



## **QUITE BY ACCIDENT**

### **EPISODE 4**

#### **“How Steve Hess met Richard Nixon”**

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#### *Participants*

**STEPHEN HESS**

Senior Fellow Emeritus, Governance Studies  
The Brookings Institution

**KATHRYN DUNN TENPAS**

Visiting Fellow, Director of the Katzmman Initiative, Governance Studies  
The Brookings Institution  
Practitioner Senior Fellow, The Miller Center  
University of Virginia

#### *Episode Summary:*

In episode 4 of *Quite By Accident*, Steve Hess explains how he entered the orbit of Richard Nixon, the former vice president. Host Katie Dunn Tenpas hears from Steve on his role in the 1960 presidential campaign, learns what Steve did on Nixon’s 1962 California gubernatorial campaign, and finds out what both Nixon and Hess were doing on that fateful day in Dallas, November 22, 1963.

[automobile sounds]

**HESS:** Eisenhower gets in his old Chrysler and drives 80 miles to Gettysburg. He's got a Secret Service vehicle traveling with him. When they get to Gettysburg, the Secret Service vehicle turns around and goes back to Washington. And Eisenhower is alone.

[music]

**TENPAS:** At noon on January 20th, 1961, John F. Kennedy is sworn in as 35th president of the United States. It's a frigid day in Washington. Outgoing President Eisenhower sits next to Jackie Kennedy on the dais with a coat and heavy scarf. Ike looks tired. After a post-inauguration lunch with the new president and first lady, and a short reception at a nearby club, Ike and the former first lady Mamie Eisenhower depart for their farm in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

And Steve Hess is out of a job.

[music]

I'm Katie Dunn Tenpas, a visiting fellow and director of the Katzmman Initiative at the Brookings Institution, and a practitioner senior fellow at the University of Virginia's Miller Center. And this is episode four of *Quite By Accident*, a podcast about Steve Hess's life at the center of American politics.

Back to Steve on what happened next.

**HESS:** Eisenhower got there and had nothing. Gettysburg gave him rooms at the college to write his memoirs, and he had a couple of aides—military aide he had an aide and so forth, but he's got nothing.

And I don't know what I want to do, but I ... Clarence Randall says, go out and make money and then you come back to government, which is probably good advice but not something I could do.

**TENPAS:** Clarence Randall, chairman of the board of Inland Steel Company and an adviser to Presidents Eisenhower and later Kennedy.

**HESS:** The Kennedy administration actually offers me a good job, I'm quite surprised.

**TENPAS:** The Kennedy administration?

**HESS:** Yeah, they offered me a good job. But I said, no, not ....

**TENPAS:** So, they're hiring a Republican?

**HESS:** Yeah, at my age I can't switch back ... They did, they hired a person called Douglas Dillon who went from deputy secretary of state to secretary of the treasury. And by the way, Eisenhower was furious about that. But I felt as a young man, if I were going to be in politics, I couldn't switch party. So, I—

**TENPAS:** —That wouldn't happen today.

**HESS:** —I said no. The third thing, a senator from California, Kuchel, offers me a job. All right, I'll try it. I'll try the Senate and see what life is like on the other side. And I'm there for six weeks. And it ain't the White House speechwriting. I am writing speech after speech in defense of every product, every nut of California. He's running to the local strategy, which he covers every base, and I'm writing every one of his speeches. And it's painful.

And at that point Bryce Harlow, who had been the key congressional relations person on the White House staff, which is how I knew him, he is now sort of the go-go man in Washington for anything that happens Republican. But he's also looking after Eisenhower's interests.

[music]

And he comes to me and he says, The party feels that Eisenhower must be kept alive politically. He's too valuable to us to just sit there writing his memoirs. Would you handle his mail? Well, it's a lot better than writing about the nuts and bolts in California. So, I say, Sure. We don't know what it means.

So, I get an office, I hire one of Mamie Eisenhower's secretaries, Anne Parsons. I write a little book of how you answer every possible type of letter. But we don't know what it is.

