the other side belonged to the other. I needed five blondes; one of the blondes was Joan Bennett. I was interviewing blondes, and one day when a girl came in, I noticed she had her hat down on one side. Later, I realized it was to hide a scar. She had been with Mack Sennett and had had comedy training. I said, "I'll take your name and we'll see." As she walked out there was something about her. Of course, my friends always said it was the way she swung her hips, but it wasn't. I had an intuition about her, and I sent word to the casting department, "Hire her."

HESS: Who was she?

[41]

BLOCK: She became a very famous actress. We had her in that picture. Later I had her in a small talking part and I said to Joe Kennedy, "I want to develop her."

And he said, "Go ahead."

Laura Hope Crews was a Broadway actress out there. I sent the young woman to Laura, saying, "Look, I want you to teach her how to act, how to talk" (talking was in then), "how to move." She became a great actress. She later married Bill Powell and later Clark Gable. She was killed in a plane crash.

HESS: My wife would know. She always knows who's married to whom, but I don't.

BLOCK: She was a fine actress -- killed in a plane crash.

HESS: Carole Lombard?

BLOCK: Carole Lombard.

Going back to Bohlen. I didn't know Bohlen, but some friends had taken me to a reception and party of some Philadelphia people. Now, Philadelphia

[42]

people are unlike any other people.

HESS: How are they?

BLOCK: They are a little different, a little crusty. I danced with Bohlen's wife. That's all I ever knew about Bohlen, except that I thought he had a good mind.

HESS: What about George Kennan when he was in the State Department? Did you know him then?

BLOCK: Kennan was a member of the policy staff at the time that Davies was. At that time, instead of eating at the State Department, some of us went to a restaurant on New York Avenue, near 17th Street, the famous Allies Inn. You got better food there, and Kennan used to walk over. He always seemed to act as if he were a religious novice of some kind. I had met him very briefly once through Davies, but he was very offhand with me. I was just one of those information people, you know, and had been in the movies, too.

[43]

HESS: That made it worse.

BLOCK: Yes, but despite the Kennan viewpoint, frankly I'm for the war in Vietnam. While I think the President's fighting the Alamo all over again -- yet, I am for the war in Vietnam, in spite of these innocent people who think that we can make a deal. Although communism is old stuff now, I still believe that once Vietnam falls to the Chinese, Burma would fall, Thailand and India would fall, and who knows where the rest would go. Yes -- the domino theory: I agreed with Kennan that there would be changes in Russia which would make them less formidable. And that's the attitude which is being taken nowadays about Mao's China. We're playing footsy with Russia now, against them in some things but playing along with them. The Chinese are not like the Russians. There's a long boundary line between China and Russia, which is one reason the Russians aren't friendly with the Chinese. Everybody agrees that we've got to stick, but I think we have to do more than stick. The only fear that I have, and

[44]

this is my own personal conviction, is that maybe America will begin to seem to others merely like any great power, not the friendly power that it's supposed to be; the power for justice, freedom, and so on, but just a power. I don't like that.

In re-editing this statement, I must add that irrespective of the confusion in Mao's China in February 1967, I have always believed -- contrary to most authoritative opinion -- two things are necessary for continuing American security: (1), we must have a foothold in land Asia; (2), we must have an army in being, not just one to be drafted, but one with an experienced knowledge of guerilla warfare.

The other day in the bank, a young man said to me, "Why, it's Ralph Block." I've been out of the agency for a half-dozen years, but they remembered me, and I asked him, "What are things like?"

He said, "They're pretty bad. We're just doing our job now. There's no guidance there."

Now, under this man who died of cancer...

HESS: Dulles?

[45]

BLOCK: No, the CBS man.

HESS: Edward R. Murrow.

BLOCK: Under Murrow, the Agency was a real agency, a real force in the world.

NESS: Your friend didn't think that they were really doing a job now?

BLOCK: No, of course, there is always some grouching in the Civil Service, but there may be some grounds for it.

HESS: Anything else you remember about Kennan?

