DATE: February 2, 1999

INTERVIEWEE: JAMES FETIG

INTERVIEWER: Martha Kumar

[Tape 1 of 1, Side 1]

MK: The project is called the White House Interview Program and it's a program funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. Its goal is, in the year 2001, to provide information for people coming in to positions in the White House that will help them be better able to make choices about how they organize, and how to use their time, and that sort of thing. One of the ideas behind it is: when people come in, they think they have a clean slate, and they tend not to learn about the past. We're working on the theory that the more people know about the patterns that exist in an operation, the better off they are going to be. So we're going to try to provide them with information that will better inform them about how the place works, so they can maximize their opportunities when they get in.

The way the process is going to work is: we're going to provide them information on a website. It's going to be a private website. Some things will be in a public website as well. It depends upon the level of how somebody wants to bury their information. So within any one interview, most everything will be on-the-record, unless you specify otherwise; but you can specify otherwise. Then, we will provide you with a transcript; you can go over the transcript and make any kind of corrections you want. And, ultimately, the materials will go into the National Archives, the presidential libraries.

JF: I think it would be worth your while to talk to Dennis Fox because [inaudible] [Bill] Clinton administration in the Pentagon, and saw some things from a different perspective and had insights taken from different points of view, to help you calibrate. What you see from the inside is not what you see from outside. The other person I would recommend is Tom Ross. Tom Ross hired me. He was essentially David [Johnson]'s predecessor. I've got his number; he's in New York.

MK: That would be good. Ultimately this stuff goes into the National Archives, and then it will be released under some kind of terms that everybody agrees upon. After the transcript comes back, then I'll give you one of these deeds of gift for the National Archives and it will specify what materials you want to be on-the-record and what things will be on- background. Hopefully as much as possible; we like to use things on-the-record.

JF: This is not where you tell tales out of school.

MK: Right. Mostly, what we're interested in is learning how operations work and how transitions take place, and that sort of thing. Some of the materials are ones that are questions that we have, and stuff that relates to campaigning. In your case, obviously, we're just going to work on governing.

JF: I could give you a couple of insights into campaigning only because there was a campaign while I was there.

MK: That's right. You were there during 1996.

JF: Unfortunately, in spite our best efforts not to get involved, we got involved, like it or not, because the [Robert] Dole campaign would drop little bombshells with which we had to deal.

MK: First off, can you tell us how you came in, how you came to get into the White House? What were the attractions of working in the White House? How your appointment came about?

JF: I was brought to the White House by Thomas B. Ross who was the senior director for public affairs at the National Security Council and Deputy White House Press Secretary for Foreign Affairs. Ross and I had had a relationship going back several years. I was an army colonel, stationed in Panama, working for the commander-in-chief of U.S. southern command. I was attending a worldwide conference; Tom came in to speak to the senior military public affairs officers in the world and he complained that they couldn't get—

[Interruption]

JF: As part of Tom's presentation to our group, he complained that the White House could not get a fair shake with the press. After that I chastised him and said, "You know that's never the case. When you start blaming the press, the problem is you. Whatever you guys are doing, you're not doing something right." The short of it was, "Well, smarty-pants, if you're so good, why don't you come work for us?" Ken[neth] Bacon and I talked about it; it was more complicated than that, but the answer was yes. I went through a series of interviews with Nancy Soderberg, who was then the National Security Council staff director; Tony Lake, who was the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, and Mike McCurry.

MK: What was the date when Ross spoke? When was it?

JF: Some time in January of 1995, and I actually reported for duty the week of April 23, 1995. It took some time for them to engineer it, and there were some complications in getting me assigned from the military over there. I think if I had been a civilian it would have been easier and faster. Most administrations—and I know you know Bill Harlow who was there during a big chunk of the [Ronald] Reagan and [George H. W.] Bush administrations, a navy officer—there had always been a military officer in the National Security Council Press Office. There were a lot of reasons for that. You know the shorthand; you know the code; you understand the patterns. You have contacts in the Pentagon and you can negotiate with the national security apparatus in public affairs matters more effectively. The Clinton administration didn't believe, for whatever reasons, that was necessary and, therefore, there was no military officer present. Ross could tell you, but I believe they started to realize that having a military officer would be of some advantage.

There was a hang-up for a while, on whether or not I would be good on TV. I found in this [Clinton] administration, they tended to focus on a lot of what I considered to be the wrong things. The question was whether you had any substance. You didn't have to go on television; Mike McCurry did that. The question was whether you could get the right answers. Get the government coordinated to act with a single voice, and [search] out the flaws in policies or the primary questions that the press would focus on, get some straight answers and respond.

Also, in the Press Office at that time, in addition to Ross, was Calvin Mitchell, who was a Foreign Service officer who went to work in the Treasury Public Affairs Office after that—he resigned from the foreign service—and Tara D. Sonenshine, who was actually in

Communications. She was the senior director for Communications but she had some connections to Lake and others in the administration which were not clear to me. [Note: Ms. Sonenshine was Special Assistant to the President and Deputy Director of Communications in the National Security Council's Office of Public Affairs.] She had been an NBC news producer, and a writer at *Newsweek* magazine.

MK: What was her name again?

JF: Tara Sonenshine. And, of course, Natalie Wozniak who had been with the White House as a professional staffer since the [Gerald] Ford administration, and had been Marlin Fitzwater's personal secretary in the previous administration. She liked the Press Office so much she moved over to the National Security Council when the administrations changed. She is still there. She has been a source of continuity.

MK: When you came in, you then became the first military person that was there in this administration.

JF: In the Press Office.

MK: Right.

JF: Now, there were others on the National Security Council staff in some of the various policy directorates.

MK: But you were on the Press Office staff?

JF: Right.

MK: What about in previous administrations? Were there people who had held your job before that?

JF: Yes. Bill Harlow had it, in the Bush administration and a reasonable amount of the Reagan administration.

MK: He had done both.

JF: Yes. And Bill is at the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] right now. He is still in the navy; he's a captain.

MK: Did you talk to him? What kind of preparation did you have coming in?

JF: I had no preparation. I was in Panama engaged in crisis management. We had been asked, on no notice, to accept and house ten thousand Cuban rafters, which was a global media story. Since I was the senior military public affairs officer in the southern hemisphere, it was my responsibility to manage the public affairs aspects of that crisis. I was fully engaged doing that. So I went in to the White House reasonably cold.

Now, I called a number of journalists I knew—Charles Bierbauer at CNN, and others, people who covered the White House, to say: "What am I walking into here? What shouldn't I do? What should I do?" And the answers were pretty simple: know your stuff and respond to the journalists; don't let them languish. Which is a fundamental rule of public relations. If you aren't responsive to the press, if you don't develop good relationships with

reporters, you're not going to be effective. Obviously, you have to know what you're talking about.

MK: What kind of advice did you get? If that was your advice from reporters, what kind of advice did you get from officials? What sort of preparation did you have from the official side?

JF: None. Zero. I got very little advice, guidance or counsel from Anthony Lake or Nancy Soderberg. The nature of the National Security Council offices are such that they are all what are called SCIFs, which is a Special Compartmented Information Facility, S-C-I-F. Which means, all the doors have cipher locks, motion detectors, and safes. They are designed so you can work with highly-classified information in the open. So you don't have a lot of interaction between people, because people work behind locked doors; and it takes a long time to develop relationships, get to know people. You do it issue-by-issue, as you're required to work with them.

Tom Ross basically laid out a few problems. We had problems developing press guidance; in other words, the government's policy line-of-the-day, which is an amalgamation of the positions of the State department, the CIA, the Pentagon, and any other agency that happens to have involvement with foreign policy questions or issues that [are] current. And that's done periodically. It was quite a drill. It was not an effective process. That was my first mission, to try to see what I could do about that. The assumption was that, because of my experience and background, I would know what to do. I found that not to be the case, however. Having worked even at senior levels in the military establishment is at best only partial preparation to work at the most senior level in government.

In my job as a military officer, I visited the State department often; I had a series of people I would visit there. When I would come to Washington from Panama, I had a number [of people] in the Pentagon I would see, and [in] the Joint Chiefs of Staff within the services. I was used to coordinating the Office of National Drug Control Policy as well, DEA [Drug Enforcement Agency], other agencies. I was used to coordinating in the interagency environment, but being at the White House, and the National Security Council, is a step above and beyond that. I was not fully prepared.

MK: What things were you not prepared for, and what things were you prepared for?

