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## M. William Adelson (June 6, 1972)

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Oral History Interview

with

MR. M. WILLIAM ADELSON

June 6, 1972  
Baltimore, Maryland

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. M. William Adelson.  
M. the first initial stands for . . .

ADELSON: Morris. I adopted that initial for the first name when  
I was in my first year in high school and I have kept  
that name that way ever since.

ARENA: Here in Baltimore, Maryland, June 5, 1972, Arena inter-  
viewing.

ADELSON: Correction June 6, 1972, 12:15 a.m.

ARENA: This is a very early morning interview of June 6. May  
we begin Mr. Adelson by my asking you where and when  
you were born and a brief resume of your educational  
background and career to date.

ADELSON: I was born September 6, 1911, in Baltimore, Maryland.  
I grew up in a small town in Virginia, Covington, Vir-  
ginia. I attended the public schools in Covington,  
Virginia, graduating from Covington High School in 1929 as the  
valedictorian of my class and then attended Washington Lee Uni-  
versity in Lexington, Virginia, where I majored in history and  
political science, finishing there in three years in June 1932 as  
a magna cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa. Having been a sports publicist

for the various teams at Washington Lee, I came into contact with Coach Jack Coombs, who was then the very famous coach of the Duke baseball team and on the occasion of their visit to Washington Lee in my senior year, I talked to him afterwards. I knew about the reputed wealth of Duke, but I knew nothing about the school. Coombs was a very famous big league baseball pitcher for the Philadelphia Athletics years before and a very successful baseball coach at Duke.

Coach Coombs told me that Duke had a (new) excellent law school headed by Justin Miller who was the dean. He thought there was a reasonable opportunity of getting some scholarship help there, if I had the sort of scholastic background of which I apprised him. He told me he would talk to the law school people as soon as he got back to Durham [North Carolina] and suggested that I immediately mail off a transcript of my record, with a letter of application, telling a little bit about myself.

My recollection is that conversation occurred on a Tuesday afternoon, my letter went off that evening, and Thursday afternoon I had a wire from Duke telling me that I had been accepted and that I was being awarded a full tuition scholarship, which then amounted to, I think, the enormous sum of \$250 or \$275 a year. The cost of schools then, all over the country and particularly in the South, was miniscule compared with costs today. I started Duke in the fall of '32 finishing in June '35. I was editor of the Law Review section of the Duke Law Journal in my senior year and finished magna cum laude at Duke in June '35. It was in my senior year, which was Dick Nixon's first year at Duke, that I first met and became acquainted with him.

ARENA: May I ask you what you do recall about the first meeting if it was memorable, in the sense, was there anything unusual about the first time you met the President?

ADELSON: I would say there was nothing unusual or particularly distinguishable about it. Duke Law School in those days was a very small school. I think there were a grand total of about 105 students with an outstanding faculty of some seventeen or eighteen full-time professors, which provided a student-teacher ratio beyond anything in the whole United States. I had read a number of Law Review articles he had written, in the course of my writing a senior thesis in one of my undergraduate courses. I had used the Washington Lee law library for research purposes, and it seemed that almost everything in the field had been written by Justin Miller, which, of course, was a great attraction to me. When Coach Coombs told me that Miller was dean of the law school,



I can tell you that Justin Miller was a great attraction to me, as well as to a number of other people of outstanding scholastic distinction who went down there.

ARENA: Well, let me ask you this . . .

ADELSON: Well, I didn't answer your question really about Dick Nixon. In a small school of that sort inevitably everyone gets to know everyone else. I seem to have had the happy or unhappy faculty of wanting to know everybody in the school and making it my business to quickly become acquainted with people. Particularly in that senior year, I probably spent more time around the law school day and night than any other single student. I had my office on the third floor of the law school where I directed the student Law Review work and quickly got to know practically every member of the freshman class, including Dick Nixon. Dick was a very quiet, reserved, dignified young man, not particularly an outgoing sort of person. Just from my rough, vague recollection of him, I would never have predicted or felt that he was the type of person who was going to succeed in the highly successful way that he has succeeded, in the tough world of politics.

I particularly recall Dick Nixon from the times that I used to see him in the library at Duke University where I was a constant sojourner, particularly in the evening hours. My very definite recollection is that Nixon would probably work hours in the library from somewhere between 2 and 3 o'clock in the afternoon up 'til 8 or 9 o'clock at night, as one of the assistants, delivering books and keeping the books in order and returning them to the stacks. He had to undertake that as a supplement to his scholarship and as a means of providing himself with maintenance there at the school. And this was not an unusual thing.

