

Oral History Interview

With

COMMANDER WILLIAM M. RIGDON

Assistant Naval Aide in the White House, 1942-53

Washington, D.C.

July 16, 1970

by Jerry N. Hess, Harry S. Truman Library

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HESS: All right Commander, we are recording, and to begin let's refer historians to your very excellent book, *White House Sailor*, and many of the questions that we would normally cover in an interview like this, if they are looking for those answers, they can go to the book and find what you have had to say about it at that point, but just to begin this morning, would you tell me a little bit about your background; where were you born and where were you raised, and what are a few of the positions that you have held?

RIGDON: I was born in Statesboro, Georgia. That's a small town about fifty miles northwest of Savannah. I was raised there, and went to school there. About a year and a half after I finished high school I enlisted in the Navy, and the Navy took care of the next thirty years of my life.

HESS: They did a good job of taking care of that thirty years.

RIGDON: Yes.

HESS: All right. And then since your Navy career what have you done? You've been associated with...

RIGDON: I retired from the Navy in August 1953. Then I attended Cornell--the school of hotel administration at Cornell--for one year. I came back to Washington in July '54, to take a job as executive secretary of the Virginia Hotel Company, which although a corporation, is really the Willard estate. I am referring to the Willards who built and operated the Willard Hotel here for many years.

By the time I had joined the corporation, both Mr. Willard and Mrs. Willard had died and the members of its board of directors who ran it were mostly bankers and lawyers who didn't have the necessary time to give to details. I personally knew several members of the board and one of them prevailed on me to change my chosen career--second career--from hotel man to managing this hotel company. It was not an operating company, but sort of holding company. I was with them for about four years. When one of the principal stockholders sold her interest, it became a one-woman affair. I didn't think I would like that arrangement, so I left there and went to work with two members of the board of directors who were attorneys. I've been with them ever since, but I am leaving them at the end of this month. I'm going to try retirement again.

HESS: Are you going back to Georgia?

RIGDON: No, I have to stick around Washington for a couple more years. I had this operation on my neck and the doctors want to watch me for...

HESS: For a little while.

RIGDON: A little while longer. And since I had the operation at the naval hospital here, it's much better that I just stay here until they release me, which I hope will be in another couple of years.

HESS: Fine. Now, your duties as Assistant Naval Aide are fairly well down in your book, but just briefly, what were your duties as Assistant Naval Aide during the years that you spent in the White House?

RIGDON: I was the administrative man for the office and that explains why I was there so long. As you probably know, the White House is loath to make changes as long as everything is going well. It was this reluctance to change horses as long as everything was going well and not that I was the only man who could have done the work that I stayed on so long. I stayed on almost eleven years. Actually, I had had only one predecessor.

When World War II broke for us, President [Franklin D. Roosevelt foresaw a lot of travel and he wanted a male secretary who could be able to accompany him anywhere and everywhere that he might go. A young fellow by the name of Frank Terry was the first one to serve in the job as Administrative Assistant to the Naval Aide. President Roosevelt promised command of the Battleship *Iowa* that was under construction to his then Naval Aide, Captain [John L.] McCrea, and Terry asked to go to the *Iowa* with McCrea. McCrea, with whom I had served in another battleship previously, very kindly thought of me and had me ordered to Washington to relieve Terry.

I came to the White House during the Roosevelt days, and my duties were strictly as an assistant to the Naval Aide when we were in Washington. But on the road, my principal duties were taking care of the President's mail and his clerical needs. Sort of like Topsy, those duties grew and grew. As we traveled more and more I assumed, or was assigned, additional duties. On almost every trip, I seemed to acquire new duties.

President Roosevelt was quite a Navy man and any chore that the Navy could do, he had them do. We were responsible for coordinating all his travel. We had to assemble the staff that we were going to take with us. For instance, stewards, or messmen as we call them in the Navy, cooks, photographers, and various other personnel, as you can see from the roster of the President's party. Not all those chores were mine, but many of them were.

HESS: Did you work closely with Dewey Long the transportation--I believe he was transportation man.

RIGDON: He was White House transportation man. There were times when we had to arrange our transportation through Mr. Long, but there were other times when not even Mr. Long was cut in on our plans--I mean, they were so secret that not even...

HESS: On the secret trips he wouldn't be utilized. Is that right?

RIGDON: That's right. By the time Mr. Truman came in, they had started taking newsmen along. I think the last trip President Roosevelt made we picked up three newsmen, or representatives of the press services, the International News Services, the Associated Press, and the United Press...

HESS: Was that on the Yalta trip?

RIGDON: Yes. On our way back from Yalta, we picked them up in the Mediterranean. They didn't know where we had been or what the President had been doing. They were told only to check in with General [Dwight D.] Eisenhower and that he would see that they were at the right place at the right time to join the ship for the return voyage.

But what I was leading up to is that by the time Mr. Truman came in, the very first trip that he made, he did take some press along in the ship. And as a matter of fact, Mr. Long went along to be on hand, had it been necessary to elaborate on or change those plans.

For most of the Key West trips, the staff was sent down to Key West by Navy planes. the President, of course, used the Air Force plane, and Dewey Long arranged for the newspapermen to go down in their own chartered plane. Our rail travel, of course, was all arranged by Mr. Long, even our secret travel. Mr. Long was a very important fellow in those days, but there were times when he was told only what he had to know and nothing more.

HESS: What were your duties in relation to the *Williamsburg*? When President Roosevelt was there he had the *Potomac*, was that right?

RIGDON: Yes.

HESS: What were your duties in relation to the two vessels, the *Potomac* and then later the *Williamsburg*?

RIGDON: I was just the Naval Aide's mouthpiece, you might say. Most of the time he would give me the details and it would be my responsibility to get them to the commanding officer of the *Williamsburg*. Generally, the Naval Aide would give him the general plan and I would have to pick up from there and arrange the details, such as delivery of mail and passengers joining after the ship had left Washington. Quite frequently the President would invite guests who could not get away in time to leave with him, and we would have to arrange to have them flown to certain spots where the ship could pick them up. The Naval Aide's office, or the Assistant Naval Aide would have to arrange for the delivery and pick up of mail, and we also took care of urgent requests made by the ship. Quite frequently they would need this or that. They were pretty good about preparing for these trips, but the best of us sometimes overlook something. Frequently they would send up a request by wire for us to get this article or get this person and send them down.

HESS: Now Donald MacDonald was the captain of the *Williamsburg* for a while. Is that right?

RIGDON: Right.

HESS: Were there other people who were the captain, or was he the captain for the...

RIGDON: Oh, no. The *Williamsburg* had a number of captains. There was Captain John H. Kevers, Commander William A. Bartos, Captain Charles Freeman, Captain Edwin S. Miller, and Commander Donald J. MacDonald. Kevers was the first skipper of the *Williamsburg*. He was the one who actually recommissioned her.

Ordinarily the command of the *Williamsburg* was changed about every two years. It sounds like a very easygoing job, but it was very exacting, and after two or three years of it, most of those officers were...

HESS: They were ready for something else.

RIGDON: Quite willing to move on--that's right. They were in a position where remaining too long in that spot would have actually hurt their career. They had to get certain experiences not available there in order to qualify for selection for promotion, and it just didn't do to get into a spot like that and stay there too long.

HESS: Would you usually go along on the trips that the President would take on the *Williamsburg*?

RIGDON: I usually went along unless the Naval Aide did.

HESS: It was usually one or the other?