BLOCK: I always thought that some of his policies were correct, the policy that time will in itself mellow the Russians. But when Kennan testified before the Fulbright committee, I thought he was wrong, applying to the Chinese what he had applied to the Russians. He knew Russia, but he has not been in the Far East.

HESS: He's an expert on Russia.

[46]

BLOCK: Yes. These people who talk about the Far East after they've spent a few weeks out in Vietnam, they don't understand it. Now, I don't say I understand it, but at least I did get a sense of another kind of thinking of the North Vietnam Communists. That's why I'm against the attitude of coming to an agreement with the Vietcong.

HESS: Awhile ago, I inadvertently mentioned General MacArthur, when I meant Marshall. I'd like to digress for a moment. Did you have any dealings with MacArthur?

BLOCK: Yes, in a strange way. One day in New Delhi in 1945 when I visited the G-2, the colonel (a graduate of the Hollywood High School and of West Point; his wife had been in a picture that I had made years before in Kansas at Fort Riley -- a cavalry picture), said, "Well, you're going to Manila."

And I said, "Who said so?"

He said, "General MacArthur."

I said, "I don't know anything about it and my headquarters will have to tell me."

[47]

I cabled Washington, and Washington said they didn't know anything about it. They cabled the OWI in Manila, who came back and said, "We're just a handmaiden for General MacArthur." MacArthur wouldn't recognize civilians in psychological warfare. He had his own staff.

So Washington said, "All right, you're to go to Manila." But since I was a civilian, even though I wore the U.S.'s on my uniform half the time, I had to take a lieutenant colonel from G-2 and brief him, spending two weeks with him going over papers, and so on, so he'd know what to talk about.

We went to Colombo, Ceylon, and there met China people, one of the members of the OWI staff from Chungking, and a member of the embassy on the military side. From there we went in a plane 2900 miles over open water. Now, this was 1945, a long time ago; 2900 miles over open water in a headquarters plane with tables and chairs. There were four of us and five members of the crew. We landed in northwestern Australia, at five o'clock in the morning, Australian time, near Port Exmouth, near the

[48]

place that had the lights on when the first astronaut went around the world. I looked for kangaroos, but I didn't see any, I had liked Australians, and they seemed to like Americans.

We flew across to Port Darwin, and spent the night there. There we changed planes. My lieutenant colonel came down in the morning, and found a regular DC plane with plush seats, one of the kind that they were flying in America at the time. When the crew arrived, I looked at them and said, I didn't like their looks. When the assistant pilot came out from forward and said, "Anybody here got a flashlight?" I said, "Well, this settles it."

We did come into Biak, New Guinea, but barely. I spent the night in a house on stilts, and walked a half a mile to get a shave. From there we went to Leyte and then to Manila. We were quartered in an old apartment house, as if we were in Omaha, but the stairway had been blown out. One morning I came down late to the mess and they said, "You just missed it. A Japanese had been hiding here all this time and they finally flushed him out."

[49]

He didn't know the war was over."

After a meeting with General Sutherland, the chief aide to MacArthur, I had gone to Brigadier General Bonner Fellers, MacArthur's military secretary (MacArthur had fancy titles), and I said, "Look, you've got a 100 watt KW. I would like to use that to shoot messages into some of these places in Southeast Asia."

He replied, "General MacArthur wouldn't permit it."

When we first set up psychological warfare operations in Burma, I had a man, a go-getter, who had been behind the enemy lines, but he was too eager and finally one of the generals up front wired down to Delhi: "Get this man out of my hair."

I didn't want to upset the guy so I wired Elmer Davis and said, "I want this man sent to Australia by your orders." Later I met him in Manila.

At a long military conference a colonel said: "I know Tokyo, and I think that on a certain day we should drop a leaflet in front of the palace and in front of the Rotary Club and say that on a

[50]

a certain other day to follow a positive print of American bombing operations in Europe will be dropped for your interest."

He said, "That's going to have quite an effect on them."