I would say that the great majority of the students in those days at Duke were subsidized by scholarship grants from the law school, mainly if not wholly, awarded on the basis of scholastic excellence first, and secondarily on the basis of financial need. As a result, I know it was true in my entering class of about fifty-two students, there were forty-five Phi Beta Kappas, and I think somewhat that same ratio held true in the classes of '36 and '37, Nixon being in the class of '37. Each one of those classes had truly outstanding students, as I observed them then and as I came to know them over the course of the years. I didn't know really the overall performance in that freshman class with any detail, never having the occasion or reason to pay attention to it. I was



particularly interested in top students in the second and third years because of constant contact with these students in my senior class and the class immediately behind me, in editing all of their Law Review work. Consistently, the top rated students have turned out as top flight lawyers, and Nixon proved the rule in the course of his practice.

ARENA: There are three areas, and I just want to be sure we cover them from the standpoint of trying to digest as much of this given the time. You did mention Nixon the student. Is there anything in particular you want to add about Nixon the student? For example, even though you were an upper classman, did you happen to be in any of the classes with him where you could see him perform?

ADELSON: No, that was an impossibility under our system. The first year courses at Duke were more or less mandatory and the last two years were wholly electives, so there was no way for me to get an actual classroom contact with any of the freshmen to know exactly how they performed. As a matter of fact, I was not too well aware of Nixon's capabilities, although I later have come to know that he had to be a singularly outstanding student because he made Coif in that class of '37. Coif is a law school honor society that is the equivalent of the undergraduate Phi Beta Kappa, and there were probably only three people in Nixon's class who made it, so he had to be an outstanding student. I know that he was a very dedicated and a very conscientious sort of person. He always seemed to have a very serious aspect and appearance to him whenever I saw him.

I recall one thing specifically because it's been mentioned so many times in various books written about Nixon and also in his book Six Crises. He sent me an autographed copy of it, and I noticed he had reiterated the same story in that book that occurred during his freshman year and my senior year. On one occasion at night in the library I noticed that Nixon seemed to appear unusually dejected and upset. I was certainly friendly with him as I particularly went out of my way to be friendly to those boys I thought were having a tough time from an economic standpoint, and really had to do things that fortunately I didn't have to do. I felt a great deal of empathy with them. I could understand their situation. Thus with a boy like Nixon, I was particularly concerned about attempting to be nice to him. I watched him work in that library. I could run him around there doing all kinds of things, because I had to have those books and he was a great help.



And he seemed so upset and concerned one night, I asked him what was bothering him, and he said, "Look, I can see that I am just never going to make it in this law school. There are so many smart boys in this class. There are so many Phi Beta Kappas, I just don't know how I'm going to compete with them." And I told him that with the kind of determination he showed and the way he wanted to stick with things that he had the secret of success. It was not being so all fired smart but it was the fact that you had to have an iron butt, just sit and sit and sit and the answers would come. And that's just what I told him then, and what I now know to be true, after some thirty-seven years in practicing law.

I work all hours of the day and night, not five days a week but seven days a week. I don't do it for the financial reward, but I do it because I want the best possible product. And I am convinced that those extra hours and that extra sitting and that extra studying and thinking pays off, because while the other fellow's asleep, somewhere along the line you are going to come up with that one extra theory, that one extra thought, that gives you the extra impetus that means success in law school, that means success in practicing law. It has proven itself out to me.

ARENA: Since that story has been in print and is known by so many, do you mind if I ask you where you got the idea to use that word or if you had anything in mind, or if that was something that came spontaneously--that particular way of putting that?

ADELSON: Frankly, although I pride myself on a fantastic memory and power of recall, I can't recall the specific details of this incident. I can recall where in the library it happened. We had entrance doors to that library and we had a table there and we had stacks beyond it. And I was sitting at the very first table, next to the stacks on your right hand side, as Nixon had walked behind me and was walking back in those stacks, and as he did, he had to turn and come in front of me. I just sort of glanced up and looked at the expression on his face, and I turned around and called him back from the stacks, where he was putting some books. That is when I had the conversation with him. But as for the exact details and remembering the use of that phrase "iron butt," I am really relying more on Nixon's memory of the use of that word. My phraseology would have been more inclined to say sticktoitiveness or something like that. Not that I didn't use almost any sort of language to express myself, and I undoubtedly used it. It is something that fastened itself in his memory while I had so many things that passed through my mind, so many things



that I was doing, that I didn't have exact recall of it. I may have expressed it that way to [Earl] Mazo the first time or Mazo may have said that Nixon recalled it that way. I don't have the exact recall of using it, but I know the substance of the conversation, and I am glad to say that my advice to him proved itself out by the standings that he attained in that 1937 class. And it's been later proven out by some of the things he has done.

