

Oral History Interview

with

ROBERT L. RIGGS

Journalist with the Associated Press in Madison, Wisconsin for two years and with the Milwaukee *Journal* for six months. From 1929 a journalist with the Louisville Kentucky *Courier-Journal* serving as the chief of that newspaper's Washington, D. C. bureau from 1942 until he retired at the end of 1966.

Washington, D.C.
March 31, 1971

by Jerry N. Hess, Harry S. Truman Library

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

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HESS: To begin, Mr. Riggs, will you give me a little of your personal background?

RIGGS: Well, I'm a native of Missouri. I was born in Joplin, Missouri sixty-nine years ago. My parents and their parents and grandparents on all sides were Kentuckians. I'm a graduate of the

University of Missouri School of Journalism and of its College of Arts and Science. When I left college I went to work for the Associated Press in Madison, Wisconsin, worked for them two years. I worked for six months for the Milwaukee *Journal*. I worked for the Louisville *Courier-Journal* from the fall of 1929 to the end of 1966. I was thirteen years on the paper in Louisville, holding several executive news jobs, the last one being assistant managing editor. They sent me here in 1942 as chief of the Washington Bureau and I've been here ever since, until I retired in '66. And when I retired I worked two years as administrative assistant to Congressman Carl Perkins of Kentucky, and I've

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worked a little more than two years as administrative assistant to Senator John Sherman Cooper of Kentucky.

HESS: Fine, what are your earliest recollections of Mr. Truman?

RIGGS: He was Senator, and at the time he was head of the preparedness subcommittee of the Senate. The first personal dealings I had with him involved Kentucky. In those days there was no Armed Services Committee. There was a Naval Affairs Committee, and the Military Affairs Committee and the Truman Committee was kind of in between. There was some dispute over jurisdiction as to who would investigate a certain thing, whether it would be the Naval Affairs Committee -- I mean the Military Affairs Committee, or the Truman Committee. And the reason I got involved in it, the Kentucky Senator, A. B. Chandler, was wanting to go on this investigation and there was some objection to him.

So I went to see Mr. Truman whom I had never talked to before. And I said, "I'm having a little trouble about one of my Senators, I'm having trouble getting some news."

He said, "We're all having trouble over your Senator. The trouble is that nobody wants to travel with Chandler because he's ----. But if you print that

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I'll just deny it." So I never did print it.

HESS: Do you recall what the difficulty was with Senator Chandler?

RIGGS: It was nothing very important. I don't remember what it was, no. It was probably over a question of committee jurisdiction

HESS: In the *New Republic* magazine of April the 11th of 1955, you have an article, "What Political Reporters Are Told Off the Record." And that article refers to Mr. Truman. Would you tell me about the background of that article and about the reference to Mr. Truman?

RIGGS: Well, there had been quite a bit of controversy over these background dinners and luncheons and meetings between public figures and reporters. And I had written this article for the *New Republic* to explain the situation. And to illustrate it I mentioned the fact that we had had one of these meetings with Vice President Truman. I said in the article that he sat and talked

with us just seven days before he became President and that his whole attitude, his whole bearing, was that he would become President. He never had any doubt that he'd become President. Now he didn't say, "Roosevelt's going to die," he didn't say, "I'm going to succeed him," but he would talk about the many

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problems, about how I will handle this and how I will handle that. It was a mood and tone rather than exact words. And as far as I know this is the only publication that has ever carried that. I never wrote it anywhere else, I don't know of anybody else that did.

HESS: Do you recall where that meeting was held?

RIGGS: It was in one of the hotels here, perhaps the Statler.

HESS: Did Mr. Truman attend any other of the meetings that you set up in this connection?

RIGGS: No, sir, not that I know of. He could be involved with other groups. These were Bureau Chiefs of the best-known papers in town, the New York *Times*, the Cleveland paper, the St. Louis paper, Louisville, and we weren't after news especially, we were trying to find what was on people's minds.

HESS: Did anything else strike you about Mr. Truman's attitude that day? Just what type of a man did you think he was at that time?

RIGGS: He was a very serious, quiet man, and I had never -- as I say, I had never known him very well, and my admiration for him grew greatly that evening. He was no dummy, he had been pictured, you know, as kind of

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a hick from Missouri. He was a bright, intelligent man, obviously. It was very helpful to me when Roosevelt did die and Truman did become President to have had advantage of this background session.

HESS: As we mentioned, he was in charge of the Truman Committee, the Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program, but during the time that you were in Washington, did you ever attend any of their hearings?

RIGGS: Yes, sir, not many, but some.

HESS: Do you recall anything about Mr. Truman's handling of those meetings?

RIGGS: I thought he was very good, very impartial and very firm, very capable. In fact, it is that chairmanship that made him known nationwide and got him the nomination for Vice President.

HESS: Do you recall anything about any members of the staff of that particular committee. Hugh Fulton was the General Counsel.

RIGGS: I remember Hugh Fulton, all I know is he was the Chief Counsel. I think I went to see him once about some subject. We were having some controversy in Kentucky about a war plant or something out there. I've forgotten now even what the details were.

HESS: All right, now, going back just a little bit in

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time before then, but do you recall anything in particular about the events of 1944 and Mr. Truman's selection as vice-presidential candidate that year?

RIGGS: Yes, sir, I remember quite a bit about that.

HESS: All right.

RIGGS: Of course, if I hadn't of been so sold on the idea that Senator Barkley might get the nomination, I might have known sooner that Truman was going to get it, because some people who were very close to Bob Hannegan, who was Democratic National Chairman, assured me that it was going to be Truman. I didn't believe it.

HESS: Who?

RIGGS: Well, one of them was Ed Pritchard from Kentucky; Paul Porter from Kentucky. Paul Porter you may remember. Of course, Hannegan was working hard for Truman. I didn't really think he'd get it.

HESS: Who did you think would get it that year?

RIGGS: Well, I thought Barkley would get it.

HESS: What do you recall about the effort that was made to prevent Wallace from receiving the renomination?

