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William A. Sparling (December 14, 1972)

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Oral History Interview

with

MR. WILLIAM A. SPARLING

December 14, 1972
Oakland, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. William A. Sparling. The A, middle initial, stands for Alexander. We are in the Oakland Chamber of Commerce. Today's date is December 14, 1972, Arena interviewing. Mr. Sparling, by way of background information on yourself, could I begin by asking you where and when you were born?

SPARLING: I was born in Hollister, California, March 20, 1906.

ARENA: And also by way of getting background information, could you give a brief resume of schools you attended, the cities, especially where you attended them, right up through the end of your formal education?

SPARLING: I went to elementary schools in Hollister, California. I went to San Benito County High School. There was a county high school located at the county seat in Hollister. I then graduated from Stanford [University] in 1929, with a major in economics and a minor in political science.

ARENA: Could I ask you to give a brief summary of your career to date?

SPARLING: Yes. The career to date has been primarily in the field of public service, chambers of commerce and association. First, out of Stanford, with the telephone company for a year and a half, going to their graduate school, so-called. This was only two years after the establishment of the Stanford School of Business. Having taken the course through the telephone company, I worked for the California State Chamber of Commerce for nineteen years, and I've been in this present capacity for twenty-one years.

- ARENA: Would you give your present title and precisely what the full name of the position or the name of this Chamber of Commerce?
- SPARLING: This is the Oakland Chamber of Commerce, and my title is General Manager. Prior to coming here, I worked with the State Chamber of Commerce in the State of Indiana. I did consulting work back there and wrote a book on Indiana State Government.
- ARENA: Just to be sure, do you recall ever coming into contact with Quakers in Indiana, especially those who may have been around Vernon, Indiana, where the President's mother was born and raised before she came to California?
- SPARLING: I don't believe I'm able to do that. David Starr Jordan was the president of Indiana University and came to Stanford from there. But I don't remember the affiliation of any Quakers with the education process there or at Stanford.
- ARENA: And you don't recall coming into contact with the name Milhous in connection with Indiana while you were there or anything like that?
- SPARLING: No, not in Indiana, but out here I've been in contact with the name Milhous, through a little church affiliation, Episcopal Church out in Orinda [California].
- ARENA: Would you mind stating what that has been and the name of the Milhous, the full name, if you know it; if not you could let us have it later on, when there's time.
- SPARLING: His name is Theodore Milhous, an architect. He was entertained by the President at the White House three years ago.
- ARENA: Mr. Sparling, to get right to your firsthand contact with President Nixon, may I ask you, to the best of your memory, what WAS the first occasion when you and he got together?
- SPARLING: It was part of my duties as the manager of the California State Chamber of Commerce, Southern California Section, which comprises about 60 percent of the State of California, to advise with the chambers of commerce in the locality.
- ARENA: About when was that?
- SPARLING: That was in 1946. And in performing such duties, I was in Pomona [California] at their annual meeting following

which Mr. A. T. Richardson, who was the publisher of the Pomona Progress Bulletin, invited me to the home of Roy Day.

ARENA: Excuse me, would Richardson be spelled just the way it sounds?

SPARLING: Yes. Roy Day had with him at that function a guest of his dressed in a Navy uniform, with bars indicating that he was a lieutenant commander. In his living room was Roy Day and Mr. Richardson and Mrs. [Evelyn Shore] Sparling and I and Richard Nixon. Richard Nixon was then in the process of determining or sampling the people in his district, which was the 12th district of California as far as Congress was concerned. He was trying to determine as best he was able his acceptability as a candidate for the congressional seat in that district, currently held by Jerry Voorhis, who lived in that district.

I lived at that time in the City of San Marino, which, together with Whittier and Pomona comprised the entire district. Of course, our reaction was extremely favorable, not only because we were not satisfied with Mr. Voorhis' representation of our views in the Congress, but because here was a young man who was mild and modest and able, and he reflected an attitude in which we all felt we could have great confidence.

ARENA: If I could dwell on that for a moment, did he make a strong first impression? You say, for example, that he was modest. Was he so modest that he did not stand out until you read about him later on in the newspapers in connection with famous events? I'm thinking of the [Alger] Hiss trial, and of his running for Vice President. I'll just stick to that question first. What type of a first impression did he make? And remember, I'm not interested in politics per se in this project, but the personality and the nature of the President at that time, if you can separate the two?

SPARLING: That's a fair question, because in politics to find someone who is modest enough and yet aggressive, not in an overbearing way, but in a way that you know that he is going to do to the best of his ability the things that he's committed to, is a very refreshing thing. You have a lot of glib, fast talkers in the political arena, and he was obviously not one of them. He had his own convictions; he made that quite clear.

