



American Conversation
DAVID McCULLOUGH
50th Anniversary
of
The Harry S. Truman Library & Museum

June 13, 2007

At the Truman Library & Museum in Independence, MO, Archivist of the United States Allen Weinstein welcomed historian and author David McCullough. The discussion was in conjunction with the opening of a new exhibition on the American presidency, Treasures of the Presidents.

ALLEN WEINSTEIN: I think they welcomed you, David, properly. But let's have another one, anyway.

[Applause]

That a historian of the distinction of my friend David McCullough can write so brilliantly; so intelligently; and so effortlessly, apparently that, of course, the greatest test of all because the effort that goes into it is enormous but for David McCullough to have emerged from--and he still in his career is extraordinarily active. He's producing a book every couple of years now. His books increasingly are tackling complex, monumental subjects. Who wants to write on Truman after David is finished with Truman? Who wants to write on John Adams after David is finished with John Adams? I don't think we're going to see much on 1776 for a while. So it's a privilege to be here with you, David and to try to see whether we can talk a little bit about the kind of history you write and why you write it that way.



For those who are curious, I'm Allen Weinstein and I'm the Archivist of the United States and a great admirer of this gentleman. Now, how do you write?

Just physically, technically--

Do you write on a computer? Do you write--I think I know the answer to that...but do you write Selectric 3, the way I do? Do you write on...How do you write?

DAVID McCULLOUGH: I write on a secondhand Royal Manual typewriter

[Laughter]

[Applause]

that I bought in 1965 in White Plains, New York. And I don't remember what I paid for it--not very much. And it was manufactured in 1940. I have written everything I have had published since 1965, which is virtually everything I have written on that typewriter. And there's nothing wrong with it.

[Laughter]

And I'm told by my children and my more advanced friends that I could go so much faster if I used a word processor and I tell them, "I know that. I don't want to go faster. If anything, I'd--I'd like to go slower. I don't think all that fast." And that's what writing is, is thinking.

WEINSTEIN: Well, those who have investigated say that you work in a small garden-shed office in the backyard of your Martha's Vineyard home and you produce 4 pages a day or thereabouts.

McCULLOUGH: When I'm really rolling, I produce 4 pages a day, 4 typewritten pages which I then will edit later with a pen. And people say to me "Don't you realize if you use a computer you can move a paragraph from the bottom of the page to the top of the page you can get rid of a line?"

I say, "I can get a paragraph from the bottom of the page to the top of the page. I just draw a ring around it and put an arrow."

[Laughter]

I find that if I try to do more than 4 pages a day the quality decreases. And I'm often asked, how much of my time do I spend writing and how much of my time do I spend researching? Which is a perfectly good question.



WEINSTEIN: Then consider it asked.

McCULLOUGH: But nobody asks me, how much of my time do I spend thinking? And the thinking is in many ways the most important part of it. It isn't just gathering all the material taking all the notes. It's sitting down and really looking at what you've accumulated thinking about it thinking about how to put it into the English language in a way that will have some compelling quality. And I feel very strongly that one ought to try when writing history to reach toward the ultimate of literature.

You don't always--

You don't always get there but that ought to be the polar star, it seems to me to try and write what you have to say as well as if you were writing a novel or a play or poetry to use the language in the great tradition of historians going back to Thucydides and Homer because if it isn't well written, it seems to me that's going to vastly decrease the number of people who are going to want to read it and vastly decrease whether it will survive. And I really believe that if history isn't well written it will die. And so I work very hard at making it look easy.

WEINSTEIN: Somebody who claimed to be David McCullough said the following: "I think of myself as a writer, not a historian I'm a writer who's chosen history and biography as my field but to me, the writing problems the writing opportunities, the writing adventure are what run the engine not being a historian or biographer."

McCULLOUGH: That's right. I do think of myself as a writer not an historian who has chosen history and biography as my field. And I really care about the writing. I was an English major in college and I'm very glad I was. I discovered that I wanted to write history quite by chance in Washington at the Library of Congress when I was working on something else for the U.S. Information Agency during the Kennedy years. And once I started into the work which was a book about the Johnstown Flood I knew this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

WEINSTEIN: Tell me about that period working for the USIA. Did that have an impact in terms of shifting your career?

McCULLOUGH: Oh, entirely. I had been working at Time-Life in New York since I got out of college and when President Kennedy in his inaugural address called on us to try to do something for the country I really took it to heart and gave up my job, which was a very good job and went to Washington. I had no connection with the new administration. I just wanted to do something, and I wound up



getting a job with the U.S. Information Agency. And it was an exciting time because Edward R. Murrow was then the head of it.