So, it's a contract in which we agree I will get paid \$3 for every letter. What we don't know is that Eisenhower is the most beloved man not in the country, but in the world. And the letters pour in. And I'm getting \$3, which finally I say, no that's too much, give me \$1.

And I say, hey, this is the way it's coming to me, I'm finally going to have enough money to support my family and write some books, at least for a while. And that's where I was.

**TENPAS:** As Steve was replying to letters to Eisenhower, he also began to enter the orbit of Richard Nixon, Eisenhower's VP for 8 years, and who was before that a U.S. representative and senator from California. Nixon had just lost a very close presidential race to Kennedy and was also without a job.

**HESS:** And that eventually is how I get into the Nixon web because Harlow says, Well, while you're doing this—

**TENPAS:** —answering Ike's mail—

**HESS:** —look after Nixon. He's got no one in Washington. There may be issues. And so, at that point, it wasn't till April of '61 that I finally meet Nixon for the first time. And he wants he wants me to help him on articles for the *Saturday Evening Post* and the *L.A. Times* Syndicate. And so, I have my first meeting with him, and I didn't know that I'm going to like him because he's the guy who from the House un-American Activities Committee.

**TENPAS:** You don't like that?

**HESS:** I don't like that. Oh, funny, the first question he asks me when I go to meet him for the first time, he said, Were you Phi Beta Kappa? Weird question. Never been asked of me in my life. And he really is interested. The answer, fortunately, I have the right answer.

But then he says that he loves writers. A lot of politicians who hire speechwriters don't like them at all because they're taking away something that he should be doing.

[music]

But he really liked writers, and he read books. And he told me that writing his memoirs, *Six Crises*, was the most difficult test of his life. And we start to really get together.

**TENPAS:** So, Steve Hess, 28 years old, first met Richard Nixon in the spring of 1961 and started working with him. But let's back up just a bit, because the relationship between Nixon and Eisenhower is really interesting, and Steve was around enough at the end of the previous administration to offer some keen insights about it.

Think about the vice presidency today: always in the center of the administration, part of cabinet meetings, and sometimes visiting Capitol Hill to break ties in the Senate. But, it wasn't like that for Eisenhower and his vice president, Richard Nixon.

**HESS:** This is very weird, because, first of all, I didn't really know Nixon at that time. In those two years, he was never at the White House. He didn't have an office at the White House under Eisenhower. This didn't come about till Carter and Carter brought in Vice President Mondale. And since then, the vice president has office and staff in the White House.

But that was not the case with Nixon. Nixon's office was in the Capitol. He was paid by the Capitol, his staff was in the Capitol. We didn't see him, except when he came there for Cabinet meeting, or a National Security Council meeting.

And when Eisenhower writes his memoirs, he says something that's really very peculiar. He says the vice president didn't belong to the executive branch, the vice president headed the legislative branch. He was the president of the Senate. And when he did things for me, he did them because I asked him and he wanted to do it, but he didn't have to do them.

Entirely different. It was an old fashioned definition of the vice presidency, but totally foreign to how we think of the vice presidency today. So, there was even that sort of constitutional separation in Eisenhower's mind between the two of them.

**TENPAS:** Indeed, it was Walter Mondale, President Jimmy Carter's vice president, who transformed that office.

[music]

Nowadays, the presidential nominee's choice of running mate is a big story, and, after the pick is announced, we'll see the pair on stage together, campaigning together, sometimes with their families joining.

Here's Steve again talking about how Nixon became Ike's running mate and then VP in the first place, another example of how presidential politics differed during the time when Steve's was first in the middle of it.

**HESS:** This is very interesting because there's always a sense that tickets are put together—a liberal, conservative, a this or a that. And certainly the idea was that Eisenhower was the non-politician, comfortable guy, had run a war, and he wouldn't be able to deal with the machinations of politics.

