



3-24-1973

Stanton Haight (March 24, 1973)

C. Richard Arena
Whittier College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://poetcommons.whittier.edu/nixon>

Recommended Citation

Arena, C. (1973). Stanton Haight (March 24, 1973). Retrieved from <https://poetcommons.whittier.edu/nixon/19>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral History Projects at Poet Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Richard Nixon Oral History Project by an authorized administrator of Poet Commons. For more information, please contact library@whittier.edu.

Oral History Interview

with

MR. STANTON R. HAIGHT

March 24, 1973
San Francisco, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. Stanton Roberts Haight. This interview is being held just outside San Francisco at the San Francisco International Airport. Today's date is March 24, 1973, Arena interviewing. By way of getting an idea of your own background, would you mind stating where and when you were born?

HAIGHT: I was born in San Francisco [California] on April 22, 1904.

ARENA: And would you give an idea of your educational background?

HAIGHT: I went to Lowell High School in San Francisco and graduated from the University of California in 1924 with a Bachelor of Science degree in economics.

ARENA: And would you go over your Navy career, the highlights?

HAIGHT: I received a commission on June 1, 1942, as a two-stripe lieutenant on a provisional basis. In August of 1942, I reported to Quonset Point, Rhode Island, Naval Air Station for training, and graduated from Quonset Point in October of 1942, and was assigned to Ottumwa, Iowa, to assist in the opening of a new primary Naval Training Station.

ARENA: How long did you remain at Ottumwa?

HAIGHT: From approximately October of 1942 until September of 1945.

ARENA: Thank you. That would certainly include the period that the President was there himself, President Nixon.

HAIGHT: Much longer, as a matter of fact.

ARENA: Oh, yes. How about your naval flying experience?

HAIGHT: Under the program that was set up to organize primary naval air stations for the purpose of giving cadets from the primary schools their first fifty hours in the air, there was a great need for ground personnel, not trained flyers, and for that reason I have had very little experience, either as a pilot or navigator or bombardier or in any capacity in a flying way.

ARENA: As you know, that would be the case of the President himself.

HAIGHT: That is correct.

ARENA: And just for the record would you describe, as you recall them, and where you're stating something officially, I'd like you to point that out, where you know this is an official designation; for example, what was his title and what were his duties while he was stationed at Ottumwa?

HAIGHT: To the best of my recollection, President Nixon came from Quonset Point, Rhode Island, to Ottumwa, Iowa, with the rank of Lt. j.g. [Lieutenant junior grade]. He was assigned as an aide to the executive officer of the station, who at that time was Commander Jimmy James.

ARENA: Would you happen to recall Commander James' full name by any chance?

HAIGHT: No, I wouldn't because Commander James was the type of person that, I imagine from the time that he first drew breath until he died, he was known as Jimmy.

ARENA: And for the record--we discussed this off tape--he is no longer living.

HAIGHT: Commander James ultimately attained the rank of rear admiral, and if I recall correctly, he passed away about five years ago.

ARENA: What would be very helpful, I think, to put on the record, with your permission, is your recounting the personality of Commander James, especially as you compared it with that of President Nixon at that time.

HAIGHT: I would say that I don't believe I've ever met two people who were so completely different.

ARENA: What made them different? What was Commander James like as compared to the President at that time?

HAIGHT: Well, succinctly, the President was a very quiet individual, unobtrusive, did his job well, but not with what probably in the vernacular would be termed a great mixer. Jimmy James, on the other hand, was the leader of every operation, every project, and the creator of some that nobody else had ever thought of.

ARENA: As far as you know, were there any contacts, especially social, between Commander James and President Nixon outside of the office? In other words, of course they saw one another during the day, the business day, so to speak. How about after hours?

HAIGHT: I can't answer that. I knew Jimmy James pretty well, as well as the commanding officer at the time, Dorris Gurley. I was a bachelor at the time and had quite a few opportunities to mix with him socially, and at no time do I remember President Nixon being involved in any of our escapades.

ARENA: And speaking about President Nixon, of course, who is the main subject of this interview, do you recall, possibly, anything about your first encounter with him? Does that stand out? We'll go into the other meetings, of course, but I just wonder if there was anything unusual, and if you recall at all the first time you met President Nixon?

HAIGHT: I think that the best way to answer that question is in the nine weeks at Quonset Point, the entire emphasis of the whole program was to cut everybody out of the same piece of cloth, and when we came out it was very difficult to tell one person from the other, because in the nine weeks we had been indoctrinated into the fundamental principles and theories of the Navy. Insofar as President Nixon is concerned, when he arrived at Ottumwa, Iowa, to me he was just another officer who had come out of the mill at Quonset Point with a white cap and a blue suit.