JF: I was prepared for the need to closely coordinate activities and guidance. I wasn't quite prepared for the fact that I was going to be not just a participant but basically the coordinator. I was very well schooled in the process. I knew how decisions got made and I knew who was supposed to do what. What I was not well schooled in were the nuances of all of that; how the politics worked and, in particular, which was important for someone in a press office, a lot of the language that had to be used at that level. In short, diplo-babble would be a good description, but it actually is more serious than that. In foreign policy and in high politics, there is jargon that means very specific things, as in any profession. I certainly learned it the hard way.

MK: How did you learn it?

JF: By making mistakes, and being chastised, or, in the process of preparing the press guidance, or statements, or position papers, being edited. It's a learning process; you don't mind that, but you wish you didn't have to go through it. You're expected to bring more to the table than that. Some people who obviously came out of those worlds—some of the people who came out of academic backgrounds who had been dealing with that for a very long time

seemed to do very well at it. I considered myself a simple soldier, and actually scored a lot of points with the press for being very plainly spoken and very direct. In politics, at that level, as well as in the art of diplomacy and foreign policy, being much more indirect is more important.

MK: Can you give examples of how you learned things, and when you learned them?

JF: It's hard to give a very specific example, but I had an intern once—it's probably better to tell the story this way. It's a good little vignette. His name was Dan O'Leary. In fact, Dan works in town [Washington, D.C.]. He was an environmental sciences major and somehow he got himself a White House internship and wound up in the Press Office. He was a marvelous young man; everybody liked him. Extremely intelligent and down to earth. It turned out later, we found out he had a straight-A average, and was Phi Beta Kappa. You never would have guessed that by his demeanor. He was too pleasant. He was not arrogant in any way. Dan and I actually worked alone in the Press Office for a long time. Natalie was on vacation; everybody else had left. I was stuck there by myself with no other help.

MK: Now is this the press office at the NSC [National Security Council]?

JF: Yes. The NSC press office.

MK: Is it in the OEOB [Old Executive Office Building]?

JF: Room 489 in the Old Executive Office Building. It's been in that room for years and years. I walked by Dan's phone one day and I noticed, scratched on a piece of paper he had taped to the wall, was a series of phrases: "We're aware of the situation…"; "…following it closely…"; "…the President has not yet made a decision…"; "…we have nothing for you on that." He had a series of short-end answers, which basically said nothing, yet were designed to mollify the reporters and buy enough time to go find out what the answer was. And he was bright enough to figure out all these little diplo-speak shorthands. It's the same as when a diplomat has a "…full and frank exchange…" That means they're yelling at each other.

We've seen those reports. There were was a whole series of these little phrases that he had captured, from listening to me, and to others, and to calling and asking for guidance and, "What can I say about that?" And they would say, "Well, say you're seen the reports and we're following the situation closely," which means we have no clue what's going on but we're sure going to find out real fast. So Dan did that. That's a good example.

As Mike McCurry was extremely comfortable, very fluid on the podium, he had all the mastery of the shorthand answers and techniques to move the briefing along without getting himself in trouble, and slide around and off issues that he was not prepared to discuss in detail; maybe because he didn't know, or maybe because he wasn't supposed to. You have to get comfortable with this new language of policy. You have to know what you can say that won't get you in trouble, and how to avoid what will get you in trouble. You have to learn the shorthand that is used in whatever community you're in—whether it's public policy, domestic policy, foreign policy—that can get you past a very tight set of circumstances, in which the President: does not want to show his cards, or may not be ready to show his cards, but yet [does] not [want to] set off some kind of crisis, or advance a news story that: "The White House doesn't know what it's doing…"; "…the White House is unprepared…"; "…the White House is in disarray…." It goes beyond that.

As you learn policy—in this particular administration the Cuba policy, Bosnia policy, Ireland is another—every policy set has a range of issues: a history that goes with it; what has been said; what has not been said; code words that are associated with it. It takes a very long time to learn that. It's one of the purposes of press guidance. The press guidance then is to give any official who needs to make a comment or who would be in a position where a question could be asked; it gives that official something safe to be said that is both responsive to the public's right to know, and the press's right to know, but yet does not move the foreign policy needle anywhere.

MK: Where does it come from?

JF: It comes from a lot of places, and it is a collaborative office. Sometimes, the various cabinet departments or agencies involved have opposing views; those are reconciled at the National Security Council level. But, in our case, we would start with the NSC policy directorates. Their job was to go out to agencies they worked with on the various issues, and get input for the day, on the questions of the day, and then they distill those into succinct talking points that could be used by anybody who required them. They were the ones who made sure that the language, the nuances, were exactly right. We also got copies of the guidance prepared by State and by [the] Pentagon, so that we could compare the two and see if there were any major disconnects.

We also had a daily conference call, at least one, where various principal spokespeople—at the time I was there it was Nick Burns at State; Ken Bacon at the Pentagon, and Mike McCurry at the White House. And the rest of us, listening and chiming in, would have a little murder board and say: "They're going to ask about this. What are you going to say about it?" The State Department would say, "Well, we're going to say that…." The Pentagon would say, "Well, I want to say this…." And then, if there was a disconnect, they would iron that out, so that they would be close enough, so they would not contradict each other. That was very important.

MK: When was that held?

JF: The press call started at about 11:30 and was supposed to last until 12:30, when State went out to brief, and then the White House followed at about 1:00. It moved around a little bit, depending on what was going on that day, because you can't quite operate government on that kind of precision. But it pretty much stuck to that. The participants on the call were the senior members of each of those press offices: Dennis Fox at CIA; Nick Burns and two or three of his top aides from State; Bacon and a couple of his top people at Defense, and then the National Security Council press office, and Mike McCurry from the White House.

MK: So this was a conference call that lasted for how long?

JF: An hour. Sometimes an hour and a half depending on how thorny the issues were, depending on how many there were. Sometimes it would last thirty minutes. But I would say generally the average length of time approached an hour.

MK: Where would they get the information [off which] they would be working?

JF: In my case, my job was to prepare the press guidance that was given to Mike. So Mike had my paper in front of him. The others had their papers in front of them. Sometimes we had copies of theirs, and sometimes we didn't, because this was the time when all of that was coming together. So the reconciliation actually occurred in real-time. Later on in the

afternoon, we'd all exchange these documents so we each had each other's. The policy bureaus at State, the functional parts of the Pentagon, and the policy directorates at the NSC, were the sources for the respective sets of press guidance.

MK: Can you walk us through your day, and how you were gathering information for that guidance? When did you come in, and what are all the streams of information that come together?

JF: The day in the National Security Council press office started at 6:30. We would arrive and begin reading the newspapers very quickly. Now we had some old technology there. We were on a closed LAN (local area network), which was classified at the top secret, sensitive, compartmented information level. It was not connected to a phone line; it wasn't hackable by anybody—which didn't allow us then to go out onto the Internet and use some sources that were available. Mike [McCurry] had a program called "News Edge" which is an electronic clipping service. The White House on that side had resources we didn't have. So we actually went through the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Times* by hand, and we typed a quick summary sheet for the National Security Adviser to take to the morning staff meeting, which began at 7:30. So between 6:30 and 7:30 we would see what was in the news for the day, and prepare a quick summary.

MK: How many people would be involved in that?

JF: Three. The three members of the press office staff. When there was less than three, less than three; whoever was there.

MK: That's the NSC press office.

JF: Right. What McCurry did was different. I'll leave that to others to explain. But that was so Tony Lake could walk into the chief of staff's senior staff meeting, knowing what was in the newspapers, and what the likely questions of the day would be. We took that summary then, and I electronically distributed to every member of the NSC staff. The agreement was: "When this comes, take a look at it, and see what's coming down the pike in your area; then send us the talking points we're going to need, to deal with the issues as described in the [news]papers."

MK: Did you clip stories that were highlight stories, that were foreign policy stories?

JF: This is all foreign policy now. National security policy stories. We were not concerned with domestic. That was something that other parts of the White House were concerned about.

MK: I was thinking just in terms of what kind of impact they would have on your day.

JF: Well, that would set your agenda. That's how you knew what you were going to do all day. Or at least you had a good idea of what was going to happen that day. You could almost predict how long it was going to last and just how intense it would be.

During this period of time, the journalists, television journalists, who would do the stand-ups for the morning shows on the lawn, would oftentimes call in to either get some White House reaction, or guidance, on a given question: whether it was fighter planes bombing in Iraq, or something that happened in Bosnia, or some foreign policy development. And we would scramble around and try to find out what the answer was. Sometimes they were fishing for something to say, because sometimes you go out there and there's not much going on. So

we would offer them an issue that they would make comment about; something the White House was thinking about that day. Quite frankly, that sometimes could be a severe interruption, because of the time crunch you had. You couldn't get the papers before 6:30 and the summary had to be typed and proofed and e-mailed to the National Security Adviser in time for him to read it before the 7:30 meeting.

MK: How many pages would it be, typically?

