Brian Robertson: Okay, I am Brian Robertson and I am conducting an oral interview with Edward Nixon. It is November 14, 2005. I am in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. Nixon is in Lynnwood, Washington. And how are you today Mr. Nixon?

Edward Nixon: Here we are, reflecting. It’s time to reflect when you get to a certain age, and I guess I’ve reached it. (Chuckle)

BR: Right, right. First off, I thought I’d ask you about your father. There seems to be a lot of different descriptions of what Frank Nixon was like. I’ve read that he’s stern. I’ve also read that he could be a gentle man, as well. I thought I’d ask you. What was Frank Nixon like as a person?

EN: Well, it’s a good question because there are many, many varying descriptions of his personality and his character and most of them never get it quite right. I probably couldn’t get it right myself, except that I do have some vivid memories.

BR: Ah.

EN: Frank Nixon was born in 1878, which is a while ago. He was not a very happy child, although he was able to smile about anything by hearing stories and then repeating stories of the funny things that happened in rural life in southern Ohio. But what he got out of it was after his mother died when he was seven years old, he came to California after doing a number of various jobs. Always working and refusing to take any handouts from anybody. And when he got to California he found plenty of work.
One of the things he had done in Ohio before leaving there was running a streetcar in Columbus. So he came to Whittier, California, and worked as an operator of the old Red Line. The Pacific Electric Streetcars that ran between Los Angeles and Whittier and Santa Fe Springs and all over southern California. In the course of that he was still a religious man, raised as a Methodist, but not particularly inclined to show allegiance to any particular human religion. He chose to go to church after church. Wound up one day in a friend’s church in Whittier where my grandfather had—let’s see, there were six daughters, ranging from eleven to probably twenty-four, and my mother was one of them. She was, I think she was nineteen or twenty, twenty-one maybe at that age, when they met. And he asked if he could take her home and walk her home and she agreed. Of course, that gave him a chance to meet the entire family. It was something that he recalled with bellow. It ever left his memory how they met and the fact that she agreed to walk home with him. In these days, I don’t know if that would happen. But back then, humans were a little more caring about other humans, it seems, although there’s wild ones in every generation. When they got to raising a family, started in Whittier, Harold was born. Then they moved out to Yorba Linda. My dad tried to plant a lemon grove on ten acres on land that was described as ideal for citrus. Came to find out in a few years that it was definitely not that. It was much too exposed to the cold air coming down Santa Anna Canyon. And in those days you either had to have plenty of money to run smudge pots to keep the trees warm or you lost it all. The citrus farm didn’t work out, so he worked himself back into jobs of various sorts. Finally moved back to Whittier and while they were living in Yorba Linda, Richard Nixon was born in 1913 on a very cold January night. And he is the only one of the five brothers who was born in that little house, which is now the birthplace and site of the museum. The Nixon Library and Museum.

BR: Right. They still have the bed there, don’t they, that he was born in?

EN: Yeah, it’s all been restored and they actually took the old house up off its foundation, put in a new foundation, let it back down, refurbished inside and out. I’m sure if my father were alive while they were doing that, he would have been shocked at how much money they were spending. He was a very frugal man and he had to be. In those days, you didn’t waste a dime.
EN: You would make whatever. That conservatism in his work habit, his ethic, was to avoid taking any kind of charity if he was still able-bodied. He said, “I’ll work for it. But don’t give me anything unless I earn it.” And that philosophy passed on to all of us in a sense that there were certain things that were inevitable in the course of the last hundred years. But we resisted to the extent that we keep ourselves strong enough to take care of ourselves and our own. He was a generous man, though. This didn’t mean that he didn’t sympathize with people who were destitute and really on the down and out. And he was always generous and charitable to anybody in great need. But he felt that if they could work, he’d give them something to work on and pay them for it. If he had a job, he could always find somebody willing to work. Frank Nixon was misrepresented in many ways, saying that his brashness, his boldness, his sternness—in those days, a slap on the fanny was not considered anything crazy at all. It was to get the attention of someone not paying attention. And he got our attention many times with a good swat on the butt. There was also I think—who is that one that you introduced me to, Fawn Brodie and her—?

