

White House Interview Program

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INTERVIEWER: Martha Kumar

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MK: When you come in as press secretary, what kinds of decisions can you make as to who you hire, how many slots you have, at what level they are? If you come into a company, you have a range of choice.

MM: If you're not starting from scratch, or building an office as part of a transition, you just basically are confined by the arrangements of your predecessor. I found when I went to the White House in 1995, I was very hampered by the budget that DeeDee [Myers] had negotiated and that was the existing budget for that staff. Of course, the problem was—I had visions of bringing all kinds of people in, and building a team of people there. It turned out there wasn't a budget sufficient to do that, because DeeDee had sort of frozen in a budget that paid all these young kids, that had worked on the campaign, the best salaries they had ever had in their life. But they weren't the salary of a Senate press secretary or someone from a PR [public relations] company that had experience, so you couldn't go recruit people with a lot of talent. You couldn't recruit people from outside, because you couldn't meet their salary requirements. That's why we ended up, basically, promoting from within—which was not a bad thing to do, because we had good, bright, energetic, talented people and you could promote them up. And I couldn't find any way to change it. When we started the second term, I think I did go back in and say we wanted to do some reconfiguration, we wanted some new money, we wanted to restructure aspects of the press office.

MK: Did you ever talk to Jodie Torkelson?

MM: Sure. And Jodie was very helpful to me, and got money. Then Virginia Apuzzo was helpful and got money. So I think it got straightened out over time, but it was sort of a haphazard process. There was not a formal budget-making process within the White House, like there is within other agencies, where you submit your figure and manage a budget. Again, part of the problem is, by and large, I don't think each assistant to the President who manages an office manages the budget. It's just given to you. Essentially, the main resources that you have to manage are slots and salary raises, and things like that.

MK: So, one of the things that happens, then, at the beginning of an administration, is that deals that are made right there at the start just resonate throughout.

MM: They lock in. Remember, what happened with DeeDee was, they had this huge operation that Jeff Eller was running.

MK: Right.

MM: And then they had a big Communications Office. DeeDee essentially had—and George Stephanopoulos didn't want to have anything to do with being the manager of the press office. That was kind of the Press Secretary's responsibility. So she had a budget that

reflected the fact she had a fairly junior staff, all of whom had been campaign veterans, by and large. So, you're right: once you inherit that body of people, you have to kind of fit them into slots. You sort of fit them into existing slots, too. You wouldn't probably do some things to reconfigure the way in which the offices are set up but there wasn't any wholesale redesign of the Communications Office and the press office when they came in—that I was aware of.

MK: What happened to Eller's operation? He came in with an idea—I remember reading a column Sidney Blumenthal did in the *New Yorker* about how communications was going to be entirely changed.

MM: He did build this kind of office of media affairs, I think is what they called it. The idea was: it would create avenues to local press coverage and you'd bypass the White House press corps. That created a lot of animosity, because they were flagrant about it. Eller is a partner of mine in this company now, and I do this stuff with him. He's great, but he's a showman. He was always very voluble about how they were going to run around Brit Hume and "get the message to the people." Well, that was like waving a red flag at the press corps and the White House.

MK: In a way, if you look at 1998 when the press corps is focused on [Monica] Lewinsky, you all were able to do that.

MM: It was exactly the right thing to do—to create other avenues—to get your message in front of the American people. It's just that you couldn't be so brazen about it.

MK: What avenues, in particular, was he good at creating?

MM: Well, Eller, when he created that shop, he created a system of desks with high-quality press people working those desks. That became, in effect, the press office for the non-Washington-based journalists. That still exists. We had exactly the same arrangement when I was there. But if you were like a Joel Connelly at the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* or Phil Trounstone down at the *San Jose Mercury News*, serious political reporters who otherwise fit in at the White House briefing room but they weren't there because they were somewhere else, that was your press contact. So there were all these transactions going on getting information, getting story ideas, getting responses to inquiries out to the premier political journalists around the country who were not Washington-based. There was a lot of that all throughout the second term. I think arguably the fact that you still had some sense of a White House that was functional and working on these issues and substantively working on the problems of government—that continued day in and day out. Then, from the "bully pulpit" level, we had [Bill] Clinton every day doing something that was reflecting his job. Even if it was just a picture or some little squib of information in the newspaper, not the main story of the day, people would at least have some sense that: "Here's the President of the United States, he doesn't seem to be in a bunker, he seems to be doing what he is supposed to do."

During that same period, the Internet began to bubble as a primary vehicle for news dissemination, and that really began to take off [in] 1997, 1998.

MK: What difference has the Internet made, do you think, to the White House?

- MM: It just creates a lot more confidence: that you can get information out to citizens who seek it, without having to rely solely on the filter of the press corps. I think there's a higher degree of confidence now that you can use these web sites and use these alternate means of getting information to audiences that you're trying to reach in a way that you couldn't before. I haven't asked anyone now: "Where are you in the year 2000, compared to where we were in 1998?" but I know some of the things they've done in the last two years, and I think it's been a marked improvement in the ability to use the Internet to drive information.
- MK: How do you judge success in an operation like that? You say you get to the people. How do you know that, besides "hits"?
- MM: I don't know. There wasn't when I was there. Maybe they've done some now. You didn't have any real metrics for measuring what the utility of an Internet source is but, anecdotally, I know I've seen articles where information was primarily delivered through the White House web site. That's where you get the text, that's where you get the documentation. I think they're doing more now to post interesting questions onto the White House web site, so that people can pick up and use it. I know it's increasingly used, if you're responding to an inquiry, "That was in the President's April 13 speech. You can get that at our web site." That's what you need. Then the necessity of finding a document, faxing it to an individual journalist is beginning to wither away now, because everything is just archivable and you can just call it up and get it.
- MK: Do you think more reporters do that as just a matter of course, they just archive a bunch of things themselves, and they go to it, rather than calling the White House for stuff?
- MM: I suspect they do, yes. I have never tried to get onto the White House web site and access a speech that had been given in the past, but I know you can do it. If you had some need to go back and look at a particular transcript, or look at a particular speech, it's all there and it's available.
- MK: Sometimes I've gone onto the weekly compilation of Presidential documents too and gone back [inaudible].
- MM: But that's a notoriously unreliable document, I think, because it's so selective in what is actually compiled. It is not a complete compilation, I don't think.
- MK: It's not complete—of everything. No, it certainly isn't. Sometimes even the White House web site, even in briefings—remember early on, they were putting all the briefings on. Your briefings probably all were there but I can remember briefings that did not make it, or just disappeared very quickly. Like DeeDee Myers' briefing about the travel office employees being fired. That disappeared pretty quickly.
- MM: From the archives?
- MK: From the White House web site. I'm sure I can find it somewhere. You can get parts of it from the *Post*.
- MM: Now, that's interesting. I think that's a serious issue, because they're struggling right now with the whole question of: how much is the electronic record of the White House officially deemed presidential documents? You have to get that right. That's a little worrisome to me because I've always assumed—in fact, I think when I left the White House, someone gave me a CD that had all of my press briefings on it. Now, what I've always thought is that

there is some way you can get on the White House web site and search it. If I ever wanted to go back—

MK: You can.

MM: I've got a stack of all of my press briefing transcripts from when I was at the White House. I told Debra, "We ought to throw these out, because if I ever needed to get it I could get it electronically." In theory.

MK: That's right. I don't know that I'd trust it 100 per cent, particularly with the way things vanish around there.

MM: Well, if the Monica Lewinsky briefing—someone decides they don't really need to be shipped off to the Little Rock Presidential Library some day—so they're not there, that would be kind of interesting.

MK: I'm sure those would be around. In thinking of measuring success, is that something that's just difficult in communications operations generally?

MM: Yes. You always have that problem in private-sector public relations: how do you demonstrate the bottom-line value of communications, public relations, public affairs, image-related things? It's very, very difficult to measure. You can make the argument to a CEO [chief executive officer] or a president, that your public reputation affects the value of the enterprise, so, thus, it affects your share price or your overall standing with the American people. But it's hard to quantify that directly: X amount of good press coverage results in Y increase in the value of our stock, or the political measure of the president's job performance. You can't make those direct kinds of arguments. I think, increasingly, though, because of that [intangible results] public relations always was sort of the poor stepsister to marketing and advertising. Marketing and advertising, that branch of communications, people said, "I can see the direct correlation between sales and what I'm investing in advertising and marketing and public relations." But it was harder to do that with public relations. I think that's changing now. It's certainly changing in the Internet economy, because buzz and reputation and what kind of image you have in the marketplace is driving a lot of the value of some of these companies. So you, if you have more sophisticated CEOs who do see what the value is—but it has been a slow change. I think it's historically been hard to demonstrate what the utility is of good, effective public relations.

