



5-18-1972

## Harland F. Leathers (May 18, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

MR. HARLAND F. LEATHERS

May 18, 1972  
Washington, D. C.

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Harland F. Leathers, F. stands for Francis, in Washington, D.C. Today's date is May 18, 1972, Arena interviewing. Would you mind giving your official title, Mr. Leathers?

LEATHERS: I am the Chief of the General Litigation Section of the Civil Division of the Department of Justice.

ARENA: Thank you. Mr. Leathers, may I begin by asking you, from the standpoint of orientation, where and when you were born, a brief resume of your educational background and your career to date?

LEATHERS: I was born in Hermon, Maine, in 1911. I was educated in the public schools of Hermon and Hampden, Maine. I went to the University of Maine where I received an A.B. [Bachelor of Arts] degree. I was in the class of 1932. I left college at the end of my third year to take a job teaching in a high school, where I taught for three years.

ARENA: Excuse the annoyance, but I was wondering what your major was for pre-law?

LEATHERS: I had a major in English and a minor in Latin. After teaching three years, I discovered that I needed only one additional course to graduate from the University of Maine, so I made an arrangement to enroll in the Duke Law School and to take the one additional course, which was a course in American Literature at Duke Law School at Duke University. So I enrolled there in the fall of 1934.

ARENA: The President himself came in that year, if that's a help.

LEATHERS: Yes, '34, and completed the course and graduated from Maine in due course and Duke Law School in due course. From Duke Law School I went to New York City [New York] where I was in private practice with the firm of Milbank, Tweed & Hope. In those days it was Milbank, Tweed, Hope & Webb.

Shortly after Pearl Harbor, that would have been early 1942, I came to Washington with the OPA [Office of Price Administration], expecting to be drafted any time in the military, and worked for the OPA as an attorney until late October or early November 1942, at which time I was inducted into the military and I started as a Private in the Army and eventually worked my way up to Captain. I was in the Pacific area for some time. I've forgotten the exact dates, but I ended up as an Army Captain on Admiral [Chester W.] Nimitz' staff in the Pacific, and came back from there to Washington where I decided I would practice with the Department of Justice for a while to get a little government experience, and I have been here ever since, in the Civil Division.

ARENA: Thank you. Going back to what may have been a possible contact with the President, when you started at Duke in 1934 do you recall running across President Nixon personally?

LEATHERS: Well, the class at Duke University in the law school was relatively small. I don't remember how large it was. The graduating class was approximately 28 or 30 I suppose, so obviously you ran into everybody. The first year you took almost exactly the same courses, so you were in class with all the members of the class all the time. So I ran into the President and the other members of the class.

ARENA: From the standpoint of your running into him, I would like to divide this into some three categories and ask you what you recall regarding each one. For example, there is the academic side, there is the extracurricular-academic side and you might say the extracurricular-extracurricular side--outside the campus and everything. Beginning with the academic side, what do you recall of him as a fellow student, of his working in the library, of his writing of law articles--those materials dealing strictly with his and your combined academic associations?

LEATHERS: Well, I don't remember any great detail, but I clearly recall that the President was considered one of the most conscientious and hard-working of the class; also, of course, one of the ablest in the class. And it's my recollection that he was one of those who was always participating quite actively in the class discussions, but I don't remember any particular details about that.

- ARENA: Would there be on the academic side opportunities for formal public participation? I'm thinking, say, of mock court situations or anything like that.
- LEATHERS: I'm sure that there would have been. You probably know already of the publications, I assume, which were in print at that time. There was a Duke Bar Journal and a Law and Contemporary Problems, I think was the name of it, and Law Review, and my recollection is that he had some participation in both of those. And I am quite confident, without remembering in detail any particular incident, that he was active in the Student Bar Association activity. I think, but I'm not sure, that he was president of the Student Bar Association at one time. But there were a number of committees, and I'm quite sure that he was active on perhaps several of those committees.
- ARENA: Given the fact, if I'm not mistaken, the students were on scholarships, which depended on continued outstanding work, I understand. There was a matter of just so many scholarships and it was a question of maybe survival of the fittest might be the best expression, do you recall that this put any visible tension, any visible strain on him?
- LEATHERS: I don't remember him from all the others. The situation as I recall it was something like. . . . The first year class had something like twenty scholarships. I think they were just tuition. I don't remember whether there was any additional money with them or not, and the second year, the number of those scholarships dropped from twenty to, I would say, six. Therefore there was considerable stress on all of the class, particularly those who already had scholarships, to qualify to be among the roughly third who were going to continue on scholarships, and I think the quality of the class, the quality of the work the class did, was undoubtedly affected by the fact that in a relatively small class, somewhere between a third to a half of the students in the class were working very hard to maintain their scholarship.
- ARENA: Speaking about the effect on the quality, if it isn't too personal, was there an effect on human relations? Did this kind of competition eat into your human relations in any way?
- LEATHERS: No recollection that I have of anything that would be classified as antagonistic. Although everybody was trying hard, it was a very close-knit, friendly, cooperative class. No one was making an effort to keep material from anybody else, so if you wanted to borrow somebody's notes, if you missed a class and wanted the information, it was no problem at all. So it was competitive, but only in a real competitive sense. There was nothing sneaky.

