

Oral History Interview
with
RICHARD L. STROUT

Served as a reporter for the Christian Science Monitor from 1921 (with the Washington Bureau since 1925 to the present, and writer of a weekly column (signed "T.R.B.") in the *New Republic* magazine since about 1943.

Washington, D.C.
February 5, 1971

by Jerry N. Hess, Harry S. Truman Library

The Harry S. Truman Library
Independence, Missouri
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HESS: To begin this afternoon Mr. Strout, would you give me a little of your personal background?

STROUT: Yes, I've been a newspaperman now for almost 50 years. I came down to Washington from Boston on the *Monitor* in 1923, I think it was, and I have been to practically every presidential press conference between now and then. I have been on the *Monitor* all that time, and the last 27 years I have also, in addition, written a weekly column in *The New Republic*

magazine called "TRB." I went to, I suppose, practically every press conference that Mr. Truman ever had.

HESS: Would you tell me a little about Mr. Truman's press conferences? Just in general, how skillful was he at fielding the questions that came up?

STROUT: President Truman had the disadvantage, of course, of following a famous President, and we all tended to decry

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him and minimize him, and I think also certainly underestimate him, until in his own right in 1948 he won this amazing election.

The jokes that reporters usually make about Presidents (they were a rather cynical group), I remember on one occasion we had to wait for about an hour to get into the press conference. In those days we stood around the desk just the way we had done under Franklin Roosevelt. And I just remember an amusing little scurrilous remark, "What are they doing? Why do we have to wait?" "They are trying to get his foot out of his mouth," that was the comment. Well, you know, you have total recall of some absurd little thing of that sort. That sort of puts it in perspective.

HESS: Well, he was accused of "shooting from the hip."

STROUT: That's right.

HESS: Did you think that was a fair accusation?

STROUT: Yes, I think so. I think he did and his personality has been pretty well identified and will be by others who will be interviewed by you.

Yes, that was a charm and of the same time the awe-inspiring personality that he had. He was perfectly direct like somebody driving a nail in a piece of wood,

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and you knew just where he was and he said what came into his head.

HESS: Is it always best for a President to be so forthright?

STROUT: It certainly is not always best, but at the same time, I think under these circumstances in the great '48 campaign which I'm going to try to talk about, I think it was probably the thing that finally elected him, because I think the public -- he established his personality, his character. That was Harry Truman and Harry Truman was a man who said what he thought. He would always -- there wasn't any credibility gap about him. I believe he was saying what he had in his mind.

HESS: Do you think that he used the press conferences in the most effective manner to educate the public and influence congressional action?

STROUT: I think he did that as well as he could. He was not a past master as Franklin Roosevelt was, or later on perhaps as Ted Kennedy was. But yes, they came as I recollect, about once a week, and I think it was a magnificent method of carrying things over to the public.

HESS: You mentioned the location of the press conferences, and they were held in the Oval Room until April the 27th of 1950, and then switched over to the Indian

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Treaty Room in the Executive Office Building.

STROUT: Well, you've done your homework on that, yes.

HESS: What location did you prefer?

STROUT: Well, the character of the press conference has evolved. In Franklin Roosevelt's days it was a group perhaps of 50 or 100 people. They were wedged so tightly that just before I went to World War II as a war correspondent, they filled me up with millions and millions of bacilli of antitoxin shots and I fainted right there. It was the only time in my life I ever fainted, but we were so packed, so close, I always remember, that I never hit the ground, and I woke up on a sofa outside. Never fainted in my life before, and for awhile it was...

HESS: Too crowded to fall down.

STROUT: It was. That was the most informal, ideal way, but then it got so big and the press corps multiplied many times and it had to be moved out.

HESS: Since you have mentioned Mr. Roosevelt, how would you compare the two men that were his two principal press agents, Press Secretaries: Steven Early, and then at the latter part, it was Jonathan Daniels. How would you compare these with Charles Ross and Joe Short?

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STROUT: Well, it takes quite a long time. You've sprung this on me suddenly. Steve Early was very, very good, and he was more a -- I would have to stop and -- they were both good. Charlie Ross I knew and loved him, he was a lovable person, very high moral character (if that isn't something that you say derogatorily), he was as...

HESS: That used to be in a complimentary way, didn't it?

STROUT: ...direct and...yes...and loving and they had complete rapport, that's the big thing. The press officer must know the President very well.

HESS: Did you feel that Joseph Short lacked some of that rapport?

STROUT: Yes, he wasn't as good. He was -- and he had physical difficulties too. I think he -- didn't he die on the job? I believe he had some...

HESS: September the 18th of 1952, during the campaign.

STROUT: Yes, well he had -- that was an example of Harry Truman. When he liked somebody he just gave them complete confidence. I don't mean to say that Joe wasn't very good, but he was not, he was not a professional man who would aid his principal all the time. He was a good man, but he didn't quite come up to the others,

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I would say, on this particular job.

HESS: After Mr. Short's death there were two men who were Acting Press Secretaries: Roger Tubby...

STROUT: Yes.

HESS: ...and Irving Perlmeter. What do you recall about those two men?

STROUT: I don't recall Irving Perlmeter at all. Roger Tubby I knew pretty well. He was a nice, I'd say rather -- he was a nice little fellow, and was not really much of a personality in his own right. I would -- he was an awfully good man, but that's really a story in itself, the art of being a public relations man for -- you have to be intimate with the press, but not too intimate.

HESS: You've been in Washington for a good many years. Who's the best presidential Press Secretary you've ever known?

STROUT: Well, I think Steve Early was as good as any, and then...

HESS: How does James Hagerty stack up against those?

STROUT: Then -- you take the words out of my mouth, it was sometimes a little hard to tell whether he was President or whether Eisenhower was President. He was more than a press, he was a politician and you might even say a

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statesman. He influenced history. Yes -- well, that's another story.

HESS: All right, moving on to the events of 1948, what do you recall about that very eventful year?

STROUT: Well, it begins with my going over to Union Station with my wife in June and waiting there. The sixteen car special was waiting below, and it was kind of pathetic, there was no crowd there. There were about, oh, I guess maybe twelve people, mostly wives. I was talking about this to my wife just last night. She said it was -- the mood she got was sort of the pathos of this little man who was -- we all accepted the fact that he had insuperable obstacles, he couldn't possibly win, but he was going out in a game fight.

Then I'd like to say a thing about living on one of these special trains. It was like a traveling circus. The only thing is you can't take a bath, you get kind of high after the third week, you know, but it was a traveling circus. You knew everybody, and everybody was moving up and down. You got a feeling of intimacy with the President.

He worked awfully hard. No President has ever made as many speeches in a day as he did. He would make

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from twelve to fifteen appearances in speeches. He'd come out on the back of the -- I think the train was called the Ferdinand Magellan, wasn't it? I think that was...

HESS: That was his car.

STROUT: We called it the Magellan, I think.

HESS: That was his special car.

STROUT: And of all these electronic devices that was new then, I don't think there was a tape recorder on the train. I don't think the recorder came in until Nixon's -- in Nixon's time. And it was all -- the train would whistle, and you'd jump out. We'd learned to jump out like a train man. And we'd fix up the train, and fix up the door and get out and then we'd wait until the train came -- the train came to us and then we'd have our yellow copy paper. We'd see a Western Union boy with a big Western Union sign he holds in his hand, and we'd send off a new lead. And then we'd wait to see if he said some indiscreet thing and then we'd make a new lead and quick send it to the Western Union and we'd have ten or fifteen minutes to do it.

HESS: During those whistlestops, did you ever have a chance to talk to the people who were there?

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STROUT: Oh yes, we'd always try to do that. There'd always be one squalling child, and there'd be a -- people were friendly. They came out very largely to see the President, and everybody -- that was -- this thing grew. It was like a developing character, this whole -- it was a drama, it changed as we went along. First it was curiosity and they came out to see the President, to show Johnny the President, and that sort of thing. And then he began this business of attacking the "no-good do-nothing 80th Congress." And then it became -- well, I don't like to make a comparison about Mr. [Spiro] Agnew, but I suppose you do now in a different way, but Agnew suddenly electrified the people and got on the front page. Now, it wasn't like that, because I think it was -- there was a little more high-toned, let us say, in his attack and he had a great deal to say about this 80th Congress, a good many criticisms.

