



11-6-1972

John H. Neagle (November 6, 1972)

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Recommended Citation

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ABSTRACT
Oral History Interview

with

MR. JOHN H. NEAGLE

November 6, 1972
Long Beach, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

Mr. Neagle, a professional photographer, served at the U. S. Naval Air Station in Ottumwa, Iowa, during the period Richard Nixon was stationed there.

His interview begins with coverage of his personal background. He was born in 1913 in Illinois. He was involved in pre-law studies but was forced to leave his first semester of law school in order to help his family during the depression. He worked for various newspapers and the publicity office of a university before joining the Navy in 1942.

The interview then progressed to the following verbatim recollections related to Richard Nixon:

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ARENA: Generally. . . . Obviously, you couldn't remember all the pictures you took, but do you recall any particular cases where you did take pictures of the President, say, and had any feature stories on him with photographs? He did play the piano. He did attend things like the officers' club, and maybe there might have been some story on him. I wonder if you recall, offhand, that there were any?

NEAGLE: Well, this is what I was going to say a moment back. Almost any officer I would see, after a short matter of time, would say, "Sometime when you've got an extra film, take a picture of me." Or, "My wife will be here." Or things like this. I can't recall President Nixon, of ever making his photograph per se, unless he was in a group, or when they were having inspection on the parade ground. I'd see him practically every day, because

I'd be all over the base, because this was my job. He was the type of person at that time that you didn't--well, I can't say didn't like or dislike--but you weren't impressed that much by him. I mean if he was trying to hide his light under a bushel, publicity-wise, he certainly did a very fine job of it. Our conversation was just generally idle chitchat.

ARENA: Do you think that--this might trigger something--the fact that he was a Quaker, and here he was in a combatant outfit, did that come up at the time or does that ring a bell?

NEAGLE: Well, I thought about that. I don't know whether I thought at that time or later, or it may be presumption on my part, but I think that that might well be it. He wasn't antisocial or timid. He seemed to be serious. I covered many of the officers' parties for pictures, and I don't recall EVER seeing him. It is my estimation and observation that he was sort of a loner.

ARENA: Do you recall that you did meet his wife?

NEAGLE: No, I never saw Pat [Patricia Ryan Nixon]. But if he WENT to a party, he's the type of person that if someone asked you if you saw Mr. Nixon, you wouldn't know whether he was there or not, because he never pushed himself forward. And as far as any idea of thinking that he would be President of the United States, it was preposterous. I'd have picked almost any man on the base before him. I don't mean this is a reflection on his intelligence or personality. But like you said, like I thought, he was just the Quaker type. He was quiet, reserved but congenial. Frequently when I contacted him in the Base administration office, he'd go in the captain's office and then say, "The captain will see you now." So I'd go right in and see what the captain wanted, or deliver pictures. Now most people are curious about pictures, but he never did ask to look at 'em.

Sometimes the captain would be busy and I'd have to wait to see him. This Iowa weather didn't set too well with the Californians, because a lot of them came in the middle of winter, and this base, as you know, is on a wind-swept prairie and it was real cold. So on those occasions he generally did mention something about California weather. I would say he loved California. Once I recall he told me he didn't like the Iowa winter, and he said, "Why, in California in December and January we have stores that just have an iron lattice-work pulled in front at closing time." And I said, "I beg your pardon, Sir, I just can't believe that." Because I had always lived in winter cold of the midwest. At that time he laughed. And I think he said, "Well, come out and try the Golden State," or something similar. Little did I know I was going to wind up here.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, did you ever meet him or correspond with him since those days?

NEAGLE: Well, I'll tell you, an amazing thing happened. I was working for the Press-Telegram, a Long Beach [California] paper, as photographer. And I was covering the Rose Bowl Parade and. . . . What do you call the man that's . . .

ARENA: The Grand Marshal, the man who leads the parade?

