Interview

with

Bryan Dorn

University Libraries
University of South Carolina
Interviewers:
Herbert J. Hartsook and Robert Barratt

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Barratt House, Mr. Dorn’s home, near Greenwood, S.C.

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Synopsis:
Former Congressman William Jennings Bryan Dorn reflects on his tenure in Congress particularly as regards foreign policy and the menace of communism. Joseph McCarthy and Harry S Truman are mentioned.

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[Interview begins]

**Barratt:** As I said to you earlier, I just wanted to ask you a few questions about your views on foreign policy, on the Cold War, and maybe on what you thought about anti-communism in South Carolina and how that went on. I guess my first question will go right into the foreign policy. You were an outspoken critic of President Truman's policies of containment and foreign aid and things like that. I've found that in your papers and your speeches. You also criticized the similar policies of Eisenhower and Kennedy.

But you were also a strident anti-communist. You criticized the Soviet Union for its beliefs and policies in Europe and all that after the war. But Truman also claimed that he had a plan to fight communism. Could you tell me a little bit why you were against his policies? I mean, he offered a policy for fighting communism, so, to you, why was this not the right way to do it?

**Dorn:** Well, at that time, I figured that we were trying to buy friendship with money, almost solely. And I differed with him on that policy, the Marshall Plan, the Truman Plan if you want to call it that. But I believed -- and it proved so in the end -- that if we held out and remained strong militarily, eventually the communists in Russia would see the light and see the difference and change their own form of government. And they did. I made that point in a speech in Taipei when I was in Congress. There was a world meeting out there, and I told them that we've got to remain strong, and that if we did, that we would survive. I argued that people were basically the same all over the world in their hopes and aspirations and all. In their heart, they were virtually the same. And that if we held out, eventually they would change their own form of government, which they did.

President Truman was a remarkable man, though. But he had his prejudices. I defended MacArthur and he was against MacArthur, and he wouldn't see me. I came back from over there, from a conference with General MacArthur, and I called his secretary and told
him that I thought it would be proper when I got back in Washington to report to the
President my findings. "Oh," he said, "that would be great. You just call and we'll set
the appointment up." When I called back, though, he had read in the newspapers where I
said that MacArthur was a fine, Christian gentleman, and he wouldn't see me to this day.
He was that type of fellow. I mean, there was nothing bad about it; he didn't want to be
bothered with somebody with a completely opposite view.

Truman was amazing, though. I got a picture of him planting corn over there, in the
corner behind that door. It's amazing that he came from that kind of environment to the
presidency of the United States, and knew what was going on. He did study history. He
was a thorough student of history, and of the Civil War, he was a complete student of all
its phases. He could sit down and talk to you for hours about various battles and how
they turned out and why. I admired for all of that. Of course, I grew up on a farm, too,
and never went to college. He didn't go to college. And I don't know whether that
affected him or not. But President Truman was a man for the times, I think. We were
fortunate to have him serve during that particular period.

Hartsook: Do you think the study of history plays a good role in politics? I know
you're a scholar of American and world history, and you noted Truman's interest in
history. Does a good knowledge of history help in government?

Dorn: I think it's absolutely essential. If you don't know what went on in the past
history of the world, you're not going to have much of an opportunity to prepare for the
future. But I think that history is...well, it's the story of mankind. And you can't prepare
for the future if you don't know the past. I think it's very important.

Hartsook: Can you think of any good examples of members of the delegation that did
not share that interest in history and were hurt by it?

Dorn: I think all of them liked history. Most Southern people do. They
understood the importance of history. I mean, the members I served with, all the way
back to 1947, were historians, in a way, themselves. Maybe not as ardent about history as I was, but they liked history, and they knew history. The fact of the business is you can't serve in Congress successfully unless you know some history of the government and some past history of the formation of the government.

**Barratt:** During the Fifties, how did you feel about Senator Joseph McCarthy and his fight against domestic communism?

