

Lawrence O. Houstoun Interview on Robert B. and Helen S. Meyner

Diane Shaw (DS): Today is May 3, 2013. A contingent of Lafayette College folk are here [Philadelphia] with Larry Houstoun, Lawrence O. Houstoun, Jr., Lafayette Class of 1952. With Larry here are Professor John Kincaid, Director of the Meyner Center for the Study of State and Local Government, and Danielle Moran, Class of 2015 at Lafayette, and I'm Diane Shaw, Director of Special Collections and College Archivist at Lafayette. We are really grateful to you Larry for being willing to meet with us.

Lawrence Houstoun (LH): I'm going to digress right at the beginning. The woman [his wife] in the other room was a cabinet officer in two states [New Jersey and Pennsylvania] under two governors.

DS: I was glad John was going to be able to meet Feather because she really does embody, she has had a remarkable career, so we are delighted that she's here too.

DS: Larry, we were hoping that you would talk a little bit about yourself and give us a quick biography and include a little bit on your Lafayette years.

LH: Just for nothing, I've got three sections in my notes. One is personal about Governor Meyner; the second is political; and the third is government accomplishments in his term. I worked in his [Meyner's] administration as a very young person for seven years, and I put a note there that he was renowned for the fact that he encouraged young people. He had a great record for encouraging young people in government and taking them into his administration. I noted, going through here that two people that nominated me to this post are listed here, each one of them as secretary to the governor sequentially, Ed [Edwin C.] Landis, and, I was about to say, Brendan Byrne, but I think Brendan had a different job after. Anyway, I was briefly the interim press secretary for the governor, which gave me some interesting experience, but wasn't very important to the Republicans.

DS: Larry, was that during the first term, the second term, or both?

LH: I don't remember. His first press secretary someone or other had a national search and he came in and set up shop with a really nice man, Ralph Coughlan [Succeeded by John Farley.] The problem with Ralph was that it was always party time. He had a Pulitzer, which I guess sold him to Meyner, but he had a drinking problem. And since I had some literary experience and knew the government at that point, he [Meyner] tapped me to be press secretary for a while. And I discovered that I wasn't a good press secretary; so I didn't want to continue. Anyway, those were the three notes for myself. The personal stuff for Meyner...

DS: Yes, how did you meet Governor Meyner first?

LH: Well, in a strange way, because although he was a retired naval officer, and I think he fought the whole war [World War II], he was sort of a left-wing pacifist--slightly left wing, very slightly. The first time I met him, he was new in office, and I was old in office. I had to find something to do because I hadn't worked for a living in two years, in 24 months. I thought it

would never be over. So I wrote him a letter at the end. I was on the beach in a sense, with no prospects whatsoever. Probably didn't think I would ever get a reply, but I sent him a letter--and this got to be a thing later--and I said in the letter that I was looking for work. He never forgot anybody, and he saw the name and he knew my father. So I come in, in full uniform for a quick interview, and he'd already figured out what to do with me. He put me under Carl Holderman. Carl Holderman was the former head [president] of the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations], which made him a little left-of-center, too. And, in fact, it was a controversial appointment. Carl Holderman was a saint. Died in office. I must have been in his department for five years, wonderful, wonderful man. I learned everything good about the trade union movement and none of the bad things. That's how I met him.

The Star Ledger was the number two paper in the state. The number one paper is one that doesn't exist anymore, *The Newark Evening News*. The *Ledger* tended to go to the lower ranks, and so when I came on board there was an article, "If Meyner's having trouble with his patronage jobs, they should all write to him because this young man got a job." I didn't spend much time with him that first year, but he was a state-wide personality in a lot of different ways: he was young, handsome and unmarried. When he got out of, I think it was Columbia Law School, before the navy, [Meyner] went to work in Hudson County with a Union City law firm, and that was a contact that served him well. Most of the time [during his life], his practice was in Phillipsburg. But in the beginning, when he was a young fellow, his firm was in Union City. I remember he had commented one time on about how did he escape the tar that a clean government guy would want to have. And he said of the boss of the county at that time, I never had any problems; he never asked for anything that was impossible. We got along fine. So he never had the kind of split that Hudson County machine could have easily produced.

