2-5-1973

Robert O. Blake (February 5, 1973)

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Oral History Interview

with

THE HONORABLE ROBERT O. BLAKE

February 5, 1973
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with The Honorable Robert O. Blake, United States Ambassador to Mali, Africa. (O, middle initial, stands for Orris). We are in Whittier, California, February 5, 1973. This is Arena interviewing.

May I begin, Mr. Blake, by asking you, from the standpoint of getting some background for the interview itself, where and when you were born, and a brief resume of your educational background?

BLAKE: I was born in Los Angeles [California] April 7, 1921. At that time my parents were living in Whittier [California] and I was born at the Good Samaritan Hospital. They lived on North Bright [Avenue] for a short period, in the 200 block, and then moved to the house where we lived until I left Whittier to join the Navy and go into the Foreign Service. That was at, formerly, 520 North Friends [Avenue]. I went to Lincoln [Elementary] School, to Bailey [Elementary] School, then to John Muir [Junior High School], and finally through Whittier High School.

ARENA: May I ask you your class at at Whittier High School?

BLAKE: Yes, 1939.

ARENA: Thank you.

BLAKE: In 1939 I went to Stanford University and stayed there until February, 1943. I was already in the Navy, from a period right after Pearl Harbor until I was called

to go to Navy Officers School. I was in the Navy from then until 1946. Just as soon as I got out of the Navy I applied for Foreign Service. I never really lived in Whittier since then, although I returned often to visit my parents, Mr. and Mrs. Frank O. Blake.

ARENA: What year did you leave the Navy and go into the Foreign Service?

BLAKE: I left the Navy in '46 in the spring, took my written examinations for the Foreign Service in September of '46, had a year in which I got my master's degree in International Relations at Johns Hopkins [University], and went into the Foreign Service in May of '47.

ARENA: May I ask you when you ever had contact with the President? As you know, this project does not go beyond the 1945 period, when he went into public service. When did you first meet the President before that date, if it comes to mind, or we'll say, even members of his immediate family; his parents, his brothers and so forth?

BLAKE: I don't really know. In a small town atmosphere you're just always aware of people and their families. To what degree I was specifically aware of the President in his early times, it's hard to say. The fact is that being roughly nine years apart in age is like being a thousand years apart, and we had no personal associations until after the period you were talking about, when he became a congressman; I got to know him increasingly well after those years. My only personal knowledge of him was as a young man who was president of the student body of Whittier College, somebody who people around town thought of as a hard-working comer.

He was slightly outside the immediate group in which my family moved, for several reasons. One was the fact that the President lived in East Whittier [California], and people that lived in East Whittier in those days physically were somewhat removed from us. The Nixons went to different schools and lived a different kind of a life, a little bit. We were aware of the problems their parents had in making the store go. My mother had lived in East Whittier; her maiden name was Sada George. Her father had been a man who had a lot of money, which had come from real estate. And she was a good friend of Mrs. [Hannah Milhous] Nixon. I know that all through long periods when things were tough, my mother helped them.

ARENA: If this isn't too personal, were they members of the same church?

BLAKE: No, not at all. I know my mother came to this area in 1893. She knew the [Franklin] Milhous family.

ARENA: May I ask what was the point of origin? Where had she come from?

BLAKE: She was born in Chicago [Illinois]. She was six, seven years old when she came here.

ARENA: You may or may not know that the Milhouses themselves, that is, the President's mother [Hannah Milhous Nixon] and her father [Franklin Milhous], the President's grandfather, of course, came a little after that, 1897, just ten years after the founding of the city of Whittier. That is interesting.

BLAKE: Right. And I know, for example, of my mother's feeling for the great value of Mrs. [Hannah] Nixon and all the hard work that she did. I also know of my mother's finding ways to help them, quietly, all through her life. And even more recently at the time of the 1968 Inauguration, for example--this is outside the period but shows the relationship--she paid for some of the family to go back to the inauguration. Mother's dead now, and I'm sorry she didn't have a chance to talk to you to give you her impressions. But it was not a close social relationship our families had, in any way. I was just vaguely aware of a bright, older guy.

ARENA: Do you recall, maybe the President himself, or anyone delivering groceries? Do you know if your mother bought regularly from their grocery store in East Whittier?

BLAKE: No, I don't think so. I just know that once in a while, when we'd go to the Hacienda Country Club or out in that direction for something, we'd stop off and buy lemons, or something like that.