**Dorn:** You want me to comment on him?

**Barratt:** Sure. Just whatever you want to say about him would be great.

**Dorn:** I knew him well. The fact of the business is he employed some members of my family. My wife's sister worked for him, and my wife's brother-in-law worked for him. So I knew him quite well. But I think he was, in many respects, kind of a wild man. He was un leathered [check: possibly "unlearned?"] in the history of the world and the government, and he was...well, he was the kind of a fellow that you didn't understand. I couldn't understand him. He'd come up with some wild charges that he couldn't support. And he didn't support them, but he kept making them, and the people, a lot of them...he had a big following.

I knew the other side, too, Secretary [Robert T.] Stevens of the Army. In fact, he had been down here to this house. They just couldn't see McCarthy calling everybody "pink" and that kind of stuff.

**Barratt:** Do you think that during the Forties and the Fifties and the Sixties, that sometimes American leaders used people's fears of communism for political purposes and to get there programs through?
Dorn: Oh, yes. They harped on communism frequently. And I think most of them did, political leaders. If it would help them in the campaign, I know they'd bring it up. And it did.

Barratt: One thing I've noticed in your correspondence is that the people that wrote letters to you during this time, a lot of them argued that the civil rights movement and the push for political equality for blacks in South Carolina, a lot of these people said, "Well, these people are communists, and they're dangerous." Do you think that your constituents really believed that, or were they just trying to make these people look bad so they could keep things as they were?

Dorn: I think that's the reason. More than anything else, they wanted to keep and maintain the status quo, economically, politically, and every way. Because they couldn't see the change as it resulted. None of us could really. But it's been a fantastic change, unbelievable thirty years ago or forty years ago, but it has changed. And I think it's a credit to the United States to be able to weather all of that and not collapse. Of course, we've got time to collapse yet, if we don't get on the ball. But a lot of folks felt like, then, that we could be taken over from within by communist agents, and it created a kind of a situation where communism would follow. They feared that, and some of the politicians played on that fear. And civil rights, they tied it in.

Barratt: In 1965, late in the year, you made a speech where you called for South Carolinians to end bigotry and racism and for them to put their energy into making our state into kind of a shining example of the New South, where we could bring industry and have a bright economic future. Can you tell me a little bit about what prompted you to make that speech? I think it made a lot of people kind of mad at you. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Dorn: Well, it was kind of easy for me to see that you had the change. There again was history. I felt that we could not get up and continue to lambast the Negro and blame him for all of our problems. And that's some politicians were doing. I didn't
believe that in the first place. But you know, you had to tread softly and walk carefully because they could label you as pro-communist or pro-civil rights and they could make it rough for you politically. And some people would do that.

**Barratt:** After you made these speeches, how did you feel when you started getting threatening letters? I think I read a clipping in the State where some people had written you nasty letters. How did you feel when some of your long-time supporters came out against you? I think your papers show that you represented the views of your constituents pretty closely, and I think you really tried to do that. How did you feel when people said you weren't representing their views and were getting nasty towards you in that respect?

**Dorn:** Well, I always felt that a politician -- a congressman particularly, or a United States senator -- should lead his people. Now most people felt the other way around, that you should follow them. But the people do not have access to all of the facts, and they can form a mob pretty quick. And I felt like that a congressman or a senator should lead the people, should tell the truth if he had the ability to make them see it. And if he had the ability to do it, and didn't do it, I thought it was criminal. And this is one of the reasons why I took the stand that I did, was that I could see there was no end in sight for that kind of a philosophy. So we had to change. And I think we, on the whole, did a pretty good job. You look at things today. You have some prejudice, but nothing like it was then.

**Barratt:** This is a little off the subject, but in some of your speeches and in your letters you warned against the dangers of the expansion of the federal government into state and local governments. Did people really fear that we were kind of adopting socialist or national socialist methods in doing that, and was that legitimate, that there was a danger of something like that happening here?