I said, "It will, except for one fact. The Japanese are awfully smart about dubbing. And when these things are shown they will show the effect of Japanese bombing on Tacoma, Portland, Seattle, San Francisco." That ended that.

I was traveling under Army orders and I came back across the Pacific to Honolulu. I spent the night there, went on to Hamilton Field in San Francisco, and home to Beverly Hills. Finally I went on back to Delhi, where I arrived just before the bomb was dropped at Hiroshima.

I got a cable from Manila: "Do you have the report" (which was secret) "of our conversation, and if so, where is it?"

I said, "I have the report and it is in my safe."

Why they wanted it I don't know. Years later

[51]

the deputy of one of the offices that I was in, sent me the same paper. He said, "I was in Manila in '45 and I noticed your name here. You can have this if you want it."

My feeling about MacArthur was pretty much the general feeling. He was a man of ability, but, the front was important. I'm just the opposite, you see. I talk to everybody in my walks. I talk to dogs, cats, birds, people, everybody.

HESS: You're not quite so pretentious.

BLOCK: No. My pretense is that I don't have any.

HESS: One other question here, were there any occasions when you worked in the State Department that you worked with the White House staff?

BLOCK: No. I think that once or twice, when we had to get clearance. We were always informed at that time, about the President's press conferences, and we were given the questions that might be asked and from our point of view, the answers that might be made.

[52]

Incidentally, I know quite a bit about painting. There's a favorite American painter of mine who once did a picture called "Morning Before Gettysburg." I discovered that the only copy of it in

color is owned in Italy, and you could get only black and white copies in New York. So I sent a note to the then Secretary of the White House -- to the man that died -- telling him that I would like to send a copy of the painting to the President, who was ill at Gettysburg; he replied affirmatively, but I never received an acknowledgement from the President.

HESS: Is there anything else that you would like to add concerning General MacArthur?

BLOCK: Well, yes. The refusal of Brigadier General Fellers to allow OWI to use the 100 KW transmitter because MacArthur wouldn't permit it, gave me the impression that there was a headstrong, self-important attitude in the MacArthur personality.

HESS: Drawing from your experience, and as a newspaperman,

[53]

what reporters, principally Washington reporters and correspondents, would you recommend to future scholars for their reliability. Which ones do you think can be relied on the most?

BLOCK: I think Marquis Childs is probably the most reliable in the Washington press corps, I've always been impressed by his fairness and his acuteness.

Lippman, whom I knew briefly when I was on the *New Republic*, is now my age, an age in which most men crystallize. He is against the present administration's attitude in Vietnam. Possibly he has justification from his point of view. But I feel that he's a man of the past, and Marquis Childs is a man of the present. It's interesting that in Lippmann's column, two or three days ago, he ended up by saying that he wondered if perhaps the real focus of the administration's efforts, was to occupy a position on the mainland of Asia. This was interesting to me, because in a play that I had written after the war ended, when I had more time in India, I had a character say, "If we don't have a position on the mainland of Asia, we'll be awfully sorry."

[54]

I want to read that line again because I haven't looked at it. It bothers me...

HESS: What's the name of your play?

BLOCK: *Not Your Yesterdays*. It's laid in India during the war.

HESS: Was this play ever produced?

BLOCK: No. I've never done much with it. Actually, the play has a great deal of resemblance to the present situation.

HESS: You have fundamentally the same thing in your play as he had in his column?

BLOCK: Yes, of course he had it as a suspicion. I was thinking of it as an assertion:

The State Department man says, "If we don't get Americans on the mainland of Asia before this thing is over, we'll spend the next hundred years wishing we had."

The newspaperman says, "You mean, keep Americans there for the next hundred years. How far do you think you'll get trying to have a standing army with

[55]
politicians who have the home folks nudging their elbows?"

HESS: Pretty good. A little bit of prophecy.