ARENA: Do you recall that the fact that he may have been the farthest west student and the fact that he was a Quaker set him off in your mind in a way, or in the mind of the class, your fellow students?

LEATHERS: No, actually he wasn't the farthest west. A girl in the class came from Walla Walla, Washington, Helen Lanier. And the fact that he was a Quaker, I'm not even sure how many people knew that at the time, or for that matter cared. There were no peculiarities of his religion that set him apart from anybody else.

ARENA: If there is nothing further regarding the academic aspects, could I go into the extracurricular recollections, in the sense, did you eat with him, room with him anywhere along this time, or engage in any school activities--serve on some of the same committees with him, for example, and whatever comes to mind there?

LEATHERS: Well, I never roomed with him. I'm sure of that. Now as for eating, as I say, it was a small group and the most common eating place was the Commons, the school cafeteria, which was right near the law school. They had a couple of orchestras that played after supper there, so it was a very pleasant place, and all of the students at one time or another ate their lunch or dinner or both there. There was a considerable amount of that. There were also several private eating places which the students went to because they were cheaper. As I recall the Student Union meals cost 35 cents and at this other place you could get them for 25 cents. [Laughter]

ARENA: And was there a comparable difference in quality?

LEATHERS: Well, the difference was between an institution--these were home run places that catered to the students and the food was more nearer home cooked food. They were quite popular, both with the graduate students and the undergraduate students, and I'm sure one time or another, in fact I'm sure quite often I have eaten with him or in groups both places.

ARENA: Is there any recollection that he had any particular interest in any particular extracurricular activities including sports?

LEATHERS: Well, this was a pretty hard-working class and there wasn't any time generally for anything more than most casual sports. Occasionally there would be a weekend football game--touch football--or softball or just throwing balls around, or sometimes a short hike or handball--handball was very popular. And he was just about the same as I was. He enjoyed athletics but only casually.

ARENA: A related aspect, maybe it is and maybe it isn't. Dancing and the social life--you mentioned music for entertainment during your meals. Was there music for dancing purposes as well?

LEATHERS: Not regularly in school. These orchestras were student orchestras. Actually they both became fairly famous. One was Les Brown and one was Johnny Long.

ARENA: And they were students at the time?

LEATHERS: They were students at the time. My understanding at the time was that they got free meals or something for doing this. I don't know that I really knew what the arrangement was, but anyway it was very pleasant. There were two campuses, as you probably know. There was an east campus for the women and the main campus. And the bands--oh, I don't know, I suppose three or four times a week--alternated. One would be on one campus and one on the other. But there was no dancing. This was just a get-together and occasionally a little singing along with the band.

ARENA: Were dances held, which you may have attended and observed the President in that capacity?

LEATHERS: I just don't remember any particular. . . . There were a number of formal and semiformal Student Bar Association sponsored and that sort of thing dances. I think they were usually held down town, although, no, some of them were held at the university. They were fairly casual and I think they were regular dances on the east campus where the women were. I just don't remember whether he went to those or if I ever went with him.

ARENA: Do you possibly recall ever witnessing him as a pianist or joining a group, or maybe there was a piano in the room?

LEATHERS: Yes, there were several people who were musically inclined in the class, and as I say, it was all fairly casual. Every once in awhile somebody would sit down and play a little bit on the piano or do a song or a monologue or some magic tricks you remembered from high school or something of this kind, just more for casual amusement of the group more than anything else. And I do remember that Dick played the piano and we thought quite well at the time.

ARENA: Would you say as an overall statement on this question of extracurricular activity, he was an extrovert, an introvert, or just one of the ordinary fellows? Does he stand out in a particular way in your mind?

LEATHERS: I would have said that he was just about normal. I think he worked a little harder and everyone thought of him as a little more thoughtful, is just as good a word as any, than most of the students, a little more serious, perhaps is a better word.

ARENA: Would you say he liked to argue anything, including politics, by the way?

LEATHERS: I guess he did, but all of the law school class liked to argue anything on any side at any time, so this didn't really set him apart. I do remember that he was engaged along with several others at various times in fairly heated debates about whatever the current subject was and ran all the way from the status of the Supreme Court to the relative merits of the justices and political systems, where we were going next and so forth.

ARENA: To be sure we have covered the question of the coincidentals, membership in the OPA, did you have any contact with the President during the OPA period where he was a member beginning in 1942, but I believe he left around the middle for military service? You left a little later on.

