

EUGENE C. PATTERSON

Interviewed by David Shedden, September 8, 1984.

Eugene Patterson was the Pulitzer Prize-winning chairman and chief executive officer of the *St. Petersburg Times* and president of its Washington publication, *Congressional Quarterly*. In 1971 Mr Patterson moved from his position as Managing Editor of the *Washington Post* to serve an academic year at Duke University, then assumed the editorship of the *St. Petersburg Times* and *Congressional Quarterly*, succeeding the late Nelson Poynter as chief executive officer in 1978.

Mr. Patterson received his A.B. degree in journalism from the University of Georgia in 1943. During World War II he served as platoon leader with the 10th Armored Division of Patton's Third Army and was decorated three times—Silver Star, Bronze Star and Oak Leaf Cluster. Thereafter he won his wings as an army aircraft pilot. He resigned the Regular Army as a captain in 1947 to enter newspapering as a cub reporter with the *Temple (Texas) Daily Telegram*, then the *Macon (Georgia) Telegraph*. Mr. Patterson joined the old *United Press* in Atlanta in 1948, became New York night bureau manager for *UP* in 1949, and moved to England in 1953 to serve three years as *UP*'s London bureau chief. He returned to his native Georgia in 1956 as executive editor of the *Atlanta Journal* and *Constitution* and became editor of *The Constitution* in 1960 succeeding the late Ralph McGill. He joined the *Washington Post* in 1968 and served three years as its managing editor.

Mr. Patterson won the 1966 Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing. He has received honorary degrees from twelve institutions, including Harvard, Duke, and Emory Universities. In 1980 he was awarded the William Allen White National Award for journalistic merit. He was a member of the Pulitzer Prize Board at Columbia University from 1973-1984 and of the American Press Institute Board at Reston, Virginia from 1983-1988. In 1980 he became chairman of the board of *Florida Trend* magazine and served for eight years. He was also chairman of the board of The Poynter Institute for Media Studies in St. Petersburg from 1978-1988. From 1977-1978 he served as president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. Mr. Patterson retired in 1988 and was inducted into the Florida Newspaper Hall of Fame in 1997.

Summary

Eugene Patterson begins by discussing his beginnings in journalism and his relationships with Ralph McGill and Nelson Poynter. He talks of their views on segregation and civil rights and their personalities. He describes a trip to Vietnam and his own views on the Vietnam War as well as those of President Lyndon Johnson. He talks about the publication of the Pentagon Papers and Nelson Poynter's close relationship with the Washington Post. He describes Poynter's views of other newspapers and newspaper chains. He tells of the purpose and formation of the Poynter Institute. Patterson tells of receiving a job offer to work for the *St. Petersburg Times* from Nelson Poynter and lists some of Poynter's Standards of Ownership. The

standards list ideal aims in running a newspaper, including service to the community, profit sharing, treatment of staff and control of publication. Patterson discusses ethics in the newspaper business. He talks of taking over the operation of the *St. Petersburg Times* and the standards of the paper. He discusses Richard Nixon's presidency along with that of Carter and Reagan. Patterson describes Poynter's opinions on education. He tells of Nelson Poynter's death and what he believes his legacy will be.

S: Would you say that Nelson Poynter was a motivator or teacher?

P: Absolutely. I had three tremendous determinants of my course in life. One was my mother. One was Ralph McGill of the *Atlanta Constitution* with whom I worked for twelve years in Atlanta. And the third was Nelson Poynter who taught me over the last seven years of his life so very much.

S: Could you tell us how Nelson Poynter was an idealist?

P: Nelson simply believed in justice for the poor and the unfortunate. Nelson himself, because of his tremendous ability, never knew poverty. But he felt for the people who did. Very, very early in the South, perhaps the very first of the big southern daily newspapers to come out for desegregation and obedience to the Supreme Court's 1954 decision of desegregating the schools, was the *St. Petersburg Times* under Nelson Poynter. The man's whole life, I think was marked by a feeling for the underdog. Especially when he achieved great wealth and power, he felt even more strongly his debt to those who didn't share his good fortune. This does not mean

noblesse oblige in the old chivalrous southern meaning. It means a deep, heartfelt feeling for his fellow man. He felt that deeply.

S: From 1933 to 1947 you served in the U. S. Army as a tank commander under General George S. Patton. When you returned to the states you worked as a reporter at the *Temple* [Texas] *Daily Telegram* and the *Macon* [Georgia] *Telegraph*. What drew you into journalism?

P: I had been interested in writing ever since I was a kid in grammar school....I liked to write poetry even as a kid. It was pretty pitiful stuff. But I read a lot. I was a bookworm as well as a fairly active boy. [I tried] to maximize what strengths I had. And those lay in the area of the humanities and literature and less in the areas of science and mathematics....

S: Are there advantages to working on a small paper versus the large paper?

P: ...The great thing about working on a little paper is that you get to do a little bit of everything. I was a cub reporter on the *Temple Daily Telegram*. I landed there because it was the first town I came to when I left the Army.... I went into that newspaper and I asked for a job as a reporter, and they hired me in 1947. Consider some of the stories I covered. I covered the city commission. The first weekend I was there I covered a high school football game, a rodeo and an armadillo fair. You know, when you can do all of this it's good training. Then I went on to the *Macon Telegraph*, still as a cub reporter. We had three reporters on the staff, which meant that I got the mayor's office, all of City Hall, the City Council [and] I had Macon Hospital emergency room. I had the police and the fire departments. You think I wasn't on pavement every day of the week? It was a great training period.

S: When the Supreme Court's 1954 Brown decision was announced, I believe you were in London working for *United Press*.

