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## **Newton P. Robinson (January 10, 1972, first interview)**

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

MR. NEWTON P. ROBINSON

January 10, 1972  
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

- ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. Newton P. Robinson. P., middle initial, stands for Porter, January 10, 1972, Arena interviewing. May we begin and do you mind if I call you Newt?
- ROBINSON: Please do.
- ARENA: And will you please continue calling me Dick. May we begin, Newt, by positioning you historically here, where and when were you born?
- ROBINSON: Where: Globe, Arizona. When: October 21, 1913.
- ARENA: What led to your coming to Whittier, California, and about when, if I may ask?
- ROBINSON: Prior to coming to Whittier, my family had moved to Los Angeles [California] and then to Huntington Park [California] and I came here to attend college. And I came here because a friend of mine was coming to college here, and this looked like as good a spot as any.
- ARENA: Do you mind if I ask the friend's name?
- ROBINSON: Yes. Woodrow Knudtson, an old high school friend of mine from Huntington Park. He now lives in Orange, California, works for Standard Oil Company.

ARENA: Did he belong to the same graduating class?

ROBINSON: Yes, but he didn't stay. He was at Whittier for only two years and then went to UCLA [University of California at Los Angeles].

ARENA: You might have mentioned this, but to be sure, do you mind if I ask you what your father's occupation was?

ROBINSON: He was in the cattle and banking business in Arizona and, unfortunately, after four years of very heavy drouth, he went bankrupt in the cattle business. And so we came to California, and he continued in banking here until his death at the beginning of my sophomore year at Whittier College, with the old Pacific Southwest Bank. A great man.

ARENA: Do you happen to know if your father had any contact with any of the Milhous-Nixon family, for example, Franklin [Milhous] who was the . . .

ROBINSON: No, none whatsoever. Really his only Whittier contact was Albert Carden who was a long-time friend of his back in Arizona and then was one of the originators of the Quaker City Savings and Loan Company here in Whittier. He is deceased, since.

ARENA: I see. How about Washington Hadley?

ROBINSON: No.

ARENA: He had no contact with him?

ROBINSON: None that I know of.

ARENA: I believe he was one of the first of the important bankers to come into the area.

ROBINSON: Yes.

ARENA: Did your father have his own bank or was he connected with one of the banks here?

ROBINSON: No. He was known as a cashier of the old Dominion Bank in Globe [Arizona], and then came here as Branch Manager and later Vice President, for what is now the Security First National Bank.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you your religious persuasion?

ROBINSON: Protestant. We have been involved. . . . I was christened in the Presbyterian Church, attended the Methodist Church, Congregational Church, Friends Church here in Whittier for a while, and now I'm back in the Methodist Church again.

ARENA: Do you recall that your father, or in your own experiences, on your own end of things, ever had any unfortunate experiences because of your not being of the Quaker persuasion? In other words, this being founded by the Quakers, although they might not have been in the majority when your father came and when you grew up, but was there ever any difficulty or ever any unfortunate circumstance because of that fact, that you were not . . .

ROBINSON: No. You see, we never lived in Whittier. We were in Huntington Park. I just came to Whittier to college.

ARENA: Your father remained in . . .

ROBINSON: . . . in Huntington Park for an additional year prior to his death, and then following his death my mother and invalid grandmother came to Whittier and we lived together here then.

ARENA: And there were no problems from that standpoint while they were here and you were here.

ROBINSON: No, no.

ARENA: How about the fact that you were a student in an official Quaker college and you were not a Quaker? Did that ever create any problems for you in any way at all?

ROBINSON: No. And for no other students that I know of. No, even though it was a Quaker school, there was no. . . . Well, the Quaker influence certainly was there because of the members of the Board of Trustees who were Quakers, but there was never any religious dogma pushed on to the students. We did have weekly chapel sessions, some of which were of a religious nature, but . . .

ARENA: Were there non-Quaker preachers or non-Quaker speakers?

ROBINSON: Yes; oh, yes.

ARENA: Could you think of some of the most influential or some of the most dynamic and interesting--maybe you agreed or disagreed with them--but some of the most interesting speakers of that chapel series?

ROBINSON: [Laughter] I'm afraid that both my memory is short and I'm not sure that my interest at that time was real whetted. I do remember one or two of them. Kirby Paige. Kirby was rather a liberal writer, preacher. I don't know what his religious persuasion was. Then, let me see, there was another, oh, the fellow that was the head of Technocracy--can't think of his name right offhand--but he was a very, rather a liberal, a way-out idea, a new socialistic economic concept.