BLOCK: Let me tell you about the First World War. I was here in Washington as special correspondent when Wilson was President. Like all young, forward-looking people, I was for Wilson. For the first time in the White House in my lifetime, Wilson was a man of intellectual training, to the onlooker fair, honest, all the things that idealists want in the world.

The correspondent for the New York *Evening Post*, which at that time was a paper owned by the man who owned the *Nation*, Oswald Garrison Villard, was David Lawrence. David Lawrence is now the publisher of the *U.S. News and World Report*. In World War I David Lawrence was the chief confidant of Wilson. He was a liberal. Now David Lawrence seems to be on the other side. I am a member of a group of more than two hundred old, retired men, calling themselves "The Fossils." A lot of them swear by the *U.S.*

[56]
News and World Report.

HESS: What do you think of David Lawrence?

BLOCK: Well, he's my age now. I think most men... You see, I haven't finished life and most men have. I don't like the *U. S. News and World Report*.

HESS: I guess that pretty well answers that, doesn't it?

BLOCK: Yes. Generally speaking, I question what has happened in journalism. I became a member of Sigma Delta Chi at Ann Arbor in 1909. I'm probably one of the oldest members. But Sigma Delta Chi has now become pretty much a business enterprise.

This, remember, is an old man talking.

The whole fabric of conscience, you might say in the United States, is stronger in the Middle West.

HESS: Why do you think that is?

BLOCK: Perhaps because people are closer to the land. The land exacted a certain loyalty, a certain honor,

[57]

I think some people have gotten far away from that...

HESS: Back here in the East?

BLOCK: Yes, especially in the East. And the whole fabric of morality -- even though I'm an agnostic you know. Religiously, I agree with Voltaire, that if there were no God, he would have to be invented. But even so, I have a strong, pietistic sense of myself and the world -- the universe -- in which we live.

Society is built on one human being trusting another human being, and when that breaks down, the whole fabric goes. At 77, I think the world is certainly different than the one I was brought up in. But I know that there are a lot of young people who are honest in their explorations of life. But it is a different world, and it's hard for me to grasp it.

HESS: You're working on an autobiography, aren't you?

BLOCK: Yes, it starts with a quotation from George Moore, the Irish writer: "God forbid that I should

[58]

deny to the caveman the sense of mystery he lives in and dies in."

I had been deep in the pages of Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*. Strachey wrote about people already gone from the scene. I was writing about contemporaries, and I needed to find a way to extend the time range. To interpret the spectacle of the armed camp of Washington, I had recourse to as much characterization in perspective as was permissible in a daily newspaper. In "Mr. Wilson goes to Keiths," I said, "Thrown aside the heavy mantle of delegated authority, forgotten the perplexities that beset the path of a great people, the tempests and thunders of time in its careening, on-rushing career; statecraft, diplomacy, the surge of power, the seductions of destiny -- all fade and are dim as Woodrow Wilson raises his glasses to inspect the chorus of Gus Edwards' annual song review.

"Looking back after almost a half century in arenas drawing on public interest, I wondered whether it would be feasible in a record of my own

[59]

passage through the events of those years, to achieve the critical effect of my model. It became apparent, however, that self-revelation introduces a new set of values. Recollection, recovery of the past, is a complex and often painful process, spooed with the sand traps of disaster. In dredging the past there are such violent confrontations that the will is stretched to the utmost, to face and transcend them. But recollection is also seductive. Fitzgerald, Edward, that is, says in one quatrain, what is the essence of Proust's eight volumes:

"And those who husbanded the golden grain, and those who flung it to the earth like rain, alike to no such aureate earth are turned, as buried once, men want dug up again."

HESS: On newspaper commentators, can you give a few that you would advise scholars against using?

BLOCK: Reporters are no longer in the position that they once were. Garet Garrett, in 1917, managing editor of the New York *Tribune* said to me, "What

[60]
do you think is the future of journalism?"

I said, "I think more and more men will write with authority under their own names." Well, now we have them.