RIGDON: More often, I remained at the White House where I was kept quite busy.

HESS: What do you recall about some of the trips that you went on, do you recall anything in particular? Any places that you went on the *Williamsburg*, anything that you may have heard the President say of interest during those times? First, where did you go?

RIGDON: Well, actually...

HESS: Just sailing on the Potomac?

RIGDON: Most of the trips that I made in the *Williamsburg* were on the Potomac River or the Chesapeake Bay.

HESS: Weekend trips?

RIGDON: Yes. Because, whenever the President went to Key West I usually flew down early. I was in the advance party and it was my job to see that everything down there was set up. You'll find in the logs that of the ten or eleven trips, about eight or nine I went down in advance. The Naval Aide seemed to prefer that I go down with the Secret Service and assure him that everything was ready. The house used by the President was within the naval base.

Key West, as you know, is a very small town, and the naval base is situated right in the middle of the town. It was a very convenient arrangement and afforded ample security with the use of a minimum of extra personnel. The naval base had a fence around it, and the usual outer guard--which they didn't have to enlarge--sufficed. As far as the naval base was concerned, I don't think the Marine guard was increased by a single man. Down there the President felt that he could step out of the house and walk around the base without every person he encountered wanting to stop

him and talk to him. I guess the servicemen were told not to pester him; not to say anything more than "Good day, Mr. President," unless he spoke to them to...

HESS: To answer back..

RIGDON: Stop and answer if asked a specific question, but otherwise just to salute him and go on their way. Well, from his first trip he saw the advantages it offered, and that, in my estimation, is why he so thoroughly enjoyed his time at Key West. Key West does not have any really good beaches. It's because of the terrain more than anything else. The sand is coarse and rough. To remedy this, the Navy hauled in a lot of sand, did what they could to make a suitable beach there within the area of the naval base, and set it aside for the President. That added to his enjoyment and...

HESS: I noticed in your logs you referred to that as the "Truman beach."

RIGDON: Well, that was the name--after--after he had used it one time and decided he would like to...

HESS: Decided he liked it.

RIGDON: ...go back. There was never any formal dedication as such, but after Truman's first visit the press began to refer to it as the Truman beach.

Getting to little asides, I don't think I had occasion to mention in the book but, his privacy at Truman's beach was never disturbed but one time and I almost got into the middle of it then, or I was in the middle of it. Some of the press photographers called me up one day and sort of misrepresented things slightly. They gave me to understand that Mr. Ross had approved of them using a blimp to make some pictures. I took them at their word and set up a flight for them.

Well, anyway, we were all down at the beach that morning and low and behold this blimp shows up and takes a position off the beach, about a hundred yards at sea. Next we noticed that their cameras were grinding away. The President didn't get particularly excited, he was sitting there in his shorts and enjoying himself. But Mr. Ross, who was press secretary, got furious. He first wanted to know "What are those fellows doing." Then he recognized some of the faces even at that distance and wanted to know what the hell they were doing in that blimp. When I told him I had arranged for it, he didn't say another word to me. He hopped in a car and speeded out to the naval air station, and had the blimp recalled.

HESS: Did you tell him that they had phoned and made a misrepresentation?

RIGDON: I told him later, but at that particular point...

HESS: He just didn't have time.

RIGDON: He just didn't take time. He was bent on getting their exposed film. Nothing ever came of the incident because he accepted my explanation. However, I don't think he ever gave

them their film back. That was the only incident of the President's privacy at Truman beach ever being violated.

HESS: What do you think the President enjoyed the most, the *Williamsburg*, Shangri-La, or Key West?

RIGDON: Well, I don't think there is any question but he enjoyed Key West the most. You know...

HESS: You were also in Shangri-La weren't you?

RIGDON: Yes. He has gone back to Key West several times, as you know. A mutual friend of ours down there, John Spottswood, has been his host. I've talked to Mr. Truman a couple of times since he retired and he still enjoys going down and visiting with John. But Shangri-La, as we called it in our day...

HESS: Camp David now.

RIGDON: President Roosevelt preferred, and insisted, that we leave the trees as they were. There was growth almost up to the windows of the lodge.

The first time or two that Mr. and Mrs. Truman went up there, why, it just seemed obvious to me that he didn't like it. So I pinned him down one day and asked him, "Is there anything that we can do up here that would make you like the place better?"

It was a wonderful retreat, as far as Washington was concerned. In those days the quickest way to get up there was to drive. In two hours the Secret Service could have him there.

So he finally told me, "I feel cooped up in this lodge." He remarked, "I look out the window and there's nothing but trees." He didn't like it.

So, I got a detail of men from the *Williamsburg*, with axes, bulldozers, and everything else we needed. We went to work and cleared out an area which is now the so-called "Eisenhower putting green." It's the area immediately east of the main lodge--or the back side. We cleared it out all the way over to where the mountain starts descending. The clearing affords one a really beautiful view of the valley below.

HESS: And then he could see something else besides trees.

RIGDON: After we cleared it out so he didn't seem so hemmed in up there, he went up more frequently, and so did Mrs. Truman.

One of my chores whenever he went up there was going along with him on his morning walk. I know that he just loved those morning walks, because two minutes after you left the lodge you were in the woods on a trail. He was very interested in things up there, and I had to take a crash course in...

HESS: Woodsmanship.

RIGDON: Woodsmanship, that's right. Another thing that he got to enjoy up there was driving. Shangri-La was the only place I knew where he could drive his own vehicle. He and Mrs. Truman could go for rides in the jeep up there. The Secret Service man and I sat in the back seat and Mr. and Mrs. Truman in the front seat. He didn't have to stick to the reservation. I don't know whether it's a national park or a state park, or what sort of a reservation up there, but there's quite a bit of wooded area there beyond the confines of the President's camp and he could ride for a whole afternoon and maybe not even meet another car or anything or see another person.

HESS: Did he enjoy getting out and driving?

RIGDON: He certainly did.

HESS: Was he a safe driver, or did he like to go a little too fast?

RIGDON: Well, in my opinion he was an expert driver, but I do remember that Mrs. Truman would occasionally slow him down. But I suppose that that happens with other couples, so I wouldn't say that it was unusual.

HESS: Where did Mrs. Truman seem to enjoy the most? What did she like to do when she got away from the White House? Shangri-La, Key West, or just...

RIGDON: Well, I really don't feel qualified to say. She enjoyed--at least she gave me the impression that she enjoyed getting down to Key West. She very seldom spent the entire time down there. She would come and go. But I think both she and Margaret enjoyed it down there because they had absolutely no duties. I mean nothing to worry about, and could set their own routine; eat whenever they wanted to, sleep as long as they wanted to. Mrs. Truman also seemed to enjoy the camp. She entertained groups of lady friends quite frequently up there, and, again, that was one place where they could, the only place I know where they could be risqué enough to take off their shoes and stockings and sit on the edge of a pool and...

HESS: Soak their feet, dangle them.

RIGDON: Dangle their feet in the water. At those times she would tell me that she wouldn't need me or that she wouldn't need the stewards for an hour or so. I would probably never have known what happened during those periods except one day the President called when she and some of her lady friends were over at the pool. Even though she had asked me not to interrupt her, I was told to go over and deliver a message from the President.

HESS: You were ordered to interrupt her.

RIGDON: Yes sir, that's right.

