

Steve Silver: This is an interview with Peggy Harlow Knight. Thank you for helping us out on the Bryce Harlow Oral History Project.

Peggy Knight: You're welcome.

Steve Silver: Let's start by having you tell us a little bit about your professional career and background and then we'll get into the stuff with your father.

Peggy Knight: Well, I started off a professional career, if you will, right out of high school working for the Republican National Committee's research division, thanks to my father, obviously. And moved from there to working on Capitol Hill, and then the presidential Campaigns of 1964, 1968, and 1972.

Steve Silver: And you are the oldest of the Harlow children?

Peggy Knight: Yes.

Steve Silver: And you worked for your father in the White House for a short time, correct?

Peggy Knight: Yes. I worked, actually, not in the White House. I worked for him in the transition government in the Hotel Pierre after Nixon was elected in 1968, and moved down, briefly, to the New Executive Office building where the transition government was located. I was only there a short time before I ending up working for the famous Spiro T. Agnew on Capital Hill.

Steve Silver: What was the best part of working in that job?

Peggy Knight: The best part was that tiny weenie little room in the Hotel Pierre where we were sitting jowl to jowl, cheek to cheek, with my father's desk against one wall, mine against another, and then a big, overstuffed chair where my father interviewed people constantly. Everything else was covered with paper; everything was just incredibly busy and right down the hall we had all of the high-falutin members of the administration, including the president-elect himself. So you had people wandering in and out all the time, the Henry Kissengers of the world, the Bob Haldemans, and the president himself, or the president-elect himself. It was quite a heady time – the conversations that went on over the telephone, and the various kinds of correspondence, and the various kinds of decisions and policy determinations, and interviews of potential department heads, all that kind of thing – were quite heady for someone of my age.

Steve Silver: What was it like to grow up with your father doing what he did, and the people that he worked for? Did you feel like you had a unique vantage point of history, perhaps?

Peggy Knight: I felt privileged. For example, we got to watch 4th of July fireworks on the White House lawn. Now, you know, that was kind of fun. And we got to run around the White House a bit before the era of lock down, if you will, where all the quarters were blocked by a Marine or Secret Service guy, there was a lot more flow in the White House from the West Wing to the East Wing, and all that kind of thing. And so it was a lot more informal back in the 50's when Dad started at the White House. And we took that for granted. We didn't know that it was not something open to everyone in the whole world; that only became apparent later. And it was quite fun, and we got to, used to the idea of access at the White House.

Steve Silver: Which is not how it is now.

Peggy Knight: No, no, no. I don't think that staff family has that kind of access anymore and hasn't for decades. I think all of that changed significantly even before Dad left the White House, actually. I think the 50's was the last time that it was that informal when we could toodle down the hall to Sherm Adams' office.

Steve Silver: Not anymore.

Peggy Knight: No, you don't do that anymore, no.

Steve Silver: Why?

Peggy Knight: You didn't do that the last time Dad was there. You didn't go from Dad's office to Henry Kissinger's office.

Steve Silver: Did you notice a change even from the first time he was in the White House to the second time? Was it already changing by then?

Peggy Knight: Yes. Yes, it was, very much so.

Steve Silver: You were born in Washington, correct?

Peggy Knight: Right.

Steve Silver: And then you--

- Peggy Knight:* Columbia Hospital for Women; so was Trudy and so was Larry. Oh, actually Larry was born in Oklahoma.
- Steve Silver:* And you moved back to Oklahoma for a short time, correct?
- Peggy Knight:* We moved back to Oklahoma before Dad was in the White House the first time. We were there two years. Dad went back, you know. We rented; Dad and Mother rented here when he first came up here, saying they would never stay here permanently. They'd go back to Oklahoma. Dad went back to Oklahoma when I was in about 3rd, maybe 2nd; I can't remember the precise timing – 2nd grade maybe, to become vice president of Harlow Publishing Company, which is his father's business. So they bought a house and we lived in Oklahoma City a couple of years, at which time Dad was asked to come back to Washington, so we came back and rented for another ten years or whatever it was. So yes, we moved back to Oklahoma.
- Now, when my mother was pregnant with Larry, she was RH negative and he was RH positive and one of the premiere OBGYN places in the country was in Oklahoma City. We went – the kids, Trudy and I and mother – we were in Oklahoma City for the greater part of mother's pregnancy, and for Larry's birth because of that.
- Steve Silver:* Do you think that your father would have preferred to raise his family back in Oklahoma--
- Peggy Knight:* Yes--
- Steve Silver:* Or in Washington?
- Peggy Knight:* No, he would have preferred, he had extraordinary ties to Oklahoma, to the feel of Oklahoma, to the being in Oklahoma. We went back every summer for a month or more until I was maybe 15, 16. I started working in the summer and the trips – the annual trips, and going back to stay for a really long time – fell apart. So the ties were very deep, and he always thought, I think, he'd go back there.
- Steve Silver:* So he was convinced to stay in Washington--
- Peggy Knight:* Yes--
- Steve Silver:* Because of the jobs he was offered?