JF: Usually, it was a page, page and a half. It was a distillation. We would read an editorial, an op-ed, or a news article, and do a synopsis of it in two or three sentences, so that the salient point was there. You could boil the issue down to its nub.

Once that was done, and we had the papers read, and it's 7:30, we'd quickly dash out [to] a Starbuck's, come back, and it was then time to start—we'd read the intelligence then. This was the CIA's national intelligence daily. We'd read the State Department cables that were sent to our computer by the Situation Room. We would look—there were other NSC summaries in distribution that were done. We would look at that so we would have a good grip on what was going on in the world of intelligence. Sometimes, that would tell us, "Okay. You've got a day or two or three, before something is going to become public." Or you would know that a story was developing in a foreign capital, and it was just a matter of hours before it might rise to the U.S. media's radar scope.

This may be a foreign political event as opposed to some thunderclap event where you'd alert the media first. But we'd do that and send out the—at the end of the previous day we would have sent the press guidance back to the staff for review to be refreshed and updated in any way necessary. So, in the course of this early morning period between 7:30 and say 9:30, we were busy sending out questions that we know we're going to need to deal with, and calling people, and discussing issues. Because just sending a question and waiting for an answer is not the answer. You call the person who works on the policy: "Tell me what's going on. Explain this to me, if you will."

MK: Who would the people be that you'd call?

JF: These are the directors on the National Security Council staff, directors and senior directors; the people who actually work the issues and policies day-by-day. So, in my case, one of my favorites was Northern Ireland, and I would call the people working on Northern Ireland, and I'd have something that had developed or appeared in the *Irish Times* overnight. We would discuss what was really going on. We usually couldn't say very much about it, but at least I was given some understanding, so I would realize the implications—in case I didn't understand them—of what had developed, and then know what the response should be so I wouldn't make a mistake. But there'd be some discussion depending on the issue of the day or the issues of the day. Sometimes during that period we would call our counterparts at State or at the Pentagon or CIA or any other agency that we had to coordinate with, so we could start ironing out wrinkles in issues early, remembering, "You've got a conference call that's going to pop up in the 11:00 to 12:00 range and you've got have things done by then."

At 10:00, the staff would then provide revised press guidance back to us. The way it worked was: they had to bold changes on the previous day's so we would know what was missing, what the change was, what the difference was. Natalie Wozniak then reassembled it all and made sure it was correct. Natalie had an excellent—one of the keys to the professional staff is they've been there, they understand. Natalie had an excellent eye; [she] had a great bullshit detector. Natalie raised a lot of questions herself. A lot of times she called directly and

asked or, sometimes, she would ask one of us to either resolve it, or: "Is this right?", that sort of thing. But Natalie then would get that document assembled so that Mike could have by about 11:00. Mike needed some time to ready and study it.

Mike McCurry used to disappear. He's very quick; he's a very quick study. But he would hide in places. He had a couple hideouts in the old EOB; he had a couple hideouts down in the West Wing basement where he would go. The photographer's office was one I saw him walk into one time. But he'd take his briefing book, his papers for the day, and go get that stuff in his head, where it was quiet, so that he could be back up in the office to take the conference call. And then, in the conference call, there's all the back and forth. After the foreign policy conference call was over, then there was a gathering of all of the seven or so press assistants—

MK: This would be all the deputy press secretary level.

JF: Yes. We'd all sit in a room. Domestic people would do a little murder board on questions, and issues would get discussed and, sometimes domestic policy people would drift in and out to discuss things. You would see senior White House staff drifting in and out. Mike would call people and get answers, get updates, or get refinements from them.

MK: What time is that?

JF: Now we're in between 12:00 and 1:00, usually close to 1:00.

MK: So this is after the conference call.

JF: Yes. This is after the conference call, usually about thirty minutes after the conference call, between 12:30 roughly until about 1:00; very intense. How McCurry did it, I don't know, because ten people would be talking to him at the same time. But he did. Then he would call the briefing, and we would all walk out and we'd take our seats along the side. Something we did in this particular era [was] we had pagers that would hold thirty-six characters. There were other people watching the briefing from other places in the White House. It's always on White House closed-circuit television. So wherever you are in the White House you can turn it on and watch it. Sometimes, Mike would get a question and he wouldn't know the answer and so, he'd say we'd "…get back to you on that." And the answer would be paged to us. Sometimes, if it was a long answer, a series of pages. We'd sit there looking at our pager writing down the answer and then hand Mike a little card.

MK: Who would typically watch it?

JF: In our case, one of us usually stayed back in the Press Office to watch. On the domestic side, I'm not sure quite where they came from. And this didn't happen every day; this happened once in a blue moon. Maybe once a month or twice a month. But the point is: somebody was watching the briefing and saw that; your pager would tell you who it was from. That was an interesting way of slipping [in information], so that the question could be answered in real-time before the briefing closed. Or, if you made a mistake, they would send down the correction. Maybe he used the wrong word or "mis-described" something, so he could correct it right there in the same briefing. So you didn't have a bad news story result or one that would mislead or cause a problem. So that was an interesting little nuance.

Also, during the press guidance period between the hours of 7:30 until about 11:00 you'd get a few press calls, but not a lot. You might take half a dozen to a dozen. And, a lot of times,

these were reporters who were looking for guidance for the day. They hadn't really defined their stories but they were kind of looking for you to steer them in a certain direction.

I left out the gaggle.

MK: You can go back to it.

JF: We'd all go down to the gaggle and take notes furiously. When [you] come back from the briefing, however, because people all over town are watching that briefing, you would find probably twenty to thirty calls to return, on various issues. They could have been issues that came up in the briefing or they could be other issues.

MK: But they'd be reporters' calls?

JF: These are all reporters' calls. And the later in the day it got up until the hour of seven in the evening the more intense the number of calls would be. There was no day, I think, that we a piece took less than thirty or forty. I kept track of it for a while. My average was about seventy. On a crisis day it could range into the hundreds.

MK: And how would you answer all of them?

JF: Well, the irony is here that most people wanted the answer to the same question. You'd have your talking points and by the time the day was mature you'd know you were going to use one of them. Sometimes you could knock down three calls in a minute because all they needed was—each reporter needed an exclusive White House comment for the story. It's one of the little natures of journalism. It's sort of the anal-retentive part of journalism. Everybody has to have their own; they can't take it from the wire.

MK: Even if it's the same thing. You could say the same thing.

JF: Exactly. So you would give them the sound bite. And if they're reporters you knew and they generally were, it was all a shorthand. They'd say, "What about Cuba?" You would give the sound bite and they would say thanks. Boom they're gone. It would take literally ten to fifteen seconds. You could pop through these calls like it was nobody's business.

MK: Was there a rhythm, like you had wires calling in the morning, you had newspapers in early afternoon or radio? Was there any rhythm to any of it?

JF: No rhythm, except in the early morning you had the television people, the people who had to report for the morning shows. They had to do their stand-ups at seven. That was clear. And there was no rhythm after that, with the exception that the wires were generally done by five or six o'clock. What would happen [is] the newspapers would be the bulk of the folks that you would talk to, up until seven, which is first deadline for front-page, major stories like that. I've learned since I've been here the business section deadline is at five. So there's a difference there. And it would be very quiet between seven and seven-thirty. Then the editors would read the stories and have questions, and everybody would start calling back. You could tell by about seven-fifteen—I'm kind of contradicting myself—but by about seven-fifteen to seven-thirty you knew how long you were going to be there. On a good night you were out by seven-forty-five. That would be a really good night. A bad night is going to last until nine.

So, somewhere around eight, eight-thirty you could start hoping to go home. You'd put all your papers away, pull the hard disk out of your computer and lock it up, because you did work in SCIF, and it had all those [inaudible] secrets on it, and then you'd go home. Your phone would ring on average two or three times—your cell phone would ring—because reporters with last minute questions were calling you on the way home. They all had your cell phone number. Or, you got paged by the White House and you returned the call. The time you got home was nine to nine-thirty in the evening. You almost always had a call or two or three during the night.

For us it was mostly the White House Situation Room calling to tell us of things that had happened in foreign capitals: big explosion somewhere, could be terrorism. There was no idea what it might be but the arrangement we had was: "We'd rather get called by you than be surprised by a reporter." So the watch officers were very sophisticated people and they knew exactly when to call you, and they would do that. Then you had, during the course of the night, one or two calls from foreign journalists; Europeans who were up early, or Asians who were late. The White House operator would call you a lot with that. When you had duty officer, it was bad but other times—you had duty officer once every three weeks. Other times it wasn't that bad; it was just the Situation Room mostly.

MK: Can you fit in the gaggle and the preparations? After the senior staff meeting and Lake came back, did you all gather with him at all?