LEATHERS: Yes, when he was here I did see him a number of times. My recollection is that he worked in a somewhat different area than I did. I was in rations and I'm just not sure where he worked, but it was not in an area where I had daily professional contact with him. But, of course, I knew him and there were several other Duke boys there.

ARENA: Would one be the son of Dean [H. Claudel] Horack himself?

LEATHERS: I expect so, although I didn't know him as well, but there was a boy who was in a class ahead of us, [Edward] Eddie Rubin, his name was. And I think there were a couple other boys from Duke whose names escape me. And so there was a fairly good group, but there again, most of the young lawyers at least who were here then were here because they were convinced that the state of the nation depended on their getting this program going and the hours and the work were very, very strenuous.

ARENA: When you say most of the boys, would you include the President in that category?

LEATHERS: Oh, yes, he was one of the boys.

ARENA: And in recalling this period, bearing in mind that you did not have daily contact with him, for that period of time whatever incidents come to mind of direct contact,



not only we'll say on the job, so to speak, but if you met with him socially, if you met with his wife that would be interesting. Any recollection you might have.

LEATHERS: I have forgotten when he was married.

ARENA: It was 1940 back in California, before he came there actually.

LEATHERS: I was not married then. There were a number of the married young lawyers and they did the best they could to create a kind of a social atmosphere whenever they could find anybody who would stop working long enough to come for supper or play a little softball in the backyard, or anything. And I went to a number of social affairs where he and Pat [Patricia Ryan Nixon] were among those that were there. And, I don't know, we may have gone to a movie or a show. I just don't remember.

ARENA: As a final overall question, since you knew the President before he even entered politics, and knowing him as you do now, what changes or what lack of changes would you say mark his personality, his character, his habits? I'm thinking maybe of speech, of story telling, his appearance, we'll say, in public. You may recall him speaking in public back in those days and, of course, we've all seen him speak in public on TV [television]. Whatever you can in the way of the now Nixon as compared with the law school days.

LEATHERS: Well, basically, I don't see much change. One of the things that has baffled me throughout his career is the suggestion that he is somehow sneaky or tricky or whatever the word is. I suppose of all the class, he would have been the very last one that I, and I think any of the other members of the class, would have picked out as being at all devious in any way. So I have always been at a loss to understand how this suggestion came about. And the best explanation I can make of it is that he was, and I think still is, a very--well, inspired isn't quite the word--but vehement believer in what he believes to be right, and I think he perhaps, therefore, drives harder for his objectives than most people. I think that was true then and is probably true now. On the other hand, the impression we had then, or I had at least, was that he was very straightforward--everything was laid out on the table. If it was a problem it was identified, faced, and he did the best he could to solve it. You know, like a big assignment, or what is the prof trying to get at by this series of questions, and I think that's still true.

ARENA: Is there any question that I have not raised, or any point that has not come that as this interview comes to a close now that you would like to add yourself, Mr. Leathers, for the record?



LEATHERS: No, I don't think so. I might point out, as I indicated, we were fairly close. Dick went to New York with a group of us when we were looking for work in New York in our senior year, and I remember that trip quite well. We had a real good time as well as getting around to the various offices. I don't remember any particular incident, except that I remember it was a very pleasant trip all the way around--pleasant for me because I got a job and pleasant though whether you got a job or not. And I felt at the time that I knew him quite well, and felt sure then that he would be a successful lawyer.

ARENA: As you know, he did get a job in his hometown. Was there any indication of that along the way, maybe even unintentional or maybe he let it slip out, that there's no place like California or maybe he was positive?

LEATHERS: Well, I never really knew for sure. I went on the job hunting to New York, not really so much to get a job, although I was glad to get one, but everyone who had been there before said that it was a great way to spend a little time. Just going around interviewing with these big law firms was an experience all by itself and at this stage, whether you were really serious about a job in New York or not, you really ought to go and do this. And I was really never sure--that's mostly why I went and I'm not sure if it's not mostly why he went. But I'm sure, like me, in those days you were happy to get a job. But I don't know whether he really meant to practice law in New York or not.

ARENA: Eventually, as you know, he did for a while after the 1960's. Mr. Leathers, I can't thank you enough for your hospitality in not only giving me of your time but in answering all of my questions so frankly and fully, and above all, I know my colleagues in the historical profession join me in that. Thank you very much for these firsthand observations and recollections. Just for the record, again from the standpoint of history, would you happen to have in your possession, not that you have to go into it now, but would you happen to have personal correspondence with him and where would this be located for future purposes?

LEATHERS: I don't know. I don't think so. I don't think I have anything--any correspondence. At one stage some member of my family fished out a letter that I had written at the time of this New York trip, that I think I mentioned Nixon, but I'm not sure the letter is not lost now.

ARENA: Again, thank you very much.