Now just at the start, a great issue was was he going to -- was he a spent bolt? Was he a burnt out ember? Was he going to be able to attract people to come? And very early in the campaign (I

don't have the date but you have it here), he went to this Omaha, Nebraska; the Ak-Sar-Ben amphitheater, which held 10,000 people. And

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we went in there -- let's see, these are the actual notes that I took on the June 5th, '48. I wrote, "amphitheater brick, cement, good functional arena stage, got American flag as backdrops sides of stage, and rather ugly wallpaper, sign from the top Ak-Sar-Ben." But the point was that nobody was there. The first - as I'm holding now in front of you a picture of this thing which is...

HESS: That appeared in *Life* Magazine.

STROUT: ...taken from *Life* Magazine on June 21, 1948. They were having a convention of Truman's old buddies from the Army and these boys didn't want to go down and hear a political speech and they were out on the town. And so we were right up here to the right (the press that is), the photographers were right here. The cameras were up here. He was half-way through his speech (here's his speech here), see if I can find the place where I noted it down. "Six great tables of press men were in front, then a gap of six empty rows, and then about a thousand people," writer says 22,000, you couldn't possibly say there was two thousand people. "There was about a thousand people, and behind that emptiness." There were reporters -- whispered to each other. We were

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kind of awed by this horrible flop.

HESS: All of the empty seats.

STROUT: Here it is here. "A gasp of amazement as reporters entered the place and saw this thing and the spotlights were on Truman's face at first." (In this picture you see they are on him.) "Halfway through the speech the spotlights lifted from Harry Truman, and like a finger swept slowly all around this great amphitheater on the empty seats." And as I wrote down at the time in my black pencil, "There was a brutal, there was an affront." Harry was then reading his speeches (I'm going to come back to that), in an uninspired voice with no resonance. He couldn't read his speech. "The audience is frozen," and so forth. Well, that's about the point -- well, that was a horrible beginning.

I think nothing has ever been as bad as that. The *Life* magazine on this June 21, 1948 has this article "The Truman Train Stumbles West." It was a very sharp piece in which they just, "The most impressive thing last week about Mr. Truman's trip to the West was his incredible ability to pretend that nothing at all was wrong."

Then you go to Cheyenne, that was the next day as I recollect it. And this was the picture in *Life*. This

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was a series of pictures that irritated me. The crowd -- he had a good-sized crowd and they had all gone up to the mansion up here and so this was just a fraud. I took it upon myself...

HESS: That shows a soldier, just standing there and no one around.

STROUT: Yes. No -- yes, yes, his back is toward us and he is looking up toward the mansion. The trees hide the crowd, so it looks just empty and it says, "A lonely soldier faces outwards towards what should have been crowds along President's route in Cheyenne. Crowds were small nearly everywhere." And the fact is that there was a fairly big crowd there.

I took it upon myself -- I suppose the reporters tended to identify themselves. I sent a -- I wrote to *Life* magazine and two weeks later they published an apology, which I have the date of it, maybe I can find it later. And they explain that -- I thought that I had the date, but I -- oh yes, my letter to *Life* appeared on page 7, July 19, 1948, and there was an explanation by *Life* that they had been able to cover it only half of the trip, and were not aware of the good crowds and, "*Life* regrets that the time element caused a one-sided picture

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of the tour as a whole." Well, that was I suppose, a reasonable enough explanation. There was no question about resentment. We were just -- I try to speak, as I say, for forty or fifty reporters on just that one particular item.

Ah, let's see, then he -- then he went on and what he did was he dropped -- with the thick lenses of his glasses, he could never read a speech successfully. He finally dropped the speech reading and took up his famous direct speech, in which he was utterly himself, and he had a short jerky right-hand motion up and down

HESS: Just a chopping motion.

STROUT: A chopping motion. And he got it over and I look back through my notes, and I say this at my own expense, because we were all utterly convinced that he didn't have a prayer. And the great question that we all asked ourselves was, "Does he know it?" And we never really knew whether he knew it or not and we don't know it to the end.

Another untoward occurrence (which is terribly funny), at the Carey, Idaho airport, where he -- I don't blame that on Charlie Ross, and Charlie Ross was my dear

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friend, and how he did it I don't know. Maybe he had stayed up too late the night before playing poker, maybe he had one or two too many, although he was not a drinking man. But anyway, he had been told by long distance telephone about the circumstances and he gave the circumstances.

Truman was out to dedicate an airport. He thought the airport was for a brave soldier who had lost his life for his country and when he got there he began by saying, "I'm honored to dedicate this airport, and present this wreath to the parents of the brave boy." Somebody told him that it wasn't a brave boy. Wilma was a girl. And then he went on, wandered on, he said it was someone that gave -- she had given her life for the country, and she died in an ordinary airplane accident. Well, that was a horrible thing to happen to anybody, and when you think of the -- really of the

disadvantages of the problems that he had when he started out to -- of course we all know he won, but he overcame this hideous beginning.

They say...

HESS: One other question on the Carey, Idaho incident: That took place the morning after you were at Sun Valley.

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Do you recall being at Sun Valley?

STROUT: Yes, but not very much. Sun Valley, of course, I think it was Harriman's place and he went there I think probably to help Harriman out and it was a great luxury spot. The only day I can remember is Harry Truman coming down -- they had one of these ski lifts, and he was -- the shock that he gave to the Secret Service men as he came down. The ski lift at one place crossed a drop that was about, I guess, three stories high and he was just on a little parachute seat. He well could have fallen down and broken his neck, but I don't have any other recollections.

HESS: Do you recall if that day got underway before you got any breakfast; the Carey, Idaho day?

STROUT: Oh well, if you want to go in for broad -- he was a farmer and we had a standing running joke about it that he overslept this morning and he got up at 6:30. That was a standard joke and people were saying, "This is the last time I'll ever work for a farmer."

I don't know, was it Carey that he got up at 5:00? Well, he was -- it was not merely Carey, but many other places. Yes, there was a running joke.

You develop a life of your own, this little circus

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of vaudeville troop that goes around the country. You have your own jokes and you have your in phrases and so forth. I'm going to come to that because it produced one of the funniest campaign special songs that was ever written I think, one of the best. Every campaign special in those days produced its own song and then years and years after, we'd start singing them. Like a Gridiron Club affair you know, a parody.

And I'd like just to refresh myself. I'd like to -- could I now go onto the emphasis about how convinced we all were that the little man didn't have a chance?

HESS: Fine.

STROUT: And I look back over the pieces I'd been sending to my paper, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and I just in glancing through them, October 8th, "The politicians are baffled. They cannot figure it out, and some places registration figures are the highest in history, in others they are low to the point of apathy." We thought the apathy later on was, "Well, we know who is

going to win, so why spoil the record." There was a great deal of apathy and it was obviously his job to go out, try to break that up and get them -- there were more Democrats in the country at that time, I think there still are, if you

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could just get them to come out. And his job is to get out some liveliness and excitement.

On October 14th I wrote to my paper -- oh no, I switched over to the Dewey train at this time and I wrote this: Then I say it with blushes, "October 14. It is now as certain as anything can be in the course of American politics that Governor Dewey is elected and the nation knows it, and yawns over the final three weeks of the campaign, whose outcome was certain before it began."

I've jumped as you see from June. I'm coming back to June, and to October, because that was what we were writing. We're a respectable, reputable paper like the *Christian Science Monitor*, just sort of taken for granted.

On a little later, October 15th, I said, "Governor Dewey on his side is blandly continuing his chosen course, which is apparently carrying him straight for the White House."

And that was what really apparently ruined Mr. Dewey, because he accepted that he was going to be elected, so he -- was not a -- Dewey was a sort of an artificial person. He was -- the famous story about him was that he was like a little bridegroom on the wedding cake, you know, and he

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was rather cold. He had a sonorous, beautiful voice. He had been trained one time, I think he had thought of going into the opera, and a beautiful voice, but he didn't have any passion, nor did he feel that he needs to elicit any passion.