BR: Oh, yeah.

EN: Is about as ludicrous as anything I’ve ever read, and I haven’t read it all because couldn’t wade through the mud.

BR: Right.

EN: On the other hand, there are those who did listen to other family members before they wrote anything. And the best of them, of course, was Jonathan Aitkin who interviewed all the family members who were willing to talk to him. That’s the only biographer that did that. Others did a pretty good job, but they too often branched off into psychobabble and tried to figure out why things were as they were.

BR: Right.

EN: Usually missing the point. My mother’s influence is another story. The contrast between the two, I think, is what made Richard Nixon the man he became. As well as the environment of the times: the Great Depression, the Roaring Twenties jumping into the Great Depression. Losing two brothers in the course of the early years made him the elder son. Of course, I came along very late in the game. And he was
seventeen years older than I and therefore was a bit of a second father to me in many ways. As was my brother Don, who was fifteen years older. But we came through those early ‘30s and launching in toward World War II with a great many friends who respected what we did and mainly because we respected what they did. People who were willing to work were the most respectable of all. And that’s not to say everybody isn’t willing to work, but too many fall into that welfare trap. If it’s there, they’ll take it and try to get along on it instead of doing a little more to get ahead.

BR: Right. Another question I had about your father was, I don’t know, what were his political affiliations? Because you know that the parties were much different back in the ’20s, ’30s, and ’40s than they are today.

EN: They were different back at the turn of the century, as well. In fact, in [1896,] my dad often told the story about his break from the Democrat traditions in his own family when he was in charge of, the owner of a very, very beautiful palomino stallion. And I don’t know what town it was, Zanesville or Logan, or one of those towns in Ohio. At the time when William McKinley was running for office, and McKinley’s parade was getting ready to launch through the town and my dad’s horse was, the one he was caring for, it wasn’t his horse, but it was a beautiful stallion. He had it all curried out, brushed and combed and soaped down, and McKinley came along in his carriage. As he passed Frank Nixon he said, “Young man, that’s about the most beautiful horse I’ve ever seen. I would like you to ride right up behind my carriage. Would you do that?” And my dad said, “Of course, I’d be very happy to, sir.” And McKinley said, “Now when you’re going to vote, are you going to vote Republican?” And my dad said, “Yes, sir.”

BR: (Laughs)

EN: And that’s the first break into that run. He didn’t really know what a Republican was at the age of eighteen. And he wasn’t quite that then, I guess, because he would’ve been eighteen on December 3, [1896.] And even then, there wasn’t an eighteen year old vote in those days. So it took him a while to make his first vote, which must have been for Teddy Roosevelt.

BR: Right.
EN: That’s the story of how Frank Nixon became a Republican and bolted the family party, so to speak.

BR: (Laughs)

EN: Many of the family then followed him in the ranks when they realized what direction it took through the next three decades.

BR: Right. Another question I had about your father was he seemed like he was a very fair man. He would support labor at times when he thought that labor deserved support. And at other times when he thought that maybe they were disingenuous, he wouldn’t, you know, support its cause. But didn’t he organize some sort of boycott while he was working for the streetcar company?