MK: What kinds of discussions did you have at the White House, and who was involved in where you grappled with measuring success?

MM: Very few of them, because it was all sort of intuitive. You're going to—the weekly measure was: which way are the numbers going in the polls that Mark Penn took every week, are we going up or going down? That was kind of the bottom-line measure. Everyone instinctively knew whether we were getting good press or bad press, affected the equation. But it was also based on: are the media spots we're running effective? is the storyline that the press is carrying, meshing with the president's personal appearances? and the coverage of them working to drive the message in the way we want to go? That was the basis of evaluation as more of a political one: are you getting done what you needed to get done as part of your political standing?

MK: Did you think of stories as something that was reflective? Could they be reflective of what the public was thinking, and that's why the numbers were in a particular direction, reflective

of what they wanted to know about? Or does a story reflect your ability to get in and shape it?

MM: It was a little bit of both. It was more the content of the story. If you went through a week—when we did the residence meetings every week, we'd get in the big long memo that got put together for those meetings; part of it was a measurement of what were the top ten news stories of the week, how many of them were the stories that we had tried to generate, how many were stories that the press generated that were off our agenda but on their agenda, and what was the net result of how people were looking at it? We had a fair amount of data on that, as most White Houses do, and a lot of it was available through the polling that news organizations did, too, about: "What's the current public attitude about this particular issue?" Nobody ever really did content analysis, if that's what you're driving at. Like: "Did you break down the story, and say how many of the messages that the White House constructed and delivered, were contained in the coverage of this particular issue?" We never got down to that kind of sophistication.

MK: Can you go into the preparations for the residence meeting: sort of, who put that together; and who decided the top ten stories; and, then, what you all discussed and who was there in those residence meetings?

MM: I think, during the period of 1995-1996 when we were in reelection mode, it was put together—well, they began before [Dick] Morris showed up. But once Morris showed up, frankly, they were a little better organized and a little more directed around a set of questions that were put on the table by a strategic team that included [Leon] Panetta—I think Panetta, Erskine Bowles, [Doug] Sosnick as the political director, maybe [George] Stephanopoulos. [They] had a pre-meeting each week. Don Baer was often in that, because Baer was so intensely involved in the crafting of the message and the speechwriting. I think they had a little pre-meeting every week, just to go through the numbers, and decide what they were going to put on the table for the larger group.

I've always assumed there was some polling that was kept private, more about: "What do people think of Clinton? What do they think of Hillary [Clinton] on a personal level?" I think some of that was probably edited out of the presentations that we got every week. They were done by Penn's [associate], Doug Schoen. Doug Schoen tended to do the presentation of the polling data. Penn would comment on it. A really bright guy who works for Bob Squier, Bill Knapp, would very often do some of the presentations, too; a very, very creative guy. Then, Morris would sit there and comment and summarize: "Here is the strategy that this suggests..." from time to time. And that was an interesting process. [Harold] Ickes, of course. I left out Harold. If there was one of these pre-meetings, I think Ickes was there, too.

They used to get together—if we were having one of these residence meetings, on a Wednesday night, they'd get together late Wednesday afternoon, down in the ward room of the mess and plan out what the presentation was going to be like. I'd wander down there to get a cup of coffee late in the afternoon, and see that they were working in there. I always had too much to do. It always struck me as fun to go in there and watch them connive and conspire against each other. It was a good texture meeting. We basically got done what we needed to get done every week.

MK: How long were they?

MM: They went ninety minutes. Of course, Clinton was always, endlessly fascinated with the polling data, but that would then trigger a whole set of conversations: sometimes about policies, and how certain things were being affected; and whether or not we could get more political mileage out of certain things Clinton was interested in and working on and talking about: “Why can’t we figure out a new way to talk about this.” They were good brainstorming sessions and review of “where we are” and planning meetings for saying: “We’ve got three or four issues we want to get on the agenda, when would be the best time to try to do that?” They were useful.

The polling was always totally not counterintuitive. It was just basically exactly what you thought. The only thing surprising about it was, throughout the 1996 campaign, the fact that Clinton’s number held up for the whole year. We always worked under the conventional assumption that the race would get tighter, the longer it went on. And it just never did. It got tighter only in the last two or three days, because I think—by that point—if you hadn’t decided to vote for the incumbent, it was more likely that you were going to vote for the challenger. So [Bob] Dole picked up probably more of the late-breaking vote, I think.

MK: He also had the fundraising issue, some of the fundraising stuff coming up.

MM: So, much of that was sitting there, impeding the message delivery, every single day.

MK: Did you find, in spite of all those issues, that they didn’t sideline you, that you were able to get the alternate message out?

MM: It was very, very difficult. I think—particularly the close of that, the last part of the campaign in 1996—I think, in retrospect, people didn’t realize how much damage we were doing to Clinton’s prospect of having a successful second term. Because they were creating such ill will with the press—by basically being quite obvious about the fact: we were not going to deal with the press’ agenda, period. We were only going to be putting on the events that we were putting on, and trying to drive the story line in the direction we wanted to drive it. And, yes, we did get them. The press had to cover the events that we were putting on, and the news that the President made every day about whatever particular subject, but it was in a very contentious atmosphere because so much of what the press wanted to cover was the questions about financing and fundraising and all that. What happened was, you could probably even get some reporters to be candid about this: they decided they would get even in 1997. They basically said: “Clinton skated through this election, dodged the issues; he essentially ran unopposed, because Dole was such a weak candidate; we’re going to make him address these questions he should have addressed in 1996.” I think that’s what drove the storyline in the White House in 1997. Little did we know we had zestier material—

MK: —about to come about. Do you think, though, that a bigger element might have been that they felt they had been hoodwinked? That a story got by that they should have seen? They should have seen all these people going in for all the fundraisers? The fundraising has been different in the Clinton White House, the use of the White House itself. And it made them [the press] look bad, that story coming out.

MM: I don’t know. I don’t know whether they feel guilty that they didn’t perform very well. They should. I mentioned something in a little op-ed piece I did recently: that the way I’ve always felt about it is if [Ann] Devroy [since-deceased, top *Washington Post* White House reporter] had been there, she would have said, “This guy has an uncommon amount of time when he’s not doing anything...”, or she would have seen—she knows half the western

universe—a lot of these characters when Clinton had one of his coffees and they had a bunch of Texas—.

MK: Where did they come in? Did they come in the northwest gate?

MM: I think they came in the northwest gate, sometimes.

MK: I don't remember ever seeing the number of people coming in, that you would think. Part of the problem is that, for a function that's in the residence you can come in the east gate, you can come in any different number of ways. I remember running into people who were on their way over—"I'm on my way over to have coffee with the President"—and I remember thinking to myself, "That's weird; that's one of those political things they're doing, but I wonder why they've got so-and-so there?" I never got asked the question, so I never stopped to get any answers about what is that all about? I honestly do believe, if we had gotten pressed early in 1995, and the press had started raising the issue of "What are all these political events you're doing in the White House?", I think we would have had to get on top of it and have the answers, we probably would have checked out a little more thoroughly what can you and can you not do with respect to fundraising activities. I just think it hadn't been that big of an issue, so nobody paid a lot of attention to it. That's my general sense of it.

MM: Now the press—you raise a good point—did they feel they missed a good story? Well, they missed the central story of the 1996 campaign which was Clinton's extensive use of early media, targeted in local campaigns, to really basically put Dole in a box he would never get out of. The two things that were the most stunning about the 1996 campaign [were], one, the press never reporting that extensive use of advertising, the earliest ever in a presidential campaign cycle.

MK: On the budget?

MM: Yes. Basically joining [Newt] Gingrich and Dole at the hip on Medicare and a whole bunch of issues. Not seeing that and writing about it and covering it was extraordinary. The second thing was the fact that the Dole people never responded to it. It just went out there totally unanswered. According to, what's his name, Scott Reed, Dole's campaign manager, the theory was it was a wasted investment by Clinton and it wasn't going to have any impact on voters, because they weren't paying attention at that point.

MK: But couldn't they do their own polling and see? I remember the ads ran in Philadelphia. How many markets did they run in?

MM: I don't know the total number. I don't know. It was dozens of markets, in critical swing states, but it wasn't national, and it wasn't in Washington.

MK: Right.