John Kincaid (JK): So that was Frank Hague wasn't it?

LH: No, I think that was two later.

JK: Two later, was that Kenny, or the one after?

LH: I think it was Kenny. [Meyner was not much involved in politics when he lived in Hudson County. He was elected to the New Jersey Senate from Warren County in 1947 and supported Kenny over Hague in 1949.]

JK: Because Hague was in office until '49, and then John V. Kenny defeated him in the '49 election.

LH: He never asked for anything outrageous, summarizing I think it was John Kennedy. He [Meyner] was first-generation immigrant family. His parents came from some obscure part of Switzerland, I think the Catholic part; they worked in the mills in Patterson. Patterson was the center of the silk-mill industry. And they came down to Phillipsburg and they both worked there. Meyner himself worked in the mills at one point. In effect, he had working class parents. Whereas he was not a liberal in the sense of Adlai Stevenson, for example, he did alright. The AFL were Republicans, and they couldn't do anything, but the CIO backed him, especially Holderman, and he appointed Holderman for the cabinet. I'm digressing too much. Young,

unmarried, handsome--much of the early discussion about him was, "who was he dating?" At one point, it was Margaret Truman.

DS: Larry, did he actually date Grace Kelly? That's on your website. That he dated Grace Kelly.

LH: I don't think so. That's one for Wikipedia; I don't think so. It would have been interesting, though. He was known; he was a pretty good speaker; he worked hard to win that election. And he became known, among other things, for his puns. He liked word play. One I can remember was when he was running against Paul Troast (in the '53 gubernatorial race), and the line I can recall was "Troast for breakfast, Meyner for governor." The cornier the pun was, the more he loved it. He kept up his [military] reserve status, and during that period, he called me in early one morning. He was in full uniform with his cap, his white cap, and while we didn't even discuss it, I figured it was my responsibility to tell the entire press once they got into work and they did and made the great photo. I'm going to do this faster.

LH: Political. He was known coming in as a crime fighter, and he went out of his way to cut waste. One of the minor scandals that he ignited was the Joint Toll Bridge Commission. They apparently had a solid silver tea set meant for the staff; he made much of that, the Joint Toll Bridge Commission. He became a crime fighter really because the Republicans under [Alfred E.] Driscoll, nobody ever said Driscoll was a [unintelligible] he was and they were pretty careless about what their people said. There was always something to pick on. [According to Edwin C. Landis, Meyner generally respected Driscoll and thought he was a good governor.]

DS: In regard to crime, was some of his role in dealing with organized crime?

LH: No, not really. His MO was: find it out before the press does and reveal it. And he did, in the auto industry. I don't know how he got this story, but the head of the inspection service turned out to have a sweetheart deal whereby he got all the reports, came to me, and we found that he was charging the inspectors for their work. And the private inspection agencies had a good thing going up until that. I remember sitting in on a press conference one time, I don't know which one of these things it was, a minor scandal, the question was: "How are you going to prevent something like this thing from happening again". And he [Meyner] could get up on his high horse, and said, "You can't! There are no rules you can use to prevent this thing. The way to prevent it was to appoint men and women of integrity to positions of public trust." And that was the end of that discussion. Just put better people in. In 1960, he was on the cover of *Time* magazine. That helped fuel the Meyner-for-president movement, and in fact he made it serious. Well, it was serious for him. It wasn't for the Kennedys; they swamped him. He got recorded votes for president in the '60 election.

DS: Larry, what was the reason that he was on the cover of *Time*?

LH: Promising young fellow, already elected. If Henry Luce didn't cause it to happen, it wouldn't have happened. [Luce had a country estate in New Jersey about five miles north of Malcolm Forbes's estate.] Second election, second term, along those lines, the legislature required a new senator for Somerset county, Malcolm Forbes [served in New Jersey Senate 1951-1957]. Forbes had more money than anybody else, and he had name recognition, and it

never came out until later but that was a first step for a Forbes-for-president election. And he did alright, but Meyner beat him. He never got a chance and, I think, he resigned from the legislature.