**TENPAS:** It was 1952.

**HESS:** And Nixon, who he didn't know by the way, they didn't know each other, was the politician who had beaten Jerry Voorhees for the House of Representatives, Helen Geoghegan Douglas for the Senate, and was the politician and so forth. So, they were put together.

**TENPAS:** And was it mostly orchestrated by the RNC?

**HESS:** No, it was orchestrated basically by two people, Tom Dewey and the lawyer who ... his name will come to me, who became attorney general. Yeah, but they were the guys who were advising—

**TENPAS:** —who thought that Eisenhower—

**HESS:** —Eisenhower, who had no opinions of himself. He had been given a list of five people, who was acceptable to you and so forth. So, that's how they put that together.

And at one level, it worked very well because Eisenhower was not going to go out run around the country shaking hands for the next Republican election. But of course, that was Nixon's theme. So, he did very well at that.

But he did very well otherwise, too. He was in many ways a perfect vice president. He knew how to handle himself when Eisenhower had some serious illnesses. He knew how to go all around the world for funerals and whatnot. He really did the things that a vice president is supposed to do.

[music]

**TENPAS:** By the way, yes, *that* Tom Dewey, of "Dewey Defeats Truman" fame. The other man Steve mentioned as instrumental in getting Nixon on the ticket in 1952 was Herbert Brownell, who served as attorney general for most of the Eisenhower administration.

And then, in July 1960, Nixon won the GOP nomination in Chicago. Steve was on the platform committee for the Republican National Committee. Still working for the Eisenhower White House, but in a way also for the Nixon campaign, since it was their convention.

**HESS:** In 1960, leading to the Republican Convention, which Nixon will easily win the nomination, I've been assigned by the White House to the platform committee, to follow it through and make sure that they don't do anything that is not fully reflective

of Eisenhower. The platform is going to be written by a committee. It's going to be Nixon's platform. It's not going to be Eisenhower's platform. But we wanted to make sure that nothing slipped in. So, I'm there along with this process.

The chairman of the platform committee, by the way, is Charles Percy, who was the president of Bell & Howell. He was a total amateur in politics and later, of course, became a senator. But at that time was very, very inexperienced.

[music]

So, this is a situation where it's a week before the convention, we're in the Blackstone Hotel in his suite, waiting for the mimeograph machines to churn out the eight versions or the eight planks of the—

**TENPAS:** —of the platform—

**HESS:** —of the platform. And suddenly there's a call coming in. Percy takes it. And you can see that this is not the ordinary call. Something important is happening. And what's happening is that Richard Nixon and Nelson Rockefeller are on the other end. Nixon has flown to Rockefeller's home in New York, and they are now going to tell the chairman what should be in the platform.

There are two other extension phones in the suite. Rod Perkins, who is Rockefeller's assistant there, takes one extension. I take, with other people, the other extension. So, I'm listening to this conversation what's going on.

By the way, it's sort of funny, it went on for 4 hours. And at midnight, the hotel telephone operator pulls out the plugs and goes home. And we have to we have to reestablish the conversation to get back going with the conversation.

**TENPAS:** Why did they rip out the plugs?

**HESS:** Well, she went home. That's what you do. You go home, you pull out the plug, you go on to your next ...

So, at any rate, this is what's going on.

What happens is that the platform committee explodes. What is Nelson Rockefeller having anything to do with our platform? You have sabotaged the platform. This is the Munich of the Republican Party. They are in chaos. And eventually, after 36 hours, Nixon has to fly to Chicago and settle them all down.

This was totally unnecessary. It was Nixon's idea of somehow bringing the party together. Of course, he came close to destroying it, and he didn't understand the nuances involved. The idea of his going to Nelson Rockefeller, of Rockefeller standing up there and saying, the vice president has come to me, and this is what we're deciding and so forth. It couldn't have been all wrong, and also, as it turned out, all unnecessary. Since I'm reading all the material myself or reading what Nixon and Rockefeller want to say. And there's not even that much difference that the party should be destroyed over this.