P: Yes, I was the bureau chief for *UP*.

S: Nelson Poynter's editorial reaction at the time... was: "A major blow for man's freedom has been struck. America can take pride in the patience and common sense of its white and black citizens that this major blow is being made through our courts rather than through brawls and violence. Our highest court has recognized that legal validity to the concept of segregation does violence to the spirit, to the dignity of those who are segregated." At this time I believe you called up Ralph McGill and tried to get his initial reaction to this Supreme Court decision.

P: Mr. McGill had, even before that decision was made, written a famous column, and the headline on it was, "Someday It Will Be Monday." You know the Supreme Court handed down its decisions on Monday, and he knew that [the] Brown decision was before them, and he was preparing the readers of the *Atlanta Constitution* even then that the Supreme Court might rule that segregation in the schools was illegal....

Mr. McGill was a bona fide hero. He did as much I think as he could. One time he went back into the 1960s and was looking at some of the old editorials and columns he had written in the forties and fifties on the racial issue, and he came into my office and he shook his head and he said, "Gene, I've got to tell you it's pretty pale tea." And he said, "I hope they never look them up." Of course, everybody will look them up and say, "Who was the great southern editor? Where did he stand in 1954?" He stood about as far out from the pack as he dared. But then, as the years went on, he pressed the outside of the envelope and he moved further and faster, I think, than any other

southern editor, except Nelson Poynter. But Nelson had the ownership of the paper. He controlled the newspaper and couldn't be fired. Mr. McGill was standing on the precipice every day of his life in the 1950s and 1960s. By the early 1960s he was speaking very plainly on behalf of southern blacks, on behalf of the Supreme Court, and excoriating the segregationists and pointing out that they were misleaders of their people.

S: At this time in the 1950s, when you were editor of the *Atlantic Constitution*, you did work with Ralph McGill. He wrote of your relationship, "Gene and I, despite the gap of years between us, had the gift of being able to talk with one another in the full meaning of the word. We could talk philosophy, ethics, morality, books, poetry, history, men and meanings. He and I would often talk about ourselves and how we had put our feet on paths that had brought us together in mutual respect." And you said of him, "I was fascinated with him, with the great range of his mind, the depth of his understanding, the utter clarity in his heart. There was a human warmth about him that drew me to him as it drew all men. I wanted to learn, from listening to him telling stories and reading poetry, what he had over the years learned from the living--the song in the language, the music and the mystery of life, the cadence of the passing days and seasons, reverence for lasting things." Now my question is, was your relationship with Ralph McGill, in many ways a teacher also, anything like your relationship with Nelson Poynter?

P: Totally different. They were utterly different men. Ralph McGill was a literary man. Nelson Poynter wasn't. Ralph McGill was a master writer. Mr. Poynter always had some difficulty clarifying his syntax. McGill was a poet, he was a Welshman

subject to dark moods, and Nelson Poynter was as steady as a rock. He didn't have ups and downs. Ralph McGill, sometimes under pressure, became very bellicose and belligerent. He would punch you in the nose. Nelson Poynter never lost his composure. Sometimes you felt you wanted to protect Ralph McGill because he was such an honest, open, big hearted man that you felt he would be taken advantage of. And to some extent I was one of his bodyguards, because I was a little more worldly than he was, to protect him from some of the pressures that beat in on him.

Nelson Poynter needed nobody. He mastered every situation that he went in[to]. The last thing you could think of about Nelson would be that he was a helpless man. He was the courtliest of men, the politest, and in many ways the gentlest. But just as tough as nails. And that toughness, that entrepreneurial understanding of the business world, that experience of the commercial arena which Nelson Poynter had as the manager of a great enterprise, was something totally outside the experience of Ralph McGill.... But how fortunate I was to have been able to see both of these men in action because they had such great strengths of their own....

And they had many similarities....Audacity. They both shared that in rich measure.... Nelson Poynter loved to be first. He was very proud of having introduced cold type instead of hot lead printing into American journalism, of having committed the *St. Petersburg Times* to offset presses in 1970, when most big publishers said you could not run those presses at speeds high enough to handle our great circulation. He always liked to pioneer, to be first at things. And to that extent, Ralph McGill too had that quality of audacity.

They both had independence of mind. I have seen both of them sit in a room

where a consensus formed, and usually the consensus formed around the kind of conclusion that was safe. And if they thought it was wrong, alone in the room they would say, "I disagree...." But they both would fight, they both had great courage, and I think more similarities than dissimilarities. Above all they had a feeling for their fellow man, a commitment to the less fortunate, the courage to act on that commitment and on that conviction. They both had an abiding faith in freedom. That sounds corny, but in the lives of these two men who are heroes of mine, that word had great meaning. They believed in freedom versus totalitarianism, versus authoritarianism. They believed in individual freedom and the right of the individual human being to have dignity and to make his or her own life. It was a consuming belief of both these men. And so, though I say they were totally different, and in many ways they were, in many ways they were the same because in my view they were great men.

S: As the 1960s began, and you were editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, you often wrote about the subject of blacks and civil rights. About this time Nelson Poynter received a letter which said, "Warning. Dear Sir: Keep all nigger news out of your paper or you will meet with an early death. We have proof that you are half nigger. Leave us whites alone in peace. Agitate on race and you will die and soon." This was signed, "An organization to keep America white. Do editors, Nelson Poynter or yourself, receive threats like this? And what is it like when you get something like this in the mail?"

