

INTERVIEWEE: REVEREND ELMER GRAHAM

INTERVIEWER: ERIC F. GOLDMAN

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I: Reverend Graham, when did you first meet the President?

G: I met the President in about 1926 or 1927. I was in college about 2 or 3 years ahead of him.

I: This was in San Marcos?

G: Yes. I was several years older than he was. I had dropped out of school for some five years and then gone back. As I recall it, at the time of our debating together, I was a senior and he was about a sophomore. So I was several years older than he was.

I: You were never actually a roommate of his?

G: No, he and I debated together. The way they did it, we had a debating group. We had meetings and debated each other and then a team was selected to represent the school. He and I were the school debating team, that is, so far as intercollegiate debates were concerned.

I: This was for how many years?

G: We were debating partners just one year.

I: What year was this?

G: 1927 and 1928, as I recall it.

I: And do you recall the subjects you debated and which sides you were on?

G: Well, that year we debated the question of sending U. S. Marines into South America. I thought of that just recently when the President was faced with that problem.

I: You stuck to that one subject throughout the year?

G: Through the year. No, that wasn't the only subject we debated about that was the only intercollegiate subject we debated. The debate subject was set by the Association.

I: Which side were you on?

G: We were on both sides.

I: Which side did the President really believe in?

G: I was talking to a reporter from Time last week and I told him a little incident that I think is very revealing. I think he really believed that we ought to send the Marines in there. The President was always pretty good at bringing up little stories and little illustrations, as he is now. But we were deb-ting on the affirmative that the United States should send the Marines down to South America, where our interests were involved and he told a story that sticks with me now to wind up the debate. He told a very simple story about a farmer who had some boys who were stealing his fruit. He went out and talked to them and explained that they were not only stealing the fruit but damaging the trees and they just didn't pay any attention to him. So the next time he heard them out there, he got himself a handful of rocks and went down and without saying anything, he just started throwing at them and in just a few minutes they came down. Of course, the point was: We would talk if we could, but if we had to, we would send the Marines.

I: What colleges did you debate?

G: I don't recall all of them. At that time, all of the teacher's colleges in Texas were in this Association and the debate that we won--well, in fact I believe we won all of our debates--the one that was the wind-up for the season was against the Sam Houston Teacher's College. We won what the debate coach said was the best debate victory he had ever won. This was a team that had been quite well known and we managed to beat them.

I: You were state champions then?

G: I don't know if you could call it state champions. I am trying to think of what the Association was called. It was not called the National Collegiate Association but it was something like that. The schools were

all banded together for athletic purposes and debate purposes and so we really were the champions of the Teacher's Colleges of Texas. I guess you'd say that.

I: Would you please describe the President's manner as a debater?

G: He was very forthright. I think he would agree with this--that neither he nor I were any great orators but he had common sense and was very forthright and usually--you can check this if you want to--but as I recall it, I did most of the groundwork, laid most of the groundwork, pointing out the arguments we were going to use and the things we were going to prove and making the basic argument, and then they would have someone who would present that. Then he would come on, usually with what we considered the most effective argument that we had.

I: And answering their most effective point?

G: Both answering their most basic proposition and also re-emphasizing the thing that we considered the strong point. Now in this particular debate I was talking about, where the President told that little story about the farmer, our strong point was (on the affirmative of that) that everyone ought to be willing to talk but if talk didn't get the job done, we should do whatever was necessary to be done.

I: Did he move around the stage a lot, did he talk in a high or low voice?

G: He moved around quite a bit. We both did.

I: Hands in pocket?

G: I don't recall. I don't think he had his hands in his pockets much in those days.

I: Did he use a lot of stories?

G: Yes, he'd usually bring in quite a few illustrations.

- I: Some people have said about his high school debating that he was a fiery debater. Would you say that is an accurate adjective for his college days?
- G: I wouldn't put it as "fiery." For one thing in our college debates, the judges went more on the logical argument than they did on the presentation. I don't know if I would describe him as a fiery debater but as a good debater.
- I: You mentioned that neither of you at that time considered yourself good orators. However, you did become the State Teacher's College champions. In the light of what you have just said, would you say that you won that championship not so much on the basis of eloquence but on the development and presentation of your ideas so that actually speaking ability had less to do with it than thinking ability?
- G: I think that's a fair statement, as I look back on it.
- I: Was Professor Greene the debate coach during this whole period? Everyone has told us that Professor Greene was a great influence on the President. Would you describe Professor Greene and point out in just what ways he influenced the President?
- G: Well, Professor Greene was kind of a homely sort. He wasn't very dignified or refined. He had a lot of stories himself. I guess that's one place where the President got that method. He did have some good ideas on the matter of civic organizations.
- I: What were some of these? And were there any issues or personalities that he particularly emphasized? What would a young man learn from him?
- G: I wish I could answer that question but actually I doubt if I can. I don't remember. Of course, as a debating coach, he helped us develop primarily the subjects we were debating. I do recall one thing. He believed very definitely that the United States should take a major role in the world.