MM: But it would be like anybody in the political world would say: Clinton has a heavy "buy" here that's got an ad on about Dole and Gingrich. You couldn't miss them. They did have a powerful effect, because I think it really did put Dole way behind the curve on a lot of the budget issues. Maybe some of that was just the way public opinion was being shaped anyhow, but I think they were successful in framing the choices the way we wanted to frame them.

MK: How did they come about? Whose idea were they?

MM: I want to say Morris. I don't want to fault him, but I think they were Morris' idea, and there was some disagreement inside about whether or not it made sense to spend that much money, that early, on advertising. The conventional wisdom and certainly reflected in the way some people thought inside the White House was that, "This race will get real close in the Fall, because it always gets closer, and that we ought to be squirreling away our resources so we have enough to do advertising when it counts. It was a pretty unorthodox approach to go out and try to spend that money early.

MK: Whom did he have on his side? Who are the people that get involved in these kinds of decisions? I assume it's the residence meeting.

MM: Clinton, first and foremost. I think Squier liked it, because he was going to get to make a lot of ads early on. I think that probably [Al] Gore had to, therefore, like it, too. I don't know. It was never really clear how—it wasn't like a vote of the group. It was sort of a discussion. I think Panetta kind of liked it. They were about the budget and I think Panetta's view was—he had such strong distaste for Newt Gingrich, and the Republican Congress, and what they were doing on budget priorities, that the idea of kicking around Republicans on budget priorities.... I think Leon sort of liked that idea. But I don't know. I'd have to go back. Frankly, I recall George [Stephanopoulos] having some of this in his book. I think there's no doubt that Morris deserves some of the credit for strategically envisioning this early effort to sharpen up the distinction between the Dole-Gingrich Republicans and Clinton and what he was doing. It was, I thought, very effective. It was sort of meat-and-potatoes political media, but it was very effective. In terms of what's now called negative and not negative, they certainly were ads that took direct aim at the Republican budget priorities, but I think each ad counterposed what Clinton was trying to do to advance his agenda. So it was not your classic slash-and-burn negative spot.

MK: Who was in the residence meetings on a regular basis?

MM: Rick Berke, I think, at some time in 1996, did a story on exactly that. They had even a little chart, on where people sat, which was uncannily accurate. I think it was most of the political people on the White House staff, like Sosnick and Ickes and Stephanopoulos and Baer and then the deputy chiefs of staff. Then, from the outside, the consultants and some members of the Cabinet. Dick Riley came on a regular basis. [Henry] Cisneros came on a regular basis. Mickey Kantor came on a regular basis. That may have been it.

But anyway, I think there was a longer listing of that in Berke's article.

MK: What uses did you all make of polling?

MM: Well, as I said, they were, sort of, the barometer of "where things stand," the rolling picture of "What's the approval of the president's performance and what is the satisfaction of the public with the job?" We did some polling, the re-elect number, during 1996. So it was a good rolling indicator of whether you were up or down in a particular time period. But the real interesting polling and the real use of the polling was to make the most persuasive case for a lot of the policy things that we were doing and to decide—from the menu of things to talk about—which were the most salient things and the most important things to drive home. Of all the different stuff Clinton was doing on the community: community policing, school uniforms, drugs, anti-drug stuff in the neighborhood, which of those things resonated the most with the people? Well, you'd want to talk about those things that resonate more.



So, selecting what sort of things to publicly target your effort on, and then how to make the case most persuasively: what's the best argument you can use for your Medicare plan or what's the best argument you can make for this issue or that issue? A lot of it was message testing and how to communicate more effectively.

MK: How would it be tested? You all did not use focus groups, did you?

MM: It was mostly quantitative. I don't know the size of the sample. You can probably go back and reconstruct that by looking at what the expenditure reports were, because it was all presumably paid through the DNC [Democratic National Committee]. But there was enough to have a rolling national sample available on a weekly basis.

MK: How long had that been going on? Was it in place when you got there?

MM: Yes. I think it was—I'm trying to remember whether it started in 1995. I think they followed pretty much the same pattern that [George H. W.] Bush had with the RNC [Republican National Committee], in the quantitative data that they had. I've never bought the idea that—I don't think the Clinton White House polled more than the Bush White House. I just think Clinton as president made more extensive use of the data than Bush as president made use of his data. That was the big difference, I think. I don't know that to be true but it would be interesting to go look at what the expenditure reports for that for the RNC—say on that versus the DNC reports. It obviously is higher expenditures, depending on where you are in the quadrennial cycle.

MK: How did Clinton measure publicity success?

MM: Intuitively, not quantitatively. He felt the press had noticed, taken notice of or written about or broadcast about, something that he felt good about, that he thought had turned out well, like a speech that turned out well, or a proposal he had made. He felt if he got noticed doing those things—I think that, for him, was the barometer of success. If the list of topics most heavily covered in the past week was more on campaign finance issues or stuff that was negative, then his evaluation was: "There goes the press trying to destroy the country again." Of course, it was usually a mix of the two.

MK: How did they decide what were the ten biggest stories?

MM: I just think they did that—they measured all the network news shows, by minute, and some sampling of cable shows. Then they had—

MK: Was it the DNC that did that, or the White House itself?

MM: I think it was done through Squier. I think they did it. They would be tracking that kind of data anyhow, because they needed it for their ad placement purposes: "What are the most watched shows?" But they had some way that they kept a content analysis of that, too, so they knew what the storyline was, and whether it had referenced Clinton's proposal. They had some way of judging whether they thought it was a favorable reference or an unfavorable reference.

MK: So, generally, things are measured in terms of television?

MM: Television and print. The other part of the sample was, I think, the top twenty-five newspaper markets in the country, the top twenty-five newspapers: how many front-page

- references? I think that was part of it. There was a print content and a broadcast content to the measurement.
- MK: For the Squier ads?
- MM: Yes.
- MK: You were mentioning Panetta, and Panetta's role. What is the importance of the chief of staff in really shaping a White House, what it is a White House does, how it comes together?
- MM: Well, it's an indispensable role, because it is really the person who sets the organizational tone. Panetta is the one who convened the morning meeting, the one who laid out what the priorities were for the day, reprimanded the staff when it needed to be reprimanded, congratulated the staff when something had gone well, reflected the direct conversations with the President on sensitive issues. I just think—when I arrived in 1995 it was a pretty efficiently run organization and Panetta had a real way of setting priorities and holding people accountable and you had, in some sense, a process that worked. Clearly, there must have been a much different model in 1993 and 1994, although every time I see Mack McLarty, he reminds that all those things they did that set in motion the longest economic expansion in history happened on his watch, by gum, not anyone else's. That's fair. McLarty kept a really relentless focus on the economy and on budget deficit. He obviously, to the exclusion of other subjects, stayed focused on the stuff that ended up being the most important.
- MK: There seems to be a little wooliness to the organizational structure of the White House during that early period.
- MM: I don't think it was so much the structure as the process. Anyone could go and intervene with an Oval Office appeal, and circumvent some project that had momentum and [was] going in a certain direction. There wasn't a way of adjudicating things at a staff level, and presenting a unified recommendation to the President.
- MK: How was that done with Panetta, adjudicating?
- MM: He'd call a meeting.
- MK: Can you give an example?
- MM: There were always environmental issues out west, in which—suddenly—you'd find Katie McGinty and the Council [on] Environmental Quality on one side of the issue, and the economic team on another side of the issue, and the political people—who were worried about California—on one side of the issue. Panetta would say, "Let's get everyone into my office." His method was: you get everyone into his office, and then the relevant Cabinet Secretary or Assistant Secretary that needed to be there, get them all in there, and just hammer it out. It was an effective way of doing business. Leon would basically get everyone in the room, let everyone have their say, and then decide what you're going to do, or decide what the options are, and then take the clear sense of the options to the President. If there needed to be a shoot-out between one view versus another view, make sure you have the right people to present the case to the President in the Oval Office so he can make a decision.

The most dramatic example of that is, obviously, welfare reform and whether you should sign it or not in [the] summer of 1996. That was every issue big and small. Depending on the salience of the issue or the importance, Leon would try to resolve it at his level.

MK: Did you take part in any of those?

MM: Only to monitor. We've talked about that before. My view of the Press Secretary's role was to be the fly-on-the-wall, and not an active participant. I only, on rare occasions, would chime in with my point of view. I'd only chime in with my point of view if it was related to: how would something play in the press? would the press pay attention or not to a particular argument? how big of a story would it be? When they needed my judgment on what the reaction of the press corps would be, and to a certain course of action, I would participate in that sense. If I had a view on an emerging policy, I think I could count on one hand the number of times I expressed that view, either directly to Clinton, or in a meeting. I wanted basically to hear all sides and, more importantly, wanted all sides to come and spin me, tell me why they thought this was really going to be the right decision.