- Peggy Knight:* Yes. He said a number of times, “When you're asked to serve the president, you respond.”
- Steve Silver:* Even if it--
- Peggy Knight:* Even if it doesn't match your own personal goals, you respond. He was quite duty-minded that way, and he was, of course, in the Army during World War II. I just think his exposure to these leaders, and his intimate connection with them, led him to believe that he was very much needed here, and they, of course, indicated that to him and so he responded.
- Steve Silver:* Did your father talk much to you guys growing up about the virtue of government service?
- Peggy Knight:* Yes. But he didn't preach about that so much as he just lived it. We didn't see a whole lot of him growing up but he set aside Sundays as family day, which were – and I'm sure Larry and Trudy will tell you this as well – those were the days we would all have to pile in the car, the three of us who, of course, couldn't stand that close – boy those were experiences – and we would drive into what was then the wilds of Seven Corners; the wilds of Bailey's Crossroads, the wilds of, actually we would go up much farther, but dad never would ask directions. We would get lost and we would wander around country roads all over the place. I can tell you that, as an adult, the first time I drove out toward West Virginia passing Hilltop, I recognized the old gray stone house that sits almost on top of the road, from those interminable Sunday drives. So, yes, but those were the times we chased history. We chased culture, different culture outside the, of course there was no beltway then, but outside the metro area.
- Steve Silver:* That's the beltway now.
- Peggy Knight:* Yeah. So he felt that he wanted to instill a good sense of history and connect with a good sense of history.
- Yes, well, he was very tight with Larry on the Civil War stuff. They really go into that. But we had already, as kids from the youngest time, been touring all over the place, whether it's in downtown D.C. to all of the monuments, and the Capitol, all over the Capitol, and the museums, and all that, to covering the D.C. area, all over, Baltimore included, and down to Fredericksburg. So, yes, ours was a house focused on history and government.

- Steve Silver:* Do you think that that's uncommon these days?
- Peggy Knight:* Oh definitely.
- Steve Silver:* For people who work in government especially?
- Peggy Knight:* Definitely. It's a totally different feel. I don't think folks study history the way they used to 20, 30, 40 years ago. It's not that, when I was in school for example, we never got past the second World War, no matter whether it was college or anything else, you just get hung up on some of these old controversies that took up time in the class, and took up time in the reading, and therefore you didn't get up to the modern time. But these days, I don't think kids, beginning at the earliest age, are taught the history that we were taught as children. And I think there's a great deal of ignorance about U.S. history itself. It's interesting because, in my family's home, we had books – all of the books were dealing with history, classical writers – and so what we read, and what Dad read to us often was history and classical writers. So we had, we were really steeped, and I don't think there's a lot of that these days. I think they read Barney instead of reading Kipling. I think it's sad because we're doomed to repeat it if we don't know it.
- Steve Silver:* Do you think that's partly what made your dad unique in terms of a being a public servant – that sense of history?
- Peggy Knight:* I think that's part of it.
- Steve Silver:* Yeah.
- Peggy Knight:* That's part of it; also the integrity, the determination not to compromise his principles.
- Steve Silver::* It's funny you mentioned integrity. I wanted to ask you, certainly the book that was written, *Mr. Integrity*, and he's known as Mr. Integrity, but I wanted to ask, why do you think he is known as Mr. Integrity? Where did that come from?
- Peggy Knight:* His willingness to say what he believed in spite of the fact it would work negatively against him. He did that at home and he did that throughout all of his career. There were times, for example, that he told me about later (of course I was too young to know), where he simply refused to continue working on a certain position if the requirements that he had been given weren't changed; that he would simply not do what he had been asked to do because he thought it was dishonest, or immoral, or unethical, or whatever it

might be. And he always said to me, as I was growing up and looking for jobs, and doing that kind of thing – never to put myself in a situation where I had to compromise my principles out of economic need. He thought that was an extremely important factor to take into account as I planned. He himself was trained as a secretary; I don't know whether you know that.