WEINSTEIN: Right.

McCULLOUGH: And the day of my decisive interview with a man named Don Wilson he asked me, after we'd been through a good deal about my background and my work and so forth he said, "How much do you know about the Arabs?" And I could just see all chance of getting the job going up in smoke. And I said, "Mr. Wilson, I don't know anything about the Arabs." And he said, "You're going to learn a lot."

[Laughter]

And that's the way--exactly the way I feel when I embark on any new project--how much I'm going to learn. And I think, for example of the 10 years I spent here at the Truman Library how much I learned what a privilege it was and what an adventure, a journey it was to work with this collection to have the advice and encouragement and stimulation, inspiration of the people who work here in the library.

WEINSTEIN: It's a wonderful library.

McCULLOUGH: Wonderful people who work here.

WEINSTEIN: And of course, after the Roosevelt Library it was the next one developed by President Truman. And President Truman was here all the time working in the library, if you will, himself.

McCULLOUGH: Yes, I came too late. I didn't know--never met Mr. Truman.

WEINSTEIN: What did you learn about the Arabs? Let's not leave that sit.

[Laughter]

McCULLOUGH: Well, alas, I learned a lot and I became extremely interested in the Near East and in Islam and I went everywhere through the Arab world. I was the editor of a magazine called "[Indistinct] America" which means "Life in America." It was a "Life" Magazine-style magazine which we produced in Washington. It was translated and printed in Beirut and it sold on the newsstands.

WEINSTEIN: Mm-hmm.



McCULLOUGH: And so we really had to earn our readership. It wasn't handed out. And of course, at that time, the USIA had libraries all through the Middle East, all over the world. And it was a wonderful program, wonderful to

WEINSTEIN: This is a generation, David, which has grown up without knowing anything about the USIA experience in those years and the extraordinary importance in reinforcing the role of intellectuals across the board, without--

McCULLOUGH: Well, it was very exciting and admirable in the extreme looking back on it and to have been part of that then was exhilarating beyond description. And I was thrown in to a job that I knew virtually nothing about. I had never run a--I was in my 20s. And I had never run a magazine in my life. I was so over my head. And then it dawned on me about 6 months later everybody was over his head.

[Laughter]

And it was very encouraging.

[Laughter]

But we don't know enough about how we learn. And it seems to me from my experience that how we learn, how quickly we learn how well we learn depends an awful lot on motivation, need. And the sink-or-swim sort of environment calls upon a lot of fast learning. Alas, much that I learned is still true today about the problems in the Middle East the problems of our inadequacy in understanding it our very tragically, shamefully limited understanding of Arabic and how different the people of the Middle East are one from another, depending on which part of the world they're located and how interesting that world is how interesting intellectually, going way back. I loved it. I absolutely loved it.

The time in Cairo and Beirut and Morocco. Baghdad was not so appealing. It was a very dangerous time then, all those years ago a very dangerous place to have been then. And I can't say that I know a great deal about Iraq but I certainly learned a lot fast. And I'll never forget him saying "You're going to learn a lot," and what an exciting thing that was to be told.

WEINSTEIN: Now, are you going to do the book on the Middle East?

McCULLOUGH: Am I going to do a book? On the Middle East? No.

WEINSTEIN: Why not?



McCULLOUGH: Because I'm not in any way up to speed and there are other things that I really want to do.

WEINSTEIN: In that case, let's talk about the first historian. You mentioned the second one. You mentioned, at least, the second in my estimation Thucydides but remember, first there was Herodotus

McCULLOUGH: Yes.

WEINSTEIN: talking about the purposes of history. And remember, just to refresh your memory and mine what did Herodotus say? He said, "These are the researches of Herodotus of Hallicarnassus which he publishes in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done and of preventing the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the Barbarians from losing their due meed of glory..." Barbarians, by the way, are the Persians. And withal who are not Barbarians "And withal to put on record what were the grounds of feud." Three purposes, he talks about: Analysis of what happened. He talks about commemoration which is something some historians do not talk about. You do, and I'm delighted that you do.

And the commemoration not simply of what the home team did but what the opposition did accomplish. And finally, analysis. Why did it happen? What were their grounds of feud? Has much changed in terms of the historian's function since then?

McCULLOUGH: Well, obviously, one would agree with all of that but I think that it's not just what happens what happened to whom and why and to what consequences. And history is human. It's about people. It's about two great mysteries, it seems to me: time and human nature, human personality. And it's--it's essential to in effect be grown up. Cicero said that anyone who goes through life thinking that nothing of much interest or consequence happened until you came on the scene is someone who will go through life with the outlook of a child.

