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The Elite Speak: Political Oral History at the University of Kentucky Library

Library Notes

The Elite Speak: Political Oral History at the University of Kentucky Library

Terry L. Birdwhistell*

Only recently and reluctantly have historians acknowledged that history is more than wars and elections, that comprehensive history must include analyses of the lives of women, blacks, the poor, mountaineers, miners, native Americans, factory workers, and other nameless people who are invisible to traditional records. And historians have been relieved to discover that the techniques of oral history can produce documents to preserve these otherwise forgotten stories. The value of oral history in this area of historical research is well recognized, but it may strike some as ironic that oral history has also become such a welcome bedfellow of political history. It would seem that the "elitist" story of politicians is sufficiently documented by traditional sources and that the use of oral sources should be confined to social history. Yet, as Eric Foner argues in the prologue to *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War*, "the failure to consider politics—by which I mean not simply voting returns and legislative alignments, but the ways in which power in civil society is ordered and exercised—and the retreat from the analysis of political ideas deprived social history of the larger context which alone could have imparted to it a broader meaning."¹ Allan Nevins, Columbia University's oral history pioneer, realized one way to enrich that context when he began interviewing political subjects successfully in the 1940s.

Political history remains extremely popular, both in the historical profession and among the general reading public. Witness the popularity of such recent works as Arthur Schlesinger's *Robert Kennedy and His Times* and Robert A. Caro's *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power*, both of which rely heavily on oral history sources.² The story of recent American history is richly enhanced by the preservation of political recollections in oral

interviews. Many modern political biographers have accepted oral history enthusiastically, and their volumes abound with notes citing oral history collections. Popular biographies and scholarly histories utilizing oral sources have lifted oral history from obscurity to a level of respectability in the historical profession.

The University of Kentucky Library Oral History Program, which today encompasses subjects as diverse as Robert Penn Warren and the Frontier Nursing Service, began with political oral history projects. The library is fortunate to have a large collection of modern political manuscripts, including those of former United States Senators Alben W. Barkley, Thruston B. Morton, A.B. Chandler, Earle C. Clements, and John Sherman Cooper; former Congressman Rogers C.B. Morton; and former Justices of the United States Supreme Court Fred M. Vinson and Stanley F. Reed. The lives and careers of these well-known Kentuckians account for a significant portion of state and national history. Each of their collections contains hundreds of boxes of manuscript materials. Scholars of the modern political scene often find, however, that answers to many key questions simply cannot be unearthed in this seemingly endless array of correspondence and memoranda. The fact is that many important facets of the contemporary political process are never committed to writing.

Oral history, then, becomes a means of preserving the record of these political careers. It allows the politician to recount in great detail his or her own career. Additionally, it offers an opportunity for both supporters and opponents to comment at length. It saves from extinction those important telephone calls and late-night discussions during which far-reaching decisions are made.

While oral history has become an essential tool in preserving modern political history, such projects create certain problems and challenges that warrant attention. This is true for presidential library projects, senatorial and gubernatorial projects, and even local political projects. American politicians have much in common wherever you find them, and so do political oral history projects.

A significant concern among oral historians is the eagerness with which politicians themselves have accepted and even pursued oral history. Today's politician donates his or her papers to a library and often expects an oral history project as a condition of transfer. Does this merely reflect an acute sense of history, or are there other motives as well? Similarly, the oral historian must be careful not to fall into the trap of conducting the project as a tribute to the

political figure. This danger is accentuated by the tendency to title a project after the name of the politician being studied. While the oral historian attempts to cover the breadth of the subjects, events, and issues in which his subject was involved, the general public and even interviewees often assume that naming the project after an individual is akin to naming a building or highway after him. This misapprehension will sometimes dissuade a critic from granting an interview because he or she feels that the interviewer is seeking only positive comments about the subject.

Another threat to the integrity of oral history projects is the possibility of becoming too close to and involved with the subject. Politicians are generally very charming people who have spent the greater part of their lives polishing the art of winning friends and influencing people. When an interviewer spends hours talking with an affable subject, objectivity can easily be undermined. Oral historians, of course, are not the only group susceptible to this weakness. Many biographers experience these lapses, although their subjects may have lived centuries earlier and no personal contact occurs. One might conclude, however, that the combination of interviewer and biographer can place a double strain upon historical objectivity.

What persons make the best interviewees in a political oral history project? In most cases, the subject of the project, if living, makes an excellent interviewee. One is able to learn a considerable amount about his or her early life and impressions as well as pick up names of old acquaintances and classmates who may still be available for interviews. Probably most important, the interviewer is able to retrace significant events of a subject's life and career for his or her reflection upon them.

