

INTERVIEW WITH  
Robert E. Clark

by

Dr. Thomas Soapes  
Oral Historian

on

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for

Dwight D. Eisenhower Library



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Robert L. Clark

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This interview is being conducted with Robert E. "Bob" Clark in his office in Washington, D.C. on August 17, 1978. The interviewer is Dr. Thomas Soapes. Present for the interview are Mr. Clark and Dr. Soapes.

DR. SOAPES: You were on the campaign train in '52. Was that your first contact with [President Dwight D.] Eisenhower as a reporter?



MR. CLARK: Actually, I was assigned to cover Eisenhower from the time he came back from Europe (from SHAPE headquarters) to seek the nomination. I was assigned to him at that time. I picked him up in the East flew out to Denver and covered him throughout the 1952 campaign, which included a period of two or three weeks when he was on a campaign train.

DR. SOAPES: And this was for INS [International News Service]?

MR. CLARK: Right.

DR. SOAPES: You mentioned you wanted to tell the story about when [Richard M.] Nixon Fund episode came up.

MR. CLARK: Yes, and it is hard to believe today, thinking back, how big a story that was. Of course, it boiled up very quickly. One newspaper had first broken the story. Nixon had had this, what by today's standards was a rather small expense fund. I think it was seventeen thousand dollars. But, he was the vice-presidential candidate on the Eisenhower ticket which was running on a promise to clean up things in Washington and to do an end with the sort of scandals that had plagued the Truman administration.

So, this story developed very quickly aboard the Eisenhower campaign train. Eisenhower was under heavy pressure. We all learned within twenty-four hours or so that there were Republicans such as Tom [Thomas E.] Dewey who felt that Nixon should be dropped from the ticket. We had two sessions with Eisenhower during that critical period aboard the campaign train. Both times the reporters covering him were summoned back to the press car on the campaign train. On one occasion it was scheduled; the other one we just suddenly got the word. Eisenhower just walked into the press car. The ground rules in each case were "background." We could not attribute what was said to Eisenhower. We could attribute it to an official in the Eisenhower campaign. The most celebrated comment that came out of those sessions was when Eisenhower said that in order to stay on the ticket Nixon would have to come "clean as a hounds tooth." At the time that remark was just attributed to a high official aboard the Eisenhower campaign train. It was President Eisenhower himself. You can get some argument as to whether he actually held to that. This story continued dramatically over a period of several days, and the climax came of course with the Checkers Speech. That night we were all with Eisenhower in Cleveland; and he held up addressing a big Eisenhower rally in Cleveland while he watched, backstage, Nixon's performance on television. Then he came out, and I forget the exact comment as he opened his speech, but the essence of it was that I have just seen one of the most courageous displays I have ever observed in politics--that was the sense of it. It was very clear at that moment that Eisenhower had made his decision that Nixon would be kept on the ticket. But, then we



went through another twenty-four hours of waiting for the formal reconciliation, and that happened in Wheeling, Virginia the next night where Nixon was summoned to meet with Eisenhower. Nixon arrived first. When Eisenhower got there he went aboard the plane and said, "Dick, you're my boy," as I recall.



SOAPES: That "clean as a hounds tooth" phrase was not defined further?

CLARK: No, that was the full phrase as I recall, and we had to make our own interpretation of that.

SOAPES: Were there other episodes aboard the campaign train where you got a chance to talk with Eisenhower in an off-the-record--.

CLARK: No, there really were not. There were just those two that I recall. The reason being, presidential campaigns, while they have grown much bigger since, they were large enough in those days, whether you had a group of fifty or whatever reporters and photographers along, that they did not lend themselves to intimate chats with the President.

There was one session the first time Eisenhower fell afoul of the press; and it was before the nominating convention. He was talked into it by the press secretary who preceded Jim [James C.] Hagerty, the press secretary who served Eisenhower up to the nominating convention in 1952. He had talked him into

meeting with a small group of reporters mainly from papers who were supporting Eisenhower, and that produced a good story. This was a candidate giving a shared exclusive to a half a dozen reporters. It infuriated the rest of the press corps, and I think Eisenhower felt burned badly on that. From that time on he was very careful not to give out exclusives to single or exclusive groups of reporters.



SOAPES: Was there a change in the quality of press relations, then, when Jim Hagerty took over?

