



3-2-1972

John Bernard Reilly (March 2, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

MR. JOHN BERNARD REILLY

March 2, 1972
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. John B. Reilly. B., middle initial, stands for Bernard. March 2, 1972, Arena interviewing. Mr. Reilly, may we begin by my asking you where and when you were born?

REILLY: I was born in Kern County, California, February 13, 1893.

ARENA: How did you find yourself in this area, Whittier?

REILLY: I have been in the oil business all my life since 1910 in the Kern County oil fields, and then when the oil was developed in Southern California I moved from Taft, California to Los Angeles [California], and then later moved to Whittier.

ARENA: Would you mind giving a brief explanation of your educational background?

REILLY: I attended the elementary schools in Bakersfield [California] and the freshman year in the Kern County High School in Bakersfield. Kern County is near the town of Tehachapi.

ARENA: And what is the first occasion that you recall when you met President Richard Nixon?

- REILLY: It was sometime during the year '32 or '33. At that time I was president of the Whittier Rotary Club, and the program chairman of the club asked Whittier College to furnish a speaker for a noonday meeting. And when the speaker arrived it was Richard M. Nixon. I think at that time he was probably a sophomore in Whittier College, and his subject was "Young People should get into Politics."
- ARENA: Do you recall the person or persons with whom you dealt at the college concerning him? Did you follow that yourself personally?
- REILLY: No, it was the program chairman. I do not have any knowledge as to who it was.
- ARENA: Do you have any idea if that was a policy with others as well, in the sense that college speakers were provided for other service organizations?
- REILLY: Yes, I believe they were. At that time service clubs were asking for students to speak to them periodically and visit with the clubs.
- ARENA: Do you recall that you were furnished and do you have a kind of background of the President, so that when you introduced him you had some notes on his situation?
- REILLY: No, I do not.
- ARENA: Whatever you gave maybe had been supplied from the school orally or from the President personally.
- REILLY: That's right.
- ARENA: Do you recall at that time what was said about his background, from him himself? Did he say to you that he was born in Yorba Linda [California], for example, and mention any of his relatives in the area?
- REILLY: My memory will not carry me back that far. I do not recall any statement being made other than the address that he gave to the club.
- ARENA: And in addition to the address which I will get into, what do you think of all the things about that experience where he came to the Rotary and spoke and left, what are some of the things that you recall very vividly even now, including his appearance, if that left an impression with you?

REILLY: I do not remember it. The only thing that I could say with reference to that program is many times afterwards visiting with Dick, he and I would talk about his address being "Young People should get into Politics." And I've said to him many times, "Well, Dick you sure did, over your head."

ARENA: Do you recall what the reaction of the club was after he spoke?

REILLY: No, I do not.

ARENA: Do you recall that you invited other speakers on the college level and how they compared with him in your view?

REILLY: No, I do not recall.

ARENA: Do you recall that he did impress you as a public speaker for a young man in any way?

REILLY: Yes. I remember that. I remember that I was much impressed with him and much impressed with his drive and determination.

ARENA: Do you recall, after having met him on that occasion, seeing his name if he appeared at an oratorical contest, at a debate, and that from that time on when his name did appear in the newspaper, it would ring a bell even before you met him more and more in 1945 when he went into politics?

REILLY: Well, I should say naturally after he spoke to the Rotary Club--that was my year as president of that Rotary Club--that any time I read an article concerning Nixon I was interested in it. I was interested in him.

ARENA: How about the period when he came back from law school and joined the firm of Mr. Thomas Bewley. Do you recall there that his name, or if there was an announcement, and if you had any dealings with him?

REILLY: No, I do not.

ARENA: Do you recall ever attending any of the plays of the Whittier Community Players in which he appeared, again during this early law practice period?

REILLY: No, I do not.

ARENA: Then let me go to the speech itself. What do you recall about the speech that he did make and if there were any surprises in it?

REILLY: I do not.