ARENA: If an officer would stand out, or say any person, why would that be so? In other words, would it be because of his own personality, his unusual mastery of his assignments, from your own recollection? Were there people who stood out, in view of the fact they were all indoctrinated in the same manner? [Interruption] Just to be sure now, is there anything else at all that comes to mind about your first encounter with the President?

HAIGHT: Nothing unusual.

ARENA: What do you recall about President Nixon at Ottumwa? What experiences do stand out in your mind from the standpoint of recalling his life including, of course, that of his married life at the time? I don't recall if this was said on or off the record, but I want to make sure it's on the record. You did say, if I'm correct, you were a bachelor.

HAIGHT: That is correct. I was a bachelor at the time. As a matter of fact, most of the officers at Ottumwa I had any contact with were either bachelors or their families lived elsewhere. There were just a handful of married officers on the station, one of whom, of course, was President Nixon. And obviously, in discussing social life, that made quite a difference, because the unmarried officers had a tendency to stay pretty much to themselves and engage in lots of activities that the married officers didn't enter into.

ARENA: Were there any activities though where all did get together, that do come to mind? I'm thinking of, if there was such a thing, an officers' club.

HAIGHT: We had an officers' club, a very fine officers' club, which incidentally was conceived and started by Jimmy James, the executive officer of the station. It was quite active and was used by all of the officers on the station, married or bachelors or otherwise. I recall seeing, although there was nothing unusual, President Nixon and Pat [Patricia Ryan Nixon] as we called her, at that time on a number of occasions, having dinner and attending social functions at the Ottumwa Naval Officers' Club.

ARENA: Do you recall he ever played the piano for any groups, including all of you on any occasion? Were you aware that he had studied the piano and did play from time to time?

HAIGHT: If he did, he kept it to himself. The answer to your question is no, I do not recall on any occasion the President stepping up and playing the piano, as many, many people who are accomplished on that instrument are inclined to do.

ARENA: Was there anything like a chapel? Do you recall any association with him on that level, the religious level, in any way at all?

HAIGHT: No, we did not have a chapel at Ottumwa, Iowa. We had a Catholic chaplain and a Protestant chaplain. President Nixon's religious life I know nothing about.

ARENA: I don't know if you were aware at that time that the President's religious preference was that of the Friends church, Quaker. And let me ask you that outright. Did you know that at the time?

HAIGHT: No, I did not know that at the time.

ARENA: Going back to that question about remembering any particular experience in which you saw the President or his wife,

for example, even seeing Mrs. Nixon in the bank, if you did deal with that bank. Do you recall actually seeing her at work there at any time?

HAIGHT: Oh, on a number of occasions. She was a teller at the Union Bank and Trust Company in Ottumwa, Iowa, and at many different times she cashed checks for me. She was a very pleasant, attractive, efficient young woman.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, would you know if that was a common occurrence, that the wives of Navy personnel did have jobs in the community or on the Navy base itself?

HAIGHT: I think it could be considered common, yes. At that time the pay of a naval officer was not too considerable and not only to fill in the time but to add to the family income, it was quite prevalent that many of the wives had jobs locally.

ARENA: Was there any sort of custom, or maybe even pressure, of officers to entertain one another?

HAIGHT: Well, upon a number of occasions we had what we called a command performance. By that I mean the commanding officer or the executive officer, or a higher ranking officer than you might invite you to attend some particular function. It was pretty much incumbent upon you to attend. Among officers of equal rank, that condition was not at all prevalent. You have to remember, also, that a good many of the officers lived in what we called the BOQ, the Bachelor Officers' Quarters, and didn't have a home. For those who did live at home, it was quite often that they invited one another to dinner, just exactly the same as you would do in your normal life now or in civilian life. There was no compulsion, if that's what you mean.

ARENA: I was just wondering, by way of compulsion, a kind of maybe tradition or standing Navy protocol about officers inviting one another on a family level, if there was anything in the way of a sort of tradition, including this idea maybe of obligation too.