ARENA: To be sure, I believe you mentioned 1937 as your graduating year.

ROBINSON: Right. Then I did some graduate work the following two years, and a time or two since then also.

ARENA: Did you actually earn the graduate degree at Whittier [College] as well?

ROBINSON: Right, at Whittier, yes. My undergraduate work all four years were here at Whittier.

ARENA: Then you also got your graduate degree here.

ROBINSON: No. I did some graduate work here, but I got my master's degree at USC [University of Southern California].

ARENA: Were you able to transfer the credits that you had at Whittier to USC?

ROBINSON: Most of them. Right.

ARENA: Being a member, at that period especially, of a small city, a small college, going to what must have been a larger school at that time and, of course, now even much larger, but I imagine USC was considerably larger then, in 1937?

ROBINSON: Oh, yes.

ARENA: How would you compare the two? How would you evaluate your preparation, we'll say, for competing in a large school with a high reputation, such as USC?

ROBINSON: Well, I don't see that there was any particular problem except physically, finding your way through the registration procedures. Now, I didn't attend [U] SC until probably 1940 and '41 and then again following the war, the fifties on up into the sixties some. And then I finished two or three courses at Whittier again just last year. It's still pretty much up to the professor. Classes there at SC, of course, were much larger in most instances.

ARENA: Newt, would you give your present position, the correct name, and please spell it out, from the standpoint of making sure our typist gets all this correct. You will be given a typewritten copy of this transcription. That's why I'll bug you on the spelling of these things. And then relate your professional career from graduation time to the present, if you don't mind.

ROBINSON: Do you have time for all this?

ARENA: We certainly do.

ROBINSON: My present position is liaison counselor at Frontier High School.

ARENA: Which is located where?

ROBINSON: Frontier High School is the continuation school of the Whittier Union High School District, located on Florence Avenue in Santa Fe Springs [California], in the old Little Lake School buildings. My job is to call on four of the other comprehensive high schools in the district to interpret the policies and program of our continuation school to students who could, perhaps, profit by that, or who may want to attend that, and to assist the counselors in the regular high schools. As far as my history since graduation from Whittier in 1937, it reminds me a little bit of today's time in 1971, in that teaching jobs were hard to find, perhaps more difficult then than now even. And I recall making a circuit out through Riverside and San Bernardino and San

Diego Counties [California] looking for jobs. I finally got a job in La Puente High School, which was called Puente in those days, a half-time job. I was the librarian, study hall teacher for one period, and then was the lightweight athletic coach. I held that job for two years while I did some graduate work at the college and worked at odd jobs as I could. Then I worked full time for the Whittier Elementary School District at the old Jonathan Bailey School, where I had all of the sixth, seventh and eighth grade boys in health, physical education and athletics.

ARENA: Remind me, please, and for the record, the location of the old Jonathan Bailey School?

ROBINSON: The old Jonathan Bailey School was on Hadley Street, faced Hadley Street. Now this is the second Jonathan Bailey School. The original Jonathan Bailey School was between Comstock [Avenue] and Newlin [Avenue] facing south toward Bailey Street, where the Alpha Beta Market is now located.

ARENA: In both cases they were elementary schools?

ROBINSON: That is correct. Then, the school where I taught was the second Jonathan Bailey School, but on the same site, except on the north end of that site facing Hadley Street, across the street from what is now the uptown branch of the Whittier YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association]. And this was the intermediate school at the time I was there--sixth, seventh and eighth grades.

ARENA: What is the present system now, from the standpoint of the division of grades?

ROBINSON: The same system . . .

ARENA: Intermediate is still sixth, seventh and eighth?

ROBINSON: Mostly seventh and eighth. We had the sixth grade because of overcrowding in some of the elementary schools. The seventh and eighth grades are typically the intermediate schools, somewhat similar to a junior high school.

ARENA: Now in your time, do you recall what the setup was in Whittier? Was there just elementary school right up through eighth and then high school was four years?

ROBINSON: No, no. The Whittier Union High School District encompassed seven separate elementary school districts. The elementary districts, kindergarten through eighth grade; the high school district, ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth grade. Now within each elementary district, or most of the elementary districts and certainly the Whittier City Elementary District, they had different combinations of grades in various schools. Lou Henry Hoover School, I think, went only through the fourth grade. But most of them were kindergarten through sixth grade. All of the seventh and eighth graders came to the intermediate school.

