Truman and the Presidency—Records and Oral Recollections

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SPECULATION in 1944 about Franklin Roosevelt's choice for the vice-presidential nomination was probably as widespread as was speculation in 1964 before Lyndon Johnson chose Hubert Humphrey. Senator Harry S. Truman of Missouri was one of several people considered for the nomination in 1944, and shortly before the Democratic convention of that year he granted an interview to John Gunther, the well-known journalist. Gunther was pleased with the interview and hastily scribbled a note to himself: "Senator Truman on other Senators—most valuable —do this right away." Unfortunately he didn't "do this right away." Several years later, long after Truman had left the Presidency, he came across this reminder in his notes and tried to recall what Truman had told him. From his memory he could dredge up nothing; he admitted he didn't have "the faintest idea" of what Truman had said.[1]

Gunther's advice to anyone interested in journalism is a stern command: "Write it down!"[2] All of us interested in history can understand, certainly, why he advises so vigorously. And this advice can be readily appreciated by the people historians write about. President Truman remarked in a letter he wrote in 1947 to Burton K. Wheeler, his friend and former colleague in the Senate, that "if everybody could keep a record of his transactions from day to day it would save a lot of misstatements in history." But then the President acknowledged: "I have never been able to do it."[3]

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[1] John Gunther, *A Fragment of Autobiography: The Fun of Writing the* Inside *Books*, p. 104–105 (New York, 1962).

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 104.

[3] Harry S. Truman to Burton K. Wheeler, Apr. 9, 1947, in President's Personal File 634, Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

Gunther's note, surely, is not a happy note on which to begin a discussion of records and recollections. And by citing Truman's remark to Wheeler you might think I intend to do a "hatchet job" on history itself—oral and otherwise. This is not the case; I mean rather to emphasize the obvious point that more has happened in the past than is recorded *or* recalled. Neither records nor recollections are as informative and dependable as we wish they were. But critics of oral history, on the one hand, tend to understate how fragmentary the written records can be and how usefully interviews can supplement research in the records. Defenders of oral history, on the other hand, tend to overstate the value of the evidence disclosed in spoken recollections and to disregard the value of thorough research in primary sources. Little is achieved by talking about the advantages of records or recollections and defending one against the other. My purpose is to focus more attention on the relationship *between* records and recollections. This might be helpful to the many people interested in launching new oral history projects. As an indication of how this interest is growing, in 1963 the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University received 31 inquiries from people thinking about establishing new programs.[4] Also it might be helpful to remind ourselves that the familiar problems of oral history are very stubborn and that these problems deserve as much attention as do the declarations of what oral history can achieve.

Most bothersome to me about the growing interest in oral history is the fairly prevalent notion that recollections may supplant records as the primary documentation of recent history. "Not to exaggerate," one oral historian has written, "the future of manuscripts . . . as a primary corpus for scholarly research would appear bleak: we shall have naught but telephone bills; travel journals on the back of ticket envelopes and the stubs of airplane (or rocket) tickets!"[5] This prospect is discomforting but I think it is unlikely. Similar suppositions were made a few years ago about the development of atomic energy. Richard G. Hewlett and Oscar E. Anderson, Jr., have pointed out in their history of the Atomic Energy Commission how such notions can be misconceived:

> Folklore has it that the United States developed the atomic bomb without benefit of paper work. Striving for speed with security, American leaders forsook the reports and memorandums dear to the bureaucrat. With memories

[4] Oral History Research Office, *Fifteenth Anniversary Report*, p. 9 (New York, Columbia University, 1963).

[5] Doyce Nunis, "The Library and Oral History," in *California Librarian*, July 1961, p. 142.

for files, Pullman compartments for offices, crisp spoken commands for directives, and steel and concrete for progress reports, they made the decisions that shook the world. Like all legends, these tales have some basis in fact, but the impression they create is false. The wartime atomic energy program must rank with the most thoroughly documented enterprises in history.[6]

It is risky business, in other words, to assume the absence of written records and to assume that interviews are warranted. Sometimes interviews are *not* entirely warranted. Since oral history is usually defined as an effort to fill gaps in written records, it is necessary for an oral historian to know where the gaps are. This is the first advantage of knowing the records thoroughly. Records made while events were happening, even in this day of jet travel and the telephone, can still be more valuable to historians than recollections of what happened.