P: Well, they are routine. Bill Hartsfield, when he was mayor of Atlanta back in the 1950s, once told me, "Don't worry about all that hate mail, or those telephone calls that come from people cussing you out and threatening you." He said, "Any coward who's going to write you an anonymous letter or call you anonymously on the telephone is too

much of a coward to do anything.” He said, “The only fellow you’ve got to worry about is the guy you never hear from.”

S: One specific case in point might be your Pulitzer Prize-winning writings attacking the Georgia legislature’s failure to seat Julian Bond. Did you get much heat from that?

P: That was just one of ten editorials. The Pulitzer rules are that somebody submits ten editorials that exemplify your work for a whole year and one of those editorials happened to be the Julian Bond editorial. It’s not factual to say that’s what won the Pulitzer Prize. It was the body of the work for the year. But most of that work did center on civil rights questions such as the Bond question. And yes, 1966 when I was doing that writing was about as rough a year as I ever had. Because the South was extremely restless. The decision was not yet made as to whether the South was going to close its schools or admit blacks. That’s so recent. It seems incredible. And yet in that period the pressure I suppose of that year was about the toughest that I ever encountered.... And yet it was the point where you could begin to feel that mountain move. You could begin to say, we’re going to win this thing. The South is going to do what’s right. And you know, once it started moving, it moved all the way and the South is going to do what’s right. And you know, once it started moving it moved all the way and the South, with absolutely astonishing speed, accepted desegregation and did it in better grace than many parts of the world.

S: Another issue during this period was Vietnam. Both you and Poynter supported the war at first. Why did it take so long for you to come out against the war?

P: I was at the *Atlanta Constitution* at that time of course. But sure, I was one of the later ones to change. I suppose it was 1967 or 1968 before I finally lost hope. The

construction I placed on that war, because I knew Lyndon Johnson, the President, fairly well, and I trusted his instincts, and I know his view of that war was totally different from that of the critics of it.... I was wrong, because we undertook something we couldn't achieve; and therefore realism, if nothing else, should have led me to foresee the tragedy that was coming. I didn't. But I was taken with what Lyndon Johnson's motivation was in that war. He felt in that period that we had a duty to the poor of the world. He felt that Communism was making great advances in the world because it had something to offer the poor and that capitalism seemed to offer nothing, and if we continued down that road then freedom as we know it was going to perish. Khrushchev had come out with his wars of national liberation strategy, and this was what was happening in Vietnam.

Then, too, Ralph McGill and I, in supporting this war, were of a generation that had seen Munich in World War II, had seen Korea, which had many parallels to Vietnam. And so, we made the mistake in Vietnam of assuming that was not a civil war...and that the South, with American support as we had offered in Korea, could defend itself. Johnson's feeling was that...we try to do something to help the have-nots of the world. And he looked at South Vietnam and here were a lot of Catholics who had fled the North. The people themselves didn't want to rush into the arms of Ho Chi Minh.

The South Koreans wished to be independent and wished to defend themselves. The South Vietnamese, if they did, never developed the leadership that could achieve that end. And so we went deeper and deeper into a conflict that had no end and ultimately became a terrible defeat for this country. I wish that I had the length of vision

at that time to know it, but coming off the histories of my lifetime, World War II and Korea, I couldn't foresee it, and neither could Lyndon Johnson. So, perhaps I stayed too long hoping we could, with dedication to the goal, pull out at least some deadlock as we did in Korea and walk away from it, and we didn't. So we were totally defeated and I looked pretty bad in retrospect on that.

S: You knew Lyndon Johnson through the Civil Rights Commission that you were working on. Did he ever tell you what he thought of southern editors, for instance, Nelson Poynter or Ralph McGill?

P: No, he didn't talk much about them. He liked in private to talk about the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Lyndon Johnson had a great feeling of being persecuted by anyone who went to Harvard. He never quite got over the fact that he only went to Southwest Texas State Teachers' College. As John Connally [Governor of Texas and Secretary of the Navy] once said, "Johnson's great failing was that he was ashamed of being a Texan." Well, Johnson, with all his bluster, I don't think was really ashamed of being a Texan, but he had an inferiority complex a yard wide. And so anybody with a Harvard education and who put on airs and worked for the *New York Times* or *Washington Post*, he just automatically assumed, "That's the enemy." It consumed much more of his time than it was worth. He appreciated southern editors who supported what he was attempting to do in civil rights. And there weren't many of us who would just come right out and say, "Look, let's do it because it's right."

S: In 1968 you addressed the American Society of Newspaper Editors and told of your trip with Jack Knight{ Publisher of *Miami Herald* and founder of Knight-Ridder] as part of President Johnson's mission to South Vietnam to view the elections. What was

your sense of what was going on then?

P: I had been to Vietnam first in 1964. We only had 23,000 Americans there at that time. They were advisers. [John F.] Kennedy [President of the U. S., 1961-1963] had started putting them there. Johnson had put some more. I went and spent a week in the Delta with a helicopter company, Americans, who were simply there supposedly advising the South Vietnamese, but they were fighting. Then I went up to Da Nang and Hue and went into combat with a battalion of South Vietnamese Rangers up in the Ashau Valley because there had been an ambush of some South Vietnamese armored personnel carrier the night before. We went in by helicopter and killed and captured the people who had done that. In that period when the war was so small, it seemed to me that there was no question but that the South with American help could win it. By 1967, I went back to Hue, this was just two or three months ahead of Tet, when Hue was destroyed.... I went back as a part of this group, with Jack Knight, a big dove on the war and I had been a hawk. So we were the two editors who had decided if one would go, the other would....[We would] be a part of this group that President Johnson had asked us to join, just to watch the polling places to see if we thought there was going to be an honest vote.