EN: Yes. Speaking of labor and business, he always noted that labor is what makes a business run. But the business wouldn’t have jobs if they weren’t healthy, as well. So, he was always alert to the challenge of keeping business healthy and profitable so that they could hire more people and pay them well. The streetcar incident when he was running the streetcar in Columbus, Ohio, there weren’t any vestibules. And the motormen was standing right up there in some bitter winter weather sometimes and freezing their feet. There was nothing to be done about it except maybe close the vestibules and it wouldn’t have been that difficult a thing to do. So he organized a campaign, I don’t know if it was a boycott. But he said, “We will support the candidate who enacts legislation or brings about some kind of an act of legislation to require that the vestibules on streetcars have a closed vestibule, so that the motormen can be protected from the elements on bitter winter days.” Well, I don’t think that they got it done before he left Columbus. But the man he was supporting promised to do that and he was elected. And shortly afterward, those streetcars were remodeled a bit and modified slightly enough to get them a warm spot for the motormen’s feet. And he felt good about that. That was an accomplishment from the grassroots, so to speak. When it came to business though, he really resented government from a very high level outside the local realm trying to dictate how a business should be run. That especially became true in the 1930s when they began imposing all kinds of regulations. And especially after World War II got underway and they would send them messages from the Department of Agriculture on how a grocer should market an old hen or how they should cook an old
hen. I don’t know what it was. Anyway, this little brochure came out from the Department of Agriculture and Frank Nixon in his rustic way, reacted in maybe unseemly fashion. But he wrote on that little piece of flyer. He wanted to have the name of the person that designed this and required this to be sent out at great government expense to all the grocers in the country. And Dick saw it before it went out and asked him, “Dad, why are you going send that? That won’t do any good.” He says, “Well, I want them to send back a picture so that I can flush it down my toilet.”

BR: (Laughs)

EN: That’s what he thought of government control from exterior sources.

BR: That’s pretty good. Well, another question I had is what was anti-communism like in Whittier when you were growing up?

EN: Well, Whittier is a conservative little town in the sense that there are churches on every block, I think. And the philosophy that prevailed was we took care of our own. We don’t need government to organize and take care of us. That’s the fundamental part. Socialism, in other words, was frowned on because we didn’t need it. If we were smart enough and able-bodied, we could take care of our own. If we could not, then others in the neighborhood would come to our aid. All we had to do was communicate with them. Open the doors, open the windows, let everybody see what the problems are and what the situation [was and] who has means and who does not. And balance it at the local level. So intervention from a Soviet-style government was out of the question. And even in a modestly liberal American government, it was just not acceptable for most people. However, there were those who felt that we should have the government take care of us in a, what do we call it? A baseline of support, which came to be known by 1935 as Social Security. And it sounded like a reasonable thing in those days. It wasn’t going to provide very much in the way of retirement benefits. But there were so many people contributing to it, that there was plenty of money for it and it didn’t take much of a draw. Well, that was, as old Senator Borah from Idaho might have said, “That’s letting the camel’s nose under the tent and look what always happens after that.” And people today who depend on Social Security certainly can’t live in New York or Southern California, unless they have other income. You just can’t.

BR: Right.
EN: They have to move to the hinterland, way out in the sticks where it doesn’t cost much to live. Where they can perhaps grow some of their own food. There’s another way of course, and you’re getting me off onto the course now of private accounts, which is what Roosevelt called for way back when. Nobody will acknowledge that. But he could see that this is something you start because we’re in the depths of a depression. But there comes a time in two or three decades when people would have to start relying on more of their own private accounts to supplant and support in addition to whatever the government would give as a baseline. So, we got a philosophy today that we need to save Social Security, and I think most people agree with that. But it’s certainly not enough. And it certainly cannot be enough as the working population goes down in a ratio with the retired. So, this idea of communism in Whittier was it was everywhere. You could hear it discussed. It’s an ideal. And students into college and many academicians still cling to the Marxian ideas, mostly because they’ve never worked. They don’t know what can be accomplished when you work for a living and by producing something that can be sold or contributing to the economy in a free market society. Well, you’re hearing a lot of my philosophy bouncing off the walls here but—

BR: That’s alright. That’s alright. I kind of wanted to move forward now to Vietnam. Did you ever have any conversations with your brother, the president, about Vietnam?