In my limited knowledge of his practice of law, for example, the citizenship exam, I believe it was, which he had to write in connection with the New York Bar, his record has been outstanding. The citizenship essay was rated as the best one among those from all the people who had ever written anything like that in connection with an application for the New York Bar. He was exceptional. He's a gifted person. There's no doubt about it. And I've watched him grow and develop from the days of law school. I had no contact with him after I left Duke until after his election to Congress. I knew that he was running, but I didn't know he was around Baltimore [Maryland] during the war. I don't know why, but I just didn't. I knew [Richard W.] Kiefer was, but the wartime was a hectic time in this town.

ARENA: Just to be sure, did you run into him at any time after graduation and before the political years, 1945?

ADELSON: I am absolutely certain I never encountered him after I left law school in '35. It was quite a while after that, at least five or six years or more, before I had occasion to go back down to Durham [North Carolina] on a visit. A number of times I went to New York during the war years to watch Duke play Army up there, but I never encountered Nixon on the occasion of those Duke football games, when they had Duke get-togethers afterwards which I attended. And I didn't see him here in Baltimore.

ARENA: Excuse me. If it isn't too personal, we have been discussing off the tape the fact that you are of Jewish heritage and background. He, as you know, is a Quaker. Do you recall if there were any discussions or conversations regarding your respective backgrounds?

ADELSON: I never had such a discussion with him during those days. My religion was never a thing that caused me any concern. I was proud of the fact that I was Jewish although, unfortunately, I do not know too much about the Jewish religion, never having had the opportunity for training, living in a small country town. I never experienced any religious prejudice at all at Duke among the students. I was one of two Jews in my class of '35.



ARENA: May I ask who the other was?

ADELSON: The other was a boy named Joe Abrahams, who is located in Atlanta, Georgia. My recollection is that Joe came to Duke in my second year. He had done his first year's work somewhere else and he came into Duke in the second year. I never felt that there was any feeling or antipathy or that there was any anti-Semitic feeling in that law school and for that matter around the campus or in the town. I had some reservations about possibly one or two of the professors because of some contacts with them and what I may subconsciously attribute to anti-Semitism, may have been my proclivity for getting into arguments and antagonizing these particular professors. I would say though that on the whole I didn't have that feeling about 97 percent of the professors, all of whom were extremely friendly and went far out of their way to accommodate not only me but every one who was a student there. Their office doors were always open to you, and their homes.

ARENA: If I'm not mistaken, while both you and the President were law students, some of the great names of U.S. jurisprudence at that time were [Benjamin S.] Cardozo, [Louis D.] Brandeis and [Felix] Frankfurter. Would you happen to know what the President's views regarding their ability was, and whether or not he was aware, or whether or not you were aware that they were of Jewish extraction. Correct me if I'm wrong, Sephardic Jews. I'm not sure about Frankfurter but I believe Brandeis and Cardozo were.

ADELSON: I would have no way of knowing how he regarded them. After all, in his freshman year he hadn't hit constitutional law yet. I took constitutional law in the second year and a seminar in it in my third year under an outstanding teacher, Douglas Maggs, who unfortunately now has passed away. I know my own reaction and I strongly suspect it may have been Nixon's, but he wouldn't have expressed it this way. He would have been more politic.

Maggs was an extreme liberal who reasoned with precise correctness that the decisions of the Supreme Court can be pretty well predicted by the makeup of the court from time to time. I was in constant conflict with Maggs, an extreme liberal, as I have said, because I couldn't buy the views of the Cardozos and the Brandeis'. Frankfurter wasn't then on the court. Frankfurter came along a little later. You still had basically a conservative court. And



I answered my examination questions that way on the AAA [Agricultural Adjustment Act], the NRA [National Recovery Administration] and that sort of thing, even though I knew it was in direct conflict with the thinking of Maggs, which was stupid because I had to get a grade in the course. And while I later turned out to be right, he was marking my paper then on what he thought, and I refused to submit to it. I was a rebel. Nixon would have held that differently I'm sure. He would, I think, have been more politic. I'm not saying political, but more politic, in the sense of being more diplomatic and riding with the tide. I could suspect that Nixon as a student might have bought some of those ideas of Maggs at the time even though he may not subconsciously really have believed in it.

ARENA:        Although you and the President. . . . [Interruption]  
              This is one final question as this interview is coming to an end and broad and general, bearing in mind that you had a very limited contact with him, it could be difficult. But from your knowledge of Duke Law School and from your firsthand knowledge of the President, being a contemporary of yours at that time and from your knowledge of him as the President today, what is there, do you think, of Duke Law School in the President today? What stamp or what mark from your overall experience would you attribute to his Duke experience?