And I loved what Dan Boorstin, former Librarian of Congress the late Daniel Boorstin--who was a front-rank, first-rate historian himself American historian--he said, "Trying to plan for the future without a sense of the past is like trying to plant cut flowers." And I think that's true. I think what Samuel Eliot Morison said that history teaches you how to behave.

WEINSTEIN: Mm-hmmm.



McCULLOUGH: But I think above all you can't really know something unless you feel it. Otherwise, information would be all that would be necessary. "Encyclopedia Britannica" would be in effect sufficient to tell you what you need to know about events past and people of other times. One of my favorite examples is from E.M. Forster's book on the art of fiction in which he's explaining the difference between a sequence of events and a story, or a plot. He said, "If I tell you that the king died and then the queen died that's a sequence of events. If I tell you the king died and the queen died of grief that's a story." And it's with that "of grief" that you feel something. And otherwise, one can skip reading. If I may, one further point. I think that what he is saying--said about history ought to be taught over and over, and more as well to help counteract the notion that information is all we need that information is learning.

This is something that we're fed all the time in a variety of ways. "Information Age, the Information Highway." Information isn't learning. Information isn't poetry. Information isn't literature. Information isn't drama. And if information were learning if you memorized the "World Almanac" you'd be educated. If you memorized the "World Almanac" you wouldn't be educated, you'd be weird.

[Laughter]

And I really, truly believe that the 3 elements of education are, in order of importance the teacher, the book, and the midnight oil. You've got to work at it, got to work hard at it. And I've always felt and I was raised on the idea that ease and joy aren't synonymous that joy can come from work and the joy of research the joy of being on the detective case side of doing research is surpassing for anyone who's done it. And—and it's what makes me want to get up out of bed in the morning.

WEINSTEIN: There is not a single one of your books which does not spend an extraordinary amount of time to my knowledge on framework and context which is another way of talking about what you're talking about now.

I'll tell two stories, briefly. I helped organize a conference with Russian scholars--Soviet scholars, actually, late-Gorbachev era in which most of them were apologizing for things they had done in the old days lies they had told about Western scholars and things of this kind until a young historian who was not part of this cabal turned to me he was sitting at the table in Moscow and he said, "You know, Allen, we live in a wonderful country. People can predict the future and the present is perfectly clear to us but the past the past keeps changing every day."

[Laughter]



McCULLOUGH: Wonderful.

WEINSTEIN: Story number two. World War II, Paris a garret in the heart of Paris and a scholar named Marc Bloch, whom you know well a great French social historian is putting the finishing touches on his masterwork "The Historian's Craft." Why? Because the Gestapo is chasing him. He's basically a resistance leader. And that's the book that produced, among other things the simplest and clearest exposition I've ever read of the nature of a generation which he says, "To be excited by the same dispute even on opposing sides, is to be alike and this common stand deriving from common age is what makes a generation." So many of us are part of your generation and what I wanted you to think about and to perhaps share some thoughts on now is how you see the successive generation doing history in comparison to the history you've done and others have done in this generation.

McCULLOUGH: Well, I'm very concerned that future historians and biographers, scholars, students will have so much less to work with maybe nothing to work with. We don't write letters anymore. Writing letters isn't part of our notion of being civilized. Very few people in public life will ever keep a diary again as things are today.

WEINSTEIN: Zip.

McCULLOUGH: I don't know how long. I'm not sufficiently informed to know how long our electronic devices for communication will hold up. Will they last 50 years, 100 years, 200 years 1,000 years? I have no idea. I'm told by many who do profess to understand that they won't last long at all. It's a huge shame. And when I think, for example to give you the reverse I've been working for the last 12 years or so in the 18th century and we have no photographs of any of those people we have no TV outtakes we have no recordings of their voices. We have precious little except their letters and diaries and paintings. And those alone are so remarkable the volume of letters, the quality of the writing--which means the quality of the thinking--is so vivid and timeless that we can know them very well. And more and more new things--new in the sense that some of us are seeing them for the first time--keep coming to the fore.

When I started working on "1776," I thought "Well, I've got little chance I'm going to find anything that hasn't been published before." I found all kinds of things that hadn't been published before or things that people had looked at but never looked at in the context of what else was happening. Context is all. Context of the time, context of place context of culture. You can't understand who those people were if you don't understand the culture in which they lived. And I felt, as I said



yesterday in my remarks here it is not just important to read what they wrote but to read what they read.

WEINSTEIN: Exactly.