EN: Well, at the time before we got into Vietnam, when the US government was supporting or trying to support the French colonial government, and eventually toward the transition to the Vietnamese people handling their own government. We supported it in the sense of a treaty or agreement. And then Jack Kennedy followed on with support in the sense of technicians, as they called them, from the military to go in and see if they could keep communism from developing into a control of the whole economy. Which we knew would wind up in a disaster. Jack Kennedy agreed to do that as well. Unfortunately, with Robert McNamara’s push for flooding the country with Americans and to try to invoke maximum control, we wound up in a genuine quagmire. Too many people were sent by the time Richard Nixon took the reins. And you know, five-and-a-half—550,000 people were over there and going by the wayside one after another as the media grew in strength. And that really was where we lost it all was having such vivid
pictures of the kind of terrible things that happen in war, way beyond the kind of
reporting that Edward R. Murrow and others did back in World War II. Television made
a new world. So, when Dick was—when we talked about it, I said, “What do you think
we can do in the face of everyone seeing how brutal war is?” He said, “I know how
brutal war is. I spent enough time over there in the South Pacific with bombs going off
every night and fighting off the scorpions and the snakes. I know how bad it is and this is
the kind of thing we have to settle so that the natives can take care of themselves.
Always this, get it into their own hands.” How do you do that when you’ve got yourself
so thoroughly involved by the time we got to 1968 that Lyndon Johnson himself did not
know what to do? And of course, Robert McNamara apologized later on in saying that
the course they took with the massive buildup was not the way to go. However, we did
win that war by the time Richard Nixon had to leave office. But shortly after that, we lost
the war by giving it away by forfeit, actually. I think the South Vietnamese probably
could have held on to that corner of freedom that they had experienced and grown to love
and they still have it. Ho Chi Minh City today, Saigon as it was then, is still a vibrant
city full of people, entrepreneurs, who have a terrible fight with Hanoi and the old lost
causes of communism. Communism is a failed method, a failed system. It’s proven it
over and over again because it weakens the people, sheltering them from the truth, hiding
the truth from them. But, of course, you can always see where it has risen, such as North
Korea, and held on by subjugating and starving the people. Eventually, they wake up.
Usually too old and weakened to do much about it except go into violent conflict again.
Hopefully we can avoid that more and more, but Richard Nixon’s idea was, “We have to
turn it to the natives. They have to manage themselves. But we also need to support
them to the maximum extent we can afford. Otherwise, we will lose them and then have
to fight it off very much more viciously later on.”

BR: Right, because when the North Vietnamese crossed into South Vietnam in
’75, they did so with Soviet tanks.
EN: Yep. Oh, yeah. They had the support they needed, but the South Vietnamese
did not because our Congress in their great wisdom, decided it was enough.
BR: Right.
We backed out, forfeited the victories we had held. And so that little book Dick wrote about *No More Vietnams* is something everybody should read. It shows his philosophy. He talks about it again in his memoir and he points to it indirectly in *Beyond Peace*, the last book he wrote.

BR: Right. So, you campaigned for your brother in ’68 and ’72. Am I right?

EN: That’s right. Before that, I was—well, I had campaigned for him back in 1946 when he first ran for Congress. But by the time the next one came along, I was in college in North Carolina. Not much you can do there when he’s running for Congress in California.

BR: Right.

EN: And the Senate, and the vice president, all the rest of it, I was in the Navy. The Hatch Act precluded—if you really want to observe the law, the Hatch Act said that we could not, if we were in uniform can make, you know, get into a political campaign. So, by 1968 though, I was footloose, fancy-free, and a civilian able to do something. So I said, “This time let me get involved.” And he brought me back to New York. In the ’68 campaign he put me in charge of a large group of volunteers reading all the letters, the correspondence coming to the candidate, and then figuring out how to send an answer to each and every one. We did that pretty well. I think we sent back about 150,000 response letters to everyone who wrote. But that took the load off of Dick because I could answer a letter on my brother’s behalf and it worked out pretty well. I can’t sign my name anymore though, the signature’s completely shot. It doesn’t even look as good as Napoleon’s signature.

BR: (Laughs)

EN: Seventy-two was another year and that involved the reelection committee. I was nominally a co-chairman of the Committee to Reelect. All that meant was that John Mitchell was running the show and I was out on the road making little speeches all over the country. I think I got into forty-five states and about one-hundred sixty-five cities nationwide, encouraging the local guys to support the reelection and keep this thing moving in the right direction. There wasn’t so much to do in ’72, especially after that visit to China in February of that year, because the opposition was simply saying, “Stop the war. Get out. Give up. Surrender now.” And the American people, they’re not
inclined to do that, I think. Fortunately, we still have that, although there’s a lot of
pressure to do to encourage people to revolt and say—we have to finish what we start.
And Richard Nixon was one of those who was not inclined to give up as he so clearly
stated in his resignation notes from the White House.