Interviews conducted with Senator Thruston B. Morton clearly illustrate this point. Morton served three terms in the U.S. House of Representatives during the late 1940s and early 1950s, was assistant secretary of state in the first Eisenhower administration, and served in the U.S. Senate from 1956 to 1968. Morton came from a prominent Louisville family, was educated at the Woodberry Forest School in Virginia, and received a degree in English literature from Yale University. In the following interview excerpt, Morton, a shy person by nature, recalls the adjustments necessary for an educated, wealthy, and urbane candidate to campaign successfully across the rural state of Kentucky:

Well, the only thing was that Louisville even in '46 and '48 . . . you'd outgrown the old neighborhood rally. I mean it still went on, but didn't amount to much. The only people that came to them were your own people anyway, your own precinct people. And you go to these rallies around town and meetings, St. Matthews, say, and half the people there would be from all over Jefferson County. They were precinct people. They came to swell the crowd, so that there'd be a good article in the paper. So there were two hundred people there. Well, one hundred of them were--the same one hundred of them were at all the meetings.

. . . but out in the state where the cultural things, opportunities were less, there was less entertainment; to go to a courthouse speaking was quite an event. And they expected the candidate to come there, and if there were forty people there or two hundred it didn't make any difference, they'd expect him to speak for three quarters of an hour. Well, this was a little difficult at first, but I realized that these weren't the same people every time, and that they expected me to put on a show and pull a few cracks about your opponent and get them laughing. And they'd yell from the back, "Go after 'em, go after 'em, Morton. Give 'em . . ." Well, this was all new to me, and I had to get used to it.³

When the Thruston B. Morton Oral History Project was conducted several years ago, only ten hours of interviews were recorded with Morton. In the current John Sherman Cooper Oral History Project over thirty hours have already been taped with Senator Cooper, and at least twice that many are anticipated before the project concludes. During the late 1940s and early 1950s Cooper was elected to two partial terms in the U.S. Senate and then served consecutively from 1956 to 1972. Always known as an independent liberal Republican, Cooper recalls some of his first votes against the party in the Senate:

. . . and I voted "no." He [Senator Robert Taft] came down the aisle to me and said to me, "When will you begin to vote with us?"--the Republicans. And well, I can't say that I got angry, but on the other hand, he was quite upset. And I just said to him, "Senator, I was sent here by my constituents, and

I'm going to try to vote as I think right for my constituents." That was about all there was to it. And I sat in the back row, and two or three members back there, although they all voted with him, they told me later they thought he shouldn't have done it, and I remember two or three pages ran up to me and said, they were so happy, what I had said to him.⁴

But sometimes even Senator Cooper's constituents were not in agreement with his liberal philosophy. Lorraine Cooper recalled a letter to her husband from one of his more conservative constituents who pleaded, "Mr. Cooper, please don't vote the way you think."⁵

Interviews with family members can be extremely enlightening. Often a son or daughter has the best sense of the politician as a person. Many times he or she can strip away the public veneer for a closer personal look. And at times the personal side will reveal much about the public side. This occurred during an interview with Senator Morton's son. Reversing his position on the Vietnam War during the late 1960s was one of the most difficult and controversial decisions that Morton had to make while in the Senate. In the following excerpt his son explains, at least partially, how that decision was made:

. . . it's a funny thing, you never know how much influence you have with my father in that he won't respond. But I can remember going out and hearing him address an anti-war rally at the University of Louisville. Well, I guess it was an anti-war rally; it was a little more sophisticated than that. But it was put on, I think, mostly by the Friends group here. It was a full house out at Bigelow Hall. And he was asked questions afterwards. At that point he was one of the Republicans who had started coming over to the peace side. But he was pretty much in the middle. In fact, my brother called him a "chicken hawk." He got some questions at this thing about his position, "Why don't you come all the way?" kind of thing. Maybe it was about mining Haiphong Harbor, or—I don't know what it was. He didn't really respond to that, so these people would have thought they didn't have any influence on him. But two days later in a speech on the Senate floor he had accepted that position. And I asked him, I said, "Right there on Sunday you. . . ." He said, "Well, I got to

thinking about it. Their questions made good sense to me so I changed my mind." Well, these people had great influence on him. But you wouldn't know it right there—he'll ponder all that; but he won't really discuss it in a give and take. He would more than likely say, "You're right" or "That's a good point" and walk away from you. . . . Yet it's strange because on like "Face the Nation" or "Meet The Press" he'd answer questions and he would be a great advocate, but in a personal conversation he doesn't like to do that.⁶

In a lighter vein, Happy Chandler's daughter, Marcella, recalls her father playing ball with his children in the side yard of their home:

I can remember Mother talking to him saying, "Happy, why are you playing so hard against all these children?" And he'd say, "Why, I play everything to win and I want them to play everything to win."⁷

Political spouses are sometimes good sources of information. Many times, however, their information reveals more about social life in Washington than about political campaigns and legislation. In an interview about her close friend Senator Earle C. Clements, Lady Bird Johnson, who certainly knew the political ropes of Washington, chose to keep her comments positive and general in nature.