JF: There was an NSC senior staff meeting three days a week, that we all went to from time to time. But the senior director, David Johnson, went most of the time. Then, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, there was a small group that would meet with Lake and the press office was part of that small group. And that was right after the senior staff meeting. Lots of information got traded there. It was mostly issues of, "What are we going to do about this?"; what's upcoming; a little bit of a look ahead, as well as trying to get a fix on how we were going to handle a given problem that day.

Sometimes, if it was an announcement, we'd make sure we understood: how it was going to be made; who was going to do it; did we have the press kits and materials ready?; those kinds of things. In the small staff group was the Deputy National Security Adviser; the staff director; the press folks; his special assistant and his counselor—who was a senior diplomat— who sat on the staff. That was his title. And if there was a hot issue, the senior director for that hot issue would be in there. [Inaudible] for Bosnia was in there a lot. That sort of thing. Out of those meetings came specific taskings and guidance, things that you needed to do, we'd pick up on: "Oh, boy! This one is going to be hot!" So we need to be getting ready to deal with a specific issue that would come out of that.

The gaggle—McCurry would sometimes call you and say, "Find out about such and such," something he knew was going to come up in the gaggle, and he didn't know anything about it. He'd see it in the papers or hear about it.

MK: When would he call?

JF: Whenever. He'd call whenever it occurred to him.

MK: Seven?

JF: It could be as early as seven; it could be two minutes before. Sometimes we'd come in late, because we were dragging the answer. Sometimes he'd tell you: "Just be prepared, they'll ask

about this; I'll just point to you when they do." You've been in the gaggles; you sometimes see when one of us would speak up and explain something. Out of the gaggles we would get a pretty good idea of what the stories of the day were going to be. You could tell by what they were pressing Mike on. That was the purpose of the gaggle; it was intelligence gathering for the White House, and a chance to get some spin on the early news, as the news developed during the day. It was a two-way street. But we'd come back from that armed with all sorts of questions that we knew we had to get answers for because they were coming right back up in the briefing.

MK: Did you sense that there was any kind of arrangement with reporters, maybe just a tacit understanding, that reporters would ask a question in the gaggle first so that they could let you all know what they were going to ask in the briefing, and that way you could have a mature answer by the afternoon?

JF: I never had a sense of that, but that went on because reporters would call us and say—. Something I didn't add to that: When I walked into the White House I went down to the Press Room for the first time and looked across the room and realized I had worked with half the people there over the previous several years.

MK: Reporters?

JF: Reporters who were covering the White House. So I felt very comfortable, and I had good relationships with them, which helped me. They let the word be known that I was a good guy and straight and a fair player and all the rest of that. And they would tell you, "I'm going to have to ask this question; you need to get Mike ready for that," or, "I just want to let you know right now, we're not buying this line; if you can come up with something better…." The idea was they would let you know as part of the game that you needed to do something about a specific itch that needed scratching.

MK: How did they let you know that?

JF: Sometimes they'd call you. Sometimes they'd see you and tell you. Sometimes they'd just ask you the question: "Can you explain this?" Sometimes, in the case of any number of people on things like China, people who didn't normally cover that—when the Taiwan Strait crisis heated up, there were a number of reporters who had to start addressing that in broader stories and things. They would catch you in the morning and say, "I need to get smart on China; can you find some time to do that?" So you would call them up and give them a good, thorough briefing on China policy and how the situation got to be the way it is. Or you would follow them back to their little cube—everybody had a seat in the Press Room somewhere—and you'd just discuss it, or you'd loiter in the hallway and do it. But there were lots of little ways that that happened. There was constant dialogue. And most of them didn't want the other ones to know exactly what they were talking about, for a variety of reasons.

MK: How many of those would you do a week?

JF: It would happen several times a week. That was not an uncommon occurrence, where someone would give you the tip. The way we operated the Press Office—we decided to carve the world up. Rather than have all of us try to be competent in the entire range of issues, what we decided to do was—there were two directors and a senior director. The two directors split the world in half. We did it so we could balance out the crises. When I came there, Cuba was hot; Northern Ireland was very hot; Bosnia was hot; the Middle East was

hot; and then the war on drugs. There were a couple of non-geographical issues that were hot. We did it so we split those issues up, so you'd have a fair load. The idea would be that one person wouldn't be in crisis all the time and the other one would be kicked back smoking cigars. The senior director spent most of his time keeping the National Security Adviser happy.

MK: That was David Johnson.

JF: Yes. A lot of hand-holding was necessary. His job was basically [to] go to meetings and manage the boss. The rest of us basically got the work done and kept the place going and organized and fielded most of the calls. And we all worked with the National Security Adviser. There were no prohibitions against that. It was just—on a day-to-day basis—we had to structure ourselves and organize ourselves in a way that would allow us to survive, given the amount of work that had to be done; the number of calls that had to be addressed, and the number of issues that existed. So we divided up the world and developed a network in the other parts of the government and within the National Security Council staff, to help us do that, and then we tried to stay on top of it.

MK: Did you keep the same areas? Did you do it strictly geographically or was it done in a way by crisis area?

JF: It was done geographically. I had Europe, Latin America and Asia. Calvin Mitchell—he was a Middle East expert anyway—had the Middle East, Bosnia and Africa. And I had drugs because drugs went with Latin America; he had military and intelligence issues because they were sort of intertwined more with his. He had them before I got there. They may have fallen to me; it would have been logical given my background. I had a couple of other items. I had environmental policy, economic policy. I went to the economic summits. So that's how we split it. It was personality- and expertise-driven, as much as anything else. There were some pre-existing things. As people left—I was there by myself with no senior director a number of times, for various lengths, so—over time—I developed a working fluency in all the issues. You had to pay attention to what everybody else was doing because, on any given day, you could be the stuckee.

When we would travel, for example, the President would go overseas—once, the President flew around the world. He started out in Japan, went to Korea, went on from there to Moscow, and then on home. I didn't do Russia but I did Asia. I did the Asian part of the trip and flew back—the First Lady didn't go to Russia either, so she flew back and I flew back on that plane and manned the office. The guy, Brian Cullum by then, who was doing Russia policy stayed in the office for the first part of the trip while we were in Japan, and then he displaced to Moscow, and met the plane when it landed in Moscow. David flew all the way around the world. There was a gap in the office where it wasn't manned, but that was easy, because White House comms put you in touch with the world no matter where you are, and most of the press who would be asking questions were with us anyway.

MK: When people called and you called them back, you were authorized to provide answers?

JF: Absolutely.

MK: You didn't have to check with anybody.

JF: No. You're authorized to do anything. You're a pretty senior member of the government, but you're also required to do the right thing. So you're hired for your judgment. It was sort

of interesting. The Clinton White House was noted for its kiddie corps, particularly young staffers, but everybody in the National Security press office had gray hair. There were no unseasoned people. Everybody was very, very experienced. Tom Ross was over sixty years old. He had been Harold Brown's Pentagon spokesman, years before. He had long service as a newspaperman and as a senior corporate public relations official with General Electric, RCA [inaudible] and he wanted to do one more stint in public service. That's why he was there. I was a full colonel in the U.S. army. Calvin Mitchell was a foreign service officer as was David Johnson. We were not inexperienced people. We knew what we did not know which was very important.

The other trick you use in the White House is you do almost everything on background, as an administration official. That way you never get crossways. It also allows you to expand your brief a bit. It's always better to have the right news out there and have reporters not get it wrong. Now, we're into an area that you could write an entire book about, and that's how you guide the press, just exactly what you say. On-the-record comments are generally very narrow, but the background comments are much more expansive. You may explain policy, how it's being made, what the state of play is, who is doing what; what the hoped for outcomes are; things that are reasonable and prudent for the American public to know but, yet for domestic political reasons or international political reasons, you don't want them directly sourced to the White House.

MK: What about off-the-record?

JF: On occasion you would do that, too.

MK: What kind of circumstances?

JF: It could be having to do with upcoming announcements, presidential decisions. First of all, you'd know what the recommendation was. I didn't make it a habit of telling people what the recommendation was going to be. I left that to McCurry and other people, who were in a better position to make political judgment than I was. What comes to mind is the recognition of Vietnam. For diplomatic purposes, the decision memo did not [go] to the President until very late in the evening, so that we could plausibly say until after the evening news was over, the President has not made a decision, nor has one been put before him. But the decision memo had been typed and sitting in Tony Lake's in-box for a long time. We knew what the recommendation was going to be and we also knew that he had told his advisers he was going to sign it; he would sign it when it came.