CLARK: A total change. I don't want to malign the other fellow whom I knew very well, but there was a great difference from the time Jim Hagerty moved in. He had total access to Eisenhower. Hagerty was a crack old pro who was given to Eisenhower by Tom Dewey. He had been Dewey's press secretary, and it was known by the pros in the Republican Party that Eisenhower had press problems. The word got to Dewey; and Dewey just made a gift of Jim Hagerty, who is still ranked by old timers at the White House--. I think if you took a tally today you would find that most White House reporters who have covered the White House over a number of years would rate Jim Hagerty as the best press secretary there's ever been at the White House.

SOAPES: Let's pursue that point a bit. What was it about Jim Hagerty that gave him such a high ranking?

CLARK: Well to begin with, it was something he insisted on when he first met Eisenhower; and that was total and intimate access to the President at any time--or to the candidate Eisenhower originally. Now that is critical with any press secretary. He can't keep stalling the press while it becomes known that he's unable to get through to talk with the President. So Hagerty had almost an open door policy with Eisenhower. He could get in very quickly to see him at any minute and get an answer to a question he did not understand. Otherwise, Hagerty had been a former political reporter, a respected working reporter himself. He simply understood reporters problems. He had the best empathy with reporters of any press secretary I've ever known. He went out of the way to protect them in all sorts of little ways. To be sure, if there was a lid on at the White House, that lid would never be broken without Hagerty protecting the regulars in the wire services and those who covered the--.

SOAPES: The lid, for the record, is--.

CLARK: Lid means there's not going to be any news, but lids have to be broken occasionally if suddenly there's some big foreign policy development and the President has to speak out immediately. If the lid had to be broken, Hagerty would just go into a crash program, Hagerty and his staff, to get all the regulars there before the announcement was put out.





SOAPES: Did Hagerty frequently have to go back and check for an answer to a question, or was he intimately enough involved in the administration to know the answer?

CLARK: Well I would say this was the third facet of the Hagerty strategy as press secretary. He was the best secretary I have ever known in saying "No Comment," and he could say it in a way that implied he understood the problem thoroughly but just couldn't say anymore about it. He would cut off reporters. You did not have any of these long haggling sessions that you have today at the White House that have become sort of a disgrace to the White House Press Corps and occasionally to the White House staff also. Hagerty just handled reporters much better. He would cut them off. Hagerty was not a policy maker. The definition of Jim Hagerty as a policy maker has always been exaggerated. It stemmed a good deal from the fact that he often sounded as if he knew more than he did. But, he could sit in any cabinet meeting he wanted to. Hagerty just really did not have the intellectual drive to involve himself in social programs or foreign policy or whatever. He would be there as a reporter who could come back and report accurately to the White House press what had happened, and he would not get over his head. If the reporters were trying to tug him into an area where he didn't know the answers, he always had the opportunity to go back and get the answers from Eisenhower if he wanted to; but more often he'd simply say, "I can't say anymore on that."



SOAPES: I was going to raise that issue because I remember the press frequently spoke of Hagerty as one of the more powerful figures in the administration, or more influential ones. Then it's your observation that he really did not have--.



CLARK: No, and something else that added greatly to that myth. If you'll recall, after Eisenhower's heart attack in Denver, Hagerty was not there at the time. When he arrived on the scene the next day, as I recall, Dr. [Howard] Snyder, the President's personal physician, had called Hagerty aside and said, "the President has told me to tell you, 'Jim, take over and make the decisions,'" I think was the phrase. When that became known to the press why there were all sorts of wild stories written about how Jim Hagerty had been acting President of the United States. I don't know that we know to this day precisely what Eisenhower meant when he said that, but at least it added to the myth that Hagerty was a major policy maker within the White House and the Eisenhower administration, and he never had been.

SOAPES: So there were no problems from the press' point of view with Jim Hagerty in terms of credibility or his cooperation with the working press.

CLARK: Certainly, minimal problems. Nothing compared to the problems that the White House press has had with press secretaries or vice versa since.

SOAPES: Did he develop a personal comradery with the press or did he maintain a distance?

CLARK: Eisenhower or Hagerty?

SOAPES: Hagerty.