ARENA: Would I be correct in that the East Whittier School did go all the way through the eighth grade, the one from which the President graduated?

ROBINSON: That is correct, at that time that he was there. It is now an intermediate school, seventh and eighth grade only. And that is in the East Whittier Elementary School District, which is one of those seven districts that were part of the Whittier Union High School District.

ARENA: I take it too that your position as liaison counselor did not exist at the time that you were a student in high school in this area, or college?

ROBINSON: Well, there was a continuation school in connection with Huntington Park High School, which was largely industrial trade, hand skills types of work. Our continuation school here now is primarily academic which is one of its shortcomings. We need trade skills.

ARENA: Would you mind explaining, basically, what the purpose and the function of the continuation program is, Newt?

ROBINSON: Well, it's to help those students who are not being successful in the traditional comprehensive high school, for whatever reason that may be: students who are academically doing poorly, students who are discipline problems, students who are drug-oriented, students who refuse to cut their hair or meet the dress codes, students who are fed up--they're bored, perhaps, with the classes that they have--students who are fed up with the rules and the regulations that are necessary in a large high school--being to class on time, for example--they can't smoke, this type of thing.

ARENA: It doesn't have anything to do with the idea of continuing education. In other words, it's not something that's for adults who might have dropped out earlier or anything like that?

ROBINSON: That is correct. That need is met by our adult education program, and some of our students at our continuation school we enroll for a class or two in the adult education program, if there's a need, as our offerings are quite limited. We offer some remedial reading, for example. All of the work is done on an individual basis. Students work on contracts, and there's a minimum time limit, a sixty-hour minimum time limit to complete a contract, which represents a semester's work in one subject. But then they go on and work as long as they need to in order to complete that contract without getting a failure. There are no failing grades given.

ARENA: Could there be the equivalent of this, we'll say, for the exceptional student in the positive sense, the one who wants to go beyond the average student but probably not with your setup?

ROBINSON: Not a separate school, no. Continuation school would not be this. We require somewhat of a minimum requirement of students. But anyway, getting back to the Nixon era, there was not a continuation school, so far as I know, when he was a student there. Of course, that was before my time in Whittier, but I think there probably was not one then.

ARENA: Have you had a chance to have a direct contact with elementary and secondary schools, and by elementary I'm including the junior high level, outside of the Whittier area; that is, firsthand, direct contact? Have you ever taught outside of this area?

ROBINSON: Just at Puente, at La Puente High School, is all.

ARENA: I was thinking even of outside of California.

ROBINSON: No.

ARENA: Well, from the basis of your secondary information and secondary contact, how would you evaluate this school

system around the time of the President with other school systems in the country that you might know something about, emphasizing that period, you know, rather than today?

ROBINSON: The high school district?

ARENA: The high school and elementary. What were California schools--the Whittier area, including East Whittier--what were these schools like in your estimation, as compared with other schools around the country?

ROBINSON: Well, my recollection of conversations with people who taught during those times, and were still teaching when I started teaching, were that they were somewhat conservative in nature, because of the boards of trustees. Most of the members of the board were businessmen or ranchers in the area here. But it was a fairly wealthy school district. And I should speak mainly about the high school district because I'm more familiar with that.

Whittier Union High School District had one high school up until 1950. At that time there were seven separate citrus and walnut packinghouses in the district. Most of our area was either citrus or oil or walnuts, agricultural; not much industry other than the oil fields in Santa Fe Springs and in the hills in back of town here some. Today there are seven public high schools and two parochial high schools, and there isn't a single packinghouse left. You can see what's happened. But in those days money was not a big problem, except that the people in town, the old Quaker heritage was one of thrift. But Whittier High School, my first recollection, was a well-equipped, well-run high school. Their shop program, for example, was excellent.

ARENA: What about the standards for the teachers? Do you recall, for example, that it was necessary for a teacher to have a college degree?

ROBINSON: Oh, yes.

ARENA: How much beyond that, if anything?