Well, in Hue that time I saw things that led me to have some very serious doubts. I had dinner with Robert Shaplen in Saigon who was the *New Yorker* correspondent and the most knowledgeable man in Indochina. He'd never been caught up in the political ideologies which were causing such shrill debate in this country. I remember looking down this table at Shaplen and I said, "Bob, what do you think now, here in 1967, the outcome of this thing is going to be?" He paused a moment, and he said,

“I’m beginning to think we can’t hack it.” To hear Shaplen say that then shook me. So when I came back [to the U. S.], I started reassessing....

When we got back, Johnson asked us all to come to the Cabinet Room at the White House and he went down the line expecting glowing reports. He came to Jack Knight and Jack said, “Well, anything I’ve got to tell you, I’ll tell you in private, Mr. President.” Then he turned to me, and I didn’t hold my tongue. I said that on the whole it was remarkable that there could be a vote at all out there.... I’ll never forget Johnson’s eyes. He was looking at me—and he had eyes like a water moccasin anyway, you know—and those black eyes were literally snapping with surprise and then anger that I wasn’t performing the way that he expected me to perform. He immediately shrugged his shoulders and went on to someone else. But from then on, from that look in September of 1967, I began saying, “It’s entirely possible we’re wrong.”

S: The *Washington Post*, which you joined in 1968 as managing editor, wrote of Nelson Poynter at the time of his death. “A good number of us at this paper knew Nelson Poynter as a friend as well as a professional colleague. And as a leader in our business we respected him for his unique, many-layered contribution to both journalism and politics.” What was the nature of the *Washington Post-St. Petersburg Times* relationship? It seems to be something beyond what most newspapers have.

P: Well, Nelson Poynter and Katharine Graham were good friends. Long before I knew Nelson, they were friends, and also Phil Graham, her husband who later committed suicide....Phil was told by Kay’s father, Eugene Meyer, that he was to run the paper. One of the first things that the two of them did was to make a trip to St. Petersburg at Nelson’s invitation and he walked them through the St. Petersburg

operation, everything from the press room right up to where the reporters were and showed them how we did things. He was very proud of the independent-minded way in which he had constructed a newspaper company. And he loved to show other people. And he always sort of felt that Phil Graham and Kay Graham were worthy people that needed his instructions. He offered it and they eagerly accepted. Donald Graham, Kay's son, has been down here. We have a close relationship. And, of course, I worked for three years at the *Post*.... Then, too, Nelson was quite a figure on the Washington scene.... He founded in 1945, [the] *Congressional Quarterly*, which is one of the more influential national publications now, and probably the most influential one covering the legislative branch of the United States government.... And so, that gave him a Washington visibility that brought him to the attention of serious political observers such as those at the *Washington Post*.

S: Do you know how Nelson Poynter felt about the *Washington Post* printing the Pentagon papers?

P: He thought it was a good job. The Pentagon papers—let's face it, there wasn't a lot of news in them. There was a great hullabaloo. But once you go back and read them, there wasn't a great headline in the whole bunch. All you had there was simply documentary evidence supporting what we had been printing for the last couple of years—that some of the figures from Vietnam were wrong, that some of the motives for our activities out there were not being frankly told to the people. We had been reporting all of this, reporting informed sources, interpretive analyses, whatever. And all we did with the Pentagon papers was have the supporting evidence to show that this was all true. So it wasn't that big a deal. It became that big a deal simply because of the

Constitutional challenge that the President [Richard M. Nixon, President of the U.S., 1969-1974] put to the *Post* and [*New York Times*.... Nelson was a bear, a barracuda for getting the news out. He felt that in a free society the people ought to know what the government is doing. And he felt that publishing the Pentagon Papers was a contribution.

S: What papers did Nelson Poynter admire?

P: Oh, the *New York Times*. He felt that it was a great newspaper. He saw the erratic qualities in the *Washington Post*, but he also saw the great people that were assembled there.... [A]ny newspaper that has people like David Broder or Meg Greenfield, or headed by someone of the quality of Katharine Graham and her son Don, these are magnificent people.... I won't say the ones he didn't admire. He did admire what Otis Chandler did with the *Los Angeles Times*. It had been a very bad paper and became a very great newspaper under young Otis in a city that didn't support Otis politically all too well in some of the changes he was making. Nelson always admired the *Chicago Tribune*, not for Colonel McCormick's right-wing anti-British politics, but he admired any single minded publisher who put quality first. And the *Chicago Tribune* spent the money and hired people to put out a quality newspaper, even though its editorials made Nelson wince....

He admired very few chains. He strongly believed that conglomerate journalism was the ruination of newspapers because when you own more than one newspaper serving one community, then which community do you love the best? Which do you put first and serve the best? How do you keep your mind undiverted if you are publishing

papers in several towns? He never understood that and never wanted to go that route. He felt it would not be playing fair with the people who demanded and had a right to demand his full, undiluted attention....

But among the chains he admired Jack Knight, John S. Knight, of the Knight-Ridder newspapers, because Knight had that quality of single-minded devotion to integrity and quality and to editorial independence from business pressures. As long as Jack was alive there was no way that the Knight-Ridder business side could intrude itself into the news operations because Jack Knight made that clear.... Nelson believed that public ownership of newspapers was a threat ultimately to their free expression. Because suddenly when you have public shareholders, as he once said, "How do you know who's buying up your shares if you're trading then on the New York Stock Exchange?"...

Knight took [his] newspapers public because [he] felt he could create an organization that would keep his values intact after he was gone. Nelson felt that once he [Knight] turned loose the closely held control of the privately owned Knight newspapers and put them into the public arena that ultimately those commercial impacts that beat in on any enterprise that is publicly traded were going to beat in on the editorial standing of his [Knight's] own newspapers. They were a little bit estranged as a result of that, plus which I understood that Knight wanted to buy the *St. Petersburg Times*, and nothing could outrage Nelson more than for anybody to offer to buy his paper. As if they wouldn't know he would never sell his paper!