HESS: How did the crowds react to Governor Dewey as compared to the crowd reaction to President Truman?

STROUT: Every newspaperman watched that and that's why you switch from one train to another. At first I would say there was not much difference between the two. At the end though, without any doubt, and I'm going to come to that, the Truman crowds had just changed in the last three weeks. They had changed enormously and part of -- reading through this to me is like a Sherlock Holmes story. I had all of the evidence here in my own writing as to what was happening, and yet I was, like everybody else, I was so mesmerized by what everybody was saying that I didn't take the logical conclusion of the evidence that I was writing about.

HESS: Just why were you convinced that Mr. Truman was going to lose?

STROUT: Well, I think probably it was due to the polls. I think the polls hadn't -- I don't know that they have

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perfected it now, but they had -- they were not merely the Gallup Poll, but the Crossley Poll and all the other polls and they all unanimously said that it was all over. And what can you do, what can a reporter do if the polls say that it is just -- it's all happened. And yet here as I'm coming down -- this is again from the Dewey trip, "Dewey's speeches are so generalized that accompanying newsmen find difficulty in picking out a salient news item for the lead in the stories." Every newsman has to say in the first sentence the lead of his story, but you'd get these speeches where there wasn't any lead.

HESS: You have to head your story with something.

STROUT: Yes, you have to star something.

Then October 21. Now see this is about three weeks before the election. "There's no doubt about it any longer, that shuffling you hear is the sound of the wide Democratic hopes over their prospects in House and Senatorial election contests." See, I was coming closer to it, but I wasn't quite getting it. But, I said, "A combination of recent evidence indicates that a mild 'trend' may be developing in many areas for Democratic congressional and state candidates and if any such result

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actually occurs it may complicate the problems of interpreting the 1948 election. Your reporter notes a slight increase in Truman sentiment in one of the national opinion polling groups."

Of course, "he was defeated," but he was coming up a little bit, they were subtle enough to catch that, "But nothing that would give them a chance at capturing victory," I add.

Well, what a relief it was to get away from the Dewey artificiality and getting back into the bubbling hard-hitting naturalness of this little Harry Truman's campaign. I mean I would defy anybody, even people who were ardently for Dewey, not to find it more entertaining to be with Truman because he put on a better show.

HESS: Do you think Mr. Herbert Brownell would have even enjoyed Truman more?

STROUT: And I want to make the point that what Truman said in a way made sense. To Congress he had presented a plan for (way back then), for nationalized health insurance; they just turned it down and a whole series of things. And, oh, so that he was not -- he had some basis for attacking them in the campaign.

Now, if I can switch back to this first initial June

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trip. One of the jokes about the Truman trip was that the further West he got the more his western vernacular increased. He started out for California. They wanted a good reason for a "non-political" trip to go out to California. And somebody, [Dr. Robert G.] Sproul; the president of the university offered to give him a degree if he came out there. You can tell little, in their corniness that today would -- well, there's no cornier than Lyndon Johnson when he tells about

his grandpas! All the way across the West as his vernacular got thicker he told about Grandpa's covered wagon trip to Oregon and produced an historical relative or two in virtually every area where he spoke. Furthermore, as he advanced, denouncing the 80th Congress with more brilliant flights of language he would just -- he would fetch out these grandpas.

Now, if you will permit me, I'll glance through a piece that I wrote for my paper at the time. As you can see, we were having just a wonderful time on this picnic. I will say in all my almost 50 years of traveling, I never enjoyed a trip more, with one exception, and that was going across the country with the Russian, Mr. [Nikita Sergeyevich] Khrushchev, and that was very much like it

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It was a burlesque. Anything would happen and it practically did.

I say in this piece that, "President Truman carried the savor of his two grandpas through the West with him on his recent trip." This was written in the past tense, because -- "there seemed to be hardly a rear stop sometimes when Grandfather Young or Grandfather Truman weren't brought up. Generally they had an adventure in the vicinity." The incident was told in semi-humorous, intimate fashion and the rear platform audience seemed to like them; the President getting up and telling about Grandpa, you know, and as I say, you couldn't help loving the little fellow...

"Generally they linked Mr. Truman up with the neighborhood, by inheritance anyway. It was maternal Grandfather Solomon Young who popped up in the introductory remarks of the President in the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City." Now, that was hardly a place for Grandfather to come in. "The President's grandfather he said had been a trader," trader apparently was a technical word, "and it had come up to Salt Lake City with a consignment of merchandise which the consignee refused to accept. His grandfather appealed directly to Brigham Young." He

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wouldn't have said grandfather; grandpa. He'd reached the grandpa stage then. "Mr. Truman told the audience Brigham Young had helped him get justice. This pleased the big crowd a good deal. It was another score for the Truman grandfather."

"It was down at Shelbyville, Kentucky that the grandparents really went to work, however, it was here that a love interest entered the story. Nobody could tell a romantic affair better than candidate Truman himself. And so let it be recorded that at 8:45 a.m. on October 1st, Mr. Truman greeted several thousand Shelbyvillers from a rear platform of his special train, with the customary friendly good mornings, and went on from there." And then I'd tell it. I apparently have a verbatim transcript of what he said, which I think I will skip if you want to transcribe it sometime. Anyway, they...

HESS: It's probably recorded in his other papers.

STROUT: It very probably will be, yes. And then I go on, "Well, that was the Shelbyville incident as Mr. Truman told it. He added that he was proud of his Kentucky ancestry, naturally, and the audience seemed flattered and pleased."

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Lyndon Johnson did just the same thing as this when he was running as a vice-presidential candidate with Mr. Kennedy. He went right through the South telling in a very southern accent...

HESS: Relatives all over the place.

STROUT: ...very, very slow.

"As the train pulled out of Shelbyville the reporters could hear Mr. Truman on the loudspeaker, which they had forgotten to cut off, good naturedly challenging his daughter, Margaret. The people of Shelbyville were well-acquainted with her he insisted because she had come up here to make certain investigations of her own as to the validity of his runaway grandparents marriage lines."

"Later on Charles, Charlie Ross, hurried back into the press car," that's where we had one big car where the typewriters were, "with a self-conscious and anxious expression on his face to make sure the reporters understood the President had been facetious in his remarks."

HESS: Just kidding?

STROUT: That's a job, you know, that's the job of a Press Secretary.

And now may I just add this. I hadn't read this

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thing, for heaven's sakes, for 25 years or so. This is written from Washington. "What is causing correspondents aboard the presidential train some anxiety as to what is going to happen to the grandparents when Mr. Truman leaves the West and starts an intensive drive of the East. He has made a preliminary trip to Philadelphia, through upstate New York this week...no grandparents. Correspondents had grown familiar with the group and wanted to hear more about them, but what will happen when he gets to work, say, in New England. Is President Truman running short of grandparents? In this genealogical crisis it is believed, however, that Mr. Truman has virtually untapped stores of great grandparents, almost certainly one or more of them came from the East. Then again, from Mr. Truman's own admission, Grandmother -- Grandma Young was one of thirteen children. If one of them doesn't turn out to have settled in Roxbury, Mass. and made the long trek home to Freesport, Long Island before the campaign is over, this correspondent will be surprised and disappointed."

Well, okay, that is an introduction to the campaign song that we built up.

HESS: How did that song go? (see appendix)

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STROUT: Well, that's what I wanted to get into. He had got these two lines, he would tell these crowds, not the formal audiences, but generally the whistlestop crowds, "I am going to Berkeley

fur to get me a degree." I am going down, you see, if you put the down in it begins to scan. "I am going down to Berkeley fur to get me a degree."

The Republicans I think had started out a truth squad special (I'm not sure whether that had been invented yet or not), anyway, they were denouncing Truman vigorously and naturally, up and down the country. And Truman at one point said, "They can't prove nothing, they ain't got a thing on me."