HAIGHT: No. There are certain traditions that have been handed down from the days of John Paul Jones, and when you are assigned to a new post or command, it is customary to stop by the captain's house and leave a card. In other words, you make a formal call. But when you get down to the lower ranks of lieutenant junior grade, lieutenants and ensigns, that's just normal existence, that's all, and particularly so when you remember that each and every one of us at Ottumwa Naval Air Station, as well as the ten other primary naval air stations, and hundreds of other air stations, were not career naval people. We were manufactured from insurance men, from historians and from school teachers and every

other walk of life, so that Navy tradition was not nearly as prevalent when you put USNR [United States Navy Reserves] as when you put USN [United States Navy] after your name. Regular Navy is a horse of a different color. We've always referred to USN as a ring bearer and you're in a different world.

ARENA: The ring bearer would be the USN man, and very possibly even an Annapolis man?

HAIGHT: It would be an Annapolis man and a career man.

ARENA: Just for the record, was there ever any indication, in your contact with the President, directly or indirectly-- and by indirectly I mean that you saw papers or possibly you and the commanding officer may have discussed him at some point, indirect knowledge--that he might stay in the Navy as a career man? Did that ever come across your knowledge while you were with him?

HAIGHT: It never came across my knowledge as far as the President was concerned or, for that matter, anybody else, because the constant talk among the officers was, when are we going to get out of this thing?

ARENA: The same with enlisted men.

HAIGHT: That's right. I met very few who wanted to continue it as a career.

ARENA: Just for the record, was there ever any knowledge that came your way, either directly or indirectly, that the President was anxious or trying to get into action, that is, rather than remain in Ottumwa, to get into a combat area? Do you recall that?

HAIGHT: I will have to answer that in this way. I cannot positively say that President Nixon was anxious for a transfer, but on the part of most everyone at the station, at one time or another they indicated a very strong desire to get into a more active phase of naval operations than we were involved in.

ARENA: Did you, by any circumstance, happen to be in the close vicinity of the President when he did receive his orders that he was going to be transferred out? And I don't know--you would know possibly better than I--received orders that he was going into action in the South Pacific? Was there a going-away party or anything along those lines?

HAIGHT: Not to my knowledge, because it occurred very frequently. We had, in round numbers, 2,000 sailors at the station and five or six hundred cadets learning to fly, as well as the instructors and others, both in the flying and on the ground. Orders, just like in any naval air station during the time of war, came in

and out of there with great rapidity. There was no such thing as a going-away party, because you'd be having nothing but going-away parties.

ARENA: Did you have the occasion, while you were at Ottumwa, to know anything about the President's legal training and legal background, and the use of that training while he was at Ottumwa? In other words, how did he put his legal training and experience to work?

HAIGHT: To the best of my knowledge, he didn't use it, because as I say, we had a legal officer. As a matter of fact, we had three of them as I recall, and the chief of our legal staff was an officer by the name of Harold Donohue who subsequently became a Democratic congressman from Worcester, Massachusetts.

ARENA: Do you recall about the period? Would it be about the fifties, sixties?

HAIGHT: I'd say in the early sixties, maybe '58.

ARENA: You don't know if he might still be serving in that capacity by any chance?

HAIGHT: I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he is.

ARENA: While we do touch on the subject of politics, and just for the record, was there any indication that the President was interested in politics, again from your direct or indirect knowledge of him at that time? Excuse me, if it is indirectly what would be the source? Did you hear anyone mention this to you, or something like that?

HAIGHT: At no time, to the best of my recollection, did President Nixon ever speak of any ambition politically.

ARENA: And not getting into politics per se, as I mentioned off the tape, this project has as its cutoff date 1945, when the President did get interested in politics, but what was your reaction when you first found out that he was going to go into a political career, and recalling him as you did back in the Ottumwa days?

HAIGHT: Frankly, I was greatly surprised and expressed myself in that manner to a number of my friends.

ARENA: Speaking of his early California period again, whether you discussed this with him directly, or through your indirect association, the fact he was born on a farm--a ranch as Californians like to say--in this case a citrus ranch of lemon groves, did that part of his life, or that part of his early career, manifest itself in any way, in the sense that he, maybe, unlike many others born and raised in the big city, had many characteristics

that were a result of his being originally a farm boy, although, of course, cultivated in the city?

HAIGHT: The answer, as far as I'm concerned, is no, because when you're in a situation such as we were, knowing it was going to be for a short period of time, or you hoped it was going to be a short period of time and you were going to come out alive or you were not going to come out of it, your interests are pointed so much toward the job that has to be done at the time. It's one of the few situations where everybody has a common cause, and your thoughts and your actions revolve around the Navy, and what you are going to do. You don't have the background to discuss what you would do normally among your friends or business associates. If you've grown up with somebody and gone to high school and then to college with them, you know something about his entire history, but these people including the President were pretty much strangers, which was evident by the short time they were in Ottumwa, Iowa. They came and went, and we never asked them where they were born or anything about them. If someone had told me he was born in Whittier, I'd probably say, "Where's Whittier?"