HESS: I would like to ask you just a few questions about a few of the men that served on the military and naval staffs during the Truman administration. If you could tell me just a little bit about what kind of men they were, and if you ever worked with them on a particular project, something that might illustrate their duties, and your duties in relation to them. Let's start off at the top with Fleet Admiral William Leahy. Now he was Chief of Staff to the President from '45 to '48. Just what kind of a man was Admiral Leahy?

RIGDON: Well, I had known Admiral Leahy back in my fleet days. This is an aside, but it's...

HESS: That's good. That's what oral history is, just one little aside after another.

RIGDON: He was commander of the battle force, and I was an enlisted Yeoman. I remember that he was looking for relief for his yeoman. Well, the best descriptive word I can give you as to his reputation is that he was a Navy man's admiral. In other words, he was a seadog. Everybody had the greatest respect for him, but few yeomen were anxious to work for him. Being his yeoman meant you had a fulltime job. I don't know that I ever had the opportunity to be chosen for that billet, but I was asked if I wanted to be considered and at the time I said no. I was perfectly satisfied where I was. So that when I came to the White House I knew that as a Navy man that he had had the highest reputation.

Between the time that I had been in the fleet and arrived at the White House, Admiral Leahy had served as Chief of Naval Operations, which is the Navy's top billet. He had retired from the Navy and President Roosevelt had appointed him as Ambassador to Vichy, France. He had left that billet mainly because his wife had just died. They had been very, very close and the old man was all broken up over her loss.

In 1942, President Roosevelt prevailed on Admiral Leahy to take a job as his Military Chief of Staff. It was just about the time that the Joint Chiefs was officially formed as such, and the President wanted for his staff a counterpart to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, someone on his level. But when I came to the White House Admiral Leahy was doing, it seemed to me that he was--well I had better not venture into that.

HESS: What were you going to say?

RIGDON: I had nothing--really, had no contact with him, or little contact with him except when the President traveled and he was a member of the presidential party. Since I was the only clerical man in the President's party, whenever Admiral Leahy had any work to do, why I did it.

It was the same way with Mr. [Harry L.] Hopkins. If Hopkins had anything to do, why I did it. Sometimes I had to tell them that they were number two or number three on the list because...

HESS: Keep their priorities arranged.

RIGDON: If the President had something for me to do, why of course, that came first. Well, anyway, in time I had enough association with Admiral Leahy to remind him about these fleet days when I had the opportunity to at least be considered for the job as his personal yeoman, and

that, based on his reputation, I had turned it down. That amused him and seemed to cement a bond between us. I thoroughly enjoyed being in his company and highly respected him. I couldn't have respected any person any higher than I did Admiral Leahy, and couldn't have enjoyed being around anyone any more than the Admiral.

HESS: Were there any times that you may have assisted him on a project or...

RIGDON: At Cairo I did quite a bit of work for him. Admiral Leahy and Mr. Hopkins were the--when the President was going to meet with some high dignitaries--the two who would finalize the agenda and make up the position papers he used.

As you probably know, Mr. Roosevelt was a person who wanted everything summarized, if possible. He didn't give a darn if it was the Declaration of Independence, he wanted it summarized in one page. He didn't want to have to turn the page.

I was never in a position where they asked me for comment or anything but...

HESS: Just assistance.

RIGDON: Yes, but quite frequently I would have to work with him. After Mr. Truman came in this didn't happen very often. Admiral Leahy made the trip to Potsdam and I worked with the Admiral then.

HESS: What do you recall about your trip to Potsdam? Anything that's not down in the log? Any little asides that didn't get in the log?

RIGDON: No. I tried to put most of the color in--either in the log or in the book there.

HESS: And I see that George Elsey assisted you with the log. He wrote the foreword.

RIGDON: I can tell you a couple of little asides about Admiral Leahy that...

HESS: That's very good.

RIGDON: One of them has to do with Potsdam.

When we arrived at the house where the President's party lived, oh, an hour or so after we had all gotten there, the President called us all together and pointed out to us that that house was within the Russian zone, that the Russians had gone to considerable expense and trouble to fit it out nicely for us, and that he--the President--wanted everything that was there when we arrived, in the same place when we left.

HESS: He didn't want any souvenir hunting?

RIGDON: He didn't want any liberation, not from that house.

Well, in Admiral Leahy's room there was a pair of ivory statuettes. About a week or so later the Admiral missed one of them. Every time he would pass me or every time I would see him he would say to me, "Rigdon, do you know anything about that missing statuette in my room?"

I answered him very militarily for about, oh, four or five times, "No sir, I do not."

But he caught me one day when I didn't have my usual patience. He asked me the same question. I said, "Admiral, you have asked me that question at least a half a dozen times and I've told you at least a half a dozen times I know nothing at all about your statuette." So, he didn't ask me that question any more.

HESS: Did they ever find it?

RIGDON: No. We never did. But there wasn't any international consequences as a result.

The other incident was on one of our trips to Key West. The Navy sent a German submarine down there that had been captured. The U.S. Navy had had it long enough to have it overhauled, and they were experimenting with its snorkle and a few other things.

The Naval Aide at that time was Admiral [James H.] Fosskett. He told the President that the submarine was there and suggested that maybe he would like to visit it. Admiral Leahy was in the President's presence and was quick to comment, "Count me out on that. I'm not the least bit interested in it."

Well, the devilishness came out in Mr. Truman. It was one of the few times I saw it come out in him. He forthwith scheduled an official visit to this submarine and listed Admiral Leahy as a member of his party.

HESS: Knowing that he didn't want to go.

RIGDON: Knowing that he didn't want to go. It practically amounted to Admiral Leahy being ordered to go. Not only did the President visit the submarine but he took a trip and a dive in it, as you probably recall. After Admiral Leahy saw what was up, he went along with the President, but he did not want to go, and told him so beforehand. I remember the Admiral fussed about that for a long, long time.

HESS: What did the Secret Service think about that, taking a dive for...

RIGDON: They were on pins and needles the whole time.

HESS: Who gave the order for the dive? The President?

RIGDON: Well, the President knew that that was in the plans.

HESS: He knew that that was in the plans. And the Secret Service...

RIGDON: Admiral Foskett was criticized over it, and so was the Navy, for taking that risk.

The details of the visit, cruise and dive were arranged by the Naval Aide. I couldn't blame the skipper, the captain of the submarine, because the captain of any ship is usually delighted to demonstrate anything his ship will do, for the benefit of the President. I merely mention this because of Admiral Leahy's part in it. There were quite a few people who had beads of perspiration as big as marbles on their foreheads.

HESS: I expect they did.

RIGDON: It's in one of these typewritten logs. I didn't get a chance to put in there that Admiral Leahy--I don't think I did--that Admiral Leahy was a reluctant accomplice.

HESS: And at this point let's mention the logs. Now this morning you have brought with you the logs that as far as I knew we are missing at the Library and we will have these xeroxed and return the originals to you. Now this is from the first...

RIGDON: The first three trips.

HESS: The first three trips, November 17-23, 1946 and March 12-19, '47, and of the third trip December 3-8, '47. So, we'll have these xeroxed and that will complete our set and then we will return these originals to you.

All right, moving on, how about Vice Admiral Wilson Brown. What do you recall about Wilson Brown?

RIGDON: Admiral Brown, as you probably know, was superintendent of the Naval Academy three times, I believe, three different times. He was also a very close personal friend of President Roosevelt. And checking back, you will find that he was Naval Aide twice or perhaps three times during Roosevelt's time.