The telephone, of course, is often denounced as a thief of information that in earlier days would have been communicated in correspondence. Sometimes the telephone is guilty as charged. Obviously its use is convenient and messages confided to it are transmitted without documentation. But at other times the telephone is not guilty. Some people do make records of their phone calls. A former member of Mr. Truman's White House staff, Donald Hansen, illustrated this point in an interview conducted for the Truman Library oral history project. Comparing White House staff procedures with his earlier experience as a career attorney elsewhere in the Federal Government, he said:

I had been reared in the Government tradition of making a memorandum for the file every time you got a phone call or every time you crossed swords with somebody or every time you were afraid somebody else was going to make a memorandum for the file of a conversation you had with him [which] might be a little bit different from what your recollection was going to be and which you thought might be important some time. They didn't bother with that over there [at the White House]; there were too many other things to do; they didn't have time for it and they just didn't bother with it.[7]

To assume from Hansen's comment that Presidential staff work was not recorded during other recent administrations would also be unjustified. If Truman's phone calls were not recorded, there are reports that Eisenhower's were and that some of Kennedy's were.[8] The point to emphasize is that neither the speed of travel

[6] Richard G. Hewlett and Oscar E. Anderson, Jr., *A History of the United States Atomic Energy Commission.* Vol. I: *The New World, 1939/1946,* p. 657 (University Park, Pa., 1962).

[7] Donald Hansen to Charles T. Morrissey, in an oral history interview, Apr. 5, 1963 (transcript in Truman Library), p. 7.

[8] *Boston Globe,* Dec. 23, 1963, p. 3; *Kansas City Star,* Apr. 29, 1964, p. 11A.

nor the speed of sound means that people no longer report in writing about their trips or make memoranda about their phone calls. An oral historian should look to the written records before he begins to look for recollections of events he assumes are not documented.

Preparing for interviews likewise involves the relationship between records and recollections. Evident in almost all the literature about oral history is frequent homage to the importance of careful preparation, but also evident is an absence of detailed explanations of how interviewers actually have prepared for specific interviews. The emphasis on careful preparation, I suspect, is not always so honored in practice as in rhetoric. It is hardly sufficient to look up entries in the *New York Times Index*, for example, or to peruse the better known memoirs. Research in a limited number of papers, even of limited significance, can aid an interviewer greatly in his preparation. George E. Allen has demonstrated this point in a comment about the recollections of people who attended a meeting in Franklin Roosevelt's White House study 6 months before the Democratic convention of 1944. With the President these people discussed the political future of Henry Wallace and of others who might replace him as the party's nominee for the Vice-Presidency. Of these people Allen has written: "Some of them swear to this day that I was there, too. . . . I am positive, after consulting my memory and my appointment slips, which are somewhat more accurate, that I was not."[9]

Records also provide the best basis for assessing the value of recollections. It is disconcerting to read of something elicited by an interviewer for another oral history project, something considered a significant addition to knowledge of the Truman Presidency, when the point already is documented abundantly—not only in the records available for research at the Truman Library and elsewhere, but in speeches that were published verbatim in the *New York Times*.

An important function that an oral historian can fulfill is to acquire papers as well as use them to prepare for interviews and to assess the value of his transcripts. By approaching someone for papers he can estimate the prospects for a productive interview before he commits himself to recording an interview. Often an inquiry about papers leads to a discussion of what the man has in his files—folder by folder and item by item. As preparation for an interview this experience is extremely valuable. And it means

[9] George E. Allen, *Presidents Who Have Known Me*, p. 125 (New York, 1960).

that a man's records and recollections may be acquired and made available ultimately by the same institution—another convenience to scholars.

Also this is a plea for more specialization by oral historians. One interviewer cannot prepare adequately for discussing far-ranging topics with several different people. In our project at the Truman Library we have realized that minor officials involved in a few major policy matters often remember well what happened, whereas major figures involved consistently in top-level meetings and decisions do not remember so fully. It is more glamorous—and more impressive to others—to cite the "big names" included in an oral history project, but the "big names" do not always provide the most valuable recollections. A specialist can identify the minor figures and record worthwhile interviews with them if his time and attention are not diverted to interviews with "headline" figures on a variety of subjects.

Discussing specific records during an interview is a means of striving for greater factual content and of assisting the person interviewed to recall some matters that otherwise might not come to mind. Records themselves, furthermore, often have a history of their own. This was especially noted by Richard Neustadt in a recent study of the Skybolt Missile controversy. Some memoranda were ignored and others were widely read and discussed, he learned, and a historian working solely with records might not be able to determine which were important and which were peripheral. This also indicates how a man's memory can help a historian to surmount some of the problems of dealing with evidence that is fragmentary and possibly misleading. Comdr. William M. Rigdon, Assistant Naval Aide to President Truman, has explained how a part of the official log he kept of a visit by the President to Key West in 1951 was written to obscure deliberately the fact that the President had told his staff he would not run again in 1952. Truman confided his intention to retire from the Presidency because he wanted his staff to know about his plans for the future. In his log Commander Rigdon entered the names of everyone present at the time. If a "leak" to the press developed he wanted a record of who knew the secret. But he entered these names in such a way that anyone who saw the log would conclude that the President conferred with his staff about a speech draft not related to the actual subject that brought them together.[10]

[10] William M. Rigdon, with James Derieux, *White House Sailor*, p. 267 (Garden City, N.Y., 1962).