ROBINSON: A teaching credential. You had to have a teaching credential when I was applying for jobs in 1937. It was necessary to have a valid California teaching credential. Now the credentialing structure was different then than it is now. I started teaching with a special secondary in physical

education, which required four years only. Today, you almost have to have five years in college in order to get a credential. But they were concerned about the character of teachers. For example, Nixon's old school, East Whittier School District, up until, oh I suppose as late as 1945, well, right after the war, perhaps the young man that they hired to teach physical education there also was automatically the Scoutmaster of the troop there. You were asked if you smoked, drank. This was frowned upon as far as teachers were concerned.

ARENA: Was that still the case on the college level when you were a student at Whittier College?

ROBINSON: Yes. We could not smoke on campus.

ARENA: Smoking and drinking and dancing.

ROBINSON: Yes, that's right. Well, now, we danced on the campus. I guess before he was student body president, the year before he was student body president, they had the first dance on the campus. But smoking was still banned up until after I graduated in 1937.

ARENA: Since you were not a Quaker, how does this setup affect you? In other words, thinking back to that period, were you ready to leave Whittier or did you find life was intolerable because of these restrictions?

ROBINSON: Oh, no. This was never a problem with me. I've never smoked, and I didn't drink until after I was out of college and married, really. Not that I'm a boozier now. No, I really sort of frowned on it. There was never liquor in my home, and so this was not a problem with me. And I think most students accepted this. Oh, some of the kids would sneak a smoke out behind a bush, or I know some of the women would smoke in their rooms in the dorm once in a while, their head hanging out the window so it wouldn't smell up the place, but it was frowned upon.

ARENA: Would you say that that attitude about smoking and drinking was a part of the community attitude as a whole, maybe with special emphasis on the part of the Quakers? But were there other groups that also--and when I say groups, were there other religious denominations--that went along with that too?

ROBINSON: I kind of doubt it. My understanding of the Quakers, and my connection with them is that they have been pretty tolerant of what anybody else did. No, I think this was probably pretty much true of any church-related school. I don't know that smoking was allowed on the USC campus, for example, at that time. Now the big schools would break over sooner than the small ones. It was beginning to come. There was some, you know, some talk on the part of students, a little bit of griping because they couldn't smoke on campus. But I think most kids accepted that.

ARENA: Newt, would you give a general summary of your direct contact with President Nixon, beginning with the very first time you met him or heard about him, right up to the present time, without going into detail and then, depending upon the time we have left, we'll go into detail, and if we don't finish in this interview we'll continue in future interviews, with your permission. In other words, I'd like to get an overall picture of your direct contact with President Richard Nixon over the years.

ROBINSON: Well, when I came to Whittier College as a freshman, he was student body president.

ARENA: To be sure now, that would be the year 1934, when you were a freshman.

ROBINSON: The year 1933 . . .

ARENA: I beg your pardon. The year '33-'34, that academic year. You graduated in '37?

ROBINSON: Yes, that's right, '33-'34, and he was student body president. I really was not too much aware of him the first semester. I was playing football and commuting to Huntington Park part of the time.

ARENA: How did you commute, by the way?

ROBINSON: I drove.

ARENA: Your own car?

ROBINSON: Yes. I had a Model A, my second car. My first one was a Model T. [Laughter] But I'd go home weekends and try to keep tabs on my old high school friends and so

forth. But I would attend the games here and I knew who Nixon was. He presided over the chapel sessions and so on. Well, then the second semester I was president of the freshman class and as such became a member of the student council, and this was my really first recollection of Nixon in his presiding over the student council. I suppose that's really about the main contact I had at that time.

ARENA: How about extracurricular activities, in addition to sports and chapel and student government? How about seeing him in plays or debates? Were you a member of any of these groups yourself?

ROBINSON: No, I was not and, in fact, I would probably not have recalled that he did participate. I remember the debates, but I would not have recalled that he was in dramatics, except that I have read about it since, and looking back through the annual see his picture in that, the annual of his senior year. No, those student council meetings and the one or two dinners that we had together and, of course, on the football field. . . .

Now our freshman team would scrimmage the varsity. George Kellogg who is still around Whittier was our freshman coach that year, and we would learn the formation of the team that the varsity was going to play that week on Monday, and then on Tuesday we would practice it, and then on Wednesday we would scrimmage the varsity with the formation that the varsity would be playing against that week.

ARENA: For the layman--say there's a lady historian who might never have seen a football game--how would you describe scrimmage the varsity? You would scrimmage the varsity.

ROBINSON: We would run the opposition's plays against the varsity.

ARENA: And since the President was a member of the varsity team, although he didn't play as much as he would have liked to, although he was a member . . .

