

From Tyler TX to the White House: Harry C. McPherson

By Interviewer John Vanderstar

A few years after I retired from Covington & Burling, I was asked to conduct “oral history” interviews of a man I did not know, Harry C. McPherson. This turned out to be a very enjoyable experience. I conducted 14 interviews and thus got to know Harry very well. He turned out to be a delightful and extremely intelligent man with a gift for story-telling and a clear and accurate memory of the events and people who shaped his life. (Our relationship continued after the interviews ended.)

Harry was born in August of 1929 in Tyler, TX. His mother died when he was 14, and his father traveled a lot on business. Harry became dependent on Ela Clark, an African American woman who worked in the McPherson home for 40 years. Pressed on his relationship with the Black community in Tyler, Harry admitted that there was none, except for three people, Ela, a waiter (and some time band leader) named Eddie Finell, and the man who cleaned Harry’s father’s store -- even though there were three Negro colleges in Tyler and the nearby town of Marshall.

Harry’s Dad was reasonably successful in business, enough so to send his son to college, first to SMU (where Harry barely made the grade) and then to The University of the South (Sewanee) in Tennessee. After graduating he enrolled at Columbia working toward his Masters in English Literature. While there he lived at International House and helped write the script for their Christmas show; the singing was not too great until a Julliard student arrived and participated; her name was Leontyne Price!

Originally Harry planned to teach, but he didn’t feel his so-so academic performance would support that. Besides, the Korean war had broken out and military service was called for. He joined the Air Force. After OCS, he was commissioned in October of 1950 and stationed in Germany.

But first he married Clayton Read, a native of Columbus GA. (That marriage ultimately ended in divorce, and Harry later married Patricia “Trish” DeGroot. He had a son by his first marriage, and he and Trish later adopted another boy.)

Clayton’s grandfather had been the mayor in Columbus for many years and at some point he had become well acquainted with the commander of the infantry school there, George Catlett Marshall. Clayton arranged a visit to General Marshall at his home near Pinehurst NC. As they got better acquainted Harry decided to raise a sensitive point. He noted that the General had been attacked for being insufficiently supportive of Chiang Kai-shek (and thus contributed to the “loss” of China to the Communists). The General went to his files and showed Harry some letters from Chiang Kai-shek that said “Free China will always be in your debt. You did everything a human being could have done and then more for Free China.” When Harry asked what the General’s critics said when they saw the letters, he replied that he had not released them publicly. Why? Because “they were from him to me and I didn’t think it appropriate.” Harry was appropriately stunned by this example of General Marshall’s character.

Upon discharge from the Air Force and returning to the US, Harry decided to go to law school. He was partly attracted by an opportunity to work in a profession in which words and ideas were important, and also by a reaction against the activities of Senator Joseph McCarthy making exaggerated claims of Communist influence in the government, which made Harry believe that lawyers were needed to defend those who were unjustly attacked.

He attended Texas Law School in Austin and graduated in 1956. His cousin, Jack Hight, was working on LBJ's Senate staff. During Harry's third year Hight called him and told him the Senator was looking for a young (Texas) lawyer to be assistant counsel to the Senate Democratic Policy Committee, which was chaired by the Senate majority leader (Johnson). Harry jumped at the chance and headed for Washington.

The Committee consisted of what LBJ referred to as the "whales" – the Senate leadership. Most were Southerners; 10 of the major Senate Committee chairs were from the South. The Committee's job was to review all up-and-coming legislation and decide if it should be passed by the Senate. The counsel's job was to review each pending bill to determine what changes it would make in the current situation and make recommendations to the Committee by memoranda that could be as long as 30 pages. It is therefore obvious that he, as the Committee's counsel, personally amassed an enormous amount of material about all legislation that came to the Committee during his time there.

Then came the 1960 national election, and LBJ became Vice President of the United States. He had no need of someone like Harry, and in any event Senator Mansfield, the new Majority Leader, asked Harry to stay on the Committee staff, which he did.

Meanwhile, Harry had become involved with two "outside" activities. One was amateur theater, and the other was St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Washington. These interests came together in an interesting way: He was a member of St. Mark's and one Sunday he did not agree with the point made in the sermon and told the preacher so. The preacher said he would call on Harry the following Sunday to explain his disagreement, and then actually did so! The next thing Harry knew he was teaching an adult Sunday School class. Then he got a call about whether he would be willing to play a modest role in a play about to be put on at the Church. He accepted the role, but in very short order he was "promoted" to a larger role, and soon after he became the director. (Harry admitted in my interview that he was "a ham.") This was only the beginning of a sub-career in the theater: Harry later participated in and/or directed several more plays at the Church and even wrote some plays himself.

In due course Harry began thinking about moving into other work, but still in government. LBJ was now the President after President Kennedy's assassination. Harry knew Cyrus Vance, who became Secretary of the Army in 1963. Vance called Harry and asked him to take a position of Deputy Under Secretary of the Army in charge of Okinawa and the Canal Zone. Harry visited LBJ to get his advice. During their meeting, after lunch on a hot day, LBJ seemed to have fallen asleep! Harry was perplexed about how to handle the situation, but LBJ suddenly awoke and asked Harry: "What do you want?" Harry interpreted this query to relate to

Harry's future in a broad sense, not just whether he should take the Army job. But Harry's response led him to do just that.

The following year Harry was appointed Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs. Just a few months later he was invited by Bill Moyers to come to the White House as special counsel to the President, which of course launched Harry on a new and extremely interesting career, winding up as the President's main speech writer. This lasted until January 20, 1969, when the new Nixon administration took over. Early that morning he received a call from LBJ, who was making last-minute appointments while he was still President; as a result Harry became a member of the Kennedy Center Board and of the Board of the Woodrow Wilson Center at the Smithsonian – two appointments that generated their fair share of good stories.

Harry's successor at the White House was none other than John Erlichman. Harry spent about 2 hours briefing Erlichman, who then asked two questions: Who gets to eat in the White House mess? and When can one use the White House car for personal trips? Much later, after Erlichman had served his prison term for his activities in connection with the Watergate scandal, the two of them were on a panel at the Press Club. Harry told Erlichman he was going to tell that story. Erlichman said that was OK with him "because it illustrates the incredible arrogance and ignorance that I brought to my job at the White House."

Upon the conclusion of Harry's government service he was persuaded by his good friend Berl Bernhard to join him and others in the law firm, Verner, Liipfert & Bernhard, which quickly added Harry's name to the firm name. Harry was frank in discussing how difficult the transition to private practice had been. For example, for his first several months there he did not keep track of how much time he spent working on this client's or that client's business so the firm could send out proper bills! But he soon learned this new aspect of his professional career. Ultimately he adapted well to private practice and tells a considerable number of stories about it.

The interviews closed with a very thoughtful discussion of Charlie Horsky's book, *A Washington Lawyer* and the whole idea of what it means to be a lobbyist.

Harry McPherson died on February 16, 2012, at Suburban Hospital in Bethesda MD. Even his obituary, published in the *Washington Post* two days later, contains some good McPherson stories.

To sum up this 383-page transcript any further would be impossible. There is no substitute for [reading the transcript](#) and absorbing the very fascinating life of this unusual "Washington lawyer." One can also read the transcripts of other interviews that are stored at the LBJ Library in Austin TX and also Harry's book, *A Political Education*, published by the University of Texas Press initially in 1974, and updated in 1995. Another good read is his article in the *Washington & Lee Law Review*, vol. 40, #2, Spring 1983, about his representation of Czech families whose assets had been seized by the Nazis during World War II.