ARENA: How could you demonstrate, for example, that he was not a glib talker? Would this be because he would not come up to you and start talking, or wait for you to ask him questions, if that comes to mind, if you can recall his manner that much in detail so many years ago? Did he just seem to kind of wait in the background, wait to be introduced, or was he the type that actually came up to everyone in the room, we'll say, individually and start talking about himself?

SPARLING: No, he was not a glad-hander in any sense. He was there to listen, primarily, and I think he was sincerely trying to determine what he said he was, his acceptability as a candidate for office in that district. He was not forward, and he seemed to be genuinely interested in the viewpoint of the people in that room. As I say, they were not numerous and he couldn't have gotten a lot of information, but you had the impression, and I certainly had the confidence, that he really meant what he said and that he'd follow through. He looked like that kind of a man.

ARENA: Bearing in mind now, as we all know, that he was raised in Whittier [California], although born in Yorba Linda [California], did that show up in any way? I'm just wondering, from your living in that area, did Whittier have a certain reputation, say, as being able to produce a successful political figure? Again, we're not interested in politics so much, but the impression or the image that Whittier had among non-Whittier people, and here was a living example of a Whittier person. Did that come up in any way, and even in your own mind. Did you think this fellow from such a community could sustain an important campaign?

SPARLING: Well, of course, that was a question. I wouldn't think that anyone in his most imaginative moments could think of the potential achievements of this young man at that time. But Whittier is like any other American city. I don't think there was anything special about Whittier that would stand out as a birthplace of Presidents, for example. And he was seeking to enter the political arena, not at a point at the bottom of the scale, but the Congressional seat was pretty well up the scale. And he was seeking to defeat a candidate for reelection who had been there five sessions before. So it was not an easy thing, but his background was that of humble Americans, which is attractive in its own right. But in addition to that, he seemed to have personal charm that. . . . Well, at least we were encouraged to think that this was a man worth supporting.

ARENA: Did the fact that he had not been elected to any office before that time come up? In other words, do you recall that, and did that seem to be an advantage or disadvantage on that occasion, the fact that he had not been elected to any political office?

SPARLING: I would think it would be somewhat of a handicap, because it would reflect upon his experience. But the fact that he had spent his years just prior to this as a naval officer would certainly be accepted in lieu of the other possible experience that he would have--from going up the ladder--from being a member of the city council, board of supervisors, to state office, to federal office.

- ARENA: Let me also ask you, for the record. I know I've brought this up before, but I would like to have it on the record, if you met Mrs. [Patricia Ryan] Pat Nixon on that occasion or on any occasion?
- SPARLING: No, I had not met Pat Nixon. She was not accompanying him on this particular evening.
- ARENA: May I also ask you if you met any of his other immediate relatives, either on that occasion or immediately afterwards? I'm thinking of his two living brothers, for example, still living today. One is Donald [Francis Donald Nixon], one is Edward [Calvert Nixon] and the others, of course, in the way of immediate relatives, would be his parents. I'm wondering if you ever met any of them?
- SPARLING: The only one I met was Donald.
- ARENA: What are your recollections of Donald? Not going into politics per se, but as a member of the family.
- SPARLING: I didn't have any special recollections, just another businessman, as far as I was concerned.
- ARENA: On the matter of that meeting, if this isn't confidential or too personal, what impressions after he left did he leave with you; and I might say, did he leave with your wife. I believe you said Mrs. Evelyn Shore Sparling was there?
- SPARLING: Yes, she was at the meeting with Richard Nixon, but not with Donald Nixon.
- ARENA: Do you recall discussing him with her? What were the impressions that were made of the young Richard Nixon?
- SPARLING: As I attempted to infer, they were very favorable as far as we were concerned. And he, actually, I think, had convinced us that he was a very eligible candidate for that office which, as I think I said before, was not represented properly in our opinion. My wife, subsequently, went door-to-door in his behalf in San Marino [California] and I did what I was able with the political writers such as Kyle Palmer of the LA Times and the campaign down in the center of Los Angeles working for Preston Hotchkiss and Asa V. Call.
- ARENA: Was it your impression that he--again concentrating on his personality--would make an appeal to the person who was not, we'll say, a regular political worker, someone who would be an average citizen and would turn out and campaign for him, or ring bells, and that sort of thing? Was it your impression

that he could sway that type of a person, again, at that time when you first met him, did he seem to be the average boy next door, so to speak, who could appeal to the average, not necessarily politically oriented voter?

SPARLING: Well, in that community, I would say very definitely, yes. He was able to convince people of his own sincerity and his credibility. He didn't overstep anything, didn't overstate anything. He was not a typical salesman in any sense. He was a young lawyer in which, I think, anyone could have confidence. My wife had a very favorable reaction in the door-to-door canvassing in San Marino, for example. He won overwhelmingly in that part of his district.