Steve Silver: No.

Peggy Knight: Yes. He did that because, if all else failed, he could go take dictation.

Steve Silver: His shorthand is well known

Peggy Knight: Yes, he said he wanted all of us to do that. Well, of course, we were in a transitional – as children – we were in a transitional period, for a woman, being able to take dictation was definitely not something you wanted to add to your resume. It works against you, or worked against us, and so he didn't move that far along to think that; he saw it as a backstop. He saw it as the ultimate. You can always go out and make a buck, so you don't have to compromise your principles. And he did that at home too, you know. He would say when we would have conflict among the siblings; he would say you never, ever attack your brother or your sister. You never, ever say negative things about your family. Even if he thought it was true, you don't say it. You never attack within the family. So, I mean, these are things that I grew up with, and as the oldest, I got a lot of those lessons, you know, heavily handed.

Steve Silver: It's interesting because, working in politics – especially a life in politics the way your dad did – you think it would be a very adversarial.

Peggy Knight: Especially the folks he started off with, the Shorts of the world, yes.

Steve Silver: So it's interesting that you say that.

Peggy Knight: Yes. But he got that from his father, my grandfather, who was the epitome, really, of, what is the word I want? Well, there's integrity and "upstandingness." There's a word I'm looking for that I can't find. You don't get to be my age and remember all the words you want.

Steve Silver: You don't get to be my age and remember all the words you want either.

Peggy Knight: What is it? Anyway, my grandfather was revered in Oklahoma City and in Oklahoma. So, for the same reasons Dad has been highly regarded, so he came from a strong line of folks.

Steve Silver: Did you know your grandfather very well?

Peggy Knight: Very well; very well.

Steve Silver: Can you talk about that?

Peggy Knight: I lived with him for almost a year when mother was in Oklahoma, being pregnant with Larry. I started school with them, with my grandmother and grandfather Harlow. And my grandmother Harlow taught me to play the piano, and my grandfather read to me every afternoon and every evening. I'd sit in his lap in his big, overstuffed chair, and my grandfather was a very heavy, big-boned man. I thought he was huge. I think, looking at pictures, probably he wasn't as huge as I thought. He was probably no huger than my father, but he seemed huge to me, and a deep philosopher, and deeply religious man. So he taught me to play chess. He taught me to play canasta. The man was wonderful to me. And in his last days, his last weeks and months, I spent a great deal of time with him. He had bone cancer, and he couldn't move around much, so we would take these very halting, very slow walks, and talk about life and about death, and about religion, and it was wonderful. And it was the middle 50's when he died, so I don't know, I guess I was just in high school, maybe. He gave me a dollar once and said, keep this to remind you that you can always go back to your first dollar and start again.

Steve Silver: Do you still have it?

Peggy Knight: No. What happened was, I kept it with me all the time, and had inadvertently left it in something that got washed in the washing machine. I was devastated. But in any event, yes, I was very close to him.

Steve Silver: Did your grandfather lay out a path for your father?

Peggy Knight: Oh no, I don't think so. Back then, when my father was a kid, schooling was different. You could go as fast as you wanted no matter your age. You mastered subjects, you passed exams, you did things. So my father was one of those child prodigies who was

in college at the ungodly age, probably, of 14. I can't remember the exact age, but very early in his life.

And at that same age he was working at the new airport – this new industry – learning all about airplanes, as a mechanic. So, no, there was no career path for him laid out at the outset. However, my grandmother Harlow was the German nanny type. Every child learned to read in her family by the time that child was two. She had, in her nursery, posted a blackboard. She was a teacher. She posted a blackboard and there was a letter with a little picture, so you would have “A for apple” – even a 12-month-old would learn “A for apple.” I mean, she was really quite something. And that was why I learned to read by the age of two. Also it was because of my father's experience – because he's the one who worked with me.