New Jersey has the most powerful governor. I can appreciate that sitting here over in Pennsylvania. We might have a couple of bums over here, but the rule around the country is “don’t have strong governors”; they don’t want strong governors; I mean the parties don’t want strong governors, so it never gets into their constitution. It’s an idealistic people who ran the constitutional convention in New Jersey, and whatever good trick they heard about, that’s what they put in. If you don’t like what the governor has done, throw them out, but don’t go around nickel and diming every prosecutor and judge; that’s not accountability. This state is not much better than the southern states. Everything is on the ballot, and everybody is on the ballot. Sometimes you get good people and sometimes you don’t.

LH: Working in the Meyner campaign could be fun. Running in the second election, they had something they had done before, which was “Ask Governor Meyner.” Channel 13 was barely alive, but it was the only thing that was doing anything about New Jersey at all. He had and I don’t think he missed three of them. He had Governor Meyner’s weekly report. Some of the worst television imaginable. But as I used to say, “Where can you speak to three thousand viewers once a week?” He thought it was worthwhile and maybe it was. And we had some fun. They would have an all-day call-in show, “Ask Governor Meyner.” Well 10-12 hours of questions believe it or not would call in. But he would call on some people to liven the thing up a bit. And they would go off the air about 11:00 at night and Forbes bought the time immediately after this program of Meyner’s for a rebuttal. And so the plan was, and it worked, Meyner’s program went off 10 minutes to 11, and they played music. They played “The Star-Spangled Banner” and they had the flag waving. And I’m told that Malcolm Forbes was eating his microphone. But he [Meyner] had a sense of humor.

LH: Last section: what did he do as governor? I don’t know; this seems to be out of order, but if you don’t like the way the governor is running the state, vote him out. There was another funny thing happened. When the governor was out of state, the acting governor – and we had no shortage of these – the acting governor was the president of the state Senate, I think. When he went to the Far East, I think, or when he went back in the Reserves, so he was gone for a couple of weeks. Part of the game was the staff hid everything. There was nothing he [the acting governor] could put his name on. And, on the other hand, when the Democrats controlled the Senate, he would drive over to Pennsylvania, and because he was out of state you see, and then for a day or two he would let one of his own have fun, and have on his record acting governor. The big issue in my view, I think, was water, and we got a few reservoirs out of that, but it was an undercurrent of everything. Round Valley [Reservoir], I forget. These things are still holding water. Either it wasn’t such a crisis as everybody thought it was.

JK: This is a question of supply? The water, you are talking about the supply? Not necessarily the cleanliness of the water, the issue was the supply?

LH: Yeah, you know you can drink out of the Delaware on the other reaches of the river. I used to canoe up there. And that’s because there’s no dams. And when Tocks Island was proposed,

that would have been the first dam, and that was a flooding issue, but it wasn't under his watch. Recreation land, I think his record on acquisition of pristine land has been neglected. The Worthington Tract was from the Delaware Water Gap up to Stokes State Park. Sunset Pond [Lake] is a plus and was on top of that. Island Beach – 10 miles of ocean waterfront. In these cases, I don't know who was organizing this stuff; maybe it fell in his lap. But these were all pieces of vast tracts of land that wealthy people had for 1500 years. You could write it off as a tax thing, I don't know. But, anyway, those two--the Water Gap on the one hand and Island Beach on the other, I remember when we were sort of exploring Island Beach, and we couldn't believe that here was this thing that didn't smell like most of the Jersey shore. He [Meyner] had no children, which was an important characteristic. Helen had a pregnancy during the third run for governor. I don't think they can do that anymore.

JK: Do what anymore?

LH: Have a third run for governor.

JK: It depends on the state and their term limits.