CLARK: Hagerty, a personal comradery; and it was deep in his whole method of operation. I was fortunate in those years. The wire services, they were the big wheels at the White House; and I happily worked for a wire service. Today it is the networks that are more likely to be coddled and fed and to socialize with the press secretary. Hagerty is an old pro. He understood in those days, he knew, that the wires could get a story out to the country or to the world almost instantly; and he worked very closely with the three wires. There was Merriman Smith of what was then UP [United Press] and Marv [Marvin L.] Arrowsmith of AP [Associated Press] and I was there for INS. He worked extremely close with us, and we were all buddies of his. That does not mean that we cozied up to him. We all retained our objectivity as wire service reporters, but we all did a lot of dining and drinking with Hagerty too.

SOAPES: Now I assume from your response to my question that Eisenhower's relationship was considerably more distant.

CLARK: Yes, totally different than the relationship with Hagerty; but yet I have felt, looking back on the last half dozen or so



Presidents, that it came closest to what I would regard as the proper relationship between a President and the press. There were very rarely any really needling, nasty questions put to Eisenhower at press conferences. The mood was much different than it is today. There was an atmosphere of mutual respect. I have said from time to time over the years, as we talked about how Eisenhower looked at reporters, he really regarded us as second lieutenants. Eisenhower was a five star general and retained a good deal of that five star air in the White House. He looked on the press corp as though we were officers, junior officers, fellows to be dealt with with some respect and with the assumption that there was credibility on both sides of the relationship; but it was never an intimate relationship. It was a rare thing, and it would be a deliberate thing on Eisenhower. There were times where we would have social sessions with him, where there would be very friendly social chit chat; but still it was almost like the general on Christmas Eve walking into the junior officers mess or something of that sort.

SOAPES: You told me you had a story about his temper.

CLARK: Eisenhower had a temper which the press really rarely saw. People like Hagerty and some of the White House insiders would see it occasionally. The instance that sticks in my mind most-- I did not see the explosion of temper, but this is a story that Hagerty told us off the record a couple of months after it happened.



When Eisenhower first went into the White House he made a decision to join the National Presbyterian Church. The pastor was the Reverend [(Dr.)] Edward L.R. Elson, who much later became chaplain of the Senate. Elson was very proud of the fact that the Eisenhowers had chosen his church. They went for two or three Sundays, and then there was a Sunday when they were taken into membership. Elson was prepared with a press release which Eisenhower was unaware of. After the service Elson had told us if we'd come back to his study he would have a little release to explain what had happened. That release, as I recall the words, said something like, "President Eisenhower throughout his military career was bouncing around from military post to another and never before had the chance to stake down his faith. Today he has been taken into membership at the National Presbyterian Church." It went on in a rather self laudatory way to say what a fine thing this was for the church and for Eisenhower. Well, Hagerty told us that that story appeared; it was widely played in the press the next day; and Hagerty was summoned into Eisenhower's office. He said he was just livid, that he did not want any publicity about his religion. He told Hagerty to tell Elson--you should get the original version from Hagerty but it was, "You tell that blankety-blank Elson if he ever again puts out a press release or does anything to inspire publicity about my going to church I will never go back to his blankety-blank church again!"


[Laughter]



SOAPES: We were talking a couple of weeks ago that you were up at Newport [Rhode Island] at the time of the Little Rock episode and had an off-the-record session with Eisenhower.

CLARK: Yes, and that was by far the most fascinating off-the-record session I ever had with him. Actually, there were three of us involved. There were three members of the White House Press Corp who had been at Newport. It was the day that the Eisenhower announced--it was a flash on the INS wire and a tremendously big story at the time--that he was sending federal troops into Little Rock to assure security at Central High School. That night, as you may recall, he returned to Washington to address the American people and tell them just why he had acted as he did. There was the problem that three of us, only three members of the press corp, had been told by their newspapers or organizations to come back to Washington and cover the speech. We had a problem of getting back to Newport the next day so Hagerty put us on the Columbine which was then Air Force One and told us that Eisenhower said, "I know this is an unusual opportunity but we really can't treat it that way." Hagerty added "Eisenhower will probably come back and talk with you or invite you to come and talk with him, but it'll have to be all off-the-record". That was agreed, that it would be an entirely off-the-record conversation. Well things went as Hagerty had thought they would. We'd been in the air for twenty minutes or so out of Washington, and Eisenhower called us back. He seemed to want to talk to us.