It's very interesting. You could kind of hear—after a meeting was over, someone would call you up and say, “Did you get the whole point we were making? You understand this. You understand how important it is for the President to do this.” In a sense they were spinning me because they wanted me to be able to spin their side of an argument. So you would hear everyone's point of view that way, if you kept yourself neutral and acted like you were the sponge soaking it all in.

MK: Did people ever talk to reporters in order to get questions asked at the briefing, to push things along?

MM: Not that I saw. I was kind of surprised. I didn't see a lot of that going on. I found in 1995, 1996, 1997—Clinton had had real worries about leaks from inside the White House in 1993 and 1994. There was, my own feel, far less of that in 1995, 1996 and I think it was because there was a more orderly decision-making process, and people felt they didn't have to pull a stunt like that in order to get a point of view reflected. I don't have any sense of ever feeling like I was standing there saying: “I know where that question came from.”

MK: In looking at—

MM: Now, what did happen sometimes is: you got a question if HUD [Housing and Urban Development] had some big initiative, they would plant a question, maybe, with a friendly reporter to get asked at the White House. Not so much to put us on the spot, but so the White House press corps would say, “Gee, I better pay attention to this thing going on at HUD, because someone else is asking about it.” I think it was more a billboard service: “How do you more effectively advertise something you have going on in your agency?” Although I was surprised. I used to always, particularly early in 1995, put out a blanket invitation to people: when you have something big going on, give me a heads up on it so I can mention it at the top of the briefing and get people interested. I was really struck by the fact that very few people took advantage of that. I think it's because they were afraid, if the White House said something about it, it would become a White House story and their Department secretary would kind of fall out of the storyline. It's really sort of interesting.

MK: Did you find that televising the briefing brought about more people coming in with their own agenda, and trying to use your air space for it?

MM: Rarely. There was a good—the policing against that [was by] the reporters who were there in the Briefing Room every day. You’d get hooted down if you came in to try—yes. Occasionally we did have the nuts to press a case, or Pacifica Radio would complain about the misbehavior of the United States in some part of the world.

MK: East Timor. I remember a woman who came from East Timor.

MM: She actually came with a pretty good question. She came and said: “We’re going to meet with Archbishop Bellows, I think, from East Timor,” who had won the Nobel Prize.

MK: She was on it before he won the Nobel Prize because I remember—

MM: Yes. She was on it well before that. Land mines was another issue. I guess we did have it but I didn’t sense that televising affected that equation so much. Not that many people work that hard to get on C-SPAN.

MK: What did you think that the bottom line on televising the briefings was? What were the pros and what were the cons of it?

MM: The pros were just to make access to the briefing available to a wider audience. The way I looked at it, I had several reasons for doing it. One, it had been the practice at the State department and I thought it was a sensible one. It treated the electronic journalists the same way as the print journalists, so everyone would have access to it, particularly the radio people. The radio people made the strongest case: that they really were the ones who had to go out and broadcast once an hour all day long and they just needed the material, they needed more fresh material put on the air—which I always thought was pretty persuasive. I knew there was some audience for this on C-SPAN, and that was a good thing. It was a way you could see some functioning part of government every day. I personally liked it. I liked the “ham” factor of just being on television, but I also liked I found—remember, when I got there initially they had experimented with the televised briefing under George [Stephanopoulos] and it had been less than successful. They then went to this weird first-five-minute rule.

When I first started briefing with the five-minute rule, all of a sudden the lights would go dark in the back of the room, and my mind would switch off. It was the most disconcerting thing. I suddenly felt like the briefing was over and let’s all go home. I would lose a sharp edge. I remember little Kathy McKiernan, who works at AOL now, she was the one who usually ran the lights in the back. I’d say to her, “Kathy, let it run a little longer today,” because I never wanted anyone—I figured if it became a big deal that we were televising the briefings that somebody would try to shut it down. So we basically, over a space of about two weeks, increased the length of time the thing went on, until finally we never turned the lights off, the whole thing was on air.

MK: Did reporters notice it?

MM: The broadcast people did. And [Mark] Knoller did. The radio guys noticed it. I said I don’t think it’s in your interest to make a big deal of it. They said: “We understand,” and the TV guys never even mentioned it. It was a strange thing. And nobody ever made a big deal of the fact that we suddenly had gone to televising it. I thought it was good for me because if I had something I wanted to get done in a briefing as a sound bite or something I needed to get out there and frame and get our take on, I didn’t have to rush to squeeze it into the first

five minutes. Or I could come back and try it again a different way. I could do it three or four different ways, give them plenty of choices to choose from.

MK: Did the networks pick up—?

MM: No. The larger question is, on balance, was it worth it or not. I don't know. Obviously it helped us in 1995 and 1996, 1997 frame the issues we wanted to frame them. In 1998 it just became this absurd carnival, because you suddenly had 400,000 people showing up every day. I don't know. I'm still not detached enough from it to know whether it hurt or helped. I've had people tell me in my travels: "You being out there and being calm and not ever getting into a fight with the press during the Lewinsky thing, probably helped Clinton weather the deal, because it didn't look like you guys were rattled and you were just kind of doing your business and weren't playing in their ball game." Then, other people have said, "The press looked so bad because they were whacking you every single day...", that it turned people off and made them more sympathetic to Clinton because they saw this howling group of reporters. I don't know. That's a very interesting question. I don't know what the answer to it is.

MK: Do you end up in that briefing having to be much more formal, and not able to go on-background or off-the-record? Are there informal exchanges that are lost?

MM: Yes. But I don't think that would have been affected that much by television being there. You can't go on background.

MK: You couldn't do that anyway today.

MM: That's the big complaint they had of Hodding Carter when he instituted the television briefing at the State Department: that he had taken away some of the usefulness of that on background. In fact, they still have—the tradition at the State department is still—when the television briefing is over the lights go off, everyone then comes forward and the spokesman is then on background—and you do a second briefing on background. I basically hated that. How do you have an on-background briefing with thirty people, including foreigners, who are probably intelligence officers for foreign governments? So I'd sit there and say, "Ladies and gentlemen, I've said everything I can possibly say about this on-the-record." I usually preferred to get more on the record anyhow.

MK: Did you find that the "gaggle" [an early, informal encounter by press standing by, with the press secretary, prior to the daily briefing] offered some opportunities if you needed to do that?

MM: Yes. You could do a little bit, but not a lot. It was still an on-the-record session. I used to joke around. If I said something that got into—wanted to be silly or something during the briefing, I would say, "This isn't on C-SPAN is it?", just to sort of mockingly say, "I know this is being silly...", just sort of signal that's what you're doing. The problem with the format and the problem with the job is that you have to wear different hats at different moments. Sometimes you have to be giving a formal declaration of U.S. policy, particularly when it's a question of foreign policy, and that has to be read in just the right way and has to be communicated in a way in which it's the government speaking. There are other times when you're sort of being political and doing combat with the other team. There are other times when you're just getting raw information in front of reporters so they can do the primal function of reporting the news. And there are other times when you're just basically

trying to divert the attention or take the body blows for the president on stuff. I think the fact that one person is there wearing all those different hats at different moments in a briefing, is a little unsettling to the public. They are never quite sure of what to make of this. Because, one minute you're joking about something, and the next minute you're taking a shot at Newt [Gingrich] and the next minute you're issuing some challenge to a foreign government. It's like: "What is all of this?"

I think that's one of the problems with the format. It's a very inefficient way to communicate the work of government. I also, in retrospect, think the whole spin, the propaganda, the looking like you're trying to spin the politically attractive side of the argument, I think, is very unsettling. I think it also diminishes the authority that you need to have in that process, so people understand this is good information they're getting. It needs to be more of a session in which you just communicate basically factual information, so people can get their work done and leave the argumentation elsewhere. I think there's too much argumentation in the process now.

MK: Do you think the argument comes in when there are political issues? That one of the things that has happened is in the way you worked stories is you would give stories out in a variety of ways? Let's say it's a computer/tech story. You would have given it to *USA Today* to start off with. So you wouldn't be dropping something like that at the briefing.

MM: Right.