RIGGS: That was a combination of the professional politicians and the southerners-- professional northern politicians and the southerners. The pros were convinced,

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sincerely, that Roosevelt could not win a fourth term with Wallace on the ticket. I think it didn't make any difference who was on the ticket, he would have won anyway. But they were convinced that Wallace would be too big a drag. And so you remember they persuaded Roosevelt to write a letter to Hannegan in Chicago, at the Chicago convention, saying that he'd accept Bill Douglas, Henry Wallace or Harry Truman. As a matter of fact, Barkley had asked Truman to place his name in nomination and Truman had agreed. And then later he got the word he was getting the nomination, and he went to Barkley and told him he couldn't do it, and the reason why he couldn't do it.

HESS: All right, did you travel on any of the campaign trips that year?

RIGGS: I went on the trip that Truman took to the west coast in June.

HESS: But not in...

RIGGS: About a month before -- oh, you mean '42?

HESS: No, this was in '44.

RIGGS: Oh, yes, I covered every speech Dewey made and all that Roosevelt made. That's a pretty good trick, too.

HESS: That's pretty good.

RIGGS: In that day there was no airplane campaigning.

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HESS: Did you travel on both campaigns?

RIGGS: Yes.

HESS: How would you judge the reaction of the crowds that met Roosevelt's speeches, and that were there when Dewey spoke?

RIGGS: Of course, there was a frenzy about the Roosevelt crowd, people were wild about him. Dewey had good crowds, and good reception, but it was obvious early that Roosevelt would win. The war was on, remember, and many, many Republicans who wanted to vote against Roosevelt said, "I just can't vote against him while the war is on." But there was a fervor about the Roosevelt crowds which nobody else had.

HESS: Now you indicated that one of the reasons that the professional politicians did not want Wallace on was that they thought that President Roosevelt could not win with him. Do you think (this is just asking for an assumption), that maybe part of their reason was that they did not think that Roosevelt was going to live and that the man that they were selecting for Vice President that year would be President?

RIGGS: Yes, I think that was on my mind, and I think it was on the public's. They thought it would influence the public, that the public would hesitate to vote

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for Roosevelt knowing that Wallace would succeed him.

HESS: Mr. Truman in 1944 took a few short trips. Do you recall anything at all about Mr. Truman's efforts in the campaign of '44?

RIGGS: No, sir, I worked with the Dewey train and on the Roosevelt train. Of course, I couldn't have covered both of those candidates except that Roosevelt only made a few speeches. He went to Boston, he went to Philadelphia, and he went to Chicago, and I remember I caught a train out of Chicago -- I left in the middle of a Dewey speech in Chicago to take a train back to Washington and get on the Roosevelt train to go to Chicago.

HESS: Were you present the night at the, I believe it was the Teamsters Union, where Mr. Roosevelt made his famous Fala speech?

RIGGS: I was with the Dewey train out of...

HESS: You missed that one.

RIGGS: Out in the desert in Nevada somewhere, and Dewey went wild. He heard it on the radio. And he stopped the train at some wayside station and we could see him in the telephone booth talking to New York or some place getting material. They'd answer him at Oklahoma City -- he was going to answer him either at Tulsa or Oklahoma City. I've forgot which, Tulsa I guess.

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HESS: Who did you think would win in 1944?

RIGGS: Well, it became obvious early that it would be Roosevelt.

HESS: All right, moving on...

RIGGS: As it was obvious in '48 that it would be Dewey.

HESS: Just as obvious.

Were you present at the Roosevelt inauguration on January the 20th, of '45? This was the one that...

RIGGS: Yes, I was.

HESS: You were?

RIGGS: I've got a story right here on it.

HESS: Well, good. This is the one that is supposed to have been held out on the south portico of the White House.

RIGGS: I've got a picture of that.

HESS: "Roosevelt sworn in again and pledges to work for just and lasting peace." Oh, yes, this is your article.

RIGGS: Yes.

HESS: I understand that it was a sort of cold, snowy day?

RIGGS: It was cold.

HESS: All right, what did you think of Mr. Roosevelt's health at that time?

RIGGS: I was the last man to think he was dying. A friend of mine was up here during the '44 campaign. He was

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a newspaperman. We could take visiting newspapermen into White House press conferences. I took him over to the press conference and introduced him to the President and when we walked out he said, "Awful isn't it?"

I said, "What's awful?"

He said, "Well, he's so ghastly sick."

I said, "Well, he looks to me like he has always looked."

"Why," he said, "he's a dying man."

It didn't occur to me. Why, his death was a complete surprise to me. The last time I saw him was when he made that speech when he came back from Yalta.

HESS: The Joint Session of Congress?

RIGGS: He spoke to the Joint Session and instead of standing up he sat in a wheelchair, but he didn't put on his braces. But he sounded all right then and he got by with it all right. And of course, I covered him that day he traveled through New York City in the '44 campaign.

HESS: The day it rained.

RIGGS: It rained all day long.

HESS: Tell me about that.

RIGGS: Well, that was a fantastic thing. I just happen to

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have that. I think I have it, if I can find it.

HESS: They had the top down on the convertible that day, did they not?

RIGGS: Yes, they stopped three times to change his coat. Here is his picture. The audience could come around and see...

HESS: Did you catch cold?

RIGGS: No, I was in a covered car, I wasn't exposed.

HESS: All right, where were you when you heard of the death of President Roosevelt?

RIGGS: I was on a streetcar going home a little bit early, around 5 o'clock. And a kind of nutty man got on and sat down beside me. He said, "Too bad, isn't it?"

I said, "What's too bad?"

Well he said, "The President's dead."

I didn't pay any attention to him, you get all kinds of nuts you know. So, we got to the District line at Chevy Chase, and I overheard a couple of streetcar employees talking to each other and one of them said, "Well, I feel especially sorry for her."

So I stepped up and I said, "Has something happened to the President?"

And they said, "He's dead."

So, I just got on a taxicab and came on back down

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to work.

HESS: But you didn't expect that?

RIGGS: No.

HESS: You thought he would bounce back just like he had so many times before.

RIGGS: I thought so. I thought so. Just as wrong as I could be.