LH: No, no I am just talking about New Jersey. But the hand-down rule, at that time was, you could have two terms and pause and not have any, not going to run again for, I think, eight years. And he reminds me of [Frank] Lautenberg [U.S. senator from New Jersey, 1982-2001 and 2003-2013]. I think he just got bored with not being governor, so he made the third run. [William T.] Cahill beat him [Cahill served as New Jersey governor 1970-1974]. I think in large measure was that Meyner was no longer a fresh item. It wasn't anything bad particularly. The electorate gets tired of people after a while. That's all I've got.

DS: Well thank you. We have some follow up, if we may, to some of that. That was a great. We appreciate all of that down. And walking us through that.

LH: I have to say it was a pleasure.

DS: Good.

LH: I remembered things...

JK: That you thought you had forgotten?

LH: Yeah.

DS: Larry, Danielle typed out your remarks from the dedication of the Meyner Center, and we all read those. And those quite moving things you said about Meyner being your hero. But there were things in that, but it was very short, I mean I know you all were probably told to be brief. But there were some things in there that were really interesting to me. One was your mention of Meyner's attempts to be fair to all races. And I wondered if you could talk about Governor Meyner and the issue of race. And the things he may have done or said about that issue.

LH: Well that was a long time ago. No, he didn't make the first appointment of a black man to New Jersey state government; he did not. It was considered precedent breaking that he appointed a woman to be commissioner on aging. But I would describe him as fair. In 1954, New Jersey had to open several schools that had been shut down for segregation. And we were at least half a southern state. And I would put that under the category that he was fair. And that's the best I can do.

JK: Do you recall if he made desegregation an issue or pushed it?

LH: No. I'm just trying to indicate what was the tenor of the times. And the tenor of the times was that the Witherspoon school in Princeton was the black school and that was that. And the further down you went, there wasn't any white schools. And it's hard to put these things in today's . . .

JK: He made many advances in the area of environmental protection. It seems to me that he was a pioneer in that area and conservation. Can you talk a little more about that?

LH: The two biggest things were Island Beach and the Worthington Tract. He expanded the public domain substantially, and I underscored that because whoever it was the lead speaker at that

DS: Rubenstein, the lead speaker at the Meyner Center.

JK: Rosenthal you mean, from Rutgers?

DS: Rosenthal, that's right. Alan Rosenthal was the keynote.

LH: He [Meyner] didn't waste money, his own or the public's, but I never thought that was a determining factor of his administration. I think acquiring and starting major pieces of the natural environment was more important.

JK: Was he active in economic development and redevelopment? By that point of time, we had the cities were declining, Newark and Jersey City.

LH: They hadn't declined. I remember there were two hotels in Camden, and we had meetings in both of them, and now they are shells. Likewise Newark. The issues were different. It was water not racism.

DS: He was very involved in education.

LH: So I've read. I remember the education commissioner. He was a holdover as I recall. I can't think of his name off hand and he played tennis with Meyner. But I either was not in a position to note that, but I don't think that was a big issue either, and just because it is in Wikipedia doesn't mean it is right.

DS: You often think of transportation issues when you think of New Jersey. And I know he was

pretty involved with some of those decisions wasn't he?

LH: He had no reason to do anything else but keep those highways going. As I recall, the first grants to railroads to keep commuter service going occurred under Meyner. I could be wrong about that.

DS: And the turnpike was finished during Meyner?

LH: No, before. That may have been a section around Cape May; it probably happened during his term because I remember it.

DS: I read that he was originally against the turnpike. I think he didn't like the idea of having toll takers.

LH: Could be, but that would have been while I was still in uniform. I wasn't reading the papers.

JK: But you worked for him for seven years? You were press secretary. And what other roles were you in the administration?

LH: I was the deputy in the department of labor and industry and I was director of the rehabilitation commission. It's taught me that government is not a snap.

DM: Can you talk a little bit about Helen?