People take positions in magazines and publications, apparently for reasons of personal aggrandizement; less often -- like Lippmann -- for reasons of conscience and knowledge. I'm sure that the *U.S. News and World Report* is probably closer to the way most Americans think -- but it is regrettable. We are still an insular people. The Middle West is both liberal and reactionary. Nebraska, from which Norris, the great liberal, came is now a hotbed of reactionary opinion; so that people, when they look for guidance, are going to have to read all of the papers of opinion.

Any young man has got to make up his own mind: Is he going to try to create, to take part in the creation of the world as it goes on, of the American world, with its fundamental belief in democracy, liberty, honor, and so on; or is he going to yield to the possibilities, of making money.

[61]
Yesterday, I was reading about the poet, Robert Frost. He said, "Man comes into the world with difficulty, and he goes out with difficulty, and between them there's not much sense in what happens to him."

I think any man who is willing to do something, who means to really get somewhere and make his mark has got to, in the going, make up his own mind about life.

When I was in Washington in 1917-1918, Lenin and Trotsky had entered Russia through the help of the Germans in a closed car.

HESS: The sealed train?

BLOCK: Yes. The sealed train. We were pretty stupid about what was going on. Kennan has called attention to the fact, that at that time in Petrograd we had as our ambassador, a St. Louis businessman who didn't know anything, and a well-to-do YMCA man from Chicago. A very altruistic fellow. He was really calling the turn on things.

[62]

George Creel, as the chief of American propaganda in World War I, had a group of young men and young women, who were all forward looking people, idealists, all ready to have a Bolshevik revolution in the United States. Nobody then thought anything about it. At that time, we weren't attuned to what was going on. We didn't really know anything about Karl Marx. Americans were pretty stupid then.

Once in New York, Simeon Strunsky said to me, "Oswald Garrison Villard wants to know if you would like to be the literary editor of the *Nation*."

I said, "It sounds interesting."

I knew that Villard was a pacifist. After we had talked for a while, I said, "Look, I might as well be honest with you. My feeling is if somebody hits me in the face, I'm going to hit him back."

That ended it, of course. Strunsky met me in the corridor and said, "What happened?"

I told him, I said, "Actually, I have a feeling that if I worked over here and I wanted to spit, I'd have to go outside three blocks to do it."

[63]

That ended that.

Well, we're a funny people. You ought to know; you're from Kansas.

HESS: That's right.

BLOCK: I remember once when I was on the [Kansas City] *Star* there was a story in some little town in Kansas. We had a stringer in the county seat and there had been a murder in that little town, and I had to go down and see what it was all about. The stringer, who was the editor of the local weekly, said, "I'll take you over, but I won't stay long. It's a dangerous place."

HESS: What town was that?

BLOCK: I can't remember. So he took me over and I went to see the family of the murdered man. When I came back there were men all along the main street with shotguns.

HESS: A pretty rough place.

BLOCK: Yes. But, I love the idea of America and the

[64]

fact that I was born here. I was telling somebody the other day that if I hadn't been born here I probably wouldn't be living now.

HESS: Can you think of anything else on Mr. Truman or the Truman administration? Any other thoughts?

BLOCK: No, I can't think of anything.

HESS: It's been very nice of you to have me in today.

BLOCK: Well, of course, everyone likes to talk about himself.

HESS: No, not really? Shall we shut it off?

BLOCK: Yes.

[65]

INDEX

Acheson, Dean, 34-35

Adams, Franklin P., 6

Allies Inn, Washington, D.C., 42

Block, Ralph:

