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Sam Donaldson

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Sam Donaldson
INTERVIEWER: Robert Esch
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

ABC News reporter and former UTEP student;
UTEP Outstanding Ex of 1976.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; the journalistic profession; privileges
of the press; political campaigns; the Watergate Case.

45 minutes (1 7/8 tape speed); 18 pages.

Sam Dondaldson
by Robert Esch
April 19, 1973

E: Sam, can you give us a brief biographical background of your life here at UTEP when you were here, some of the people that got you steered in the direction of news reporting?

D: Bob, I was here in 1951 until '55. It was then Texas Western College. Virgil Hicks was head of Radio and Television department. That was my major. I consider him a very good teacher. I think many of the things I learned from Virgil have stood me in good stead today. I enjoyed my time on this campus. I wasn't a particularly good student, because in the early '50s, there were not many scholars among us. [It was] the Silent Generation.

E: Where did you go from UTEP?

D: To the University of Southern California.

E: And you got what type of degree there?

D: Nothing from the University of Southern California.

E: Did you move right into ABC from USC?

D: No, I went into the Army for 2 1/2 years. I was stationed mainly at Fort Bliss.

E: How do you regard news broadcasting as a career? I'm curious about the type of job opportunities that it offers young people today, particularly women and minority groups.

D: I think it's a good career. I enjoy it, certainly. It gives me an opportunity to think that I'm accomplishing something that's worthwhile--not just bringing home a paycheck, which is important, but doing a little something in addition to that--that is, informing people about what's going on. I think there ought to be more women, there ought to be more Blacks, Spanish-speaking Americans, minority groups, in broadcasting than there are today, but I am against a quota system. I wouldn't set a certain quota. And I guess I'm like everyone

else, Bob. As you know, at the moment I anchor a program on Saturdays on ABC. If you say, "All right, if you feel so strongly, why don't you step down and let a woman anchor it?" No, I'm not going to do that. The network's going to have to do it by assimilating more women and more Blacks rather than changing people just for the sake of bringing minorities in.

E: Some critics of news broadcasters have charged that broadcasters think of themselves as sort of a privileged class that is immune from criticism by the government or any restraints from publishers or editors. What do you think about this charge?

D: Well, I don't think we think of ourselves as a privileged class. I think we regard ourselves as custodians of something that really belongs to everyone. It may sound corny, but I think most of us believe in the so-called "right to know," which springs from the First Amendment of the Constitution, which says we believe that no one--least of all government--has the right or power to control the free flow of information, that only the public marketplace does. If you and enough of the people who watch ABC think that I'm not doing a fair and objective job of presenting the news and you begin to turn me off, it won't be long before ABC takes me off, because they're in business to turn a profit and to beat the competition. So there is a check, you see, and there is a balance on what people disseminate.

E: What about government subsidized programs and also the public broadcasting service?

D: I am not for government subsidy in the sense of trying to change our commercial broadcast system. I think it's the best way to pay the freight. I would not be for government subsidizing us so that we could be commercial-free. By the same token, I am not against the fourth network, the Public Service Broadcast

Network that the NET stations are now linked to, the corporation for public broadcasting, which is receiving a government subsidy. It does bother me, though, to see what's happened in their public affairs division. The White House doesn't like Sandor Vanoker, it doesn't like Robin McNeal, claiming they are Leftists, and so they're fired, let go. Their position is made untenable. The White House doesn't like a number of public affairs programs, so they are canceled even though the majority of the individual station managers around the country say they want to carry programs like William Buckley's "Firing Line" or "A Moment With" from Washington, "Washington Weekend Review." So there you see an example of what happens when government steps in with money. It then steps in with the control and it wouldn't be any different, I suppose, under a Democratic White House than it is under a Republican White House. Politicians, simply, once they have that type of control, can't seem to keep their fingers off the throttle.

E: You may recall in the Laos Invasion that Senator Dole accused CBS of slanting their news. And according to a recent article in Journalism Quarterly, ABC is supposed to be more supportive of the Nixon Administration than CBS or NBC. Do you think that is a fair statement?