LH: We were talking about who Meyner would wed, and she was the big secret. She was Adlai Stevenson's niece as I recall. [She was a second or third cousin.] And Adlai Stevenson was an important figure at that time. The state was gaga over this brunette marrying the governor. I remember I had invited them to a meeting I had organized and people were fighting for chairs. She was either a quick learner or an instinctively good politician. She made the transition by being someone that was interviewed on television. Slightly interesting, she and Governor Meyner represented much of the same territory at different times. He came out of the state Senate with the top three or four counties that were lightly populated. She ran for Congress somewhat later and represented at least two of those. I don't remember why, I was out of government, as I recall, she called and asked me to represent her when she was in Congress and she couldn't make a speaking date, and I don't know when it was. I drove all the way over to Hackettstown, I guess it was, and gave the speech. Politics was easygoing in this state.

DS: Did you follow her political career as a congresswoman?

LH: A little bit. I knew her as well as anyone that was in the Meyner administration. We were all pretty close. We were delighted, everybody was to see these things. Three other guys from my time, two of whom apparently fingered me, Landis and Byrne.

DS: [Edwin] Landis and Brendan Byrne.

LH: And that was another example of that thing I said earlier about helping young people along.

But Helen was the big secret. I didn't know the name anymore than anybody else.

DS: And she was quite an asset to him.

LH: Oh yeah, no question.

DS: Our collection contains wonderful materials of her time in Korea before she met ... with the Red Cross and we are trying to get those letters made available. They are wonderful, wonderful letters. Danielle had worked with them and has had a very high opinion of Helen Meyner, as do we all.

JK: Can we ask you a little bit about your own life and your biography, and where you come from, and what are your memories of Lafayette?

LH: Well, let's see, it was assumed in my family that I would go to Lafayette. I just had to make sure that I could get in. My father and my uncle had gone there. It was a family kind of school. One of the things Meyner liked about me was I succeeded him as editor of *The Lafayette*. Anybody who could do that was on the winning side. Landis, on the other hand, was only managing editor. Meyner had no compunction about reminding him that he didn't make first team.

DS: That's good, that's very good. We do need to interview Ed Landis, and we will save that tidbit for him. Did you major in government?

LH: Yes.

DS: But you had Al Gendebien as a student?

LH: I took more history. Much of the government was okay.

DS: Who was teaching at the time in government?

LH: Pfretzschner [Paul A.] and that's about the best I can do. There were probably about four professors at that time.

JK: Did you go to graduate school for city planning?

LH: Yes, but about a decade and a half later. I got a fellowship to Princeton and finished a lot of credits there, and when I wasn't there, I was working in the federal government. I went to Catholic University of America. That has been a puzzling combination for other people. It was very convenient.

DS: Do you remember the very first time you met Meyner? Was it when you went to his office in your uniform?

LH: No, it was probably for coffee.

DS: On campus probably?

LH: No, somebody says they want to help, and they say well do a coffee; so they get all their friends and let him pour his charm on them. I got a priceless picture of him I think at one of those coffees. My grandfather, god, he must have been my age at the time. And they took the picture and used it in the campaign. Alexander J. Houstoun is supporting Robert B. Meyner. It was priceless.

JK: Were you in touch with Bob and Helen in the later years of their lives, long after they were out of government?

LH: Yes and no. He was retraining himself for a subsequent career and I didn't know that he could run for a third time. But he did. And I was in Washington and I remember calling Ed Landis and saying, "Look, I got \$50 riding on this, is he going to win?" And he said "Yea!" but Ed and I always got along.

JK: Did he continue political involvement after leaving the governorship, or other civic involvements?

LH: Not much. Tennis.

DS: Well, he was involved in the cigarette advertising code. Did you talk to him much about that?

LH: No, I remember being in a meeting with then a Secretary of Health Education and Welfare for the US government, probably during the Republican years, and my question was essentially this, "Your head of the Public Health Service has said that these things will kill you and they are very bad things," and I got the mushiest answer.

JK: Did he smoke himself?

