

Steve Silver: Okay, we are here with Mr. Stephen Hess for the Bryce Harlow Oral History Project. It is so great that you are here talking to us. Thank you so much. Let's start by having you tell us how you first came to know Bryce Harlow.

Stephen Hess: I knew Bryce Harlow because I was on the Eisenhower White House staff. And I arrived there in time for the mid-term election of 1958. I had been drafted into the United States Army in 1956 and got out of the army in '58 and risen from the rank of private to private first class. And while I was gone my mentor at the university, at Johns Hopkins, Malcolm Moos, had become the speech writer to the president.

And I was invited aboard primarily to help on campaign speeches and paid at that time by the Republican National Committee and in the beginning of 1959 went directly onto the White House staff. So I knew Bryce for the last, basically two and a half years of the Eisenhower administration. And although I was by far the youngest person on the staff, 25 when I got there, and he was one of our stars, although not an old man, it was such a small staff that it really was very easy to know each other, at least in a working capacity, pretty well.

For example, the White House mess, the staff dining room, which is a relatively small room and we have such a small staff that we could all sit down for lunch at the same time. I came back to the White House under President Nixon, eight years later, and by that time the staff was large enough so that we had two seatings; the young staff and the old staff. And then actually by the end of the Nixon administration we had two dining rooms. So it shows something about the growth of the staff.

But really, had this been the beginning of the Nixon administration, I would not have had the same opportunity to sit and have lunch with people like Bryce Harlow or Jim Hagerty or Andy Goodpaster. And it was a wonderful experience for a young man. And they were very, very gracious to a young man. Harlow particularly fitted into my world or rather me into his world, because although Harlow was basically the head of Congressional relations, he was such a good wordsmith, such a good speech writer that early on he had been called in for lots of Eisenhower speeches.

And, in fact, I think he was largely responsible in some ways for hiring speech writers by Eisenhower so that he could relieve himself of those chores, which is not what he wanted to do. That

was fairly unusual in the White House staff. I mean, previously and even afterwards with Lyndon Johnson and Kennedy, a lot of folks involved themselves in the president's speeches; that is, there wasn't a shop that was just there for speech writing.

But I think Harlow promoted that idea of having full-time speech writers. And at the end of the administration it was Moos and Hess. Now the administration was almost over, and I did some odd jobs because we weren't all that busy, and some research for various Congressional battles we might have on foreign aid, for example, I dipped my hand in. But in fact even the Congressional relations staff that Harlow headed and before him Jerry Persons, was really much, much different than today.

It was very, very small. I think Harlow had maybe two – it could have been five altogether, including himself – it could have been two for the House and two for the Senate. And they did not involve themselves in every issue that came down the pike. I'd say that there were probably not more than a handful, maybe three or four major issues a year that were brought into the White House on which the White House was the lead agency. Typically if it was an agriculture question the agriculture department would take the lead. And that's the way it was.

So we were part of a very small staff that we knew each other. And then the administration was over. The [Eisenhower] presidency was over January 20th, noon, 1961. Bryce I think went directly to Procter & Gamble at that time to set up their office. And even that compared to the sort of trade or lobbying associations that we have now, was a modest, modest operation. I think he had one other professional and maybe each had a secretary. And that was the Washington operation of one of our nation's largest companies.

Steve Silver: Not what it is now?

Stephen Hess: No. So it just was a different world at that time. So at that level people tended to know each other, which was much more intimate, which meant of course that personal relations were very much more important. I went to work immediately for a senator from California named Tom Kuchel who was the Assistant Minority Leader, the Republican whip, and actually only stayed there about six weeks, partly because it turned out not to be the job that I wanted. Senator Kuchel a very nice man, wanted to build some sort of more national reputation.

But in fact I found that California was so complicated that I was busy writing speeches about the wine industry one day and the defense industry the next. And Harlow came to me at that point, he had become sort of a mentor. I mean, he could tell you what you should be doing next with your professional life. And by the way everybody who knew Harlow would know that he almost whispered that at you, his voice was so soft. It's just the way it was, but at the same time it was a marvelous trick of the trade, because you had to be very attentive, very quiet and very up close to catch what he was saying.

