

**George Tames**  
**Washington Photographer for the *New York Times***

**Interview #1:**  
**Introduction to the Hill**  
**Wednesday, January 13, 1988**

**DONALD RITCHIE:** Can you tell me about your background?

**GEORGE TAMES:** All right. My name is George Tames. I was born on January 21, 1919, in Washington, D.C., within the shadow of the Capitol, at the old Episcopal Hospital on North Capitol Street. I was raised in Southwest Washington, again within four city blocks of the Capitol. I remember the building very well. I didn't know what it was, as a young boy, but I remember seeing it. My first visit to the Capitol occurred I guess in the first grade, when our teacher took us on a field trip and we walked up to the Capitol, and got a chance to ride on the old subway cars. That was a big treat for us, and we took a turn from the Capitol to the Senate Office Building and back again, and made our tour of the Capitol Building.

Then in later years I was at the Capitol as part of the mob at the swearing in of /Franklin D./ Roosevelt in '36, for his second term. In '32 I was too young, and I don't recall whether I bothered to go to the Inauguration, but I do remember watching the Inaugural parade, because I can still see in my mind's eye,

Roosevelt and /Herbert/ Hoover going up Pennsylvania Avenue in their top hats, going up to the Capitol and coming back. I probably watched it from the old Post Office Building, because I remember us boys from Southwest scouring the old markets in Southwest and getting discarded onion crates, apple boxes, and anything that could support human weight. I remember going up Twelfth Street carrying about ten of these onion crates. And then we'd sell them for twenty-five cents apiece to the spectators along the route, so they could stand on them and get to see the president when he came by--because there was such a crowd, such a mob scene, that you couldn't see over. We'd sell these crates and then we'd get away in a hurry, because a lot of times they would collapse, and we didn't want to be around when that happened! I did this when Hoover was elected, I was there selling boxes on Pennsylvania Avenue. But in '36 I was old enough to head up to the Hill and watch it from there, and it was quite a scene. It was so exciting.

My next introduction to the Hill was the introduction of a long love affair, that began in 1940--maybe 1939, because by 1940 I was pretty well established. In 1939, when I was a copyboy for Time and Life in Washington, it was my job to be a gopher, and I would go up and pick up bills, and handouts, and releases, and whenever there was an assignment up there for one of the Time and Life photographers to photograph any personality, invariably I

would ask to come along and hold their gear, and write their captions, and so forth. I became fascinated with a camera, and also realized that being the son of a Greek-Albanian immigrants, a first generation American who couldn't speak English when he went to school, that my schooling was minimal. In fact, I dropped out of high school in the tenth grade, I had to go to work, there just wasn't any money. Being the oldest, I was responsible. In the old tradition, my mother and father never let me forget the fact that I was head of the family, and that I was responsible for my younger brothers and sisters. That was a burden I didn't want. That's why I can never remember believing in Santa Claus, because I was the one who was told there wasn't one, but I was to take care of the younger ones. I always thought I was short-changed on that one.

Anyway, I came to the Hill and started in 1940 going with the photographers and eventually photographing individual members. But we didn't cover the Hill the way it's covered today, so intensely. It was a much more leisurely pace, particularly before World War II, and during the war there wasn't that much of a churning up there. I remember covering /Harry/ Truman's War Investigating Committee, but I don't recall that there was that much of a flap over it. But you have to remember also that I worked for a weekly magazine, and didn't have to be on top of everyday affairs. I feel sad every time that I walk up to the

Hill nowadays and realize how much security is around and how many guards are there. I used to feel that that was my Capitol and my Senate--I didn't go around the House that much, I just didn't feel that I could become acquainted with that terrific number. Unless the House members were chairmen or were making noises, I very seldom got to go around them. The Speaker, of course, and the leaders, I knew them. Whereas on the Senate side, I think by 1950 I recognized every member. Of course, we were all about the same age. They were slightly older. I considered them old when they were ten years older than me. We all had children about the same age, so it was a personal relationship. It was a sort of a family atmosphere up there, unlike the frenetic, bugger-your-brother attitude I get sometimes.

I was particularly amused during the /Iranscam/ hearings when one senator would take off after another, or one House member would take off after another, and they still tried to keep it in a polite vein. The one and only real bitter fights that I have ever listened to were the ones involving Civil Rights in the early days, by early days I mean the forties, when blacks were becoming more militant and we were starting to realize that something had to be done. Senator /Theodore/ Bilbo at the time was the big gun on the anti-black side, who used that as a platform for reelection. I recall one time being in the gallery when Bilbo took on the whole Senate on Civil Rights. This was about 1946 I

think. All I remember was that I was impressed by the fact that he took on the whole Senate, and right during the debate, a New York senator took on Bilbo. Bilbo refused to yield to him, and finally he said, "I yield to the nigger-loving senator from the State of New York." Well, needless to say, the whole Senate erupted. The senators were jumping up, demanding the floor and denouncing the language and views of "the distinguished senator from Mississippi." I've never forgotten that! They kept referring to him as the distinguished senator from Mississippi. And this was also about the time that Bilbo was in trouble for some financial shenanigans, and he was being censured by the Senate. Bilbo's personal habits were rather repulsive to me. He chewed tobacco on the floor, and later it came out that he died of cancer of the mouth. But he would dribble tobacco juice down his front, and the stains were there. It kind of repulsed a young, eager, Democratic liberal to see this happening by a person flying the Democratic standard.