He discussed the events of the previous day with a remarkable candor that would have made banner headlines if we'd been able to tell the story and attribute it to the President. But discussing the Little Rock crisis and his order in sending in troops, he first spoke rather gloomily of the long range problem of changing the minds of Southerners about segregation. He said, and I made some notes at the time, "You know this really doesn't settle anything. This thing is going to go on and on in other places." Of course, he was very prescient in those comments. But, the most interesting thing is that throughout the conversation he did not show, indicate, any feeling or deep concern about the civil rights issue or about the problem of integrating Central High School in Little Rock or the school integration through the South. He emphasized very strongly, and several times, that his reason for calling in the Army was simply to end the obstruction of the orders of the Federal courts. The implication was that he was not involving himself in any way in the school integration controversy as such. He didn't show any anger, just determination to prevent any interference with Federal law. He disclosed to us that he had received what he described as an almost hysterical telegram from the mayor of Little Rock after the violence earlier in the week. But, he said that he had already signed the order to send in federal troops before receiving that wire. That was the essence of his comments about sending the troops into Little Rock. He then complained about being "nagged", and that was his word, during his stay in Newport. We weren't quite sure what he meant. But

of course, Orval Faubus had been up there to talk with him; and that had been a very big story, that it had interrupted Eisenhower's vacation. He said at one point, "They've been nagging me day and night. I've never been nagged as I have up here." He also made a critical comment about the communications set up, apparently meaning to criticize the fact that the White House and the communications experts there were unable to let him address the Nation directly from Newport. He had to fly back to Washington in order to do it.

SOAPES: Did he mention Faubus by name?



CLARK: I don't recall that he did. The session with Faubus had been a rather friendly one. It looked as if they had worked out an arrangement where the peace would be preserved and Eisenhower would not have to take any Federal action.

SOAPES: That's a very interesting side light on his priorities in that situation. Were there other big stories like the Little Rock situation, where you got some background information that you couldn't put out at the time?

CLARK: There was no similar situation. That was unique, Eisenhower talking off-the-record to reporters. It was a unique situation. This would be a different type of help from the White House, but another very dramatic one was when Eisenhower went to the summit conference in Geneva in 1955. That was the conference with [Nikita] Khrushchev and [Nikolai A.] Bulganin



which was an awfully big story at the time. I remember Eisenhower dropped the bombshell with his proposal for Open Skies inspection where the United States and the Soviets would each have the right to overfly the other country and take aerial photographs of any military base or anything they suspected to be a military base. That was an astonishing proposal for Eisenhower to make and was treated as such in the press. But to be sure that we understood that, that was a case of Jim Hagerty working very closely with the three wires. We were given that story before it was ever announced at a formal press conference. After Eisenhower had made the proposal at the summit meeting--why of course the press was not inside the meeting--Hagerty, as he came out, gathered the wires, the three wire services, quickly about him and said, "Fellows, jump into the car over there; I'll join you in a minute; I've got something I want to tell you." He gave us the essence of that Open Skies proposal as the car raced--it was a matter of three or four miles away as I recall to downtown Geneva--to the press headquarters. Hagerty was frantically briefing us along the way on the Open Skies proposal and what it all meant. It took quite a little briefing because it just came out of the blue. Nobody had anticipated anything of that sort; and there was a lot of, "What does he really mean, Jim? How could this possibly work? Would we really let Soviet planes overfly the United States?" and that sort of thing.

SOAPES: Yes. How did he answer that question?



CLARK: Well Hagerty was a good reporter. He knew exactly what Eisenhower meant by it and the emphasis was that he means exactly what he says. This is just as he spelled it out at the summit meeting.

SOAPES: If the Russians accepted, we'll--



CLARK: I don't know what we would have done if the Russians had accepted it. [Laughter] The right wing of the Republican Party might have been in an uproar the first time a Soviet plane flew over Des Moines or whatever.

SOAPES: You had a story about his fishing trip with Herbert Hoover.