McCULLOUGH: To go back and read what those 18th-century people were reading that's when you really begin to understand them.

WEINSTEIN: Context. We're in the green room. I'll tell a story out of school. David and I are waiting to come here and he wants to speak to somebody at the National Archives in Washington. He has a fact to check, a name to check. We track the person down. David spends a good amount of time talking about the person's work and what's happening does the fact. That's context. That's the context not just of the fact but of the person.

McCULLOUGH: Yes. May I tell a story that goes with that, please?

WEINSTEIN: This is all for you, David. So you can tell all the stories you want. I'm just here--

McCULLOUGH: The man we got in touch with is named Rick Peuser and Rick is an archivist at the National Archives and his specialty are the pension records. the pension files. These are dating from the pensions for Revolutionary War veterans. And to qualify for a pension one had to write to the pension office a description of service where you served, with whom you served under whom you served, and so forth and so on to qualify for a pension. And very often, those pension records were filed by the widow of someone who had served or someone who died before filing for the pension in time. And we're walking down this long hall—aisle with industrial-style shelves packed with these pension records which are about that big, in envelopes thousands of them. And Rick was explaining to me that they were arranged alphabetically and he said, "Is there anybody whose record you'd like to see?" And I hadn't thought about it, and I said "Yes, Billy Tudor."

Well, Billy Tudor was one of those characters that one encounters when writing a book that is infinitely interesting, colorful, a good story but doesn't quite make the cut and doesn't wind up figuring very significantly in what you write. And I regretted it because it was a wonderful story. Very quickly, Billy Tudor was a patriot. He served with Washington, served in Boston, served elsewhere in the war was there crossing the Delaware and the rest. Young Harvard graduate who had fallen in love with Delia Jarvis in Boston. Delia Jarvis was from a prominent Tory family and it was sort of a Montague-Capulet love affair. And Billy would sneak out and cross the tidal parts of Back Bay at night taking all his clothes off



and carrying them over his head to get over to where Delia Jarvis lived. And then he'd redress and go and call on her. And all through the war she was writing to him, begging him to give this up it was a lost cause there was no chance that the Washington patriot side of the struggle was going to succeed and come home and marry her. And he kept professing his love and his adoration for her but also his devotion to the cause. And he kept on serving.

Eventually, the war ended and he went home, and he married her. The pension file was written--The letter of his record in the war was written by his wife, his widow, Delia Jarvis Tudor. And we pulled it down, and very often in these little envelopes there will be a letter confirming an additional letter confirming that what this person says is true and I know it's true because I know her and can trust her and have every confidence that you can be certain that this is an accurate, fair account. And in there was one such letter signed by John Quincy Adams.

[Crowd murmuring]

So there was a treasure of a kind that Rick Peuser and the National Archives didn't know was there. So it isn't ever all a known story.

WEINSTEIN: Can I continue that story?

McCULLOUGH: Yes, please.

WEINSTEIN: There's another part of it, which I hadn't put the 2 and 2 together there. We collected at the National Archives--eventually, the National Archives. It was collected before then, but the U.S. Government collected enormous number of appeals from widows like this when their husbands passed away to collect their pension. Why? Because of course, there were no draft cards there were no documents that said "I worked for the Revolution," et cetera. What many of them did was to send us their family Bibles. Why? Because somewhere in the Bible, they said "Billy Tudor left for the war today will return, General Washington," et cetera. We never returned those Bibles. They were the most treasured family possessions of these people, but they became federal documents. So we have them. I have hundreds of them. I don't have them, but we have hundreds of them here. I was sworn in on one of them and shed a few tears as well because I realized that this was somebody's major possession. Now, I'm going to find some way of getting those back to those families. I don't know how it's going to be done because there are probably 2,000 cousins cousins all of whom want possession of every Bible there. But we'll work on that. The stories continue. May I read something to you and get your response?



McCULLOUGH: Yes.

WEINSTEIN: OK. This is by a classicist named Francis Cornfield turn of the century, the 20th century. He's trying to describe his view of history. "Moment by moment, the whole fabric of events dissolves in ruins and melts into the past and all that survives of the thing done passes into the custody of a shifting, capricious, imperfect human memory. The facts work loose. They're detached from their roots in time and space and shaped into a story. The story is molded and remolded by imagination by passion and prejudice by religious preconception, aesthetic instinct by the delight of the marvelous the itch for the moral the love of a good story and the thing becomes a legend. A few irreducible facts will remain no more, perhaps, than the names of persons and places." Well, how does the historian rescue us from this agnostic paradise of recalled but basically unverified memories? How do you--

McCULLOUGH: That's wonderful. That's wonderful. Well, you're trying to get the truth trying to get at the truth and you're trying to do it by casting as many nets as possible. And you are verifying or disproving stories that come down. In my experience, most of the stories that come down are true in essence. It's the details, it's the sequence or the timing or something that's not quite right. And of course, if you're interviewing people which I think is of the utmost value memories do fade. Memories can sometimes become colorful and extreme. And here in Missouri, there's the old tradition that any story worth telling is worth exaggerating.