I was born into the Democratic party. People ask me, "Why are you a Democrat?" I say, "I was born into the Democratic party, the same way I was born into the Greek-Orthodox Church." When I became old enough to think for myself, I saw no reason to change either. Even to this day, in spite of everything, I think that the broad programs instituted and proposed by the Democratic party are the best for all the people. If there is anyone that

should be a Republican or an ultraconservative, it's me, because I have not only conquered the fact that I had only a tenth grade education, but based on the friendships that I made, and the betting on people, like Mr. /J. Willard/ Marriott, who I used to carhop for. I bet on him, and I invested heavily in Marriott. Today I am financially well off and have nothing to worry about, yet I still feel for the people who don't have it, and have no choice in the matter. Because I know, I've gone through it. So I believe, my own self, that the thrust of the Democratic party is the correct one for this country. I also, in my heart, believe that Roosevelt prevented a terrible bloodbath in the Thirties. People say, "Well, he didn't do much." Yes, he did. He gave people hope. If you don't give them bread, at least give them hope, that they'll know that tomorrow things will be better.

My family was on relief during the Depression, but everybody in those days when they were on relief they tried to hide it. We went to great pains to hide it. We would receive these government surplus oatmeal, flour, butter and can goods. These were all marked; they came in a plain cover that said "Government Surplus," or "Government Issue." So we at home would keep old Quaker Oatmeal boxes, and when these surplus ones would come in, we'd pour the oats into the Quaker Oats box, put the lid on, and stick it up in the cabinet, and throw away the government box, so anyone coming into our house would not see that we were doing that.

Also, every winter we would receive a ton of coal, or a half a ton, I don't remember what. The only heating we had in that old house was a wall furnace behind isinglass. One was in the living room, and one was on the second floor. The rest of the house was heated by the wood stove we had in the kitchen. The federal government truck would come in our alley and dump the coal in the alley, and it was my brother Steve's and my job to go out with buckets and put the coal in the buckets and bring it into the shed and dump it--and count the buckets. Because, by the number of buckets that we had, my father calculated how many winter days there were, and how much coal you could afford to burn. Otherwise you ran out, and then you really were stuck.

Every year we always had a few buckets left when the spring finally arrived, because some of those March days used to fool us and we'd be caught short. It was nothing for us to wake up in the morning in our bedroom and find the ice on the inside just as much as outside. As a result of being that way, and receiving handouts from the federal government, and we were not alone, people had a different feeling about our President Roosevelt. My father would hear the truck and say to me, "Go out and bring the Roosevelt coal in."

My mother's reference to Roosevelt would be "Ieous," which is the Greek word for saintly, Sainly Roosevelt. She would refer to Hoover as "garata," which means someone with horns, like a goat. So that's how I reckoned my own feelings. Then also in every Greek Orthodox family there's a holy corner, usually in the bedroom of the parents, and it faces east. The icons are there, and the candles are lit. It's tradition for the couple who are married, who receive these crowns when they are married, to put these crowns in an icon and keep them there all their lives. Every night my mother would light the candles, these were little wicks that were floating in a little bit of oil. I can remember knowing when it was time to get up because I could hear the sputter of the wicks. They only poured enough oil to last a certain amount of hours, because they had to be very careful of the oil that they poured.

As soon as it started getting dusk, my mother would yell at the nearest child and say, "Go up and light the candles." It was our job to pour a measured amount of oil in, and drop the wick in and light it. We'd pull up a chair in order to do it. Well, one day, when I went up there, in the line-up first was the Virgin Mary and Christ child, then we have the saints, Mark, John, George, and Luke, and one day there was another one: Roosevelt. Roosevelt was in the line-up of the saints, so when I was finally a photographer and was working around Roosevelt, I always had a



different feeling, unlike Truman, whom I met when he was running the War Investigating Committee. I considered Truman a human, whereas I was never able to really throw off this awe of Roosevelt, and the fact that he had been president all of my growing days. I never thought that anyone could ever replace him, and I never wanted anyone to replace him.

So those were my ramblings about my early days in Washington, but then coming up on the Hill, I became very friendly with individual members. I was able to work with them, very early on. I make friends easy, as a result I gained their confidence. Most importantly, they realized that when I was photographing them, whatever I would overhear I would never mention to anyone. As a result I had the confidence of the members. I think Senator /Howard/ Baker once said to a group, "One thing you can say about Tames, anything he ever heard wasn't leaked." That was true. The only times that I ever gave stories to the New York Times was when I had their permission. I had a way of signaling. The moment I'd hear something that perked up my ears, involving something that would be newsworthy, I would look over towards the chairman or the senator who was making the statement, and with a glance they could see the question in my eyes. They would either shake their heads no, or nod, and then I would know that this was something I could repeat. Other times, when I heard things that I thought would make a good story, that it was favorable to the senator, or

favorable to our country, or just a story, but had been told at an executive session, well, I would later go to the chairman or the individual who made the statement and say, "This is what I heard" or "This is what I understand. Is this something that could be used?" He'd say yes or no, and then I would follow through. If he said no, I would never repeat it.

I remember one incident, unlike today at the White House where we have reporters going in with photographers and shouting questions at the president, why we photographers would go in and make a picture and we wouldn't repeat anything that we heard. One time I went in and heard /Dwight/ Eisenhower talking to a foreign visitor. Whatever he was saying, it was very newsworthy and very favorable to the president. I came out and I was just hot for this. I sat down and I typed out about three hundred words on what I had heard. Then I went in with the typed sheet into Jim Hagerty. I said, "Jim, this is what I heard." I handed the sheet to Hagerty, and I said, "Can we use it?" And Hagerty just sat back and read the whole thing, and then right in front of me he just took his hand and just tore it right in half. I said, "Why? It makes the president look good." He said, "Look George, it makes him look good this time, but next time you might hear something that will not." Today it's impossible. There's nothing the president can say--he can't even make an aside into a supposedly dead mike without having somebody pick it up."