And what he said in fact was two-fold. He was going to see that an office was open for me with my name on the door, some excuse for having a name on the door, for two clients that really needed some Washington help. And they were Eisenhower and Nixon.

Steve Silver: Which were two pretty big clients.

Stephen Hess: Well, it was quite unusual and quite hard for people to understand now – the Eisenhower account, if you will, and of course this was all arranged by Bryce. Now, he didn't pay for it, I mean, it was funded otherwise. There was no Former President's Act, as there is now, that gives them big office space in California or New York and Secret Service protection and secretarial help.

Steve Silver: They were just ordinary people.

Stephen Hess: They were just ordinary people; that's right. Dwight Eisenhower got in his old car and drove back to Gettysburg and retired. And I think he had a private secretary and that was it. Well, the Republican National Committee and other Republican leaders felt that to keep him active in politics for their purposes he would have to do among other things answer his mail. He had no special interest in answering letters that came in from, you know, school children, nor did he care to write little messages and so forth.

So the client was Eisenhower. The job was to see that all his mail was answered and it was all put on a Trailway bus and sent back here [to Washington] and I had people who sorted it out and mailed it. And a funny part about it was none of us knew what to charge for something like this. How would we know? So I think that with the Republican National Committee, the man who was in charge was named Abe Hermann, whose daughter actually is Congresswoman Emerson right now. So he decided that we'd do it by piecework. I'd get, I don't know, ten cents for a letter, five cents for a post card.

I don't remember the exact figures, but something like that. Little did any of us know that it would pour in. There would be thousands and thousands of letters such that – and they weren't very difficult, because they were all basically on certain themes that you could put them aside and answer all of these with one form letter. And I had hired somebody who had been a top secretary for Mamie Eisenhower, Ann Parsons, and she knew the ropes.

So I was making so much money in a funny way that they paid me over a number of years. So number one, Bryce Harlow, I should say, made me a rich man. He didn't make me a rich man, but it was through him that I had enough money to do the things that I really wanted to do, to recreate my own life. The Nixon account was really quite, quite different. Nixon, having just barely lost the presidency had gone back to California, was partner in a large firm, and missed Washington. He could read the New York Times or the LA Times, but he missed the feel of the place. And my job initially was basically to almost write a newsletter with an audience of one.

Steve Silver: To Richard Nixon.

Stephen Hess: To Richard Nixon; to tell him what was going on among the people he knew and the world that he knew. And eventually I moved on to other things, to helping him write articles for the Saturday Evening Post or a column for the LA Times Syndicate and so forth, and eventually to go out to California to help him run for Governor in 1962. So again I wouldn't have knocked on the door of an Eisenhower or a Nixon, it was all Bryce Harlow, always all Bryce Harlow. He was looking out for me. He seemed to care. I'm sure it was convenient to have some young man, a moderate Republican, who was available and could write well and so forth.

But nevertheless I wasn't the only person with those credentials, and Bryce Harlow was the one who was there. And consequently he was always there when I needed him for advice. There were plenty of times that I would ask his advice on things. And this over time had a lot to do with Richard Nixon. Not Eisenhower, we didn't have that sort of relationship. I was just answering his mail; writing little speeches for him. With Nixon, it got elaborately involved in other questions of politics, in which there was always Bryce around to assist.

And then I was with him once again when Nixon actually got elected in 1968. I had not expected to go back on the White House staff just because I really wanted another type of experience in government. I did plan to go back into government with Nixon. But Daniel Patrick Moynihan, unexpectedly, who was a friend of mine, was asked to be the Assistant to the President for Urban Affairs, and I agreed to join the staff as the Deputy Assistant to the President for Urban Affairs, partly because I knew that it was going to be fun with Moynihan, he was always fun, and also he needed me. He was this Democrat going into a Republican administration, a Republican culture, that I thought I could help explain to him as he went along.