ARENA: It is the subject itself that stands out in your mind. Would you happen to know if minutes were kept, if by doing some research one could find the announcement in the Rotary records, as service clubs tend to announce coming speakers through the mail; if it might be possible to find some of the original newsletters that the Rotary Club put out concerning that particular program?

REILLY: I do not know whether they are available and I do not remember whether they were printed at that time. We use the weekly Newsletters now, but I do not know whether they were printed at that time.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you if you ever met before 1945 any of the other relatives, and maybe you didn't know they were relatives at the time, of the President, such as Franklin Milhous, who was his grandfather, his wife Mrs. Almira Milhous, Mrs. Franklin Milhous, and some of the other aunts and uncles including Mr. Oscar Marshburn and his wife [Rose Olive Marshburn], who you probably know now is the President's mother's sister?

REILLY: The only person I have any knowledge of during those years was Oscar Marshburn, and I knew that his wife was related to the Nixon family and my acquaintance with Marshburn, he and I both served on the Whittier Union High School Board at the same time, and also on the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association], and on the Red Cross Board for several years during the time of the Long Beach [California] earthquake. But I do not remember any conversation with him with reference to Nixon.

ARENA: Do you recall that Mr. Marshburn, again during this period before 1945, ever seemed to indicate any interest in politics?

REILLY: No, I do not.

ARENA: Did you ever stop in the Nixon grocery store before 1945 and meet any of the President's relatives there, the immediate family?

REILLY: Yes, the grocery store at one time was in combination with a restaurant and Mrs. [Vera] Reilly and I many times ate in the restaurant and were acquainted with [Francis Donald] Don Nixon and Dick's mother [Mrs. Hannah Nixon].

ARENA: From the best of your recollection, how would you describe Mrs. Hannah Nixon, and in this case if you want to, take her up from any period, not just before 1945, but her personality as you recall any time that you had contact with her?

REILLY: Well, I always thought of her as a very lovely woman. I always thought of her as a very dedicated mother. I believe I could say to you that she represented a true Quaker, as I knew the Quakers when I first came to Whittier. A very lovely person.

ARENA: Were you aware that her husband had been a Methodist before he became a Quaker?

REILLY: No.

ARENA: Were you aware that the President had attended and taught Sunday School in the East Whittier Friends Church by any chance?

REILLY: No.

ARENA: Did you ever serve with Mrs. Hannah Nixon in any connection with activities of the East Whittier Women's Improvement Club?

REILLY: No.

ARENA: Then, would it be accurate to say that you do not in your personal experience look upon her as one of the active women club persons of the community, a lady who was frequently in the public eye or a lady, we'll say, who was interested in political affairs.

REILLY: I had knowledge of her presence in the community but not personal. I did not belong to the same church. My church is the Methodist and they belonged to the Quakers, as you know. But I knew of her and had knowledge of her presence and influence in the area, but no personal experience with her.

ARENA: Was there ever an occasion where you saw her speaking publicly, I'm thinking now especially after 1945, and you might be in a position to make a comparison between her as a public speaker and her son, President Nixon, especially where some of the mannerisms might be concerned?

REILLY: Well, she was a very modest person. She was unassuming. She was very mild mannered and not of the aggressive nature that Dick possessed, but there was no question that she was an influence within the church.

ARENA: Without going into politics but knowing the President as you did, although briefly before 1945 and, of course, much more so afterward, how would you comment on the observation that he is reserved, he is shy and at the same time

is aggressive? I'm thinking, of course, of public speaking and his style. How can you account for that? Is there no relationship between the two? Can both of these things be true at the same time?

REILLY: I think the best that I can answer you is to deal necessarily with my first real acquaintance with Dick in a political way. I can give you my first impressions of him and also my wife's. When he was asked to come to Whittier by a group of Whittier people and consider running for the House of Representatives, I don't think at first he warmed up to it. I don't think he was too enthusiastic about it, and then after a short time the influence of others convinced him that he might be able to be elected a Representative of the United States from the 25th District [formerly 12th District]. Now, I wouldn't say Dick was modest. Dick was a driver. I remember probably the first or second time my wife and I went into an area campaigning for him, Dick spoke and Mrs. Reilly made the remark, she said, "Well, there's one thing he'll have to learn modesty and humility first." Because he. . . . [Laughter] Well, that's the best answer I know of. And there was a young newspaper reporter I believe from an eastern newspaper that attended all these meetings where we were throughout this 25th District, and this young fellow said to Mrs. Reilly one day, "That'll be a great young man politically some day, if he'll just be a little more modest about it and not drive quite so hard." Now, Dick was a crusader.