S: Did he get many offers?

P: Oh, yes, constantly. And I do. But you know the routine answer is "these

newspapers are not for sale to anybody at any price.”

S: These papers that you mentioned, what did they think of Nelson Poynter?

P: Only the very best knew Nelson Poynter. He wasn't a self-serving man. He didn't seek publicity and didn't like it. He didn't even want a funeral, and didn't have one, because he said that people don't like to go to funerals. He didn't want more than a one-column story of his death on the front page of the *St. Petersburg Times*, and that is by golly what we put, because he told me if we put more he would come back and haunt me. And I think he might have. Nelson was a genuinely modest man who felt that his actions would speak for themselves, and that if they were worthy their worth would be found out....

The Jack Knights, the Katharine Grahams, the Punch Sulzbergers, the Otis Chandlers, and many, many others... recognized quality.]They] studied what he did and revered his way of going. And so now that he is gone I think the greatest monument to Nelson is not necessarily the *St. Petersburg Times* or *Congressional Quarterly* or *Florida Trend* which we acquired after he died, or Modern Graphic Arts, Inc., or the other enterprises. The great monument, I believe as the generations go on, is going to be The Poynter Institute for Media Studies, the educational institution that he founded....

Nelson had a very unclear idea of what he wanted to do, but he knew that more and better training was needed in American journalism for the younger journalists. And so he left it pretty much to us to evolve at The Poynter Institute what training that's going to be. And it's already doing enormously important work in writing, in design and graphics, in ethics, in really exploring the outer edges of ethical questions that we

otherwise might want to dodge. As time goes on the Ethics Center at the Poynter Institute is going to be very important.... These are areas of unique training that don't duplicate any other educational undertaking.

Let me tell you one thing that I am very impressed with.... We went out and looked for the very best writing instructors at American universities. We said to their deans, "Identify your top people and we will bring them to St. Petersburg to The Poynter Institute and put them in contact with the other professors who are doing the best job of teaching writing in American journalism schools. And then they can learn from each other and we will put together here a series of seminars that will teach journalism teachers the best work that is being done in journalism schools so they can then go back and multiply." The multiplier effect of this is enormous.... If we were doing nothing else at The Poynter Institute but broadening the educational reach and experience of the professors in American journalism schools, it would be worth it. But we are doing so much more than that.

S: As we are still on the topic of other newspapers, across the bay there's the *Tampa Tribune*. Was it important for him to have a rival over there that he could be fighting against?

P: Oh yes. It worried Nelson if you had any diminishing of competition. He recognized that competition was the lubricant of American enterprise and without it people get fat and complacent and lazy.... He enjoyed the competition with the *Tampa Tribune*. And *Tampa*, I think, is a better paper because of us. So it is great to have two good newspapers going head to head in the market.

S: By 1971 you were on the faculty at Duke University as professor of political

science. Was it here that you were approached to work at the *St. Petersburg Times*?

P: Yes, I was at Duke. At the time that I had determined to leave the *Washington Post* because that place was not my home. I had lunch with Nelson Poynter in Washington at the Metropolitan Club. I told him that I was leaving the *Post* and he said, "Well, I don't blame you...." And I said, "Well, I'm just not really doing a very good job there and I'm just not happy, and so I'm going to move on." And I said, and this is quite true, that I'd been in the news business long enough now that the only publisher that I still wanted to work for was Nelson Poynter. I'd looked all over the country, and that would be it, and if he needed me I was available. If he didn't need me I was going to go into teaching and write my books....

So I went on to Duke. And within two months of taking up my teaching duties at Duke I get a telephone call from St. Petersburg and Nelson said, "Come on down, I want you to run the company." And I said, "Now you tell me! I've got a commitment to Terry Sanford at Duke University to teach." And I worried about this for about three or four weeks before I finally told him yes. But I had to finish my commitment to teach a full academic year at Duke, two semesters. So it was not until May of 1972 that I came full time to work in St. Petersburg....

S: You once said, "What you find in Washington is only government. Out here in St. Petersburg you find people." What did you mean by that?

P: The effects of policies made in Washington impact on people in St. Petersburg. So there are two ways of looking at government. One is to run to Washington and cover the process of making the laws, which *Congressional Quarterly* does cover, and of the political process, the elections, the White House, the President, and the Supreme

Court. But the far more fascinating part of it to me is to be out in America and to live out where those policies come rumbling down from the Potomac and really impact on the lives of people who are living on social security or are in veterans' hospitals, or who are unemployed or who are rich and don't want to pay taxes. All of these Washington decisions affect lives out here, whereas in Washington they're just theories.

S: Once at the *St. Petersburg Times* you had to deal with the "Standards of Ownership." What exactly are the "Standards?"

P: The "Standards of Ownership" are a set of declarations that Nelson Poynter wrote down and proclaimed when he acquired the controlling stock from his father in the *St. Petersburg Times*.... Here he was, with this busted little old newspaper where literally sometimes he would have to walk over to Doc Webb and get the payment for tomorrow's ads in order to meet today's payroll at the *St. Petersburg Times*. He was having to take thousands of dollars a week out of the cash drawer at St. Petersburg to meet the payroll at *Congressional Quarterly* in Washington. He was living on a shoestring. His profits were infinitesimal, if any, and yet, I guess this was 1947, he proclaimed this long set of standards.... He said "Once we start making a profit we're going to share the profits with the people who work here."...