And so I went back into the White House staff. Bryce Harlow also went back to the staff, really in a sense in the same place he had come out of the staff eight years before; eventually he had more elaborate duties. But again he was in charge of Congressional relations, I guess, and other things. And if I remember correctly, we were in the West Wing, and his office must have been directly above me. I guess if I had drilled a hole in my ceiling I could have hit him, or the young man who sat outside his office, whose name was Lamar Alexander.

Steve Silver: That's quite a big name now.

Stephen Hess: Yeah, quite a big name now. And there were others... a young woman on the staff named Liddy Hanford, who is now Elizabeth Dole. So there are two members of the United States Senate now who were just young people on the staff when I was on the staff.

Steve Silver: I wanted to ask you about that, because when you touched on the whole mentoring idea, do you think that he really enjoyed having the young people, you guys, around to mentor along?

Stephen Hess: Yeah, I think he must have. You don't ask, "Are you enjoying yourself, Bryce?" But we were consuming; we were consumers of his time. His time was limited. He was a busy person. He always did have time for us. I mean, I can't ever remember sort of having to make an appointment for next Thursday with Bryce. He was always available. I think he probably enjoyed sharing his knowledge.

And I think that he probably enjoyed the fact that young people came and sought him out and sought his attention. And I think – I can't tell you how many people there were like me. You'll have to find that out as the researcher on this project. We didn't meet as a

group or anything like that. But I'm sure I was not the only person that looked to him. And, of course, there were the younger people who were on his own staff, many of whom have become very important in their own right subsequently. And my feeling is that it was always a happy staff.

I never sensed any underlying tensions. First of all with the Eisenhower staff, at least when I was there, but I think that it would probably describe the whole eight years. These were really not a lot of – I was going to say men, because the staff at that level there was only one woman – people – on the make. It really was quite different than subsequent staffs. In many ways they were chosen to be professionals. In other words, Hagerty, the press secretary was a professional press secretary; that was his business.

Gerry Persons and of course, Harlow were professional lobbyists; that had been their business in World War II in the Pentagon. The lawyers were professional lawyers. Since then, in many cases they're called counsel, but like I'd say of Lanny Davis under Clinton, they're counsel, but they are there really to spin stories about the president when he's in trouble over Monica. And the staff was really arranged in such a way. It was the first White House staff that was pretty much boxes on an organization chart. I mean, there were limits; the boxes didn't bleed one into the other.

So in other words, you did your job and there weren't people poaching on your work. If you didn't do your job well, Eisenhower could be a tough guy; he could fire you. But nevertheless there wasn't a lot of that sort of looking over your shoulder.

Steve Silver: Micro management.

Stephen Hess: Yes, to see who's gaining on you in that staff. So it was a happy shop and so I always thought of Harlow originally in that context. When it got to be the Nixon White House, that would not necessarily apply. But I don't think that either one of us stayed around very long. I'd have to figure out when, or you can tell me. I think ultimately Bryce came back, didn't he, to the Nixon staff, or at least informally, because Nixon was in such trouble at the end? But I would have – do you remember how long he stayed? I think that he would have been gone after two years.

Steve Silver: It sounds about right. I know he did a lot of back and forth between Procter and the Nixon staff.

Stephen Hess: Yeah.

Steve Silver: Of course he worked for President Ford for a while.

Stephen Hess: Yeah, Ford – I was around a little – there and again I just keep thinking of all the things that he did both with Ford and with Les Arends, who was the deputy, the whip, the Republican whip. And this would have been when Ford was suddenly elevated to the Republican leadership in the House. And in a sense Bryce Harlow sent me over to write speeches for them, you know, it was as if he was a clearing agency.

He'd say to me, "You know Gerry Ford has just been made the Republican leader, a guy from Grand Rapids. He doesn't know much of the world; he's got to give a speech at the National Press Club. It's a big introductory speech, you know. I've told them that you'll come over and write the speech, that sort of thing. Les Arends – I saw him at a party the other day, he said oh, god, he needs some speeches. I said Les, I'm sending over a young man to..." And so by the way, these were business deals. I mean, in a sense; not big deals.