ARENA: Knowing his mother as you do and the family, again mainly after 1945, to what extent do you see this crusading spirit as a part of his family upbringing?

REILLY: I believe the mother demanded much from the children. I believe they were raised in a good Christian environment. I think she had ambition for them, and I think his inspiration was her.

ARENA: The President himself has acknowledged that he owes much to his parents. I'm thinking of the book in particular, "Six Crises."

REILLY: Yes.

ARENA: He does refer in part to his family upbringing. In one case he expresses the idea, the statement that his mother had hoped when he was young that he would some day be a missionary in Central America. Do you happen to recall discussing that in any way with Mrs. [Hannah] Nixon or the President himself?

REILLY: No, I do not.

ARENA: But are you surprised by it?

REILLY: No, I am not. It would be what I would expect, not from personal knowledge of the family life but only the community knowledge, what we understood in the community. Yes, I would have expected that. I think she was that dedicated a person. I think that would have been a reward that she would wish for herself and her family.

ARENA: If I could ask some related questions on the community of Whittier in which the President grew up. Namely, as a person growing up a Methodist, in a community founded by Quakers, where the Quakers played a prominent role in education, I don't know about politics, but in education, in business, the farms, for example, and the ranches, did you at any time ever feel uncomfortable, or that the Quakers made you feel uncomfortable because you were not a Quaker yourself? Did that feeling ever come to mind all the time you lived in this Quaker community of Whittier?

REILLY: Let me tell you my first experience. As I told you before, I have been in the oil business all my life and I was living at Huntington Park [California] at the time working for the Standard Oil [Company] out in the La Habra [California] area. And Mrs. Reilly and I had two little children and we wanted to move to this area so that I wouldn't have to drive such a distance from Huntington Park. Well, we came to Whittier looking for a house to rent. And we found two houses owned by an older Quaker couple, and we thought we had the houses rented in each case, but in the final question in each we were asked, "What did I do?" I said I worked for the Standard Oil and the reply was, "Well, we're not going to have your kind of people in this town." So we had to move to La Habra because we could not rent a house, even though houses were available, could not rent them in Whittier because we were oil field people. Now you ask me what influence the Quakers had on my early experience in Whittier. [Laughter] It's exciting, it's a good story, but it wasn't very pleasant at the time. Later, a few years later when I could afford to buy a house, I bought a house and moved on North Friends, 542 North Friends, and the Quakers couldn't do anything about it, so I'm here today. I've lived in Whittier fifty years.

ARENA: Just for the record, all the time that you knew the Nixon Quaker family, was there ever anything in your experiences with them indicating that attitude--the attitude that they did not, were not tolerant towards oil people or towards any people, including Methodists, we'll say?

REILLY: No, I did not. I cannot say that. I think the Methodists were welcome in Whittier, they had a large church here, but the oil people had a bad reputation.

ARENA: Do you think this was just because the oil field people were foreigners, in the sense that they were not from the local community or was there something else? Were

they transients in the sense that many came to work and then left with the oil fields and the Quakers had that notion, whether it's true or not, they had the notion that oil workers were transient people? Or what would you base their attitude on?

REILLY: Well, I think their attitude at that time is they were transient people, they moved from one area to another, and they had a similar reputation to the mining people. Well, they were just roughnecks, that's it. There was not a saloon in town. There was no place to buy liquor. As I review the years I spent in Whittier, I think they were right. They came out here and founded a Quaker community and when they did I don't think they had any intention for people other than Quakers to migrate here. And then, of course, when these oil fields were booming, why people from other parts of the country were coming in. And I think it was an intrusion on the privacy of these people and on the sanctity of these people. I think they wanted a holy city. Now, I have never had any unpleasant experiences since then.