Lyndon relied on him for solid judgment. Senator Clements was a man who just commanded respect and also liking in the Senate and he and Lyndon made a great team, I think. And he could appeal to members of the Senate that might be turned off by Lyndon sometimes. And he was a very solid man of wisdom and sage good judgment and Lyndon had great affection for him, and they just worked together beautifully.

When Lyndon had a heart attack in July of '55 it was touch and go. Well, first we didn't know when or whether he would be coming back to the job of majority leader, which was a terribly demanding job. But one of the first visitors that he began to insist on seeing and just deviling the doctors until

they let him see him was Senator Clements, who then began to come to the hospital giving Lyndon little résumés of the day or the week in the Senate and who was doing what and how certain programs and bills were faring. And then they would talk about what they could do to make them run better and how they could get the troops lined up better. That went on almost daily, I expect, as soon as Lyndon could see visitors. He was in the hospital in Bethesda for six weeks. I expect that Senator Clements began coming perhaps after the first week or ten days. . . .⁸

While family members are able to offer revealing comments, one must remember that they are inevitably subjective. Furthermore, it is always more difficult to ask relatives questions that deal with sensitive subjects.

Administrative assistants and other staff members are key sources of information. At times, staff members can actually recall more detailed information than the political subjects themselves. As a rule, they are quite willing to participate in an oral history project. One must remember, though, that the reputations of staff members depend in large measure on the success and prestige of their former bosses, and there may be a tendency to enhance that reputation in an oral interview.

One serious drawback to political oral history is the necessity of interviewing active politicians. Whether they are small-town mayors or U.S. senators, their comments tend to be somewhat guarded. These are people who from experience have learned to distrust those who carry tape recorders. Some individuals on whom projects are centered may still be powerful forces in state and local politics; some may not be above vindictiveness toward a less-than-loyal individual. Obversely, former politicians as a rule are much more candid, have leisure time to reminisce, and generally contribute a more enlightening interview. Many have already vanished into political obscurity. They are flattered by being contacted and welcome the opportunity to record their recollections.

Active U.S. senators are by far the most difficult group of interviewees. Many of them are simply too busy to offer much time unless the subject of the interview has also been a particularly close personal friend. In addition, current senators are increasingly being called upon by the growing number of projects around the country.

Former Senator John McClellan, who had been associated with a sizeable number of senators during his long career, agreed to be interviewed for the Earle C. Clements Oral History Project. After what had no doubt been a long and demanding day, the visibly tired senator gruffly began his interview by noting, "You people doing all this oral history are going to drive me crazy!" Oral historians need to be sympathetic to that perspective, or at least recognize the potential dangers inherent in the situation.

Also, senators are extremely reluctant to speak negatively about former colleagues. At the close of an interview, Senator John Tower was asked if he had any further comments or anecdotes about Senator Morton. Only partially in jest he responded, "I won't tell any on him because I don't want him to tell any on me."

Individuals no longer in Congress are much more willing to make helpful comments. William Miller, best known as Barry Goldwater's running mate in 1964, succeeded Thruston Morton as chairman of the Republican party in 1961. In the following excerpt, Miller offers interesting insight into the relationship between Morton and Richard Nixon:

My personal view is that Senator Morton was the first man in politics, in Republican politics, who was seared by former President Nixon. They talk now about the Watergate people, but Thruston Morton was really the first one I think who was a casualty of the Nixon personality and the Nixon *modus operandi*. Because I can't prove it and I'm not saying it as a fact, but I am led to believe by very credible evidence that Thruston Morton was promised the vice-presidency by former President Nixon and did not get it. In addition to which, following the convention in Chicago, former President Nixon asked Thruston Morton to stay on as the Republican National Chairman, indicating that he would have a very substantial role in the '60 campaign, which proved to be totally untrue. The Nixon Committee . . . had their headquarters a couple blocks away from the Republican National Committee. And the whole campaign was run right out of the Nixon headquarters with Maurice Stans, Bob Finch, and Herb Klein, etc., etc., etc.⁹