I formed a very close relationship with Senator /Arthur/ Vandenburg, one of my first heroes, and I liked Tom Connally because I liked his sense of humor, and his sense of drama, posturing and put-on pompous, like /Everett/ Dirksen. I think Tom Connally and Dirksen were cut from the same cloth. They were competent politicians who masked their real intellect by playing the buffoon, and that's a very clever way of doing it, particularly when you get everything done that you want done. Connally took care of his Texas constituency, and I'm sure Dirksen did also.

Dirksen, for example, never once called me George, he'd always say, "Dear boy." "What can I do for you, dear boy?" I would ask him about certain things, and he'd say yes or no, and so forth. I think of the humor of Dirksen. One day it was the first day of spring, and it was a terrible day. There was snow and ice and the wind blowing, it was miserable for the first day of spring. Dirksen was having his Ev and Charlie press conference, which was a weekly thing. They were trying to drum up some interest and publicity after the Republicans lost control of the House and Senate under Ike, and it was slow going. In those days there wasn't as much news under Eisenhower anyway. We didn't realize how well off we were. I used to bitch about Ike's not doing this, Ike's not doing that, but I look back with nostalgia on how calm things were. Things were going along okay. God was

in his heaven and his representative on earth was at Burning Tree having a golf game. Everything was fine with the world. So Dirksen was meeting the press, and finally during a pause, one of the reporters said, "Well, senator, it's the first day of spring. What do you have to say about that?" Dirksen got up very dramatically, walked to the window, looked out, then came back and said: "It's been my observation that petunias, planted with a pickaxe, never do well."

I've got others on him, but the other one I like so much was when he was on the floor and about forty women came in, an elderly group to lobby for Social Security. They sent word in to him, and he came bouncing out with his hair all aflutter, and shaking his head, that mass of white hair. He looked up and down this group and said: "Ladies, I was on the floor, defending the Republic against the onslaughts of the opposition, when I was informed that forty lovely girls wished to see me. I immediately removed the armor of the warrior and put on the cloak of the poet. What do you girls wish of me?" There was dead silence, and then this little voice piped up from the back and said, "Nothing senator, we just want to hear you talk!"

Then the Ev and Charlie show hit the boondocks. They went to play Gettysburg, at Ike's office there at Gettysburg College. They went up there and held a press conference with the president, just to drum up some more publicity. Dirksen turned to Ike and

said, "Mr. President, this Ev and Charlie show is becoming so popular that it is my understanding that the *Washington Post* is receiving complaints from viewers of television who say the *Post* is not listing the Ev and Charlie show." Ike laughed, and looked over to Dirksen and said, "The *Washington Post*? I don't see why anybody reads the *Washington Post* anyway." He said, "I wouldn't read it, and I wouldn't have it around the Oval Office." He said, "One day, there was nothing to read, so they ripped out the sports page of the *Washington Post* and gave it to me. And I read it, and do you know, that Shirley Povich, for a woman, is not a bad writer." This was right in front of us!

Anyway, I've covered every important hearing in the Caucus Room since Truman's War Investigating committee. I've covered /Joseph/ McCarthy, the terrible hearings on Pearl Harbor, where we just seem to relish beating ourselves over what couldn't be recalled. I mean, we were trying to find fault, like we always do for something that I guess was a general, overall lack of awareness. In spite of all the warnings we received on the Japanese attack, I never heard anyone mention the words Pearl Harbor. I was outside Secretary /Cordell/ Hull's office with all the press, which in those days you had a crowd if you had ten press, including the photographers and reporters. I remember standing out there with three other photographers, we were the only ones in the hall, waiting for the Japanese envoys to come

out. I remember seeing old Cordell Hull sticking his head out and shouting down the hallway for Sumner Wells, who was Undersecretary at the time. He said, "Sumner! Sumner! Where the hell are you Sumner!"

The Pearl Harbor hearings went on and on and on. We tried to put the blame on various persons in the military, I guess we always do that. Then going right on in to the present day, Watergate and Irangate, and so forth, and /Oliver/ North. I think of all the years--forty-seven years--that I've covered hearings up on the Hill, I had never seen a performance like North's before. One, I just kept waiting for the members to tear him up. He made the whole Senate look foolish. He had them buffaloed, and he did it deliberately. It was well-planned out. The man even put on a strict diet and lost about fifteen pounds so he could wear his uniform and look real good. When they finally accepted his terms for appearing before the committee, the committee originally intended that North would be the last witness. As a result, you would have heard the complaints by the Secretary of State, by the Secretary of Defense, and by these other people who came after North. But North got his story in first, and they had a hell of a time following him.

Of all the members of the committee that I talked to, only one had the balls to see this and to react to it, and that was Jack Brooks. Jack Brooks told me before he appeared and during

the appearance by North, that every time he'd shake his finger at me and I knew what he was talking about. He said to me, and I'll be very blunt, he said, "[Expletive] him! He doesn't want to appear, we'll subpoena him." And then after about four or five days, Jack Brooks came up to me and said, "I was so upset, I went to see Senator /Daniel/ Inouye, and I said, 'Goddamn it, I'll put my Marine record up against his any time.'" He said, "I propose that every member of this committee that served in the military put on their uniforms, including the chairman, and everybody march in here and plump themselves down, and see then what." The chairman was shocked at the suggestion. Then after a while, he said, "I cooled down. I realized we'd be playing into North's hand." North made them look foolish.

However, I personally believe that was one of the best examples of democracy in action that has ever come out of Congress. Because it has been my strong belief that there is no such thing as too much news in a democracy. As a young man I remember reading somewhere that the old Greeks in their wisdom, when they sat down and conjured up this frail being that they called a democracy, that some of the wiser heads cautioned that democracy cannot survive beyond the range of the human voice in the market place. When the people on the fringes are uninformed, then democracy dies. It's been my feeling that our country has been very fortunate that it was formed at a time when

communications were improving, you could get a letter from England in three weeks and so forth, newspapers were developing. And then the big burst of our development came right at the same time.