Well, my dear friend and one of the finest newspapermen I ever knew in my life was the syndicated columnist Thomas Stokes. He had written many songs and parodies for Gridiron Clubs and he got us together one time. He said, "We've got to have a song for this trip." And he sat down in somebody's cubbyhole. Each one of us had a little room we sat in and I remember he began pounding on the table to get the rhythm, and he said, "'Oh Suzanna,' that would be a good tune." And then just by a flash of genius it came to him right all of a sudden

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Tom Stokes (and I'm not in a singing voice today and I can't carry a tune, but you can get):

They can't prove nothin', they ain't got a thing on me
I'm goin' down to Berkeley fur to git me a degree.

If you've got a chorus like that, why you don't -- anything falls into place. Well, the -- it began:

Old Grandpaw went to Oregon, the dough was on his knee
Grandpaw went to Oregon, the west coast fur to see
He got himself a partner in Californiay
They bought up Sacramento on a lovely summer day.

Now actually Grandpaw was no businessman, and he went right on the rocks. Just the way Harry's haberdashery store went bankrupt.

Grandpaw warn't no businessman, he went right on the rocks
So grandson went to old KC to peddle drawers and socks
The curse was strong right down the line, no profit could he see
So Harry quit and folded up his haberdashery.

And then you go on that same one:
They ain't got nothing...

The next line:

I went to work for Pendergast, he made a judge of me
Before I knew what happened I was picked by Franklin D
I got my boots and saddles on and started for the sea
I made a lot of speeches and I plugged for Sun Valley

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It all comes back to me as I recite it, the gang -- and then somebody would want to -- we all felt this was going to be an immortal song, so each would compose a little quatrain to go into it. And you'd kid above the bounce of the train and the smell of cinders and the rattle of the typewriters and so forth. And some people were taking drinks and holding beer and singing a new stanza that somebody had just written. Yes.

HESS: Did you write sentences yourself?

STROUT: I don't recall. I don't recall that, but Tom Stokes really was the one who organized it. I suppose we probably did. One would think of a precious line and then try to make it rhyme with something. And you kind of went in with the sound of wheels, you know, going around below. Truman talked at one point about "a light-foot Baptist" and none of us had known what a "light-foot Baptist" was. I think he had gone out to -- what was it, yes. Oh yes, this immortalizes that.

One Sabbath bright he campaigned right through Texas bonny breast
He laid a wreath at Alamo and there the heroes blessed
He met Rayburn, a Hard Shell man, a Baptist to the root
And there revealed, though one himself, he claimed to be light foot.

They can't prove nothin', they ain't got a thing on me.
I'm goin' down to Berkeley fur to git me a degree.

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Well, I think that's...

HESS: How many verses was there to the song?

STROUT: I think I've got the whole thing here.

HESS: Also on the June trip at one of his stops in Eugene, Oregon, he said, "I like old Joe." Do you recall that?

STROUT: Oh, yes, that caused him a lot of trouble. It had a qualifying phrase to it. "I like old Joe, the only thing he's -- or you can't believe a word he says," or "He's a terrible liar." But first he said, "I like," yeah, that was just poison to say a thing of that sort.

HESS: And also on the June trip, in Irwin Ross' book *The Loneliest Campaign*, Ross quotes part of an article that you wrote. He said, "The bombast made effective political vaudeville," and then he quotes you: "His reception has been uniformly cordial, Richard L. Strout recorded in the *Christian Science Monitor*."

"Most reporters on board feel that his warmth has increased as the journey progressed. Just why is a matter of speculation, but it may be that word has gone around that a scrappy fighter is making an uphill fight."

STROUT: Well, that - yes, I would say it colloquially a little bit more. First he made his attack on Congress and that caught on. Then he abandoned the prepared speeches for

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colloquial speeches. He hit his stride, and then it got closer to the election. And first you get through the World Series, you know, and then you get through something else, and then finally they come to the last three weeks. I think I have a little about this right here. As I went through my notes I noticed that in my own correspondence that it got more and more so -- October 22, I say that, "Hardly a week exists before election day." Now that was -- you see it was warming up now, he had got hold. Oh, and I think, too, that Dewey realized that he had, that he wasn't coming over, and that it was too late for him to change. I think that was another thing.

"October 25th. Mr. Truman had a spectacular turnout in downtown Chicago, and today Mr. Truman is storming over the big cities of the East." He had won confidence and we had won confidence. No, I should not say that, we still knew that he was "defeated." There was no question at all though, that he was coming up.

October 27th, this I remember rather vividly as my paper's published in New England and I accompanied him up into this New England trip there looking for his grandparents. "President Truman has swept into New England

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for a two-day campaign tour breathing hope and confidence. Accompanying reporters are sufficiently impressed by big crowds, the enigma of the trade union vote, and the last-minute Democratic appeal to minority racial and religious groups to revise earlier estimates, and reappraise the whole situation."

Well, that seems almost as though I were going to come out on the right side there, doesn't it?

HESS: Yes.

STROUT: Then I immediately add, "While correspondents almost to a man, believe that Mr. Truman's uphill fight will be unsuccessful, an upturn of Truman stock generally is felt to be underway." In other words we sensed it, we saw it, if it had not been for the polls we would have -- might have touched it. "There seems to be no question that Mr. Truman generally has outdrawn Governor Dewey, whatever that may mean in the final vote. The Democrats obviously feel that they are gaining ground. The upturn of Truman stock might change the result from a rout to a mere defeat."

HESS: One of his principal speeches in that campaign, given before a civil rights group, was his address in Harlem at Dorrance Brooks Square.

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STROUT: I don't recall that. I think I was not there. I think I wasn't there, so I can't report on that. My impression is that when he got down to New York he went from there out West, you know, I left him I think at New York and came back to Washington.

HESS: I knew that you had left the train in Washington because that is indicated on the printed itinerary. I didn't know if you were with him during his stops in New York or not.

STROUT: I think I came to him -- well, I answer my own question here, to be October 30th. October 28th. "He, Truman, has shown much ability so far as this writer can judge, to communicate emotions of fear, rage and similar political passions to his audiences that have appeared in horrendous charges."

October 29th. "The agile Mr. Truman was moving about almost every instant," that was in New York City, "and made fifteen speeches after leaving Boston the day before, six of them in New York City."

October 30th. "Mr. Truman went to New York after being seen by 2 million to 3 million people."

And here is one comment that was made to me (this was back, way back in the June speech), it was out in

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Idaho, and as you say, the reporters talked to people in the crowd, "Say, what do you think of him? What do you think of his speech?" And people would all smile in a friendly way. And one Idaho editor I talked to who was evidently a Republican and who I was absolutely sure would vote for Dewey, observed to me, "He's a spunky little cuss." He said it in a very friendly fashion and I've always had the feeling that -- or at least it was -- many people have said that people didn't know how they were going to vote until election day, and then they got into the polling booth and they said, "This poor little guy is going to get beaten so badly that I'm just going to give him a vote to show I..."

HESS: Just because he's spunky.

STROUT: "...I like him," yes. I'm not sure, he didn't win by very much.

Going through my files I ran across some amusing stuff. One is published by the Republican State Central Committee in Michigan. This shows the bitterness of the campaigns. "John A. Wagner, Battle Creek, Chairman." The headline is -- this is in June 1948. The headline is, "Communitic Project Plans Big Expansion." And turns out that the one is "The Tennessee Valley Authority has asked Congress for four million dollars to begin construction

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of a 54 million dollar steam electric generating plant in Tennessee." It's almost unbelievable to us, but this does help to bring back the passions and the emotions of this incredible time.

This is another quotation from it, the second paragraph: "Here can be seen how bureaucracy progresses, how it starts, wearing an innocent mask of social welfare and ends in the garb of communism." That was the Tennessee Valley Authority.

HESS: Was this printed in a newspaper or just put out in this form?

STROUT: I think it -- it looks to me as though it had been printed in this form and had been thrown out.

HESS: By the Republican State Central...

STROUT: It's signed by the Republican State Central Committee of Michigan, with a list of signers on it. Arthur E. Summerfield is well-known, he is Republican National Committeeman, and finance director. He's the only one whose name I immediately recognize there.