Still another difficult area in regard to political oral history is that of interviews relating to Supreme Court history. The

University of Kentucky Library conducted a limited project on former Chief Justice Fred M. Vinson and is currently working on the Justice Stanley F. Reed Oral History Project. *The Brethren* demonstrated that law clerks are an invaluable source of information. But repercussions from its publication have forced interviewers to be cautious and tactful in approaching law clerks concerning the Stanley Reed project. Most clerks want to make sure that their comments in no way impinge upon the confidence of their former bosses.¹⁰

Experience shows, however, that clerks will generally be quite candid in oral interviews. Often, even noncontroversial comments can help one better understand a justice. Former clerk Joseph Barbash had this recollection of Justice Reed:

. . . some prospective law clerks came around, candidates for the next year, and one fellow came in who had been rather highly recommended, working for a judge of the Court of Appeals, and spent about an hour with the justice and came out all smiles and left. . . . We asked the justice how he liked him. He said, "Oh, I thought he was just fine." "Well, are you going to hire him?" He said, "No." And we said, "Well, why?" And he said, "Well, he kept agreeing with me."¹¹

Another clerk, Aley Allen, drew this conclusion about his former boss:

He [Reed] was preeminent as a person; he was eminent as a justice. He was a marvelous man. He really had qualities of character and personality that . . . that the world should envy—not in the sense that he was brilliant and sparkling in conversation or anything like that; I'm talking about qualities of probity, solidness, and the like.¹²

Another interesting aspect of Supreme Court history is the reverence with which many view the Court. Until recently, most Americans envisioned the Supreme Court justice as above the fray of petty politics and mundane activities. When a former college classmate of Chief Justice Fred Vinson was asked about Vinson's prowess as a poker player both in college and later in Truman's White House, the elderly man, visibly agitated, responded, "Why in the world would you want to bring something like that up?" On

the other hand, former Speaker of the House of Representatives John McCormack had no qualms about giving his assessment of Vinson as a poker player:

I can remember one time in a poker game . . . Fred Vinson . . . and Clint Anderson . . . had the President [Truman] in between them and they were belting him. And it was apparent to me that from looking at the cards that were exposed, Truman didn't have a chance of winning either high or low—a burglar's chance—and a miracle probably couldn't accomplish it.

But we used to have some great times. Fred was one of the regulars. He liked a game of poker.¹³

Oral history reaches beyond printed opinions and official memos, or even drafts of opinions. The Supreme Court is an integral part of the American political structure, and Supreme Court manuscripts and oral histories fit logically into modern political collections.

Oral history has become essential to the thorough documentation of modern political history. Political projects conducted with proper planning and direction and with sufficient caution can make significant contributions to this area of scholarly research. A balance should exist between the number of elitist projects and those documenting the lives of less well-known individuals. As long as we do not allow the glamour of American politics to overshadow the story of all Americans affected by political events, we need not apologize for our efforts to document more thoroughly the lives of politicians by encouraging the elite to speak for the historical record.

NOTES

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¹Eric Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 9.

²Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power* (New York: Knopf, 1982); Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978).

³Interview with Thruston B. Morton, Louisville, Kentucky, 14 October 1974, Thruston B. Morton Oral History Project. This and all subsequently cited interviews are in the named projects in the Department of Special Collections, University of Kentucky Library.

⁴Interview with John Sherman Cooper, Washington, D.C., 20 January 1980, John Sherman Cooper Oral History Project.

⁵Interview with Lorraine Cooper, Washington, D.C., 28 April 1980, John Sherman Cooper Oral History Project.

⁶Interview with Thruston Ballard Morton, Jr., Louisville, Kentucky, 24 March 1975, Thruston B. Morton Oral History Project.

⁷Interview with Marcella Chandler Miller, Wilson, North Carolina, 2 June 1977, A.B. Chandler Oral History Project.

⁸Interview with Lady Bird Johnson, Austin, Texas, 19 October 1976, Earle C. Clements Oral History Project.

⁹Interview with William Miller, Buffalo, New York, 7 April 1976, Thruston B. Morton Oral History Project.

¹⁰Bob Woodward and Scott Armstrong, *The Brethren* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979).

¹¹Interview with Joseph Barbash, New York, New York, 15 May 1981, Stanley F. Reed Oral History Project.

¹²Interview with Aley Allen, New York, New York, 12 May 1981, Stanley F. Reed Oral History Project.

¹³Interview with John McCormack, Boston, Massachusetts, 26 May 1976, Fred M. Vinson Oral History Project.