Then came the radio. This televised and radioed hearing was an exercise in democracy which to me helps sustain us. Radio in particular. Television demands that you sit and watch, whereas you can listen to the radio whether you are changing a baby's diapers or driving an eighteen wheel truck, you're still part and parcel of what's going on. Television focuses on the dark side, the problems, the injustice of it all, the way Israel today has got their balls in the wringer. They're being the oppressors, and no matter how many parties they can have for Martin Luther King here in Washington, the blacks are going to realize that what Israel is doing to the Palestinians is exactly what was done to them here. And it's done because of information. Do you think that we or the southerners, white southerners who held the political power for years would have given it up willingly? No way. They didn't give it up for fifty or sixty years or more--and only because of information. Also, in a democracy, if everyone is going to be equal, we have to respect the other person's viewpoint.

I've always maintained that the worst piece of legislation that can come out is one that is unanimous, or damn near unanimous. The moment I hear that word unanimous I think, "Oh,



oh, somebody's getting sold down the river." Because there's no such thing. You've got your viewpoints, I've got my viewpoints, and I'm just as sincere in mine. Everything is a compromise on the Hill. A half a loaf. And if you get sixty percent of the loaf you have really made a big impression. And you are ten years behind the general public! They want something and you're ten years slow. But that's the way it should be. I think our form of government, how frail it is, and how lucky we were that the two times in our history since our establishment that there was a demand for a dictatorship in this country, when /Abraham/ Lincoln was president he was urged to become a dictator, and he said no. And /Franklin/ Roosevelt himself could have taken over the powers and nobody would have objected. In fact, I as a young man would have approved it, because I didn't know any better. But at least those two men saw, and we're fortunate. I've always been afraid of the man on the horse that's going to come down the pike and solve all our problems. There again, television has the power. Can you imagine what Hitler would have done with television? That's what Harry Truman told me one time. Can you imagine what Reverend /Charles/ Coughlin could have done with it? Or even /Huey/ Long. When people have a grievance--I'm wandering on, I'm not talking about the House and Senate that you're interested in.

**RITCHIE:** No, I'm interested in all your views.

**TAMES:** I've thought about where we're going, and what we're doing. I hate what's happening to us, the so-called national security. In the name of security we're doing everything. If as Samuel Johnson wrote that patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel, then I think that security today is the second refuge of the scoundrels. In the name of security we're covering up everything. North was doing that. Thinking back, I'm just wondering what some of the senators would have done, fifteen years ago, twenty years ago, thirty years ago, if a colonel in the military had shredded documents and his girl friend had stuffed her clothes with the documents and gotten them out of the White House, why they would have exploded! What are we doing here? What is happening? You can't do that.

In a democracy the railroads and the airplanes don't run on time, and people's baggage gets lost. We could have a more efficient, so-called scientific government. But look how efficient the Russians are. The greatest experiment in the world since Jesus Christ, and look what's happened to them. They can't feed their own people.

People say, "Well, that Congressman is really doing that to further his own political ambitions." I say, so what, as long as the country is also being helped. I always maintained that Lyndon Johnson really didn't believe in Civil Rights, or push for them. But the moment he became president he was very conscious of what

history has to say about him. He wanted that record to show that LBJ was bigger than life. I have always felt that Lyndon Johnson got tangled up in Vietnam because he wanted to out-Roosevelt Roosevelt. At one time it was very revealing to me, when I was talking to him-- because Johnson and I were pretty good friends, as Congressman and Senator. And when you're one-on-one you're able to say things you don't want people to here. But I got on him about this habit of his having the White House photographers shoot pictures of him all day Monday, and Tuesday morning when he came into his office, they had to have the stack of prints on his desk, shot from the day before. That was the way he operated on the Hill too. He was the one who created the staff photographer on the Hill, because he wanted that photographer shooting pictures of himself. He was always conscious of pictures.

I was kidding him about the stack of pictures that he had on his desk, and how he'd go through them, and when he found one he'd like he'd leave it on the desk, and the rest he'd throw on the floor. That meant you were supposed to destroy all those, throw them away. I said, that's just the image, not how they're going to remember you. They're going to remember you, I said, for what you've done in office. He looked at me and said, "Name me five presidents, immediately /snap, snap, snaps fingers/. "Don't think!" Well, hell, he caught me by surprise, and I said, "Well, Washington Lincoln, Roosevelt." He said, "Hah /snap/, war

president /snap/; war president /snap/; war president /snap/." He said, "You remember the war presidents." And I had to agree with him, that the ones who came to my mind were the ones who were active, Jackson, and so forth. He, I think, if not consciously, unconsciously, he wanted to imitate them. I called that the "Texas Syndrome."

I used to joke with LBJ and tell him every little bit of scandal I'd heard, or picked up around the Hill, and tell jokes, and he'd laugh. But two subjects were taboo. One was jokes on Lyndon Johnson himself, and the other was jokes about the state of Texas. One time I got into trouble when I told him that I thought there wouldn't have been any Texas if there had been a backdoor to the Alamo. I started laughing. He didn't laugh. He didn't think that was funny, not one goddamn bit.

When he was majority leader I took that series of pictures we have of him with /Theodore Francis/ Green. Hugh Sidey told me after he saw my show that he was there as a reporter for *Time* when I made that series. It was an executive session of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. We were allowed in until the chairman called the meeting to order. We were just wandering around, which is the time I always like to work, because you can get candid shots of the senators in action. Hugh Sidey told me that that was the time that LBJ was leaning on Green to give up his chairmanship of the Foreign Relations Committee in favor

William/ Fulbright. He finally persuaded Green to do so. Green was getting way up in age anyway, but I think LBJ lived to regret Fulbright because Fulbright finally had enough of the war in Vietnam and turned around and went after LBJ.