[Laughter]

And...but. And sometimes you're almost like an umpire at the plate. You have to call the play. And if you're doing that then you have to make sure that comes through in what you're writing. In other words you have to always level with the reader or if you wish to see it to history in the long run. You can't ever know enough but in the last analysis you have to take all of that that you've been marinating your head in and try to figure out what happened and how can I express what happened describe what happened fairly and to take them into consideration--them, the people you're writing about. For instance, nobody ever knew how things were going to turn out and therefore, to judge people for not doing something this way or that because they weren't aware of how stupid that would look in the future is very unfair. Nobody in the past ever knew how things were going to turn out any more than we do. By the same token I was schooled, trained as a writer with the old adage, "Don't tell me; show me." Don't tell me that he was a miser. Show him being a miser. And so therefore, I tend to hold back. on the kind of analysis that many historians specialize in. I want you, the reader I want generations to come, if what I've written holds up to come to their own



conclusions from what I have written which is, I hope, as fair a presentation of what happened and what those people were really like in individual character as I've been able to achieve.

WEINSTEIN: Back in my teaching days, I used to call that knowing where you end and the past begins.

McCULLOUGH: That's good.

WEINSTEIN: Don't sound so surprised, David.

McCULLOUGH: No, it is. No, it is. No, I like that.

WEINSTEIN: Ok. Good.

McCULLOUGH: Maybe I'll swipe it. No. No, that's good. I think that people talk about revisionist historians. All historians are revisionist.

WEINSTEIN: Exactly.

McCULLOUGH: You wouldn't bother to do it if you weren't going to have some new way of seeing it putting new light on it. There was a big move--there has been a move to get away from writing about the protagonists of conventional history the "dead white men," supposedly. And I think that the lights of the drama of history or the stage of history had been too much focused on the protagonists the leaders, the obvious sort of traditional people of history and not enough on all the other people onstage. But to take the lights away from the protagonists to not write about Washington or Harry Truman or Abraham Lincoln with the same kind of intensity and desire to understand them that a more old-fashioned sort of history specialized in is really to avoid addressing yourself to why things often happened the way they did because they happened the way they did because who was in charge, who was leading who was inspiring, who was making the mistakes? Which is not to say that the everyday life of everyone else isn't important. Of course it's important. When I worked on my book on the Panama Canal I was the first historian that I know of who went and really tried to find out what was it like to be a laborer on that job? What was it like to have been a Barbadian who came out from the home island to live in Panama and work on that canal in physical labor, manual labor in that heat and that sun and under those conditions?

WEINSTEIN: Let me ask you a question about that book and the body of your work. I have a theory. I want to try it out on you. Before I do, I should tell you that the Truman Library and the state of Missouri have filed formal protests against



your assertion that they were going beyond the facts early on. But there is a sign on Mike Devine's desk that says, "The blarney stops here," but it's not to be. OK. David McCullough produces an extraordinary trio of books in a field that could be called the study of the technical developments in the modern West and we're talking about his book on the Johnstown Flood his book on the Brooklyn Bridge, the building of the bridge obviously "The Path Between the Seas." Those are--there's a niche in there that you filled which you were dealing with the sociology and the history and the individual developments that made all of those technological achievements possible or that made the responses possible. And then we have a turn at some point in the Seventies toward the focus on, I suppose, what I would call substantive books having to do with the American adventure and I'm talking here, obviously about some major books--the Adams biography, the Truman biography, "1776" and a number of other essays. And you used the phrase at one point that one could see allegorical commentaries here that "1776" is, after all, about the founding of our nation major turning point. The Adams book is about the kind of individual improbable though it seems who is absolutely necessary ballast to a Jefferson or some more mercurial figure in stabilizing the American identity through its early decades. Harry Truman--goes without saying. Ends World War II stabilizes America at the time of the Cold War. So many of our institutions that emerged to fight that war emerged in the Truman years and so forth. This isn't just accidental, is it? This reflects something of your perspectives on the kind of history you want to write. Can you talk to that?