ARENA: Do you recall anything about the President's participation in the Whittier Community Players? We'll go into this in a moment, of course. I believe you did have his wife, Mrs. [Patricia Ryan] Pat Nixon as your teacher. But were you aware that she was interested in and volunteered for plays, and that he was involved in them too? As a matter of fact, that's how they met. I was just wondering if that gave you any opportunity to be aware of him around that time.

BLAKE: Yes, but before that I was aware of him getting his scholarship to law school at Duke [University].

ARENA: I wonder how you knew that. Was that information that your mother mentioned, do you think?

BLAKE: Probably not. I probably learned this from the Whittier paper and from the general talk in town.

ARENA: Because it was a small town, and someone who had received a scholarship way across the country to Duke, that would have been not only newsworthy, but would have been known around the town.

BLAKE: Sure, everybody would know it. I've always found in this town, even as big as it's gotten and as far away as I've gone, that everybody always knows what I'm doing and where I've been, and very accurately what's been happening. Even today there's a small town atmosphere about the means of oral communication. So one knew lots of things about people, sometimes reputations, even when one wasn't personally involved. One knew about almost every family and about every person in every family, in a general way where they stood, what they were like, and their general considered value in the community. Certainly Richard Nixon was one of those persons who had a very high standing. He and his mother seemed to stand out above other members of the family.

ARENA: On the question of your mother coming here, I believe you said around 1893, I brought in a little side history. I didn't mean to cut you off. You may have been following an idea or a point there, when you mentioned the fact that your mother came out in 1893. Did that mean that she met Mrs. Hannah Nixon, the President's mother, about that time? In 1897, when she was a young girl, twelve or thirteen, did they know one another?

BLAKE: Very well. And that was really the main connection.

ARENA: Had they actually gone to school together, do you know?

BLAKE: I don't know. Mother went to Jonathan Bailey [Elementary School], to Whittier High School, and then to Stanford [University], but I can't tell you exactly the dates.

ARENA: On the question of the Quaker background of the President, does anything come to mind from that period, just before and actually during the war years, concerning the fact that he was a Quaker, that he did join the service and engage in a combatant role?

BLAKE: That was fairly important, not particularly with him, but with the whole community. Understand that by this time I was already beginning to move away from Whittier. In 1941 I'd been away two years in university, so I was already a little bit more removed from Whittier. But we always wondered what would happen in such a situation, and as a matter of fact, it didn't become much of a problem. People thought there would be a lot of talk, a lot of criticism of this, that there would

be a lot of conscientious objectors. In fact, it didn't turn out that way. Whittier had developed between, say, 1910 and the time of the war, and Whittier had become an atypical Quaker community. It was always interesting, for example, at a Friends meeting to see the relative lack of approval of the delegates from other communities at the way the Whittier community was developing, opening up, and becoming non-typically Quaker in many ways.

We were not Quakers--I suppose half our friends were--but one couldn't tell the difference between the ones that were and the ones that weren't. Nothing in dress. Almost everybody in Whittier shared the social norms of the Whittier Quaker community. For example, no Sunday movies, no bars, no dances at the high school. By the time I was growing up, in the middle thirties, these prejudices were disappearing rapidly, and even the Quakers were saying that they were out-of-date. And so, when the business of the conscientious objection to the war came up, I really can't remember anybody among my Quaker friends that didn't become involved in the war, one way or another. If the President had become a conscientious objector, he would have been atypical.

ARENA: Just for the record, and if it isn't too personal, do you recall that you personally, or anyone in your immediate family, suffered any religious prejudice because you were not Quakers?

BLAKE: No, not at all. The standards were, by the time I was growing up, not whether you were Quaker or not, but whether you belonged to a family which had professional ties and was well-educated.

ARENA: Could I ask you this: In view of your not only being a resident in Whittier, and literally around the world, could you say that your education in Whittier, formally and informally--by informally, the pals who were Quakers that you hung around with and so forth--that there was any sort of a special brainwashing, in the good sense of the term, or push toward service to others which, as you know, is one of the basic Quaker ideals? I'm just wondering, again, from your living in other parts of the world and other parts of the country as compared to your living in Whittier, was there anything special about that which you could definitely identify as being something you got from living in Whittier, if I'm making myself clear.

BLAKE: Yes, you're making yourself very clear. It's difficult to be completely sure about this. The spirit of the community was always one of service, but it wasn't one of government service. There was, if anything, some prejudice against that. People that became involved in government service work were thought of as not earning their money quite as much as businessmen. All through my early years I sensed this. Service to the community or to other people was a little bit different than service with the government or going away.