I'll never forget one day I was in making a picture of the Cabinet, and LBJ was sitting there. At the other end of the room by a great big map of Vietnam was a full colonel. He was pointing to the map and giving a briefing on the situation there. And LBJ was just sitting there with his head down, slumped in his chair. Every once in a while he would look up, and drop his head, look up, and drop his head. Finally, when the colonel was finished, he sort of unwound those long legs, and leaned forward, and looked up towards the end of the table, and said, "Shiiiiit." He didn't care for what was being said! I always felt that if anyone was prepared to be president, he was. He knew which buttons to push and how to get legislation done. If he had not been involved in the Vietnamese war, if he had seen his way clear to get out, or if he had won, I think he would have gone down as out-Roosevelting Roosevelt insofar as social programs.

My father always used to say that the reason this country didn't have more trouble is that it's so rich. For all the stealing that's going on, there's still some that trickles down to the little fellow. The surest way to tamper down tempers is to give a little something, give a little bit, which is a technique

we have followed, rather reluctantly, whether we admit it or not, with the blacks in this country, and other minorities. When I was growing up, nobody knew what a Greek was. We were raised in an Irish neighborhood, next to an Irish church practically. The priests came around and were giving the landlord hell for renting to a non-Catholic. They wanted nothing but Catholics in the area. At that time, the priests and the religion were pretty strong, compared to today, particularly among the Irish. We were looked down on. Between the Italians, and the Greeks, and the Jews, and the Syrians, why we were on the level with the blacks, and sometimes one step lower than the blacks.

I'll never forget the heavy drinking by the Irish, and the raising hell. Our neighbors, the mother would wait for the father to come home with his paycheck, and he had already drank it, and there would be yelling and screaming out there in the front. She wouldn't let him in. I'll never forget one Sunday morning, bright and early, our neighbor who was drunk went several doors down to a vacant house and just lay down on the porch and went to sleep. We went over there and he was still sleeping it off, with the flies on him, and smelling to high heaven. My father took me by the hand up there, I was I guess eight or nine, we went on the porch and he pointed down to--I won't give his name--and said to me: "Tute ena Iristi," "This is the Irish." He said, "Never drink, or you'll be like them." It stuck with me. I have never cared for--

I like the effect of booze, one or two drinks and I love everybody. I like the feeling, but by the same token I don't like what it does. I don't think I've drunk a fifth of Scotch a year, when I go to social events and take a drink or two. Well, we're getting off the track.

**RITCHIE:** I'd like to go back, because I've heard a lot about that old Southwest neighborhood. A lot of Smithsonian curators lived there, and regret that that neighborhood was demolished.

**TAMES:** Oh, yes. Around the old War College and Fort McNair, that was a beautiful place. We'd go there and watch the troops parading. Southwest was a rich neighborhood. I just drove past the Washington Monument the last couple of days in the snow and I didn't see one person sleigh riding, and there used to be thousands of kids up there. All the Southwest boys and girls would come there, and all the ones from downtown Washington that still maintained apartments and houses in the area that's all full of government buildings now, and various law offices. And with the Tidal Basin there, I fished the Tidal Basin. The first time I caught a fish in my life I caught it in the Tidal Basin. The Southwest that I remember was a very heavily ethnic neighborhood. The Irish finally moved out, the ones who got money, and the area was filled by Greeks, and Syrians, and Jews. A few of the old houses were still maintained by the Irish, and Germans, but most of the people that I went to Jefferson Junior

High School with were ethnic, as we refer to ethnics today, first generation Americans. We didn't know where we fitted. I'll never forget my father, every time he'd get Teed off at something the U.S. was doing, he'd tell me: "You Americans." He never considered me Greek. "You Americans do this or you Americans do that."

**RITCHIE:** Your father had a pushcart?

**TAMES:** Yes, he was a pushcart peddler. He was right there down at the Agriculture Department, down at 12th and B Street Southwest, which is Independence Avenue now. The streets were cobblestone in those days, and he used to push his pushcart next to the Freer Gallery of Art on 12th Street, where he'd park his little pushcart. I remember as a boy, eight or nine years old, also selling sodas from a newsboy's wagon. I'd put an icebox on it, and put some ice in it and some drinks, and I'd peddle them through the park. But the police didn't like us doing that in those days. They would chase us, or try to arrest us, or whatever. But that's what he did. He was a good man. He was a hard, harsh man, and he could never understand the freedom here, coming from almost a feudal society in Albania. And being a minority in Albania, in the Greek Orthodox Church. Whether our stock is ethnically Greek or Slavic or a mixture of everything is hard to say. The way you tell a Greek today is he proclaims himself a Greek and he goes to the Greek church. Then he's a



Greek, no matter what skin color he's got, or where he comes from, that's it. I'll never forget the first time I ever saw a Greek Orthodox priest out of Uganda, speaking better Greek than I did. He was a priest in the Greek church, missionaries had gone through there.

Yes, my father was a pushcart peddler, and I dropped out of high school in order to go to work. I was lucky to meet a person who was a stringer for Time, Inc. and was able through him to get a job. When he opened up a bureau, I became his office boy. That started me off. A whole new world opened up.

**RITCHIE:** Who was this?

**TAMES:** Harold J. T. Herran, was his name. He just died last year. He hired me as his office boy and told me what to do. He went to a great deal of trouble to hire me, because Time, Inc. didn't want me to be hired because I didn't qualify. I only had a tenth grade education, and they were hiring office boys who were graduates and who had masters' degrees in journalism from Columbia and various other schools. But he kept me on the payroll from the winter of 1938 to the winter of 1939, paying me out of petty cash, eighteen dollars a week. Then in the Christmas of 1939 he finally persuaded them to put me on the payroll.