ROBINSON: He was involved in scrimmage some. Now I don't remember an awful lot about him at that time. Most of my knowledge of that was reading about it since in the things that Chief [Wallace J.] Newman has talked about.

ARENA: Now Chief Newman could spend only so much time, of course, with the different sporting groups. You had your own freshman coach, but to what extent did you spend time with Chief Newman yourself?

ROBINSON: As a freshman, very little; very, very little.

ARENA: And as time went on?

ROBINSON: Well, of course, as a sophomore, junior and senior, why, all the time.

ARENA: You did go on to play on the varsity?

ROBINSON: Oh, yes, right.

ARENA: Was this football or other sports?

ROBINSON: Well, basketball, really, was my main sport, but I came to know and love Chief very much through football. And then he was my basketball coach my senior year, and we had a lot of laughs about that, the old football coach coming out and coaching basketball. But Chief was, as you well know and have heard from others, quite a philosopher and, you know, a very fine man that was interested in much more than just winning games. Well, anyway, I had very little contact with Nixon then, until later when he ran for Congress the first time.

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ARENA: I believe we were just mentioning your indebtedness, your appreciation of the type of character that Chief Newman was.

ROBINSON: Yes.

ARENA: Not just in sports.

ROBINSON: No. Well, I still have a real abiding affection for Chief. He's a great guy.

ARENA: And then we went on, before this brief interruption, to your next direct contact with President Nixon, and I believe you said it was when he entered politics right after the war in 1945.

ROBINSON: Yes. Now in this little interruption there's another little thing that I'd forgotten about entirely, the Orthogonian Society.

ARENA: Were you a member of that by any chance?

ROBINSON: I was a member of the Orthogonians. The Orthogonian Society corresponded to fraternities in most of the other schools. There were two societies on campus, the Franklins and the Orthogonians. The Orthogonians had been formed just prior to my entering college and Nixon was one of the real founders of the society, Nixon and Delane Hornaday. The two of them and Dr. Albert Upton were really the ones, I think, that did most of the background work in the formation of the Orthogonian Society. There are available histories of the Orthogonian Society prepared by the pledges down through the years. If you could get ahold of one of those, particularly from one of the early times, there might be some more detailed information about that. But the Orthogonians had a tremendous effect on my life, and I can't help think but what it did on Nixon's life and the other men that have gone through the society, because . . .

ARENA: What would you say set it apart from other fraternities or other organizations?

ROBINSON: I can't speak about other fraternities, other than what I've heard from members of them, but the real distinguishing thing to me, the value of the thing to me was a process of self-help, mutual help through constructive criticism. I learned there not only to accept criticism but to seek out criticism.

ARENA: Could you give an example of how that would be put into effect?

ROBINSON: Most of us in the society were active in athletics. It was founded by a group of the fellows that came to the college to participate in athletics. That is, that was sort of the nucleus. They had been brought by Chief Newman from Covina High School and by Verne Landreth, one of the coaches at the college at that time, from Huntington Park High School. I had known him there. He went on from Whittier College to become executive secretary to Governor [Frank] Merriam and later Chief of the Division of Health, Physical Education and Recreation for the State Department of Education here in California. Very fine man.

ARENA: The Orthogonians being a unique society and one of the assets being this constructive criticism which dealt with the sports.

ROBINSON: Well, the criticism didn't deal entirely with the sports, but the nucleus of the organization were men who were participating in sports, not exclusively, but most of them were out for athletics of some sort. You asked for an example. Say the tackle on the football team had been out boozing it up or wasn't training, or hadn't worked very hard in the game the night before or something of this sort, one of the other guys, the brothers as they were called, would say, "Look, Joe (or Dick or Tom or Harry, whatever his name might have been), I think you were loafing on the job during the game last week." Or, "How do you expect us to win games if you don't come out to practice?" Or, "I know that you're not doing well in history. You can't, because you never study. When are you going to get to work in there so you can be eligible to participate in sports?" All kinds of criticism, very personal, to the point. And one of the rules was that you listened to that criticism and did not respond to it. After you thought it over, if you thought it was unjust, you were obliged to go to the person who had leveled that criticism and talk it over with him, or at the next meeting . . .

ARENA: Would the criticism come up in an open meeting?

ROBINSON: Oh, yes.

ARENA: Would anyone be excluded, officers or upperclassmen?

ROBINSON: No.