On the other part of the question I was very aware of the high quality of the schools here. I've had a lot of opportunities in a lot of places to observe grammar school and high school education. Even considering the education that my own children are getting, I consider that I got as good an education as anybody could get, a broad-based, wide look at the world and the world's problems. If I had Quaker teachers, I wasn't aware of it. Probably half of them weren't Quakers, but there was nothing that would identify them. If you would say, "Oh, you are a Quaker?" well, that was very interesting. But there was no Quaker element that was particularly patrician; as far as I was concerned, no looking up or looking down on Quakers. My family just didn't happen to be Quaker. We belonged to the Episcopal church here. But there was no cleavage or conflict. Neighbors on both sides of us were Quakers.

ARENA: I wonder if I could move over to the question of your personal association with Mrs. Richard Nixon, one time known as Patricia Thelma Ryan, possibly when you knew her. As a matter of fact, she would have been that, because she did not marry until after you graduated, as you know.

BLAKE: That's right.

ARENA: Whatever you do recall about her, both in the classroom, the formal situation; outside, in case she served as an advisor to any affairs in which you were involved, and let's say, even completely outside the school buildings, if you had any opportunity to see her in any of the Whittier community plays, and that sort of thing. Anything that comes to mind about Mrs. Nixon, in this case Mrs. Pat Nixon.

BLAKE: Right. Well, I remember '38-'39, her first year at Whittier High School. She came to teach business subjects, and I had a class in college typing from her. I remember her, not very much on that side of things because, after all, a lot of the course work was fairly mechanical; it was a half-year course. I remember her as the young teacher with whom all the senior boys were sort of in love. She was the best-looking of all the teachers, although trying to be firm in order to establish herself as different from the students. She wasn't really much older in age, we didn't feel, than ourselves. And she had the most beautiful hair, darker than it is presently, dark auburn hair that all of us thought was just great. We wore rather tight sweaters, in the style of the day. We thought she was a very, very good-looking lady, indeed. And she was, with another teacher and a good friend of mine, Alice Martin, now Alice Rosenberger, one of the two girls that everybody thought were really great, really cool, as they say now. We all wanted to talk to them when we could. I remember often seeing her in the halls and talking to her.

She was advisor for the junior-senior prom and I was one of the students in charge of it. I remember working with her on the

arrangements for the prom, which was I believe the first one held at the high school. Of course, this was an enormous breakthrough. Up to that time we had been allowed to have senior dances but never at school. It had been at the Whittier Women's Club, or some place like that.

I don't have much more to say on Mrs. Nixon. Because she was teaching commercial subjects rather than social studies, we didn't have as much to do with her as we might have had with some of the other teachers. I remember seeing some of the plays. I remember that she was in a play of the Whittier [Community] Players. I used to go there rather regularly with my family. And these plays were, of course, a prestige type of event in the community, and one where I think that she felt, probably, was a good way to become a part of the community. I don't think that Whittier was particularly difficult to penetrate, as communities go. Nevertheless, you have to be around, and there was the establishment in this town, as there was in any other town. I believe that she only got generally accepted as a member in the big family when she got married, but there was nothing really unusual about that.

ARENA: Was there any opportunity at all, from your position then, to observe the courtship of one Richard Nixon and Patricia Ryan?

BLAKE: Yes. We had a lot of fun about this, as a matter of fact. We boys resented the President dating her because we wanted her to marry a football hero. That's just a vague memory. Somehow Mr. Nixon seemed a little bit different from her. She seemed a figure of glamour and he didn't. He was a serious kind of guy working his way up.

ARENA: Do you recall anything about his speaking to the high school at her invitation, for any purpose?

BLAKE: Nothing. I do remember one funny thing, which is entirely different. She used to live in a house down below Whittier Boulevard in what was called the McNeek Tract at that time. I can't remember the name of the street.

ARENA: It wouldn't be, by the way, with Mrs. Edna Collins, the wife of now-deceased Raymond Collins? That doesn't ring a bell?

BLAKE: I don't know. I knew Raymond Collins, but I don't know that. I had a feeling that she was living there by herself or with another teacher, but I'm not sure. Anyway, he used to take her out, and we went down there once or twice and found them out in front of the house in the car, and shined lights on them. This romance was something that we were all aware of, you know, high school kids, the deviltry that one had.