NEAGLE: Grand Marshal, that's right. And Mr. Nixon was in a special section where the celebrities were seated. He was Vice President then. Now, of course, those were the days when press photographers were using the speedgraphic camera, the large type press camera. I went up and took his picture, and he looked at me kind of funny, and I said, "You don't remember me." Of course, my hair had grayed plus I wore glasses. And he said, "One second. John Neagle, Photographer, N.A.S. Ottumwa." Just like that. His remembering my name like that surprised me. Now we know he has a phenomenal memory. However, generally speaking, people like to have their picture taken, and get to know the cameramen, especially if he is carrying his gear. He never requested a picture of me. I could see no particular feature in him at that time. And that's about the only association I had with him.

ARENA: You don't think his job had anything to do with it; it was just his personality, because there were others who had similar type jobs or similar grade, who did stand out in your mind who, we'll say, were characters or strong personalities?

NEAGLE: Yes. No, I don't think the job. . . . I would say the job was, you know the old term, duck soup. Unless, I thought perhaps it was his first assignment and he was playing it close to the vest till he got a little more indoctrinated, because I did that myself, after boot camp. The training period for both officers and enlisted men was very brief and basic. The Navy didn't have time, the Navy personnel was down and the Pearl Harbor attacked so sudden that people were processed speedily. You learned a few nautical terms, were given your shots and that was about it. You had to keep alert to learn your duty details when you reported for actual duty. It was about the same among officers. They were called "90 day wonders" after coming out of officers school. The reserve enlisted men were called "feather merchants." It was a very derogatory term.

ARENA: From the standpoint of an old Army man, and a layman, how would you describe the meaning of "feather merchant," just to be sure we have it right? It was taken from a character in the comic strip Snuffy Smith, a sort of a bumbling boob who wore a cap with a feather in it.

NEAGLE: When I reported to Anacostia, I was quartered as a photographer with the regular Navy. And I heard them browbeating the "damn feather merchants." So I started saying it myself. And a guy said, "Are you regular Navy?" And I said, "No." He said, "What the hell you talking about feather merchants?"

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The interview continued with Mr. Neagle's additional recollections of life at N.A.S. Ottumwa. The following dialogue occurred:

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ARENA: From what you do recall about his personality, from your firsthand contact with him then, from what you see, as we all do now, of the man today, on TV or in the press, to what extent would you say he has changed, and in what ways, not going into politics per se, but I'm thinking of his personality as a human being. I guess you really can't separate the two, but if you can.

NEAGLE: Well, I think he's changed tremendously, but I just think it's an outgrowth of the personality that was always there as he gained more experience of meeting people. I don't know, but I would say that his circle of friends must have been fairly tight in Whittier, because he wasn't outgoing, mixing in the community social-like; I would say he hadn't. But he was very pleasant, sharp--not aloof. After I'd made so many visits, I'd come in and he'd say, "Good morning, John. What have you got?" "Do you want to see the Captain?" But we never. . . . Or if we did talk back and forth it was just small talk. We never got in any long discussions. And it wasn't a question of officer and enlisted man. I never felt that between myself and him, and I don't think anybody else did. He'd speak to people, very pleasant. I never heard any officers discussing him. I recall that.

ARENA: Nor enlisted men, one way or the other. It wasn't, "He's a good guy," or . . .

NEAGLE: Or they didn't like him.

ARENA: Nothing like that.

NEAGLE: No. He was unobtrusive because, well, he didn't push himself. That's why I said, I can't remember the names of some of these officers that would bug me a little bit TOO much about the photograph business, like I say the welfare officer wanted pictures for the murals for the officers' club. I said, "We'll start in the morning if you'll sign this." He said,

"What is this?" I said, "That's a chit to send to Admiral King. Any photo materials to be used for other than war purposes you have to make a report directly to him." So he said, "Forget the whole thing."

ARENA: This was President Nixon?

NEAGLE: No, this was the welfare officer that was asking. The welfare officer wanted to collect a scrapbook for when he got out, like, "What I Did In The Navy."

ARENA: Maybe that's why Admiral King had that rule.

NEAGLE: Yes, that's exactly why he had it. He was pretty sharp.