ARENA: In other words, the criticism was presented in a formal way.

ROBINSON: Well, more or less formal.

ARENA: And it was followed up as you were about to say. Maybe I cut you off.

ROBINSON: It wasn't necessarily followed up, but hopefully it was. And I think most of us took it rather seriously and did follow it up.

ARENA: And it applied to all aspects, not just athletic training rules.

ROBINSON: That's right, your personal life, your academic life, your sports life, the whole thing.

ARENA: Were there any contacts with the President during these college years that we have not mentioned? You just mentioned the Orthogonians. Is there anything else that you might have left out? Any other clubs?

ROBINSON: I think not. College Knights. I wasn't a member of that until later though after he had gone. That's all that I can think of right now.

ARENA: The period following graduation, 1937, was the period when he returned from being away. He had been at Duke Law School, you might recall, and returned to Whittier to practice law. Can you think of any direct contact with him from the period of 1937 to 1942 when he left for Washington, and after Washington the OPA [Office of Price Administration], after that, military service?

ROBINSON: Not really. Yes, I recall this, that the conversations, most all of us knew Dick Nixon, a very outstanding person in college, and predictions that he would be something some day. And I think the fact that he went back to Duke, being accepted at Duke Law School was quite an honor. I kind of followed him; I knew that he was there. I knew that he was in the 20-30 Club here in Whittier.

ARENA: Were you a member, by any chance?

ROBINSON: No, I was not, but I recall that he was around town here some, of course. Then when he came back and having known [Thomas W.] Tom Bewley through the college activities, I recall knowing that Nixon became a member of that law firm, but really nothing significant during that time. I think maybe the best I could do now would be to skip to his running for Congress and hearing him a couple of times in speeches. I think perhaps the best, the only other what I would call significant contact with Dick after that was after he had been in the Congress for a while and he came home and met with a group of us here. I'm not clear about this, but it seems to me that it was a dinner that we had at the William Penn Hotel, a very sort of informal type of thing, where questions were fired at him. There were, as I recall, maybe ten, fifteen, twenty of his contemporaries in college.

ARENA: This was concerning his plans for entering politics directly?

ROBINSON: No, this was after he had been back to the Congress for a portion of a session, and there was a recess and he was back home getting the pulse of his constituents, and then returned to Washington after this. I think the thing that-- and I've related this to a number of people--stood out in my mind, the frustration that he felt at having to compromise on issues with which he did not agree. And my best recollection of his explanation was about as follows: That in the Congress you propose a bill or you support a bill which you think is very important, but you have difficulty getting the votes to pass that bill, and in order to get that bill passed it's necessary to convince other people to vote for that bill, and sometimes it's necessary to pledge your vote for their bill in order to get their pledge to vote for your bill. And the system that he had worked out in his own mind was that he would take these bills with which he was not in favor and rank them according to their harm or lack of harm, and would then try to support those bills which were least objectionable, in order to get the support for something which he felt was very, very important. And this rankled him that he had to do this, I think, and yet he could see that it was necessary.

ARENA: In your recollection of college politicking days, when he was meeting with the student government, was there nothing like this sort of thing there? These are completely different levels, but from the standpoint of this being a little nursery for future politicians, were there incidents where there were those who were running for this or that office or for this or that objective, and there was some sort of training ground on the college level political scene for future politicians that you can think of?

ROBINSON: Well, of course, I came into the student body picture after the elections were over. You see, he had already been elected student body president for the whole year and I came in the second semester. I do recall the discussions that went on in student council meeting, and this was a group of probably ten elected officers. The president of each class, for example, automatically became a member of that, and then there were, you know, the usual officers of student government. And there was some rather heated argument in this. And I'm sure there were compromises arrived at there. You know, there were no earth-shattering things, such as maybe putting a walk in across the campus, or a discussion of whether we could have dancing on campus, or how much money we were going to spend for decorations for the football game

for homecoming, or these kinds of things. You may have run across the name of Carl Sigmund who was a classmate of Dick's and who was always coming up with an idea. Seldom a meeting went by that Siggie didn't come up with a new idea. And some of his ideas were just way out, no way we were going to do anything with them. But he used to say, Sigman used to say, "Well, I know some of my ideas are crazy, but once in a while I might have a good one." [Laughter] And he did. So we would discuss these things. Phyllis Plummer was the secretary at that time, and her minutes of those meetings were very choice. They were not the usual dry minutes. They had jokes in them, play on words, puns.