BR: Did you ever run into any anti-war protesters while you were campaigning?
EN: Oh, yes. They were apparent. Most of them were in Massachusetts, Boston
mainly, and not out state. And in New Hampshire and Vermont—down in Maryland
there were some. When I went knocking on doors, one lady confronted me and said that
she was a Quaker and she couldn’t understand how a Quaker could be doing the things
he’s been doing. And so I could only counter with, “Well, a Quaker seeks to find a way
to make peace so that it will last a while instead of surrendering so that we have more
war.” Well, that didn’t set well with her. Her mind was already made up. But that’s
typical in a campaign.

BR: You once told me about a time that you were going to speak about your
Quaker ancestors and the Underground Railroad.
EN: Oh, yes. There was—of the many, many, you know, prospective venues for
my speaking, they chose one down in Dallas, Texas. It was the annual convention of the
African Methodist Episcopal Church. And big auditorium, jam-packed full of folks in
there. And I was greeted in the wings of the stage by a bishop who was going to go out
and introduce me. And as he started out to the podium, the crowd got the wind of who
was going to be speaking next and they started demonstrating and screaming, “No Nixon!
No Nixon!” And so the bishop turned away from the podium, came back, and he said,
“What do you want me to do?” I said, “Well, I think it’s probably better that we do this
another time. But the story I want to tell will be told. And if they don’t want to hear it
here, they’ll have to read about it when I finish my book.”

BR: (Laughs)
EN: Anyway, that story was that, you know, and Dick suggested—I asked him,
“How do you talk to a group like that that’s generally opposed to your name?” They’ve
got misconceptions of where we stand as abolitionists from way back. My grandparents
moved to Whittier, California, because the was town named for a very famous
abolitionist poet and activist, John Greenleaf Whittier. That’s why they moved to
Whittier. They brought the family out there. So, all those descendants, my mother and all her sisters and brothers were very, very interested in the heritage that brought us this attitude toward race that said, “We are not this or that, we are a human race.” In fact, I can’t tell you how far back, it was a great-great grandfather I guess, when they were moving gradually westward. They had settled in Belmont County, Ohio and had an established underground railway operation right there in the town right across the Ohio River from Kentucky. It got to be a very, very busy activity, even on the farm where my mother was born in Southern Indiana. It was a crucial time, as well, during the Civil War, which is told very, very neatly in the Jessamyn West book, *The Friendly Persuasion*, as to what they did and how they reacted to the rebels as they swarmed over the farm and so forth. Real stories, genuine stories, and not too much of it is made up, except for the entertainment factor to put a dance in here and there where we may not have been dancing in those days, you know.

BR: (Laughs) All right, the last topic that I’m very interested in is your role in the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency and some of your own work that you’re presently doing.

