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Raymond Henle (January 29, 1973)

C. Richard Arena

ABSTRACT
Oral History Interview

with

MR. RAYMOND HENLE

January 29, 1973
West Palm Beach, Florida

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

Mr. Henle, a retired journalist, served as director of the Herbert Hoover Oral History Program.

The interview begins with substantial coverage of Mr. Henle's career. (He is also listed in various editions of Who's Who through the late sixties.) Mr. Henle then discusses the background and procedures of the Hoover Oral History Program. The following dialogue then ensued:

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HENLE: The name of Richard Nixon is mentioned many, many times in my oral history, on any number of things involving Mr. [Herbert] Hoover and Mr. Nixon's association, going back to the very first time that Richard Nixon ran for Congress, had no money, needed funds to run, and a group of public-spirited citizens in California, in which Mr. Hoover was the silent partner-- President Hoover decided that this man had something and he should be helped--and they raised enough money for him to conduct a proper campaign. Herbert Hoover, Jr., was really the head of it. But President Hoover, himself, if not the originator of the idea, certainly was an active participant and encouraged it right from the beginning. Now that is full of meaning, because Mr. Hoover never touched anything that had the slightest shadow of irregularity about it. If there was anything dominant in that man's life it was integrity. I never knew anybody who was so unflinchingly a man of integrity more so than he was. Regardless of what others might say about those funds that helped Richard Nixon, their source was of the highest meaning and integrity itself.

Now, I'm sorry to say that I was not successful in gathering the information I wanted about that fund, and the reason for it was that the men who participated were either dead or were getting so

old that their memories were faulty, or that they still had this feeling that there was going to be some criticism of it, you see, and so they hesitated to talk. And if you go out to West Branch [Iowa] you'll see the file of letters that I have on this subject. Many of them wrote to me, and some of them strongly indicated the things I'm telling you now. So I don't know if that material can still be collected. I'm inclined to think that if it were done by personal contact it could. It would take a good deal of doing in the State of California. That has to be done out there. I tried to get it from Washington and here in Palm Beach by letter. Does that satisfy you on that point, Dick?

ARENA: Very good, thank you. Very good.

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The interview continued with further discussions concerning the Hoover Oral History Program and Mrs. Lou Henry Hoover. Then the following verbatim dialogue occurred:

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HENLE: But I don't believe there's any connection between Mrs. [Lou Henry] Hoover and the Nixons. Not that I know of.

ARENA: Other than she grew up for a while, as we said either on or off the tape before, she lived for a while in Whittier [California].

HENLE: Yes, but whether or not she knew that anybody by the name of Nixon existed, I don't think she did, because she died two years before Richard Nixon came on the scene as a candidate for Congress, and he wasn't very well known before then. Isn't that correct?

ARENA: He was not in public office, other than as a Deputy City Attorney underneath the regular City Attorney, and that was not a political office really; it was an appointment. The only thing is--and that's why I would not give up completely on the idea that there might be some knowledge between them--the President is, in addition to being a Nixon, as you know, a Milhous, and the Milhouses did go back quite a ways, and their influence was much more widespread in Whittier. There was a [Franklin] Milhous ranch and, through marriage, another very well known family of Whittier is called [Oscar O.] Marshburn, and possibly she knew some of the relatives of the President, that sort of thing, through school, because there are so many of them and so many age levels. I'm sure, among her own contemporaries the Milhous or other married relatives, there may have been a connection. But again, that's worth looking into, and you may have that information through some of the stories, you know, that were told about her growing up.

HENLE: Well, to the best of my knowledge, the only mention of Mrs. Hoover connected with the Nixons that we have was her attendance at Whittier Women's. . . . What did they call them in those days?

ARENA: Boarding school?

HENLE: Seminaries. Maybe the Women's Seminary or Academy of Whittier or something like that.

ARENA: I see.

HENLE: You'll find it in one of the books on Mrs. Hoover.

ARENA: Fine.

HENLE: And I think there's a picture in there of her too with her class.

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The discussion returned to the procedures of the Hoover Oral History Program and general oral history methodology.

The interview ended with the following verbatim discussion:

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HENLE: Mr. Hoover was a very hard man for the public to know, but the people who were privileged to know him, as in the confines of their own home, they had, one, a tremendous respect for him; two, a tremendous admiration and then an affection.

ARENA: Since you've met Mr. Richard Nixon under the same circumstances, what would you say about the situation regarding him? Would it be very similar?

HENLE: I would say that it could be similar.

ARENA: Do you think that the Quaker background would be part of the explanation?

HENLE: I think it has a great deal to do with it, although President Nixon, because he is living in a new era of public relations and so forth, he's done a marvelous job of revising his own image, so to speak. I say revising--projecting would be a better term. As you know, he is still an introspective man and he always has been an introspective man, and introspective men are not concerned with their visage. Are they smiling, are they lifting their eyes, are they making a nice impression on people? Those things do not primarily concern an introspective man. He's thinking

inside of him. Lots of time Richard Nixon has portrayed himself as scowling, and this kind of demeanor, and so on and so forth. But he's worked on that, and he's done himself a lot of good politically and from the standpoint of a President having to project himself to the public and be with the public. That's one of his prime recent accomplishments.