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I

ARENA: Just to round out the finishing touches to that recollection concerning the courtship of Pat and Richard Nixon, was there any follow-up in the sense of your teacher, Miss Ryan, then, finding out who the culprits were? Anything like that?

BLAKE: I don't remember any more than that, as we didn't do very much. I don't think we were trying to do particularly anything except a little deviltry. I don't have memories of that. We may sometime have kidded her a little, because she was a young woman that one could kid, in a nice way, not going too far.

ARENA: Do you recall anything specific about that, someone maybe playing a joke on her or vice versa, her on the students? Can you recall anything about that, kidding around?

BLAKE: No, not particularly, just that she had a good sense of humor. We were very aware of her. We knew her background, where she had come from, the Artesia [California] part of her life, and we had seen her brother and the problems he had. In Whittier everybody knew everything about people; that was the kind of town it was.

ARENA: In view of your present return from Africa, and in view of the fact that I've seen some photographs--and you may know the gentleman, Mr. Orville Espolt. . . . Mr. Espolt has shown a black man who used to work for Mr. Franklin Milhous, the President's grandfather, and he also had an interesting photograph showing Mrs. Hannah Nixon as a youngster attending elementary school, and there was a lineup of maybe, oh, twelve or thirteen in that photograph. The interesting thing is there were two blacks in the photograph. Do you have any recollections of black families living in Whittier, and to what extent they attended, not only the schools but the churches, and all of that? Anything that comes to mind on that.

BLAKE: Well, there weren't very many. They came and went. There was one family that was here for a long, long time. The father worked out at the Hacienda Country Club. I can't think of his name.

ARENA: Was his name Rickard? Does that ring a bell in any way?

BLAKE: No.

ARENA: John Rickard.

BLAKE: It doesn't ring a bell. But there were no black children in my class, or in the time I was in high school. There were plenty of Japanese, Chinese, Mexicans, but no black

children. At that period there just didn't happen to be any. We always thought it was too bad. We thought it would have been rather nice to have had some black children in our classes.

ARENA: Just for the record, had you had any direct contact with the President's other immediate relatives? I'm thinking of his two surviving brothers, one Donald [Francis Donald Nixon], and one Edward [Calvert Nixon], during your stay in Whittier, and again, before the 1945 period?

BLAKE: Not a bit, and really none since. I knew the President's mother.

ARENA: What are your recollections of her?

BLAKE: They are recollections of an older woman of my mother's age, of a very strong-minded lady. Occasionally I used to stop in and say hello to her. I considered her to be an intellectually superior person. She always wanted to talk about what was happening in the world, instead of just little small talk. This wasn't any big thing, it was just like we did with older neighbors and friends in those days. When you went by somebody's house, if they were out in the yard you stopped and talked to them, as everybody knew everybody else. I remember her as somebody that my mother and my family considered to be a very fine person.

ARENA: Do you recall ever eating any of the pies she was known to have baked regularly at some time? Do you know if your mother bought any or brought any home?

BLAKE: Just vaguely, but nothing very definite.

ARENA: How about the President's father, Mr. [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon?

BLAKE: I hardly knew him. His mother, of course, was connected through her family with other families around here. I just have the vaguest sort of memories, even of the President's father.

ARENA: Did you have then some vague recollection that she belonged to one of the old families, was one of the Milhouses?

BLAKE: Absolutely. No question about that. That was very definite.

ARENA: And what does come to mind about. . . . I realize that at that time you didn't think about it that much, but if you can, what thoughts did you have about the Milhouses of Whittier?

BLAKE: It was one of the good, old-line Quaker families, like a few of the other families that have always been around here, that they were people who had made it, had done well.

ARENA: If this isn't too personal, and if you recall, did you associate the President with the--if I can use the expression--the poor-relative side of the family, again because of living in East Whittier and working, and so forth? Was there that type of association in your mind, and I wonder if this was true of others, too, but if there was such a thing as a well-to-do part of the Milhous family and a poor side, and you associated him with the poor side?

BLAKE: Maybe, a little bit. But that wasn't important, because the emphasis was always, for everybody, on working.

ARENA: Do you recall, along those lines, your mother or anyone ever saying, "Look at that Richard Nixon," in the sense of holding him up as an example, either to you personally, or if that was done among others?

BLAKE: No, I don't think so. I can remember them speaking of the Nixon family as a whole, but not singling him out. The Nixons had more than their amount of troubles.

ARENA: From what did these troubles stem?

BLAKE: Sickness.

ARENA: The deaths of the two brothers?