Oh by the way, there is a funny sidebar to this. In the course of all this confusion, a plank of the platform that honored and was in favor of the United States Information Agency, and it had a lot about that, it was a plank of the platform. And somehow it gets lost in all this confusion.

[music]

And I rush to John Sherman Cooper, senator from Kentucky, who is the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. And I said, you know, you wouldn't believe it, but we just dropped this plank. And I know how difficult it is to do everything now because everybody's furious at everybody else. But here, I'll write it out for you if you could somehow get it in.

And John Sherman Cooper goes to his committee and turns it into a joke—a funny thing just happened—and they put it back in the platform. But crazy things are happening there and it's all because—

**TENPAS:** —Nixon's disorganized?—

**HESS:** —got it wrong.

**TENPAS:** So, even though Nixon was the consummate politician—he had won the Senate, he had won a spot in the House, he had been a faithful vice president attending funerals and doing what he should do—but he was not a good politician. And Eisenhower, who shunned a lot of the political, was actually much more shrewd in the realm of politics.

**HESS:** He certainly was.

**TENPAS:** And so unfolded, in the final months of 1960, Vice President Nixon's campaign against John Kennedy, and the final months of Eisenhower's presidency. You'd expect the outgoing president to wholeheartedly support the nominee of his party, who was his own vice president after all.

But that's not exactly what happened, especially at one of Ike's weekly presidential press conferences in August 1960.

**HESS:** And we're talking about a press conference where the president is asked a question by a *Time* magazine correspondent. And he wants to know, Mr. President, I'm just wondering if you could give us an example of something that the vice president did very important in your administration. And the president says, If you give me a week, I might think of one.

**TENPAS:** That's pretty damning.

**HESS:** It was brutal. Now, remember, Nixon is running against John Kennedy. This is a campaign in which Nixon's key advantage is experience.

**TENPAS:** Yep, eight years.

**HESS:** Yes, eight years of experience. And Kennedy is a perhaps a bit of a playboy. And at that moment, Eisenhower just pulls the experience—

**TENPAS:** —rug from underfoot—

**HESS:** —rug right from under him. At that time, these press conferences are filmed and taped, but they're not shown immediately. They're shown that night on television, but the staff watches them at noon in the mess. So, we had all gathered to listen to this, and we hear "give me a week," and it's a stillness. We don't know what to say.

The next day I asked John Eisenhower, What was the president thinking that day? And he explained, of course, the president was very exact about he wanted his press conferences to be a half hour. And at the end, he gets very antsy. And he says, says John to me, what the president was really saying was, this press conference is over. I'll tell you what it's going to be next week. This might have been true.

**TENPAS:** Because they were weekly press conferences.

**HESS:** Yeah. Yeah.

**TENPAS:** So, that's plausible.

**HESS:** It was plausible, but it didn't happen because the next week nobody asked the question and he didn't answer the question.

**TENPAS:** Do you think it was mean spirited?

**HESS:** What more could I say that the president had done something that was mean spirited and thoughtless. It was thoughtless. I think certainly attacked his sense of who he was in terms of running organizations. But he certainly went beyond that. And that was the only clue I had up to that point, personally, that there was some tensions.

I should say that it was clear that these two men and their families were not going to be close friends. They were so different. The friends that they had were so different and so forth.

**TENPAS:** So, what was going on there? Did President Eisenhower just not want to campaign for his vice president? Did Ike not like Nixon?

**HESS:** Sometime later in the future, I go back to John Eisenhower and I said, well, who would your father want to have had as his successor? And he said, Robert Anderson, who was the secretary of the Treasury, that's who he would love to have had if there were any possibility, which there wasn't, of his becoming president. Of those people of whom there was a possibility he preferred Nixon.

Okay, so the campaign is now going in after this press conference. And the president is not making speeches.

**TENPAS:** On behalf of Nixon.

**HESS:** And people are wondering what's going on. But of course I know what's going on because I'm there. And what's going on is that we've written all the



speeches that he's not given. And Mamie Eisenhower and the president's doctor have gone to Nixon and said, we're worried about the president's health.