MK: And they have that, and the "gaggle" people want responses to, or have questions about, the *USA Today* story. Then, in the briefing, they're bringing up, "[Trent] Lott said X and Gingrich said Y." So you get into the politics of it, because you've already dealt with—

MM: [Mimicking] "What's the real motive behind this new initiative you guys have here, because you're clearly trying to do X, Y and Z with this, right?" Instead of, "Go over again what the details are on this proposal?"

MK: If you were giving it the first time, then you would be sticking on that, but you're not going to give out a whole bunch of stories that way. It's not efficient. It's much more efficient to get some front-page space, which you can do by giving *USA Today* an exclusive.

MM: It's not necessarily efficient; it's just necessary, because it's the only way you can elongate the period of time the story is in.

MK: Right. So you can keep the story moving for a few days. So the briefing is sort of a casualty of that. In general, what did you see your functions being as Press Secretary, and did you discuss them with Panetta or with Clinton when you came in?

MM: When I had my real serious job interview with Clinton, before I went to the White House, I talked about the nature of the job and what the job has to be. Both with Clinton, Mrs. Clinton, and with Panetta I said, "Look. I cannot be your propaganda minister. You've got to have some flexibility in that job to be able to wrestle with the press every day, and see what they are interested in, make sure they're taken care of—in addition to taking care of our agenda."

My strong sense, when I got there, was it was a press corps that just felt like they had not been very well taken care of.

I made a point of saying [to the Clintons and Panetta], “I’m going to have to bend over backwards to help these people out, and you’re going to have to understand that. Whether or not you want to cooperate all the time, you’re going to have to try to restore some of the balance in the relationship.” Both the President and Mrs. Clinton thoroughly understand that.

Now Mrs. Clinton, in fairness, said she really felt like she had attempted to do that when they first got to Washington in 1993, and felt like they had been—in a sense—rejected by the press. She had a strong sense of really feeling like they had tried to open up to the gatekeepers in Washington and that they had not been—

MK: Well, healthcare was not—

MM: I think it was the bitterness of leftover healthcare.

MK: They closed off all information on that.

MM: I think they equated hospitality and socializing with opening up and wanting to try to make acquaintance with the powerful people in the press, and not understanding that the real way to generate that kind of good will was: how you help them do their job, day in and day out. I don’t think they really understood that that was as important as it really is.

MK: Do you think there’s a tendency among Democrats to have that attitude more than is true of Republicans?

MM: Yes. I think that’s born from the political culture of the two parties. In the Democratic party—because the pedigree is labor organizer, environmental activist, feminist, anti-war activist—some type of organizational being that believes that you have to speak truth to power and that therefore the press ought to naturally be your ally. That’s kind of the assumption of a Democrat: that the press ought to be on your side after all. The Republican party is exactly the opposite because their political culture is: advertising, mass communications, the press is there to be handled, and to be cordoned off, and to be forced your message, and you can never really view them as your friend. That’s really the theory of how you communicate message. It really was distinctly different in the 1970s and 1980s because of the underlying differences in the political culture of the two parties, I think. Now, over time—[Patrick] Moynihan’s great essay, “The Iron Law of Emulation”—organizations of conflict become like one another. I think we’ve just adopted a lot of the Republican techniques of mass communication in the Democratic party.

MK: If you look at the beginnings of an administration, Democrats and Republicans are quite different. Look at the difference between how the [Ronald] Reagan administration started and how the Clinton one did. In the Reagan administration, they thought that communications went together with policy and with politics. You pulled all that together, it was run out of the chief’s office and you had that coordinated message, you did your long-term planning and the rest of it. When the Clintons came in, obviously that was not the system. However, if you look at it as it went along, it loosened up in the Reagan administration somewhat, and it greatly tightened up in the Clinton administration. You may come at it from entirely different ways but a successful communications operation has certain elements to it—

MM: That’s exactly right.

MK: —no matter whether it's Democrat or Republican.

MM: Where it goes, and where it naturally gravitates to, is the same place, which is: you have to keep control of the agenda because, if you don't, you can't keep any coordinated focus on a set of priorities; you just are scattershot all over the place. That's what happened to Clinton early on, because he was doing—like a John McCain straight-talk express—every day out there, just kind of—

MK: In his shorts.

MM: Yes—out there in his shorts, drinking a cup of coffee, talking about whatever was on his mind at that moment.

MK: What are some of the elements that you see, that are part of a successful communications operation? In this case, getting control of the agenda drives you to the central [inaudible].

MM: I think the most critical thing is separating the tactical and the reactive from the strategic and the proactive. We've talked about this before. That was Herb Klein's great gift to the White House staffing structure. He divided the communications function from the press function, because there really is a difference between product development and marketing. You really have to have a group of people concentrating on: how do you formulate a successful message? How do you create opportunities to deliver it? How do you shape the president's ability to convey his agenda and purpose? Then you need a separate—and you have to perfect the delivery mechanism for that and have good events and clear message and well articulated language from the president. And planning so you're not stepping on your own story. Then you need a very successful delivery mechanism at the grassroots level for getting it into the hands of reporters and getting it out to the country and making more synthetic all the different elements of communicating.

I think it is both. It's got to start with good policy, strong message and a White House that is really on top of what it's trying to get done, and not drifting along and not being overwhelmed by the crush of business; a real strategic approach to telling the story effectively, and planning out how you actually do that—in a methodical way—and then really trying to deliver it effectively, by controlling the back and forth, making sure you're not succumbing to whatever the temptation is to race off after some interesting issue every day.

Now there is a flip side of that. You have to create goodwill. You have to be credible. You have to have an effective means of answering the questions that you don't want to address, because you can't call all the shots yourself. Your ability to get your side of the story across depends in part on how effectively you deal with the story. I think we obviously had to balance that a lot.

MK: What are the parts of the White House that are involved in each of those stages?

MM: It's a total team effort, in a sense, because everything is about driving your agenda forward. A successful communications strategy is only one aspect of a successful presidency. You have to have a good solid sense of priority and where you're going, and mission. And everything is supportive of that. That involves good leadership from the chief of staff, good policy planning, good legislative relations on the Hill. It's all part of a seamless whole. That's what makes for a good presidency. My guess is successful presidencies—I don't know. A good example, I think, that has been cited often is the whole State of the Union strategy, and using that as an organizational tool, sort of work plan for the year, and how you



communicate that, and how you roll it out and how you advertise it and prepare it. I think we sort of perfected that, in a way.

MK: That didn't seem to be used this year?

MM: Really?

MK: It didn't look to me like it was. They didn't get the same kind of space. It didn't seem to have the same kind of discipline into it—of having a week on this and a week on that issue. It didn't seem to me to have the same—1998 in a way it was just a saving grace for Clinton.

MM: In 1998 we had—I remember it well, because I was really seriously planning to take off, because we really put a lot into the roll up and the launch of the State of the Union, and the whole month of January had gone well. There was really a whole sense of momentum building for the agenda.

MK: Even December.

MM: Yes.

MK: Once the Republicans left town, and you had the *New York Times* interviews with Clinton about leadership and what-not and the State Department press conference, that ninety-minute one, in which he showed the range, and then it went to individual policies. That was all with the Republicans out of town and no one responding. You just had it all to yourselves.

MM: I thought it worked well and then there was going forward a pretty good game plan of how you came back. You pretty much walked up to the State of the Union by giving each element of the speech out and then we were going to give the speech and do the same thing, just week after week: continue to drive the individual elements of it. I think having that plan in place, you're right, really gave us all something to do other than stare at the Monica headlines every day.

The point I'm trying to think of, if it's true, has there ever been a presidency that was more successful at communications and less successful at everything else? I don't think so. I think a good communications operation is derivative of a presidency that is kind of on track and knows what it's trying to get done and therefore has probably successful legislative strategies.

MK: Having a good communications strategy really helps so much at the beginning. Look at the Reagan administration. It really helped them to build a base so in 1982 when the economy started going down, that they had that base of support. Right at the beginning that communications operation gave the sense that he was on the job, starting with the inaugural, right afterwards, when he started putting freezes on hiring and several executive orders. So that just built an expectation that he was a leader in charge. When you had the [David] Stockman thing coming along, talking about they didn't know what they were doing, people didn't believe it because they had this other image of him. It really can help you. How do you think it was that Clinton was able—he was just the opposite. He came in and was just all over the place and there was a sense that he wasn't focusing. How did he get it together? Watching from the State Department, what did it look like to you?