But if I wrote a speech for Jerry Ford or Les Arends, they paid me for the speech. So I should have given Bryce a commission or something.

Steve Silver: A finder's fee.

Stephen Hess: A finder's fee. I think a fair number of things that came up like that probably came through Bryce. There's no doubt. I can remember one guy who wanted to run for Congress in California. He was rich in the honey business or something. And he didn't know anything about Washington and he wanted me to research for him, and I did something for him. And I think he lost the primary. But again I can't remember why some guy running for Congress from California would have called me. The chances are probable that Bryce Harlow told him to. And that's the way he was.

I think in a way that increased, if you want to use it in a pejorative sense, his tentacles, at least in the Republican establishment. If somebody needed a speech writer, he had some guy he could send over to be his speech writer. And I would assume that if somebody needed a lawyer he could send somebody over to write his will. But that was Bryce. Now Bryce wasn't getting paid for this. Bryce had a job at Procter & Gamble, and P&G was very happy to

have him with all of those connections. So in a sense you could say I was part of his network.

Steve Silver: Why do you think people of such great prominence, former presidents, military generals, were so drawn to working with Bryce Harlow? Why did they want him as part of their team do you think?

Stephen Hess: Well, I think in the case of the three – certainly of Eisenhower and Nixon – and I guess you would have to say Ford in a different way, Bryce Harlow had exceptional political smarts. And he gave good advice. And as far as I know it was without condition. I don't know what Procter & Gamble got out of it. I guess he did his job lobbying for Procter & Gamble, and did it successfully or they wouldn't have kept him. But that wasn't what he was getting from Eisenhower, Nixon or Ford. He wasn't saying okay, I'll give you good advice and you get me a tariff change on something that Procter & Gamble needs.

It wasn't like that. So there have always been wise men. Now there are obviously wise women, too – Karen Hughes and others. But wise men, I mean, people whose reputation was built on the fact that people thought they were getting very good disinterested advice from them. Had it been later, Bob Strauss; at one time, it might have been Clark Clifford, though he got in plenty of trouble himself. Democrats seemed to think that Lloyd Cutler had given them advice of this sort, although his might have been more legal advice.

But Washington has always had that. And, of course, like anything else, if that's the reputation it almost grows on itself. But with those particular three presidents it's a trifecta, if you will. One was connected to the other. Obviously Eisenhower was non-political but he was a general and so Harlow would have been brought into that mix through his involvement at the Pentagon and then as the top staffer on the House Armed Services Committee. So he was very much in that group of people who understand the politics of the Pentagon, if you will.

And certainly the cross fertilization between the Pentagon and the Congress, which was terribly, terribly important – I mean, unlike the State Department, the Pentagon needed appropriations, needed big bucks. They had big programs. And anybody who knew how the Congress worked was invaluable to them. So from that he got in there; once he was at the White House, like anybody else once, you get the foot in the door, you make it or don't make it on your

own. And I'm sure the fact that they got somebody who knew Congress didn't guarantee that they were going to get somebody who was also a terrific wordsmith, which he was, very, very skillful.

And then Ford, of course – he knew because Ford just came out of the Congress. Ford didn't run for president. Well, he ran for president once he was president. But he got there because he was in the House. Harlow is particularly a House man as opposed to a senate man, too.

Steve Silver: You touched briefly on his speech writing before and I wanted to ask you about his speech writing. Was he the kind of guy where you could pick out a Harlow speech if you heard one?

Stephen Hess: Oh, I doubt it, for this reason. Harlow and any other good presidential speechwriter were writing a speech for somebody else. And it was the other person's speech and it's supposed to sound like the other person. So I mean, I might have known what speech he worked on, just because I was there and I knew that it was given to Harlow, but if it was a good speech it didn't have the ring of a particular person on it.

Eisenhower was a tough guy to write for because he didn't have a very distinctive style. Also, he had been a speechwriter himself for Douglas MacArthur. So was not an easy person to write for in that way. Nixon, on the other hand, was an easy person to write for. He had a distinct style, just as Jack Kennedy had a distinct style. I never worked with Bryce on speeches so I really don't know what his technique would have been. We were both speech writers but at different times and on different subjects. I can't remember a specific time where I actually worked with him on a speech.