When Captain McCrea left to assume command of the *Iowa*, President Roosevelt ordered Admiral Brown back.. Admiral Brown had already distinguished himself in the war. At least our part of the war was still very young, but Admiral Brown had distinguished himself as a commander of a task force. The best way I can spotlight it is that he was commander of the task force when "Butch" (Lt. Edward H.) O'Hare shot down five or six Japanese planes down in the Solomons and won the Congressional Medal of Honor. It wasn't any major victory, but it helped to check the Japanese at a very critical time. I mean had they not been checked then and been permitted to move on farther south, why, it would have been a lot harder to have checked them. I believe both Admiral Brown and his task force were at sea at the time of the Pearl Harbor raid.

Admiral Brown came to the White House in early 1943. He had just about reached the retirement age. As a matter of fact, he did reach it while he was there. He went on the retired list, but stayed on active duty and was Roosevelt's Naval Aide until the time of his death. He stayed on with Mr. Truman until Captain [James K.] Vardaman came. Captain Vardaman was in Okinawa when he was selected and it took two or three months to get him back here.

HESS: Do you know why Commodore Vardaman was selected?

RIGDON: Why he was selected?

HESS: Yes. Have you ever heard why he was selected?

RIGDON: Well, he was a personal friend of the Trumans. He was a reserve officer as you know. He was not a regular Navy man. I believe he was the first Naval Reserve officer to ever serve as Naval Aide to the President. But it was because of prior personal acquaintance with the President and with Mrs. Truman and...

HESS: He was there for just about one year, from May of '45 until April of the following year in '46. Just what kind of a Naval Aide did he make, was he effective:

RIGDON: Well you sort of put me on the spot.

HESS: Now that's also a part of oral history, and any statements that you make that you would like to have closed for a period of time, that we can do.

RIGDON: I never thought that Commodore Vardaman was particularly effective as Naval Aide to the President. As I recall, he spent most of his time in that billet trying to settle some personal difference he had with the Navy. He obviously had other than a high opinion of several Bureau Chiefs, and was constantly stirring up controversies with them rather than representing the President.

Vardaman, as I recall, was hospitalized home from Sicily during World War II. The convoy in which he returned put in at Boston, and he was sent to the naval hospital in St. Louis. When he was released from the St. Louis hospital and their bill was presented to the Navy Department for payment, someone in the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery very properly refused payment because the hospital had admitted Vardaman without prior authorization. The letter to the hospital was signed by some administrative officer "By direction of Ross T. McIntire," (Chief of Bureau of Medicine and Surgery). I think the matter was finally resolved and the Navy Department paid the bill, but Vardaman apparently never forgot the name "Ross T. McIntire" or Randall Jacobs (Chief of the Bureau of Naval Personnel), who had also entered the controversy.

When Vardaman came to the White House, Admiral McIntire was still Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery and Admiral Jacobs was Chief of Naval Personnel. McIntire, who had been personal physician to President Roosevelt, was also serving temporarily as President Truman's personal physician. Vardaman first went to work on McIntire. He was shortly relieved as White House physician, and then as Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery.

Vardaman then found occasion to have all sorts of differences with the Chief of Naval Personnel (Jacobs), and occasionally went directly to the Secretary of the Navy (Forrestal), with his gripes. After his vendetta with Admiral McIntire, he launched a campaign to have the status of reserve officers upgraded. He felt the Navy Department was in complete control of regular officers

(Academy graduates), and that they showed gross bias toward the reserves. As I recall, he even recommended the abolishment of the Naval Academy as the principal source of naval officers.

HESS: The next man who had the job of Naval Aide who held that position was Clark Clifford. Just after Mr. Vardaman left, and that was from April the 4th of '46 and he held it for just a short period of time until July the 1st of '46, but he had been, of course, Assistant Naval Aide from the time of Potsdam until April 4th, of '46. Just what were Mr. Clifford's duties as Assistant Naval Aide? Do you recall?

RIGDON: Captain Vardaman reported just a matter of weeks before President Truman left for the Potsdam trip and he didn't realize that when the President left town the duties of the Naval Aide at the White House were reduced to very little. They followed the President. Vardaman wanted me to go to Potsdam with him, so he brought Clifford in. Clifford was a fellow St. Louisian, and a personal friend of his. I don't think the President knew Clifford before this. Vardaman brought Clifford in to run the office while we were at Potsdam.

While we were at Potsdam, Clifford made the acquaintance of Judge [Samuel I.J Rosenman who was the Presidential Counsel. I believe that after we got back from Potsdam, he, Clifford, spent most of his time working with Judge Rosenman in the legal end of it, or the counseling end of it. And then of course, when Commodore Vardaman--he was Commodore by the time he was relieved--was moved to the Federal Reserve Board, it was done sort of precipitously as I suggested awhile ago. Clifford had gotten a promotion--I believe he was a Commander then. On Vardaman's departure, the President made Clifford his Naval Aide. It was a temporary move and not intended to be permanent. He was Naval Aide until Admiral Foskett came in a little bit later.

HESS: Admiral Foskett came in on...

RIGDON: I don't think Clifford ever talks too much about his days as Naval Aide to the President, because he will tell you that he didn't know very much about the Navy. Anyway, things began to function as they should after Vardaman left. I mean there weren't any more roadblocks or...

HESS: Did Clifford have any specific duties as Naval Aide? Did he have any functions that he performed as Naval Aide, or did he still...

RIGDON: After he was officially appointed Naval Aide he left the Counsel's office and served as Naval Aide. He performed all the normal functions that a Naval Aide does. He accompanied the President whenever the Naval Aide would normally accompany him. He...

HESS: Why I asked is because that was after the period of time when Judge Rosenman left the White House, which I believe was on February 1st, if I can find my list. He left in February of '46, and then there was a period of time when the President did not have a special counsel and then on July the 1st of '46, Mr. Clifford left the position as Naval Aide and went into the job as Special Counsel. That was started again.

RIGDON: Yes. Well, after they discovered his talents, you might say, even though part of that time he was officially designated as Naval Aide, he was more than Naval Aide to Truman. I would say from observation that he was Counsel and Naval Aide, although he didn't have the title of Counsel.

HESS: Even during that interim period when he didn't have the title.

RIGDON: Yes, that's right. George Elsey can probably give you some background on that because George worked with Mr. Clifford and was later an Administrative Assistant. Elsey was later designated as an Administrative Assistant to the President.

HESS: Let me ask you a question about George Elsey. We have mentioned the fact that he wrote the foreword to your log on the Potsdam trip, but were there other times when Mr. Elsey helped you, and just what kind of a man was he?

RIGDON: Well, Mr. Elsey, or George Elsey, started out at the White House as a Map Room watch officer. He was a personal friend of Admiral Brown, I mean Admiral and Mrs. Brown. He also knew Admiral Morison, and during the Normandy Invasion, particularly during the actual operation of the Normandy landing, he was on loan to Admiral Morison of the Naval History staff.

HESS: Samuel Eliot.

RIGDON: Samuel Eliot Morison. George was present on the spot and helped Admiral Morison compile that part of his history. The only other help, other than the foreword you're speaking of, was on the occasion of the trip that Mr. Truman made to Wake Island. The Naval Aide was in the hospital at the time. Admiral [Robert L.] Dennison was Naval Aide then. Admiral Dennison preferred that I stay here. He wanted me here in Washington for some reason, and Mr. Elsey volunteered to help. He had seen and unofficially edited other notes of mine and knew what sort of notes I usually took. George agreed to keep notes for the time he was there. And I lined up a Secret Service man to take notes and also pilot of the President's plane. If you will notice that Wake Island log was just compiled by me. I did not make any part of that trip because the Naval Aide wanted me here and...