HESS: All right, in your first impressions, what kind of a President did you think Mr. Truman would make at this time? Since you had met him just such a short time ago.

RIGGS: I thought he'd be a very earnest, hardworking, inept President, who would make up for his lack of experience by hard work and good will. Which is about what happened.

HESS : Is that your general opinion of how things worked out?

RIGGS: Just about. Although he had a greater grasp of things than I realized, and a greater capacity to absorb knowledge than I realized. I think he was -- of all our Presidents he is the one that could sit up with a document at night and turn up the next morning and know all about it.

HESS: All right, now moving on to the press conferences, did you attend the weekly press conferences that

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President Truman held?

RIGGS: I attended every one he held, yes.

HESS: Every one that he held.

In general, what is your opinion of his skill at fielding questions at a press conference?

RIGGS: Well, you'd have to compare him with Roosevelt on that, of course. Roosevelt was better in the press conferences, although they date back to Wilson's days, of course.

HESS: Did you attend all of Roosevelt's too after you came...

RIGGS: Since I came in '42.

HESS: ...in '42.

RIGGS: Yes, I never missed a one after I came. They were different than anybody else's. There was a give and take between Roosevelt and the reporters that nobody else ever had. He enjoyed seeing you try to drag something out of him, and he enjoyed fencing with you. He knew how to keep from telling something that he didn't want to tell. He knew how to tell what he wanted to tell.

HESS: He was in command of the situation.

RIGGS: He was always in command.

Now, Truman was not always in command, really. You could annoy him to a point where he would blow

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up. I've seen them just ask the same question in a dozen different ways, you know, just like twisting a man's arm, and finally Truman would pop like that and give an answer.

HESS: Shoot from the hip?

RIGGS: And he shot -- did a lot of hip shooting.

HESS: Do you think that Mr. Truman tried to always give a forthright answer to the questions that he was asked?

RIGGS: I think it was mostly his intention, but sometimes you want -- I'm sure there were times when he didn't want to tell all.

HESS: Is it best to give a forthright answer or is it best perhaps to be somewhat misleading?

RIGGS: It's either best to give a forthright answer or to say, "No comment."

HESS: Did Mr. Truman seem to make the best use of the press conference in the most effective manner to educate the people that he could have?

RIGGS: Yes, he believed in the press conference as an institution that belonged to the people rather than to the reporters and to him. Mr. Truman had a lot of sound ideas about the government institutions, including the Presidency. He believed in our institutions. He wanted to see them work.

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HESS: Let's carry that a little bit further, in your opinion what were Mr. Truman's views on the institution of the Presidency?

RIGGS: He believed that the Presidency was the most important job in the world, that almost anybody could hold it so long as they treated it properly. And he never did anything, or never intended to do anything, to demean the institution of the Presidency. Now, he might do something personally, like write somebody a nasty letter, you know.

HESS: Paul Hume.

RIGGS: Like Paul Hume, or something like that, but that was Harry Truman personally, that wasn't Harry Truman, President. Whatever he did as President, he did with dignity and proper respect.

HESS: On the location of the press conferences, as you know they were held in the same place that Mr. Roosevelt had had them, in the Oval Room, until April the 27th of 1950 when they moved over to the Indian Treaty Room in the Executive Office Building.

RIGGS: That is correct.

HESS: Would you compare the two locations just a little bit and give me your opinion as to which you favored?

RIGGS: Well, I hated to leave the, what we called the

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President's office. But so far as the actual physical layout was concerned, the Indian Treaty Room was a little better. The main advantage to the President was you didn't have your entryway clogged up all half of the day with reporters waiting for the conference. They had to go over to the building next door. And there were chairs for all of us, of course that -- not jumping the gun, but as you know, that's where Eisenhower installed the television later on, which changed the press conference entirely. But I think it was a good move. Joe Short's idea, I suppose. Joe Short was his Press Secretary succeeding Charlie Ross.

HESS: Ross was the Press Secretary at this time.

RIGGS: When the change was made?

HESS: Yes.

RIGGS: I had it vaguely in my mind that it was Joe Short.

HESS: This was in April and Charles Ross died on December 5th, of '50, in the same year, six months -- six or seven months later.

RIGGS: Yes.

HESS: Did you feel that there was somewhat of a lack of rapport in the Executive Office Building, intimacy with the President, banter back and forth with the President in his Oval Office, that was somehow lacking in the

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Indian Treaty Room?

RIGGS: Well, I think you were -- you felt the intimacy of being in the President's working office, which is purely psychological, of course. Whereas, in the Indian Treaty Room you were in these straight chairs and I believe it was -- I believe they started a rule that you had to get up, give you name. Whereas in the President's office, we all were standing all the time. The Indian Treaty Room was easier to work with, you could sit your pad on your knee you know, and write on -- in the Oval Office you had to write on somebody's back. Also, we didn't have very good stenographic services in the Oval Room.

HESS: Did you find that the Oval Room was getting a bit crowded in the last years?

RIGGS: It was very crowded, yes. The numbers increased every month.

HESS: About how many men do you think that they would crowd into that room on a Thursday?

RIGGS: Well, just guessing in the dark, I'd say a hundred and twenty-five.

HESS: Of course, as you know, Mr. Roosevelt held two press conferences a week, I think Tuesday and Friday.

RIGGS: One in the morning and one in the afternoon.

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HESS: To help the morning and afternoon newspapers. Mr. Truman reduced that to one a week, on Thursday. He still had morning and afternoon, alternately.

RIGGS: Yes he did, he did that.

HESS: But what was your opinion at that time of the reduction in the number of press conferences?

RIGGS: Well, you see, at the time it didn't strike anybody as being bad. I think that they felt that two were almost too many for Mr. Truman. Roosevelt could handle them, two, very easily, but you must remember that Roosevelt often cancelled, so he didn't always come out two a week.

HESS: Still he held a good number, I have here -- he was in there a long time, too.

RIGGS: Yes, he was there a long time.

HESS: He had 998 news conferences.

RIGGS: Yes.

HESS: Mr. Truman had 324.