Steve Silver: What do you think was his greatest asset? You mentioned a lot – let me phrase it in a different way. You mentioned a lot about his advice-giving to presidents and anybody he worked for. Did he see himself as serving the person or serving the office or serving the public?

Stephen Hess: I don't know how you could really – I mean, he was a man of integrity. If he took the oath of office he was true to his oath of office. But I think when he worked for the president of the United States that's who he was working for; that's who was in the boss's office. Everything else followed from that. Would he have resigned in protest if the president was doing something underhanded or anything like that? I don't know. He was around

Richard Nixon who turned out to do a lot of things underhanded. But I don't think he necessarily knew about it more than I know it since I was there too.

But I don't think that we can really separate that. He was a patriot, there's no question about that. And when a president asked him to do something, he did it. In other words, I don't feel that he was a person who really wanted to spend his life as a civil servant, as a government employee. He had tried to escape back to Oklahoma. At one point, he was called back, and so forth, he went in and out of government even when he was in Washington. I mean, some of that may have been financial. Obviously, when he worked at the Eisenhower administration he probably made \$21,000 a year. I think Sherman Adams, the chief of staff made \$22,500 or something like that.

Steve Silver: He was well paid.

Stephen Hess: He must have been well paid. I think the family had some money as well. But nevertheless, he was one of these people who if a president asked him to do something it would have been very hard for him to say, "I'm sorry, Mr. President, but I just got too big a job for Procter & Gamble to take time off." People do that. .

Steve Silver: He had a sense of duty, I guess.

Stephen Hess: Yes, he certainly did. So there's no question in my mind about that. And, of course, remember he was also a military man. I think he was a reserve colonel or something like that. Maybe for all I know by the time he was retired he was a reserve general. But I mean, he had a rank. And I think that he was proud of that. So that was part of the sense of patriotism. And also it was that generation. It was the World War II generation that now we look back on as our finest generation.

Steve Silver: I was reading about a great story that you had told and I want to just get it very briefly on the record involving Bryce Harlow and the transition of President-elect Nixon at the Hotel Pierre.

Stephen Hess: Like I said I left it with you so it can appended to the record. It was just one of these funny situations where he was helping the president-elect at the Pierre and a call came in from Lyndon Johnson, who was of course the president at that time and while he was talking to Lyndon Johnson, the secretary interrupted him and said, "President Eisenhower is on the phone." And he said, "I'll

have to call him back later or put him on hold (because the idea of putting Dwight Eisenhower on hold is almost bizarre).”

But nevertheless they put him on hold and while he continues his conversation with the president, while the former president is on hold, Larry Higby, who was a personal aide to Richard Nixon, came in and said Nixon wanted to see him. So he had to hang up and there was a situation where within seconds the president, the former president, and the future president all wanted to talk to Bryce Harlow.

And when I wrote a column, a newspaper column – I had a self-syndicated column at one time and I wanted to write this column about him because I didn’t want it to be published after his death. I wanted him to see that we were appreciating him; I wrote this column. It started with this anecdote and then said, “Who was this Bryce Harlow and what made him the insider’s insider?”

Steve Silver:

Why do you think he is seen as having this invisible influence on history? In other words, we don’t – there are no laws named him as you mentioned; there are no buildings named after him.

Stephen Hess:

I think that was the nature of his career. I guess I would have to say that’s the way that he wanted it. I guess he could have gone back to Oklahoma and run for Congress or whatever suited his personal needs. But he was really a very unassuming person, nobody is an invisible man. But in a funny way he was a very little guy, he was very short. He told stories about it. As I said, he spoke very quietly. And that seemed to suit his lifestyle and the way he wanted to make his mark. And I guess all one can say is he was a person of such talent that he could have done it otherwise.

It’s not as if he was an invisible man because that’s the best he could do. Clearly he was exceptionally talented and he might have chosen some other way. By the way, he was even a first rate athlete. He had been a tennis player. I think that he had been the captain of the University of Oklahoma team or something like that. So he was just a talented human being.