**Dorn:** I thought it was a very real danger, and a lot of people supported me in that belief, that you just could not continue the status quo forever. You know, we fought
the Civil War until recently. That's what it was. And people began to change, and some of us helped them change their mind.

Hartsook: I was interested in your comments about the peaceful integration that we had here. To what do you attribute the ease at Clemson, when Clemson was integrated? There was no violence, there were no National Guard troops called out. It was very unusual for a...

Dorn: Well, I told the President that's the way it would be. I told President Kennedy. He was greatly alarmed, having [had] the experience of Mississippi. I think he stayed up all night one night during that crisis, and he ordered all kinds of troops down there. And he thought that being John C. Calhoun's home, that it might be worse up there. And I told him that we wouldn't have any trouble at all. He didn't believe it, but he listened.

Hartsook: How could you be so sure that it would be peaceful? Were you confident of the citizens of the state, or the leadership?

Dorn: Well, I was confident of the people. I had never seen a Ku Klux meeting in this area. I know they had some, I guess, but I just didn't see it. It was not an ordinary thing. And the people down here that I knew were opposed to that kind of violence. They were different from Georgia or Mississippi. I observed that myself, that we were different, and I didn't think there was going to be any riot up there if we'd just step back and let the man come. I told the President that.

Barratt: Do you think a lot of South Carolinians felt that, well, once that was the law of the land, that we were going to obey that?

Dorn: That's one thing. A South Carolinian is different from most other people in other states. That's why they seceded, I guess. They're just different. I felt that they would accept law and order, and they did.
Hartsook: So you don't credit that to any particular leadership, say, from Governor Hollings or Governor Russell or Pete Strom?

Dorn: They helped. Pete Strom helped. He's from McCormick, too. I think we were fortunate in having Hollings and McNair serve at that particular time as the governor. If you would have had a wild man, he would have used all of that to promote his own political future. But these fellows, they were more or less like the people I was talking about. They were good men, and practical. I knew McNair real well, and I know Hollings real well.

Barratt: Well, I just have one more question really. This is back to anti-communism during the Fifties. Did you ever feel like the federal government and the Congress might have adopted some totalitarian methods like the ones we were fighting against to end their fight against communism? What I'm asking, did they kind of adopt of the methods that, say, the Soviets would have used in their own country?

Dorn: I greatly feared that, that we would become totalitarian in the name of fighting totalitarianism. In opposing Nazism, and fascism, and communism, we would adopt some of their methods. That's what I was afraid of. And I think the fight that we made prevented that to a great extent. There were a number of factors that entered into the picture, but I think they were afraid -- I mean the people in Washington -- that we would...well, they thought that we were putting on a show, politically, for our own benefit, but we had a great fear that the strong arm of totalitarianism would eventually crush liberty, restrict freedom of the press and everything else, and speech. That's the first thing these people want to do, you know, when they get in, is to stop the other fellow from talking.

Barratt: And during that time, the federal government was growing so fast and it was coming down into South Carolina and into the South. Not just with civil rights; with
a lot of other things. So a lot of people, I think, were afraid of that. So you think maybe they were anti-communists; they were really afraid of it. But sometimes...?

Dorn: Yes.

Barratt: Fear of change.

Dorn: And that Clemson incident was a major, major event in the history of the South. I can understand why Kennedy would hesitate, and worry about Clemson more than Mississippi. For one thing, the Clemson people were...more intelligent. I'm talking about South Carolina as a whole now. They never did go for that stuff completely like some sections of Georgia and Mississippi. Now remember, it just wouldn't work here.

Hartsook: One thing that really impressed me in working with your papers was your sense of personal ethics. In comparing politics of today...you know, people tend to be very cynical of politics and politicians. I just was curious if you would comment about the contrast of campaigning in the Forties, the Fifties, and the Sixties, and what's going on today. Your collection is filled with letters returning honorarium, or refusing honorarium, and I just can't imagine many politicians today doing that kind of thing.