HESS: And in your log for the trip to Wake Island it says for George Elsey, "Washington to Pearl Harbor and return," so I don't believe that he made it all the way to Wake Island, but he was making the arrangements for the particular trip.

RIGDON: Yes.

HESS: One question about this: After the time of the dismissal of General MacArthur, in the same month, on April the 21st of 1951, there was an article by Anthony Leviero in the *New York Times* about the dismissal of MacArthur, in it were quoted several of the verbatim conversations that took place at Wake Island and those conversations had been under a security classification until that time. Do you know where Anthony Leviero got his information?

RIGDON: I wouldn't have the slightest idea.

HESS: All right, fine.

RIGDON: He--from my experience with him, never asked me a single time to ever, you know, to give him anything special or anything he knew that I had not business telling him, so that...

HESS: Did you have any problems like that with other members of the press? Were there some of them who wanted special favors or...

RIGDON: Well, there were one or two who from time to time would ask me, and I would just tell them point blank that I wasn't going to prejudice myself just to...

HESS: Who would ask?

RIGDON: Well, again, I'd rather not name names.

HESS: All right. I've gone as far as I could; I've asked the question.

All right now, Rear Admiral Foskett came in in June of '46 to '48. What type of a man was Admiral Foskett?

RIGDON: Admiral Foskett, speaking from a point of working with him, was an ideal Naval Aide. He had an understanding that I was the administrative man and he would take care of the other part of the aiding, and things ran well. He was an excellent boss.

HESS: Now, you speak of the "other part of the aiding," just what did he do? You took care of the administration, what did he do?

RIGDON: Well, by other part of the aiding, I mean, the Naval Aide, in those days, was somewhat ceremonial, you might say. He had a number of ceremonial duties. He was also the, you might say, the liaison.

He was not only the President's Naval Aide, but actually he had certain responsibilities with the Secretary of the Navy. He was liaison, within limitations, between the Secretary of the Navy and the White House. The Navy Department looked to the Naval Aide to keep them informed as far as the Naval Aide could do it without prejudicing himself. I always felt that it was done so the Navy could do as good a job for the President and the Nation as possible.

It helped if they knew something about the desires and the thinking of the people at the White House. They never pressed the Naval Aide for any information that they shouldn't know about. But there were always little things that the Naval Aide could tell them.

When Foskett came in, the practice of the Naval Aide attending frequent staff meetings with the Secretary of the Navy or the Secretary of Defense was resumed. The Navy didn't want any part

of Vardaman after a couple of sessions because all he would do was go over there and do more disrupting than add to the meeting. But Foskett sort of put things back on a normal basis.

HESS: Did the Naval Aides in the White House attend the President's daily staff meetings?

RIGDON: Some did and some didn't. Now Clifford did, Vardaman did--well, I'll change that. In looking back now, after Mr. Truman came, they all did. But in Roosevelt's day, no, they did not.

HESS: You mentioned the Secretary of the Navy, of course, the man who most readily comes to mind is James Forrestal. Was he very much in evidence around the White House during the period of time that you served there? Did he come to the White House very often?

RIGDON: I would say no.

HESS: Did you get to know Mr. Forrestal very well, or--even though he did not come to the White House very often? Either as Secretary of the Navy or as Secretary of Defense.

RIGDON: I felt that I knew him, but whether it was mutual I don't know. Because he was a man who always impressed me as being preoccupied. He usually appeared to have so much on his mind that--well, he was not one to say, "Hi Rigdon," even if you saw him every day.

HESS: No small talk.

RIGDON: But getting back to Mr. Forrestal. It was a coincidence that Terry, Frank Terry, the fellow that I relieved at the White House, ended up as Mr. Forrestal's traveling secretary, and that is why I felt that I knew Mr. Forrestal perhaps better than I really did. I was an admirer of the man and, of course, I heard a lot about him whenever I would see and get to talk to Frank Terry.

I don't think Mr. Forrestal ever came--well, I'm sure there were occasions where he asked for appointments, but he never came over without an appointment. Sometimes he was asked to come over, but he wasn't a person who was in there every day and made, really made excuses for coming. It was strictly business.

HESS: And Rear Admiral Robert L. Dennison was the Naval Aide for the second term of Mr. Truman's administration. He came in--a little more than that, he came in in January of 1948 and stayed until the end of the administration. What kind of a man was Robert L. Dennison?

RIGDON: Well, he was an outstanding man, or is an outstanding man; he's still living. Admiral Dennison was another member of the staff who was more than Naval Aide. You will find that the President used him on committees and boards.

Not too long after Dennison came there was this trouble arose about the paraplegics. There were a couple of movie stars who were going around, you might say, politicking, to improve the treatment and care of these paraplegics.

Admiral Dennison helped in veterans matters. He also advised the President on maritime matters. He was practically his liaison with the Maritime Administration, which got considerable attention in those days. So I would say that Admiral Dennison was--I know that in Mr. Truman's opinion, he was a top man, and also mine.

Dennison was commanding officer of the *Missouri*. He came to the White House from the *Missouri*.

In 1947, I believe it was, the President went to Rio to some international meeting held down there. His visit was also timed with the Brazilian independence celebration. We flew down, but came back in the *Missouri* and the President met Dennison for the first time then and was so impressed with him that when Foskett left, Dennison was ordered in as his Naval Aide. Once he got him there, well, the first trip to Key West after the election in 1948, the President called us all together and said he wanted us all to stay and to make our plans accordingly. He wanted us to stay with him through that term and that explains why Dennison was there so long. He didn't have much choice. The President had already served notice with him that he wanted him there, wanted him to stay. And in the meantime, Dennison made himself more available every day and there wasn't--I don't think there is any subject that that man can't handle. He was more or less the coordinator of intelligence for the President. I mean, he would take the CIA data, the dispatches we got from the Defense Department, and to save the President time he would go through those documents and set aside the ones he thought that the President should read and lay the others aside and say, "If you have time, you might like to read these, but these are a must." I simply can't speak too highly of him.

HESS: And there was another gentleman that was Assistant Naval Aide for--during 1944 and '45; John A. Tyree, Jr. What do you recall about him?

RIGDON: Well, Tyree had the title of Assistant Naval Aide, but he was on duty in the Map Room. The Army had a counterpart, a Colonel Matheson. They headed up the Navy section and the Army section of the...

HESS: Of the Map Room.

RIGDON: Of the Map Room. When the President traveled, particularly during the war, he used to take his Map Room, or portions of it right along with him to keep this war information current at all times. That was the extent of Tyree's naval aiding: He headed up the Navy section of the Map Room.

All the Navy officers in the Map Room were on the staff of the Naval Aide. Tyree's now a Vice Admiral and heads up one of the Bureaus in the Navy Department. He's a very capable fellow. But to answer your question, when he was at the White House he had the designation as Assistant Naval Aide which gave him the right to wear the aiguillettes and to assist the Naval Aide at large functions held at the White House; social functions.

HESS: And speaking of the men who served in the Map Room, I believe that one was Robert Myers, who is now a member of Williams, Myers & Quiggle, the firm that you are associated with. Is that right?

RIGDON: Right.

HESS: Did you know Robert Myers back in those days?