D: No, I don't think it is a fair statement. By the same token, I don't think it would be a a fair statement to say that ABC is against the Administration, because we ought not to take a position. And I don't think ABC News does. Now, what we do, as you know, is allow our anchormen, Harry Reasoner and Howard K. Smith--in fact, urge them--to comment at the end of each night's program. They are free then to express their personal viewpoint, and that viewpoint is labeled Commentary. And Howard Smith then says, as he has rather consistently over the last five or six years, that he supports the Vietnamization Policy of

the Administration. That is his right. But if viewers had looked and remembered what was in the balance of the program, I'm certain they would've seen basically the same reports that the other networks presented on the same stories. So you ought not to judge ABC's news objectivity--and we may not always be objective as we hope to be, I'm not telling you that--and you may judge it for yourself by the comments of our anchormen. Set them apart. Then write them a letter if you don't agree with them, or write them a letter if you do. But for the balance of the program, I think we're presenting a viewpoint which is neither pro-Nixon nor anti-Nixon.

- E: One of the distinctive features of television news reporting is that visual component, that visual impact. But I wonder, what is your reaction? Do you think that this impact of the visual experience on the viewer has been overrated?
- D: No, I don't think it's been overrated. I worry about it a little bit. It's McLuhanish. You've got an impression. The impression in your mind, maybe in your subconscious, then leads to a conclusion which you haven't thought out. But it is an emotional experience. A visual impact gives you this, whereas words, for the most part, must be examined in your mind. Although you may not go through this step by step examination process consciously, you're thinking about the meanings of the words as you understand them, and you're testing them against other ideas you have. But an emotional experience is another thing.

The war is a perfect example. You see the mangled bodies of children who have just walked on a land mine laid, let us say, by the French twenty years ago, and you are now affected emotionally. You may reach a general broad conclusion about the purposes of the war and whether it's a good thing or not from that. Maybe it's good that you do and maybe it's not, because on the other side perhaps there are rational arguments, at least, to be made for

fighting. I am not making them for the Vietnam War; I'm using it as an example. But it bothers me that we do have this tremendous power using the visual impact.

E: Tell us about some of the personalities in Washington--that's always exciting. People like Martha Mitchell or someone else.

D: I only saw Martha Mitchell once and she wasn't /exciting/ then.

E: She wasn't telephoning you?

D: She wasn't telephoning anyone at that time. It was early in the first Nixon Administration.

I like the Congress. I spend a great deal of my time on Capitol Hill, although at the moment I have been following the Watergate Case, since last July. It seems to be going on and on and it's presenting us with a very serious crisis, I think. It may come even to a Constitutional crisis. But I like the Congress, and I like to talk about the members up there. You know, a few of them I think are crooks. I say that in the broad sense. Obviously, if I had any direct proof of anyone having taken a bribe I'd do a story on it, and we'd see the fur fly. A few of them are simpleminded, but very few. What I'm leading up to is, the vast majority of the Congressmen, I think, are exceptionally well-qualified to represent their constituents, and most of them do. Now on a national sense we can complain about some of the southerners who are from safe districts and have been elected to Congress ten, eleven and twelve terms, and therefore have the power. But they are representing their constituents, which, after all, is what they are paid to do and /are/ elected to do.

E: What is your impression of Senator Ervin?

D: I think Sam Ervin, who has now come into his own, deserves it--and I say that warmly. I think his integrity is above reproach. He's a great storyteller,

he fascinates you. But don't ever ask him a question and expect a short answer. Three or four weeks ago, during one of the preliminary news conferences after his special committee to investigate Watergate and other political machinations of the '72 Campaign was set up, we wanted to shoot very quickly because we were on a deadline. We were hoping that the news conference would end in thirty minutes. It took him fifty minutes to field fewer questions than it would take a normal public figure fifteen minutes to field.

E: He wasn't evading?

D: Oh, no, no. If you would ask him, "Senator, do you believe the President has the power of Executive Privilege to forbid his principal assistants from testifying before Congress?"--he wouldn't simply say, "No, I don't." He would pull out citations from legal decisions going back to Chief Justice John Marshall, put on his spectacles, and read to us. And it was not that his staff had come up with these citations, as the staffs of less brilliant and learned men do; he himself had _____ them from his extensive law library. And he was ready to not only tell us why he thought the President didn't have the power, but quote us the legal decisions that he thought buttressed his case. Very brilliant mind. I detect no senility in Sam Ervin, as yet. He is 76 or 77 however. Once in a while he'll meander, but he always comes back to the point.

