

GEORGE SKELTON, INTERVIEWED BY RICHARD EHISEN IN SACRAMENTO ON FEBRUARY 28, 2022

PART III

Rich Ehsen: Let me ask you about writing the column, because this is really important stuff. You started in what, in 1993? Writing the column.

George Skelton: Yeah, early 1993, late 1992.

Rich Ehsen: Okay. Because as a columnist, you have the opportunity and certainly the responsibility to put out a lot of thought-provoking material, which you clearly have done. But to do it for as long as you have, I think you really have to develop and build a lot of trust with readers. Tell me about your approach to your column, whether it's in how you choose the things you write about or the way that you write about them.

George Skelton: Well, I try to write about things that are timely if I can. Or if they're not timely, things I really deeply care about. Or some interesting experience. I try to keep up with the news. I may be late because I only write two a week, and I write on given days, Monday and Thursday usually. So I may be late, but if I feel like it's a subject that I should write about, even if I'm late I write about it. I've gotta get how I feel about it in there. I usually decide how I feel about it before I write about it, either state as strongly or not so strongly.

Rich Ehsen: Do you think about the influence that you have with it? Because I think a lot of people in positions of power, if you write a column that is critical of them, they're going to take notice much more so than maybe someone else that might have written that column. Are you cognizant of that when you write, or is that something you have to shut out of your brain and say, 'That doesn't matter, what matters is the thought I have on this?'

George Skelton: You've gotta think, first of all, and almost exclusively about the product of the column and not be concerned about what somebody's going to think about it. I mean, is it factually correct? I mean that's all journalism, you know? We used to say in UPI, "Get it first, but first get it right." So in writing the column, I gotta think about how the column comes out and what it looks like to the reader, and not about what somebody, some politician, thinks about it. And a good example of that is... We didn't talk about Pete Wilson, so we'll talk about Pete Wilson. I was really critical of him running for president because he promised not to do that.

Rich Ehsen: Right.

George Skelton: So I beat up on it unmercifully, quite frankly, about running for president. Several, several columns. And he didn't like it. I mean, Bob White caught me at lunch one time, and said, "Stop beating up on my boss." With a stern look on his face. But I still did. But Pete had a very thick skin. He and I got along as well as I have with any governor. Even after that there were things I was critical of him about. But at the end of the day, I'd go into his office. He'd open up his liquor cabinet and bring out some scotch, would have a drink of a glass of Scotch, maybe even two, interview him. He was great. And so, you can't think about that. I

don't. I don't worry about it. Well, I'd rather have him like it than not like it, but I'm not going to write it so they'll like it.

Rich Ehsen: Reporters are generally pretty loathe to put themselves into the story. Columnists of course are a little different. You're paid to have an opinion. A lot of times that has to be personal, but you rarely give too much of a glimpse into your own connection to a story.

One very notable difference that I want to ask you about: six or seven years ago, we had some very major protests here all around the capitol about a bill over vaccine mandates, not terribly unlike what we're seeing about the vaccines and mask mandates around the country now. You wrote a column, April 23rd, 2015, about all this. And in that column you noted that there had been death threats made against the two authors of the bill, Senators Richard Pan and Ben Allen. And that bill was essentially to take away some of the exemptions for kids being vaccinated to go to school. And then you noted, and again I'm going to quote you here: "In 1951, before there was a vaccine, more than 10,000 Americans were afflicted with paralytic polio. I was one. My strong single mom guided me through the ordeal. She was a saint, but if there had been a polio vaccine that she had prevented me from receiving, I never would have forgiven her. Parents who won't allow their children to be vaccinated are, let's put it politely, misguided. That's their problem and their kids. The legislature should gather enough courage to make sure it's not also everyone else's problem."

Was it hard for you? I mean that's a very strong stance on a very, very volatile subject, especially at that time. Was it hard for you to put yourself into that column as an example in the way that you did, number one? And were you concerned at all that doing so, might expose you to the same kind of threats that Richard Pan and Ben Allen were facing?

George Skelton: Yeah, it's two different questions.

Rich Ehsen: They are two very different questions answer. The first one, was it difficult for you to put yourself into that story?

George Skelton: Yeah, sure it is. I never talk about having polio. For most of my adult life I was able to walk around like everybody else, and so I didn't talk about it. Later in life I had what's called post-polio, and now I use crutches. But yeah, it's hard for those reasons because it's something I don't like to talk about. But I felt in this case, and it was the first time I wrote about that, I needed it for the column. I needed it for credibility. People knew my situation and if I didn't spell it out in a column when I was writing about vaccinations, they would wonder why. And I thought it would make the column more powerful and credible if I did. So I did. My editor, when she got the column, she wanted to jump that up into the lead paragraph. I said, well, that might be a good thing to do from a journalistic standpoint, but I'm not going to do it. I don't want to do it. I buried it down about two-thirds of the way through the column, maybe three fourths. So that's why I did it. I felt that the column needed it and the column came first. That's the way I felt. Did I feel any personal fear? No. That goes with the territory. I mean, I got a lot of threats over the years. Many, many writing about gun control, particularly. Also some of the most vicious people in the world are animal lovers. Animal rights people. I hear it from them.