That was still the Depression. Everybody today keeps talking about displaced persons, the homeless and so forth; we used to call them bums. They were around then, and they're going to be around no matter what you do. There are certain people that just cannot be helped. They love it, or do not do any better. Sometimes I think they really like it, being out there on the grates and begging. I kid with them, I went in the subway the other day at Farragut North and there was a panhandler there, several of them, with signs saying they were hungry. I looked at one guy, and said, "You've been here for two years, are you still hungry?" And as I came up, for the first time I saw one at the Sears, so it looks like they're picking the spots like we used to sell newspapers, when I was a boy. Once somebody staked a claim on some streetcar stop, it was their's. I came up and this bum was holding out his hand, with a sign that said "I'm hungry." I said, "I gave at Farragut North. I can't give at both ends of this thing!"

**RITCHIE:** You said that you worked for Marriott, was that at the old Hot Shoppes?

**TAMES:** Oh, yes. I went to work for Mr. Marriott carhopping on Connecticut Avenue, when he opened up that one on Connecticut Avenue. He had the root beer garden next to the Hot Shoppe. We boys--because I don't remember too many girls at that time, I guess they did have them, but mostly boys--were running

the orders back and forth. He would have the big root beer mugs that they serve the root beer in, iced mugs. We fellows got to be pretty hip to what was happening. Some of the young dudes would bring their girl friends to the Hot Shoppe and sit in the root beer garden and talk and carry on, the way teenagers do. They would carry flasks with them, so when they ordered root beer they'd say: "Two glasses of root beer, please." Then he'd give me a wink, which meant I put ice in the glass, but no root beer. I sell them that, and they'd give me a little tip for that, and they'd pour a little bit of booze in it and sit there and drink it. Well, you know, Mr. Marriott being a Mormon and against that, he would have fired us if he had known. Years later, I guess thirty years or more after I did that, I mentioned it to Mr. Marriott one time, and he just became very angry at me. I thought he was going to disown me, and this happened thirty years earlier!

The other thing we used to do, my friend Frank Aurito and I would work around the kitchen. In those days the Marriott had chickens. He'd cook them en masse and then warm them up as ordered in those ovens. They didn't have the microwave, but would warm them up. These were roasted chickens. Once a week we would steal a chicken and a pound of coffee, coffee was in bags. We alternated. I would take the coffee one time, and he would take the chicken. I'd take the chicken and he'd take the coffee. The reason for that was you had to put the chicken under your coat,

and you couldn't put it in a bag, because it could make noise. You literally got a greasy chicken under your coat, naturally you got some fat on it. We had to alternate anyway. And I told Mr. Marriott about that, and he got very upset. But I must say, I invested in the Marriott Corporation and it's done very well for me.

Yes, I worked for Mr. Marriott. He was part and parcel of the Washington scene, a true blue conservative--I mean a real conservative. A Mormon, one who lives his religion, and I admire people who do.

**RITCHIE:** A strict taskmaster, I gather, as an employer.

**TAMES:** Yes. He mined the University of Utah and got the best people out of it and put them in his corporation. He did very well by them, and they did very well by him. I know the present Marriott, Bill, Junior. I knew them when he was still suckling his mother. They're very fine people.

I've searched back in my mind as far as the members of the House and Senate and maybe it's because I always try to see the best in people, but I can't recall any incidents where some real bad ones were there. Of course there was Joe McCarthy, whatever personal devils were driving him. He was trying to become popular. I'll never forget those speeches he made about Communists and homosexuals in the State Department. He started

getting publicity and got on that treadmill and couldn't get off. As things got tougher, he took to drink. In fact, I've got one of his old flasks in my memorabilia. On the fourth floor of the Russell Building, near the elevator, is a small committee hearing room, where towards the end when he wasn't drawing the crowds that he used to, he would preside over a hearing and he would excuse himself and go into the men's room, which was next to the elevator, and he'd have a flask of booze up on top of the stall. One day, I was by there and looked up and damn if his flask was there. The hearing was not going on, and he was gone, so I went up and got it. I have it back there as part of my memorabilia.

The first time I noticed Joe, Senator McCarthy, was when there was hearing being held by the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Malmedy Massacre, and Joe came and testified in defense of the Germans. They were following orders, he said, you could not fault a colonel or a captain for following orders. Of course, our position was there were some orders you just couldn't follow. This was murder pure and simple. And Joe stomped out of the room on that. Then he picked up the other thing on the homosexuals. The thing I remember more than anything else. When he was being battered by the State Department, that there were not any homosexuals in the State Department, and that he should come up with a list and prove it. I was sitting there listening to this

and realizing that I had it in my power to make Joe a hero and to get him off the hook, because the task force that the State Department had put out to investigate his charges of homosexuals in the State Department, was headed by a homosexual.

Nobody knew it, but the way I knew it was simply because I had subleased an apartment from this man. I subleased an apartment up on Sixteenth and Calvert Street, and I kept the phone that he had. In those days, if you turned in your phone you had to justify needing a phone, because of shortages, so everyone just kept the same phone. And I would get these mysterious phone calls from various people, and sailors knocking on my door at all hours of the night. It doesn't take an Einstein to finally realize what was going on. This man apparently was a practicing homosexual. But I didn't say a word. I sat there, playing God, I guess, and enjoying it, as to whether I should blow the whistle or not.