Fairly late in the evening I was down in Tony Lake's office when he whipped out his pen and signed it. He said, "Now it's official." He signed his recommendation to the President and walked it over for the signature. The next day was when we were going to have a big East Room ceremony to make this announcement and it would have [been] disingenuous and misleading, and not the President's advantage clearly, not to tell people that the decision was forthcoming. I never once said what it was going to be; everybody already knew. But that's an off-the-record thing you just say.

MK: Who would you tell, say, on that one? What news organizations?

JF: Well, the kinds of people who were most interested in that were the television people, because they had to have that on their evening news. So it's the Ann Comptons, the Bill Plantes, the Brit Humes. Those kinds of people would ask you that, and you would just tell them, off-the-record: "Tomorrow", so they could go out and do their job.

There are many rules in PR, but one of them is: "You try not to surprise reporters and have them embarrassed, and vice versa; they usually reciprocate." It's smart to know what the news is going to be.

MK: When you look back to coming into the White House, and you had no formal preparation, what were the most important things that you had in your background that prepared you for service in the White House?

JF: Lack of formal preparation is not exactly true. I wasn't specifically prepared to work at that level, but I did have some formal preparation as a graduate of the Army War College. You spend a great deal of time studying political military affairs and you know how the national security decision-making process is worked; you understand how the policy is made. You know who the players are, and you get a pretty good course in U.S. policy and its policy goals and objectives, and national strategy, and how all that works. Then, having been part of that apparatus, at least the military side of it, for many years and at very senior levels—I worked for the chief of staff of the army and I was working for a CINC [commander-in-chief]. You had interaction with most of the component parts of that apparatus: State Department, CIA, the Pentagon, and other agencies. In my region, DEA, Office of National Drug Control Policy, were players. Then, in my public relations background, I spent approximately eighteen years as a military public affairs officer with appropriate university background and military schooling. The military has a program that allows you to go out into the civilian world and work for a year. I spent a year at a public relations agency.

MK: What agency? What did you do?

JF: Ketchum Public Relations, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I sold Heinz pickles among other things. I worked on hospital accounts, industrial accounts. It was learning how to promote things, which is something you don't get much of, working as a Government public affairs person. And then having been in Washington the better part of ten years, before I went to the White House, I had a good familiarity with the journalists in town. In the course of my jobs in the Pentagon I had had to do some work up on the Hill as well as within the agencies as previously described. So the point being that I had been around it and involved in it:

I just had never sat at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue and quite witnessed just how it's done from there. The level of responsibility is much, much higher. As I said, the biggest hang-up for me was a lot of the jargon and language that I had to acquire because, as a soldier—soldiers are famous for being direct and blunt, because that's what works. It doesn't work that way elsewhere. It's a matter of adaptability. It just took a while. It took about six months before I started feeling comfortable. It took almost a year before I felt I had my hands really wrapped around the issues, the White House apparatus, the entire government apparatus, and I could predict what was going to happen. As opposed to react to what was going to happen. I found that, as I moved through a series of senior-level jobs, the more senior you get the longer it takes to really get to the point where you've mastered—

[Tape 1 of 1, Side 2]

JF: You don't feel like, everyday, you're going to be surprised by something.

MK: Is there any way that you can think of, that one can get that kind of experience, other than learning it when you're doing the job?

JF: There were a number of people in the Clinton Administration who had been in and out of government at various levels, and who seemed to have a very good sense for what was going on. There was a woman named Jill Shooker who was a PR [public relations] type, a political PR person, who was in the NSC communications office for a while and she had more rolodexes than [Jimmy] Carter has pills. She'd just been around it for so long that she had a very good grip. She also was not his press spokesman. She knew how to stage events. She understood political optics. She knew how to create the impression that you needed. I'm not sure how well she would have done as a press spokesman, a voice for the administration, for the president, an advocate for policy. It's a little bit tougher, because there isn't much room for error.

MK: So it's a combination in the office of people who have experience over a period of time in the policy areas, and in the government.

JF: Yes. And I'm speaking uniquely of the Press Office. People in the policy-making directorates came from policy backgrounds, and they were well versed in their political area in policy. They were academics who had extensive experience; they were on loan from other government agencies, they came out of the State Department, the Pentagon, the FBI, CIA, Commerce Department. They came from a lot of different places. But they knew what they were doing.

The problem for someone in—. This administration had a particular problem, and that problem was: the problem that actually got me into the White House. They were getting pounded for their messy foreign policy. Once you got in and you could see what was going on, in my personal opinion, it wasn't as much the policy itself that they were making; it was the way they were presenting it. They were not as effective, I thought, as they could have been. They didn't speak with one voice. They seemed to be reactive all of the time. They were tentative; they were unsure. It was not smooth. This whole press guidance process I was discussing—part of it was in place and part of it was not.

I and others refined that, and it helped smooth out the understanding and perception of the Clinton administration foreign policy because it made the communication of that policy more effective. I don't mean to imply here, by any means, that I'm taking any great amount of credit for this. I'm just saying that one of the reasons that the acceptance of the president's foreign policy improved had to do with the improvements made in presenting that policy to the press and to the public. Also a lot of things calmed down. Haiti calmed down; Cuba calmed down. Bosnia, there was a lot of debate back and forth whether or not troops should be sent into Bosnia, but there was a period of time where things were relatively calm, that allowed the ship of state, if you will, to right itself and a much better reputation and image of Clinton foreign policy to develop. Then as other crises began—as Bosnia heated up, as China heated up, China/Taiwan, North Korea—they got more benefit of the doubt, and we had a more effective means and apparatus in place to aid in the communication for that policy.

MK: Was the decision-making process improved during that time? Were there changes in it that then changed the way in which policy was presented?

JF: I'm not sure how much they improved, because the administration was two years old by the time I got there. There's a line in Colin Powell's book, where he described National Security Council meetings as graduate school bull sessions. I saw a certain amount of that when I was there. It was messy because it was egalitarian in a lot of ways. A lot of people could have a voice. That's the way they wanted it, and that's their privilege. My purpose was not

to judge that. I think they got their mechanics of it down a little bit better and I think that helped a lot. We also had a systematic means for engaging the press. We had journalists on a regular basis come in for on-the-record and background sessions with the National Security Adviser or his deputy.

MK: How often did they occur?

JF: Those occurred weekly.

MK: You've got a sense here of the rhythms of a day. What are the rhythms of a week? What were the things that you could expect that would be on your schedule, or would be happening each week? The anticipated kind of events.

JF: I'm going to edit this out. Right now I can't remember half of what happened. They say stress really warps your mind.

MK: Well, one of the things would be the news weeklies. Did you—

JF: What I've forgotten is precisely what days we intended to do some of this stuff. It floated a lot because it was hard to get on Lake's schedule. That's a down side. What our intent was and what happened—and this was a Tara Sonenshine invention before I came—was to have regularized, weekly meetings with the news magazine writers, and we'd usually do that on Thursday or Friday.

MK: Would those be the White House correspondents?

JF: Right. White House correspondents. And it was *Time*, *Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report*, and *Business Week*. At first I didn't understand why *Business Week* and later on, I did. Part of this administration's domestic policy was to expand foreign trade and create jobs, so *Business Week* was an important part of that. Also, if you're interested in free trade and some of the other economic policy this particular administration chose to pursue, *Business Week* would be an important component in helping you communicate that. Also they had a reporter who was interested and engaged and, therefore, it made a lot of sense. So those folks would come in once a week for an on-the-record session. Some parts of it were on background.

MK: That would be with Lake?

JF: That was with Lake or [Sandy] Berger, depending on who was available at the time; usually nobody else. When I did them, I found it fascinating because we would walk out the West Wing entrance and stand there under the portico and have another thirty minutes worth of conversation, just myself and them. I know this happened a lot with David as well—where you are sort of back-filling and explaining what was meant by comments that the National Security Adviser made: Tony made or Sandy made.

MK: Were those off-the-record?

JF: Yes. They were, absolutely. Yes, they were off-the-record. They were not for attribution, let's put it that way. Very clearly, we didn't want our name, or position, or White House, being attached to that. In some cases, you could call that spin. You could call it: this is what my boss meant to say or it was just a clarification session, which is what it was, mostly.

MK: Can you think of any other regularly-scheduled [meetings]? Was there anything with radio reporters? Was there a tong [group of reporters]? Was there a tong that dealt with foreign-policy issues? National security issues?

JF: No. Before I came there were. By the time I got there, those tongs had dissolved. And I think it had to do as much with Tony Lake's schedule, as anything else. Part of it was the way they organized themselves, and the lack of discipline, or the amount of discipline that they had in their process, and the way they did things that made his schedule sort of mushy, fluid. It was hard to stay on schedule.

MK: When you say "they", you mean the White House?

JF: I'm talking about the National Security Council senior staff.

MK: Right. Okay.