RIGDON: Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, that association is what led to me coming back here to work with the Virginia Hotel Company and later with Williams, Myers & Quiggle; this friendship with Bob Myers.

HESS: How long was he associated with the Map Room? How long was he associated with the White House, do you recall?

RIGDON: He came there in December, '41 when the Map Room was first set up.

George Elsey, Bob Myers, Bob [Robert] Bogue, who is an in-law of Bob Myers, and a fellow by the name of Mott, Bill [William C.] Mott, who was later Judge Advocate General of the Navy, were the four Navy officers in the Map Room. They were all attached to the staff of the Naval Aide. They were all under the Naval Aide.

HESS: For administrative purposes.

RIGDON: For administrative purposes, they were under the Naval Aide.

HESS: Could you go and come from the Map Room?

RIGDON: Yes. There is mention of that in the book, the *White House Sailor*.

HESS: I thought it was mentioned there.

RIGDON: I was the only member of the Naval Aide's staff who could do that, I mean other than the Naval Aide and the officers who were assigned to the Map Room.

HESS: And the Air Aide was Major General Robert B. Landry. He came in '48 and left in '53. Did you have any dealings with General Landry?

RIGDON: Well, only in coordinating certain details. And one of my many duties--these things grew, but I acquired the job of running the group known as the "White House Aides." That's a group of officers, usually an even number from each of the services. When I was there I think we had seven from the Air Force, seven from the Navy, and seven from the Army. They are called in to assist whenever they are going to have a social function or have a need for any of the social aides. They are primarily social aides. The usher's office used to call me and say, "We'd like to have three aides to assist at such and such a function," and it was part of my job to find three who were available and make sure that they were there on time and were briefed.

Eventually, I was the one who screened the new applicants. I would screen them first and if they suited me I would take them before the Naval Aide before they were actually nominated for orders. The Naval Aide gave them a final screening and either accepted them or turned them down. I never had the right to accept any of them, but I did have the right to...

HESS: Screen them out.

RIGDON: Screen them out, yes. If it was obvious that the Naval Aide wouldn't like them for some known reason, you know. The most common reason for rejection was if the applicant had ever been married before. They thought that if they were single at the time, why, that didn't matter, but we tried to stay away from any who had been married because we found it didn't work. Some dowagers would take offense if you put them in a position where they had to talk to a divorced man.

HESS: And Major General Harry H. Vaughan was a military aide to the President throughout his administration. Just what kind of a man is General Vaughan?

RIGDON: Well, to summarize it, I would say that he was one of the best friends I ever had. I think he's been very greatly misunderstood. The man has a heart of--the biggest thing about him is his heart and I think his big heart and his generosity got him into most of his difficulties.

I've known the time when the guards at the gate would call up and say that so and so is out here; he does not have an appointment but he would like to see the President. Well, General Vaughan invariably would say, "Well, send him in and I'll talk to him and I'll see what I can do for him." And the General would--I mean it was just inherent in him to believe everybody, and to believe everybody, and to believe all their stories. That's my opinion. I think eventually a few people took advantage of him.

Militarily speaking, I don't know what the Army thought of him, but I know that he was a very good friend of the President's and sometimes Vaughan was just what the President needed. I mean, he had that ability about him that he could make the President dismiss burdensome problems or questions that were on his mind, for the moment anyway, and enjoy himself.

HESS: Now General Vaughan was not a member of the Regular Army. Just as Commodore Vardaman had been a Reservist. Do you think that that caused any hard feelings among the Regulars, both Army and Navy, to see these Reservists, and what they might call even semi-professional men...

RIGDON: I have never heard the slightest insinuation that anything like that existed. That's why on the other side--the Navy side--it stood out like a sore thumb, if you know what I mean.

HESS: All right. How about a few questions about some of the other members of the White House, other than military and Navy? Did you ever have any close relationships, any business dealings so to speak, with Matthew Connelly, who was the Appointments Secretary?

RIGDON: Mr. Connelly was quite frequently a guest at Key West and I worked with him then, but in Washington, no, except in a business way. For instance, he was the one who controlled the list of people authorized to make the special tours. Mr. Truman was the one who started that after the White House was rebuilt.

HESS: Congressional tours?

RIGDON: Congressional tours, and it was controlled by Mr. Connelly's office, I mean to keep-- not control as to who would come, but the number.

HESS: To hold the numbers down.

RIGDON: To hold the numbers down.

HESS: Down to a manageable size.

RIGDON: Right. And frequently we used to get requests to help such and such a person out. And then, of course, Mr. Connelly used to call occasionally and say that the President has asked that so and so come down to the ship and see him, or come down to Key West, and he would call the Naval Aide's office and we would have to arrange for transportation. But other than that, we had very little business with him.

HESS: How about William Hassett, who was Correspondence Secretary? Any dealings with Mr. Hassett?

RIGDON: I knew him personally quite well. Whenever we drafted a letter for the President's signature, why, we had to satisfy Mr. Hassett and...

HESS: Was that always--was that an easy thing to do, satisfying him?

RIGDON: Generally, yes. Once you...

HESS: Learned his style.

RIGDON: He was a stylist, and an expert I'd say.

HESS: Now we mentioned Mr. Ross this morning, but how close were your associations with the press office?

RIGDON: Here in Washington, except when we were preparing for a trip, ordinarily we didn't have too much to do with them, but I remember that whenever the President went up to Shangri-La, for some reason or another, Mr. Ross did not want to go and he used to give me a sort of a general briefing and then tell the press that I would come down to Thurmont once a day and give them a rundown of what had been going on. That was really my only connection. I mean working with Mr. Ross or his staff, except that, at Key West, if he wanted anything, any favors

or any changes in the members of the press party, he would notify us and then it would be up to us to follow through.

In those early days I don't believe there was a commercial airport at Key West and all additions to the press party would come by Navy Plane, at least from Miami over to Key West. We would have to send a car out to the air station to meet them and arrange for accommodations at the Bachelor Officers' Quarters on the base. In other words, get them set up. And then this one incident I told you about--the blimp. My relations with Mr. Ross, I always thought were tops.

HESS: How about Dr. Steelman, John R. Steelman, who had the title The Assistant to the President? Do you have any associations with Dr. Steelman?

RIGDON: He was quite frequently a guest of the President. When I speak of guests, I mean anyone who the President put on his list when he contemplated a trip to Key West. I considered them guests, even the Naval Aide. That's why I had so many duties at Key West. I took the attitude that the Naval Aide was down there as the President's guest. It was a vacation for him and I tried to make it so--I mean, I tried to relieve him of as many things as I could. Of course, he was always available and whenever anything arose that I felt I should consult him, why, I did. But otherwise I tried to...

HESS: Take care of matters yourself.

RIGDON: Take care of things--without overstretching my authority. That's one thing that we have to guard against--overdoing things and having your boss think that you're trying to get his job. I always tried to avoid that.

HESS: All right, sir, while we're discussing Key West, I'd like to bring up a subject that you mentioned in your book--let me get my right folder out--and that is the President's announcement at Key West to certain members of his staff that he did not intend to run for re-election in 1952. Now one of the things that I want to mention in this connection is that in Mr. Truman's *Memoirs*, on page 489, he mentions that that announcement was made in March of 1951, and in your book *White House Sailor* on page 267 you mention that the announcement was made in November, November the 19th of 1951. Now there is a difference of about six months here. There were some interesting things that took place in that six months period, the dismissal of [General Douglas] MacArthur, and the like. I wonder if this morning we couldn't just discuss the difference in the times given, and what you remember about that announcement.