E: What do you think of Attorney General Kleindienst's interpretation of Executive Privilege, that the President could, if he wanted to, forbid any of the 2.5 million government employees to testify?

D: I think it's silly. And I hope that Richard Kleindienst knows it's silly. Public men, as you know, Bob, say things that they think they have to say for the purposes of whatever project or goal they're seeking to promote at the

moment. I would hope that when Kleindienst goes home and sits down in his rumpus room, he knows that his interpretation of Executive Privilege is silly.

E: What do you think about this shield law for journalists? I was reading about Connecticut and something that was debated in their House of Representatives. Do you feel that if there is a shield law of journalists, that it should include any restrictions such as those requiring disclosure of sources to Grand Juries or Legislative Committees when serious crimes were being investigated?

D: I do not; I am for an unrestricted, all-encompassing shield law, a very simple one. It must of course by necessity attempt to define who is a reporter or who is to be covered under the shield law. I think perhaps legitimate scholars ought to be covered also. It must, of course, define its terms. But outside of that, I would make no exceptions, because I don't think the First Amendment makes any exceptions. And until the Bransburg Decision--there were three cases, and it's more popularly called the Caldwell Decision--last summer by the Supreme Court, in modern times we hadn't questioned the journalist's right to keep locked in his safe his unpublished notes and unshown film. It was only since that decision that some judges, some prosecutors, some Grand Juries across the country, have begun, I think, to trample on the First Amendment.

Pardon me for going on at some length here, but you've touched a subject that I feel strongly about. Who is hurt if reporters are required to identify their sources? Well, initially the reporter, perhaps, because he's going to lose stories, he's not going to be able to do investigative reporting. If you can't talk to me confidentially and know that you'll not be named, you're not ever going to tell me anything that you wouldn't stand up in the middle of Main Street and say. And when you're talking about investigating wrongdoings,

such as the Watergate Case, then you're not going to find people initially who are going to stand out in broad daylight. But it's not really the journalist, although he's the initial man to hurt. It is the general public, because they, then, don't get the information. They, then, don't get the fruits of the investigation. They don't ever hear about the wrongdoing. They are hurt. So if we're going to have a shield law, I'm for one that's unrestricted, one that has no ifs, ands, or buts. Because I think the Constitution says that, and if we have to buttress it with a law passed by the Legislature, as invited by the Supreme Court decision, then we ought to have one that's unrestricted.

E: In Arizona recently there was a court ruling that allowed superior court judges to close trial proceedings to the public and the Press if the judge felt that there was a clear and present danger to the defendant's right to a fair trial. What is your reaction to that?

D: I don't know the specific case that you cite. I have taken a look at some cases in which the Sixth Amendment--guaranteeing the right to a fair and impartial trial, and the First Amendment--which is the one that we stand on as journalists, have come into collision. Quite obviously, we have to use common sense. I am not, in trying to support the First Amendment principle, suggesting that journalists ought to have the right to make certain that people accused of crimes don't get a fair trial. That would be asinine for any journalist to suggest that. I don't think we do do that. But if we're going to have the Sixth and the First Amendment collide, then I think the greater good of the body politic--and excuse me now for lapsing into the broad generalizations, but I /don't/ know any better way to say it--the greater good requires that we continue to have the free flow of information. If judges begin to close trials so that they are in effect star-chamber proceedings, on the grounds that the defendant

might be injured by publicity, then who is to protect the defendant from the injuries that might be dealt by the prosecutor, by the judge himself? The injuries that many, many years ago (perhaps not so much in this country, but in Europe where we got our Common Law from) were the injuries to be feared-- the star-chamber proceedings. Who's going to protect him from that? I think if I were a defendant, I'd want to make certain the trial was open so the public and journalists could be there. I'd take my chances, then, that way, rather than have the door shut.

E: What about the Ellsberg Case?