MM: Well, it looked like what happened was—very early on, remember, they got hammered with the travel office matter, and then they got into more Whitewater matter. I think what happened was—the honeymoon wasn't very long in any circumstance—once they got into questions that were sensitive and difficult to handle, and they were getting pounded, they had to reorganize themselves and figure out new ways of doing business. So that started it moving in the right direction. But there was probably not anything as action-forcing as the election results in 1994, because that just produced wholesale changes in leadership and structure and staffing. It obviously changed the whole environment for doing business, too.

MK: Do you think, without the 1994 election, it would not have come together in the same way?

MM: There's a very strong likelihood that it might have continued—Panetta would have had a more organized and efficient White House staff. The President would have become more deliberate and forceful, I think, in making his argument. But there would have been, in any circumstance, a very razor-thin margin for the Democratic majority in Congress, many of them nervous about Clinton anyhow, not inclined to be supportive of him automatically for reelection. So we would have had a whole different atmosphere for the 1996 election campaign. It would have made a very big difference.

What happened was: the arrival of Gingrich and then, suddenly you had a sparring partner. You had a way of defining what the choice was—that wasn't really available up to then—and ended up being a real godsend because it was an organizing principle for the work that we were doing and the way we were communicating about it. It was, obviously: "They believe X and we believe Y, and here are what the choices are for you, the American people."

MK: Did it help get the attention of the public that, once the Republicans came in, it was easier to get a story out, because it was more combat?

MM: Yes. Remember, in 1995, when Gingrich—there was practically an inauguration. The news anchors were all up on Capitol Hill and anchoring the thing. There was a palpable sense it was a new day.

MK: Which turned out to be not quite as—

MM: They drastically miscalculated the degree to which the American people wanted change and they underestimated Clinton's ability to occupy the center of the political spectrum and use it successfully to get things done. Of course, they also were 100 per cent wrong about macro-economic policy. They don't like to remember that, but they were completely wrong about what was going to happen with the economy under the impact of the deficit reduction package that got passed in 1993.

MK: Can we go back to the functions of the office? When you look back on the office, what functions you performed, what categories you could put them in?

MM: Well, there's a public information function which is so valuable and necessary and not enough time spent on really getting all of the necessary ingredients of decision-making by the President and by the administration in the front of the public. That is the primary function of the press office, and I think it's the one in which I think more effort and resources need to be devoted to [it], getting more basic factual information in front of the press and the public. That's really what the press office is mostly responsible for.

Now, there is a persuasion function that is located in the office, too, and that is the one I'm increasingly ambivalent about: is part of the job of that office to participate in the selling of the program? I think that's where you drift over to spin and you drift over to argumentation and opinion-based communicating. I think that's a little more problematic. I'm not sure that's a legitimate function of that office. I've even thought of going so far as to separating the political function out of that office entirely. We really changed the nature of the office of the press secretary and the person in the press secretary a lot, but if you had a career government employee or if you had some sense that this is the public information office and we don't do politics here, you have to go to the DNC, or you have to go to the president's political operation in order to get political commentary, the result would be: it wouldn't be a job I would be as interested in having.

MK: It's hard to imagine how that really could come about, because the person who signs your commission is the president—

MM: Yes.

MK: —and he doesn't want something down the middle.

MM: Also the press corps wants to have a heavy player as their point of contact. You can't be a heavy player unless you know all aspects of what the White House is up to, day in and day out. I still think that there still is, maybe, some way of breaking it up.

It's interesting. Clinton had an opportunity—they might have tried something like that if they had a Stephanopoulos in the position as chief policy/communications person and a press secretary junior. The press secretary could be the person who handled the flow of information, the detail work of government, presenting all the information necessary just to get the hard news right. Then you could bring in another official to talk about the background to the whole thing, and the purpose, and how it fits with the whole program. If I was waving a wand to change the way things worked, I think I would put much more premium on the flow of hard-core, factual information. People are definitely hungry for that.

MK: Don't you think people can figure that out? Reporters can figure that out. They know what they see, what kind of information is coming to them, what the value of it is. They know the differences between it.

MM: That's changing a lot. Do they know the value of it? I don't think they do right now. I think if you could create a White House web site that would just be chockful of information about factual stuff with respect to decisions that are flowing through the White House. It would be almost like a Bloomberg machine. I think there would be a lot of interest in that. I think it would be a primary news source for people, but none of this opinionated analysis of motive.

MK: The people who have been regarded as very successful news people are people who have always had a real good handle on information, giving it straight but also being important in the persuasion line as well. It's having a sense of what sells and what doesn't.

MM: I know that. I think it's a radical new environment for communicating, because there's so much more information. I think this whole idea of authenticity is people really do not want to get spun or marketed to until they get basic information that they're looking for. And this is happening in commercial advertising. I think the Internet is driving these people. People

first want the factual foundation from which they can then make whatever decision or opinion or argument they want to make.

MK: In a way, the information on the Internet is much more suspect. You read stories on the Internet—read something on *Slate*. It has much less backup than anything.

MM: Right. But then, you say: where can I go that will sort this out and get it right for me? The analogy I use now is: in the field of technology, you can hear a lot of people debating the merits of certain types of technology, but if you really want to figure out what the straight story is, you can go to C-Net. Now C-Net also has a lot of people that have different opinions about different kinds of products and stuff, but they do have—that is a very reliable, credible, accurate source of information so you can then make whatever decision or listen to whatever persuasive argument you want to hear. I think that’s what’s missing from White House journalism right now, the flow of factual information that kind of builds a broader context for understanding what’s going on.

MK: Beside the information function and the persuasion function, what are some others?

MM: Well, there’s an internal communications function which is: making sure everybody knows what’s going on, and what’s happening, and what the story line is. I found that sending around my briefing packet to the senior people in the White House every day was a welcome deal. When we started doing that in 1995, people really appreciated having the talking points that I had been using at the briefing, because it could help them day in and day out. So we started doing more of that.

I think there is a policy-making role, too, that by driving into the senior levels of government—including the president—the questions about policy you’re getting from the press, you force answers to be made or developed sometimes. You force decisions to be made. [Bill] Safire is right. That’s one of his arguments: why you have to have regular press conferences, because you really force the government to come to terms with difficult choices sometimes. I think that’s absolutely true. And I think it’s part of the daily function of the Press Secretary to drive that internal deliberative process.

MK: You could say it’s true with the briefing.

MM: Absolutely. [Imitating] “I don’t have an answer to that, I’ll go get one.” It has that function. It also is the best of all of—the only other finger on the pulse that’s better than the press office or is equal to the press office is the congressional affairs shop. If they are getting hammered by members of Congress on a certain issue, then it’s probably a reflection of public opinion. If we’re getting hammered in the press office, then it’s a reflection of public interest in some issue. I think that’s primarily public information, but it also has an internal communications function and it also has kind of a derivative impact on policymaking and internal deliberations.

MK: Can you walk through a day? What should a future press secretary expect?

MM: I wish you could walk. You mostly have to run as fast as you can in the opposite direction.

MK: And drag yourself by the end of the day because it starts pretty early. Yours, I remember, started particularly early, because you had to read beforehand.

MM: I was an early riser, anyhow, but you have to consume your news early.

MK: When did you get up?

MM: I'd get up at four, four-thirty in the morning, and read newspapers and walk the dogs and kind of take care of stuff at home. I could actually wash the kitchen floor and listen to NPR [National Public Radio] simultaneously. So I'd do some things to demonstrate to my family that I still actually was a functioning member of that unit. As you read newspapers and listened to the radio and kind of absorbed the news, you usually got about 80 per cent of your day planned, because you knew what the questions were going to be, and you could start thinking of what the answers would be, and starting thinking about the lines you were going to use in response to certain issues. You also kind of knew what you would have to go to the office and start finding out about, early on. Then, by the time you got to the office at seven-thirty that began the change. When you arrived for the senior staff meeting, you could actually give a reasonably coherent summary of what the headlines of the day were, what the key issues were going to be, what the press was likely to focus on during their questions. Then you could set in motion—beginning at seven-thirty—those things that would be necessary to make it through the day, with respect to what the press was going to be up to.

So, if I went in and said: "There's a story here about the Interior Department and land management, and the west we need to be on top of, because the press won't follow it today, the Chief of Staff could convene a meeting or get hold of the secretary or begin the process of addressing the question from the very beginning of the day."

MK: What was the first meeting when you came in? Did you talk to your staff first or did you go into a communications meeting?

MM: The very first meeting of the day was with the rest of the senior staff in Panetta's office, kind of like the management team. He used to call it the management meeting because the idea was—the way he kept some people out and other people in was the senior managers at the White House had to be present. Which was a clever way of excluding some people who thought they were important enough to be senior staff. So, that was the real meeting, at seven-thirty. Then, at eight o'clock, there was the so-called senior staff meeting in the Roosevelt Room that was basically the entire White House staff, practically.