ARENA: I noticed in some of the newspapers put out by the Navy base that are still in existence that he was on the staff, and there would be an article from time to time mentioning his name. One article mentioned that he played handball. I'm just wondering if any of his extracurricular activities along these lines comes to mind. In addition to working on the newspaper and in addition to being interested in handball, if anything else like that comes to mind, including handball, if you had any knowledge of that kind.

HAIGHT: If President Nixon was athletically inclined, it was news to me. I played a lot of tennis and I played golf with a lot of the officers. He didn't belong to the Ottumwa Country Club, I know that, and I never saw him there to the best of my knowledge.

ARENA: Was the Ottumwa Country Club a private club to which the officers were invited?

HAIGHT: A private club to which the officers were invited at a very nominal fee, and it was the center of social activity in this small Midwestern town.

ARENA: I did mention off the tape a moment ago that the President's former classmate, not in law school necessarily, but at Duke [University] when he attended law school, was the band, orchestra leader, Les Brown, and I did notice in one of these newspapers that he was coming with his band to Ottumwa. I'm wondering, one, do you recall that; and, two, did you have any knowledge that these two may have gotten together?

HAIGHT: No, I have no knowledge that the President ever got together with Les Brown and his Band of Renown. I do know that, like every other station during the war, there was considerable activity, and we had not only Les Brown, but every performer of any prominence at all at the time, offer his services to put on a show at Ottumwa. There were eleven primary naval air stations throughout the Midwest. Ottumwa just happened to be one of them.

ARENA: Given your own background in California, as well as that of the President, and given one unavoidable topic whenever California came up, the weather, do you recall that the President ever indicated complaints about Ottumwa weather, and that if it were up to him, he couldn't wait to get back to Southern California, or anything along those lines? Did you and he get together concerning the virtues of living in California as compared to living in Ottumwa, Iowa?

HAIGHT: I think in the Navy, when you threw a miscellaneous group of people together from Texas and the Midwest and California and the New England states and Southern California, there was always some conversation, particularly at mealtime, about the various places where you happen to have lived or the places where you were born, and it seems that there were only two or three sections of the country where there is constant bickering, and that's Northern and Southern California, Texas and perhaps Florida. You very seldom hear two people arguing about the relative merits of living in Michigan or Iowa, but that's not true of California. And I'm sure, although I can't quote, that at sometime or other, during the horrible winter in Iowa, President Nixon expressed a desire to be back in Whittier. He would have been a very peculiar person had he not done so.

ARENA: Realizing that this subject could touch on the confidential, and of course I don't want to go into anything confidential, but from the standpoint of your recollections of the President's associations with, one, his fellow officers, those on the same level, his associations with those above him, those to whom he was responsible, and finally, his associations with those enlisted men under him, if anything, what comes to mind about such contacts?

HAIGHT: In the position that President Nixon was in in Ottumwa, Iowa, being an aide to the executive officer, who was the operating manager of the station, his contact with enlisted men would be very nominal. In fact, his contact with the other officers would not be as broad as those who were in a different position. His primary job was to carry out the orders of the executive officer. He would, in all sense of the word, be an aide, and to the best of my recollection, President Nixon conducted himself at all times in the true traditions of the Navy. He was a gentleman and a good officer.

ARENA: From the standpoint of--again not necessarily President Nixon, but anyone in that position--just how much opportunity was there for decision-making? Or was it really this idea of carrying out other persons' decisions? Was he put in any sort of challenging, decision-making position during this period? Were there any crises, among other things, for example, that came up, where he was on the spot?

HAIGHT: No, because it was drummed into you that the Navy is a chain of command, and your decisions are very, very limited in their scope.

ARENA: This interview is continued on the other side of this cassette.

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I

ARENA: By way of a biographical addendum, would you mind putting on the record what you did say about your own personal ancestry's connection with California history?

HAIGHT: Well, I'm a member of the California Society of Pioneers, and in order to become eligible for that organization, you have to prove conclusively that you had a male relative in California prior to 1850.

ARENA: Where is the headquarters based, by the way?