S: Another declaration was: "Ownership or participation in ownership of a publication or broadcasting property is a sacred trust and a great privilege."

P: ...[I]f you want to be sophisticated and blase about it, that sounds pretty corny. The interesting thing about Nelson Poynter though, and you have to understand this, is that he meant it. He did regard being publisher of a newspaper as a sacred trust, and his life demonstrated that.

S: "A publication or broadcasting station must be aggressive in its service to the community and not wait to be prodded into rendering that service."

P: He believed that a newspaper was a major part of a city structure in a town like St. Petersburg, and that you have certain civic duties to the United Way, to the museum, to the symphony, to the educational institutions. And if you are making a profit, you should give back some part of that, plow it back into the community where you made your money. He also learned something from his father [Paul Poynter] that he once told me.... He said he was in the office once day when a delegation of St. Petersburg businessmen called on his daddy and said they were collecting money for some good cause and hoped that the *Times* would contribute. He said his father immediately got out a checkbook and wrote a check and handed it to these people. And as they got up to leave they said, "We want to thank you very much." And Paul Poynter, according to Nelson, replied, "Don't thank me. I thank you. You're taking your time and your energy to go out and do good works in this community, and all I'm doing is handing you a check. You're the one and I thank you very deeply...." Nelson never forgot that and it was his whole attitude.

S: "Adequate and modern equipment is vital for successful publishing, but it is secondary to staff."

P: He was a bear for equipment. He wanted the best presses. He wanted the best photo-composition machines. He wanted to be first. And he believed instead of paying out too much money in dividends and starving his machinery, he wanted all the best before he paid out the dividends. But he never lost sight of the fact that the people that you are handing those tools to use are the most important factor. You can buy the best

presses in the world, but if you do not have the best pressman in the world running them then you have wasted your money. And he kept the human element always foremost. "Number one", he said, "is our reader. Number two is our advertiser, and number three is our staffer. The management and ownership of this company owes a great debt to those people who do the work of getting out these papers every day." And he respected them....

S: "A publication is so individualistic in nature that complete control should be concentrated in an individual."

P: As far as one-man control goes, in his lifetime he had complete control of the paper because he had sixty percent of the voting stock.... So he believed deeply that one solid publisher should have the total responsibility for the successes and the blame for the failures of a newspaper. It's a living organism, and you cannot have a committee blundering around trying to make consensual judgements as to how to run it. You need somebody who will have the authority to take the blame if he's wrong, but to be decisive if he's right.... But after observing him when he was chairman of the board, I saw that he never, ever lost his understanding that he needed other people. He needed his board of directors. They were expert in many fields in which he was not....

The fact that the control is vested in one pair of hands makes you extremely careful not to misuse it. Because to get arrogant and start throwing your weight around with an organism as sensitive and as fragile as a newspaper capable of doing so much damage... The newspaper has great power to hurt people. And so you really have to come to the control of a newspaper like that with a great regard for other people, including the people you work with because you need them very much.

S: We read on the editorial page that the policy of the paper is to “tell the truth.”
What does that mean?

P: Isn't that wonderful.... John Quinn of *Gannett* was writing an article on why newspapers should have a written code of ethics. And so I wrote an article saying why newspapers should not have a written code of ethics. Now how do you describe infinity? Each day we run into ethical questions that scatter like quicksilver. There is no way to write a list of them. Oh, we offer integrity and fairness and accuracy against abuse of power, and all of this stuff. But to start putting down specific incidences where a code of ethics will give an ironbound rule to follow, it is impossible. Because each day brings an entirely new sunburst of ethical questions.... And the staff knows this. We don't take free trips. We don't take freebies from people. We don't have conflicts of interest in investments or involvements or anything that would conflict with our jobs. It's just generally known what our ethical standards are. But to write down a list of them?... What you can write down is a marvelous motto such as that—“The policy of our paper is very simple, merely to tell the truth.”...

S: Did Nelson Poynter believe this was the best paper in Florida?

P: Yes, he did. He wouldn't put that out there for a long time. But it was after they had won the Pulitzer Prize, I guess in 1962, that he decided, well, the paper had come far enough now, it was the best, and so he made that claim. Now, of course, the *Miami Herald* doesn't agree. And the *Orlando Sentinel* now is saying it is the best newspaper in Florida.

S: What was a good story to Nelson Poynter?

P: Nelson's mind ran very strongly to substantive stories, government stories,

international stories. He felt that the readership of the *St. Petersburg Times*, which is an extraordinary one... If you stop and think of the number of retired people in our part of Florida who have been retired diplomats, generals, professors in every discipline, teachers, all kinds of people of advanced learning out there who know a little about everything in the world, they are reading the *St. Petersburg Times* every day. And he had a great respect for those people.

S: So it would be a story of politics, maybe, or something like that would grab his attention?

P: Yes, politics. Well, freedom, as I mentioned earlier. ...that is exactly what his guiding mission was, to preach freedom, to believe in freedom as the basic institution in human life.... Nelson believed that politics was an extremely important part of this.... We as a newspaper have a duty to let those people know how that president and that senator and that congressman are doing. Otherwise they won't know how to cast their votes. So he was a bear for coverage of politics and government. He believed in the institutions of this country as devoutly as the founders who wrote the Constitution did. He really was a student of how a free society governs itself. And he believed that a newspaper was essential to that. Without free information, a society cannot govern itself and will be misled by demagogues and misused by totalitarians and freedom will die. Therefore to him journalism and the free press were the very central linchpin of freedom as an institution....