McCULLOUGH: Well, the first 3 books all take place in the period between the end of the Civil War and the start of World War I. Barbara Tuchman called World War I "the great burnt path across history" that everything changed after that and that's the way I see it. I think there is something quite allegorical about Truman's life. He's Harry True-man from Independence and he sets off on his journey. And this is a classical story form. And his--the arc of his life includes the period of the greatest change ever in the history of the world. And to have this 19th-century boy from a farm experience what he did in the war, the first world war and then go on to assume the burdens that he did without panting for position, power, political importance is the kind of allegory that if you wrote it as a novel nobody would believe it. Wouldn't believe it. Things like that don't happen in real life. Well, it did happen, and

WEINSTEIN: Yeah.

McCULLOUGH: For example, as an English major I was led into all the great books that came out of World War I from the so-called "Lost Generation"--Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Faulkner, Dos Passos and so forth--the Lost Generation. And then I read about Harry Truman who had no connection to the Lost Generation. He is the part of that World War I experience that came home and



became active in the Veterans of Foreign Wars and whose career depended on the fact that he had led his fellow people from Jackson County in the war and had been a hero of a kind in the war. It's the reverse story. It's--again to sustain the literary analogy--it's as if George F. Babbitt turned out to be a very different sort of fellow than George F. Babbitt. He became Harry Truman. And how the country has reacted to Harry Truman was interesting to me. The night of the '48 election I was very interested in politics. I tried to stay up late. I was in high school. I got too tired. I went to sleep. So I didn't know what the outcome was. And I had grown up in a very Republican family. And the next morning, my father was in shaving and I went in and said, "Dad, who won?" He said, "Truman."

[Laughter]

Well, 30 years went by and I was back visiting my father same house, same everything and he was going on, as he often did about how the world and the country was going to hell and he said at one point "Too bad old Harry isn't still president."

[Laughter]

Well, that interested me a lot because we have to stand back from history from events of our own time. I liken it very much to an Impressionist painting. If you're up very close to it, it's all a blur, doesn't read. You step back from it, and you can see it. And that's what happens in the 50, 60, 70 years when the dust settles, as Truman liked to say and you see it. I find it hard to understand why anybody isn't interested in history and I find it wonderful, especially wonderful that young children--fourth-, fifth-sixth-grade children--adore it.

WEINSTEIN: That's right.

McCULLOUGH: And they want to know about it. They're hungry to learn. It's not yet cool to be dumb. And they can learn all about this kind of thing easily as readily as they learn languages. We know how fast they can learn another language. And again, Barbara Tuchman was once asked "Well, what's the secret of teaching history?" And she answered in two words:

McCULLOUGH and WEINSTEIN: "Tell stories."

WEINSTEIN: This straight-arrow soldier comes back from France after the first world war and he decides to go into politics. So who does he go into politics with? The Missouri equivalent of the duke and the dauphin.

McCULLOUGH: Exactly.



WEINSTEIN: I mean, they were all that was available.

McCULLOUGH: And he goes into business and fails.

WEINSTEIN: Right.

McCULLOUGH: Failure is a very important part of life and a very important part of understanding human beings. How have they handled failure? In anybody who is aspiring to public office and particularly the presidency I'm always interested what blows have they had to sustain in life and how have they responded to that? How have they coped with it?

WEINSTEIN: The State of Israel owes one debt to Harry Truman based upon that failure, basically--the Eddie Jacobson relationship.

McCULLOUGH: Absolutely. And the Eddie Jacobson importance in that story is true. That's sometimes sort of said, "Well, that's just a story. That's..." No, it is true. Again and again you have to understand where somebody came from. That's why it's so very important, in my view that the presidential libraries are located where the president grew up where he--that part of our country which was part of him. You want to understand Jack Kennedy? You got to go to Boston. If you want a feeling of the world of Franklin Roosevelt go to Hyde Park and just walk out there and look at that view of the Hudson and get a sense of--of a very different America from Independence, to say the least. Before--Alexander Pope talked about the genius of place. You have to go there. You have to walk the walk. You have to smell it. You have to breathe it. You have to eat the local food. You have to hear the local expressions. If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen. That's not Harry Truman. That's Jackson County. That's an expression that was used here. Time and again, when I was working on my Truman project I would hear things. "Oh, I know where that comes from." And he used to finish a sentence saying "And that's all there is to it." That's an expression.

WEINSTEIN: I will never again be invited back to Missouri unless I do a few things right now. One, make up for the fact that I haven't indicated up to now that Mr. McCullough's books have won 2 Pulitzer Prizes, 2 National Book Awards and the most extraordinary array of other awards imaginable that we knew him, obviously know him over all of these years also from not only from his books and articles and reviews but from those wonderful "American Experience" and Smithsonian public television programs which I think we might want to thank him for separately now. Thank you.