ARENA: In your dealings with Mr. Oscar Marshburn, was there ever any unpleasantness of any type?

REILLY: No, I was very fond of him. I realized he was a Quaker. I realized his philosophy of life was different than mine. I think we served together either on the YMCA or the Red Cross, associated with each other for a period of eight or ten years. I don't mean the YMCA, the Red Cross and the Board of Trustees of the Whittier High School.

ARENA: In speaking with other gentlemen concerning the changes in Whittier, especially as the President was growing up. As you know he came here with his father in 1922 and for all practical purposes was a resident until 1945 when he entered Congress, except for the three years when he lived at Duke Law School. But essentially it was this period, 1922 through 1945. Speaking with other long time residents, you get the impression that Whittier was fundamentally changed after the coming of the oil industry. From the standpoint of asking someone who is very intimately connected with the oil industry, would you comment on that?

REILLY: Well, I don't think there is any question but that the migration of the oil people changed Whittier. Many of the old Whittier families, I'm confident, made considerable money from land that they owned in the Santa Fe Springs oil field, which is adjacent to Whittier. I think they were very happy to see it come. When I first came to Whittier you couldn't get a meal on Sunday, you couldn't even go to the drug store. There were no drug stores--the town was totally closed up except the churches.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you if that was the same in the town where you had been before? I am wondering to what extent the Blue Law situation was also common in other communities besides Whittier, or did Whittier seem exceptional to you in that respect?

REILLY: I think Whittier was exceptional. I do think the other communities reacted to this migration of outside people, or I don't think they were as religiously dedicated. I've always respected the early settlers of Whittier for the dedication they had and the fact they wanted to build an area that represented their philosophies, and people came in and destroyed it. I think it could be very disappointing to many of them.

ARENA: Knowing the old Whittier, knowing the Whittier in which the President grew up, do you mind if I ask you what of Whittier is in President Nixon today? What part of Whittier makes up a part of his personality, which I think you realize he refers to as his home town. He was not born here, as you know, but he does refer to it as his home town. Knowing the old Whittier and knowing the President as he is today, what part of the town still has a hold on him in your view? I realize that's a personal subjective question, but if you have any thoughts on it, it would be interesting. History will be interested in knowing what are the influences on the making of a President and certainly towns differ.

REILLY: I have made a remark many times that when I finally came to Whittier and was able to buy a place and live here with two little children, I said it was the proper place for a person to raise a family. Now this area was a Quaker area and was a religious area, and I don't think there is any question but that every young boy and every young girl during the period of time we are talking about was directly influenced by the activities of the church.

ARENA: Would you say that is true in the case of President Nixon?

REILLY: Yes, I would.

ARENA: How could you give an example that he was influenced by his religious upbringing?

REILLY: Well, my first answer to that would be knowing his mother. I think later I learned to know her quite well and surely she was a dedicated, religious woman. Her whole life, I think, was devoted to her religion.

ARENA: Was she religious in the sense that she tried to convert people?

REILLY: Well, I think Quakers tried to convert everybody. Yes, I should say that I believe that is true and I think and I am sure she would demand a moral, religious training attitude of her children toward her church. Now, that's the reputation she had by everybody. I think you could ask hundreds of people in this area and they would tell you this. She was truly a dedicated Quaker and she was dedicated to her family, and I don't see how she could separate the two. I think they had to be one. I think Dick was raised, knowing his mother, I think he was influenced. I think every influence was brought to bear on him.

ARENA: Did you ever get the impression, especially as the President was starting politics, that his mother consciously or unconsciously favored him over the other children, in the sense of praising him at the expense of her other children?

REILLY: Possibly I do not.

ARENA: Then as far as Mrs. Hannah Nixon's reference to her three sons in your presence, Mr. Reilly, did she ever seem to give the impression that she preferred Richard over the other sons or that she was ashamed of the other sons in comparison to Richard, that's the basic question from your own personal knowledge?