HAIGHT: McAllister Street in San Francisco [California]. My great-uncle was a Democratic governor of the State of California. His name was Henry Huntley Haight. He founded the University of California with a grant from the state legislature of \$100,000. As a sort of insight into his character, he also founded the San Francisco Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

ARENA: You may know now, I don't know if you were aware at the time--speaking of history--the President majored in history in undergraduate school. That was his pre-law major, of course. Just for the record, did that ever come up in any way? Did you and he ever discuss history?

HAIGHT: No, I seldom do. As a matter of fact, my great-uncle was the immortal Samuel Brannan, who was the publisher of the newspaper here in San Francisco along in the 1840's. He was the one that announced to Montgomery Street that gold had been discovered at Sutter's Fort.

ARENA: Just for the record, and even though you did clarify the matter of your mutual non-discussion of history, but the President's forebears were kind of pioneers, in the sense

that Whittier was founded by a group of Quakers in 1887, and ten years after that date, his mother's father, his own grandfather, did settle in Whittier, and in that sense he was among the early settlers of that part of Southern California.

By way of closing the interview at this point, let me ask you. Is there any subject that I have not brought up, any question that I have not brought up, that you would like to make sure is on the record regarding your firsthand recollections of President Nixon, or maybe you want to emphasize any particular theme, as we bring this interview to a close?

HAIGHT: No, I don't think there's anything that I can add to what has already been done, except to reiterate that President Nixon, in the short time that I knew him when he was at Ottumwa, Iowa, was a good officer and performed his duties well. He was quiet and went about his business and that was about it.

ARENA: There's just one point that comes to mind that a person like you could answer better than others, of course. Is there anything that he has said or done since those days when you knew him at Ottumwa, without getting into politics per se, that is unmistakably associated, you might say, with his Navy background, a particular phrase or use of words, or some incident in which you can detect, well, this is the Navy coming out, whether the Navy was at Ottumwa or any part of his navy life?

HAIGHT: No, there's nothing in particular that I can point out, other than when I looked at him on television, welcoming back the astronauts while being on the bridge of one of our large carriers, somehow I always got the feeling that he was very happy to be there, and that he would prefer to be in that position rather in the reviewing stand in the Army. I think that the intensive training that he got, even though it was many years ago, is something that you can't erase. I think he has a tender spot in his heart, like we all do, for the Navy. When they play "Anchors Aweigh," it does something for you.

ARENA: Which is the next logical question, and this will be the last one. Of course, you cannot speak for him--period. And you have a feeling that others would not have regarding this Navy background, but speaking for yourself, may I put the same question to you, and elaborate if you will on something that you think is deeply ingrained in you now as a result of your Navy experience. In other words, to what extent. . . . And may I ask, by the way, when you did leave active service?

HAIGHT: I was discharged at Great Lakes [Naval Training Center, Illinois] in 1945 and went back to the insurance business.

ARENA: This would be about the same period, in other words, three years, as the President.

HAIGHT: And I, like I suppose a good many other officers, attempted to transpose the Navy or the military way of doing things, to my business, which is a very difficult thing to do. I think time is a great healer, and time takes care of a great many things, and as we all grow older--I'm sixty-eight years old now, and been retired for three years--and all the spit-and-polish that I learned in the Navy has sort of worn off, but I wouldn't be a bit surprised if President Nixon, as well as any of the rest of us who were exposed to the same training that we were, didn't try to carry out some of the things that we learned, in business. And I'm not too sure right now that President Nixon doesn't fully understand and comprehend that he's the Commander-in-Chief.

ARENA: Is there anything concerning the period at Quonset Point that would be equally significant, do you think, along these lines, as having an influence on you. That's where you got your first immersion in officer training.

HAIGHT: That's correct.

ARENA: And so did he. Anything you'd like to say, again, from your standpoint, which would serve as a help in understanding the President's own training. About Quonset Point, was there anything in particular. . . . And by the way, there you were by the sea, if I'm not mistaken, which would make a difference. . . .

HAIGHT: On Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island. Well, I don't think that anybody, as I said, can go through nine weeks of that training without it making indelible impressions on him.

ARENA: Any idea as to those who go through that training and don't make it? I realize you don't have statistics at hand, but any idea as to what the flunk-outs would be in a situation like that?

HAIGHT: There were what we call carry-overs. In other words, they didn't complete the required courses and were carried over for another nine weeks. There were always in the neighborhood of fifteen or twenty in that particular category.

ARENA: Mr. Haight, I want to thank you very much for accepting my invitation to answer this call to history and for answering all my questions so frankly and fully, and even taking the trouble to come out here to the airport for this interview. Thank you very much.

HAIGHT: Not at all.