[Applause]



And I think I will go out on a limb and say that until somebody comes along in another generation to tell better stories David McCullough is my Homer my candidate for Homer here. But let me tell you one about Jacobson Eddie Jacobson, you probably don't know. I was in Israel for the 30th anniversary of the State of Israel, running a conference along with folks from the Truman Library here--Ben Zobrist and various others. And it was on Truman and the State of Israel. And it turned out that two of Mr. Jacobson's children--I think maybe they were his two daughters-- were in Israel. And the mayor of Jerusalem, Teddy Kollek took all of us on a tour and took us into the Arab section of Jerusalem to dedicate a Harry S. Truman I think it was the Harry S. Truman Boulevard. And-- Excuse me. Yeah, it was Harry S. Truman Boulevard. And I couldn't resist saying, "Mayor we just passed a Harry S. Truman Street. Two blocks from this one, there's a Harry S. Truman Lane. Then there were about 3 or 4 other Harry S. Truman places. And he didn't even look at me. He just looked at the Jacobson children and their husbands. Then he finally turned to me, and he said "Well, sonny boy, you know what a fact on the ground is? That's what Eddie Jacobson does for us. He's a fact on the ground. We will be grateful to him forever and if we name 10 places for Eddie Jacobson it won't be enough."

McCULLOUGH: Wonderful.

WEINSTEIN: Yeah. Well, I think we have covered a lot. David, is there anything that you would--I have one more question that I'm going to ask you but is there anything you'd like to cover at this point?

McCULLOUGH: I'd like to say something in addition to what I talked about in my remarks yesterday that what we can do to educate our children and grandchildren in the storied history of our country more effectively than we have been. I think if there's a problem with American education the problem is us, all of us. We're not doing enough ourselves. Education really does truly begin at home. And we need to talk with our children, grandchildren more about the story of our city or our state or our country. We need to tell them about the books that we read when we were their age and loved or that we're reading right now and love and interest them in reading more than we do. And I think we need to encourage them to embark on books that are maybe a little above what they think they're ready for because they're ready for all of it. We need to bring back the dinner table conversation. We need to bring back dinner.

[Laughter]

And we need to take them places. Take them to historic sites. Don't wait for the school trip. The school trip may never happen. And bring them to the Truman Library. Bring them to the Eisenhower Library, the F.D.R. Library. Take them to



Gettysburg, Williamsburg. Washington, Philadelphia, Concord Bridge. Take them there not just to convey the idea, the truth that these are places where real things happened with real human, living people of great interest and importance but to let them see how much that place and that subject means to you. Father takes his little boy to a baseball game and the father loves the game. The little boy sees the father loves the game. That's as important as the little boy's enjoyment of the game. So show them what you love. And let's make conversation reach beyond sports and television. Let's talk about history. And let's do everything we can to encourage teachers to let them know we're on their side. "What can we do to help you?" ought to be our attitude with teachers. And of course, we're all students. We're all learning all the time. That ought to be the point of education, that it never ends.

WEINSTEIN: Thank you. Before we conclude this I hope that whoever has the gift that I had for Mr. McCullough is in the audience so I can have that. Won't you bring it up? David, while that's coming up can you tell us what you're now working on? What book--

McCULLOUGH: No.

WEINSTEIN: Oh.

[Laughter]

I knew he was going to say that.

McCULLOUGH: I am working on a new project. I'm very excited about it. But until some details are worked out with my publisher I'm not talking about it.

[Laughter]

WEINSTEIN: Well, the National Archives of the United States is now offering a reward for the person...

[Laughter]

...who successfully identifies even the period of David's new book. We'll see about that. I wanted to basically say that to repeat something that David has already said that our Presidential Libraries are a major component in this education of the American public on history. We at the National Archives are incredibly proud of our relationship with the Presidential Libraries individually and as a group and they are doing enormous work and we intend to fund them even more effectively than we have in the past to continue doing that work. And so,



since I'm not above shilling these matters this is something that I urge you to take and find for your youngsters particularly those in grade school or whatever. It just won the Education Publishers Award for the best book on education of the year. This is the "Guide to the Constitution" done by the Mini Page folks who are in hundreds of papers around the country and the National Archives. We have many other publications of that sort. We welcome your presence. Do come and take a look and join the one million plus people who have come to see us every year over the last several years to look at our exhibits. I look forward to welcoming you there. And come here. Come to the Truman Library. Come to all the other--and there are now 12 Presidential Libraries. Come to them, and take your kids. And give them time Let them really look around. And bring in your own stories so that you become part of that history. But, Mr. McCullough, for all--a very modest token for all that you've done for all of us but this is--these are various small gifts from the National Archives. I'm told they're not the originals but I won't guarantee that, so

[Laughter]

But this is Harry Truman's report card.