RIGDON: Well, I'd like to start by saying that the November trip was the first trip following the said March trip, even though there is an eight months time interval between. I've gone back over my records and I cannot find, nor can I remember, any other occasion where I was ever directed to, you might say, mask an entry in any of those logs. This is the only time. The log was not just written by me and sent to press. It was reviewed and approved by the Naval Aide, and I find it hard to conceive that I could have put that data in the wrong log. Each log was prepared, printed, and distributed and almost forgotten before the other one ever came out.

HESS: Did the press secretary, Joe Short, help with this too?

RIGDON: No, I have thought about this a little since you raised this question last week, and I remember very distinctly that it was Admiral [Sidney W.] Souers, who was the intelligence chief; he was head of the CIA then, who spoke to me about this. Later Admiral Dennison got me aside and told me that it was very important that we have a record of everyone who had heard what the President said that morning. I wrote that particular entry; it was checked and approved by both Admiral Souers and Admiral Dennison.

HESS: Now you say "morning," was it morning or afternoon? Which entry in your log here-- now what I have here are xerox copies of two pages of the November the 19th log, pages 55 and 57. Now in your book you mentioned that secrecy, of course, was important because the President couldn't afford to tip his hand, and that you entered it in--"I entered the names in my log."

RIGDON: This right here.

HESS: Yes. Now that's on page 57, "The President met with Mr. Short." Now that was...

RIGDON: Short, Murphy, Tubby, and Hassett. These other people came in later and that is the reason it was so worded. They were joined by Leahy, Steelman, Vaughan, Souers, Dawson.

HESS: But this disguised speech drafting session was from 3 to 5 in the afternoon. Is that right?

RIGDON: Yes.

HESS: All right, and yesterday I noticed one other thing that I want to call to your attention, and that is the fact that the names that you have listed here on page 267 are the same names as you have listed in your speech drafting session, with the exception of one man, and that is Dr. John Steelman, who is listed in the log as being present at the so-called speech drafting session, and I do not find his name as one of those who was present as given in your book..

RIGDON: Oh, that's just an oversight of course. I don't know how I missed him.

HESS: Do you recall his being present at that moment?

RIGDON: Well, I would say yes on this, because this thing was not just a one-man operation. There were three of us who finally agreed on this wording here.

HESS: Getting back to the President's announcement itself, just what do you recall about that? What did he say and what was the attitude of the staff at that time? You may even say in your book, but I'm not sure.

RIGDON: Well, no, but he just told us and told us the reasons that he had. He wasn't talking to me at the moment. I just happened to be there. That was part of my duties, I had to be available whenever the President was downstairs. I couldn't even go to bed until he did, and I had to be up when he came down in the morning.

As I recall this incident, he came down and he said he wanted to see all the members of the staff. He went about trying to locate all of them because 3 o'clock in the afternoon was one time when they were pretty well scattered. The President used to go up to his quarters after lunch and usually took a nap of an hour or so. He'd come down about 3 o'clock and they would start their card game. He said he wanted all members of the staff, and we got the ones who were immediately available and he started the meeting with them. And that was why they were joined later by the others--because we had to round them up.

At the beginning of this meeting, I was busy rounding up those who were not there and telling them the President wanted to see them and to come on back right away. But towards the end of the meeting I recall that he said that he had given a lot of thought to this, and had made up his mind. The reason he was telling us now was that he knew it affected every one of us and our future and he wanted to give us a reasonable chance to make some personal plans. But everyone present was cautioned that they had to do it so they wouldn't give away any significant information. In other words, had there been a mass exodus the next day, it would have been obvious that something was in the wind and...

HESS: Do you think that that secret was fairly well kept between then and March the 29th, the day he gave his announcement at the Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner?

RIGDON: As far as I know. No one ever came to me to check that list as to who was there to see who might have, you know, breeched the confidence.

HESS: All right. One other question: It has been pointed out that on the list of people who were there, there are some names of people who would quite likely have been present in a meeting of this importance. Was their absence perhaps because they just couldn't be rounded up in time for the meeting?

RIGDON: Who? Who were you thinking about?

HESS: Oh, well, let's just see...

RIGDON: You see these people were coming and going.

HESS: Some of them may not have been there for the entire trip?

RIGDON: That's right. Toward the end you'll find that they only stayed part of the trip. We had room for only so many and we had to...

HESS: Do you recall if the Chief Justice was there on that day?

RIGDON: I think that you'll find that he came towards the very end of the trip.

HESS: Yes. Now, those are things that could be checked in, but--now let's see, these men were all there.

Is Landry listed? Yes, General Landry is listed. How about David Stowe, he was Administrative Assistant at that time.

RIGDON: I don't think so--I think Mr. Stowe had gone back..

HESS: All right, George Elsey.

RIGDON: George Elsey had gone back. George had just resigned, as a matter of fact, about two days before.

HESS: Kenneth Hechler and Richard Neustadt.

RIGDON: Well, these people were down for two or three days and...

HESS: I see.

RIGDON: Some were leaving and others arriving almost every day. That was one thing that kept me busy: Shifting and shuttling guests around.

HESS: Arranging for transportation back and forth.

RIGDON: Yes, but if you followed the log through you would find that some of them were coming and some going. If we brought down any of those people listed on the first page and didn't put them up in either the President's house or in the *Williamsburg*, why, they didn't feel like they had...

HESS: Had been down there.

RIGDON: Had been down there, that's right. I mean, they attached great importance to that part of the...

HESS: All right, just one general opinion. Mr. Truman gives this as March of 1951 and in your opinion that is wrong, also just asking for a conclusion and opinion, why do you think the wrong date was used in his *Memoirs*? How did that come about?

RIGDON: I have no idea unless he was dictating from memory. Having made eleven or twelve trips down there, why, unless he made a note of it somewhere, he could very easily have done that. Another thing that makes me believe more strongly than ever that it was November, is that that would be an awful long time, a year and a half, for him to leave this matter open for violation, you might say, to have revealed it then. But I cannot conceive of something being in the November log that happened in March.

HESS: All right.

On another subject, what do you recall about the attempt to assassinate President Truman on November the 1st of 1950? Where were you when you heard the news?

RIGDON: I was in the Naval Aide's office which at that time was in the East Wing of the White House. It was as much of a surprise as anything I can remember, and I guess I was as excited as anyone else when I heard about it. There was...

HESS: You were in the East Wing you say?

RIGDON: The Naval Aide's office at that time was in the East Wing. After the White House was rebuilt, we managed to get offices in the East Wing.

HESS: That's quite a ways away from Blair House. Did you hear any shots or anything?

RIGDON: No.

HESS: After that period of time...

RIGDON: The police headquarters is in the basement of the East Wing and it was because of commotion there that I learned about it. There was a policeman killed, you know, Coffelt I believe.

HESS: Leslie Coffelt. How long was it after that when you saw the President? The same day?

RIGDON: No, I think not. The next day I believe. I don't think he came to the office that day after that incident. Seems to me he stayed over at Blair House. It happened after lunch as I recall, in the early afternoon.

HESS: What seemed to be his attitude when you saw him the next day? Any different than normal?

RIGDON: Normal, so far as I could tell. He never commented.

HESS: Did you ever hear him speak of that assassination attempt or of assassination attempts in general after that?

RIGDON: Never. I never heard him say anything along those lines.