JF: And part of that was just the immense workload. The number of issues that flowed through there on a given day was just mind-boggling. In the evening before we would go home, we would go down to the Situation Room, and there in a box were all the decision papers that the National Security Adviser had acted on that day—letters he had signed, memos he had sent to the president. They were there to be read, right before they went into the files. Some of them got distributed to other agencies like to the Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, or the people who had to see them. We were free, in fact encouraged, to go down and read them, because that's how we could find out what was really going on.

MK: And how many items typically would be in that box?

JF: The box would be twelve inches thick every day. Those were the formal documents. Those were not the informal little memoranda that flowed through, and all the junk.

MK: Right. And that twelve inches would be—how many items, do you think?

JF: Anywhere between twenty and fifty. These are major policy issues that are being acted upon in a given day. It's enormous. The nuance in the stuff was pretty incredible. Now, what you learned is it's all iterative, so once you got the base down, then they're easier to follow and you could actually track them and understand them. When you come in fresh, it's not that way. The learning curve is vertical.

MK: And there's no way of really learning things other than through experience?

JF: It's hard to have a portfolio that's that broad. Now, I've found that people coming in from State, like David Johnson, coming into the Press Office—Eric Ruben who succeeded me, Calvin Mitchell who preceded me—at the State Department, the portfolios were broader than they were in Defense. So they had a better understanding, a better grip, a wider frame-of-reference than the folks coming in from Defense. But, there was a huge hole in that frame-of-reference that the State Department guys had, and that was Defense. It was a complementary relationship, and I'm mostly describing, I guess, how difficult it was for me—as someone with a Defense background, or how I think it would be for someone who was a pure politically-appointed civilian—to come in. And I've talked to David Leavy who had a rough go of it. He had no idea just how big the fire hose was and how complicated things were. Other people have said the same thing.

MK: Did you have anything to read? Did they give you any kind of briefing books about White House operations, press operations or anything?

JF: No, ma'am, they did not. That would have been something extremely helpful. Now what I did was: I put one together. In fact, it sits right over there. I could even tell you what's in it.

MK: Could you xerox it for me?

JF: Well, I'm not sure how much good that would be. I put together a brain book.

MK: Where did you get the information for it?

JF: Wherever I could find it. I would pick up things as I was walking around. [Begins reading.] I have here the list of booth numbers for all the White House correspondents and, as you can see, I've written numbers for other people I needed to remember—all around the edge. There's something called an all-call. All members of the White House press corps have beepers that can be set off at one time. There's the all-call number right there. Sometimes I think about playing a trick on people, because I know the number. The National Security Council changes its zip code; there it is. Fax numbers for an emergency late evening press release, right there. All the other public affairs people in all the government departments in domestic and foreign policy. Here is a detail list of who the regular reporters are that cover the White House, and how to find them at home, by fax, and in the office. A map of the White House grounds that you could fax to people so they could find you. My copy of the Taiwan Relations Act, because that was such a hugely important issue at one time. I actually went and got the act, made a copy of it. I must have faxed a hundred copies of this; I used to read from it.

MK: Did you fax it to reporters?

JF: Sure. So they could see it and understand it. [Continues reading.] A list of all the telephone numbers in the National Security Council. Duty officer instructions that I got, and this I got out of Mike McCurry's office. You have to be White House press duty officer after hours and on weekends. This is a memo that was done for Mike McCurry when he came to the White House, so that he would know what his duty people were doing, and how the system worked. As you can see, there are a number of things: it describes what a lid is, what a paper lid is, what a full lid is, travel pool. All these little things that are institutionalized here [that] you might not know about.

MK: Had they given you other things like this?

JF: Ginny Terzano was very helpful to me and she fed me—. I would ask questions: "How do I know this? What do I do?" She would say, "I've got a paper. Here." Nobody ever put anything together.

Here are all the members of the White House Press Office, and their phone numbers. This is the NSC staff directory. This is not just phone numbers. This is exact titles, exact names.

MK: From the White House phone book?

JF: Yes. No. This is a special list that was made up by Tony Lake's office. What their office address was. The White House phone book is over there. Let's see. Instructions on how the voice mail system works. Little things that matter. It's funny how much they matter.

MK: That's the NSC calendar?

JF: As you can see, after a while—I had a series of files on my desk where I started keeping this. This is a list of upcoming events. This one says: Presidential congressional municipal elections in Guatemala; municipal elections in Peru; parliamentary elections, Azerbijan. All those little day-to-day things that could cause news to happen some place, that you had to be ready to answer. "What's the US policy on the upcoming election in Azerbaijan?" Well, a couple of weeks out we would find out.

MK: How far ahead of time did you have this? Did you get one that was, say, a year ahead of time?

JF: [Still reading.] These came out about once a quarter, and they usually go out more than a year in advance. They go out about eighteen months. Here are the press tongs. This was the stuff that was defunct, but I found this in my desk when I got here. I kept them because they were neat groupings, and if I had to put together press tongs, which you did from time to time for things, it helped you kind of think through the process as to who should I get and also, you would never know—. For example, here's a radio tong! There's no place you go in the White House where there's a list of all the radio networks that cover the White House. You might be able to get that by asking, and then writing them down as you talk to people, but there is no directory that says that. So here it's all listed out. This is the rotating tongs that they tried to set up for Lake that, as you can see, just lists the reporters at various newspapers—and you can see who's been added, crossed out, changed, and so on and so forth.

MK: That's your media list.

JF: [Reading.] These are people who cover the other agencies. Even if you're in foreign policy, when you're White House duty officer you cover the domestic front as well. So I have no idea who the reporters are who write about HHS [Health and Human Services], or EPA [Environmental Protection Agency], or FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency], or Justice, or Interior, but here is a list that has all of them and where to find them.

MK: You have news syndicates there.

JF: Op-ed contact lists, so if you need to place an op-ed—the White House is very good at that—this is who you call and this is how you fax it to them. And it has a huge list of newspapers here ranging from the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette* through the *Asian Wall Street Journal* to almost every newspaper in the country. Very important.

MK: What types of things would you place, say, for an op-ed?

JF: If you're trying to get the public to accept any policy, whether it's Bosnia or changes in social security, health care, anything like that, one of the things you do is you've got to mobilize opinion leaders to do things or to say things that are favorable to you. From time to time the National Security Adviser writes op-eds that appear in any number of newspapers, explaining national security policy on a given issue. Speechwriters would write them. A number of people, including the Press Office, would have an opportunity to comment but, ultimately, we would place it.

[Interruption]

JF: —all of the senior people in the national security/foreign policy apparatus in the United States—these go from secretaries who sit outside doors, executive officers, military assistants to the principals themselves—and it's exactly how to get hold of them, where they are, what their fax numbers are because on any given day you may be talking to the Secretary of State herself, the Secretary of Defense himself. The National Security Adviser could turn to you and say get the Secretary of Defense on the phone, please. You could call the Situation Room and do it that way or, sometimes, you'd just pick up the phone and do it yourself; it depends. But these are all important things to know.

Then, a copy of the president's schedule. We got weekly schedules as well as daily. The weeklies were broad in outline, without specific times; the dailies were very specific and sometimes things would be added or eliminated, depending on whatever he needed to do. There's a place for press guidance. And this is the State Department interior press office contact list all the way down in to the bureaus.

MK: For issues?

JF: Yes. So, who's doing south Asian affairs? You know exactly who to call. Home phone numbers. Other lists of important phone numbers. You can never have enough lists of important phone numbers. Here's the office of the Vice President, all of his staff, who they are, what they do, how to find them.

MK: How often would those be updated?

JF: I never noticed. They seemed to be updated quarterly.

MK: What kind of coordination meetings did you have with staff in other parts of the White House? Was there any kind of coordination in which you [were] involved?

JF: There was a point when we were having lots of problems coordinating: something Evelyn Lieberman did. There seemed to be disconnects between the First Lady's office, the Vice President's office, the Executive Office of the President, the national security office, and others. On Fridays, early Friday afternoon, there were informal meetings in media affairs where everybody sort of kicked their feet back. For a while, I was the only guy there which was—it was called the girls' meeting; "I'm going to the 'girls meeting'." But we would go down there, and Evelyn—who was the Deputy Press Secretary for Operations then—not deputy chief of staff, got Peggy Wilhide who was Vice President [Al] Gore's press secretary and someone from the First Lady's office—four or five people—and we'd sit down and say: "What's your principal doing next week; what are your messages for next week; what are your objectives for next week?" So the idea was, we could figure out if we had a big conflict. If the Vice President was about to make some news on a Thursday, yet we found out we were going to recognize Vietnam that day, or some other major, momentous event, you'd say, "Maybe you ought to not do it on Thursday, because you're message is lost." Or, in other cases, you wouldn't want the subordinate principal to blow the President off the stage, upstage the President. We couldn't have that happen.