MK: How many people were in the first one and who were there?

MM: There were about a dozen. That would be the assistants to the President, the people who had real functional moving parts of the White House operation, that they had to deal with, and Maggie Williams from the First Lady's office, and someone from the Counsel's office, someone from the Vice President's office, all the integral parts of the White House that had responsibility for getting the business done. Then, the second meeting was the expanded universe of people who were serious players in one way or another.

MK: What would be the difference in the kinds of things that would be discussed?

MM: The first meeting was a very candid assessment of: "What are we going to do today, and how are we going to get through the day, and how is this shaping up, and how is that shaping up?" Then the next meeting, there were two purposes. One was for Leon or Leon's designée to really give the marching orders to the entire staff, sometimes based on what had just been decided at the seven-thirty meeting. He'd come in and describe: "Here's what we're going to do today, here's how we're going to do it, here are the assignments for everyone." Then you'd go around the table and everyone could report in on whatever issues

they were dealing with. So it had kind of a making sure the rest of the organization knew what your operation was up to that day, and then making sure that the entire staff had some sense of what the primary purpose of the day was.

MK: What was the one [meeting] after that?

MM: That was pretty much it.

MK: When Bowles was chief—

MM: Then I would meet with my staff.

MK: —was there one between? When Bowles was Chief of Staff and [John] Podesta had a communications meeting—he had a communications meeting right afterward, didn't he?

MM: Yes. That was basically developed during the scandal. That was a device to handle scandal problems.

MK: Which scandal?

MM: It began with campaign finance and then kind of continued in the Lewinsky matter, although it became kind of a waste of time.

MK: It kind of became institutionalized.

MM: It was also a waste of time. I stopped going during the Lewinsky thing, because there wasn't much you were going to do every day. It was pretty much: "Let's just take stock of where we are." My attitude was: "Give me a piece of paper that the lawyers have signed and that's what I will read." And nothing more.

MK: Which you did the first day.

MM: That communications meeting really did become kind of the way in which the public relations, public affairs, congressional affairs people then intersected with the legal team. That was what it really was in 1998. Now prior to that, when Podesta first had it, he had everyone who had some responsibility for communications, a communications function. We all got together and just went through: "What's the message of the day and how are we going to deliver it, who's going to do what?" That was usually a pretty good meeting and we usually came out of that with a good sense of who was going to have what assignments.

I went back and had a staff meeting with my staff, so the press staff would know this was what they were going to have to do today, and I could report on other things that they needed to know about. It was a way of keeping my team wired in. Then we had the gaggle and then we had the scratch-and-scrounge part of the day where you run around and look for the information I needed, or read whatever I needed to read or study, and get on top of an issue. One part of that was to read the news summary much more thoroughly, to really go through all the different stories. Ninety per cent of the information about a given thing was coming from the press not coming from inside the government. I would go down and read the intelligence down in the security room or in the Situation Room. I would generally talk to Clinton. I'd go and see Panetta and then Bowles and go through my briefing book, sometimes with George, later with Rahm [Emanuel] or others and say: "Here are the key questions today." When we needed to do that with Clinton, we'd go in and see Clinton.

- MK: What time would you have that by, because that's the responses to the various queries that you've laid out, right?
- MM: Well, yes, it usually was—we had decided earlier: this was going to be the real question of the day and here's how the answer came out. Then, sometimes, it would be: "Here's what I'm going to say on your behalf, Mr. President; is this the way you want me to say it?" It was really more my opportunity. Clinton would dial me to whatever frequency he wanted me to be on.
- MK: Did you do that most days, meet with him beforehand?
- MM: Well, most days we had already—by the time of my briefing—some public encounter in which Clinton was in front of the press. So we, in effect, had that meeting—when we'd go in: "...at ten-thirty the President is going to sign a proclamation in the Roosevelt Room, there's going to be a photo opportunity...." We'd take that same group, Panetta, Ickes, Bowles, McCurry, Stephanopoulos, sometimes Rahm, sometimes Don Baer, sometimes other people.
- MK: Would you take someone like Bruce Reed, a policy person, along, too?
- MM: Depending on the issue, sure, if it was a policy-related issue, or if it was a foreign policy question, Sandy Berger. We'd all go in and say: "Mr. President, you're about to go face the press; based on what they asked at the gaggle this morning, here is what they're going to ask you." Clinton's usual response is: "What do I say?" He wanted to hear how someone else was going to propose that he answer it, even though he generally knew what he was going to give as the answer, but he wanted to—he would usually say, "What I'd rather say is...." Sometimes, if it was something he accepted the premise of, the answer, he'd go over it and say, "Let me get it right."
- MK: Were there ways of getting him to walk back on something?
- MM: Sure. If he wanted to go chapter and verse on something, and we didn't want him to do that because we wanted to save it for later, or we didn't want him to be the primary person carrying a message, we'd talk about how he could minimize an answer when it was necessary.
- MK: What about, after his testimony, and then he gave his speech that night to the public: was there any way of derailing him from that?
- MM: That was a total psychodrama. In retrospect, not only a psychodrama but a horrible mistake, too. Because, I think that the Lewinsky matter lingered and lingered and there was probably a real opportunity to bring it to some kind of close at that moment. The fact that he had such animosity that spilled out at that moment, I think kind of fired up the other side of the town.
- MK: Did you all try to get him not to talk that night?
- MM: Yes. No. I think that he wanted to. He wanted to finally get out and didn't want to have to deal with it anymore. He wanted to basically go on his vacation and deal with his family.
- MK: Even the next day, he clearly was tired.

- MM: He was tired.
- MK: But he also seems to have this thing where he has to blow up, and he never had that chance to blow up in private, before he took it public.
- MM: He had all the drafts of his message that night that were prepared and circulated among senior people were all—
- MK: I remember reading one. It was very good.
- MM: —reasonably coherent. [Paul] Begala took the lead in putting it together, and it made a lot of sense, and was really right on the money.
- MK: Who took the lead?
- MM: Paul. I can't remember whether I knew—I think I knew at the time that he was given that speech that he was wrestling with the decision on doing the [Inaudible] Bin Laden strike. Very few people knew that, and there was no open discussion because of that. It was so tightly held—that we were planning to go to war. I don't think there was a discussion where somebody said: "This guy has a lot on his plate right now, he's wrestling with a tough decision, a commander-in-chief level decision about use of force and that on top of all the other stuff going on makes this an inauspicious moment to do a nationally televised address." I'm pretty sure—that was a Sunday. Friday night?
- MK: I think it was a Thursday.
- MM: It was a Thursday night and then we were leaving for vacation Friday afternoon, the next day.
- MK: And then you came back maybe Monday.
- MM: Monday. If that's the sequence I don't think I did that. I don't think I found out until two days ahead of time.
- MK: I can't remember what the days were, but it was something like that. In walking through your day again, you would take the questions to him from your briefing book.
- MM: We invariably, most days, had an opportunity to talk to him, and I would get some sense of how he wanted to answer certain questions. So, even if it didn't come up or he decided—often we'd just say, "There's no reason for you to get into this, so if you don't want to take a question you can just not take a question." Most days, for most of the time I was at the White House, he'd have some kind of event that would be a photo opportunity: he'd get the big question on the news of the day and it would have addressed it. So that was then in the can by the time of my briefing. So you had the President shaping the answer or shaping the story, and I was doing the background news around it by the time the briefing came. Occasionally, it would happen that we had practiced how he was going to answer a certain question, but it didn't come up in the photo opportunity. So, when the press raised it with me, I gave the answer Clinton would have given if he had been asked. That happened a lot. That was the utility of really hearing him talk it through.

Then there were times when it was really tonal quality. If the suggestion was that I go out and mix it up a little bit with the Republicans or Gingrich on a certain issue, I wanted to



make sure I had clearance from the President on that. He more often dialed me back rather than torque me up. It was rather interesting, but he was juggling all these conversations that he was having with Gingrich and he always wanted to be very careful about how much we frontally assaulted the Republicans and came at it from different angles, sometimes.

MK: Had you passed through him your comment on—

MM: Withering on the vine?

MK: —Gingrich wanted old people to die?

MM: No. He yelled at me for that. He yelled at me. I think that was one time when I think Mrs. Clinton was around, when that subject came up. Somehow or other I recall him being very angry at me: “You shouldn’t do that! We can’t get into that kind of back and forth with them....” And Mrs. Clinton saying, “...that’s absolutely true!” Her reaction was entirely the opposite. It was kind of funny.