Then of course there were the Army hearings. He had the Secretary of the Army up and was beating on him. Anyway, Joe had his faults. One of the things that I remember was when one of my photographer friends came to me and said, "Look, we've got a scheme. We can make a lot of money. We need ten photographers to come up with two thousand dollars each." That was an immense amount of money then. "We would go over to Alexandria, south of Alexandria is a piece of swampland that's for sale for half a million dollars. With twenty thousand dollars we can get an

option to buy that land. Then we can go to the federal government and get a loan to build an apartment there. Not only that, we can get a loan of five million dollars, and it's only going to cost four and a half million to build it--and instead of giving the money back to the federal government, we divide the money." The federal government still has a note for five million, see, at two percent or three percent, or whatever it was. I said, "You can't do that." He said, "Yes, because we're going to get ten photographers and Joe McCarthy is going to be our silent partner. He's going to be in on it, as one-eleventh of the ownership. He's going to make all the arrangements to push it through." I just couldn't believe it could be done. My mind just didn't work that way. But it was done by somebody else later.

Joe was very close to the photographers because he was a young senator, bachelor, and we had some bachelor photographers who had been around a good many years, many more years than I had. Particularly one was Henry Griffin of the A.P. He's still around. Then there were a couple of others, and they used to love to play the horses. Joe loved to play the horses, and every time he wanted to make a bet, he would tell one of the boys what horse he wanted, and they would call it in. They would go to the race track quite often together. So he knew the photographers. I don't know whether he came up with this scheme, or one of the photographers came up with it. But Joe was going to see it

done. And the beauty of it was, like I say, that not only did you build it, and own it, but you divided a half a million dollars and you had all this money. A lot of people became multimillionaires doing it. Another lost opportunity.

**RITCHIE:** Could we go back to when you started working for *Time-Life*. What was *Time-Life* back in those days? What was it like to be associated with it?

**TAMES:** Well, the bureau only consisted of six reporters, and they were hired in 1940. When I first started there was just Mr. Herran, and Mary Malloy and myself. Then Robert Sherrod came in. The man is ill, but he still gets around a little bit, and I think he might be a source for you. He was bureau chief for *Time*, Inc. during the war. He shared it with Harold Herran. We were in a brownstone at 1719 K Street. In those days, K Street was all houses, from Union Station to Georgetown. Beautiful old homes with big yards, with wrought iron fences around them. Of course, they were deteriorating, and had been deteriorating during the Depression and had been turned into rooming houses and into offices. Ours was the second floor. It wasn't even painted. We just moved in with a minimum amount of expenditures. My salary at eighteen dollars a week for a five day week was untold riches. And a two week vacation. I never had a vacation in my life.



I didn't know what to do. In fact, the first vacation I had, I hung around the office, I didn't know what to do. What does one do on vacation? I loved the work so much that I just couldn't stay away. We covered the town, but it was a lot easier, because there was a lot less press.

**RITCHIE:** Would assignments come in from New York?

**TAMES:** Oh, yes. They'd come down from New York, or we would generate assignments here and send them up to New York for suggestions. Suggestions for cover stories, and what have you, in fact that's how I got my start. Say we had a cover story pending, the writer would write a suggestion, and then they'd buy the cover story, then he would write it, and then he would also have to arrange with the subject for a photo session, so that the photographer could literally walk around him shooting his head and then send the pictures to New York so the artist could paint him. It was up to the reporter to write that his eyes are blue, and he was wearing a gray coat, and this and this and this. That way the artist could paint him. They hated to do that. Also, they would have to go into the files of the subject's wife and say, "Do you have pictures when he was on the Harvard rowing team?" And all of that, they'd go through the album. Then you'd have to take the album to the office, and have it copied, and bring it back. It was a lot of trouble. So I started suggesting that they give me those jobs, and that I could do it.

Meanwhile, I had bought a camera from Tom McEvoy, and I started making pictures of everybody in the bureau, just walking around. Nobody but nobody told you or gave you any lessons in photography. You had to learn by trial and error yourself. I learned by going in the darkroom and start printing, by watching and observing, and then started shooting. That's how I started. Next thing, I started suggesting stories, and I started trying to write. The way I would write--and I still write--I refer to the rhythm system. If it seems like its flowing, I just go. I was just at a fourth grade school the other day, photographing in Prince George's County, where some black students were being taught the parts of a sentence, and diagraming a sentence. I'm listening to them, and I can't do this today.

Well, I suggested a story one time on a new piece of art at the National Gallery. At that time they must have paid some fabulous sum, like half a million for it, fabulous sum. The gallery put out a release and they had a press conference, so I told the editor maybe I ought to go over. He said, "Go ahead." He didn't care, because in those days, any writer worth his salt who wrote for *Time* Magazine wrote for the front part of the book. Art, music, and leisure, books, all those back of the book sections were jobs for women or fags. Nobody worth his salt would touch that. This was an art story, so they said, "Sure, go ahead." So I went to the gallery, and I knew absolutely nothing

about art, absolutely nothing. Here I am in 1940, twenty years old, going over there, with a tenth grade education, to talk to the curator of the art gallery about a painting. Well, they had the painting up, and there was a press conference. I went just like the others, looked at the painting, put my hands behind my back, and leaned over, and looked at the painting. I didn't know what the hell I was looking at, but I did it just like the rest of them, and I commented. And they were just aflutter that somebody from *Time Magazine* would come there.

I went back and I had to write it. Well, I waited till the next day when the *Washington Post* and the *Star*, particularly the *Star* had a good article on it. I just took that article and sat down and started rewriting it. I only had to write two hundred and fifty words. I went in the files and got out a story that had been written on art by one of the other reporters before. I put it next to my typewriter, and I said, "Well, he's got five words in his first sentence, and he's got three sentences in the first paragraph. That's exactly how I'm going to do." I banged out five or six words there. Then I went to the next paragraph, and it took me all night to write it. I handed it in the next day, and John Denson who was bureau chief said, "Mmm-hmmm," and he took his big pair of scissors and cut into it, and rearranged it, and wrote a new lead on it, and sent it in with my name on it. God bless it, they used it. I went over and made a picture of the

painting, and they used that. They paid me thirty dollars. Fifteen dollars for writing the story and fifteen dollars for the picture. Well, from then on, man, I was a writer and a specialist in art!

