



AGREEMENT WITH THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

AS TO ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

I, George M. Elsey, of Washington, D.C., in accordance with the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended (44 U.S.C. 397) and regulations issued thereunder (41 CFR 101-110), hereby assign to the United States for administration by the National Archives and Records Service all my rights, title, and interest, including any literary property rights that I may have in them, in the tape recording and transcripts of the interview with me conducted by Philip C. Brooks on behalf of the National Archives and Records Service at Washington, D.C., on November 3, 1972.

It is agreed that the tape and transcript will be available (if the tape is preserved) under the regulations prescribed by the Archivist of the United States as soon as the final form of the transcript has been deposited in the National Archives. It is also agreed that only the National Archives and Records Service shall have the right to publish or authorize the publication of the interview in whole or in part, aside from quotation in the normal concept of "fair use," providing that I or my heirs, legal representatives or assigns retain the right to publish in other form the statements or facts set forth in the interview.

Signed

George M. Elsey

Date

20 July 1973

Accepted:

Signed

James B. Rhoads  
Archivist of the United States

Date

12-10-73

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with

GEORGE M. ELSEY

Former Assistant to the President  
of the United States

Major Biographical Information:

Born, Palo Alto, California	1918
A.B. Princeton	1939
A.M. Harvard	1940
Active Duty, U.S. Naval Reserve (Stationed at the White House, 1942-1947)	1941-1947
Member White House staff	1947-1953
American Red Cross staff (Vice President, American Red Cross, 1958-1961)	1953-1961
Various positions, Pullman, Inc.	1961-1965
Assistant to the President, American Red Cross	1966-1970
President, American Red Cross	1970-

Interview at the Red Cross, Washington, DC

November 3, 1972

Interviewer - Philip C. Brooks

(The reader of this transcript should also see the transcripts of interviews with Mr. Elsey conducted for the Truman Library, particularly No. 6, Jerry N. Hess, Interviewer, at that Library).

National Archives and Records Service

Oral History Project

Interview with George M. Elsey  
President, American Red Cross  
Former Administrative Assistant to the  
President of the United States

November 3, 1972, Washington, D.C.

Philip C. Brooks, Interviewer

BROOKS: George, this interview is really a supplement to the ones done by Morrissey and Hess for the Truman Library; as you know I am working on a special project on the history of the National Archives, concentrating on the very interesting period in which the Archives reported directly to the President. Both President Roosevelt and President Truman seemed to take a special interest in the National Archives. And the relationship of the Archivist with the President was obviously of great importance. I think you perhaps would be as qualified as anyone to talk about that relationship. My first question here, since you were in the White House from 1942 to 1945, was to ask whether during that period you know anything in particular about the relations between the President and the Archives.

ELSEY: No, not of the President or the White House and the Archives as such. I was aware of the interest, of course the well known interest, of the President in the FDR Library, a unit of the Archives, and I became well acquainted with Fred Shipman and other members of the Hyde Park staff in the latter part of the war. I believe, Phil, in an earlier interview I talked a little about FDR's interest in having me go up in October of 1944 to survey the Hyde Park Library to ascertain whether in the extraordinary remote event of his not being re-elected we could move his White House war time papers to the Library, whether they would be physically secure....this is in an earlier interview.

Immediately after FDR's death I talked with many people in the Archives about the transfer of Roosevelt's papers out of the White House. Some, I guess all, initially went to the Archives for processing and screening before going to Hyde Park and we had a lot of discussion of the sensitive classified documents, Map Room and comparable papers. This, of course, was after Roosevelt's death in the early weeks and months of the Truman administration.

President Truman during this period was very conscious of our interests and concern over the Roosevelt papers, fully understanding and sympathetic and supportive of the pattern that was being established at that time. He recognized that we were involved in a situation without precedent, and he wanted to be kept informed of just how we were working out some of the problems of the transfer of the papers, and the drafting of the regulations that would control access to the Roosevelt papers.

BROOKS: This may sound like a digression but did you hear in those early days any discussion of a transfer of the Constitution and the Declaration to the National Archives? The reason I ask is that there is some reason to feel that President Roosevelt was interested in this as early as 1934, when the first Archivist was appointed. It wasn't finally done as you know until 1952, and it was then very important for the Archives. I wonder if you ever heard that discussed in the meantime.

ELSEY: I am sorry to say that I don't recall any discussion. I remember of course the event, the time of the transfer but I just draw a blank on that one.

BROOKS: You said you knew Dr. Buck in western Pennsylvania, and that you knew him quite well. I am sure you had a chance to observe his relationship to the White House. I have been told by people, and I observed myself, that he was sometimes difficult to get along with. He was inclined to lecture, as a college professor would, a Congressman or his staff, or General Vaughan in the story I told you about the Hitler will. Do you have any specific comment as to whether Dr. Buck's personality had anything to do with his relations with the White House.? or with his leaving the National Archives?