REILLY: No, I do not believe that she did. Let me say that I think they all had equal opportunity.

ARENA: The other question I would like to put to you from your personal experience is to describe [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon, the President's father, from your personal contact with him over the years. In particular, I am wondering Mr. Reilly, since you also are and were a Methodist, and as Mr. Frank Nixon had been a Methodist, would you comment on the man's religious side, and put in his principles as you know, putting his principles into practice.

REILLY: Well, I believe he was a very honest man. I believe he was a religious man. I don't see how he could have been otherwise with Hannah Nixon, because I think he was influenced greatly by her, maybe not as much as I would suggest he was, because I think he was a little strong headed. But I think she influenced her whole family.

Now, let me answer it another way. My wife was not a strong religious person but she was a Christian person, and certainly

her whole family was influenced by her, and I think Mrs. Hannah Nixon was a strong character in that parent family, and I think Dick's success and the rest of the family, and the philosophy of the father was very much influenced by her. I don't see how it could be any other way.

ARENA: Going back to the President's personality, could I ask you to elaborate, if you will, on the first impression that the President made on you when you first met him, bearing in mind that, as you said, he did not impress you too much the first time? Would you say that that is one of his characteristics that on first meeting, not only you but others, he doesn't make that kind of an impression on people, and it is only as you get to know him better. . . . I don't want to be putting words in your mouth, but would you comment on some of those points?

REILLY: I think when I first met Dick, my first impression was that he was very strong willed, was very determined. I don't think that he was the type of a fellow that would please you, until you knew him better. I think I can best answer you on that question. You had to learn his dedication. You had to learn a knowledge of his early raising, his religious background. He irritated you at first and I think that was his great trouble with the press. I don't think he considered enough what his opening remarks were. I don't think he cared what people thought about him. I think he had a course he was dedicated to and there it was. Now, this I would inject. I would believe anything Dick Nixon told me. I have said many times since he has been President, he will do what he thinks is right. He will do what he thinks is honorable. He'll take the good or he'll take the bad criticism. I think he is fearless. I have great faith in him. I really do. And I hope I have answered your question to a degree, but you have to learn to know him. I had to know him.

ARENA: On that same question of his personality, as you have tied it in with his background, you mentioned earlier that Mr. Oscar Marshburn, the President's uncle, is a kind of a personification of a Quaker.

REILLY: He is, absolutely.

ARENA: To what extent could you say the same thing of Richard Nixon?

REILLY: I do not believe you could compare Richard Nixon with Oscar Marshburn. Oscar Marshburn is a devout, pious person. I think you would have difficulty in reaching a very strong disagreement with Marshburn. I don't think you would have difficulty reaching a very strong disagreement with Dick. Marshburn is a Quaker. He has traveled, I guess, over

the world in missionaries and such. He is a pious person. He doesn't have the fire that Dick has. I don't think you can compare them. They are just two different personalities entirely.

ARENA: Would this be way out of line, since I know Mr. Marshburn well. I work with him on the Historical Society. I know he takes pleasure in trying to bring union where there is disunion, regardless of whether it is people in his own church or--and you would know better than I--on the school board. I find that a very definite characteristic. Knowing him much better than I do, and knowing the President much better than I do, would you say that the President's stated aim of bring union, where there is disunion, that that could be a side of him that comes from the Oscar Marshburn side in a way?

REILLY: No, I don't think I would look at it in that way. I think I would have to analyze it in two different ways. Marshburn, I think, works through the church, works by the principles of the church. I think everything he does is influenced by it. And I do not think Dick does. I think Dick realizes that he's a leader. I don't think his leadership today or the leadership he's trying to give this country is motivated by the fact that he is a Quaker. I think his background prepared him for it, but I think he's doing it on the basis of a man who believes he can bring peace and understanding among people, and I think he's dedicated to it. And I don't think it's a religious philosophy. Of course, there has to be a religious philosophy behind it in the beginning.