Steve Silver: So what do you think attracted him to a life in government service?

Peggy Knight: I don't think he ever thought of having a life in government service. It just was one of those accidents of history. I believe he wanted to be the head of Harlow Publishing Company and he trained himself to be a thoughtful American citizen, perhaps a leader of public opinion in Oklahoma. I don't think he foresaw, or planned to be in Washington D.C. all those years. And I don't think – I mean, he trained himself, obviously, pretty well, but he never finished law school. He just found that what he was doing was more important than finishing law school. So I don't think he planned any of that.

Steve Silver: Out of all of the positions that he held in Washington – working in the White House, working for Procter & Gamble – did you ever get a sense of what he liked the most?

Peggy Knight: No, I don't think that was part of the equation – “liking.” I think it was doing it well. If it's worth doing, it's worth doing well, like it or not. I don't think there was a question of liking it. I don't think that was a judgment that he passed on any of the stuff he did.

Steve Silver: What do you think made your dad such a unique figure in Washington, especially with regard to people in his position today?

Peggy Knight: Well he was memorably short, for one thing.

Steve Silver: I know lots about that.

Peggy Knight: Memorably bald.

Memorably funny - his sense of humor - because he poked fun at himself, and he could poke fun at circumstances, but he didn't poke fun at other people. And his sense of humor was just fabulous so no matter what was happening, no matter how dire, no matter how sad, there was always a pixie in him that he could pull on to ease situations. People remember that, I think, much more than the folks who get serious and down in the mouth. I think there's that, plus he was quite young when all of this started in his life. So here was this young, really short, this dwarf, running around Washington, speaking with some authority, and being involved in some of the headiest concerns facing the country at the time, not wanting any credit, not asking for any recognition. I think all of those things set him apart.

Steve Silver: When he was working and he came home, maybe on your Sunday drives would be a good example, did he talk much about the events that he was involved in shaping?

Peggy Knight: No, although he didn't talk about the events as if he were shaping them. We talked, and I don't want to imply that he wasn't there at dinner time, but he was there at dinner time a lot of times during the week, and we had a memorable family dinners because he was not only asking us for what we thought about current events or historical concerns, but he was a grammarian. Therefore, if we used a word, we darn well better pronounce it right, and use it correctly, or we were sent from the table to use the dictionary and look it up. And, oh, it was really quite interesting. I mean the word harass, for example, I will never forget. I'm trying to remember "forte -- F-O-R-T-E," which is of course mispronounced by lots of folks except it's not accepted; point is it wasn't then. Boy, I can remember getting just nailed on those things at the dinner table. So we would talk about current events, we would have arguments, but he would never let them get out of hand because of his sense of humor. Now, my mother didn't participate much in that.

Steve Silver: Really?

Peggy Knight: No. Just the kids.

Steve Silver: Did he ever try to steer any of you guys – you, Trudy, Larry – in any professional direction?

Peggy Knight: Nope.

Steve Silver: Follow his footsteps?

- Peggy Knight:* Nope.
- Steve Silver:* Not at all?
- Peggy Knight:* No. I don't think he thought we necessarily would. And he was concerned, in fact, for the security, the lifetime economic security of doing that given the changing circumstances facing government employees and political figures. He was very concerned, especially in his last days, at the kind of economic situation he might have left his family. He had nothing to pass on to us, he felt. He wanted to have a business to pass on to us, he wanted to have an estate of some sort, and he felt very badly that he did not have that because he felt things were in such turmoil facing politicians and facing career civil servants.
- Steve Silver:* Was he conscious of the reputation he had, especially towards the later parts of his career?
- Peggy Knight:* Yes, to a certain extent, I think so. He was quite realistic and honest about things like that, and he, in fact, participated in setting up the foundation.
- Steve Silver:* Right.
- Peggy Knight:* So, yes, he was aware of those things. He took it all with a grain of salt and I think he felt the recognition could easily have been applied to others as well as himself. That it was a shared recognition.
- Steve Silver:* It's funny you said that, because I wanted to ask you about how so much is attributed to him in terms of having an invisible hand in history – working for people – could you talk maybe a little bit about this? Why do you think it's thought that he has this invisible hand in history; that he didn't take credit for a lot of things?
- Peggy Knight:* Well, I think Karl Rove took some lessons. I mean, I think that if you don't want – if you don't ask for credit and recognition, people ascribe more to you than necessarily you have actually done, and if you're not out there for the recognition, you're not disabusing anyone of anything, or claiming anything for yourself. So, not to say that my father got myths and legends swirling around him but, in point of fact, he was incredibly closed-mouthed about what he did for people who wanted to have him maintain confidences; he didn't break them. So, whether he had a role or not, people