Steve Silver:

Of course it’s always difficult to take somebody like Harlow and try to put him into a modern context, but can you think of any people today that do what Harlow did – serve in the White House, serve in business-government relations that – can you think of any modern day Bryce Harlows?

Stephen Hess:

There are people like Ken Duberstein, who was in a sense another protégé of Harlow's, if I'm not mistaken; who did Congressional relations, did it in the White House, did it of course on the Hill, and then became chief of staff for a president; now has a law firm and pops on to boards and that sort of thing. And there are others like that. Duberstein and I don't know – lawyers like Boynton Gray and so forth.

So I think that we're wrong to think of him as being unique; he's part of a group or a class of people. It's a fairly small group. I know the ones who are on the Republican side. I'm sure there are comparable ones on the Democratic side. Of a certain period, and that period would have been 1950 to '70, he was a class act. He was the one who best personified the sort of quiet hand that importantly, I think, keeps government running, keeps the wheels greased, keeps people talking to each other, keeps information flowing.

And I think that's probably harder and harder to find over time because more and more of this is fought out in the press. I think that you'd have a hard time finding his name if you did a Nexu-Lexus check on him. Given how important he was I think the number of citations, quotes from him particularly, would be very, very modest. And so I think things have changed in this city. And certainly one thing that he excelled at was the relationship and the connection between the parties.

Although he was a Republican – although originally he had been a Democrat when he got here – he was very close to the Democratic leadership in Congress; that is Lyndon Johnson, Sam Rayburn and so forth. Of course one had to be; it was an era in which it was perpetual Democratic leadership with the exception of the first two years of the Eisenhower administration and then, I think, two years later under Nixon. But I mean he had the ability to talk across party lines, across the aisle. And I think that is less and less the case now.

It's more likely they shout across party lines, across the aisle. So that was different. And then, of course, maybe we'll come back to that. We're at a particularly chaotic moment in terms of Washington and politics. It may return to a more quiet time. Although there are too many forces working against it now, mainly forces that have to do with media and technology that's produced faster and faster information sharing or information disseminating.

Steve Silver: Again it's always difficult to say how somebody would react in the future, but if Harlow were around today do you think he would have adapted himself to that or would he try?

Stephen Hess: Well, not necessarily if he was 70 years old. If he wanted this role and he was 40 years old he would either have to find a way of adapting or go into another business. Although I may be unfair; maybe there are Harlows around today. But I think I know this city well enough to think that there is not anybody quite like Harlow today.

Steve Silver: As sort of a final thought what do you think is his biggest legacy? What should students of today that want to do what he did pay most attention to?

Stephen Hess: Certainly the collection of traits that Harlow had that he was willing to apply to public service. Many of them come out of your genes and chromosomes and you're who your parents and your grandparents were. And I think in a sense that's really Bryce Harlow. We can talk about all of these things, but he was a person who was created out of a stock and with an ethical sense, a moral sense. I don't want to make him into some sort of living idol or something like that.

He was a great facilitator. He really helped to make government work while he was around, and that is so important. And people like that are the unsung heroes, because it's hard to carefully describe what they're doing unless you're writing a case study for the School of Government at Harvard or something like that on how legislation gets passed or legislation doesn't get passed or so forth. But that's what he did. He did it exceedingly well. And just a tremendous credit to any individual that he could have been in the midst of so much of American life, public policy and so forth, and really had no enemies that I know of.

I mean, I think that's a wonderful personal thing because he didn't impugn people's motives, he didn't tell gossip, he didn't ... he was not a mean man. And I think that people appreciated that, respected that. And that of course contributed to his ability to move in and out of power situations in Washington. It should be a lesson to young people in that regard. So without making him into a super hero he had an extremely valuable life for his country.

Steve Silver: I'll leave it there. Thank you so for talking to us.

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Stephen Hess: One final thing. I'd like to add that the first edition of my book, Organizing the Presidency (Brookings, 1976) is dedicated to Bryce Harlow.