**HESS:** And Nixon says, All right. I won't ask him. And Eisenhower is really very confused at irritated by this.

[music]

**TENPAS:** You mean he wants to give speeches?

**HESS:** He wanted to give speeches. He wondered why Nixon wouldn't allow him to give speeches. And finally, in the last week of the campaign, he does give some speeches and they're very good speeches.

**TENPAS:** So, Mamie and his aide go around him to Nixon and say, don't ask him to give speeches because we're worried about his health. It wasn't Eisenhower advocating for that?

**HESS:** Oh, no, no, no. At the highest level, they're telling Nixon, like maybe Mamie Eisenhower or certainly the doctor, but, you know, his health isn't good. Don't ask him. And Nixon says, no, I won't ask him.

So, Nixon doesn't ask him. And Eisenhower doesn't give speeches till the very end when he gives speeches, and they're very good speeches. And years later, Eisenhower said it was one of the biggest mistakes of my political career, that I didn't do more for Nixon in 1960.

**TENPAS:** Steve added that Mamie Eisenhower and the doctor were truly concerned for her husband's health and that might have contributed to Ike's absence from the campaign trail.

...

**TENPAS:** And what do you think, though, in his heart of hearts, did he want to campaign for Nixon? Did he like him as an individual?

**HESS:** I think he did want to campaign for Nixon.

**TENPAS:** So, as we know, Nixon lost to Kennedy in a very, very close election. But as we also know, this wasn't the end of Nixon's campaigning for higher office. In 1962, Richard Nixon decided to run for governor of California. But as Steve tells it, the former VP's motivations were not as straightforward as you might think.

**HESS:** What was he doing in California? And the story of that is an interesting story. Nixon had no interest in California. He writes this in his memoirs. He writes it in a letter. He said, these are problems that are important problems, but they're not my problems. I'm interested in problems of the world and international [affairs] and so forth. And he still holds a press conference and said, I am running for governor of California. It was bizarre.

And he thinks he's going to win. Why? Well, because he's Richard Nixon, who just stood up to Jack Kennedy in debate. That's who I am. You know, it's Richard Nixon who's doing well in the polls against the sort of bumbling governor, Pat Brown.

But Nixon doesn't understand California. His big campaign issue is communists teaching in the schools. Water, education, floods, all these thing, they're not the material I'm given to write speeches.

**TENPAS:** Steve recalled a campaign speech that he wrote for Nixon for his debate against Pat Brown, on October 1st, 1962, in San Francisco.

**HESS:** There's one debate between Nixon and Governor Brown who was sort of fumbling. And Nixon says, go up to San Francisco and write what Governor Brown is going to say in the debate. You write it so I'm protected, I'll know what he says.

So, I called Nixon headquarters. I said, quickly, send me all of Brown's speeches. And I wrote 7 minutes, which is the "Best of Brown." I would have done the same thing if I had been asked to do the "Best of Nixon."

And I take it ... it's a wonderful speech of all the things he's done for schools and for water and so forth and so on. And best speech I wrote. And of course I would give it to Nixon. And Nixon is thrilled because Brown is reading you this speech that I wrote. And of course, I never told him how it happened. He thinks I'm pretty great. Nixon.

**TENPAS:** No, wait, so you're writing a speech for Nixon's opponent?

**HESS:** I'm writing a speech for Nixon on what Brown is going to say the next day when they debate.

**TENPAS:** Oh, okay. And so, that's why it's called the "Best of Brown"?

**HESS3:** I call it the "Best of Brown" because that's how I write the speech. But that's the speech I write. He says it in his own words, but he says it word for word because, of course, I've taken it at all from his material. And Nixon is sitting there across from him and hears this, that he's just been given by his own speechwriter, and he thinks, wow, this Hess is terrific.