That was Mr. Hoover's great failing in those hard times. He overcame that, you see, in later years. He also came to know that he was making a mistake. You cannot ignore that. And so he trained himself. I'd say that in the last twenty years of his life most of his pictures are smiling.

Well, now, let me see. Did I get off the track?

ARENA: I just want to be sure on that comparison, when you said Mr. Nixon is introspective, would I be correct in assuming you mean that that was true of Mr. Hoover as well, that when you say these introspective men, you're including Mr. Hoover in that category?

HENLE: I think there's a great similarity between Herbert Hoover and Richard Nixon in many respects. I knew Mr. Hoover intimately. And, while I've known Richard Nixon a long time, I haven't had the opportunity, because of his busy life and my busy life, and not necessarily an immediate meeting of interests, I haven't had the same opportunity to know him as I knew Mr. Hoover. But my studied impression is that they are both men of the highest integrity.

Mr. Hoover differs from Mr. Nixon in that I think Nixon is more willing to use, shall we say, an artifice or a method, or something or other, to get over a point. He expresses himself a little bit differently. He's not quite as bing-bing-bing, direct, as Hoover was with his engineer's mind. Nixon has more of the lawyer's mind. He covers a larger area in getting to a point. They are both, as I say, men of the highest integrity, honesty. I just can't imagine Richard Nixon being dishonest in any shape, manner or form, any more than I could Herbert Hoover. And I would be a greatly surprised man if Richard Nixon, on having dishonesty or corruption or anything like that touching him personally, would not repudiate it, and I would expect him to repudiate it immediately. I would be a very surprised man if he didn't. He is a much better politician than Herbert Hoover was, although Herbert Hoover learned to be a good politician, but Nixon, fortunately, is while he's President. He's a man of outstanding intellect, in my opinion, just as Mr. Hoover was, outstanding. I consider him one of the great intellects of the present, certainly.

In my opinion, they're the only two men who've been President since I've known Presidents who've HAD intellects. I start with Warren Harding, because I didn't know Woodrow Wilson though, of course, I suppose he was a man of intellect. But otherwise, you go back and examine Presidents that we know only by history, those two men are head and shoulders above anyone we've had in that office.

In the case of Mr. Nixon, all you have to do is witness his foreign policy, which to me is absolutely inspiring. He has done

a terrific job, one that I never even thought of handling that way, and yet he laid it all out before he was President, in his article in a foreign relations magazine, I think.

And another similarity is that they are both plagued by an unfavorable press. Lord knows, everybody knows what happened to Mr. Hoover who, unlike Nixon, didn't know quite what to do about it. They weren't doing things that way, also, in those days. But they are now doing something about it. I made a public speech on this question before a group here in Palm Beach, so I don't mind putting it on tape.

The plain fact is that Vice President [Spiro] Agnew is right about the press and about the news media. He's right, and they needed exactly what he gave them. They hated it and they'll hate him for it, and they'll hate Nixon for it, but they'll change and they are changing. It was a very salutary development in our public information circles here. We needed that. Thank God we got it, and I think the news men are going to respond to it, but a lot of them are going to hate him to their dying day for it. So we have to wait and see how that works out. Naturally, when you tackle a subject of that kind, you have to be careful that you haven't opened a Pandora's box, and things can lead very easily from one thing to another, and we have to have it handled by men who have a strong conviction of where they want to go and know where they're going before they start it, and stay within those bounds.

Certainly, I'd be the last one to want to see any kind of nullifying restrictions on any phase of our life that contributes to our liberty. On the other hand, there have been elements in that sort of thing that have endangered our liberty. I think it's been very good to have it come out the way it has.

ARENA: We were discussing the question of your methods, and this was off the tape, but I'd like to be sure it's put on. I think it would be very useful, especially to future project directors, for either the President or any project. But I notice you did the great quantity of interviews yourself.

HENLE: Yes.

ARENA: Would you want to comment on that?

HENLE: Yes. I think the most important reason why I did is that, as I said earlier, I knew so many of these people. I had two or three men who helped me on, maybe, as many as well, at most, forty or forty-five, well, let's say fifty of the interviews of the whole bunch.

ARENA: Of the whole 450.

HENLE: Yes. I think maybe about fifty were done by. . . . Do you want their names? You don't necessarily want their names?

ARENA: No.