D: Well, we ought to have a verdict any day or so. I'm not going to pre-judge what the jury will say. Ellsberg has said that he will take the consequences of his act. If he's found guilty and the Appeals Courts sustain the verdict, of course he goes to jail; well, he would have no choice. But he says that he's ready to do so. He then asserts that his conscience required him for the greater good, he says, to publish the Pentagon Papers. And I really don't want to take a position on it.

E: I wonder if you have had any experience with universities and review boards of faculty, regents, alumni, who exert control over publications by students. I wonder if you have any feelings about that?

D: I've had no personal experience. And I've done no stories connected with the problem that your question presents.

E: There has been a number of cases with the American Association of University Professors where faculty members have been fired because of their involvement with student publications and their defending of students' rights. I was just wondering if you have had any experience with it.

D: Well, I think our society works best when the rights of all its members are

balanced in such a way as to do the least harm to all of its members, or, in another way, do the greater good. Now, what do I mean by that in your case? Well, in the old days, of course student publications were controlled by the faculty, and students couldn't do a thing about it. And when I was in college here at Texas Western, now UTEP, I don't think anyone really ever thought of rebelling against this type of strict and tight control. Now, I think that was too much control. I think it's a good thing that students at the college level or the high school level, for that matter--because people are maturing so much earlier--start using their heads, start thinking of ideas, start writing about them even though they are noxious even to the majority of the readers. Once again, ideas are not going to hurt us, it's the lack of ideas that would hurt us. But if it goes the other way into a system of anarchy, as developed on some campuses in the running of the university, where the students now assert the right to manage the university, select the professors, decide on the curriculum--I think that's ridiculous. Because, after all, they are students because they've come to learn and be taught, not because they've come to do the teaching. So I suppose I would stand somewhere in the middle of the creek on the subject of faculty control and administration over student publications.

- E: You think, though, that students should have some voice on committees in the university, faculty-student committees?
- D: Absolutely, absolutely. If I'm going to stand in the middle, I can't stand on one side.
- E: Did you have that type of arrangement when you were here at UTEP?
- D: Since I didn't work on the paper here, I can't speak to that. And I don't recall ever questioning any of the arrangements we had here. I don't know what

the situation is now. We had a closed circuit AM radio station on campus, which couldn't be picked up much off of campus. We clipped the wires of...I guess it was the AP or UPI radio wire. I've forgotten which one we had at KVOF. And in addition we would sometimes write news items and put on our little news-casts. I don't mean to be condescending when I say "little," but /when/ I think back on them now, it certainly was the first grade. But then, of course, that's why we were here. And I don't recall that anyone ever tried to censor. Virgil Hicks never tried to censor what I put on the air. By the same token, I don't recall that I ever tried to say anything that was at all controversial. The question just didn't arise. We were the Silent Generation, Bob.

E: Well, I think that you've really covered so many issues. Is there something that you think the readers of NOVA would really like to hear about that I didn't cover? Are there some other personalities, for example, in Washington? I think of people that I'm interested in, like William O. Douglas and a number of others. Are there other personalities that you'd like to give us an anecdote or something about?

D: Well, I guess if we dealt in personalities I'd have to talk all day. Not that I have that many anecdotes. But there are interesting people. Hubert Humphrey is one of them. Now he's settled down in the Senate. I think the Presidential bug has finally been stilled in him--although I wouldn't be certain. There are people older than he talking about running for the Presidency in '76. Nelson Rockefeller will be 68, Ronald Reagan will be 65. Ed Muskie will be 64. And all of them have already expressed interest in running for the nomination of their particular parties. So Hubert might do it. But I found him to be very interesting. A flawed man in the sense that he never, after making his mark as a very courageous individual who fought for the things he believed, he never

was able to sustain the reputation for being an unbending reed. He was destroyed by the Vice-Presidency and having to bend to Lyndon Johnson's will on the Vietnam War and other issues. Then when he ran in '68, and tried an aborted campaign in '72, he was still flawed. But he's a very colorful individual, well worth knowing.

You asked if there's anything else that I'd like to say. We have covered a great deal of what I'm most interested in these days. We've talked about the shield law and the free flow of information. I want to have one more word, if I may, though, about this battle between the Press and the Nixon Administration, broadcasters in particular.

E: Is there a battle?