**TENPAS:** He thinks you're walking on water.

**HESS:** Oh, boy.

**TENPAS:** But you were kind of lucky. Or do you think if you look at anybody's speeches—

[music]

**HESS:** Oh, absolutely. Anybody would have done the same thing. You ask, what is Brown going to say? And I look at what Brown has said. And out of that, I've taken what I think is the most powerful things he said. I put them all together because of them is going to get 7 minutes. And he gives the speech. And Nixon is sitting there listening to his speech, and says Hey, I've heard that speech. Of course, I gave it to him.

[music]

**TENPAS:** But then, on October 14th, U.S. spy planes detected Soviet ballistic missiles, capable of carrying nuclear warheads, being installed in Cuba, just 90 miles from Florida. Kennedy and his team spent harrowing days debating how to respond while keeping the information secret from the American public.

And on October 22d, Kennedy addressed the American people from the Oval office. Steve watched with Nixon and his staff.

**HESS:** We're sitting there, Rose Woods his secretary—

**TENPAS:** —Rose Mary Woods—Nixon's longtime personal secretary, who followed him to the White House in 1969. During the Watergate investigation, she claimed responsibility for accidentally erasing some of the 18-and-a-half minute gap on a June 1972 audio tape of Nixon in the Oval Office.

**HESS:** Rose Woods his secretary, myself, three of us in Oakland, in a hotel room. And we turn on the television and there's President Kennedy and he's telling us about the Cuban Missile crisis, the most important speech and moment of his career.

We're sitting there listening to it. Nixon, running for governor of California, turns to me and said, "I've just lost the election," meaning lost the election for governor of California. I said, What do you mean? What do you mean? He said, people aren't going to be following me, they're going to be following the Cuban Missile Crisis.

**TENPAS:** And two weeks later, on November 6th, California voters re-elected Pat Brown to the governor's office.

**HESS:** Nixon loses the election by 275,000 votes and he thinks it's because the Cuban Missile Crisis. It isn't. It's because the governor, his opponent, Governor Brown, was a very good governor.

**TENPAS:** And he was an incumbent.

**HESS:** And he was the incumbent and he was a good governor. And he said things and Nixon in turn didn't say anything meaningful in that regard.

So, the election is over. And I'm cleaning up my office in Los Angeles, ready to go home to Washington. And he calls and he wants to thank me. And he wants to say goodbye. And I say, Dick, you still think you've lost? And he says to me, Oh, yeah, I've lost, but I'm never going to have to talk about crap like dope addiction again.

**TENPAS:** Famously, the next day, Nixon gave his so-called "last press conference," held at the Beverly Hilton Hotel, where he said to the assembled press:

**NIXON:** "You won't have Nixon to kick around anymore because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference."

[music]

**TENPAS:** After the 1962 California gubernatorial election, the Nixons moved to New York City, where the former vice president joined a law firm. And Steve returned home to Washington, DC where he wrote his book, *America's Political Dynasties: From Adams to Kennedy*—the one he started thinking about during his Army days in Germany. Eventually, it would be published by Doubleday in 1966.

[music]

Surprisingly, and sadly, Steve was with Nixon about a year later, on November 22, 1963, late on the fateful day. But, oddly enough, Nixon started the day in Dallas.

**CRONKITE:** “From Dallas, Texas, the flash, apparently official, President Kennedy died at 1 p.m. Central Standard Time, 2 o'clock Eastern Standard Time, some 38 minutes ago.”

**HESS:** The fact that I was with Nixon on the day that Kennedy was assassinated is really quite bizarre. What happened was that Teddy White wrote a great book on the '60 campaign.

**TENPAS:** *The Making of the President, 1960.*

**HESS:** There had never been a campaign book like his book. Nixon decided that he would write the same thing about the making of the president in 1964. And he called me, would I basically do all the work on the book while he did the good part? And this this was big money.

So, at any rate, I had flown to New York from Washington to meet with Nixon to go over what we were going to do and to meet with the publishers. Nixon, strangely enough, was in Dallas.

**TENPAS:** On the day of the Kennedy assassination?

**HESS:** Yes, Nixon was in Dallas because one of his big clients was Pepsi-Cola, and they were having their board meeting and he was talking to them about that.