HENLE: I soon saw, in reading their transcripts, boy, they didn't get the point there. I knew what I would have done under that circumstance. So I thought to myself, well, we'll just let this thing go a little longer and I'll do more of them myself. I won't let them handle quite so many. In the end, I had to have one man do the balance of my work in New York. I just couldn't handle it anymore. And I had another man do a good many of my interviews with Members of Congress. He was a trained newspaperman; he was able to do a creditable job. I think that's probably the main reason why I undertook so much of it myself. Of course, I knew that I was not faced with any colossal number of interviews of the kind that I would think that the [Lyndon Baines] Johnson or the [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy or the [Richard Milhous] Nixon interviews would involve. That really defeats me when I think of that. That would be a long-time study.

ARENA: Is there anything else? Any question or subject that I have not raised that you want to be sure is on the record before this interview comes to a close, Ray?

HENLE: Well, we have a few more minutes; let me think. I haven't talked to you entirely about President Nixon. Let me just gloss over it fast. I first met Richard Nixon not too long after he got a seat in the House of Representatives. My wife and I soon were entertaining them and our friendship grew in a very pleasant way as well as a professional way. I remember several things. The [Alger] Hiss thing, of course. That is what gravitated a lot of us to Mr. Nixon. One of his great journalistic friends was a much more intimate friend than I ever was, Bert Andrews, who was the chief Washington correspondent of the New York Herald Tribune. And he worked very closely with Mr. Nixon. I don't know, I think maybe he mentioned him in the [Six] Crises book.

At any rate, one little vignette I have of him was in 1952 at the convention in Chicago [Illinois]. I came out of the Conrad Hilton Hotel, and here standing in the doorway was Bert Andrews and Richard Nixon, both of whom I knew well. So I stopped to chat with them, and the thing that I remember about that--this was on one of the early days of the convention--mostly was that there was no question among the three of us--whether Bert had brought it up before I don't know--but there was no talk among the three of us about, "Do you think you're going to get the second place on the ticket?" And number two is that he was passed by literally dozens of newspapermen who never even stopped to say hello. Yet a couple of days later he was in "a King's seat" so to speak. So it was one of those strange things. And I was talking to somebody about it once and they said, "Well, your memory may be a little faulty on that, because I just can't imagine you not saying something about a place on the ticket." And I know my response was, "Well, if I did it was just one of those conversational gambits and it didn't go anywhere." And, of

course, two or three days after that he was a candidate for Vice President I wrote several articles--I think I wrote two--about Mr. Nixon on the basis of the kind of man I thought he was when he was running for President in 1960. He never told me this himself, but I think he liked them because I was told that quite a few copies of them were photostated and circulated around when he was traveling.

I had access to him when I wanted. I didn't go to him frequently for the reason that by that time I was the editor-in-chief of a newspaper operation where multiple men had to be taken care of and I lost my personal contact a good deal through that position. But we maintained our friendly relations with him, and he listened regularly to our newscast. He listened in his car, he told me once, going home. It was on at a quarter of seven, and usually he could get away from the Capitol by that time, and he'd hear it in his car. And he later on surprised me by bringing up the matter of some things that I had talked about. He was telling somebody else about it. As a matter of fact, it was at the White House. He was talking to another man to whom he was introducing me, and he said, "This is the man who said such-and-such and did such-and-such," you know. It amazed me because I'd forgotten it myself, but he remembered it. [Laughter]

One other vignette I have of that meeting in the White House. It was after a Gridiron Club dinner, and he had made a notable off-the-record speech. And I said to him, "That was really a remarkable speech that you made, and I was very glad to see it go over so well." And he said, "Did you think so?" And I said, "Yes." He said, "Would you mind telling me just why, what you thought was notable about it?" I said, "The thing that was notable about it was that you were talking to a bunch of men who didn't particularly like you, who were ready to detract from you." And I said, "The impression that you left on that dinner was that you were President of the United States. It was an authoritative speech." And he looked at me and very quietly said, "Thank you, Ray." Just that way. That was all there was to it; we dropped the subject.

The other little vignette that I remember about the visit was that Mr. Hoover's portrait which had been stored. . . . If it was up at all, it was in some obscure basement room, probably in some closet; it was the William Green painting. It is a nice painting. It isn't a painting of him when he was President, but it was a nice painting. The Nixons had moved that to right at the landing of the grand staircase, you know, a very prominent place. I thought that was a nice thing to do.

And the other thing that I remember was when my wife and I were talking to him there in the hall. You know, there's the big state dining room and then there's a hall that runs down to the East Room, you know. We were close to the dining room, and do you know he walked with us to the front door, just as if it were Number Four Pleasant Avenue in Whittier. It was a very unusual and pleasant thing, and we will always remember it.

ARENA: I think on that note we can tie it up, and let me say very frankly and very sincerely that I appreciate all of the

off-the-cuff and now on-the-cuff remarks. They not only are of value to me now, but as I go over this again, much of what you say will be a good reference for me, and I want you to know how much I personally appreciate it, and future historians will appreciate what's been said here today I can assure you. Thank you very much, Mr. Henle.

HENLE: Thank you. It's a pleasure being with you.