LH: Yeah. I think I am one of the only "non-ever smokers" people I know. Ah people suspected hell in World War I; there was a song about it. I'm not sure I can call it up. But it was in World War I: "if the Germans don't get you, the cigarettes will." There was a lot of money involved in that.

DS: We ended up with his files on the cigarette advertising code, and he was the administrator of the code [for six years], which was basically the cigarette makers policing themselves and their advertising. But the advertising, that they were all reviewing, has been destroyed so that part is not in the, there are a couple things in there like the Crisis Diary and some tantalizing things in the files. Larry, I wanted to go back to something you spoke very eloquently about at the dedication.

LH: I had a script.

DS: You had a script that you wrote, I'm sure. Something that Meyner undoubtedly had to deal with because of the time period that's McCarthyism and the threat of it to society. Were there things that he had to do in New Jersey? How did that affect?

LH: This guy was a tough guy.

DS: You mean McCarthy? You mean, Joe McCarthy.

LH: No, Meyner.

DS: Meyner was a tough guy.

LH: I don't remember. I can't come up with anything.

DS: What I liked was in your speech you quoted Meyner's commencement address to the Class of '54, I think it was. I think he was our commencement speaker in '54 and he spoke eloquently about the threat of McCarthyism. I have one last question, and we can what else you guys want to ask. I want to hear a little bit more about the 1960 presidential election and his role there. You always hear that he kept Kennedy from being put over on the first ballot because he didn't release his New Jersey delegates because he was their "favorite son" candidate. But I guess others were involved in that with him. Perhaps Lyndon Johnson?

LH: Burkhart [Robert J., Executive Secretary to Governor Meyner, 1954-1962].

DS: Bob Burkhart who was really his chief of staff?

LH: At some points, but he was really the head politician.

DS: I read that Stuart Symington and Lyndon Johnson were both involved with Meyner in trying to keep Kennedy . . .

LH: Probably so. There was the wonderful event early in '60 at one of the big hotels in Washington for all of those who were serious candidates for president. And there were seven, something like that, who were invited to speak. It was a great idea because people could see the great of range of what was there. Who the hell could remember Symington? I thought the guy who won that match of whatever it was, seven or nine, was [Hubert] Humphrey. Humphrey was a hell of a speaker. Meyner was not. He was okay; he'd keep the ball moving.

DS: Did that affect his relationship with John Kennedy after the election?

LH: Yes. That froze it. All the way down to me. I couldn't think of anything better for the next eight years than to be with Kennedy. And the guy who interviewed me made it clear that he thought I was less than Troast. And a friend of mine, an assistant secretary of commerce, something like that, he brought me in.

DS: I did read that Kennedy offered Meyner some ambassadorships, but Meyner wouldn't take

them. I wonder if they were really small places. You don't remember that do you?

LH: No. And I'm inclined to think it never happened. Kennedy people, they were tough as hell. Unforgiving folks.

DS: Kennedy and Meyner shared their religious denomination. They were both Catholics. Did Meyner ever reflect on his Catholicism around you? What was your impression of what kind of role ...

LH: I had to be told. I remember the priest at the funeral. I couldn't imagine Meyner ever making peace in this life; he was wild. And Meyner was not a fellow to be pushed around. You could have it both ways in those days. But I doubt it. I'm just skeptical of it.

DS: Larry, we thank you so much for spending this time with us. We are so grateful and thankful to have your memories.

LH: I'm glad I still got memories.

DS: We are too.

LH: I had fun going through, trying to remember things. There were several times where I said, "If I could only call Landis."

DS: It's good to have this interview with you and to see you again.

JK: We appreciate you taking the time.

LH: Thank you.

Interviewers

JK: John Kincaid – Robert B. and Helen S. Meyner Professor of Government and Public Service and Director of the Meyner Center for the Study of State and Local Government, Lafayette College

DM: Danielle Moran – Student at Lafayette College, Class of 2015

DS: Diane Shaw – Director of Special Collections and College Archivist, Lafayette College

Acknowledgment

We thank Edwin C. Landis for his generous gift in support of the oral history project that produced this interview.