CLARK: Yes. Hoover was eighty years old at that time, and Eisenhower had invited him to join him at his fishing camp on the western slope of the Rockies. This was out near Fraser, Colorado--the fishing camp owned by his old Denver friend Aksel Nielsen. There was a lovely setting and a good fishing spot because the state of Colorado would take very good care of the Presidential party and be sure that this lovely little mountain trout stream would be adequately stocked before the fishermen arrived. Just shortly before Hoover arrived there had been an incident where Eisenhower had been fishing at another spot, and some of the press thought they had kept a count that showed he had exceeded his limit. That got quite a play on the sports page at the time. But Hoover was quite upset. He felt the press was

hounding Eisenhower, and he gave us a little lecture. It was quite a scene with the eighty year old ex-president telling the White House Press Corps what the proper bounds for coverage of the President of the United States were. He told us, in effect, that we should leave the President alone when he goes fishing. He called the dwindling privacy of the Presidency one of the degenerations of recent years, and while he was doing this he was helping President Eisenhower broil sirloin steaks over the charcoal grill. He gave the impression, to me at least, that this subject of Presidential privacy was one that he and President Eisenhower had discussed at some length. There were about forty reporters and photographers standing around and Hoover told us--and these are some notes I made at the time too--that, "Thirty years ago we used to believe there were only two occasions when the American people have regarded the privacy of the President and that was prayer and fishing." Mr. Hoover went on, "I now detect we have lost the second part of that. The press no longer has any respect for the privacy of the President in his fishing." This was a stern lecture. This was not bantering by Mr. Hoover. He really felt that the White House press was intruding on President Eisenhower in an inexcusable way.

SOAPES: Your mentioning the fishing reminds me that there's quite a play on Eisenhower's recreation time, his golfing and that sort of thing. Did any members of the press feel that



that was overplayed?

CLARK: I felt it was overplayed. I think if you look at the history of Eisenhower's illnesses in the White House, as we look back over his eight years while he was in the White House, he had a serious heart attack; he had ileitis and an ileitis operation (a serious intestinal operation); and he had a mild stroke. Each of those conditions, undoubtedly I would say, I think most doctors would tell you, were conditions that can be aggravated by overwork and tension. It was Doc Snyder's prescription for the President to get as much exercise as possible--to get away from that from that burden of the Presidency and to get out on the golf course or to play bridge or to paint or to fish. Eisenhower liked to do all of these things. At first, and this is true with most Presidents, the press is fascinated by the President's hobbies when he first moves into the White House. Then after a couple months they start picking at him for being too avid a golfer or a fisherman or whatever. No question, Eisenhower spent a lot of time on the golf course--much less time fishing. That would be his organized annual vacation to Colorado or wherever. But I never resented any of this because I felt and felt growingly, as Eisenhower had these serious medical problems, that Doc Snyder was dead right. The most he could get away from burdens of the White House the more likely he was to survive eight years in



the White House.

SOAPES: You also had something on the work ethic?



CLARK: Yes. It's just something that sort of stuck with me because I heard Eisenhower mention it on a number of occasions. He liked to recall the story, when he would be talking about the country's problems, without relating it directly to unemployment problems or whatever, but problems that involved the work ethic. He liked to recall that as a boy--and this was during the period after he got out of highschool and before he went to West Point and he laid out for two years before he went to West Point--he had worked in an Abilene creamery, the same creamery where his father had worked, I believe. He put in an eighty-four hour week. I think that was twelve hours a day seven days a week. But Eisenhower liked to tell that story about how hard he had worked. If there was a weakness in Eisenhower, in his failure to empathize with low income groups and people in the inner cities and so on, I always felt that it derived to a rather substantial degree from that. He felt as a boy he came from a poor family and there was another famous line that he had tossed off once there, "We were 'pur' but we didn't realize it," or something like that. The point was that he came from a poor family. All the boys had to work. He made it during one period by working eighty-four hours a

week, and then he went on into a military career, and he worked very hard to advance himself and become eventually a five-star general. I liked Eisenhower very much personally, but I feel he had in him the feeling that "I did it as a poor boy in Kansas and anybody should be able to do it." I don't know that that is a fair understanding of the problems that a kid growing up in the Ghetto has to overcome.

SOAPES: You also had notes on the farewell dinner?