ELSEY: No. I have no knowledge on that score at all. I certainly wasn't aware, or don't recall of being aware of any personality problems or personality relationships with Dr. Buck. I recall distinctly a conversation I had with President Truman in the spring of 1948, at the time that Dr. Buck's resignation from the Archives was announced and his new appointment at the Library of Congress became public knowledge. I think I expressed to the President my regrets at seeing him leave the Archives because we have worked together so well. I recall the President's comment that Dr. Buck had come to him and said he felt that at his age he would like to have a job that was less demanding administratively, and that did not have as much administrative burden to it as running the National Archives; and that he, Dr. Buck, was challenged by this new chair of American History at the Library of Congress and was eager to take it on. He wanted to get back to the more academic atmosphere of a chair of history where he would have an opportunity to do some reading and writing of his own. And it is my recollection that President Truman also spoke of some regret of losing him from the Archives, but he said he didn't feel that he could deny Dr. Buck his request. We both know that President Truman was candid in dealing with his White House colleagues on matters of this sort, and if there had been anything about Buck that rubbed Truman the wrong way or if Dr. Buck's relationship with Congress had been a source of any concern to President Truman I think we both agree he would have spoken very freely and frankly with me about that. There is nothing in his comments about Dr. Buck's transfer to the Library of Congress which would leave me to believe that the personality had been a problem.

BROOKS: What were your first experiences with Wayne Grover? What was your relationship with him?

ELSEY: Well I really can't remember. I suppose it was when Wayne became Assistant Archivist in 1947. I knew him from the time he became Assistant Archivist. We got along extremely well; I regarded him as a warm personal friend. We would occasionally have lunch together simply for the fun of it to talk over the state of the world and history and archives, and so on and so forth--even when there weren't specific working relationship between us when I was having a little problem with an early architect who was trying to draw some concepts for the Truman Library back in the days when it was still going to be on the Grandview, Missouri, location. I thought the size, the scope of the project was completely inadequate but I needed a little support so I went over to Wayne and asked him if he could make available one or two staff people from the Archives to do a professional survey of the quantities of the material that were accumulating at the White House that would ultimately be housed at the Presidential Library, and among other things the quantities of souvenirs, memorabilia, and just plain trash that are given to a President and that would have to be properly housed. And there was no question whatsoever; Wayne assigned a man to come and make such a survey for us.

BROOKS: Was that Henry Ulasek?

ELSEY: Yes, that was my recollection. Now in a case like this of course I did tell the President that I had asked for a man from the Archives. This was necessary first of all because the President was interested in the subject; secondly we had to have the Presidential blessing because Mr. Ulasek would be asking questions of people around the White House and would want to see their files which they would not have allowed him to see if he had not had HST sprinkling on the holy water. This was a minor matter but the sort of thing that I could pick up the phone and say "Wayne I want to come over to see you I have something I want to talk to you about," and within 10 minutes of laying the question before him there would be an affirmative answer and we would be on our way. It must have been in, or no later than, 1950 when Ulasek made that survey at the White House.

BROOKS: Ulasek came from the division that I was in charge of in the Archives, and later in 1953 he almost went to the Truman Library, but for family reasons decided at the last minute not to go. Phil Lagerquist was sent out there in less than a week's notice and been one of the main stays ever since. Well, to get back to the Archivist and the President: one of the interesting things George I observed going through the papers of R. D. W. Connor, who was the first Archivist, was that he and President Roosevelt had a very congenial relationship. I think they were more relaxed certainly than either President Roosevelt or Mr. Truman would be with Dr. Buck, just because they were different kinds of people. I don't know what Grover's relationship was with Mr. Truman but I gather he frequently saw him. Grover admired Mr. Truman very much and got along well with him, I am sure. At one time there was a possibility--at least there was a conversation about, maybe not a real possibility--about what we would do if the

Truman papers came to the Archives. Probably it was a thought of having them temporarily housed there before they could go to Independence. The reason I remember that particularly is because Grover talked to me--they would have come to the division I was in charge of then.

ELSEY: Well I am sure any discussion about the Truman papers going to the Archives in 1952 was solely as a temporary depository because there was never any doubt. President Truman was as firm on this subject as on any topic. And when he makes up his mind you know it is pretty well made up. It was made up in the very beginning that his papers would go to Missouri and around them would be built, he hoped ultimately, a great research center for scholars from his part of the country. There was an uncertainty as you know as to the precise location and for a long long time President Truman kept thinking of the family at Grandview-a location which I think I said in earlier interviews I thought was absolutely preposterous. It was wholly out of the question. Well it was just wrong from every point of view. The city of Independence was great. But so far the exact location was up in the air for a while. The fact that they were going to Missouri was never in question. The University of Missouri, as I may or may not have told you, made a play at one point to have the papers to Columbia. The President did send me out to see and talk with the staff of the University and ascertain just what they had in mind. But I believe that was more of a matter of courtesy on his part. I don't believe he really countenanced any thought of their being very far from Grandview or Independence. So any discussion about 1952 would have been just as a temporary holding place in Washington rather than any thought of abandoning the library idea and leaving them permanently here. Another reason that I am sure he always had Missouri in mind was that I had tried a couple of times at more relaxed moments, such as a week-end on the Williamsburg or down at Key West to float a trial balloon saying that there really were some questions about scattering Presidential Libraries around over the country. FDR put his at Hyde Park, but I didn't think a one shot proposition ought to be totally determinative. The Hoover Library, not a presidential library in the sense in which we are now using the term, was out there in California. And I could see some real real questions if over a period of a number of administrations there were Presidential Libraries all over the place. Washington would be the logical place for governmental records to remain. Well, I never got any place and I think it was the second time I tried this and was really shot down in flames by the President who firmly, but with courtesy and a bit of wit and humor just denounced me as being one more example of an ivy league intellectual who really didn't understand what the United States was. There was more of the United States west of the Potomac than there was east of it and there were scholars and there were intelligent people who knew how to read books in other parts of the country than just Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. So I got the message pretty quickly and I didn't try from that point on to suggest that he give up the idea of a Truman Library out in Missouri.