Rich Ehsen: Well, and what kind of response did you get? And I will tell you the reason I really wanted to ask that specific question and have you talk about it is because here we are all these years later, and I remember it. I remember thinking that thing and how challenging that had to be. What kind of response did you get?

George Skelton: I think I got a lot from... I can't remember. You mean what? Writing about polio?

Rich Ehsen: Yeah.

George Skelton: I got very little about that, I got some people who had polio who wrote.

Rich Ehsen: Really? So it really wasn't that much more than anything else...

George Skelton: No. I got a lot of response for the column, certainly.

Rich Ehsen: Okay.

George Skelton: But that personal reference. Not so much. No.

Rich Ehsen: Was the response in general mostly favorable? Do you remember?

George Skelton: A subject like that, you get it on both sides. I can't remember.

Rich Ehsen: Okay, I want...

George Skelton: Incidentally just might add, I get threatening emails and stuff like that. I get in the habit of saving most of my emails. Anything happens to me, look at the email and see who threatened me. That's my thinking behind it. Maybe misplaced but...

Rich Ehsen: I don't know. In the world we're living in now, it seems to be getting more and more... Well, anyway, let me ask you how has political coverage changed over the years? How has the whole atmosphere changed? I know I've seen you talk before about the influence technology has had. And of course, maybe it's obvious because, like you said about "Get it first, but first get it right." It seems like we've just left that second half of the sentence off now for a lot of stuff.

George Skelton: Yeah, you're right.

Rich Ehsen: What has been the biggest influence in the change of political coverage over the years? Is it just the technology or is there more behind this evolution than just that?

George Skelton: It's technology. Technology has changed how politicians approach politics. When I first got into it, newspapers were the main venue for communication of politics. Television was just starting. The first presidential debate was 1960. And TV, when I first came here, wasn't even allowed to cover the governor's press conferences. And there was a big debate

about that. Finally, they let TV in to cover it but they couldn't ask questions. They had to wait till the press conference was over. This was all in Pat Brown's office before the 1190 press conference room was built. After the press conference, TV reporters come back and asked the same questions that were asked and get them on film. Of course when Ronald Reagan became governor, TV exploded and everybody had a bureau here. But there was no social media, no smartphones, no Twitter, none of that stuff. No Facebook. So now, politicians use those things to get their message out. Newspapers are kind of secondary. And TV is even less. So the way they deal with you now is different than they used to be.

Rich Ehisen: They can keep you at arm's length now.

George Skelton: Yeah, right, although they're still concerned about what we're going to write for sure. And we have a way of setting the tone for social media.

Rich Ehisen: Are there any politicians, and you don't have to name names, that you're able to sit down and have a glass of scotch with or get a ride to the airport with or sit down on a bench overlooking a lake with and having a frank discussion about a major California issue with? Or are those days completely gone?

George Skelton: Well, yeah, yeah, there's some. But the last two years we've had this pandemic and the legislators and the press haven't even been dealing face-to-face with each other. Hardly, very minimally. So that's one thing that's changed. As I mentioned, when I first came here the reporters were all in the Capitol and they gradually spread out. Now, they're working at home, and a lot of the legislators aren't even working in the Capitol.

Rich Ehisen: When you're not here, you mentioned hunting and fishing. You spend a lot of time in my hometown, Lake Tahoe. We've talked a little bit about climate change and climate change of course is a significant issue around the world now. Have you had any observations of maybe the impact around Lake Tahoe? Have you seen anything, the changes over the years that...?

George Skelton: Well, a lot more people, yeah.

Rich Ehisen: Well, that's a fact, yes.

George Skelton: I mean that's the big change.

Rich Ehisen: Yes.

George Skelton: They've done a very good job of trying to control it but it's pretty hard to do.

Rich Ehisen: But you don't look around and go, "That's climate change." [laughter]

George Skelton: Change like climate change? Well, fires. I don't know, wildfires. We didn't used to have a lot of wildfires and this last summer was terrible. There's that. Tahoe Keys was a... But that wasn't climate change. They came and built Tahoe Keys and closed a big marsh on the south shore, that was not good for the water. Climate change hasn't changed Tahoe nearly as

much as development and runoff into the lake. And as a guy who's been going to Lake Tahoe since 1959 – my first wife had a family cabin up there – I think Tahoe is still beautiful. The stories about it becoming despoiled and polluted and all that are way overboard, and I think they are frankly hyped in order to keep the foundation money coming in so they can keep studying it. I have a boat up there and I go out in the lake all the time and you can still see pretty damn deep and it's great.