"TVA has been a hotbed of Communism, a haven for Communists and a factory for Communistic propaganda ever since it began operating."

Well, unless you -- I think I've run out of things.

HESS: Well, we've got several questions yet.

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STROUT: Yes, sure.

HESS: About Mr. Truman's speech in Chicago: That was the speech where he mentioned Hitler and Mussolini and Tojo and mentioned the fact that they were supported by the large economic powers in their countries. And then he mentioned, "Today in the United States there's a growing and dangerous concentration of immense economic power in the hands of just a few men." He is equating the wealthy Republicans and their backing of Dewey with the backing that Hitler and Mussolini and Tojo had received. This is known as one of the more hard-hitting speeches of Mr. Truman's campaign.

STROUT: Well, it could go beyond saying hard-hitting, you could say it was demagogic. On the other hand, I'm glad you brought it up because that brings a -- helps to balance the things. I'm naturally giving a rather sympathetic view because the drama of the thing was so extraordinary and we all have in our minds the picture of, after the election, this little Harry Truman holding the early edition of the *Chicago Tribune*, "Dewey Wins" with his...

HESS: "Dewey Defeats Truman."

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STROUT: ...with a smile on his face, and then his famous imitation of [H.V.] Kaltenborn on the radio, which became a standing joke. And -- yes, but let me say of that speech, I don't think it quite balances the idea of saying the TVA is communistic, because Franklin Roosevelt had said -

- Teddy Roosevelt had said, "Malefactors of great wealth," Franklin Roosevelt had said, "Economic royalists," and the concentration of economic power has been accepted by economists here as something...this is the disparity of income that it has been mentioned by both parties...as something that is rather deplorable in this country. I can't seem to remember, which is perhaps interesting, I can't seem to remember any of the speeches that -- the formal speeches -- that was a formal speech that he...

HESS: That's right.

STROUT: ...made there obviously. I can't seem to remember those at all. The speeches that I remember are those hard-hitting...

HESS: The whistlestop speeches.

STROUT: ...whistlestop, off the rear platform speeches, yes.

HESS: Did he seem more relaxed and more able to deliver that type of speech than he was a full-fledged, standing

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behind the podium, type of speech?

STROUT: Of -- quite -- yes, I'm glad you brought that up. Yes, he was obviously ill at ease. I don't think he could see his copy very well. I think the man who could read a speech the best I've ever known is Franklin Roosevelt. You really couldn't tell whether he was extemporizing it or his eye was moving ahead and he was -- it seems to be coming right from the -- Truman's glasses were a great handicap and then his great -- he didn't have the capacity to do that. He wasn't that type of man.

Oh, yes, after that horrible Ak-sar-ben thing, his self-confidence you could see coming back. He always claimed that he knew he was going to win. And Jack Redding in his book offers some evidence to that effect. I don't know, I never -- I don't know, I think in his heart of hearts he thought he was going to be defeated and he was -- that would have been my estimation.

HESS: Now let me ask you a question about some of his White House staff members who were on the train. Did you at times have occasion to talk to the staff members other than Charles Ross, other than the Press Secretary? Charles Murphy, Clark Clifford and George Elsey for instance.

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STROUT: Yes, I think they thought he would be defeated. I think almost certainly they did.

HESS: Did they tell you?

STROUT: When I say that -- no, naturally not, they would be heresy or would be -- it would be treachery to say such a thing as that. No, purposely they had to create this confidence and so

forth. I'm sure from other witnesses you've got the record of the public opinion polls. I have them here which are just simply seem to be overwhelming.

Well, this is from the *Washington Post* after the event. This is the Thursday after the election. It's dated November the 4th. There's the famous photograph of "Dewey Defeats Truman" from the *Chicago Tribune*, and there are three columns of excerpts from different newspapers. One that I recall appeared in *Life* magazine by Joe and Stuart Alsop, who said, "What kind of a President will Mr. Dewey make?"

HESS: Another photograph in *Life* magazine showed Mr. Dewey, I think it was in San Francisco, on a ferry boat.

STROUT: Yes.

HESS: And it was captioned, "The next President travels by ferry boat over the broad waters of San Francisco Bay."

STROUT: Broad waters of San Francisco Bay, yes. That was

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from *Life* magazine.

The columnist Drew Pearson was caught flatfooted with a prospective lineup of the Dewey Cabinet.

I mentioned this Joe and Stu Alsop, I think that was in *Life*.

Newsweek. Oh, this was -- this came to him while he was on his trip. A copy of *Newsweek*, they polled 50 top political writers who predicted, without a single exception, Dewey's victory. That was -- discouraged them enormously when that thing came aboard. Well now, look at these polls. The *Post's* Elmer Roper -- I guess they don't have the figures here or do I?

HESS: Let's see, that mentions Roper.

STROUT: "Nothing but a political convulsion would save him."

HESS: And Roper quit polling on September the 9th.

STROUT: Yes, that was his farewell; *Fortune* magazine. Gallup and his last report, his final prediction, "Dewey will get 49.5 percent; Truman 44 percent." Well, now that doesn't seem very big, but most presidential elections, that's comparable to a landslide. That's a five percentage point.

Archibald Crossley, "Governor Dewey and Governor Warren were sure of election," and so on, so and...

HESS: Now this clipping mentions Henry Wallace and Strom

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Thurmond.

STROUT: Yes.

HESS: What effect did you think it would have on the Democratic Party, splitting into three wings; Mr. Truman and then Henry Wallace moving off on the left, Strom Thurmond moving off on the right. What effect did you think that would have?

STROUT: My belief and recollection was that both of them would injure Truman because Wallace, whom I knew pretty well, and was writing for *The New Republic* at the time when my TRB column was appearing, would have taken away a lot of the militant intellectuals and Thurmond would help split the Solid South. So from both wings -- the extraordinary things was it didn't go into the House of Representatives with four parties.

I have to say in fairness too, and I say this blushing, in my TRB column I had to write it in advance, and I mentioned "President" Dewey in the column, and it's a terrible feeling for a newspaperman to know that that thing is in the works when...

HESS: And can't be stopped.

STROUT: ...when the election -- nothing on earth -- nothing on earth can stop it

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HESS: One question on that, sir: Where did you pick up the

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initials TRB? What do they stand for?

STROUT: Oh, that's another story. That's -- I didn't pick it up. That was -- Bruce Bliven invented that. They wanted it -- the magazine was published in New York at that time and they wanted an inside column from Washington, and they wouldn't have a name on it because they wanted to alternate it with various newspapermen. Frank Kent was the first one, so they decided they would put some initials on it, and they waited and waited and finally the composing room man came to them said, "You've got a half an hour to think what you are going to sign on it, the initials." And Bruce Bliven had just come over from Brooklyn on the Brooklyn Rapid Transit, BRT, so he just changed it around from BRT to TRB.

HESS: What years did you write that column?

STROUT: I've done it for the last 27 years off and on. Occasionally people would take my place.

I was going to quote some of the things I said at the time. You see I was writing -- well, here on June 28. They permitted me freedom to write as I think in *The New Republic*, but at the same time *The New Republic* had come out for Henry Wallace, oddly for him, so it's a pity - I say, "Truman has nailed the New Deal

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flag to its mast. It's a pity he didn't do it sooner."

And then I say, "We think, moreover, that the Republicans are underestimating Truman as a campaigner. There's gratification in watching a rather mild, temperate, long-suffering man finally blow off steam against a reactionary Congress (as I regarded them), and what a record he has to work on. The ore is practically inexhaustible."

This is written for a liberal magazine, it represented my views, "This election may be more entertaining than we had supposed." So, as I say, the evidence was all there only you needed a Sherlock Holmes to put the things together.

And then I paid my respects to Mr. Dewey, "Dewey, we guess is at a quiet place. We honestly tried to put aside all bias, but when he came to the front to receive the vigorous ovation after his nomination" (that was at the Philadelphia convention of course), "and we saw again his bottle brush mustache, and his toothy smile, his dimples and mannequin face, we couldn't love him. His fine resonant voice soared out and there wasn't any warmth in it. The words were appropriately humble, but the speaker seemed to us cool, calculating, and supremely self-confident."