I'd like to ask your general appraisal of some of the men who held the important office of Press Secretary. Mr. Roosevelt had -- the man who was there the longest was Steve Early.

RIGGS: Yes, I remember him well.

HESS: And then the last few months it was Jonathan Daniels.

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RIGGS: Yes.

HESS: Just what is your opinion of those two men?

RIGGS: Of course, Early was a genius. When he went in there -- of course he had all the advantages, he went in with Roosevelt when the country was under the spell of this new man who was going to save them from the depression. He knew how to deal with the press. He knew how to be the President's man and still deal with the press. I remember him at the Quebec Conference when Churchill was in Quebec. Early would come out -- there was no news going on, you know, we knew nothing. There was plenty of news going on but we couldn't have it. Early would come out and talk to you. He was very good and you could deal with Early. Now

Jonathan Daniels was a dear, sweet fellow, and I love him dearly, but he's a lousy Press Secretary.

HESS: Why?

RIGGS: Oh, he's not got the instinct for it, or -- he's a book author, magazine writer.

HESS: What does it take to be a good Press Secretary?

RIGGS: Well, you have to have a sense of values, sense of news, you have to know what the reporter wants and needs. You have to understand their problems, you have to know that they are going to raise hell with

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you all of the time. I wouldn't be a press secretary for love nor money. It's too rough a life.

HESS: When Mr. Truman first came in, for a few days, there was a gentleman around by the name of Leonard Reinsch.

RIGGS: That's one of the great mysteries of all times.

HESS: In what way?

RIGGS: He showed up there one morning as the President's Press Secretary. Nobody had any idea what he was doing there, and I think some of the White House regulars must have squawked their heads off, because inside of a week he had Charlie Ross on the job.

HESS: One of the things that has been pointed out about Mr. Reinsch, he was not a newspaperman, he was from the James M. Cox radio chain.

RIGGS: That's right.

HESS: And he was an electronic media man.

RIGGS: He wasn't even a radio man. He wasn't even a radio -- yes, he was a technician. He was a technician and he knew less about newspapering than anybody that I ever saw. He was a nice fellow and I knew him over the years. He worked -- he always shows up at the Democratic National Convention for radio media.

HESS: Do you think that at that time that there was a

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feeling among the newspapermen that a hard copy newspaperman should have a job like that?

RIGGS: I don't think there was any feeling of that kind. I think Reinsch was not a newsman, he wasn't even a radio newsman. No, I don't think that was the...

HESS: All right, and then the first real Press Secretary to be around for any length of time was Charles Ross.

RIGGS: Yes.

HESS: What's your evaluation of the handling of the press office by Mr. Ross?

RIGGS: Well, Charlie was a wonderful editorial writer, and wonderful -- he again knew very little about dealing with -- there's a funny story about that.

The trouble with White House reporters is they are always looking for a bulletin of some kind. When they were flying -- the President was flying back from the trip to the U.N. in San Francisco, and of course, they had a quota of reporters with him, and Charlie Ross. They put down at Albuquerque or somewhere. Before they got to Albuquerque, Ross said, "We'll have a little news at Albuquerque."

And they said, "Well, is it going to be a big story?"

And he said, "Well, big enough."

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So, they made the mistake of sending out bulletins in advance saying at 5 o'clock a hell of a story is going to happen at Albuquerque. And all of the editors were alert and sitting around waiting for it. And when it -- they finally announced it, it was the appointment of James Byrnes as Secretary of State which had been discounted for about two months. Everybody knew it, they were just waiting for the U.N. Conference to end before they got rid of Stettinius and put in Jimmy Byrnes. It was the announcement of Jimmy Byrnes, and the resignation of Stettinius. This wasn't worth the paper it was printed on, hardly, you know, as a news story. But it was Charlie's idea, he was trying to be helpful and tell them a big story was coming up. He knew...

HESS: And it wasn't all that big when it came out.

RIGGS: He knew very little about going to the phone and calling up with a bulletin or a flash, which is how the White House boys worked. They are a breed all their own, those White House reporters.

HESS: Ross' assistant was Eben Ayers. Do you recall anything particular about him?

RIGGS: I remember him well. I remember dealing with him but I know nothing of him, how he worked with the press.

HESS: And upon Mr. Ross' death, Joseph Short was appointed

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Press Secretary; what's your evaluation of Joe Short?

RIGGS: Joe was very good. Very good. He was inclined to be belligerent with the press. Joe had been a great reporter himself, when he became Press Secretary he couldn't see why reporters had to bother him so much.

HESS: Did he try to defend the President?

RIGGS: Yes he did.

HESS: Instead of being an objective purveyor of the news.

RIGGS: That's right. That's right.

And Joe had made all kinds of rules about going to see people in the executive branch. You had to get cleared from his office. I went up to see Philleo Nash one time, the cranberry merchant from Wisconsin.

HESS: I know him well. What was the subject?

RIGGS: It was about minorities, he was the President's minorities man.

Well, I had to clear it with Joe Short and then Philleo had, when I got over there, called up and told Joe I was there. Just a lot of nonsense.

HESS: Joseph Short had two assistants, and on his death, as you know, they took over: Roger Tubby and Irving Perlmeter.

RIGGS: I knew them both slightly. Roger, the last time I saw him was out in 1960 at the -- in the Kennedy camp

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out in Los Angeles at the national convention.

HESS: All right, and just carrying it just a little bit further into the administrations of late, what was your opinion of James C. Hagerty, Eisenhower's Press Secretary?

RIGGS: Well, he was a great professional. He was excellent.

HESS: Before even moving on, who would you rate as the best Press Secretary that you've known since you've been there in town?

RIGGS: It would rest between Steve Early and Jim Hagerty.

HESS: Why was Hagerty as good at the job as he was, what did he do that the others did not do?

RIGGS: Well, he always, he had two purposes in mind: One was to serve his master and one was to serve the press. Sometimes those interests conflicted, but he knew how to merge them most of the time. And he was a real professional.

HESS: Did it seem to you that Eisenhower...