MK: Did you coordinate with the departments?

JF: Sure. That's part of how we knew what was going on. So, when one of us, somebody from the National Security Council press office, went to that meeting, our job was to know what was going on in the national security world.

MK: Was there any meeting where all the public information officers came together?

JF: There's no way. It takes too much time. That meeting occurred on the phone every day. That was the conference call. The subjects on that call were usually the topics of the day but, occasionally, we would range ahead. We just burned up the phone lines. We were constantly on the phone, talking to people.

MK: How many calls did you do in a day within the administration? You said, then reporters—

JF: For reporters, the average was seventy. I kept score for about a month just to get a sense for how many I was doing. I'd say my average was about seventy.

MK: And that's in a five-day week?

JF: That's right. Monday through Friday. Weekends were a whole different kettle of fish. Within the administration, I'd say I made twenty calls a day. That may be a little bit high, but certainly more than ten, and close to twenty, because you're constantly checking things.

MK: And that would be with the Pentagon, CIA?

JF: State. It could be the Agency for International Development, Foreign Trade Rep[resentative]'s office. When Ron Brown was Secretary of Commerce, we'd talk to his people. [Inaudible]. Whoever you needed to talk to. Sometimes, in our case, we'd go down into the military services. We'd be down talking to the bureaus at State. Sometimes you talk to the foreign policy principal, whoever the Assistant Secretary of State for Africa was, or Latin America. Whatever. The idea was, you needed to get a grip on things.

There's something else you do. I did this on—I've forgotten the term [inaudible] for it; I dealt with this for years—certification and decertification for compliance with drug laws. There's something called an interagency working group and any major issue has an interagency working group. Those working groups are usually policy people and they usually do include public relations and public affairs components. I was not part of any standing interagency working group, but I had the power to call one or make one.

MK: How did you know which ones existed?

JF: Well, you don't, but you assume there's one for Bosnia—every major issue has one.

MK: Northern Ireland would have one.

JF: No, because that policy was so sensitive and it was so personal to the President, that was run by Lake, mostly directly himself, Soderberg; whoever it was. There were several that sat on the National Security Council. Very seldom anybody at State. And then Jean Kennedy Smith [inaudible]. That was a really tight group. That was handled in a different way. But there were I-works for drugs, there were I-works for almost everything. I only called one once and it had to do with decertification of Colombia. We had problems with the various agencies fighting with each other over—dogs peeing on the fence post—which agency is most important in the drug war.

As we went through that process it was going to be very obvious you had to "be on one sheet of music," and we had to agree with what we were going to do. So I made a quick phone call one morning and said: "I need to see you guys in the Old EOB in the afternoon."

I got all the public relations people, and people who were related to that, around the conference table, and we worked it out. That's the only one I ever did. But you could do that. It's very important to know that you can bring the government together, the people in the government who need to be involved, to get—. And this was communications policy. "How are we going to communicate this? Who's got the lead and what are you going to say?" That's a product of policy but the mechanics, the coordination, and the processing of it had to be done by the communications professionals. So that's a case of where that was done. There were several other cases where I thought about it; I just never did it. I could get what I needed to get done on the phone. So I didn't have to bring them together.

MK: When you came in, was there any period that you had, where you just studied what was going on, before you actually participated?

JF: No. I wish that were true, but it didn't happen that way.

MK: What were the dates of your service? What day did you start and what day did you leave?

JF: The Monday after the twenty-third of April, 1995; and I left, the seventh of January, 1997.

MK: So you just started that Monday.

JF: Yes. Walked in on a Monday morning, and went to work. Now, needless to say, I didn't pick up the phone right away. I had about a day—I got my badge and I did all those kinds of things. Then we sat down, and Calvin Mitchell and I figured out how we were going to do it. In media relations, it's a very simple process. You get a question; you find out what the answer is. If you're experienced, you know how many bases you have to touch. Another thing, at the White House you find out there are extra bases you didn't know about. It's okay. You stumble through that. Once you got a solid understanding, you've done your homework, you know what the answer is, you phone the reporter back and give it to them.

MK: Did you find that there were rhythms to the year? You've talked about a day, a week, how a week is laid out. What about a year?

JF: There are broad stroke rhythms that have to do with seasons and holidays, Christmas-time, all that sort of stuff. There are the August doldrums in Washington, campaigns and that sort of thing. You can see, there's an ebb-and-flow that seems to be associated with that. It might give you better insight on how the President chose to do foreign travel. Quite frankly, I didn't even think too much about it, because I was too busy trying to survive— hour by hour, day by day. They space those trips out, and they seem to have a somewhat regular sequence to them.

MK: There is something of a rhythm, if you look at the sessions of Congress, the budget.

JF: Right. When the budgets are introduced, when they're debated, when they're voted on. Because the issues get hot, and they get cold. Budgets get introduced; there's a flurry of activity surrounding the budget, and the policy implications of a budget. Then they languish up on the Hill for a while, and the President goes overseas. In the foreign policy press office, you react to international events which are not part of the domestic policy agenda. You could see that. The budget gets introduced; there's a huge flurry of activity in December, January, and then February, March it gets a lot quieter while the Congress is mulling it all over and staffing everything. Then, in the spring, when they start to debate things, the authorizers and the appropriators get into the act, and it starts to heat back up

again. Then, of course, some things go through—no problem—and other things are issues to be debated. You're driven by that; you have to deal with that.

That rolls you up to the summer and, in Washington, a lot of people disappear in the course of the summer. Summers do slow down a fair amount. It's all relative. When presidents go on vacation, life gets a lot easier. You get into August in Washington, it's time out for the most part. [Inaudible] we decided to restart the war in Iraq. It was the guns of August all over again. But I think that was an abhorrent thing. You come back in September, then it's big time into the budget again. Then you pass it and you start looking for—. Any time there's a slow period, that's when a president goes overseas.

MK: And, you also had G-7.

JF: Well, you have the G-7 that pops up—

MK: And a UN [United Nations] session.

JF: You have UNGA [United Nations General Assembly] in October.

MK: What's that?

JF: UN General Assembly. And you have APEC, the Asian-Pacific Economic Conference.

MK: When is it?

JF: I can't remember if that was regularized or not. I don't think it was. I think it floated.

MK: Because G-7 was usually June or July.

JF: June-July time frame.

MK: APEC would be summer also?

JF: I'm trying to remember. I honestly don't remember. I never went to an APEC, for some reason. I think David went to one. Clinton didn't go to the next one, the one I would have gone to. That's just how it happened.

There are a lot of long-lead developments that go with those and, for a Press Office and news organization, those things don't come on to your radar scope until you get pretty close, until it's time to start briefing reporters. The Communications Office does all of the press kits and the planning, and that sort of thing for it. You don't have to get involved in it, until reporters turn their attention to it. There are a number of meetings that occur, and so on, that there is enough time to get smart, to really get into the issues and the nuances. I used to go to meetings where the sherpas, the people who are the designated representatives of the government, negotiate the issues in the conference. So that's all pre-done; a lot of it's pre-thought, so when the principals show up, they don't have to deal with it too much. When the sherpas come in to brief, you start going to those briefings so you can start accumulating knowledge, and you take notes so you have a good grip on what the issues are. If you're particularly deficient in an area, you go to correct that. But mostly it's survive, day by day by day.

The most difficult thing that anybody ought to know when they come in is going to be physical. It's the lack of sleep. The phone rings most nights, and you almost never have a night of uninterrupted sleep. You start averaging four to five hours of sleep and the rest of the time you're at work. When people say they leave to spend more time with their family, they're generally not lying; they're telling you the absolute truth. That's just something you have to be aware of, if the opportunities are marvelous to serve your country in that way.

MK: What were the benefits of serving in the White House?

JF: The benefit as a citizen is to understand the glory of this republic, and how it works. To have a chance to serve the American people, and serve the Constitution, and the highest office of the land, first-hand, personally; to be there, to be part of history; to stand in places where history has been made. It's a very uplifting and motivating thing to do. When you walk through the gate of the White House every morning, you have no question of why you're at work. Getting motivated to go to work at the White House was never an issue, never a problem whatsoever. It was a delight to do, no matter how frustrating it could be day by day, hour by hour. But just to know you served, there's a certain amount of panache that goes with it. Even in jaded Washington, people respect people who work there. And, when people learn that you've been there or worked there, people give you a telling nod or a telling smile. Some people even thank you for having done it. They all seem to admire you even in spite of some of the scandals that have gone on in this particular case. And it's neat to be part of the government. You feel the responsibility.