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Well, he was self-confident.

Those were the biased words of a young man who was so liberal. And I might not have written them today.

I don't know how I would approach it, but -- and then finally on July 24th I wrote -- this was just before the Philadelphia convention, but you remember both conventions were held in Philadelphia that year, "Harry Truman may not have given his party victory in Philadelphia, but he gave it self-respect."

That was a time, if you recall, where he came in by train. It would have been terribly gauche for him to appear before he was nominated. So they put him down in a little room in the cellar of the amphitheater and they kept him there. Hot, humid, it was before air-conditioning, and he stayed there I don't know how many hours and then finally at 1:30 or 2 o'clock in the morning he came out and he let go. And again, it was this sense that the fellow had more power than we had supposed, and it was evidently on the -- I must have written it right after hearing him when I was elated by what he had done. It surprised me, just I suppose as a theatrical critic I thought this was going to be a lame and dull affair and had a feeling that, "Gee, this fellow may show them

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something after all."

HESS: What had been the mood of the convention up until that time?

STROUT: Dispirited. Oh, it was the most dispirited convention I have ever -- that I can recall, until Alben Barkley made a speech.

HESS: The keynote address.

STROUT: He made a splendid speech in which, he got at the line where somebody had attacked the -- how did that go? Somebody had attacked the birds...oh, the blue eagle, wasn't it, the blue eagle or something of that sort?

HESS: The old NRA blue eagle.

STROUT: Yes, I think when he -- he said when he came to -- when the Democrats came to office the poor creature was so emaciated they were so poor and emaciated. They loved it, they laughed.

Well, let's go back and just finish this thing off. "Harry Truman may not have given his party a victory in Philadelphia, but he gave it self-respect, and it was fun to see this scrappy little cuss come out of his corner fighting at 2:00 in the morning, not trying to use big words any longer, but being himself, and saying a lot of honest things that needed to be said. Unaccountably we found ourselves on top of a

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pine bench cheering."

(That's a terrible admission for a reporter to make a violent statement...)

HESS: Reporters are not supposed to do that, are they?

STROUT: This was an anonymous column you see, so I could do that. "We have always thought of Mr. Truman as Mr. Average Man himself. Nice and likeable and commonplace, mediocre. These attributes made something of a problem when one is President, but it is the hope of salvation for the average man that you find in him a touch of the divine if you jab around long enough. And there was real splendor in the way Truman took over that convention. As we wrote last week, 'He is a stronger campaigner than a lot of people realize.'"

Well, that just about covers it, I guess.

HESS: All right, one question on that particular speech: At the end of that speech he said that on Turnip Day he was going to call Congress back into special session.

STROUT: Yes, that's right. He was a sensation. That's a -- there again, lest I be thought overwhelmingly biased, that was a pure political ploy. He knew perfectly well that Congress, the

lame duck Congress, was not going to pass anything. It was pure and simple politics. He got them back and he dramatized the situation and the

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country needed -- he wasn't running against Mr. Dewey, nobody can run against Mr. Dewey, Mr. Dewey wasn't saying anything. But he had an antagonist, and the nation, it was like the end of the World Series, he was this man versus all of the powers of Congress and of -- well, the newspapers I think -- the newspapers of the country in that election, 75 percent of the papers -- or 75 percent of the circulation, was on Dewey's side. After all, the Democrats had been in office I think sixteen years and people thought it was time for a change, and it may have been time for a change. It might have been better for the country. I don't say that it wasn't, but Truman's next four years weren't very successful.

HESS: Mr. Truman, as you say, had called the Congress in to set them up as a straw man to attack them during the campaign and to run against the 80th Congress.

STROUT: That's right.

HESS: But the 80th Congress had given him the Greek-Turkish Aid bill, which became known as the Truman Doctrine, the 80th Congress had passed the Marshall plan. They had cooperated with Mr. Truman in the foreign field.

STROUT: That's right, Jerry.

HESS: Are our elections, when there is not a shooting war on (as there was not in 1948), decided principally on

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domestic issues?

STROUT: I think so, yes. That's -- you're raising a great big subject there about what they had given and what they hadn't given him. It -- yes, he had given it to them, he had sold it to them let us say, but it seemed in the national interest.

Yes, we're patriotic here in Washington. I identify myself with the government in that respect and I think politics very wisely may stop at the water's edge, sometimes it doesn't and sometimes it does. But Bob [Robert A.] Taft, and particularly [Arthur H.] Vandenberg went along with him in a statesmanlike fashion.

HESS: All right, one other question moving back in time just a little bit. What do you recall about the efforts to get someone else on the Democratic ticket in '48, other than Mr. Truman just before the convention?

STROUT: Well, I only recollect what has been and appeared in the books and so forth. This group of -- a group of, I describe them as dilettante liberals, and I try to differentiate myself from them. They had tried to get Eisenhower to...

HESS: The ADA?

STROUT: ...run, yes.

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And it was a preposterous thing, they didn't know what he stood for. And to go and just because he was -- that was the crassest kind of political maneuvering from intellectuals and liberals who would decry it if the conservatives had done -- and I didn't buy that at all. That was -- and I didn't give *The New Republic* the benefit of saying that they permitted me to write my stuff, even though they had made Mr. Wallace the editor of the magazine, as I recollect.

HESS: One question on Leslie Biffle, who was Secretary of the Senate at that time: Do you recall anything in Philadelphia about Mr. Biffle boosting Senator Barkley for the top spot on the ticket?

STROUT: I don't associate it with Biffle, but there was a lot of talk that Barkley had made another cross of gold speech that would get his -- possibly might get him the nomination. Yes, there was a temporary movement.

Those movements don't mean very much. There's always a half a dozen of these ripples on the top of the water, or the lake, that don't -- they go against the current.

But a President can get himself re-nominated, it's virtually impossible to stop him. I think Lyndon Johnson probably could have got himself re-nominated if

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he hadn't read the handwriting on the wall.

HESS: I have mentioned the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall plan, but what is your evaluation of the results obtained by the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall plan during these years?

STROUT: Oh well, I have only the -- they're fine, they're good. You can get better experts than I am to answer that.

Have a quotation here if it's worthwhile getting it (and I don't think it is), they were generally accepted by historians as being magnificent. Arthur Schlesinger, Sr. (not Jr.), a Harvard professor, on several occasions polled 65 or 70 of the leading historians of the country (I know you have this), as to where the Presidents rate. And they found -- well, they found Truman rated not in the greatest, but superior under the class of the greatest. And, oddly enough at the time anyway, he ranked somewhat above Mr. Eisenhower who was, of course, the idol, virtually of everyone.

HESS: At the time that you were traveling on the Truman train, did you ever have occasion to speak with Mr. Truman and pass the time of day with him?

STROUT: Yes, we passed the time of day and say, "Hi," and so forth, but no, I don't think we had any deeper personal contact. I did with Margaret sometimes.

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He would introduce Mrs. Truman, the First Lady, as "my boss," and then Margaret. Always with very evident pride, and he conveyed to the audience the warmth of a typical American family. They were very closely knit.

HESS: Where were you on election night?

STROUT: Right here in Washington.

HESS: What do you recall about your feelings when the election did not go your way, or did not go the way that you thought it would?

STROUT: I kind of hate -- that's a painful subject. Well, I'll be frank about it, there'd been a -- at some great rally, oh, let's see, first of all we went to friends, and the ambiguous returns began to come in and I was superior and I said, "Yes, oh yes, he's winning these, these big -- some of these big states, but wait until you hear from the small towns."

HESS: Fundamentally the same thing Mr. Kaltenborn was saying.

STROUT: Yes. Oh, quite -- yes, we all said the same thing. And then I told my wife, "Why, I'm going down early and write the story so I'm going to bed early and I'll write a story about Mr. Dewey in the morning. I'll

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get down to the office about 6 o'clock, the wire would open about 8:00," and then he didn't win.