ADELSON:     I think that the extraordinary legal education that was obtainable at Duke during what had to be the high point of its day from the standpoint of overall eminence of faculty. Some great leaders in the legal teaching field came out of that law school, Lon Fuller who succeeded [Samuel] Williston, the acknowledged American authority on Contracts.

ARENA:        And Williston is spelled?

ADELSON:     W I L L I S T O N. Lon L. Fuller not only taught Contracts but also lectured on legal jurisprudence. He does the same thing at Harvard, and he has written extensively in both fields. And David F. Cavers, who was an extremely brilliant man, and is now the Assistant Dean of Harvard. Professor Cavers undertook teaching Conflict of Laws in the place of a man by the name of [Joseph Henry] Beale, who was the outstanding American authority on Conflict of Laws. We had a great many other outstanding teachers. Those two mentioned above, Fuller and Cavers, have reached particular eminence, but we had truly outstanding people. I think



the training and the system of teaching at Duke, imparted by the calibre of men who were there, had to rub off on everyone. It particularly rubbed off best and best displayed itself on the people who were exceptionally good students, as Nixon later proved himself to be. I am sure that his legal training throughout has stood him in good stead and helped to fashion his thinking and to shape and mold what has to be a very logical and brilliant mind.

I can't speak for Whittier because I don't know his background there. I don't know even what sort of student he was there, but I know that from my own experience over thirty-five years in practicing law--thirty-seven years--I know that what I got out of Duke Law School hasn't left me and I'm sure it's an inseparable and integral part of Nixon, although I've seen him broaden and develop in so many ways, but I think the lawyer in him is something that is an integral and powerful factor of his makeup.

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I

ARENA: Finally, Mr. Adelson, is there any point of question that I have not raised that you would like to touch upon yourself as this interview is now closed?

ADELSON: Well, I might say that I am almost a biased speaker, because I have had occasion to see Nixon a number of times. He was our guest of honor at a banquet in Washington, I believe in about 1957, when I was president of the Duke Law School Alumni Association. I presided over that banquet which was engineered by his class of '37, but we took a large group over from Baltimore and Nixon spoke briefly that night and had to leave to attend a Gridiron Club dinner, and he returned to the Duke affair about 11:00 or 11:15.

Kiefer and I had organized and taken over a group of leading lawyers, about fifty-five or sixty of them. Dick Kiefer was in Nixon's class of '37. We had organized and put together a bus load, including some of the judges of the Supreme Bench of Baltimore city, which is next in line to the highest court in the state, the Court of Appeals, and a number of leading lawyers, most of whom were Democrats. And Dick Nixon came back to that affair about 11:15 or 11:30, and there you could see the charm, the extent to which he had developed, when you saw him so graciously standing and talking at length with all of these people. And the proof of the pudding was that subsequently many of these people, most of whom were not only avowed Democrats but also active Democratic workers in the campaign of 1960, volunteered on their own to be Nixon supporters.



But what I started out to tell you was that Nixon--this is completely nonpolitical--in 1966 at the May Law Day Ceremony at Duke, Nixon was presenting a portrait of the former Dean of the law school, Justin Miller, and [Charles S.] Charlie Rhyne was down to present a portrait of Bryan Bolich who was retiring as a professor of real property. He was an outstanding teacher.

At the Law Day luncheon there were about five or six hundred people present for that affair and I had my wife and my son's then in-laws and my son's wife at our table. When Nixon rose to speak, he started off by saying that he was surprised when he was met at the airport by a boy named Andy Adelson who drove him in from the airport to the law school. And on the way in he asked Andy if by any chance he were related to Bill Adelson whom he had known when he was in law school. And my son puffed himself up and said, "Oh, yes, sir, that's my father." And Nixon then proceeds for some four or five minutes to launch into a very very laudatory speech about me and praising me and my accomplishments--perhaps somewhat overdone and perhaps somewhat inventive--but it was awfully gratifying to hear and, of course, with my wife and our inlaws with us, it was even more so, and I think if I wasn't prejudiced before--and I must admit that I am strongly prejudiced in his favor, I follow his thinking and it's my way of thinking--I certainly was prejudiced after that highly praising speech of Dick Nixon's there in May of '66. I certainly never forgot it, and while I didn't need that to make me a supporter and a follower, that was proof positive that I had a friend.

ARENA: Mr. Adelson, what is your son's full name?

ADELSON: My son's full name is Andrew Edson Adelson.

ARENA: Thank you, and thank you very much for going to the extra trouble of allowing me this interview in the early morning.