thought he did. And he went to his death not giving up those confidences.

He never wrote a book, even though people just pounded on him to do so. He never released memoirs of any sort. So, you know, when you don't talk, it seems you know more than you do. I'm not going to say whether I know that he was instrumental in one thing or another based on faulty memory at this point. He was probably involved in a lot of very important decisions for this country, he probably influenced a great many thinkers, and a great many doers, we'll never know.

Steve Silver: I guess we won't ever know.

Peggy Knight: Right.

Steve Silver: If he were here today and saw the state of politics in Washington, what would he think? Would he think things are in pretty good hands, or are there some things that could maybe be improved?

Peggy Knight: He didn't do comparisons against previous eras, for example. Historically, he was constantly reminding us of the pamphleteers of the beginning of the country, so we, because of course, Barry Goldwater's a big deal for me. And the nastiness of that campaign and the politics then – I was just heart-stricken about, oh well, that was very little compared to what happened to George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and the others. So, after I got some perspective from my father, pretty hard learned, again at the dinner table, I realized, and I think he continued to let us know that he felt that this country, with all of these ups and downs, and political hard times, seemingly polarized situations, were because of the vitality of democracy; and that, when people aren't engaged, then things calm down. So it's very good when people are engaged.

And I don't think he would sit and say, I wish it were different now, or that someone else was doing this differently somehow, or that the Republicans and Democrats in the Senate would get along better, or whatever. I think he would simply take it as it is and say, "Here's what we want to accomplish; here's how we can accomplish it, so let's move forward without rendering judgment on things we don't like." That was his approach. He didn't make those value judgments and so on the basis of current current events, he was very much like Karl Rove, never talking in public to speak of, and when he did talk, would lay out philosophy, he would speak on behalf of the person he worked for, whomever that might be – Democrat or Republican – and not get into name calling

or insinuations. Always speak from the heart. And that's what he did, and his speeches reflect that. So, I think that's what he would do now. I don't think he would say someone else should be doing something differently or that we should be more involved internationally, or less involved internationally, or less warlike, or more warlike, or whatever all of these various value judgments are. I think he would say we need to just keep the course.

Steve Silver: Did he ever take things very personally?

Peggy Knight: No. Well, that's not true. In his earlier, younger days he did. He told me stories about taking things personally when he was working for the House Committee on Armed Services. But that was a very short period of time in his life, and he got past those personal feelings and, you know, most of it was political. And he was very good friends with people who criticized him or his bosses. He was still very good friends with them. That was a different era, where you had professional statesman, really—people who became politicians early in life and died politicians in the same jobs.

So when you have a Dick Russell, or a Bob Kerr, or Sam Rayburn, people like that, then you become oil skinned, everything washes off of you because that's the life you chose at the very beginning and you've learned to live that life. And those are the kinds of folks Dad was exposed to very early on in politics as opposed to now where you have short, relatively short, political life spans in this country, and no one gets past the point of having to be elected to become a statesman. Few, very few people get past the point of having to achieve something else and, therefore, they have to be out there negatively and positively campaigning for something.

Steve Silver: One last question. What do you think is the biggest legacy or contribution that students of government, and politics, and corporate representation should know from studying your father?

Peggy Knight: That if your goals are honest, and that you support the American experiment economically and politically, that you can achieve those goals by acting honestly. It doesn't take schemes, conspiracies, and other nefarious means. It might take longer to do it honestly but you'll be proud of the result.

Steve Silver: Peggy, thanks so much for talking to us.

Peggy Knight: You're welcome. *[End of Audio]*