So, I am actually meeting with an editor, nice restaurant downtown New York, to talk about the book we're going to do. And the waiter comes in, an Italian waiter, very broken English, and he's telling us that Kennedy is dead.

[music]

We thought he's telling us a joke. And I rush out on Fifth Avenue to find a store that's got a, you know, a picture of the television. And he's right, sure enough.

And I quickly call Nixon's office and Nixon's secretary, Rose Mary Woods, and I say, well, what do I do? And she doesn't know either. She said, well, you know, go to his home, which is 62nd Street and Fifth Avenue. I'm sure he's not coming down to the office. No reason for you to come down to the office. So, I go to his home.

And what's happened is that Nixon is flying in from Dallas. Coming in from in New York in a taxi. Taxi makes a stop for a light. And another taxi driver said, Hey, did

you hear? Kennedy was assassinated! That's how Nixon hears it. So, he rushes home and I'm rushing to his home.

When I get there, he has taken off his jacket, but he's still with a tie on standing at the door to greet me. And he wants to show me the *Dallas Morning* newspaper because the *Dallas Morning* newspaper has a story about he had had a press conference in Dallas, and previously Adlai Stevenson had been in Dallas and had been spat upon.

And Nixon had said then at his press conference that's not how we treat people in a democratic system. And he wanted to show me this. He's holding the paper because subconsciously, when he said I had nothing to do with the assassination of Kennedy. Because the worst thing out of his mind would be that somehow the assassination of Kennedy could be tied to him.

My reaction by now to Richard Nixon after he's lost the presidency and he's lost governor, is that he's finished in elective politics. But I'm totally wrong. The guy continues to be consumed by becoming president of the United States. And that's in keeping with that. And he had already talked to his children when he came in, they were home, and they were very upset. And he expressed that they were concerned. And later he said that he was not concerned in that way over the assassination.

**TENPAS:** You mean he wasn't sad about it?

**HESS:** But he was. He had made that clear with his children.

So, at any rate, we are now at his home. And by now journalists are starting to gather in front of his building. So, we've got to work out a statement for him to make to the press. And the statement turned out to be about his warm relationship with John F. Kennedy, how they had gone to Pennsylvania together to do a speech. And he felt this was what he was talking about.

But in the meantime big politicians are starting to gather in his home. In New York, they're starting to come to Nixon.

[music]

And what we're worried about was to call Eisenhower. And he calls Eisenhower, who happens to be at the Waldorf Towers, and his aide-de-camp General Shultz said, he can't be disturbed, he's taking a nap. So, he didn't. And then he calls J. Edgar Hoover. I wish I knew exactly what time it is, because J. Edgar Hoover is the one who tells him, No, no, don't worry about it. This guy had been in in Moscow.

**TENPAS:** This guy who killed him?

**HESS:** The guy who killed Kennedy. They already know about who he is. And he was not the right winger, he was a left winger. And that's a sort relief to Nixon.

And we're busy canceling the rest of his week and month. He's going to go to the opera with Tom Dewey tomorrow. Cancel that. He's going to play golf with Roger Blough, the head of U.S. Steel, the next day. Cancel that. So, we're clearing his

docket so that he can get back to the funeral in New York. These are the things you do in a situation like that.

**TENPAS:** The shocking and tragic death of President Kennedy changed Nixon's political calculation entirely, and Steve was right in the middle of it.

**HESS:** So, I went to New York, to my mother's home, came back the next morning. And by that time, several things were clear. Clearly, he was no longer thinking of not running for president. He didn't know what he was going to do, but he was still in the game. And secondly, the book that I had come to write with him was off.

**TENPAS:** Were you surprised by Nixon's reaction to the assassination?

**HESS:** Well first of all, yes and no. All these things happened very fast, remember, and very surprising. But it was interesting if you think about it, because the reason that Nixon chose to run for governor of California, which is I had told you, he hated the idea. He didn't want to be governor, but he wanted to protect himself from having to run against Jack Kennedy in 1964, not being able to defeat him in 1960. Now, as Kennedy being the incumbent president, he had no chance. That was his total reason to run for governor of California.