ARENA: Do you recall that your wife had any coffee klatches for him, or she attended coffee klatches?

SPARLING: Yes.

ARENA: And how was he on those occasions, again, not interested in politics per se, but how he got along with the people, how he struck them? I'm thinking of the topics that came up, what would be tossed about and secondly was he easy to communicate with? I'm thinking about this observation that he was not, you know, very aggressive or very outgoing, yet could he put people at their ease in your impression, and how could he demonstrate that? I realize that's a complicated question, but this is getting to the man in a critical period. [Interruption] Go right ahead and answer the phone.

Continue, Mr. Sparling. This is the idea of how he impressed people at these coffee klatches, not just with people as yourself, 100 percent interested in promoting his candidacy, but now you're trying to sway people, and how would he meet with those types of persons?

SPARLING: I didn't attend any of the coffee klatches myself, and I think on only one occasion was he present at coffee klatches that were held in great numbers in that district where my wife was in attendance. But we were very elated at the fact that he won, and after that, of course, we sat back and waited to look and see what happened. It wasn't until the time on the House Unamerican Activities Committee that he and [Senator Karl E.] Mundt had written the legislation back there, and when they had the Alger Hiss case before them, that we became acquainted with the tremendous abilities of the individual. He wasn't shrinking from ANY responsibility, and he stayed with it with more tenacity than. . . . The average person would have given up LONG before he did before the array of witnesses that he was confronted with-- Mrs. [Anna Eleanor] Roosevelt, Mr. Walter Reuther, Adlai Stevenson, Sidney Hillman and a great number of others. Those people were character witnesses of the highest order. And here arrayed against

them was one determined congressman. But he made it stick. On two occasions I invited him to the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles [California] for major speeches in Southern California, after he was successful in election and then reelection, dwelling on the matter of the record in Congress there. We realized what a tremendous power he'd been able to generate for the carrying out of justice in the Congress, and the successful prosecution of an individual who was perhaps not as concerned with the welfare of the country as we thought Mr. Nixon was.

ARENA: Mr. Sparling, if I could go back for a moment to that initial meeting and some of the surrounding circumstances before he actually is campaigning. This is the period, you might say, pre-political, in a way. Did the fact, and was it known, that he came from a community that did not believe in drinking, did not believe in smoking, did not believe in gambling; in other words, a true Quaker community--and I might say that that is not true of just Whittier, but other Quaker communities in the country--did that come up in any way, and did that show in his personality in any way? Did you think, to yourself or maybe out loud, that people might think he's a puritan, or he's too strict, and this might not make a good image? Did that come up in any way, either for or against him?

SPARLING: No, I don't think it came up. As far as I was concerned, he looked like a clean-cut American boy, which is bound to be appealing to the average voter, which I considered myself to be. So it fit exactly what I was looking for in a representative in the Congress.

ARENA: If THIS isn't too personal, could I ask you, again on this question of his being enthusiastic or being aggressive, did he make any telephone calls to you right after the meeting, in which he specifically asked you to consider his candidacy? In other words, did he follow up in a, well, let's say a decent manner, or did he follow up in an aggressive manner, trying to promote himself?

SPARLING: No, there was no follow-up. I think he wanted to expose himself and then make his own recording in his own mind as to just how he felt he came out. And he didn't follow up, and there was no other effort in his behalf that I knew about, except that he won the nomination and won the election.

ARENA: Having been a college-educated man yourself, and knowing that he had been a college-educated man, may I ask if that figured in in any way? For example, did his work at college, did his law education come up in your own mind as an advantage; that is, in that first connection?

SPARLING: I think a professional standing or professional achievement is an asset in the minds of most people. You find

a great many professional men in the Congress and in all the legislative bodies in the country, and I think it was definitely a plus as far as he was concerned. He had the background, the training, and the military experience that are all the things that you look for in a candidate.

ARENA: May I ask this: Again, I'm mainly interested in the personality side of him and not the political side, but that's how you came into contact with him, through politics. But did you know anything of his career, whether or not he had been a successful or unsuccessful lawyer? For example, the fact that he had been untried politically, could it be said that he had been relatively untried as a lawyer? He was just starting out in law. Did that give you any misgivings about the man as a potential winner, going against, again, someone who was well-tried in politics and someone with--and you know better than I--was the Voorhis name a well-known name, aside from Jerry Voorhis himself, but the family Voorhis name? Did you feel that he was at an advantage or disadvantage running up against that type of combination? I should say the Nixon name. Was that, therefore, not known politically and not known from the standpoint of just plain publicity-wise?