MK: What about after the briefing?

MM: After the briefing we just kind of go and do cleanup. I’d get together with my staff.

MK: You’d meet with your staff right before the briefing, too, right?

MM: I left out a couple of pieces. Right before the briefing, we’d come back in, and that’s when we’d sit and put together the briefing book. That took about an hour every day. We’d work from about eleven-thirty to twelve-thirty. We’d put together the briefing book and go through all the questions, make sure we had all the slips of paper. We’d get some cabinet agency official on the line that could walk me through something if I didn’t understand something. We’d do a little prep work on that.

At twelve-thirty we’d have the foreign policy conference call with the State Department, Pentagon and CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and USUN [United States Mission to the United Nations] people just to go over foreign policy stuff which I, most of the time, just thought was just interesting to hear what was going on in other agencies. I think we either used it to kind of divvy up the questions, and who had the lead on something, or used it to just share information a lot. I think that they’ve used it much more with Joe [Lockhart], to kind of use it substantively to go through certain questions.

Then we go do the briefing, however late it would be. After the briefing, you just sort of figure out what were the questions we needed to get more info on, or needed to go back and do some cleanup on a particular thing; based on so-and-so’s question, we should have so-and-so call him and give him a little background. Troubleshoot stories one way or another. Then, the rest of the day was just, basically, hand-to-hand combat. You do forty to fifty phone calls. Every reporter in the Briefing Room would then call and want your private inside take on the issues of the day, even if you had just said everything you had to say publicly. I was never big for going to meetings, but occasionally there would be strategy meetings or planning meetings, or a meeting about an upcoming foreign trip, or an upcoming event, where we had to get together and talk about things. On Friday afternoons we tried to look at the week ahead, and who was going to do what, figure out what were the burning issues that would be coming up in the next several days. Thursday afternoons I had that terrible hour-and-a-half long session with—an hour and a half to two hours—all the news mags which was just a heavy obligation that’s impossible to get out of.

MK: What did it do, other than made them not mad with you, which canceling would have done?

MM: Well, Ken Walsh used it pretty effectively, because he'd use it more to tell me about long-range things that he was thinking of doing, and getting my idea in my head of what I thought of this project or that project. So I then could think of people to get him together with, or figure out certain things. A lot of it was—I never did as good a job as I should have on coming up with some Washington whisper type of things and doling out little pieces of color. A lot of it was just giving them some behind-the-scenes stuff, so that they could make those newsmagazine articles sound like newsmagazine articles.

MK: Like they used to be. Did the staff watch the evening news together?

MM: Yes and no. Everyone would come in at six-thirty. At six-thirty you'd kind of stop, watch how the White House story played that day, then we'd all talk to each other and decide whether we had won or lost. Seriously, about thirty seconds after Brit Hume's story was on ABC, Stephanopoulos would come in and say, "That's okay." We'd say, "That's okay, can't complain about that." He'd walk in and say, "We got creamed". Yes, we got creamed. There were only three possible responses: that was awful, what are we going to do, that was a home run which was rare or, most of the time, we can live with that; it's not going to get any better and it could have been a lot worse. That was kind of the general reaction.

MK: Is that pretty much a reflection of Clinton's being interested in the networks, and how networks covered things?

MM: No. I didn't ever have any sense whether he sat and watched the news or not. I think he generally had other stuff going on at that time. By six-thirty at night, he was usually still in the Oval Office on the telephone, and he rarely watched TV. He did not have a TV in the Oval Office. The TV was back in the dining room. I don't think he watch[ed] a lot of it. He watched TV at night. He channel-surfed at night. I know he would from time to time watch a little bit of the press briefing, but not a lot of it. He jumped around and basically clicked all through the dial while he was talking on the telephone while he was probably doing a crossword puzzle.

MK: What time did you leave?

MM: If the news created some new problem, because there was a new round of questions and everyone suddenly called, basically as soon as the networks were over, you started dealing with everyone on deadline-finishing stories. We tried to wind up by eight o'clock. Sometimes we were still answering calls until nine o'clock or nine-thirty. A lot of times I had personal calls, people who were trying to get hold of me; I wouldn't be able to get to them until eight o'clock or eight-thirty.

MK: How did you divide up the responsibilities of the deputies? You reorganized the office while you were there.

MM: Evelyn Lieberman did all the hard work for me, before I got there, because she had basically changed some people around, she had fired some people, she had gone through and done an audit of everybody. And, with Leon Panetta's blessing, she had gone and made a lot of changes in the office and created some vacancies, and found some new people. She was fabulous. She did more to run and organize the place prior to my arrival than I would have needed to do. I only had to figure out, in the first instance, how to divide up the

assignments between Mary Ellen Glynn and Ginny Terzano, which wasn't too hard, because Mary Ellen had more interest in foreign policy stuff and Ginny was more political.

MK: Was that by design? That the house was cleaned first, so you didn't have to do it?

MM: So I didn't have to come in and fire people. What I told everyone was, when I got there I wanted a team of people ready to go to work at trying to restore some of the amicability the relationship with the President had been missing. So I wanted to go in there and, rather than fire a lot of people and create a lot of morale controversy on my office, go in and charge my office up with getting out there and beginning to deliver more services to the press corps. So they would feel there was a new attitude, a better attitude. I think, by and large, we got that done. I leaked the story early of how we were creating a little fun. Everybody had to think of one nice thing to do for the press every day and it went into a pizza fund. Remember, there was a little something about that. So I did some stuff like that. It was all to try and get on a little more even keel with the press corps.

MK: What about the administrative position, had that been there? I guess Evelyn must have had pretty much that position.

MM: I don't think they ever had an office—that was one of the problems that they didn't have an office manager. That was the great thing about having Evelyn. My strong guess is that Mrs. Clinton had a lot of—I think she was very unhappy with the press office as a result of the 1993-1994 period, and had wanted some changes made. I have a strong sense that she was pretty directly involved with me being hired. I think she was probably very directly involved in having Evelyn slotted into that position to help improve the functioning of the press operation. But it's interesting, because she was not omnipresent. She laid pretty low and I never felt any sense that she was interfering with my ability to do—

MK: Mrs. Clinton?

MM: Yes.

MK: What about sort of not telling you things, like when she held—I guess you weren't there—what's known as the pink suit press conference?

MM: She definitely went out and did her own thing. You know the famous "Today" show interview she did with Matt Lauer, during the Lewinsky thing?

MK: Yes.

MM: I had no idea she was going to be on the tube that morning. They did their own thing. I don't even think it was malicious. They were in their own zone, their own orbit, and they did their own thing. I think that they correctly felt that they functioned a little more efficiently and methodically than the West Wing. So they had their own way of doing stuff.

MK: When you reorganized and pulled media affairs into the press office itself, what was your thinking?

MM: The media affairs operation felt like they were second-class citizens, even with the very able and talented Lorrie McHugh running it. They really felt like they were not appreciated, they were sort of the stepchildren, the press office was where all the action was. So it was really an attempt to equalize their standing a little bit and also just to take advantage, when Evelyn

left, to become deputy chief of staff and Lorrie became the operational deputy that she was a very talented manager, and we could create a little more synergy. I think everybody basically got the same title. We also accommodated everyone with the same title. They had kind of [the] same duties and responsibilities when it came to pool duty and we tried to erase any functional distinction between being an assistant press secretary in the lower press office and being an assistant press secretary on one of the regional desks in media affairs. It was actually the culmination of bringing that Eller operation, which was sort of a wholly separate empire that Jeff created, back into the press office. The office of media affairs really became in the period of 1993 to 1994 and into my time in 1995 a real new organizational entity in the structure.

MK: It's existed in earlier administrations.

MM: It had existed. It had existed but it had always been, I think, the place where they had done—

MK: They did local stuff. They did regional and local. That's where the press briefings that Carter did—Carter would alternate doing a regular press conference with doing a press conference with the out-of-town people.

MM: Right.

MK: And that came out of media affairs. In the Reagan administration it was used more as a persuasion operation because you had the public affairs which had a surrogates operation and you ran booking out of that. Or did you run it out of the press office itself, the booking for Sunday programs?

MM: We ran that out of the media affairs office.

MK: Thanks very much.

MM: It was great. Some of this stuff I still remember.

MK: Your memory is very good.

MM: A lot of it I tried to forget.

[End of Disc 1 of 1]