- autobiography of, 57-58

- biographical information, 1-11

- British, official relations with in India, World War II, 22-26

- Civilian Defense, Office of, as official of, 8

- Goldwyn, Samuel, director of publicity for, 8

- India, member of U.S. Diplomatic Mission to, 1945-46, 9

- journalism, training in, 5-7

- Kansas City, Mo., recollections of, 12-17

- Medal of Freedom, receives, 9-11

- Nation*, the, offered position of literary editor of, 62

- newspaper correspondents, evaluation of, 52-53

- Office of War Information, employed by the, 22

- Office of War Information, head of in South Asia, 9

- Paramount Studios, producer and writer for, 8, 37-41

- Philippines, trip to, 1945, 46-50

- psychological warfare operations in India, World War II, 22-23

- Roosevelt, F.D., campaign worker for, 1940, 8

- social philosophy of, 56-57

- Truman, Harry S., regard for, 13

- U.S. Information Agency, advisor to, 18

- Vietnam war, opinion regarding the, 43-44

- Wedemeyer, Albert C., relationship with, 26-30, 32

Block, Sigfried (E.S.), 15-16

Block, Solomon, 15

Bohlen, Charles E., 36, 41-42

Bowes-Lyon, David, 30
Byrnes, James F., 20

Childs, Marquis, 53
Creel, George, 62
Crews, Laura Hope, 41

Daniel, Mrs. Clifton (Margaret Truman), 12-13
Davies, John P., 21-23, 26, 30-31, 32-33, 42
Davis, Elmer, 9, 22, 30-31, 49
de Mille, Cecil B., 37, 39
Denning, Sir Maberly Esler, 24
Detroit News, 4
Dietz, Howard, 8
Dulles, John F., 33, 35

Fairbanks, Douglas, Jr. , 2 8
Fellers, Bonner, 49, 52
Ferris, Brig. Gen. Benjamin G., 26, 27, 29
"The Fossils", 55-56

Garret, Garet, 59
"Goat" faction, 14
Goldwyn, Samuel, 8

Higgins, Otto, 14
Hiss, Alger, 35
Hopkins, Arthur, 5
Hubbard, Lucien, 39
Hurley, Patrick J., 20-21

India, 9, 23-26

Jackson County (Mo.) Court, 12
Jackson County (Mo.) road system, 12

Kansas City, Mo., 12-17
Kansas City Star, 4, 12, 63
Kansas City Times, 4
Kaufman, George S. , 6
Kennan, George, 42-43, 45, 61
Kennedy, Joseph P., Sr., 37, 39, 41

Lasky, Jesse, 37
Lawrence, David, 56
Linen, James, 22

Lippmann, Walter, 53
Lombard, Carole, 40-41
Louisville Courier-Journal, 3

MacArthur, Gen. Douglas, 46-50, 51, 52
Medal of Freedom, 9-11
Mountbatten, Admiral Lord Louis, 24, 26, 28, 31
Morrow, Edward R., 45

The Nation, 62
Nelson, William Rockhill, 12
New Delhi, India, 20, 28, 30-31, 46
New Republic, 6
New York Evening Sun, 5
New York Tribune, 59
New York Tribune Review, 7

Office of War Information, 8-9, 22-23, 30, 47, 52

Paramount Studios, 8, 37
Philippines, Republic of the, 46-49
Phillips, William, 9
the Press, 52, 55-56, 59-60
Psychological warfare, 22, 47, 49

"Rabbit" faction, 14
Roosevelt, Franklin D., 6-7
Rusk, Dean, 10

Schulberg, Benjamin, 38-39
Schwitzgebel, Henry C., 13-14
Sevareid, Eric, 23
Shannon, Joseph, 14
Sherwood, Robert W., 30
Sigma Delta Chi, 56
Sioux City News, 4
Smith, Robert Aura, 21, 22
State Department, U.S., 34
Stilwell, Gen. Joseph W., 21
Stettinius, Edward R., 19
Strachey, Lytton, 58
Strunsky, Simeon, 62
Sutherland, Lt. Gen. Richard K., 49

Taylor, Gen. Maxwell D., 18
Turnbull, Hector, 37

U.S. Information Agency, 18, 44-45
U.S. News and World Report, 55-56, 60

Vietnam, 43-44
Villard, Oswald Garrison, 62

Wanger, Walter, 38
War Information Board, 22
Watterson, Henry, 3
Wedemeyer, Gen. Albert C., 26-30, 32
Wilson, Woodrow, 55, 58
Woolcott, Alexander, 5