CLARK: Yes, this was a dinner that Eisenhower gave just a few days, three or four days before the end of his second term in the White House, before he was stepping down and John Kennedy was succeeding him. There was a dinner for some 60 or 65 reporters and photographers; a dinner in the State Dining Room; just a final, very nice gesture by Eisenhower to the fellows he looked on as the regulars who had covered him a good part of his years in the White House. It was a delightful and a fascinating evening. He would circulate around the room, and there would be small groups gathering and talking with him about various things. I was chatting with him, with several others, at one point. We were curious about the reports that had just appeared in the papers that his opinion of John Kennedy had risen after he had met him in the White House; where they'd come in to talk about transition, really, and

Kennedy had been extremely respectful to Eisenhower. They just hit it off; they'd gotten off well. He was a little noncommittal on this. He seemed to appreciate the fact that Kennedy, who had defeated Dick Nixon, was now looking for the answers. That he hadn't known much before. He felt he was serious and looking for the answers to dealing with the country's problems. He did note that he had met Kennedy at that first meeting for only an hour and said that Kennedy listened but did not make any suggestions. He did comment on the Cabinet members that Kennedy had already chosen and said he thought several of them were good men. He named specifically [Robert S.] MacNamara and [Douglas] Dillon and [Luther H.] Hodges and Dean Rusk. But then, when he was asked by one of the reporters what he thought of Bobby [Robert] Kennedy as Attorney General, he first joked about it. He turned to the reporter in sort of mock anger and said with a grin, "You don't have the right to ask me that." But then he added seriously that he did not at all like the idea of comparing John Kennedy giving his brother a Cabinet job to his own use of his brother [Dr.] Milton [Eisenhower] in his administration; obviously feeling that Milton, who was the President of Pennsylvania State University and an expert on Latin American affairs, was a much better qualified man and that there was no comparison. He made it very plain to us, I thought, that he



felt it was shoddy politics to put Bobby in the Cabinet. He also noted that he had rejected the suggestions that he put Milton in his Cabinet because, as Eisenhower put it, a Cabinet should be made up of equals. He said, if the President's brother is in the Cabinet, he becomes a second President, that other Cabinet members would defer to him and not argue with him as equals. I think, looking back on those days of the Kennedy administration, most people would agree that was a problem with Bobby. He did become--if not a second President he was widely described in those days as the second most powerful man in Washington. There were a few other interesting ideas that he dropped that night. He was sort of thinking back, reflectively, over his years in the White House and dropping a little advice for ways things might be done differently. He said he thought it was ridiculous to have such a long lapse between the election and the inauguration, from election day in early November to January twentieth. He said it was meaningless for the old President to submit a budget in a State of the Union message and go through these other formalities that have to be cleared up. He said he would move the election up to September, for example, and cut the period until the inaugural to five or six weeks. He also noted--after having sat through some, at least one quite chilly inaugural I believe--that this would offer a better chance for good weather at the Presidential inaugural. He was asked if you accelerated the





timing this way, if the President would have sufficient time to pick his Cabinet and the rest of his administration. He just scoffed at this and said this was just a myth created by the press. He said it really takes very little time to find the men you want for your Cabinet. He noted how quickly he had completed his. And then he used an old military expression. He said Cabinet officers should be left to pick their own subordinates so the President doesn't have to get into that. The reason, his line was, "You don't pick the corporals before you pick the sergeant." Whether that meant he regarded his Cabinet members as sergeants, I'll leave that to history.

SOAPES: Were there other people in the administration besides Eisenhower, on the occasions that you've mentioned, who were good or frequent off-the-record sources?

CLARK: No, there were not around the White House. The Cabinet members--I can't think of any that were. It was done in a formal way at the White House and done on pretty rare occasions. What I would do from time to time, I would work through Hagerty who ran his own ship at the White House. That was the best way to do it. People like Sherman Adams might give an audience to a favored reporter but not very often. It was better to go through Hagerty. I would go in and tell Hagerty that I'd like to go in and talk to Sherman Adams. He would set it up, and I would talk with Adams. We could talk on a background basis



or an off-the-record basis but I never got, I can hardly recall getting, anything out of him worth printing. He was so tight-lipped. We did very little of this sort of thing. It wasn't discouraged it was just hard to set up an appointment to get into the back rooms and really talk to people in a meaningful way. I went in a couple of times to talk with the economic advisors--Arthur Burns who in those days was chairman of the Counsel of Economic Advisors and of course later, for a number of years, the chairman of the Federal Reserve Board. I remember one joint session when I went in and talked with him and with Gabe [Gabriel] Hauge, who was the President's personal economic advisor. Thinking back now, I've always been sort of an economics buff. It was a fascinating session, and that was more helpful. They would talk in a guarded way that could give you a little news. But again, the mere fact that these things had to be staged so formally it was not a White House that leaked like a sieve, certainly.