The most interesting thing that I've noticed, I didn't see anybody treating it lightly. I saw a lot of politics fall away when decisions were being made on behalf of the United States of America and all of its citizens. Very often, you'd hear the question: "What's the right thing for the republic?" as opposed to, "What 's the right thing for our party?" or, "What's the right thing…?" for some other reason. There's an altruism that goes with that, that's worth experiencing.

MK: What do you miss?

JF: Being in the know, being on the inside, knowing exactly what's going on. It's much harder to decipher from outside. And you just miss the notion of serving a cause larger than yourself. It's pretty hard to do in private life, where you serve lesser ideals. It's the idealism that I miss the most.

MK: Can you think of what problems were caused by not having any preparation for coming into service in the White House?

JF: I think I could have been much more effective, much sooner. I would have come there with ideas about what should be done, what needed to be done, and how to do what was being done, better. I could have been more effective in serving Tony Lake and serving the President, and serving the National Security Council. As it was, it took me a long time to get up to speed.

MK: How could that have been done?

JF: I don't know. I have no idea. This project, I think, would be helpful. Something I would do now is I would take some time, and I would go and visit all the counterparts that I had in government, in their offices. I did that over time; I didn't do it right away. But I should have done it right away. I would have sat down: "How are we going to work together? What are

the things I need to know? What are the mistakes you don't want me to make? Where should I go to learn things? What should I read? Point me in the right direction," those kind of things.

The other thing I would have done, inside the National Security Council [NSC]—dumb me, I don't know why I didn't think of this—I would have knocked on every door the first week and met every single member of the staff. As it was, it took me probably six weeks to do that. It was too long.

MK: How many people were on the staff?

JF: About a hundred and sixty five, roughly.

MK: When you say you should have met with your counterparts, who would those be?

JF: It would be the members of—I already knew everybody on the DOD [Department of Defense] press staff but, I would have gone over to State and met all the people I didn't know, which was a considerable number. I would have gone over to CIA; I would have gone to the Agency for International Development [AID], and USIA [United States Information Agency], to the disarmament people, all kinds of folks—

MK: Drug enforcement.

JF: I already knew those guys. I would have gone over to the U.S. Trade Representative's Office. I would have gone back to ONDCP [Office of National Drug Control Policy]. I had been dealing with a narrow slice of that place. I would have gone back over there.

MK: Which one is that?

JF: Office of National Drug Control Policy. That issue was hot then; it's not nearly as hot now. It'll change for every administration. The idea is: go see your counterparts where they live. I spent a lot of time working with the FAA [Federal Aviation administration], and the Department of Transportation, and the Department of Commerce, because I got involved in ValuJet and TWA 800 by virtue of the fact that I was White House duty officer when those two events happened. It also happens because of my military background; I knew a lot about aircraft crash investigations. I should have gone over to meet those people as well. To this day, there's one [of] them, I know his name, I talked to him at home and all hours of the night, [but] I would have no idea what he looks like. It's hard to do. You get captivated very quickly, but relationships are vital. People will tell you things in their office, about what's bugging them, what's bothering them, what they want you to do, how they need to work with you, that's it's hard for them to tell you on the phone.

MK: Or if they came to the White House?

JF: From time to time, they all got over there, but you need to go see them. That's a gesture you need to make, in my opinion.

The other thing I would have done is I would have spent more time with the domestic press office staff, figuring out exactly what they did, learn the mechanics—because press offices have substance and have process. If you don't get the process right, it'll kill you. You've got to know the deadlines. You've got to understand how the news flow works, because journalists live by that; they're driven by the clock.

MK: So, that you learn from the regular press office staff?

JF: Coming in, as I did, in the middle, that's where you—I had a great feel for it, don't misunderstand [me].

MK: From earlier.

JF: From just having lived in Washington for a long time. But the White House is a different animal. I didn't know what a "lid" was; I didn't know any of those things. You need to find out what those things are right now, right away. First time, every time, when you stumble into something. I didn't meet all the reporters. [Inaudible] shake hands around the press room. Wolf Blitzer, god bless his soul, took me to dinner with a bunch of reporters; he got together a tong and took me to dinner the first week I was there, which was smart on his part.

MK: Who else was in it?

JF: I don't remember now.

MK: A bunch of network people?

JF: No. They were other friends of Wolf's, and a lot of producers from CNN. But Wolf's objective was for me to understand how CNN worked, and what he needed and when he needed it under the guise of: "We have all these logistical problems, you need to give our logistics people heads up that you're going to be doing things." Well, the logistical people would call Wolf right away, so you knew that anything you said to them would go straight to Wolf. So, very often, you just didn't bother telling them. So Wolf wasn't quite as clever as he thought he was there. But, nice try. The idea was: it helped to have all these relationships, and that's something Wolf Blitzer knows extremely well. And he was very adroit at how he did that.

MK: Were there other news organizations or reporters that did that?

JF: No. One interesting guy was Tom Lippman, at the *Washington Post*. He was their diplomatic correspondent. Very savvy, sage, smart guy. Experienced. Lippman cut right to the chase. He called me up one day, told me who he was. "I need to know you; meet me at Starbuck's for coffee." We ran over there. He put his cards on the table; I put my cards on the table. In the course of thirty minutes, we worked it out and that was it.

MK: What kinds of things did you talk about?

JF: We talked about ground rules, how are we going to work together. He, knowing how much b.s. there is in a White House, said, "I need to cut through the b.s.; I need to get to the chase. I need to know what the heck is really going on." We worked out—. As I did with every reporter, when I open my month, I'm on deep background. Only when we agree are we going to go on a for-attribution basis. It keeps you from putting your foot in your mouth. It was just a little check-out to make sure—. He wanted me to understand he was a serious reporter, and he was checking me out to see how serious a player I was going to be. I reminded him, "I'm an advocate for the Administration. That's my job. My job is to help the administration tell its story in the most favorable way possible. Don't forget that."

And I've got a pretty good reputation for being a very straight shooter in this town. I always remind reporters: "That's my job; I'm a paid advocate; it's what I do." Tom and I got along very well. He's a wonderful reporter; no games, no tricks, no nothing. He tells you what he knew, what he needs, what he wants to find out, and you go from there. There are a large number of wonderful reporters in this town who are as straight as an arrow and know what they're doing.

MK: How often would you see reporters socially? Would they take you out to dinner?

JF: Not very often. There's no time for that. Remember, when you roll in at 6:30 and you're going home close to nine o'clock—. You got invited to the White House correspondents' association dinner, those kinds of thing. Great socializing took place on foreign trips. Some of my best memories and some of the most fun I had was on a press plane back to Washington at the end of the trip. It's a party plane. Everybody let's their hair down and has a great time. You really get to know people as human beings then, because the news is over. It's all been made; it's all been said. You sit down and you talk about your children and your spouses and what you like, your hobbies; you talk a little about the news and what really happened. It's really a lot of fun. And, of course, we saw people at the Christmas parties, the summer press party, that sort of thing. But the opportunities to socialize were fairly thin. Occasionally on the weekends, if it was slow, you'd go to breakfast with somebody, if you were in, or you'd go to a quick lunch with someone. They didn't happen all that much.

MK: In a sense, if there was somebody you dealt with very regularly, like somebody like Wolf, you really didn't need to socialize to cement a relationship. It was just something you did on [inaudible] basis.

JF: If you noticed I walked about the press room a lot. I didn't hang around down there, but you saw me in there three, four times a week, at a time when it was very slow, and I would stop and have little conversations with people. I made it a point to make friends with the people in the basement. I realized they were not the people out to make a headline every hour, and they could tell me a lot of things; teach me a lot of things. I got a lot of drift on what are the issues, what are the longer-term things. If it was bugging somebody in the basement, that means it was tearing the heart out of somebody upstairs, or it would be. So it was great intel[ligence] and the personality of people who aren't on hourly deadlines is much different than those who are. I just happen to like those people anyway [inaudible] and they had good cookies, too. Good eats down there.

MK: Right. It continues.

JF: That was how I worked my relationships. To make sure I was current, I often offered little story ideas when I was walking around. I had little things I thought people might be interested in; found out what they were working on. Found out if they were mad at me or had a beef about something. Sometimes they'd say, "I'm mad at Mike about this and that." [I'd] go tell Mike, "You need to square your relationship with so-and-so, they're mad at you." It was a good thing to do.

One of the things I always did, if I had duty officer coming up, I'd find who was going to be on for the weekend. Each one had a different personality and I knew who I'd be working with, and how easy or hard it might be. So, John Palmer: nice guy, serious journalist. He's going to make you work on a weekend. Others, unnamed, their job was to do as little as

possible on the weekend. So you had a different kind of weekend. This is the relationship part of media relations.

MK: Thank you very much.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]