ARENA: Taking into account the fact that you must have interviewed an awful lot of celebrities in different categories, politics, maybe businessmen and so forth, would you find that this is not that uncommon, or is it, where you have a person who is a leader, as obviously the President is, but who has a side that he is not an easy mixer? Is it unusual to find a man who, as you said earlier, is a loner, but at the same time can be a leader and can and does rise to the top in his area or profession, whatever it might happen to be? Or is it really unusual?

NEAGLE: I think it's very unusual to start out like he did, because I've covered every president since [Herbert] Hoover, been in their campaigns, governors and a lot of politicians, and they're outgoing. But I think they have two faces; one is for the public and their own private one. I have known, like Governor [George] Wilson, later Senator Wilson. In private life, what little private life they had, he was very quiet, didn't say much, but he was full of oratory and good will to the public, which they actually have to do. And the pictures you see now of the President going down and shaking hands--no, you wouldn't have caught him close to anything like that. You just couldn't imagine it. He was just outstanding in one's memory by NOT being outstanding. That seems a funny thing to say, but it was brought to my attention from the newspaper standpoint, he was just colorless. I could see no picture.

ARENA: If you would speculate, again not going into politics per se, but how can you account for the fact that he did acquire leadership positions? You may have read, for example, that he was elected president of his college class; he would be elected president of this, president of that, as well as President of the United States. How would you account for that, Mr. Neagle?

NEAGLE: Well, I think there are a few people just like that. I knew some in college who became various officers in the

student body. In fact, a friend of mine, Monsignor [S. G.] Menke, is now president of St. Ambrose College. But he lived a very quiet normal life. But somehow he gained the respect of people, because the outgoing guy sometimes got ridiculous, you know. I think this is what is probably true in the President's case. They knew he was solid, and given to his duties. I think he's a very conscientious man, and looking back, not getting into politics, I think he stands for what he thinks. He's the type of man that could be in Profiles in Courage. He isn't an easily moved man, I don't think. See, there's a temptation at a new base like that to be a hail-fellow-well-met, when they have such a small group of officers, but this was, I think, evidently against his Quaker teachings, and he didn't want to be in any of these over-lively officers' parties and dances. Of course, we had dances at the base with the whole crew. These were very quiet affairs. The station had its own orchestra led by Chief Reynolds.

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After additional dialogue unrelated to the President, the following ended the interview:

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ARENA: Is there anything else that you would like to discuss that I have not mentioned? Is there any question I have not raised?

NEAGLE: Well, one thing. See, we were on land bases, pre-flight, and in the administration building there was a little salty talk about the bulkhead and the scuttlebutt and the overhead for the ceiling, and nautical terms which seemed silly, because it was treated like a ship. I never heard him talk like that at all. I presume he felt like I did. I thought it was just a little bit foolish and his talk was always serious.

ARENA: And that was not usual. In other words, most of the fellows went along with it, using the naval terms.

NEAGLE: Yes. There's no one more salty than the sailor who just gets out of boot camp, or an officer out of officers' school. But he didn't. . . . He wasn't a drag or anything, but you know, you see someone that's real, real normal, he just doesn't have the color.

ARENA: Speaking of the Navy language, let's say that the military personnel develops very colorful language. Did he develop any fancy cuss words?

MEAGLE: No. His speech was perfect. No horseplay--period. As I looked him over, I was expecting some day, as I went in there during the short time we were there, three or four

months, that he would say, "How about a picture of me at the desk," or something, because we did get friendly, friendly enough for me to remember him twenty years. Or he'd say, "My wife works in a bank here. Could we get a picture to send back to California?" Never. He never mentioned her. I didn't even know she was in town. We never had any personal discussions, as far as I know, not with me. I didn't know he was going to be a whiz in politics or what he did. I would have guessed he was a teller in a bank or something like that, not casting aspersions on tellers in banks or people that work in libraries, but that particular type. I can't give you any anecdotes, because as far as I know there weren't any.

ARENA: What you have given me is most appreciated. It's your recollection of the man, and history will be the final judge. And I want to thank you for my fellow historians for answering all my questions so frankly and fully and allowing me to interview you during your work. Thank you very much.

NEAGLE: Thank you very much. It's been a pleasure.