RIGGS: And furthermore, furthermore, Eisenhower gave more to his secretary, more authority, placed more confidence in his press staff man than any other President I've known, so that Hagerty...

HESS: He really turned authority over to him didn't he?

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RIGGS: Hagerty was a free agent, and the President listened to what he said.

HESS: All right.

RIGGS: Of course, Eisenhower was trained in the staff school.

HESS: And Pierre Salinger, J.F.K.'s Press Secretary.

RIGGS: Well, he wasn't much good. He was a nice fellow. Of course, a man like Kennedy wasn't ever going to have a very good press secretary, he was his own press secretary.

HESS: And L.B.J. had Reedy, George Reedy and Bill Moyers.

RIGGS: Well, neither one of them was very good, but they did the best they could with their -- for their master.

HESS: And now I think the latest man, Ron Zeigler, has come in since you left.

RIGGS: I know nothing of his operation at all.

HESS: All right. Moving on to that very interesting year of 1948, and to begin, what do you recall about the President's non-political trip to the West in 1948?

RIGGS: Well, I was on that trip and it was a very interesting trip from many angles.

You must bear in mind what a low state Truman was in in the early summer of 1948, a month or two before the convention. In his own party, there were vigorous efforts to drop him, you know; they ranged all the way

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from the southern conservatives to the Americans for Democratic Action. They were all wanting to drop Truman.

The ADA was hollering for Eisenhower, of all people, and it was a question whether Truman could get the nomination. Of course, everybody admitted that a sitting President has control of the party machinery to the extent where he can always get the nomination, but it was touch and go on Truman. I never knew at the time, but apparently this trip was set out as a rehearsal. It was a month before the convention, it was to show the -- the purpose was to show the country that Truman was a fighter, he was not an insignificant, inarticulate farm boy, that he understood the Presidency and knew how to fight for it.

One interesting thing about that campaign trip is that out of it was coined the word "whistlestop." Truman was attacking the 80th do-nothing Congress all the way to the west coast. Senator Taft got up in the Senate and made a speech denouncing the President for "blackguarding Congress at every whistlestop in the West." And then from that time on whistlestop has been a part of the language.

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I wrote some things about that dress rehearsal. To begin with the first big speech -- aside from the dozens of back platform speeches -- was scheduled for Omaha, Nebraska.

HESS: Yes, what do you recall?

RIGGS: I recall it well; 8,000 vacant seats. There was a veterans meeting in town that day and Battery D, to which Truman belonged, was part of this convention.

HESS: The 35th Division.

RIGGS: The 35th Division, Missouri-Kansas National Guard, as you well know. And apparently, the Battery D people left it to the Democratic organization, the Democratic organization left it to Battery D, and nobody got a crowd out. It was the most god-awful ghastly sight you ever saw to see these 8,000 vacant seats in this great big barn, almost nobody there except reporters. Of course, we all wrote stories, and all carried pictures about what a bust this has been, you know. I don't have a picture of the empty hall. I wish I did.

HESS: Well, *Life* magazine has some interesting pictures and...

RIGGS: Yes, I remember them well.

HESS: ...taken from the back of the top balcony.

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And then also, what do you recall about the day after you stayed in Sun Valley and headed up through Idaho?

RIGGS: Was that where he put his foot in his mouth about the girl...

HESS: That's right.

RIGGS: ...flyer who lost his life?

HESS: Carey, Idaho.

RIGGS: Well, I've got it right here. Just happened to have that.

HESS: Did you get to eat breakfast that morning in Sun Valley, or did they take off with breakfast on the table just ready to eat.

RIGGS: I never got any breakfast.

HESS: Very few people did as I understand.

RIGGS: [Reading]

There was the occasion at Carey, Idaho where the President was led to believe he was dedicating a small airport to the memory of a man who lost his life in the armed services. When it turned out that the person honored was not a man, but a girl, and she had been neither a Wac nor a Wave, but a high school girl, who was killed in a stunting civilian plane long after the war was over, the President had a right to be furious at his staff. He knew full well the incident would be widely publicized. He knew equally well, he had been expected to fulfill the promise that he would put his foot in his mouth everytime he failed to keep his eye on a manuscript. A company executive would not keep

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around him men who would lead him in such a trap, of their making, not of his.

HESS: Did you ever hear who it was on the staff that had given him the bad briefing?

RIGGS: I always assumed it was Charlie Ross, I don't know really. And then Charlie got it from some local people, it got garbled up some way.

HESS: And also on that trip, in Eugene, Oregon, Mr. Truman made the statement, "I like old Joe."

RIGGS: I just happened to have that, too. This story is written in Berkeley, California.

HESS: The day after.

RIGGS: Twenty-four hours after he made this statement.

HESS: That was when they stopped for the commencement address at Berkeley, California.

RIGGS: Yes, but this incident is part of this story. Let me find it here. [Reading]

The Berkeley speech was Truman's first handling of foreign affairs in a formal address on this journey through the Midwest and Far West. He unexpectedly introduced a subject during the off-the-cuff speech to a large crowd gathered about his train at Eugene, Oregon. He said that when he went to Potsdam in 1945, 'I got very well acquainted with Joe Stalin, and I like old Joe!' This homey phrasing got a laugh from the audience, and the President continued, 'He is a decent fellow. But Joe is a prisoner of the Politburo. He can't do what he wants to. He makes arrangements, and if he could he would keep them; but the people

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who run the government are very specific in saying he can't keep them.' The old Joe utterance is a direct quotation from an off-the-record speech the President made at the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Washington April 16. It was so well received then that Truman had the urge to make it publicly.

HESS: You think that he did that on purpose then?

RIGGS: Apparently. It was given in Eugene, Oregon. We, oh, I guess about 6 o'clock in the evening, all piled on the train and started over the Cascade Mountains, or whatever they've got out there, and reporters, of course, were all beating the socks off the typewriter. Finally, about two hours later, it was getting dark, we pulled in some little place, with one telegraph operator. She got hit with I guess about fifty different stories. The only guy that got through was Bob Donovan, who is now editor of the Los Angeles *Times*, but was then the correspondent for the New York *Herald-Tribune*, the late New York *Herald-Tribune*. He got off the train with his copy in his hand and a five dollar bill and a note that said, "Call such-and-such a number in New York City, ask for dictation, and read this story to the machine." I think he handed it to a kid. He got through, but nobody else got through until twenty-four hours later.