BLAKE: Yes, and their having to go to Arizona and come back.

ARENA: Were you aware of that, that there was this move to Arizona by the mother and the sick brother, Harold [Samuel Nixon]?

BLAKE: I honestly can't be sure whether I was aware of it, or whether it was something I learned since.

ARENA: Is there anything I have not brought up in this interview, Mr. Blake, that you want to touch upon before we do bring it to a close?

BLAKE: No, nothing specific. If I were talking about later periods, I see a lot that the President says and does now that has pretty deep roots in this town.

ARENA: Would you touch on that, not going into specifics about what he has done in politics since 1945, but in, we'll say, personality or mannerisms? How is Whittier, as you knew it and grew up here, how is it evident in the man today?

BLAKE: Certainly, his emphasis now on the importance of work, the importance of individuality, these were the lessons that we all learned in school and learned from our parents. These were the ethics of the community. There was, for example, a strong prejudice here in the early days against labor unions. The reason for that was that people in unions were said not to work and other people did. People in labor unions came from the outside and told other people what to do. Also, the general liberality on racial questions, and with being with different kinds of people. There was always a feeling, too, in Whittier of looking out over the plain to the sea. We had lots of people who had missionary relatives coming in here, visiting and talking at the churches. The President's enormous interest in the world and foreign policy, of seeing out, certainly must have been stimulated by the experiences that he had here.

ARENA: On that very point, the President does mention in his book, Six Crises, that his mother had hopes--and he is saying this, the President--that he would someday grow up and be a missionary in Central America. As a matter of fact, the local Quakers do have a mission in Central America, Guatemala in particular, and I've had the pleasure of meeting some of those involved. I just wondered if that story, or anything connected with it, brings back any specific incidents, or ties in with what you've been saying. But can you see, have you ever heard anything along those lines, that his mother had hoped that he would be a missionary in Central America?

BLAKE: No, but I wouldn't have been the right age to hear that kind of thing, probably. It was just that this was the atmosphere of great interest in other parts of the world. We'd often have lectures at the college or one of the churches, or in the high school by people who came from other countries. I remember once we had a long lecture by a Presbyterian missionary about Korea. I must have been fairly young then, but it made a very strong impression on me. That was just the way the town was.

ARENA: I can't help but ask, in view of that and your own present position with the Foreign Service of the United States, can you definitely link a tie between your growing up in Whittier and your choice of that profession?

BLAKE: I think so. Joining the Diplomatic Service was something I always wanted to do. But when I became aware of the problems of getting in the Foreign Service, I wasn't at all sure that it would ever happen. We lived part of the year on the coast at Balboa [California] and were aware particularly of the Far East and what was going on. I remember that the community was always an intellectually busy place. It was never really a small town in that sense, because there were rather broad outside intellectual influences here all the time.

ARENA: If this isn't too personal, would you mind, for the record, stating your last assignment with the Foreign Service and your present status?

BLAKE: I've been in the service for twenty-six years. I'm Ambassador to the Republic of Mali, and I'm a Foreign Service officer of the class of Career Minister. Just before going to Mali, I was Minister in Paris [France] for two years, and have been in a number of posts all over the world.

ARENA: From my old diplomatic history days, I recall that the highest person we could afford to sendwas a minister. When you say you were a minister, would that be in the same historic sense?

BLAKE: No, it's not the same. We don't have ministers anymore, except as number two men in places like Paris and London [England] and two or three others.

ARENA: Then they are immediately under the ambassadors.

BLAKE: Yes, that's right. But the title Career Minister comes from another historical period and is, under the Foreign Service Act which set up our service, the highest rank in the Foreign Service. There is an honorary rank of Career Ambassador for five people, but right now we don't have anybody who is serving in that rank.

ARENA: One last chance. Is there anything I've left out, or anything you still want to be sure is on the record of this interview, Mr. Blake, before we bring it to a close?

BLAKE: No, I think these are the only things from this period. Of course, I have many other memories about the President, because I knew the President chiefly as an adult and he knew me as an adult. One always has to be careful that one doesn't read back into that earlier period our later thoughts, because there was a very definite difference between my attitude toward Richard Nixon in the earlier period and the one later. The one later was very much molded by his personal successes and his relationship to my father and other people. The earlier period was through my mother's side and through the memories of the Nixon family, rather than of him personally.

ARENA: Thank you very much for granting us the privilege of this interview, and for answering all of my questions so frankly and fully, and I know my fellow historians would join me in expressing this appreciation. Thank you very much.