HESS: When the President was down at Key West and was relaxing and was visiting with his friends what did he like to discuss? What was the main topic of conversation, when they weren't playing poker? Not to imply that they played poker all the time, but...

RIGDON: Whenever he had occasion to discuss business, he would take his group either out to the lawn or upstairs. I can't ever remember any occasion when it was other than small talk. When they were playing cards it was small talk, and when they were sitting around it was just reminiscing, personal things.

HESS: Okay. And just briefly how would you rate the Presidents of recent years? Since you were there during the Roosevelt administration, and you were there during the entire Truman administration, and you were there for six months of the Eisenhower administration, and let's just tack a couple of more on just to bring it up to date. How would you rate the Presidents of recent years, from Roosevelt to the present, in terms of, for instance, their administrative ability, their general effectiveness in running the office, and just as men, starting with Roosevelt.

RIGDON: I went to the White House in the fall of 1942 and Mr. Roosevelt had been President then for about ten years. It seems to me that he had his finger on things so completely that he really knew what he was doing and what was going on. The historians may not agree with me but that was my impression.

And, of course, I felt that Mr. Truman did too after--he got hold of things. But he had a period there where he really had to grope.

He would admit that he spent most of the night reading up on important matters. He would ask the Naval Aide and he would ask Admiral Leahy for various position papers. If it were that thick, why, he would stay with it until he had finished it. Although the men's personalities were one hundred percent different, I felt that toward the end Mr. Truman had things in hand--had mastered the job every bit as well as Mr. Roosevelt had.

I was there with Mr. Eisenhower for about six months after Mr. Truman left, and got the impression that Mr. Eisenhower never really buckled down and interested himself in the complete picture like the other Presidents. I mean there were some things that he was probably more learned about than either Roosevelt or Mr. Truman, but from the administrative side, it just seemed to me that he reverted back to his Army days and depended on his staff.

HESS: In your book you mentioned Mr. Sherman Adams, but did it seem to you that he was leaving things to Sherman Adams to run?

RIGDON: Very definitely. We couldn't get anything to General Eisenhower without channeling it through Mr. Adams. I mean even the routine Navy nominations or assignments or things like that. They all had to go through him. The Naval Aide couldn't even get in to see the President without clearing through Mr. Adams and the Appointment's Secretary, which was an innovation.

I mean that had never happened before because the Naval Aide called the Appointments Secretary and said he had something he wanted to see the President about. The Appointments Secretary never said, "What is it?" He just assumed that the Naval Aide considered it important enough and I suppose the President never complained that he was getting too much time or anything like that. But that wasn't so in the Eisenhower days. I can only speak from what I've read in the paper on the Kennedy and Johnson and the Nixon.

HESS: What would be just your general opinion of those three Presidents?

RIGDON: I really don't feel I'm qualified to state as far as the Kennedy part of it, but I thought that the Johnson organization was pretty good. In other words, the man had the ability. I wouldn't say I considered him one of our better Presidents. As far as the staff and their working for the White House, I tried to get a couple of favors during the Kennedy time and couldn't get anywhere because the Attorney General had some orders out that...

HESS: Robert Kennedy did?

RIGDON: ...were blocking me--yeah.

I was asked by *Yachting Magazine* to write an article on presidential yachts and after I had written the story, they wanted a photograph of JFK on his yacht. They called it a yacht, but actually it wasn't much more than a motorboat. I forget the name of the darned boat, but before I got my picture the President was assassinated and the Attorney General, I think the very next day, sent out orders throughout the Government that no photograph of President Kennedy was to be released without his personal approval.

The photographer that I had worked with for quite a number of years was still at the White House and he didn't know about any such restriction. He told me, "Sure, I'll fix you up with a photograph." He had the negative but he didn't do any printing. That was all done over at the Navy Photo Center in Anacostia. He sent the negative over there and, of course, once it got over there, why the--Mr. Kennedy's, the Attorney General's hold order went into effect. Anyway, over a period of about three or four months I made regular inquiries about this thing and they stalled and stalled and stalled. I finally got the picture after about four or five months, but in the meantime *Yachting Magazine's* publication schedule had passed and they had lost interest in this yachting series. They paid me for the article, but it was never printed.

HESS: And what's your general opinion of the present occupant of the White House?

RIGDON: Well, I'm not too--I'm not too happy with him. I still have some friends down there in the office staff, but I haven't really had enough contacts to speak from experience and...

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

RIGDON: Two accomplishments of Mr. Truman were, in my opinion, major and outstanding. These were: (1) The thorough job he did in acquainting himself with the complex situation that existed at the time he moved into the office of the Presidency. He very quickly convinced his associates, holdovers and newcomers alike, that he knew what the situation was and what he wanted to do about it. And, (2), the relative smoothness, by which he took our country through the transition from a wartime economy to a peacetime economy after the war. We finished the war with the greatest military establishment in the history of the world and with our industrial establishment buzzing at top speed. I feel that this successful transition was particularly outstanding.

HESS: What is your estimation of Mr. Truman's place in history; just one or two hundred years from now how do you think he will be regarded by historians and members of the general public?

RIGDON: Well, I have no doubt but that he certainly established a place in history for the job that he did as President. He pulled us through some pretty precarious times. Being faced with the end of the war, and the demobilization, and change in the economy and what not. I mean, there could have been a runaway in a number of directions I think..

HESS: All right, do you have anything else that you would like to add about Mr. Truman or the Truman administration, your duties in the White House?

RIGDON: It seems to me I've talked long enough.

HESS: Well, we thank you very much.

SUBJECTS DISCUSSED

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Clifford, Clark
 President's Naval Aide, as
Coffelt, Leslie
Connelly, Matthew J.
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Dennison, Robert L.
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Eisenhower, Dwight D.
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Iowa, U.S.S.

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Kevers, Captain John H.
Key West, Florida
 Photographers
 Truman, Harry S., vacations at

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Leahy, William D.
 Key West, at
 Potsdam, at
 Rigdon, William, relationship with
Leviero, Anthony
Long, Dewey

MacArthur, General Douglas
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McIntire, Admiral Ross T.
Map Room (White House)
Miller, Captain Edwin S.
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Morison, Samuel Eliot
Mott, William C.
Murphy, Charles
Myers, Robert

Naval Aide, duties of the President's
Neustadt, Richard E.
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Potomac, U.S.S.

Potsdam Conference

President of the United States

` evaluation of
travel arrangements for

Rigdon, William M.:

as Assistant Naval Aide, duties of
biographical information
and Key West, Florida trips
Leahy, Admiral William D., relationship with
Naval Aide, as
Navy, career in
Potsdam Conference, attends
and Truman, Harry S.

announcement to staff that he wouldn't run for reelection in 1952

assassination attempt on, recollection of

Vardaman, James K., Jr., evaluation of
Vaughan, Harry H., evaluation of
White House Aides, supervises
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Shangri-La

Short, Joseph H.

Souers, Rear Admiral Sidney W.

Spottswood, John

Statesboro, Georgia

Steelman, John R.

Stowe, David

Terry, Frank

Trips, logs of President Truman's

Truman, Harry S.

Announces to staff that he will not run in 1952

assassination attempt on

Camp David/Shangri-La

Dennison, Robert L., Naval Aide for
driving

evaluation of as President

Key West, Florida, trips

place in history
Rigdon, William M., recalls attempted assassination of
Truman, Mrs Harry S. (Bess)
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White House aides, duties of
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Williamsburg, U.S.S.
captains of
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