He was not a sentimental man at all, too tough for that. But he would speak of matters of the heart unashamedly.... I remember the last television tape that he made. He said, "You've got to believe that freedom will prevail because wherever you have let

the cork of repression part way out of the bottle, whether it was Franco's Spain or whether it is going to be some communist society, wherever you let that cork halfway out of the bottle it's going to pop all the way out, because people will be free. He deeply believed that....

S: Did it bother him that they [Local Unit of the Newspaper Guild] were even trying to start a union within the paper?

P: Yes, it always bothered him. It is the most debilitating thing that can happen. With Nelson, I think it probably hurt worse. You have to remember that Nelson Poynter was not anti-labor. His editorial position supported the Wagner Labor Act [1935] back when every business in the country was trying to strangle it in its cradle. He supported repeal of the Taft-Hartley law back in the 1940s which was what labor supported. He strongly believed in organized labor where it was needed. But then he made a personal pledge to himself through his "Standards of Ownership" that he was going to run a company that would do what it ought to do without being forced to do it by its employees. And so, he felt that it was a repudiation of management if this company ever, operating under the "Standards" that he laid down, so departed from the needs of its staff that it had to be unionized and a third party come in and required him to do what he should have done.

S: How did he divide his time?

P: When I came here as editor and president, what he called chief operating officer, while he remained chairman and chief executive officer. He determined in his own mind that no matter how hard he had to try he was going to step back and let me run the company. He knew that he had to do that, because he was getting up in years. He

was not going to live forever. He was very realistic about that. He knew that if he continued to do everything that I would continue to do nothing.... Now he was always there. He was always abreast of what was going on. I made sure that he knew every day every key thing that was happening around the company. I would talk to him and I would seek his advice. But the decisions were not his, they were mine at that period....

S: Nelson Poynter would publish from time to time the paper's editorial philosophy. If I can, I would like to ask you to comment on just a few of the points. "An editorial is not important until a group of people, a civic organization or government, breathes like into it."

P: That's true. A newspaper has no power except the power to persuade. You can write editorials until you are blue in the face, but if nobody is persuaded by them, then you don't have any group of citizens or any part of government taking action to implement what you are calling for. Therefore, you might as well not have written it.

S: "The *St. Petersburg Times* staff regards a newspaper as a service rather than a commodity."

P: Of course it is. As a commodity, all it is, is [just] a bunch of paper.... What's written on that paper is the service that you perform. The courage with which you editorially state your views, the integrity with which you report the news, the courage to fight entrenched power whether it be public or private if it's damaging the well-being of the public. You must do all these things. This is the service that a newspaper performs. A commodity, my goodness. A commodity, that is just the actual tangible material that goes into the newspaper, the ink and the paper, and that's worthless if it says nothing.

S: "Our goal is to be the best." How important is that?

P: That is extremely important. That is why we have assembled here on this west coast of Florida what I think is pound for pound the best newspaper staff in America. They came here because Nelson Poynter was here, because he set up certain standards and said "here in this place," and it could have been any place, but he chose St. Petersburg, "we are going to produce the best." And so that is the simple and rather immodest goal that we are pursuing, and we have never achieved and may never, probably never will, but it is the goal that motivates what we do. If we don't become the very best, it's our own fault, because we have here, thanks to that man, the capacity, the freedom, the financial strength, the organization and the assembly of fine professionals who have come because they want to work in such an enterprise. If we don't create the very best newspaper there is, then it is our fault and our failure.

S: One of the major editorial issues that you confronted when you first came to the newspaper was the presidency of Richard Nixon. On October 22, 1973, the paper asked for his resignation or impeachment, one of the first papers in the country to do so. Was it difficult for Nelson Poynter to come out and ask for the resignation of the President of the United States?

P: No. Not in the case of Nixon. Because Nelson felt from the days of Helen Gahagan Douglas [U. S. Senate candidate who lost to Nixon in 1950] out in California that Nixon was a man of flawed character. The Checkers speech in 1952. The man's entire record during the McCarthy era. He engaged in what Nelson felt was demagoguery. Nelson felt, as I must admit I did, that this man lacked a certain quality that a president should have. It was once of my perplexities, and I think one of

Nelson's, that the business community of America represented by the Republican Party in those elections, voted so strongly and gave so much money to the election of Nixon. And yet I always suspected that not one of them would have hired him to work for his company. I just don't think he had the qualities that you have the right to expect in a president.

I remember in 1972 when Nixon was running against [George] McGovern[Democratic presidential nominee, 1972] and we recognized, our polls told us, that in Republican Pinellas County, St. Petersburg, Nixon would win seven to one over McGovern.... He turned and grinned at me and said, "You're not going to endorse Nixon, are you?" So we came out for McGovern, went down to a whale of a defeat, but we never came out for Nixon.

S: What about the pardoning of Richard Nixon by Gerald Ford. Did he had any trouble with that?

P: I think that he had more trouble with it than I did. I sneakily admired Ford for taking the heat and giving that pardon, because it started breaking the thrall of Watergate on the society and started putting it behind us. If we'd continued sticking pins into the Nixon doll for the next year, you know it could have created a great malaise on the society. But Ford had the courage to stand up and say, "Oh let's forget the whole thing, get it behind us, and go on about the purposes of America." So he gave the man a pardon. I don't think that Nelson Poynter was quite as magnanimous in that case as I was. I think he felt that it was questionable as to whether to pardon the man.

S: The last president during his life was Jimmy Carter. Did he have much hope for

that Georgian?