Perhaps the greatest service to people launching new programs in oral history would be for those of us in projects already underway to suggest how recollections might be made more factual and detailed. Interviewers who expect to find detailed accounts of past events are likely to be disappointed very quickly.

For many people in policy-making positions the flow of work is unrelenting. And much of it consists of "problems of incredible complexity and difficulty," as Charles S. Murphy characterized his experience for nearly 3 years as Special Counsel to President Truman.[11] People who were too busy at the time to record details about complicated subjects probably won't recall these details when interviewers ask about them years later. This is another obvious point, but it deserves more emphasis than it has received. At a hearing of the "Truman Committee" in April 1941, the Under Secretary of War, Robert Patterson, was asked about a procurement practice in operation 8 months before. Patterson replied: "I have looked in my files to find if I had any knowledge of the practice. From one letter, at any rate, that I signed in August it would appear that I had." Then he was asked by Senator R. Owen Brewster, Republican of Maine, if he was aware of the *significance* of this practice. "The significance, no; I can see it plainly enough now, and I think I did quite shortly afterward, and I insisted on a change in the practice. Things were moving pretty fast along about that time."[12]

The thievery committed by time on the memories of busy people, however, can be less annoying than the reluctance of these people to tell an interviewer what they do remember. Often this reluctance is rooted in a deep sense of discretion about their recollections. This sense of discretion can be exasperating to historians because people in public life may insist that many of their recollections are private property. More often than not there is nothing insidious about this attitude. It springs from the fact that too many people, too many times, have hurt themselves or the feelings of others, even inadvertently, by talking too frankly. Candor, in the minds of some, is synonymous with imprudence.

And discretion understandably induces people concerned with sensitive matters not to expose themselves in writing. In the

[11] Charles S. Murphy to Mrs. Joseph Short, Sept. 22, 1951, in Murphy Files, Harry S. Truman Library.

[12] Testimony of Apr. 16, 1941, in "Verbatim Record of Proceedings of Senate Committee Investigating National Defense Contracts [*sic*]," p. 52, in records of the Special Committee of the Senate to Investigate the National Defense Program, 1941-48, records of the U.S. Senate, National Archives, Record Group 46.

Franklin D. Roosevelt Library I came across a note from James Rowe, one of President Roosevelt's Administrative Assistants, to Grace Tully, the President's stenographer, on a memorandum about Italian-German cooperation in March 1940. The note reads: "Larry Fly of the Communications Commission asked me to give the President this message orally so will you tear up the memorandum after the President has seen it."[13] That memo was not torn up, obviously, but the question remains: how many other memos were destroyed? Rowe in this instance was practicing a political maxim that Roosevelt supposedly was mindful of—Tom Platt's "Don't write; send word."[14]

In some instances our luck is good because we learn about matters discussed in confidence. In 1939 when Daniel Tobin of the Teamsters Union sent to President Roosevelt a copy of an editorial encouraging a third term—an editorial intended for publication in the Teamsters' magazine—Tobin asked the President for his comments and suggestions. But Tobin added: "You need not write me. It would perhaps be better not to do so." Fortunately we know what Roosevelt said to Tobin about a third term when Tobin discussed it in the President's office. Frances Perkins was present during the conversation and recorded it in her memoir.[15]

But more frequently the ins and outs of political tactics are not recovered by interviewers. Rexford Tugwell has written that when the party professionals meet in the months preceding political conventions and primaries their discussions are not recorded and they seldom divulge what was said. "Considering the number of such meetings in every year," Tugwell has stated, "such consistent good faith approaches the miraculous."[16] A historian's effort to document what was said in these meetings is likely to be met by the politician's insistence that the public record is adequate for scholars as well as voters.

In moments of disappointment we should remember that political wires were pulled long before telephone wires were strung. The crimes of the telephone, I think, are petty compared to the

[13] James Rowe to Grace Tully, Mar. 28, 1940, in President's Secretary's File, "Administrative Assistants," Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

[14] Jesse H. Jones, with Edward Angly, *Fifty Billion Dollars: My Thirteen Years With the RFC*, p. 284 (New York, 1951).

[15] Daniel J. Tobin to Franklin D. Roosevelt, Nov. 18, 1939, in President's Personal File 1180, Roosevelt Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library; Frances Perkins, *The Roosevelt I Knew*, p. 126 (New York, 1946).

[16] Rexford G. Tugwell, *The Art of Politics*, p. 160 (Garden City, N.Y., 1958).

crimes committed by a deep sense of discretion and by the erosions of time. Many people today are like Martin Van Buren, who reputedly preferred not to show his hand to contemporaries or posterity—long before the telephone could be blamed for this trait.