EN: Okay. Well, going through school in North Carolina, Duke University undergraduate majoring in geology, I would occasionally take a weekend and go up to Washington, DC and visit with Dick. And he would always ask, “What do you do down there on weekends? How many girls are you meeting and so forth?” (Chuckles) I said, “You know, when you’re in geology and you’re busy as you can be all week long. Then on weekends there’s no time except to go out in the hills and bang on the rocks and see what’s in them, observe mining operations and things like that.” So I would tell him stories about Ducktown, Tennessee. Which was an area, a very large corner of southwestern North Carolina, southeastern Tennessee. Ducktown is a famous name for it. There was a smelter there, a copper smelter. And the sulfur fumes and sulfur dioxide and gases from the smelter just denuded the land for miles around. And when I saw that, I told Dick about it. I said, “You know, they’ve got things like that going on, and we know that technically it doesn’t have to be that bad. They can find other ways to get the copper out of the ore without destroying all the environment around it.” And then again another trip up into the coal mine areas where tailing piles were just strewn out from the
open pits and from underground mines and just left there. And I said, “You know, you
take wealth out of the ground, we ought to be able to put it back better than nature gave it
to us. Just take some of that wealth and require that it be reinvested in nature. Make it
better than nature gave it to us, in fact.” He said, “Well, that’s a good idea. I don’t know
how you do that. How do you do that?” And I said, “Well, you’re the one that can do
something here and out in Congress. See what you can do.” Well, it was many years
later, of course, before anything did happen. But he ganged up with Scoop Jackson and
some others that were very, very interested in cleaning up environmental matters. And
they got the Environmental Protection Agency, or the beginnings of it and got it
established, got it through Congress. And there we are, EPA. Well, a lot of people
today, conservatives included, are looking at it and saying, “You know, it gets to be
going too far sometimes.” Well, unfortunately, Richard Nixon was not in office long
enough to administer it, and observe it, and keep it under control so that you don’t
destroy an industry. You just keep it going with a clean direction. EPA was a good
thing. There are many others. There’s the National Endowment for the Arts. If there
was art that was worthwhile, it should be supported by some kind of a quasi-royal
commission. Artists have a hard time funding their work. But when they do good work
that’s really recognized as good and worthy, it deserves some support. So that was
another one. Gets a lot of criticism later on when they failed to define art for what its
value is (laughs) and it goes over the hill. Anyway, there are many things like that. It
wasn’t just foreign policy with Richard Nixon. It was domestic policy even more so than
it was foreign policy, although the whole world was his game.

BR: All right. So, I don’t know, what are you presently doing that has to do with
energy?

EN: Oh, from way back I could see that burning carbon, especially fossil-
hydrocarbons and coal, was something that could be replaced if we used the nuclear
power from radiation from the sun. Don’t have to have nuclear power on earth, although
we can do that and we can do it quite safely. Too many doubters make it difficult. But
solar energy, to me, is the source of so many kinds of alternatives, including wind and
waves and all the rest, that we should be tapping it to the hilt. And when you do that, you
take alternatives that do not consume coal or oil or natural gas. You do not let carbon
dioxide or monoxide into the atmosphere at all. In fact, you can use the electricity that
those solar radiations can produce and make hydrogen directly. And directly, hydrogen,
when it burns, is drinkable. It’s water. So, it’s the fuel of the future. It’s going take us a
long time, long after I’m gone of course, to realize its true value. But, that’s the course
for the future, and it’s consuming some of my time today. Even now, we’re trying to get
a very successful demonstration plant launched into a broad-scale application.
Unfortunately, the Americans are still reluctant to get involved in something that won’t
have a turnover for two or three years. They need immediate return to invest, it seems.
But the Chinese have already bought a license and the Indians have toyed with it as well,
many other countries. I just hope we can find a way to bring it to fruition here in the
United States and the Germans are helping on that score, as well. Exciting times. Solar
energy, Pyron Solar is what I call it. It’s been on the web and good interesting stuff to
see.
BR: All right. Well, is there anything else you’d like to add?
EN: Well, when this manuscript—I’ve been wading through about three-hundred
pages of manuscript. But you know what happens, you’ve written some, Brian, you
know what it’s about.
BR: Right.
EN: I’m editing and I’m not a writer. I have rocks in my head. It’s hard to get the
words past, you know. I’ve gotten more than halfway through it. I’ll have it out
probably by early spring and we’ll have another book. I think it will just be called, My
Story: Richard Nixon’s Kid Brother.
BR: Well, I’ll definitely buy copies for the whole family. (Laughs)
EN: You won’t need to buy them, make sure you get one, okay?
BR: Okay, alrighty, then.
EN: Good to hear your voice. Keep on track. You’re doing good work down
there, I’m sure. I know it’s hard work. But as Dick used to say, “Just don’t lose your
iron butt, you’ll survive.”
BR: Right. (Laughs) Okay, take care.
EN: You, too. Take care. Bye
BR: Bye.