SOAPES: The news that came out of the White House was dispensed rather than you pulling it out?

CLARK: Yes. That hasn't changed all that much over the years. Normally if you have an open White House where the press are invited to go in and talk to members of the staff, it is essentially because they think that's the best way to use the



press. That sort of thing is often counter-productive and you'd better be very careful--go in in a guarded way if you're invited to go in and talk to the President's chief advisor on domestic affairs for whatever. He may have in mind planting a story with you that will present something the administration has done in the most favorable light. One instance I recall that was more humorous--Hagerty sometimes could get an exaggerated idea of how the White House press should be able to read the little things that he was doing. It was when Earl Warren was nominated by Eisenhower to be the Chief Justice. Eisenhower, probably to his death, thought that was the worst decision he ever made, of course. When Warren moved to the left and Eisenhower stood firmly in the center on issues like civil rights he became very disenchanted with Warren. But in any event, when that nomination was made we had known at the White House. It came out of a White House briefing that Herb [Herbert] Brownell was going out to California and that while he was out there he would be talking to Earl Warren among others. The Warren story was leaked and it was leaked to three or four favored newspapers--leaked, as I recall, by Herb Brownell. The leak did not come from the White House, but the White House regulars screamed to Hagerty. We were all really burned badly on that one--suddenly Earl Warren was going to be nominated to be Chief Justice. Hagerty, I can remember his looking at us so innocently and saying, "Well I told you



Herb Brownell was going to California. You should have all known that that was because Warren was going to be the new Chief Justice." Well anybody who'd written it on that flimsy evidence would have been a pretty bad reporter.

SOAPES: Were there occasions where you felt used by the Eisenhower White House in any way?



CLARK: Oh, in little ways. Hagerty, he had a regular practice of sort of make believe work for the President when Eisenhower would go off to Augusta or to Denver or to one of his favorite vacation places; to Palm Springs or Thomasville, Georgia or something like that. Eisenhower would gather press releases from other Cabinet agencies and just stock them for the vacation. And we all knew we were being used when Hagerty--every day at his news conference, it would be the pretense that this is a work and play vacation, that there's a lot of work being done here. He would put out these press releases under the White House imprimatur as if it was something the President had just accomplished. But, there was none of the deliberate and devious efforts to use the press that we have seen in some other administrations since. Hagerty was a crack old pro, and he'd sort of be winking, and we both knew when there was an effort being made to use us.

SOAPES: Was Eisenhower adequately prepared for his press conferences?

CLARK: I would say he was. Hagerty would brief him, Hagerty and others in the White House, because they were concerned when he first started holding press conferences. He was thoroughly briefed. Eisenhower was a quick learner, somebody who could scan. He liked matters to be put to him in the simplest possible form, just memos of a page or two and that sort of thing. He could absorb the details of complicated problems quite quickly. I have always felt that the idea that Eisenhower stumbled all over himself at the press conferences was grossly overblown. I can recall from the time I first started covering him. He was thrown into a totally new political arena, and there were many domestic problems that he didn't know much about. You could make a case that there were quite a few where he never developed a very serious interest. But, when he had a chance to do his homework, if he was into an area such as NATO problems that he understood thoroughly, he could be tremendously articulate and impressive. At press conferences he could stumble a little and waffle a little if he was into an area he didn't know too much about. But you really didn't hear much criticism of the way he fell over himself until his second administration, and a good deal of this came after his stroke. I would put that in the area of very unfair criticism by the press. It was a stroke. What is it--aphasia or whatever you call it--when your mind literally loses the ability to immediately find the word that you're searching for.



Eisenhower would stumble occasionally or there might be an awkward pause at his press conference or you could tell he was rambling because the word that he needed wasn't popping into his mind. But that was because he had had a stroke, and I'm afraid there were not very many members of the press who bothered to point that out when they did the stories. There were a lot of highly critical stories of Eisenhower in his last couple years in office about how he was just losing control and he'd stumble all over himself at a press conference.



SOAPES: Do you have any other remeberances that you wanted to--?

CLARK: I wish I had more. I think we've covered the subject pretty thoroughly.

SOAPES: Okay.