Well, I had mixed motives. I had the feeling that this piece of mine in *The New Republic* coming out, but then a kind of snobbishness developed. We were all so badly fooled that we all began boasting. That was eating crow, we all had our own various types of crow to eat. And I was in there with everyone else.

HESS: Were you ever with Mr. Truman in some of his more relaxed moments? Did you ever go to Key West, were you ever on board the *Williamsburg* or with him at a informal moment in the White House perhaps?

STROUT: I don't think so in the sense that you know -- mean, no, I didn't have any inside information about him. I went to the press conferences all -- and he was relaxed, reasonably relaxed then, and as you say, he'd shoot from the shoulder. He wouldn't wait and really pause and meditate over what he ought to say. He didn't count to ten before he answered, and it was fun to see him and wonder what he would come out with. No, I didn't know him personally.

HESS: All right. One of the major events that took place in the Truman administration was the invasion of South Korea by North Korea. Do you believe that we should

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have supported South Korea in the way that we did and then enter the fighting?

STROUT: I did at the time, yes, I think so on the whole, although I'm very much against the Vietnam war. I think the circumstances were such there that we had more legal basis for doing it, and more hope of accomplishing a purpose there. And...yes.

HESS: Of course, as you know, on April of '51 General MacArthur was dismissed.

STROUT: Yes.

HESS: Do you think that General MacArthur should have been dismissed?

STROUT: Certainly! Without a doubt.

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

STROUT: I think that was another case of my own folly. I had gone to a Democratic meeting where he made the announcement here in Washington, I recall.

HESS: The Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner.

STROUT: Yes. And I didn't stay until the end of it.

HESS: You did not?

STROUT: No, I didn't stay to the end of it. I mean I waited until he was in the middle of his speech and I had a copy of his speech in advance, and it was -- I

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learned something from that. I waited until the end of Lyndon Johnson's speech.

And so I had the mortifying experience of when I got home, my wife told me, "You weren't there."

HESS: After he took himself out of the race, who did you think would be the best man that the Democrats could put up that year?

STROUT: Oh, you'd have to recall me...

HESS: Well, Adlai Stevenson, Alben Barkley, Fred Vinson, Estes Kefauver, and his coonskin cap, were working quite hard.

STROUT: Who was that last one?

HESS: Estes Kefauver.

STROUT: Yeah, but who was the next one?

HESS: Oh, I just mentioned Kefauver's coonskin cap.

STROUT: I traveled around with Estes Kefauver.

HESS: Did you?

STROUT: And I don't think any of them really seemed to be of strong presidential character, caliber, but...

HESS: What was your opinion of Adlai Stevenson at that time? This is in the spring of '52.

STROUT: Yes. Yes, he had made a good reputation for himself in Illinois and I traveled with him later on.

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HESS: During the campaign?

STROUT: I'll have to jump over this -- it was either before the convention or after, and this is what influenced me very strongly. At an informal speech he made, I don't even know if it was written down, it may have been, out in California, he really reached a degree of eloquence which I had not thought was in him and I said, "This is another Woodrow Wilson."

You ask me what I think of him. I don't think he would have made a good President. I think he was poetic and we had a great deal of trouble with him.

The only time I ever saw this happen he was, oh, it may have been out in West Virginia somewhere. It was a whistlestop speech he was making and a crowd of high school girls had come down to see him, and he didn't hold their attention. And they began whispering and talking, and he actually lost the trend of his discourse and had to appeal to them to be quiet. So I just -- it seemed to me that it was essentially a weakness there.

Something very much like that happened in Harrisburg where he made his acceptance speech. He made a big speech there; the Democrats were broke, and they got money enough for a nationwide television speech and they had been gathering all day, miners and workers

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and he lost the attention of -- they had been on the town these miners, and a good many of them were drunk, and they were noisy. And it threw him off his stride.

And I just don't think that a man who is unable to meet that ordeal of publicity, every man who becomes President has to go through an ordeal of publicity, and it's a very good thing. I liked him very much, I admired him and he could be amazingly eloquent and he had a wonderful wit. I didn't think he was what I -- I doubt if he would have made a very good President.

HESS: There was some criticism made of Governor Stevenson in that he quite often spoke over the heads of the people he was talking to and didn't phrase his speeches in the type of language that would be understandable to his audiences. Is that a fair statement or not?

STROUT: Well, that may be true, although I think I don't -- I think that I give the American voter and the public a higher rating. It may have been over the head of the immediate whistlestop audience, but it's been found, I think, generally that the ability of expression, and eloquence, is a good commodity.

We think of the President as a high priest, but that wasn't it. The point was that he had never let his copy -- he was always revising his speech right to the

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last minute.

A campaign speech is an art form of its own, and you can make set speeches, have them prepared, but when you are dealing with crowds, informally, you can't -- you can't try to make your metaphors come unmixed in that sort of thing and have the thing scan. He was an artist who was -- there was a poet in there trying to get out, just like Gene McCarthy.

HESS: In the 1952 campaign, did you travel both with Governor Stevenson and General Eisenhower?

STROUT: Yes.

HESS: How would you compare the way that the crowds accepted those two gentlemen?

STROUT: Eisenhower got bigger crowds.

They came to see Eisenhower. Eisenhower was a great -- was a General and they had never heard of Adlai Stevenson.

HESS: Was there anything that the Democrats could have done that year to have won? Was there any man that they could have put up?

STROUT: No. No. No, it was high time that the Republicans won, just as you could argue that it was high time -- in '48 that the Republicans had a change in office.

HESS: Is it a good thing to have a change in office every

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so often?

STROUT: Occasionally, yes.

HESS: Why?

STROUT: Well, that takes another hour, but in general you get entrenched committee chairmen here, you get entrenched bureaucracy here, you get a degree of anger that builds up in the public, and you don't want to have the feeling that it's the monopoly for one man.

I felt Franklin Roosevelt was wise to run the fourth term because there was a war and circumstances even greater than the war -- well, not greater, but you are equally important things: The depression, the crash, and then the war. But he managed to handle those things.

HESS: As you are TRB, what is your evaluation and opinion of Mr. Truman's commitment to liberal policies?

STROUT: I rate President Truman pretty high. In retrospect he grows rather than diminishes, which is a fine thing to say about anybody. In my writing 20 years later I come back to things he did. Yesterday I was writing about the Subversives Activities Control Board. Truman vetoed the bill setting it up, and was overridden in the McCarthy era. He said it wouldn't work. It didn't. Eisenhower was an idol of many but in retrospect his eight years were rather commonplace (on the economic side he got

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three recessions in eight years.) It was the cliché of the times that Truman did the hard things better than the easy things; he made some poor appointments and was over-loyal to second rate friends (unlike FDR who could sever relations skillfully and perhaps with suave brutality). Truman could make decisions. "The buck stops here," his desk motto said; he meant it. He was not the father figure of many presidencies, people felt he was one of them; they liked him; his simplicity and naturalness came through. His enemies derided him as being too little for the job which probably meant that he was not pompous or sententious; but there was no credibility gap; people felt he was honest, maybe too honest, in shooting from the hip. A trait recalling Jackson. People felt, too, I think, that he was courageous, a scrapper, "a brave little cuss." There was a deep though not always recognized, feeling by masses of people of identification with him; like them he had limitations but like them he was doing his best -- maybe working at it, in fact, harder than they were.

I try to look back. He handled the Douglas MacArthur period boldly and effectively when a smaller man would have tried to compromise.

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It is interesting to recall how he tried to get a

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national health insurance system about 30 years ahead of his time and was defeated, of course, by the conventional wisdom of his day, mobilized politically by the American Medical

Association. On foreign affairs I think he did better than average though I have never been sure it was necessary to drop the atom bomb on crowded Japanese cities. (I thought so at the time; reporters knew that it was to be done and were quite powerless to intervene.) The Greece-Turkey interventions seem wise; at any rate, they were successful. The Marshall plan was splendid. He helped create NATO.