Dorn: Well, they won't, but I think I was right in staying free of all of that kind of stuff. It's easy to go from one step to another. I felt like you should...in fact, I was elected to Congress without money. And elected over an incumbent who was a fine man, a good family man, and all of that. But I felt like that was the way to be, was to run for Congress -- I take that as an example -- or for other office on your own and get elected on your own. It cost me less than $3000 to be elected to Congress that first race. You probably read that. Today, it would cost $600,000.

Barratt: At a minimum.

Dorn: You all spent what?
Barratt: $700,000, against a nobody.

Dorn: She worked for Derrick in the campaign. It didn't cost me anything, just gas and oil and going around to the various meetings. That's unbelievable. That's in my lifetime, since World War II. You'd just announce in the paper that you would run, and you'd pay your filing fee, which I don't what it was then, $5 I guess. Then you'd get your cards printed, and go to work. You'd just hit the road, the country store, and Main Street in the little towns, courthouses.

In this day and time, they won't do it, and they can't do it. They get on television, and it costs money to do that. I wish it was like it was, where a fellow could...you could run, or you could run, and with some hope of getting elected. But it's not true anymore. They'll think you're not running if you didn't get on television, and that's very expensive.

Hartsook: Was that decision, about honorarium, is that just a natural outgrowth of your personal philosophy, or was that something that you actually decided on and made a decision that...?

Dorn: I never even thought about it. I just didn't think it was proper to be taking even big textile interests, which I was very much involved with. I sent the check back when I spoke with them. I just think it's an easy step from control of a congressman in that way. If you accept honorarium, accept travel expenses...well, it would be different for travel, but [not] honorarium. "You come make a speech for me and I'll give you a thousand dollars." That, to me, is a little bit out of order. And they do that right on, you know.

Barratt: And they might expect something from you after you take the money.

Dorn: Well, I think they would.
**Hartsook:** I'm always interested in a person's contacts, who they feel close to, who they go to for counsel. I know Mrs. Dorn played a key role for you -- managed your campaigns, managed your office -- but who else would you go to if you had some difficult decision to make? Other members of Congress, or people here in your district that you trusted? Were there people that you could go to if you wanted to just mull something over with another person?

**Dorn:** Members of Congress. I admired a lot of these fellows who had been in a long time, nearby. Like Paul Brown of Georgia. We had shared a district line. I mean, the line was between our districts, and that's all. Paul Brown had a lot of influence. Wilbur Mills, believe it or not, had a lot of influence on me. And other members of Congress. Of course, he was head of the Ways and Means.

**Hartsook:** And came to the district once or twice, didn't he? Didn't you bring him here to speak once or twice?

**Dorn:** Several times. He came here to this house. We had a big conference with him, Roger Milliken and the Self people and all of that crowd, and Bob Stevens of the J.P. Stevens Company. And he came to Anderson for me, had a big speech up there. He spoke in Greenwood. Wilbur Mills, unfortunately, got mixed up in that woman scrape. That was the most bizarre thing I've ever heard of. Knowing Mr. Mills like we did, that was unbelievable.

*Side 2 begins*

**Hartsook:** ...his service, do you think he'll rise in people's estimation?

**Dorn:** Who?
Hartsook: Wilbur Mills.

Dorn: Well, if they are willing to examine the truth, what he actually did, taxes and all that. He made the South, really. Capital gains and all of those things are his brainchild. And it had benefitted us directly. Timber, peach industry, all of that.

Hartsook: Who else? Did anybody take you under their wing when you first came to Congress, to show the ropes?

Dorn: No. I just didn't pay any attention to other members much, other than to be nice to them.

Hartsook: Was it easy to assemble a staff?

Dorn: It was sort of difficult, because I didn't know anybody that knew the ropes in Washington. It was kind of difficult to get the kind of staff that I needed or wanted.