ARENA: Could an example of these different attitudes of the two be. . . . And I'm not so much comparing the President with Oscar Marshburn, but the President and an example of the stereotype Quaker. It just so happens Mr. Oscar Marshburn is a good example of that type of a Quaker.

REILLY: That's right.

ARENA: But could we say that the President's joining the war in World War II and Mr. Marshburn's decision not to join military service in World War I could be taken as an example of the two approaches, though they both considered themselves Quakers?

REILLY: But I think they both came out of the Quaker Church and the Quaker teachings with a different type of dedication, personal dedication. No, I wouldn't. . . . And as I say, Marshburn is a very fine friend of mine, but I wouldn't by any attempt try to compare the two people because there isn't any comparison.

ARENA: Would you mind giving your own comments of the President's wife, Mrs. Patricia Nixon.

REILLY: Well, I'm very happy to talk about Pat Nixon because I'm a great admirer of hers. She and my older daughter [Patricia Reilly Hitt] were at USC [University of Southern California] together, students at USC in the field of education, and Pat Nixon taught school at Whittier High School for several years and I think it was during that time she met Dick. I do not know that. I only know by others, she was born and raised in Ely, Nevada. Her father was a miner. Her mother died when she was a child and she was a mother to the smaller children. And finally attended the University of Southern California, almost entirely due to her own efforts.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you, Mr. Reilly, if she ever came to your home with your daughter. Did you know Pat personally, as well?

REILLY: Yes, I do, I know Pat personally.

ARENA: That is before she married the President, when your daughter knew her.

REILLY: No, I didn't know her until after she had married the President. And I think the first I knew of her was when she and Mr. Nixon campaigned up and down the State of California in an old station wagon from the northern boundary to the southern boundary.

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REILLY: I think as I said, my first knowledge of Pat was when she and Dick were campaigning, and it doesn't seem to me like that was for the House of Representatives but I'm not sure. And she accompanied Dick when he campaigned for the House. Everybody liked her. She had a very ready acceptance everywhere. She's a very modest person and undoubtedly has been a very fine mother because I think the answer to what people do is what do they accomplish, and certainly she's followed Dick. I think she has worked as hard campaigning as he has. I think she's probably the greatest asset he has as far as campaigning is concerned. She seems to be fearless. She meets every situation calmly that arises. I remember the time they were in Venezuela and I have heard her talk about that, and she was equal to it. I'm a great admirer of her. I feel like I know her very well. I think I know her better through the association of my Pat [Patricia Reilly Hitt] and she, because since she has been in Washington, I think they've been the best of pals. And I don't know what more I can say. Only I can tell you I think she's a number one person.

ARENA: Is there anything else you would like to say during this interview that I have not brought up? Any question that I have not raised that you would like to raise yourself, as the interview comes to an end?

REILLY: No, I don't think so. I would invite you to come back again if you have more questions. I can say to you, and you realize that, my personal knowledge of the Nixons is much more limited than others, but I'm a great admirer of them. I get letters from them occasionally. He says, "Johnny, if you have anything to suggest, write me." And I do. I think he's a very easy man to approach.

ARENA: Would you say, without going into politics per se, but knowing his personality and his thinking apparatus in a way, would you say that the recent trip to China was something that is not in keeping with his background or his personality as you have known him--the daringness of it, the adventuriveness of it? Was this something that was a complete surprise to you?

REILLY: Not at all. That is the very thing I would expect of him because I think he has courage. I think he visualizes the world at peace sometime. He has drive. No, it's a thing I would expect of him, and personally--you didn't ask for it but this is my belief--I think he is going to be felt around the world in the next few months. I think that's the dedication I see--maybe that's the Quaker that's coming out in him.

ARENA: Mr. Reilly, let me thank you for your hospitality in allowing me to come inside your premises and to ask you these questions which you have answered so completely and so frankly and so fully, and above all I thank you for the pictures.

REILLY: Well, let me say to you. I am not accustomed to being interviewed. I have spoken from memory. I've spoken from the impressions I've had. I'm not influenced by anybody else's thinking. This is what I believe.

ARENA: Thank you very much.

REILLY: Thank you.