Probably the most familiar of all the problems of oral history lies in the statement that some people know more than they tell and other people tell more than they know. Eliot Janeway has written that most of the published memoirs concerning the replacement of Henry Wallace by Harry Truman in 1944 do not answer crucial questions about this episode.[17] The problem, I fear, is unavoidable for anyone who tries to establish how this happened. A biographer of Sam Rayburn, after trying to reconstruct the movement of the "Texas Regulars" to send an anti-Roosevelt delegation to the 1944 convention, lamented that "there are few survivors of the plot. No single person in 1962 will admit any blame."[18] On the other hand a newspaperman, trying in 1945 to reconstruct how Truman was selected for the Vice-Presidency the previous year, remarked humorously to Charles Ross, Truman's appointee as press secretary, that "already I have contacted eighteen people, each of whom is solely responsible for Harry Truman being President."[19]

Like the notion that recollections may supplant records there is a notion that interviews can simplify the complications and answer the unanswered questions about past events. This is true in some cases, of course, but not in all. It may happen that more recollections may produce still other versions of a single matter and complicate the task of interpretation. When Edward J. Flynn was interviewed for Columbia's Oral History Research Office he observed that "there are forty-seven people who give forty-seven different ideas on whether Governor Roosevelt had come to any decision at the time Mayor [James] Walker resigned."[20]

All of this constitutes a roundabout way of emphasizing that the familiar problems of oral history are very much with us and that new oral history projects will encounter them. More atten-

[17] Eliot Janeway, "The White House Doghouse," in *Saturday Review of Literature*, Jan. 17, 1948, p. 18.

[18] C. Dwight Dorough, *Mr. Sam*, p. 352 (New York, 1962).

[19] "O'Hare" to Charles Ross, Apr. 21, 1945, in Ross Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

[20] *Reminiscence of Edward J. Flynn*, p. 15.

tion to the relationship between records and recollections may help us to deal with these problems. Many of the points mentioned in this paper are not new, of course, but neither is the idea that oral history is worth doing if it is done well.

Why Not?

In my early days in Japan I worked, as other Americans do, thru an interpreter and discovered that I was not getting across the message I wished to present to the groups I was working with. So I began to study the language. To study Japanese, of course, is somewhat different problem from studying English. The Japanese writing problem is quite different, in that in its simplest form there are roughly 47 basic characters of *katakana*, 47 basic characters of *hirogana* (which is an identical alphabet with the same sounds, but which looks totally different) and 1,792 Chinese characters. You need all three sets to read even the simplest document, such as newspapers. If you really want to be an educated person you acquire familiarity with roughly 8 to 10 thousand Chinese characters; needless to say at this stage I am still semi-illiterate by Japanese standards.

I started, of course, as one might anticipate, with their phonetic alphabet because I felt it would be a start toward helping myself with my work with the Japanese industrial firms. I wanted to be able, at least, to look into the files myself.

You must realize their alphabet is not quite like ours, and so before I tell you what I got into, I'd better tell you a little about it.

The Japanese alphabet has no vowels and consonants as our alphabet has, but it has symbols that by themselves represent complete sounds. There are five basic sounds. There's an *ah* (like bah), an *ee* (like in key), an *oh*, an *ay* (like in say), and an *oo* (like in boo). Now these look like vowels and in that respect they are vowels, but they're not used in the same way because if you want to say KA, which we would make with a K and an A, you have a new symbol. You'll have a KAH symbol.

There is also a *kec* symbol, a *koo*, *kay*, *koh*. You also have a *sah*, *shi*, *soo*, *say*, *soh*, and so on down thru all 47. So you see when you learn your alphabet, you have your choice. You can learn to say *ah*, *ee*, *oo*, *eh*, *oh*, *kah*, *kee*, *koo*, *kay*, *koh*, *sa*, *shi*, *soo*, *say*, *soh*, *ta*, etc., or you can learn *a*, *kah*, *sah*, *tah*, *nah*, *hah*, *mah*, and so on. You can have your order. Who says you've got to go up or go down or start on one side or the other of the grid of five sounds and ten modifiers!

I wasn't quite sure of the proper way to do it, so I learned both by rows and by columns. I felt real proud when I had reached this stage.

To show my new knowledge, when I was at the plant, I said, "Well, let's look that up." You know—I pulled the file out and I looked at the file indexes and they didn't follow either of the orders I knew. It was *ee*, *roh*, *hah*, *nee*, *hoh*, *hey*, *toh*, *chi*, *rih*, *noo*, *ruh*, *woh*, and so on. And I looked—you know—where does this sort of thing come from—the first letter was the