My, the U.S. was lucky to have a spunky little chap just when he came, when he was overshadowed by the glamour of the late FDR. He wasn't a "great" certainly. But I would put him up in the above-average class. In my working lifetime I have seen FDR and Wilson; maybe they were in the top class. I have seen Coolidge and Harding who were below average, and Eisenhower -- average. Hoover should have done better; he was ruined by the depression. Nixon, maybe is average. I would rate Truman affectionately not at the top but in the upper third. (Lyndon Johnson got some fine social welfare legislation through but ruined himself on Vietnam; Kennedy gave us a fairy tale

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Camelot but was blocked by Congress.)

Truman rates pretty high.

HESS: In your opinion what are Mr. Truman's major accomplishments?

STROUT: Oh, the foreign affairs things I think. I would have to stop and think. You can't spring that one on me all of a sudden. It's been a long time ago.

You know you have it -- I would just take the conventional view, he did a lot of good things and then he pointed the way too, to a lot of welfare proposals that will ultimately be accepted, but he was tapering off the New Deal and obviously the country wanted time to consolidate what it has done.

I would say foreign affairs probably. I just offhand would have to go back and -- I just couldn't say offhand.

HESS: All right. What do you see as Mr. Truman's place in history?

STROUT: I think that he rates pretty high among the American Presidents. He's not one of the greats, he's not Lincoln or Washington and I think Franklin Roosevelt might get up there in the great. I would say there were five or six...Jefferson. I'd say he might make the near greats with Monroe and Madison and that

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type. But he'd be above, if you -- I think these historians have the category of mediocre, or the middle group, I think he's above that. And then to be a couple of failures of whom Grant would be one, and who was just before the Civil War...Lincoln's predecessor?

HESS: James Buchanan..

STROUT: Buchanan, yes. But I would say that he would rate pretty well.

HESS: Do you have anything else to add on Mr. Truman, the Truman administration, your years here in Washington, or on...

STROUT: I think one thing that right now (to bring a contemporary thing), is I think Mr. Nixon makes a terrible mistake by not having more press conferences. I think that the press conferences are almost a part of our form of government now and various presidents, some are good at it, some are poor at it, but I think it's a form of communication with the American people and I think Nixon is -- I think Nixon is making a very great mistake in two ways. He's not educating the public and he's not -- he lost contact with the public, I think, in part.

HESS: Which President since you have been here understood

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the true value and the true use of the press conference the best?

STROUT: Oh, without a doubt, Franklin Roosevelt. He would have two a week, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. He had one a week after the war started. He was a past master of it and enjoyed it. And then I would suppose, perhaps Kennedy for his short (I was going to say reign, that seems he's kind of a royal family), and I...

HESS: Camelot and all.

STROUT: Well, yes. He did very well. But for all, Eisenhower, everybody said he was bumbling and he couldn't say a grammatical sentence, but you could watch that mobile face of his and you knew what he was saying, and he got over to the public. And...

HESS: How would you rate LBJ?

STROUT: Well, there are two parts of LBJ. He was, how would you put it? He was just like an onion you just peeled him and peeled him and peeled him and you never knew where the final LBJ was. He was pretty good until he got trapped by this war and that just crept over him like a disease, he got further and further into it, and you couldn't believe what he said.

HESS: Did you ever take any of those walks around the White House lawn when he would hold a press conference on the

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run, more or less?

STROUT: Yes. Yes, I followed him around practically everywhere, yes.

HESS: Is that a little difficult to do, try to follow the President around the White House lawn and take notes?

STROUT: Well, yes, but nothing he said on those walks was of particular moment. He was an extraordinary figure, almost of greatness in many ways, but he just -- he destroyed himself with this war.

HESS: FDR had 998 press conferences, and Mr. Truman had 324, President Eisenhower had 193, John Kennedy had 64.

STROUT: Well, he had 64 because he was only in office for...

HESS: He was only in office for three years. And Lyndon Johnson had 135 and on December the 10th of 1970 , President Nixon had his 12th conference.

STROUT: That's right.

HESS: Why do you think that President Nixon has dropped down in his contacts with the press so drastically?

STROUT: I thought that you were going to interview me on Mr. Truman instead of Mr. Nixon.

HESS: Well, we're going good.

STROUT: That's another story.

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HESS: Well, now why do you think that he has?

STROUT: Well, now that requires an analysis of Mr. Nixon's character and I don't know that that would be appropriate here. I think he's -- just been talking over this with a fellow with the improbable name of Peregrine Worsthorne [London *Telegraph*]; who is one of the leading English newspapermen, who was in this office. I have known him for a long time, and he's writing a piece about Mr. Nixon, we were discussing this same thing.

I think Mr. Nixon is a loner. I think he has a feeling of insecurity. I think he wants to -- he sees the disadvantages of the press conference.

I asked Bryce Harlow, one of his advisers and supporters why, and he said, "Well, another reason is that it takes about a day or so to prepare himself. He's like a lawyer, he prepares himself. He doesn't have the time."

Those are some of the reasons. He's good at it. He's all right. I think too, he may feel that he'll blurt off and say something that will ruin him. He did that, you know, almost a breakdown when he was defeated for Governor of California, and after the Carswell defeat he -- that puts -- oddly enough, that Carswell statement was two days after the Carswell

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defeat. He had no excuse for saying something extemporaneously in his red hot anger. I can't understand why he would make that statement.

HESS: In the televised press conferences, as they have developed, quite often it seems that the reporter stands up, asks his one question, and does not have a chance to ask follow-up questions as you did back in Mr. Truman's day. Is it much better to be able to delve further into your questions and ask two or three follow-up questions?

STROUT: Yes, the follow-up question is the one that always gets the news.

I may say that it is familiar probably to you, that Mr. Nixon is experimenting with the format, and he's tried various things. This conversation he had with the anchorman of the television networks and is going to try two or three other things, I think. I think we haven't seen the end of that and I think any of them is good. I think I didn't like those conversation things particularly well, as well as the press conference, but anything that brings the President into firsthand contact with the American people and where you can ask him questions face to face. You can do that in any parliamentary government. You can do it with General De Gaulle

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who -- although that was hardly a press conference. But it, I think it's to Mr. Nixon's own advantage, I think he's missing...I think perhaps his inability so far as it exists of taking the country along with him, is because he doesn't see the press often enough. It would help him. Perhaps just once a fortnight, but on a regular basis.

HESS: Anything else to add?

STROUT: No, not a thing.

HESS: Thank you very much, sir.

APPENDIX

THE LITTLE MAN'S BALLAD

(On Truman train, June and September, 1948)

Oh Grandpaw went to Oregon, the dough was on his knee
Grandpaw went to Oregon, the west coast fur to see
He got himself a partner in Cal-i-forn-i-ay (Sacramento)
They bought Sacramento on a lovely summer day.

Chorus:

They cain't prove nothin', they
ain't got a thing on me (Pocatello)
I'm goin down to Berkeley fur
to git me a degree (Davis, Cal)

Grandpaw warn't no businessman, he went right on the rocks
So grandson went to old KC to peddle drawers and socks (Official biog)
The curse was strong right down the line, no profit could he see
So Harry quit and folded up his haberdashery (Chicago)

Chorus . . .

I went to work for Pendergast, he made a judge of me
Before I knew what happened I was picked by Franklin D. ('44 convention)
I got my boots and saddles on and started for the sea (June '48)
I made a lot of speeches and I plugged for Sun Vallee (ibid)

We traveled down to Tombstone with Krug and other chums (Winslow, Ariz)
And 'neath the loam we heard the moan of a guy named Jack Williams
And graven there and writ with care, there was this epitaph:
If you do your damndest you'll wind up just like Bob Taft.

He rolled to Philadelphi-ay, a big of speech to do
And there he found old Barkley a-cryin' in his brew
Dear Alben said 'This comes too late,' but then our hero spake-
If we will work together, Kentucky we will take.

One Sabbath bright he campaigned right through Texas' bonny breast
He laid a wreath at Alamo and there the heroes blessed (San Antone)
He met Rayburn, a hard shell man, a Baptist to the root
And there revealed, though one himself, he claimed to be 'light foot.'

They can't prove nothin', they ain't
got a thing on me
I'm going down to Berkeley fur to
git me a degree.

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