ARENA: Is she a Mrs. today, do you know?

ROBINSON: I think she is, yes. That would show in the alumni records, I think. The last I heard of Phil I think she was in the Registrar's Office at the University of California at Riverside [California].

ARENA: Can you recall examples where you have the opposite situation, in other words, necessity through experience of needing to compromise politically? Can you think of examples where he drew the line, his bringing up areas where he said, "On these points I did not and I would not," and looking to the future, he would not.

ROBINSON: I was probably not that much aware of. . . . If I had known he was going to be President, I'd have taken notes. [Laughter] I recall a very great respect for him, his speaking ability. Dick was not a gregarious, friendly person. He was not UNfriendly, but he was not a glad-hander.

ARENA: This has come up, as you can imagine. You're not the first one to say this, that he was not a glad-hander, that he did not seek contact with people aggressively . . .

ROBINSON: Not on a social basis.

ARENA: . . . as you would think; ordinarily politicians do. You're saying not on a social basis. How can you account for the fact that he would win these elections and that he still was popular nevertheless? In other words, what made up for that lack of aggressive sociability, we'll say? What other attributes did he have, or assets or characteristics, that

would counteract that seeming liability for someone who would be elected? Why would people seek after him? I'm thinking of the college years, let alone the political period after 1945. What was there about him that would make people still put their weight behind a person who did not have--and I think the phrase today is, you'll agree--charisma. What was there that he had that would counteract that?

ROBINSON: Well, see, again, the student body elections were carried on in the spring, late spring, and I wasn't at Whittier College then, so I don't know.

ARENA: Then you never saw him in action in a campaign on the college level.

ROBINSON: No, right.

ARENA: You saw him AFTER he was elected.

ROBINSON: That's right, presiding in front of the entire student body, which at that time was four or five hundred only.

ARENA: Still sticking to this idea of wanting to evaluate--not necessarily evaluate--but to summarize your direct personal contact with President Nixon over the years, you've mentioned this post-Congressional election direct contact. Do you mind if I ask you again, not from the standpoint of politics, but from the standpoint of knowing what your direct contact was, did you engage in direct politics yourself in his behalf, in this period after 1945, so that would be another area of direct contact?

ROBINSON: Yes, I worked for his candidacy each time he ran, on a somewhat limited basis.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you what position you operated under? Were you a committeeman?

ROBINSON: No.

ARENA: You had no formal position?

ROBINSON: No formal position at all. I contributed a little bit financially to the campaign, and mainly talking to people individually, on a one-to-one basis, and trying

to interpret the fact that here was an honest, dedicated man, as I had known him certainly. And again, I go back to the concept of the Orthogonian Society, what it stood for, and the input that HE made to that, if he believed the things that he put into it.

ARENA: It isn't necessary to mention any names now, Newt, unless you want to, but have you done this for anyone else?

ROBINSON: Done what?

ARENA: Campaign or promote the candidacy of a political candidate?

ROBINSON: Yes, oh, yes.

ARENA: And in every case it is because of your own personal convictions of the man . . .

ROBINSON: Right.

ARENA: . . . rather than a formal political party commitment. And do you mind if I ask you if you have done this for somebody who is not of the same political party as the President?

ROBINSON: Yes.

ARENA: In other words, you are a non-partisan?

ROBINSON: Well, I'm a Democrat. I'm a registered Democrat.

ARENA: Interesting.

ROBINSON: Well, I don't know what I am anymore, but probably more conservative than liberal, although in later years I think I've become more liberal, as I think Dick has.

ARENA: As a matter of record then, you have not been just pushing Republicans?

ROBINSON: Oh, no.

ARENA: And when you say you're not sure what you are though, have you always been a registered Democrat?

ROBINSON: Always. My father was, and so I did. I've never taken an active part in party politics, although I think when I retire I might. I worked in the same way for Jack R. Fenton, for example, who is our assemblyman from this district right now. I was a very strong supporter of [Thomas H.] Tom Kuchel. He was a former senator from California and was defeated by Max Rafferty in the primaries.

But, no, I've just felt that Nixon was ultimately, just GREATLY qualified. His seriousness of purpose. . . . You asked me a question a while ago, what made up for the lack of charisma? In my mind, it has been the lack of this, maybe, that has been a great thing for him, his seriousness of purpose, although, you know, people either hate him or love him, I think. We're in a doubting age, and if you don't like him, then you hate him, I guess. People don't believe that he can be as good as he says he is, or that those of us that have known him a little bit say he is.