Years later, some people commented on my work and said I used the triangular system of composition. I said, "Yes, I do." They said, "This is a Rembrandt technique." I said, "Mmmm-hmmmm." I don't know what the hell Rembrandt's technique was, but I accepted that for what it was worth.

One of the things people have often asked me is, "George, what was the most important picture you ever made?" That's a typical question. Well, I got to thinking, first of all it would have to be politics, because ninety-five percent of my work was here in Washington, and it had to be personalities. I started thinking of the Truman hearings, Watergate, Pearl Harbor, McCarthy, Estes Kefauver crime hearings, joint sessions, and so forth. And also I was there for the declaration of war in December, 1941. I was so young, I was frightened. I was angry, churned up. You just can't describe your feelings: angry at the Japanese, afraid for my country and particularly for myself. I was in the gallery, waiting for President Roosevelt to come up to request a declaration of war. The electricity in the air, you could just feel the tension. You could literally smell the tension. It reminded me of a high school locker room just before

the big game, the tension and the smell of bodies, the scurrying on the floor, and then the president came in and made his big speech. I thought, maybe that was it.

Then I thought no, inasmuch as I am a great one for theatre and I love grand gestures, it would have to be General MacArthur's farewell speech to the nation and the Congress to a joint session, for the sheer drama. Up until Colonel North, MacArthur held the great dramatic incident by any member of the armed services before the Congress. But he held the Congress for only one hour, whereas North went day after day, and managed to keep the Senate and the House on the ropes. As I recall, Joe Martin was the minority leader then, and he had arranged for MacArthur to speak. The tension was rising high. He was a proconsul, a hero, and that damned Truman had fired him. So we all went into Joe Martin's office because the *Times* wanted to do a story on Joe, and the preparations for the great visit. He hit the West Coast and came east like a Roman proconsul; every stop he made was even more of a celebration, the honors, just like a triumphant Caesar coming into Rome. Joe Martin was beside himself trying to figure out how to greet him when he came in at the airport, and what could we do.

So I'm in there with him, and I'm teasing him. I said, "I've got a great idea. What we should do, is he's going to come across the Anacostia, over the John Philip Sousa bridge, because he's going to land at Andrews Air Force Base." I said, "What you

should do is get a barge and load it up with some old, stale wine that they can't sell and pull it up into the Anacostia, and the moment the signal is given that he's coming, you just start pouring all the wine into the river, so it will be a purple vista as he comes across, befitting a proconsul." Joe said, "Aw, no, no. That won't do." So I said, "Well, I'll tell you what we can do then: we'll line up the members of the House and Senate on both sides of the bridge. We'll have them up on platforms, a little bit higher, and when he comes by, in his car, all the members will unzip and urinate a golden arch which the General can go under." He said, "I'm not in any mood for humor!"

Anyway, I made a few other suggestions, just to break the tension and get him to laugh, but he was not in the mood to laugh. He was really serious about this.

Then the great day came, and I was in the gallery photographing him, and he was really laying it on. I always felt that the way the Congress was, that all he had to do was say, "Follow me!" And they would have marched out of the chamber and walked down to the White House and stormed the gates. He was giving his speech, and all of a sudden he said, "Old soldiers never die, they just fade away. And it's time for this old

soldier. . . " And the House erupted, with senators and congressmen jumping up and shouting: "Don't go!" "We love you!" "Oh, no!" "Damn that Truman!" "Don't you go!" "We'll back you!" Finally he rolled his head up and said, "Old soldiers never die, they just fade away." And he just faded away.

We all went down afterwards to get photos of him leaving, and Joe Martin was there, and he gathered around the reporters, and one of the reporters asked him, "How did it go?" Joe Martin was a little short fellow with a round face, and he had a little grin just like a kewpie doll. He said, "Well, boys, there's only one thing I can say: there wasn't a dry eye on the Democratic side, and there wasn't a dry seat on the Republican side." So I think that was probably the most dramatic event that I covered, for sheer political drama. The general played that to the hilt, and that was his greatest moment. From then on he went downhill, including when he tried to run for the presidency and was defeated.

You know, we never know when to quit. We say we know when to quit, and I'd like to think I knew when to quit. The *Times* wanted me to stay on, but I decided forty years to the day was a nice dramatic way of departing. They said, "Can't you stay on a little longer?" I said, "Well, what can I do with this president that I haven't already done?" Of course, what with the television today, masses of press, it's hard to work. It's hard to get next to

someone. Everything is put on. Everything is acting. Everything is done for the camera. I see so much of that now, both in the Congress and outside the Congress. We're all acting.

I remember a comment by Harry Truman to me when I was in photographing him on the anniversary of his first year as president. Mr. /Arthur/ Krock had written a piece for the Magazine of the *Times* for which Mr. Krock received the Pulitzer--because you didn't get interviews with the president in those days the way you do today, when every other person interviews the president. I mentioned to him in passing, since we were talking, that I had been up to the organization of the U.N. at Hunter College, and that I had seen television for the first time in my life. I said, "Mr. President, that is really something." The main auditorium was too small to accommodate everyone, so they had these satellite rooms set aside with these TV screens. And I said, "Do you know, you could see better and hear better than if you were on the floor. Not only that, Mr. President, what struck me more than anything else was that members, and politicians have got to learn that they're on camera all the time." I saw some of those people doing some very personal things, scratching their crotch and picking their nose. He said, "Yep. It used to be to be a successful politician one had to have seventy-five percent ability and be twenty-five percent actor. I can see the day when that all could be reversed."



So, finis!

**RITCHIE:** Well, thank you. I'll be back next week with a transcript, and I thought we could talk more about some of the members of Congress you knew and photographed, and to look through some of your photographs as well.

**TAMES:** Okay.

End of Interview #1