Now, if you think about it, Jack Kennedy is not going to be the candidate in 1964. The candidate is going to be Lyndon Johnson. How would he do against Lyndon Johnson? Well, he might have done pretty well. So, fate and all these things sort of play a role. Now obviously he can't think all of that through when he decides on whether he should run or not in California. But that's how it works out.

**TENPAS:** Nixon decided not to run for president in 1964, and the relatively moderate Republican Nelson Rockefeller lost the nomination to conservative Barry Goldwater. Lyndon Johnson, the incumbent president since 1963, won the election in a landslide.

Over the next few years, Steve and his family, including sons Charles and James, returned to Washington, where he continued to work. And then in 1966, a fateful encounter took place on an airport runway, and Nixon made Steve an offer.

**HESS:** It was Lincoln Day Week. The Republican Party, there's a time every year where big politicians go out and campaign to raise money. And Nixon was going to go out in 1966. And it happened that right before that I had a gig, an assignment, to go down to Georgia, to Boeing, to do a story on a plane that was being totally done by computer. And as I got there, to the airport in Washington, Hubert Humphrey, the vice president, is coming off the plane. Hmm, that's interesting.

So, I know Nixon wanted to get to his trip. So, I tell him, hey, you know, they've just take a moment ... he's just allowed the vice president the plane. Why don't you call them and maybe they'll give you the plane for your trip? And they do. And actually, the plane is the Pussy Galore plane from the James Bond movie.

So, I then called Nixon later and I said, Hey, could I come along because I'm writing a book with Dave Broder about the Republican Party and I could use the bead on

that trip. So, he said, Sure. There were just two reporters, Nixon, me, and an advance man on that trip.

Coming back to New York on that trip, the plane refuels in Buffalo and we get off and the two of us walk the tarmac. And Nixon suddenly says to me, Come to New York and be with me. And I'm surprised. I'm truly surprised. I've had my own life writing books. I've got two books under contract, and I said, I can't do that. It's too abrupt. I shouldn't have done that. He was, he was really saying something nice and important to me.

And then we get back on the plane and his advance man, his name is John Whittaker, he was very close to him, he said, What happened? What happened? And I said, Well, Nixon said this to me and I said I wouldn't do it. And Whittaker said, That has changed your relationship with Nixon. And I said, Well, I don't know how. We were pretty good friends, everything. But Whittaker has got it absolutely right. Saying no to Nixon at that point dropped me from close, close friend to just friend.

And in a sense, I never had, until by accident, a closeness with him again.

**TENPAS:** And with Steve's decline of Nixon's offer, and the demotion of their relationship to "just friends," a new character entered the scene, one we'd hear from in American conservative politics for decades to come.

**HESS:** And that was a funny story there was that a young man who was an editorial writer and in Illinois, who was desperate to work for or for Nixon, and his name is Pat Buchanan. And suddenly there's an opening. Suddenly I've declined. And Nixon calls Buchanan, he comes, takes the job.

[music]

So, the fascinating to me bit of history that didn't happen was that Buchanan is a terribly important, as he writes himself many times, influence in Nixon's race for the presidency in 1968 because he pulls him to the right and puts him in contact with a lot of right Republicans, which is important to him. Clearly, if I had taken the job, I would not be pulling Nixon to the right. I would be pulling him in the wrong direction.

So, all of these things happened by accident.

**TENPAS:** Quite by accident, indeed.

That's all for this episode. You can read more stories from Steve Hess in his book *Bit Player*, from the Brookings Institution Press.

In the next episode, Steve joins the 1968 Nixon for president campaign and starts a lifelong friendship with a towering figure of American politics—Daniel Patrick Moynihan.

Stay tuned.

Thank you for listening to *Quite by Accident*, a podcast from the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm Katie Dunn Tenpas at Brookings and the University of Virginia.

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