D: Well, a battle in the sense that an attempt to win public support and opinion for a point of view against the Press, I think, was the deliberate calculation of the Nixon Administration. They rallied their forces, beginning with the Vice-President and others, in a calculated way. Not simply to say, "We don't think you're being fair, please be fair," but to say to the public, "Don't trust the Press. Don't trust journalists." Because we were bringing the bad news, in those days, about Vietnam and the economy. Now, we're bringing the bad news about Watergate. I think we've reached a watershed on Watergate, if I may indulge in a bad pun. And I think out of what we're seeing developing in Washington right now will come a righting of what I thought was an extraordinarily successful effort by the Nixon Administration to discredit journalists per se, in some parts of the country more than others. Because I think what we'll see exposed in courts of law, not just the marketplace of ideas, is that high officials of the Nixon Administration were involved in the crimes which seven men have been convicted of, in bugging the Democratic Headquarters in

the Watergate Apartment Complex. And I think the public may then realize that since it was the Press and the constant badgering of the Press in trying to investigate and expose what had really happened, and not the government--not the Justice Department, not the courts--that exposed it, the public will come back to the view that, well, the Press may be wrong now and then, individual reporters may be slanted and biased, that's quite true; and that you take what you read and see with a grain of salt, that's very good advice, always. But by and large, you'd better trust the Press rather than an administration with an axe to grind like the Nixon Administration, if you're talking about the overall subject of credibility.

E: You think that people like Jack Anderson, then, have done really a good service.

D: Yes, on balance. And I don't defend for a moment his bad story on Eagleton. Reprehensible. I don't defend for a moment some of the other stories that he's done. He's a muckraker. But we need muckrakers. Now, I know that that's a very harsh thing to say to the man who is the hapless target and innocent target of a bad story. I know Jack Anderson personally and I don't believe he maliciously sets out to do a bad story. He does sometimes get caught up in bad sources, he gets caught up in wrong information. I think he is sometimes careless in waiting another day or two before he prints, and I don't defend this. But on balance, the good that he has done, as his predecessor Drew Pearson did in exposing wrongdoing and government flim-flam, is far more important. Anderson was of course responsible for the Dita Beard memo in the ITT Case. And that case continues on and on now. Even this week we've seen the Attorney General set himself aside from the continuing probing of the ITT Case, because of his own involvement with individuals who are suspect. He's done the same thing on Watergate. So I think Jack Anderson, on balance, has done more good

than harm. And I think that's the major test for reporters. Maybe good and harm are not the right words. Maybe, being right more often than you are wrong, are the right words--if you will concede that no human being can be right 100 per cent of the time. Whatever the right words are to distinguish between a reporter who is more consistently right, careful, and therefore a disseminator of the facts, I think Anderson is in the latter camp.

E: Thank you so much, Sam. I think this has been a big help, and I think the readers of NOVA will really like it and appreciate it.

PAUSE

E: Has your life ever really been threatened as a newsman?

D: I've had lots of people say to me in the heat of anger that they're going to get me. When I say lots, I think three or four.

E: Dick Nixon hasn't said that to you?

D: No, no! (Chuckles) But one candidate for Governor of Maryland once did, a man named George P. Mahoney. He was the Democratic nominee in 1966 and he lost to Spiro Agnew. And three days before the election Mahoney said to me in the corridor of the local television station in Washington, for which I worked, "I'm going to get you after I win this election, because you have been grossly unfair to me." I don't think I had. The point is, he lost the election and I haven't heard from George P. Mahoney since.

E: Has anyone?

D: Well, he ran again. He had run eleven times in 1966, either for the Senate or for the Governorship of Maryland. He was defeated either in the primary--he was a Democrat--or in the general election each time. He was one of these

perennial candidates. I think you know the story. A very popular--everyone thought popular--Democratic Congressman named Carlton Sickles was headed toward the Democratic Gubernatorial candidacy and everyone thought he was going to be the nominee. So the Republicans put up Spiro Agnew, who was a Baltimore County executive. They thought he didn't have a chance. But George P. Mahoney knocked Sickles off in the primary and Agnew went on to win the election.

