

Notes

From an Interview

with

WILLIAM D. HASSETT

Secretary to President Roosevelt, 1944-45 and correspondence secretary to President Truman, 1945-52.

Northfield, Vermont
October 18 and 19, 1963

Written by Charles T. Morrissey

The Harry S. Truman Library
Independence, Missouri
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NOTICE

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[1]

MR. MORRISSEY: What was the relationship between Mr. Truman and Senator Warren Austin?

MR. HASSETT: The relationship was very good. President Truman told me that when he came to the Senate in 1935 a great many people considered him to be a messenger-boy for the Pendergast machine in Kansas City. A lot of people didn't pay him any attention and even shied away from him. But Warren Austin paid him the respect due a member of the Senate and Truman was grateful for it. Austin was correct and exact in his courtesies to the new Senator -- no more than that -- but Truman

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was touched by this kindness and never forgot about it.

When Truman was President he considered appointing Warren Austin as the successor to Harlan Fiske Stone as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. The job of U.S. representative to the United Nations came up, and Truman appointed Austin to the U.N. instead. He had great admiration for Austin and didn't allow their different political affiliations to impede that admiration.

Truman appointed another Vermont Republican to a high office -- he appointed Ernest Gibson to a Federal judgeship. Gibson had been governor of the state. Truman thought well of his abilities and made the appointment despite a howl from the party chairman and the national committee about appointing a Republican over some "deserving Democrats." The funny thing about that appointment was that many of the mossback Republicans in Vermont were so distressed to think of such a liberal as Gibson on the bench that they howled as loudly as the Democrats.

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Another Republican from this area -- Charles Tobey of New Hampshire -- had the President's respect. I remember telling the President that the conservative crowd that had defeated Claude Pepper in Florida and Frank Graham in North Carolina was thinking about defeating Tobey in New Hampshire. The President said that if that happened he would appoint Tobey to a high position in the government as soon as something commensurate to his abilities was available.

In the Senate throughout the years that Truman was President was George Aiken, of course. Aiken often voted our way. Charles Murphy used to keep a tabulation of how Senators voted on legislation urged by the White House and George Aiken was on our side more frequently than a great many Democrats.

MORRISSEY: How was Truman different from Roosevelt?

HASSETT: There were many differences, of course, and most of these are obvious to anyone who knows

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their backgrounds. More interesting to me is the fact that both men were very informal with people, but informal in different ways. Truman would be informal with guests but never ignore propriety as to calling them by their correct titles or introducing them in proper sequence. He was informal with people but a stickler for recognizing their offices and paying proper respect to

their offices. Roosevelt, on the other hand, would call royalty by their first names. Truman wouldn't do that.

MORRISSEY: Do you recall any comments by President Roosevelt about the Truman Committee?

HASSETT: No, I don't. I don't recall any occasion when he spoke about that committee. Mr. Roosevelt was rather unfair to Truman because after the election of 1944 he made hardly an effort to advise Truman of what the government was doing. I think there were only one or two occasions after the Inaugural in 1945 that Roosevelt had

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Truman come to the White House.

MORRISSEY: Was there any discussion about Leslie Biffle joining the White House staff?

HASSETT: There was some talk about this but Biffle was more valuable to the President where he was than he would have been as a member of the White House staff. Some people mentioned Biffle as a possible press secretary but Charley Ross was chosen. He was an old friend of the President from Independence and a first-rate newspaperman: Charley Ross would have written an excellent book about Truman if he had lived. In fact, I think Ross would have written the book an Truman.

MORRISSEY: What impressions do you have of other staff members?

HASSETT: David Niles was a help to me because I could refer items to him -- correspondence involving minority groups, for example -- and I would never hear about them again. I don't know what he did with them but he certainly took the pressure off

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me. Charley Ross and Joseph Short worked themselves to death. The job of press secretary was atrociously demanding, and took all they had.

MORRISSEY: Was the President interested in the reconstruction of the White House?

HASSETT: He was very interested because he had a great interest in architecture. I recall that one day I pointed out to him that the portico of the White House was out of balance with the remainder of the building and could be changed to improve the overall design. I said he would certainly get the headlines if he announced he was planning to alter the portico. This was soon after the outcry that greeted his plans to add a porch to the White House. The President had a good laugh at the mention of the ruckus he would create by tampering with the portico, and from the gleam in his eye I think he really wanted to have it moved. But that would be out-of-the-question, of course, as far as the public was

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concerned, so nothing came of it beyond the good laugh we had at the suggestion.

MORRISSEY: What was the procedure in the pre-press conference meetings with the President?

HASSETT: In these meetings we would try to anticipate what questions the reporters would probably ask the President. We would review the factual background on several issues that were current and with tricky questions on how he might reply to them. But in the press conferences, when reporters started to needle the President, he would fire back sometimes and all our efforts beforehand would be for naught. This was frustrating to us.

MORRISSEY: Was there an effort to recover the President's letter to Paul Hume, the music critic?

HASSETT: Such a possibility was discussed. I remembered I favored an effort to recover it but other people argued that such an attempt would cause a greater furor than the contents of the letter itself, so the attempt was not made.

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MORRISSEY: Do you recall the President telling his staff at Key West that he would not run for re-election in 1952?

HASSETT: Yes, I do. As I recall the President told us -- his staff -- over the dinner table one night. The most amazing thing to me is that this secret was kept so well by the people who knew about it. I was convinced the secret would "leak" because in all my years in Washington I never knew something to remain confidential if more than a few people knew about it. As I recall about fifteen people heard Mr. Truman say he wouldn't run again. He told his staff, or course, because he wanted all of us to have a forewarning of what was coming so we could make our individual plans for the future. The fact that this remained a secret until the President made his announcement publicly -- in the spring on 1952 -- is one of the most amazing things I recall from all my years in Washington.

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