ARENA: Thinking back to your very first contact with him, do you recall that he impressed you a great deal or hardly at all or that it was a question of gradually finding out about him?

ROBINSON: I suppose it was a gradual thing. My first recollection of him, as I think now, was--and I've thought about this a number of times since he's gone into politics at the national level--was his speaking to the freshman class, my first or second day on campus. I mean, gee whiz, you know, here's the student body president. This is really something. But I didn't know anything about him. He spoke well, friendly.

ARENA: That was the first meeting that you can think of and that was impressive, given all the circumstances, of course. Fine. Is there any other direct contact with the President now, coming right up to the present. I'm thinking also, of course, of contact with the closest member of his family, Mrs. [Patricia Ryan] Pat Nixon. Do you recall coming into contact with her before they were married, or since?

ROBINSON: No. I didn't start teaching at Whittier High School until after she was gone, so I had none of that contact. I have seen Dick two or three times, three or four times,

several times really. When he was Senator, he spoke at homecoming once at the college. He and Jessamyn West were on the same program, and I was the chairman of the event and so spoke with them, but you know, just "Hello, how are you?" and listened to a few comments of his about what he was doing. And then, other than that, just at political rallies I've seen him, shaken hands with him a couple of times, which I think is kind of silly.

ARENA: I know I've seen you at some of the Whittier College alumni affairs. I was wondering if you've ever held any post and come into contact with him, as you did back in the student council days at Whittier College, where he was a member, where he was on the board of trustees? Was there ever that type of contact?

ROBINSON: No. I was president of the Alumni Association for a couple of years just before the war, but other than that, I've had no contact with him there, no.

ARENA: Is there any contact with him that I have left out, possibly, for example, when his father died, his mother died, did you see him at these types of moving experiences?

ROBINSON: No. As I said at the beginning, I don't feel that I've had a lot of contact with him. I've admired him, I've read many of his speeches and his book. He's a credit to the Presidency.

ARENA: Before we do go back, and we do have to go back, because you know we've only touched on these areas of contact, and I'd like to explore them with you, whether you think that they are fringe contacts or not. But before we do go back, I'd like to ask some general questions where a person such as you is capable of answering these questions, but the ordinary person would not be. For example, you knew him as he was beginning to be a public speaker and a successful one on the college level. Of course, he is now known throughout the world as a public speaker. And this will be one of the types of questions that, again, only you could answer. What characteristics do you see in him today when you see him on TV [television], or rather infrequently now in person, but when you do see him speaking today, what characteristics remind you of the Whittier College days of the President, and what characteristics do you find are completely new or completely different?

- ROBINSON: I was thinking of this, oh, just about a year ago. I was listening to him on television one time and recall that the extemporaneous nature, it just seems to be an unprepared thing. He speaks so well without notes.
- ARENA: When he spoke to you at that freshmen orientation meeting as the student president, he did not have notes, do you recall?
- ROBINSON: I don't recall in that particular instance whether he did or not, but I can remember him speaking before the student body, and in some of his debates. In fact, this was a comment made at that time, "Gosh, how can he debate without notes?" And, of course, I'm sure he had notes on his table, but when he got up to speak he didn't. He felt rather self-assured, didn't seem to be nervous in front speaking. It's a thing that comes very natural to him. His diction is good.
- ARENA: Another general question that I know a person like you could answer: A believer--I was going to say a PRACTICAL believer--in Christianity as you are, knowing the President in this period and, unlike most people, recalling that period, what would you say, from your opinion, that the President's commitment to Christianity is?
- ROBINSON: Oh, gee, I don't think I'd want to answer that about anyone, Dick, because how do you really know what their real commitment to it is? I know this . . .
- ARENA: I was thinking of it on this basis: You would know whether or not he participated in religious activities in a formal sense. What's inside a person . . .
- ROBINSON: No, I don't know that.
- ARENA: Oh, I was thinking of his being in charge of those chapel sessions.
- ROBINSON: Well, he would have done this as student body president.
- ARENA: Oh, I see.

ROBINSON: I don't know whether he even attended church or Sunday School during those days. I don't know that he didn't but I don't know that he did. I just know that the things that he stood for, well, honesty, for example. Again, I don't like to keep harping on this Orthogonian Society.