Rich Ehsen: A lot of newspapers around the country, many newspapers around the country, they're moving away from having opinion columns like yours. Some have ditched them altogether. Do you think that's going to continue? Do you think that the kind of column you write is maybe going to go away sometime soon?

George Skelton: Well, no. I don't know, I really don't know, I don't think so. A lot of newspapers are going out of business, so they're getting rid of staffers. Columnists will go. They're losing a lot of space. Maybe they don't have room for columns. I don't know but, if you look at the big papers, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, they're certainly not getting rid of columnists at all. The *LA Times* has been adding them quite a bit. So, I don't see it in the major newspapers. It's not going to affect me because I'm not going to be here that long, let's just face it.

Rich Ehsen: Well, you know, I mean the thing you see with a lot of those, they're soliciting opinion columns from people out in the world, and that's very different than the kind of thing you do, which is a well-thought-out, and coming from a journalistic standpoint. They're more advocacy things as opposed to a balanced kind of thing that you do. That's the thing I think we worry about.

George Skelton: Well, your opinion columns in social media, is going to be opinion columns in newspapers. Newspapers are going to become mainly digital in the future, and columns will probably follow on there. I'm not sure.

Rich Ehsen: You ended a column you wrote in 2015 where you were looking back at the Watts riots from 1965 with the following line: "50 years ago, everyone seemed mad at one another. Today, they're just cynical." Do you still think that?

George Skelton: They're mad at each other right now. I wrote that in '15?

Rich Ehsen: You wrote that in 2015.

George Skelton: Yeah, right. Well, right now they're mad at each other.

Rich Ehsen: So, they're both...mad and cynical.

George Skelton: Cynical and mad. The anger comes from the cynicism.

Rich Ehsen: Mm-hmm. It doesn't seem to be getting any better.

George Skelton: Well, no, I mean, we're polarized. And we're polarized either right or wrong in people's minds. Trump, certainly aggravated people and stimulated cynicism and anger. And I think that's where we are right now.

Rich Ehsen: Yeah. I'll ask you one last thing. And it's a follow-up to what I just asked you. Which is, I'm going to ask how about you? You've been doing this for 60 years. You've covered presidents and governors. All of these things we've talked about. Some tragedies, some moments of great joy, success, accomplishment. Are you more cynical right now or optimistic for the future?

George Skelton: I don't think about that. I'm a realist. And I'm one of those who thinks that, there for the grace of our constitution, we could be like Nazi Germany. As long as we can keep our democracy going, we're going to be fine. If we start trying to overthrow presidential elections like Trump did, then we're not going to be fine. I'm not sure where this is going to go. I think we've got too many guns in this country. I grew up with guns, I hunted much of my life, but we've got too many guys. We allow too many people to get guns without background checks, allowing them to have too powerful guns. I don't know where we're going to go with that. I don't know what the American people will decide. So I'm optimistic that if we do the right things, and I'm pessimistic if we elect guys like Trump. I'm cynical, but I've always been cynical. Skepticism, I think, is where I am.

Rich Ehsen: Well, that's our foundational aspect of the job, right? We're supposed to be skeptical, you're not supposed to just take everything on face value.

George Skelton: Yeah, right. Yeah, like we to have bullshit filters.

Rich Ehsen: Absolutely. Anyone that is in J-school watching this better have their's fine-tuned, right? If you don't have that, go do something else for a living.

George Skelton: I do think this. I think the more people are educated, the more I'm optimistic about the country. I'd like to go back, and I've written this, when I was a kid going to college there was no tuition at the University of California, or state universities. They called them State Colleges then. That didn't come along until the late '70s for UC. I think the first tuitions were in mid-'70s, and community colleges didn't have fees until '80s. But now we're going back to free community colleges. I think, that would be a terrific thing for California's economy, to get more people educated and get an educated workforce. And I think the more people are educated, the better off we're going to be.

Rich Ehsen: Well, on that note, George, thank you. This is one of those situations where we could talk for hours, and hours, and hours, because we've covered just a fraction of probably the things you've covered over the years. But I think we'd all agree that even this little fraction is incredibly enlightening, and we greatly appreciate you making the time to share this for folks to glean a little bit of your wisdom from over these six decades of covering California and national politics. Thank you very much for making this time for us.

George Skelton: Yeah. We did it even without drinks.

Rich Ehisen: Yeah, I know. I'm going to have to actually work on that one, I think sometime in the future, there may have to be Scotch involved. I don't know, we'll have to see how the folks who fund this feel about that. I mean, 10:00 in the morning is not such a great idea for that either. Anyway, again, I'm Rich Ehisen, Managing Editor of the *State Net Capitol Journal*. For George Skelton of the *LA Times*, and for everybody at Open California and the California State Library, thank you very much and we hope you enjoyed this and please check out all the other great oral histories that have been done already, and we have a lot more planned. So come back to see us again.