- I: Was he what you would call a liberal or a conservative, in general?
- G: I think I would call him more liberal than conservative.
- I: Did he come out of the old Populist tradition or was he more the Southern Democrat type?
- G: I don't really know. I guess, as I recall the Populist attitudes, he was more of a Populist. He believed that the United States should take a leading part in the world...
- I: In domestic affairs, did he make fun of Coolidge and Hoover as too conservative?
- G: No, I don't believe he did. I don't recall exactly what his attitude toward Coolidge and Hoover was.
- D: Can we talk about the debate team itself for a moment more? Can you tell us just how one came to participate in the team? How many members the team had? How many hours a week did you spend in preparing for debate activities?
- G: Anybody could go out for debating and we did quite a bit of debating through the fall months among ourselves. We divided up into teams and then along toward spring, we would have most of the intercollegiate debates.
- D: Was your team selected to represent...
- G: The coach just felt we were the two best debaters, I guess.
- I: Reverend, you mentioned some other subjects you debated. Do you recall what they were?
- G: No, I don't. I don't recall a single one except the one that we debated in the intercollegiate. We debated on that particular subject several times.
- I: A question about the President's manner in debating. Was the level of his voice and the speed of his speech about the same as it is now?
- G: It depended upon what he was doing. I think he spoke faster than he does now.
- I: Higher?

G: Yes, probably a little higher.

I: Who did the research for your debate?

G: Both of us. We would have a subject and then, with the debate coach, we would work out probable places where we could get the material. A great deal of the material came from the University of Texas Library.

I: And you would write to the Library?

G: We would either go over to Austin or else write to the Library to get the material. And then a good part of it came out of the daily newspapers.

I: And Professor Greene worked with you all the while you did this preparation?

G: That's right.

I: And discussed the strategy?

G: We discussed the strategy and the points we wanted to bring out and he never did write a speech. As a matter of fact, I don't suppose that either one of us ever had a written-out speech. You just didn't do that in debating because, for one thing, after the opening speech, the speech that you had written out might not fit at all.

I: Reverend Graham, could we go on to other aspects of the President there. Did you think at that time that the President was going to be as important a man as he became? Did he impress you as a comer?

G: Well, he may not like this definition but my idea is that Lyndon was always a politician. He was running for something ever since I've known him.

I: What's your earliest recollection?

G: Oh, I don't know. He ran for President of the School Master's Club. He ran for President of the different societies that we belonged to. We had several debating societies at that time. Debating was more prominent at that time than it is now.

- I: To stay on that line of the impression the President made on you and other people, was this a young man who seemed to be tremendously ambitious? Not particularly interested in recreation or social events?
- G: I don't know if I would put it that way. He was interested in just about everything that was going on up there.
- I: Did he take girls out much?
- G: It seemed to me that he had a few dates but I don't know about that. As I said, I was several years older than he was and I was engaged to a girl and I wasn't much watching other people then. I don't recall any girl he was linked with in any way that we would now say as going steady.
- I: Was he popular?
- G: I think so.
- I: Of course that leads to the black star, white star episode. Would you tell us about that?
- G: I don't know anything about it.
- I: You did make reference to the School Master's Club. What was that?
- G: That was a Teacher's College Club. The men students formed a club to discuss their school affairs and what ought to be done, looking forward to the time when they were teachers. As I recall it--I'm not sure, you would have to check this with him--he was elected President of the School Master's Club for at least one term.
- I: During the course of that year, did he write for the newspaper?
- G: He wrote for the newspaper pretty regularly. He was editor of the paper for I don't know how long--one or two years. He wrote editorials for the newspaper.
- I: Did he go to the convention at Houston during the course of that year that you were there?
- G: I don't recall.

- I: May I ask you a few other questions, please? What courses there interested him particularly, and what kind of influence do you think they had on him?
- G: He took all the political science courses they had, as I recall. He liked those political science courses. And he was interested in writing and speaking. He took public speaking of course. I don't know if I can say what influence it had on him. I just don't know actually how much that did influence him.
- I: Was he a great reader?
- G: We read quite a bit during that year we were debating together.
- I: For that specific purpose?
- G: For that specific purpose, yes. We would read the articles in magazines and of course editorials in newspapers and things of that sort. We looked for the presentation of the two sides on a pretty hot subject back at that time. We would do most of our reading from old magazines and newspapers and things of that sort.
- I: You don't see any particular turning point at San Marcos in his thinking? He came in a young man interested in politics, lively, aggressive, etc., and he went out the same way?
- G: He went out about the same way, as far as I could tell.
- I: Are there any anecdotes or incidents that haven't been published that you remember of this period?
- G: No, I was trying to think of anything particularly interesting or humorous but I actually don't remember anything. During the time that we were together, we were pretty much in earnest. We were pretty serious about the matter because we both wanted to win and there isn't a great deal that I could bring out there.
- I: Thank you very much, Reverend Graham. You have been exceedingly helpful.



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