One time perhaps I felt in this country [that] my life--well, not my life, at least my skin--was in some danger. And that was in ^{Montreal} Utah County, Alabama in June of 1968. We were covering a rally for George Wallace. And this, of course, was in '68 and the Governor still had the use of his legs and [was] a very sturdy man, and always travelled with five or six plainclothes state policemen as his personal bodyguards even then. And there were some other state policemen around. There were about 500 under a shed on a lake somewhere in Utah County. We were the only national news reporters there. I subsequently learned that there were one or two reporters for local papers [there]. I had a camera crew. We were filming the Wallace speech, and at the end of it he said, "I'm going to shake hands with everyone here." He took off his coat and extended his arm and we started filming people coming through the line.

I spotted back in the line a fellow I recognized--Bobby Shelton, then the Grand Dragon of one of the Klans. I'd never met him before or seen him before, but his picture had been published to often. If you're in the business you pay attention to pictures, perhaps even more so than the casual reader of a news magazine or the newspaper, because you know that you might run across them if they are a newsmaker. So I said, "Keep the camera running." I don't think George Wallace knew that Bobby Shelton was there. Wallace in '68 was trying very desperately to change his image. He had been a Southern Segregationist

in his inaugural speech in 1963. You'll recall he said, "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever." He was trying to change his image from that to a more moderate position so he could run in some of the northern states in the Democratic primaries there.

Shelton stepped into the pool of light and Wallace shook his hand--automatic reflex. But the moment he did, he realized what had happened. That is, that he was being filmed by a national network, shaking hands with Bobby Shelton, the Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan. Now, people have often asked me later, would I ever use that film. I can't honestly tell you. As we were filming, it did not run through my mind, "Here's my chance to get George Wallace." It did not run through my mind, "This shows that he's in cahoots with the Klan." If anything, it would show just the opposite, wouldn't it? A public place being filmed by a national news network. If there was some backroom deal going on, Shelton would never have come to the line, would he? But Wallace didn't react that way. His immediate reaction was to send his goons over and demand the film. I said we wouldn't give him the film. The cameraman still had his portable camera on his shoulder. And I said, "We're not going to give you the film." And Wallace came over and he said, "What are you trying to do to me?" And I said, "Governor, we're not trying to do anything to you, but I'm not going to give you this film. This is our film and we have a perfect right to film here. We're here, as a matter of fact, at your invitation," which was true. But he was in no mood to reason.

He said, "Take the film," and one of his goons grabbed the camera off of Charlie Jones' shoulder. And at this point the crowd began gathering around. And call me coward, call me anything you will; I decided that discretion was the best part of valor. We put up no further resistance. They ripped the film

out of the camera and exposed it to the air. And they were smart enough to take both sides of the magazine so they had all of the film. We then withdrew a little way and the crowd began muttering. And they didn't quite know what was going on, I think; but it was clear that they were on Wallace's side, and we hadn't pleased him. And some of the folks came over and wanted to talk to us, wanted us to step out behind the shed so they could "discuss" things with us. And we got in our car very quickly and departed. I'm convinced the only reason we didn't have a serious situation there was because there were five secret service agents. Bobby Kennedy had been assassinated a few weeks previously, you recall, and President Johnson had ordered that the secret service be assigned to all presidential candidates. And so there were five secret service agents. They were not state policemen of Alabama, they were not personal Wallace bodyguards, and they weren't the "folks." And I think their presence deterred the situation from getting to the point where it might have been violent.

E: Tell me about the fee system.

D: Well, until recent years, most network correspondents have been on a fee system. That is, we would have a base salary and then for every appearance on either radio or television, we'd be paid extra money. And there was a sliding range of fees. If you did a spot of 90 seconds or two minutes or 2 1/2 minutes a news program, you'd get a certain fee. A whole series of fees.

Well, this has changed now. For the most part, reporters in broadcasting are paid a guaranteed annual salary, which covers all their work. I think this is a change for the better. First of all, from the standpoint of the correspondent, he now knows what he can count on. He's not at the mercy of the vicissitudes of news stories or assignment editors. Secondly, it's good for the business because then there can be no question that we are doing news

stories because we think we have something to say to the public rather than because we're trying to line our pockets. And there might have been under the fee system an incentive for correspondents to try to peddle to their editors or producers stories that really didn't belong on a national news program because the correspondent didn't have them solid enough, because he needed the money. Now, you see, that's not there.