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HESS: Were there other stops where you would run into the same predicament, of just lack of communication facilities?

RIGGS: Well, usually you were warned in advance, you know, you've got to file at Eugene and you've got to file at Berkeley, but this unexpected outburst about "Old Joe" caught us all flatfooted. I suppose the story went out from the AP people in Eugene there, they were, of course, on the ground and never had to leave, but those on the train never got it through until the next day.

HESS: Do you recall anything in particular about Mr. Truman's speech at Berkeley, or any of the events...

RIGGS: Well, he -- I covered the speech in the story. I don't remember anything special about it. I know the wind was blowing like hell.

HESS: A hot day?

RIGGS: Hot and windy.

HESS: All right, and then he went down to Los Angeles.

RIGGS: Yes, I left him at San Francisco and flew back, because the Republican convention was about to start.

I must say, after Omaha he got wonderful crowds , and they tell me in Los Angeles they could hardly move in town there was such a crowd there on the streets.

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But up in the northwest there, he also got wonderful crowds.

HESS: All right, anything else come to mind on that trip; about the June trip?

RIGGS: There was one little -- I wrote a piece on which they put the headline, "The Worm is Turned." If I'd stayed by this piece through the campaign, I'd have been all right. [Reading]

How is he doing? He is doing all right. He's doing very well, much better than anyone had dared hope. This is not to say that he had stirred to a fever pitch of enthusiasm, for his cause and for his candidacy. Above all, this is not to suggest that he is about to snatch from the Republican Party the November victory which has so long seemed within their grasp, but it is to say that Harry S. Truman has performed, within a little over a week, what must be accounted almost a political miracle. He has transformed for the people of the United States their inevitable image of their President, far from their minds, a fumbling, bumbling, almost inarticulate chief executive who despite a world of good intentions scarcely comprehends the scope of the duties which fall to any occupant of the White House.

That was the tone.

HESS: So you did see that he was improving even at this time?

RIGGS: Yes.

HESS: All right, next in chronological order, we mentioned

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this a minute ago about...

RIGGS: Detroit.

HESS: No, not quite yet.

The efforts by some of the people of the Democratic Party to get other people, someone other than Harry Truman...

RIGGS: Oh, yes.

HESS: ...on the ticket.

RIGGS: Yes.

HESS: We mentioned the ADA and their advocacy of General Eisenhower at that time.

RIGGS: Yes, ADA's heart wanted Bill Douglas, but they didn't think they could get him.

HESS: Do you think they really knew anything about General Eisenhower at this time?

RIGGS: Oh, no. There was a body of thought prevalent at that time that Eisenhower was a great liberal. Where it came from I don't know. But of course, Jake Arvey, or Jack Arvey, in Chicago, Democratic boss, he was for Eisenhower. Leon Henderson of the ADA was for Eisenhower, and just a whole passel of strangely assorted people were for Eisenhower. It ended up for nothing, however.

HESS: What do you recall about some of the other efforts --

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some of the efforts by some of the other people to get the nomination? Do you recall anything about Leslie Biffle's advocacy of Senator Barkley?

RIGGS: Well, I think he was advocating him for Vice President.

HESS: Well, that's what appeared on the surface, do you think that he was working in the back rooms, not for the second spot, for the top spot?

RIGGS: No. No, I don't think so. He was a Truman man and his personal welfare was out after Truman. But he was a Barkley man, too, but that -- no, I don't think that's the situation. If there was, I never had any evidence of it.

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

RIGGS: Yes, sir.

HESS: What do you recall about the convention?

RIGGS: Well, I recall that we met all night the last night.

HESS: Had the President speaking early in the morning, didn't they?

RIGGS: Yes. Here's a picture of it. Here's Truman.

HESS: Do you remember Emma Guffey Miller's pigeons?

RIGGS: Pigeons, and Sam Rayburn, I remember them well. God, what a mess. Emma Guffey Miller released a

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basketfull of pigeons in the convention hall. They flew right past the electric fans, all of them.

HESS: Now at the conclusion of his acceptance speech, Mr. Truman called the 80th Congress back into special session.

RIGGS: The Turnip Day session.

HESS: That's right, the Turnip Day session. In your opinion was that a good move politically?

RIGGS: Well, it was kind of a standoff, I think. It was good to this extent that he was doing something, action, action.

Now, Congress didn't do one earthly thing, just as he assumed they would. And of course, he blamed that on the do-nothing Republicans and made a good whipping boy for him.

HESS: Someone to run against in the campaign.

RIGGS: That's right.

HESS: All right, now the next thing that is usually brought up in a case like that is that the 80th Congress really was not all that bad, and that...

RIGGS: No.

HESS: ...the things that the Truman administration's going to be known for were passed by the 80th Congress; the Truman doctrine, and the Marshall plan.

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RIGGS: That's right.

HESS: Now, those are matters of foreign affairs. Do you think that an election is run more on domestic matters than on foreign matters?

RIGGS: Yes it is. Except in the case of this Vietnam thing, like...

HESS: A shooting war.

RIGGS: Almost a domestic matter. Your boy's going off to war is not a foreign affairs matter, it's a domestic matter.

HESS: That's right. If he's getting shot, that's domestic.

All right now, according to my records, you went on Mr. Truman's first campaign trip that year, and they went to Detroit. Is that correct?

RIGGS: That's correct. My memory of it is that there was a very lethargic meeting at Cadillac Square.

HESS: Had a big crowd there did they not?

RIGGS: They turned out some people.

HESS: The unions did.

RIGGS: Yes, not as many as they were accustomed to turning out. It was a -- I have no -- don't seem to have any clipping on that, but I remember something very vividly about this whole trip.