BROOKS: I think that idea about the middle West and the East Coast was pretty strong in his mind very strong. That reminds me that LBJ said pretty much the same thing in a conference of Library Directors at the White House in December, 1968. He took some wide swipes at the people on

the East Coast who didn't think there was anything intellectual west of the Appalachians.

ELSEY: At a time like this when I got my comeuppance I would always have to get the conversation back to the point that after all as a small boy I lived in Lawrence, Kansas and that was west of Independence.

BROOKS: In a statement drafted or written by David Lloyd at the time of the fund raising for the Truman Library there was some emphasis on the importance of having the library in the Middle West to bring materials that scholars could study materials especially that would bring an understanding of foreign relations to the Middle West. Mr. Truman felt strongly about that.

I take it there were no great single issues dealt with by the Archivist and the President during the first three years of Dr. Grover's administration as Archivist; unless it would be the absorption of the National Archives into the General Services Administration. I have talked to Jess Larsen about that as well as some of the Archives people. Of course the Hoover Commission was devoted to the principle of reducing number of agencies that reported directly to the President. I don't know that this was anything Mr. Truman was heavily involved in.

ELSEY: You're right. I don't believe this was ever presented or ever came to him as a major issue for decision I doubt it very much. The loss of a status, if that's what it was, of the National Archives was compensated possibly by the broadening of its scope to Federal records management. I don't recall that this ever came into serious discussion by the White House staff. It was a matter that the Bureau of the Budget, and those following through on the Hoover Commission recommendations, and other persons concerned with administrative patterns in the Federal Government they dealt with it. Surely it was one of those matters that would have been ticked off in a conversation or a check list by Jim Webb, I guess Jim was Director of the Bureau of the Budget at that time.

BROOKS: Well, I think that is right. There is a great deal to say in the history of the Archives about the absorption into GSA, but I don't think it involved the President himself.

You did touch on the President's National Historical Publications speech at the Library of Congress, which I believe was in 1950, in the interview with Mr. Hess. I think quite well covered there that although Grover didn't know the actual text of the speech until the day it was given, you and he had talked enough about the general interests of the Archives and the NHPC before that time so that you were confident that what was said would go along with Grover's ambitions for the Commission.

ELSEY: Yes, that's right. I didn't even know that there was going to be a speech at the Library of Congress on the occasion of that official unveiling of Vol. I of the Jefferson Papers until the afternoon before. I was called into the President's office; Charlie Ross was sitting with him at the time, and they asked me for some comments or outline of points that the President

could make. I think, as I may have said to Jerry Hess, I wrote the whole thing out in long hand during the night and never got around to talking with Wayne about it until it was already mimeographed and being prepared for press release the following day. I had no qualms at all about the phraseology proposed for the President's use ther--as you say I knew what Wayne's aspirations and hopes for the National Historical Publications Commission were. We had not talked on this specific line but I knew of his interests and felt confident that I knew enough about his interests so that this would be completely acceptable to him--as I believe it proved to be.

BROOKS: In the fall of 1951 the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were enshrined in helium filled sandwiches at the Library of Congress. In the fall of 1952 they were transferred to the National Archives, on December 15, Bill of Rights Day, 1952. Mr. Truman appeared and made a speech along with Chief Justice Vinson. Were you involved in that particularly, or do you have any special memories of it?

ELSEY: No, I was at the ceremony, but I had no direct involvement in the transfer or anything else. I recall going up the Library one time and being seen there by the Librarian of Congress, and he said "what have you come to steal from us this time." So I was getting blamed for the transfer of the items from the Library to the National Archives.

BROOKS: That was Luther Evans.

ELSEY: Yes, Luther Evans.

BROOKS: He and Wayne had a lot of fun arguing about this thing, but obviously they had to work together on it.

ELSEY: Well I knew Luther Evans also, and there was as you know a prickly fellow he could be who disturbed a few people from time to time, but he was always the soul of kindness also. And he made available some of the facilities at the Library for matters that I wanted to arrange, but that's another story.

BROOKS: This event on December 15, 1952 is something I was much interested in because I was involved in relations with the Library on the transfer of the Continental Congress Papers other than the Declaration and the Constitution. At the ceremony you probably remember they had a series of lady military, Wacs, Waves, and so on, carrying in the state flags. When the state flag of Missouri passed in front of Mr. Truman the President stood up and saluted.