McCULLOUGH: Oh, great.

WEINSTEIN: It's his second-grade report card.

McCULLOUGH: Wonderful. That is terrific.

WEINSTEIN: And this is a--

McCULLOUGH: He did very well, didn't he? 98, 90, 86, 99.

WEINSTEIN: And look what became of him.

McCULLOUGH: Yeah.

[Laughter]

WEINSTEIN: This is a Berryman cartoon that your Teddy Roosevelt book would appreciate which is why Roosevelt tried to fight the interests represented by all those stray pieces of—

McCULLOUGH: Version of life on the Mississippi with the railroad trust and the Harriman interests and the beef trust all snags in the river waiting to take care of him.



WEINSTEIN: And finally, this is a letter which remained lost for over a hundred years and it is a letter which emerged last week. Some of you may have read about it. It emerged in the National Archives in a book of other old letters and is signed by a gentleman named "A. Lincoln." And it's to Major General Halleck. "We have certain information that Vicksburg surrendered to General Grant on the Fourth of July. Now, if General Meade can complete his work so gloriously prosecuted thus far by the literal--it's misspelled--or substantial destruction of Lee's army the rebellion will be over." No happier words could Lincoln have heard. And the archivist who discovered this is a youngster. I'm happy to say he's one of our finest archivists. When he was asked by the media what his reaction was when he realized what he had there he said--told the first interviewer from the media "I said, wow." He told the second one, "I said, whoa." We haven't worked out the interrelationship between those two concerns at this point. But more seriously, he knew what he was looking at. He seized it. He brought it into play. And we now have an Abraham Lincoln letter.

McCULLOUGH: Oh, wonderful. Thank you very much. Well, let me say, please, Dr. Weinstein, that I couldn't have done what I have done in my working life without the National Archives. And I have had some very thrilling moments at the National Archives. I will never forget, ever opening up a box in the great collection of the records of the French attempt to build a Panama Canal which are part of the National Archives in which there were the death certificates of all those French engineers and others who died of yellow fever in the hospital in Panama with every detail about them--their age, their height, where they came from color of their eyes, everything. And all of a sudden the statistics of how many of them died became human and deeply moving because they were so young, most of them. And again, I must stress the value of the employees, of the staff of not just the Presidential Libraries but the great collections in Washington who can guide anyone in ways that are of infinite value. And never, ever forget that all of that is open to everybody not just to people writing books or scholars working on Ph.D.'s or whatever. Everybody, as is the case with all the Presidential Libraries and it's all free. Free. Doesn't cost anything to come and use the collections of the Truman Library or the National Archives in Washington. How blessed we are, with our public library system and with such collections and systems as that.

WEINSTEIN: Thank you very much for that. The National Archives requires someone to be 14 years old--that's a hard one to meet--and also to have an identification card and if you have both you can prove that you're 14 you have an identification card you're welcome to do research at any of the branches of the National Archives the 14 Regional Archives 17 Regional Record Centers the 12 Presidential Libraries the 4 facilities in Washington and if you can find another one you're welcome to have research there as well, but



[Laughter]

I can't thank you enough for your support for the National Archives over the years and for the Presidential Library System. I think it's probably a fitting place to close here if I close on some remarks I made just very briefly when we discovered the Lincoln letter and we met with the media to explain that. We started by trying to explain that the National Archives has always been a place of discovery. We're in the discovery business and the access business. And we pointed to something I think that will please you. It's not an American source. It's a French novel. Or at least, it's a British novel about a French detective. In Agatha Christie's "The Mysterious Affair at Styles" Hercule Poirot explains, and I'm quoting Poirot here-- Do people read Poirot and Agatha Christie still or is that also gone the way so much else of my reference material has gone? How many of you have read an Agatha Christie novel? All right. She's still in business. Good. In Agatha Christie's "The Mysterious Affair at Styles" Poirot explains, quote "One fact leads to another. There is something missing a link in the chain that is not there. We examine, we search and that little, curious fact that possibly paltry little detail that will not tally we put it here. It is significant. It is tremendous." And he closes on that score, and I'll close on that score. Thank you, David. You are tremendous.

McCULLOUGH: Thank you, sir.

WEINSTEIN: Thank you very much.

[Applause]

McCULLOUGH: Thank you. Thanks a lot.