Barratt: In your papers, I came across a couple of letters -- when you were talking about foreign policy and about not supporting the Marshall Plan and things like that -- I think one time or another you said that it wasn't good for you, politically, to say these things, but you that's what you believed and you had to say it and not support these programs. How do you think that affected you politically? Do you think it might have kept you out a committee here or there?

Dorn: Well, it didn't hurt me, because I think people looked at me for leadership. That is, most of them. There were very few people that disagreed with what I thought about things. Because they didn't know; they weren't in Washington, and it was difficult to get there then. People in this district were a little bit different anyway. See, they had John C. Calhoun up there. They're not accustomed to being told what was best in Washington. Jimmy Byrnes represented part of that district. And Jimmy Byrnes was, later on, secretary of state. John C. Calhoun never was secretary of state, but he was
along that line. And others, too. There was a fellow up here in Anderson that got to be ambassador to Russia back in those days -- I forget his name; I know him better than I know you -- but that type of people generally served in Congress from this area.

**Hartsook:** What did you think when people started to change parties and join the Republican Party? Jimmy Byrnes certainly supported Republicans for President.

**Dorn:** Well, I never did do that. I didn't go for it, and I think that people that stayed in the Democratic Party retained their influence and prestige and respect. When you start jumping around from one party to another, you must not have had much conviction in the first place. I looked upon all that as kind of bad, although it's the thing to do now. You could hardly run today if you didn't do that.

**Hartsook:** I know several of your constituents wrote you, encouraging you to switch.

**Dorn:** Oh, yeah.

**Hartsook:** Did you ever feel pressure? I mean, was that something that you had to weigh in your mind? Do you think you lost votes or supporters by staying?

**Dorn:** I didn't think about it too much. I always felt that I could on the platform and convince my people. Now I may have been wrong, but I had that feeling, confidence, in my ability to lead. Now they changed to the Republicans, a lot of them did, but this is still basically a Democratic area. You walk down the street today and ask most people whether they're Democrats or Republicans; they'll tell you Democrat. They might vote for what they think is the man. Actually, it will be a Republican, but they are....

**Hartsook:** Whose advice did you value in your campaigning? Wasn't Julian Wolfe a regular correspondent, and Steven Stevenson and people like that?
Dorn: Well, they wrote a lot, but my political philosophy was associated with people like Eugene Blease, from Newberry, a chief justice of the Supreme Court of the state.

Hartsook: So when the researcher sees your collection and sees these long, lengthy letters from somebody like Wolfe, you wouldn't have necessarily paid them a good bit of heed.

Dorn: Uh uh.

Hartsook: Do you think he wrote you trying to influence you, or...?

Dorn: Yes, I do.

Hartsook: That's interesting, because I think someone thirty years from now, looking at the collection...those letters are quite interesting because they talk about Wolfe's or Stevenson's vision of what's happening in their area.

Dorn: Stevenson was not a real political influence on me or anybody else much. He was in it for the business.

Hartsook: Going back to talking about your staff, what did you look for in staff members?

Dorn: Well, I looked for people that could get along with folks, and who...well, my first secretary was a member of the legislature. I figured that his having been down there, he would be a big help in my job. I found this out a long time ago, that you didn't have to be a big shot, that a member of the legislature, having served, would know a lot about people and about issues.
One of the fellows that I brought to Washington is up there today, is the chief counsel of the Veterans' Affairs Committee of the United States Congress. He's still there, and I brought him. He came to my office one day from the farm up there in Anderson. He'd been to Clemson University. But I gave him a position, based on the fact that he did meet with a lot of people and was familiar with...and he was a veteran. And today, I guess he's written as much veterans' legislation as any man in the United States. Mack Fleming. His picture is right there.

Hartsook: And he was with you for a long time, wasn't he?

Dorn: As long as I was up there, and then, when I left, he was made chief counsel of that committee.

[Interview Ends]