P: He admired Carter greatly. He enjoyed watching Carter in a news conference. He marveled at the man's grasp of detail, expertise, the fact that he had done his homework and was so well informed about everything.... He felt that he was a well motivated man. He felt that he was a remarkably hard working, well-informed, intelligent president. I know that he would not have cared for Ronald Reagan. But then Nelson never cared for form above substance, and Carter had the substance, but he didn't look good on television, and he didn't in the last resort strike the American people as a leader. Well, Reagan, who has no grasp much of detail, but a vast grasp of how to communicate to the American people as a leader, is a totally different kind of president. And I don't think Nelson would have approved of him as much as he did Carter.

S: Why did he give so much of his money to The Poynter Fund Scholarship Program, the Poynter Center on American Institutions at Indiana University, the Poynter Fellowships at Yale.

P: Well, go back to those "Standards of Ownership." What you must do is give your support to these causes and do it willingly without having to be pressed into doing it. Again, Nelson Poynter believed in education. Next to journalism, it was his great enthusiasm.... Nelson had a great faith in education and a great feeling for his alma maters. He took his undergraduate degree at Indiana University and felt a great debt to that school and a great affection for it. Among his many services to it was that he gave them a million dollars. And the same for Yale. He took his advanced degree in economics there, his Masters, and he always had a feeling of debt to Yale and contributed another million dollars to Yale so that some other young fellow out of

southern Indiana like Nelson Poynter could catch a larger vision of what's possible in a free enterprise society. He believed in paying his dues and, if he had been fortunate, of turning back to the people who had made it possible and sharing his resources.

S: Were there any other hobbies or interests outside of newspapers?

P: Everything interested him. But it ran basically to what newspapers do, that is, public affairs. He loved to speculate endlessly about Presidential politics. He loved to talk about the Kennedy clan. Bob Pittman once told me that he had the shrewdest judgement of political races of any person he'd ever encountered.... He told me years ago, for instance, when I first came to St. Petersburg, he said, "Teddy Kennedy will never be President." That was when everybody assumed that Teddy Kennedy was getting into position to run after {Hubert H.} Humphrey [Vice-President of the U.S., 1965-69; Democratic nominee for the presidency, 1968]. He said, "He's not Jack. He's not Bobby. Teddy Kennedy will never be President." And it wasn't altogether Chappaquidic either that made him say that. He said "Teddy Kennedy is a politician, and he's going to be a king-maker. He's going to stay in the Senate, but he's going to be a great Democratic party king-maker and will be the man who is instrumental in naming who the nominees are going to be, but will never be the candidate himself."

S: Do you think he saw himself as an important figure in the history of journalism?

P: He did not.... He truly was so modest that he never saw himself as becoming famous as a result of the work he did at the *St. Petersburg Times* and *CQ*. He saw the institutions themselves as being the important thing.... That, he said, is what should live. But you can't divorce the man from his contribution....

The day he died, though, he said a very strange thing to me. We had been to the

groundbreaking at the University of South Florida Bay Campus in St. Petersburg, and he'd been one of the people with a shovel.... Then we went to the Yacht Club for lunch with all these fancy people making speeches lauding Nelson Poynter, because he'd given a half million dollars to help acquire some of the land that those university buildings were located on.... He enjoyed himself, and everybody enjoyed him, ... everybody bragged on him that day. We left the Yacht Club... to drive back to the office.... Coming back, he was ruminating, and said, "I have never heard so many nice things about me...." Then he sort of smothered a little laugh, and he said, "They must think I'm going to die!" And that was the very day he died. We got back to the parking lot and I noticed he was having difficulty getting out of the car. His leg was troubling him. Nelson hated physical disability and hated anybody to notice. So I waved to Jack Lake who parked his car nearby, and the two of us literally had to support Nelson as we took him back to his office. And then he said, "Isn't anybody going to do any work around here?," and made us go back to our offices. But later, he tried to stand up and fell and his secretary called us. We took him to the hospital. The last time I saw him he was in the emergency room joking with Charles Donegan, his good friend, a doctor, making jokes with him, insisting that I get on back to the office and do some work. He died that night.

S: What would you say that you had gained from Nelson Poynter, both from a professional and a personal basis?

P: I learned from Nelson, I guess, to be independent, to believe in your own mind, to get away from self doubt. If you have gathered all the facts and measured them against the weight of experience and reached what you think is a well motivated

decision, move on it, act on it. Have the courage of your convictions. Don't ever be shy or frightened or filled with trepidation, but go out and seize the future. Make things happen.... It's very easy in many news rooms to let cynicism take over. And nobody believes in any values because they've seen that nobody has any for very long. In Nelson Poynter's case, I learned that you can't ever permit cynicism to overcome your basic idealism. You've got to hold to a set of values. You've got to believe. If you don't, nobody around you will. So, I learned from him, don't be ashamed of keeping your ideals, because very tough-minded men like Nelson Poynter keep theirs and act on them.

S: Mr. Patterson, is there anything you would like to add here at the end of the interview?

P: I somehow believe that the enduring, ongoing monuments that Nelson Poynter left here...the *St. Petersburg Times*, the *Congressional Quarterly*, The Poynter Institute for Media Studies, will demonstrate as the years go on what the life of that founder meant. He was in every sense the founder of this enormous enterprise that is so highly motivated and so successful. Successful materially, because he believed—without saying it, because it is a little too Biblical for him—that bread cast upon the waters does return many fold. He believed that quality was its own reward, and that if you do things, as he put it, “better, faster and cheaper” in American free enterprise, then you'll get your reward. And certainly through the *St. Petersburg Times* and its growth, devoted to quality and the very highest ideals, it has led to the assembly here of extraordinary people on its staff, to an extraordinary readership to whom it's totally dedicated, independent of any other newspaper connection.

END OF INTERVIEW