Coming back from Detroit, Roscoe Drummond, who I

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believe, was still with the *Christian Science Monitor*, then, he and I got Clark Clifford into the compartment and said, "Now look Clark, the President talks about winning. He is very optimistic, he's very, very sanguine, does he really believe he's got a chance to win this election?"

And Clark laughed and he said, "We don't know. It's a wonderful thing for the staff. We all feel we are on our own goal line and we've either got to punt or pass or do something desperate, but the boss doesn't seem to be worried, and it's very morale-building for us."

I don't think Clark had the faintest idea that Truman was going to win.

HESS: He didn't think they would win?

RIGGS: I didn't get that impression.

HESS: All right.

What about some of the other members of the staff who may have been present: Matthew Connelly for instance.

RIGGS: Well, I never talked to anybody else about it but Clark.

HESS: But Mr. Clifford.

RIGGS: Yes.

HESS: Mr. Charles Murphy was the next Special Counsel, but

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I don't believe that he was present on a good many of the trips that year.

RIGGS: I had very little dealings with Murphy. I knew him, that was all.

HESS: Did you take any other trips with the President?

RIGGS: Not that year, no.

HESS: On that particular trip when you went to Detroit, did you circulate through the crowd and ask people what they thought, sort of take the temperature of the crowd?

RIGGS: Yes. They were friendly, they were not enthusiastic, they didn't see much hope of winning.

HESS: Who did you think was going to win that year?

RIGGS: Well, I thought Dewey would win; anybody would think that if they had any sense.

HESS: Why do you think that Mr. Truman won instead of Dewey?

RIGGS: Well, I asked Dewey about that once.

HESS: You did?

RIGGS: I said, "Could you see this coming?"

He said, "I saw it about a week ahead of time."

HESS: Dewey said that?

RIGGS: Yes.

HESS: Is that right?

RIGGS: He said it was too late then. The farm situation

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he said. I never quite understood what the farm situation was to cause all that trouble.

HESS: Do you recall anything about the rewriting of the charter of the Commodity Credit Corporation and the failure to provide grain storage bins?

RIGGS: Yes.

HESS: That's one thing. Iowa voted for Mr. Truman that year and that was one of the strong things that swung some of the agricultural vote. But Mr. Dewey did see the farm votes switching?

RIGGS: Yes.

HESS: How about that. Before we move on, is this about everything on 1948?

RIGGS: Yes.

HESS: All right.

RIGGS: Let me look here one minute. If I had stayed with this story I'd have been all right too.

HESS: Did you have another good story?

RIGGS: Yes, when we got through the convention I said: [Reading]

Dim though the prospects for victory may seem, the Democratic Party is going to put on a campaign this fall so full of animal vigor that no one can write it off as defeated until the votes are counted. The delegates to the national convention went to Philadelphia to attend a funeral. The chief purpose was to fight over possession

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of the body for the next four years. They left Philadelphia giving forth battle cries, not against all Democrats, but against the common enemy.

And so on and so on.

HESS: It's just too bad you didn't stick by that.

RIGGS: Those two pieces, if I'd just gone to bed and stayed the rest of the time I'd have been all right.

HESS: All right, moving on. Were you ever with Mr. Truman in some of his more relaxed moments: at Key West, the Williamsburg, in the White House, anything like that?

RIGGS: No. I never went on those. I went on another trip to the West. I was in his special car with him and a few other people, but...

HESS: What was this?

RIGGS: Well, it was in 1950, he went out and dedicated some dams somewhere.

HESS: Oh, you were on the May trip of '50?

RIGGS: Yes.

HESS: Went out to Grand Coulee Dam?

RIGGS: Yes.

HESS: Tell me about that.

RIGGS: Well, it's kind of vague in my mind now. He just dedicated the dam and some poker playing.

HESS: Now old Grand Coulee dam had been dedicated lots

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of times.

RIGGS: I know, but we did it over.

HESS: Why do you think he went out and did it over again?

RIGGS: Well, we never could figure it, unless he wanted us to all see the country, and of course, the Government paid for it that way. My paper finally asked me to write a piece on it and I couldn't help them.

HESS: Okay, now moving on to '52, when did you first become aware that Mr. Truman did not intend to run for re-election?

RIGGS: Only when he announced it.

HESS: At the National Guard Armory.

RIGGS: Yes.

HESS: At the Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner.

Of course, there had been speculation before that time. And you hadn't heard anything about it?

RIGGS: No, that was after the New Hampshire primary.

HESS: That's right, when [Estes] Kefauver won the New Hampshire primary.

RIGGS: I had no idea he was not going to run.

HESS: All right. Now a political question. After he removed himself from the race, who did you see as the most likely Democratic standard-bearer at that time? That was March 29th.

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RIGGS: Well, I thought Stevenson, although I was very much involved in the Barkley...

HESS: What did you know about Adlai Stevenson at that time?

RIGGS: Well, I had only met him as the Governor of Illinois. I had met him when he was a candidate and I'd seen him around Washington, and that I knew him at the U.N. founding conference because, of course, he was the official leak out there.

HESS: He was sent out there to try to straighten out relations with the press. Did he do a good job at the...

RIGGS: Yes.

HESS: In San Francisco.

RIGGS: Yes. Reported direct on the speeches. But I was all involved with Barkley in 1952 because he was from Kentucky. I was writing most of my copy about him. He was running hard for the Presidency.

HESS: All right, let's just discuss that for a minute. As you know the Senator went to Chicago, made an effort to get the nomination and was unsuccessful. What do you recall about his attempt, and the reason for the failure?

RIGGS: Well he had -- when Truman was unable to get a promise out of Stevenson to run, Truman switched to Barkley

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and all the Truman men went to Chicago with Barkley instructions. But the combination of the big city bosses, a handful of them; Dave Lawrence of Pittsburgh and the labor union people decided Barkley was too old. You remember Mr. Harrison, I believe it was, of the railway clerks, head of the labor delegation, went to him and said, "We cannot support you, you're too old." Whereupon Barkley then issued a statement backing out of the race. He later said the only thing he was sorry about in his whole lifetime was that he hadn't fought it all the way through. He blamed a couple of his Kentucky friends for persuading him to drop out. Their claim was they didn't want him to be hurt publicly.