SPARLING: Two things: I think that, one, the Voorhis name was well-known and well-respected. Voorhis was, however, suspect in the matter of representation of the attitude of the people of that district. And if that has to be considered, Voorhis record was not an attractive one as far as we and our neighbors were concerned. On the other hand, Mr. Nixon was not a front runner--he was a man who had the training, certainly, and it looked like he had the integrity to make a successful representative, who would really speak for the interests of the people in his district.

ARENA: Finally, Mr. Sparling, may I ask you if you would not mind comparing--and take as much time as you like for this--comparing that young man who was about to enter into politics, and you met him before, with the man that we all know now and the world knows as President Richard Nixon. I realize that this is very difficult, but there aren't that many people around who knew him before and now. Would you compare him from the standpoint of his personality, his attitude with you? And let me know if you met him since then, and how he conducts himself today, say his mannerisms, his informal speaking personality and ability, as compared with his informal speaking personality today. Today we all see him informally, especially when he is in front of the news, where he is not giving a prepared speech. In other words, compare the personality of the Richard Nixon of 1945-46 with the personality of Richard Nixon today as you see it, and not necessarily as a political figure but as a human being. Take as much time as you like on that.

SPARLING: Well, I won't be too long on that, because the difference is vast and reflects primarily the experience that the

man has had since that time, and his fluency now in expressing himself is infinitely better than it was then, but it still reflects that sincerity that typifies him in office in all the jobs he's had, from the Congress to the United States Senate to the Vice-Presidency and later to the Presidency. He still has the integrity about him which to me is appealing. Notwithstanding all the things and criticism of what he's done, it will never cease to amaze me as to how he can get that MUCH done, with the thousands of advisors, all well-informed and able advocates of their own positions, the problem of sifting them out, to me, still seems to add up to the fact that we can have a feeling of confidence that he hasn't lost that integrity that he reflected so well when he first sought the opinions of people in his district before attempting to represent them.

I suppose he wanted to know as much about us as we did about him, but there was never any question in my mind, and I don't think there's been a substantial difference engendered in the attitude that he takes toward public issues then and now. It's only a matter of his long and varied experience for perhaps as long as any other man in public life. From the percentage of his life that's been spent in government service, he's bound to acquire a lot of experience along the line, and in his case I would say that he hasn't let it interfere with any of his moral convictions or moral judgments.

ARENA: I don't know if you have had the opportunity to have met him following his double political defeats, one for the Presidency against [John F.] Kennedy, the other for the governorship of California, and I'm wondering if you DID meet him after that period. How would you compare him as the man who could only go up when you first met him, as compared with the man who had suffered some of the greatest personal defeats a person could suffer, and would you want to make any comparison there, comparing him on the way up, you might say, and when he was really down.

SPARLING: Of course, I was personally disappointed when he made that speech, I think it was in Los Angeles [California] castigating the press somewhat on the prejudicial attitude and the slanting of news stories about his campaign. I would agree with him 100 percent that many commentators had not made fair statements. And while he was quite human in objecting strenuously to it, I don't think he should have said it.

ARENA: Mr. Sparling, is there any subject or topic that I have not raised, any question that I have not asked, that you would like to see put on the record from the standpoint of your personal contact with the President over the years?

SPARLING: Well, I think he typifies, certainly, the great American story. When his book, Six Crises, was out, those were personal observations, I trust, and they do reflect a

typical American, and it should give great confidence to the people of the United States that there is still great virtue in this type of government as against any other. He was very active as Vice President, perhaps as active as any Vice President before, or more so. He was out here with us. I invited him to make a speech here in Oakland when we were the hosts for the Northern California small business group.

ARENA: May I ask about when this took place?

SPARLING: 1960. It was in the second term of his Vice-Presidency.

ARENA: Second term would have been '56. It would have ended, if you said in the latter part, it could have been 1960, that's right.

SPARLING: But he made a fine impression here with respect to the encouragement of small business which, after all, has been the function that I've been devoting most of my life to; number one, the creation of jobs, and unless you can create meaningful jobs for people, all other problems of law enforcement and health and welfare and all of those things are to suffer greatly. But meaningful jobs on important or desirable projects can mean the difference between whether we have a good independent society made up of free men, or one of a welfare state. Personally, I'm prejudiced, of course. He has typified what Americans can do from humble beginnings up to the point where they can become the most powerful figure in the world. It hasn't turned his head in the slightest. I think that he's made a great impression.

ARENA: From the standpoint of the historical researcher, may I ask you what papers or photographs you have in your possession? I know I've seen some. But for the record, not that I'm asking you for these papers, but so that we can locate them, would you mind describing what correspondence you have with him and what photographs, and by way of description, say, one letter or about a dozen letters, and about when they begin? Photographs or letters, about what is the earliest date and the most recent date, regarding photographs and correspondence, or any type of personal document you may have?

Copy attached.