HESS: Did he mention who they were?

RIGGS: I don't know if he ever -- they were Earle Clements and Lawrence Wetherby.

HESS: And they advised him not to...

RIGGS: They advised him to drop out, after he made the effort. They had the headquarters; they had everything ready. He and his wife got off his train and walked down Michigan Boulevard and past the Conrad -- what's the name of the hotel that was the Conrad Hilton?

HESS: I'm not sure, the Blackstone's out there.

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RIGGS: The Hilton Hotel. They stayed at the Blackstone, they marched down Michigan Boulevard to show what a vigorous young man Barkley was; Mrs. Barkley in her high-heeled slippers.

HESS: Did you ever hear the story that after that walk he was a little tired and when he walked into the lobby of the hotel, and as you know his eyesight was not good, he walked right past some labor leaders who were standing there and did not speak to them, and they thought they were being snubbed and they were not, he was just tired.

RIGGS: I just heard it secondhand, I didn't know it of my personal knowledge.

HESS: Do you think that is true?

RIGGS: I'm sure it must be.

HESS: Okay. What do you recall about some of the other people who were striving for the nomination? Averell Harriman; do you know anything about him?

RIGGS: Harriman was putting on a strong campaign there, he had bands and everything else organized, the Harriman kids. "H-a-r-r-i-m-a-n spells Harriman."

HESS: Speaking of strong efforts, was Senator Kerr there?

RIGGS: Kerr was putting -- in his own way putting up a fight. Dick Russell was putting up a fight. There's

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a funny story about Dick Russell, too.

HESS: Fine, I was just getting ready to ask you your opinion of him and...

RIGGS: When it was announced that a Georgia delegation was coming to Washington to induce Senator Russell to run for President, I went out to see him. He laughed and said, "These are old friends of mine. The southern delegates -- are trying to find someplace to camp until they've decided where to go, and they think they can camp with me as well as anyplace."

So, I wrote a piece in the paper and somebody sent it to Russell. A few days later I went down to see him and he was very cool to me. He was polite but cold. He said, "I read your story, I see you say I'm not a serious candidate. That's your privilege to think whatever you want to think." It was very obvious that overnight he had become convinced he could win.

HESS: Do you think Senator Russell would have made a good President?

RIGGS: Oh, yes. Yes. If he had not had the burden of sectionalism around his neck he would have been an outstanding candidate for the party. But the Democratic Party couldn't afford to nominate a man from Georgia.

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HESS: All right. Do you recall anything else about the convention in Chicago that year? One question, an obvious question: That has been called a draft, do you think that Stevenson was really drafted?

RIGGS: Well, I never could prove it's phony, you have to assume it's phony, but if there ever was a genuine draft, that was it, I guess. He really never wanted to run, I know that.

HESS: Did you ever speak to him about that?

RIGGS: No, I never did talk to him.

HESS: All right. Did you travel on any of the campaign trips in '52?

RIGGS: No, I went out alone. I was in New York and I was in Missouri and I was in Ohio. I was covering what they call Senate states, and that's where I picked up some presidential stuff while I was there. Symington's campaign in Missouri was one. I went to New York because Tom Dewey confined himself entirely to New York State and I spent a couple of days with him in his pro-Eisenhower campaign.

HESS: Did you hear Stevenson speak any during that campaign?

RIGGS: Only on television or radio. On the subject of guessing election outcomes: One of the states I went to was Connecticut where Abraham Ribicoff was running

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for the Senate, and he got beaten too. I traveled with him one night in his car. He said, "I don't take any polls," but he said, "I know we're going to -- Stevenson is going to win." He said, "I can feel it in my guts." Oh, he said, "Stevenson may lose Connecticut by 2,000 but by that time he will have carried New York State and Massachusetts by so many and so many," and he said, "I can just feel it in my guts. Stevenson's going to win."

HESS: Didn't do very well did he for Connecticut or anywhere else.

RIGGS: Or anywhere else.

HESS: Just what was your general opinion of Adlai Stevenson?

RIGGS: Oh, I admired him greatly. I thought he was a great person but indecisive, and he might have or might not have been a very fine chief executive. You can't tell. But as a person, as a human being, and as a protagonist for causes, he was wonderful. Now he might have been a very bad President.

HESS: What was your opinion of...

RIGGS: But Dewey, I thought Dewey would have been a wonderful President, a very unlikeable man.

HESS: What was your opinion of Mr. Stevenson's speeches?

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What I'm referring to, there was that cliché at the time that he spoke over the heads of the people.

RIGGS: Most people thought, "He speaks over the heads of everybody but me." I think that everybody felt that way. "I understand him, but he's over your head." I don't think anybody ever resented his literacy. They always thought they understood it, they didn't know if Joe Doaks did or not.

HESS: Okay, who did you think was going to win that election in 1952?

RIGGS: Well, it looked like Eisenhower all along. I tried my best from the *Newsweek* poll to figure out a Stevenson victory, but I never could do it.

HESS: Just a general question about Mr. Truman's handling of foreign affairs during his administration. As you know, it was a very eventful time; the surrender of Germany and Japan; the dropping of the atomic bomb; aid to Turkey and Greece; and the fall of China and Czechoslovakia; the Berlin blockade, the Korean war. Just what was your general opinion of the Truman administration's handling of foreign affairs during those eight years?

RIGGS: I thought he did a great job. Great job. Not that everything that he did was right, but it was

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a great overall job.

HESS: What would you say was the major accomplishment of the Truman administration?

RIGGS: Oh, I think in the field of foreign affairs, meeting foreign policy, continuing what you call the best of the New Deal, the rest of the program.

HESS: What in your opinion is Mr. Truman's place in history?

RIGGS: Pretty strong. Pretty strong. He will have to have a strong place in history if for no other reason than the great election upset.

HESS: Okay, do you have anything else to add on Mr. Truman, on the Truman administration, the White House, the White House staff?

RIGGS: I can't think of anything.

HESS: Thank you very much for your time.

RIGGS: You're welcome. I enjoyed it.

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