

Exit Interview of Benjamin J. Stein

Interviewee : Benjamin J. Stein, Staff Assistant –Speechwriting, Research & Messages
Interviewer : Susan Yowell
Date of Interview: October 18, 1974
Place of Interview: Old Executive Office Bldg. Mr. Stein's office

START OF CONVERSATION

SY: I might add to that, as I said these are really for the purposes of aiding archivists, who receive all these papers, and we're hoping to get draft transcripts to everyone at some time so that we can go over it and add anything or make any changes that are necessary. We're very slow at that, we have one person doing it two days a week, so you can imagine it may be some time, an indefinite time but we do feel we would like to do that and give people a chance to look over what they had to say, although we're not trying in any way go into any policy matters or in depth on anything which might be a continuing sensitive nature. When did you officially join the staff?

BS: Well, I officially joined the staff on March 17. I was detailed here starting November 11, and I actually started working here full time November 11, '73.

SY: What – did you come on detail knowing you would remain here –

BS: No, they told me if they liked me I would remain and if I liked them I would remain. I see you have one of those cheap Sony outfits not like the expensive one that Lyndon Johnson used to have.

SY: Actually this machine this model is the 400-B, it was – I'm told it was the one that was used in the Oval Office – you can imagine the jesting we got after the tape system came out and we continued to carry these around not even knowing it was the same model, we had nothing that to do with that taping system.

BS: Ok, so you say ok.

SY: Can you tell me anything about how you were recruited?

BS: Yes, I recruited myself in a sense I had been a big –

INTERRUPTION

SY: We were talking about how you came to the White House –

BS: Well, I've always been a big Nixon fan. I come from a family of Nixon fans and I had during the summer of '73 I had written an article which appeared in the New York Times about how I thought the Watergate Committee hearings were so unfair and they were so mean to the witnesses, especially to [John] Ehrlichman¹ and then I wrote another article about how the whole thing was a fraud and that Nixon hadn't done anything wrong, this was all trumped up issue by the news media and that had come to the attention of some people at the White House, especially Peter Flanigan², who was a friend of my father and mother, and whom I had met on a trip to Japan and he told me I should go talk to Dave Gergen³ about working as a speechwriter. So I called Dave Gergen and Dave Gergen never returns his calls. So I just called him over and over and over until I got him and we made a luncheon appointment and I came up Tuesday and had lunch with him and I impressed him with the depth of my commitment to Nixon and he said he would try and get me detailed over here. It took about four weeks before he could get his ass in gear enough to do it, but he did and on November 11, I began working here.

SY: Where had you been?

BS: Federal Trade Commission – had been a litigating lawyer and a lawyer by training.

SY: Did you come then to be a general speechwriter?

BS: Yes, I came to do whatever I could to be helpful, although they said that I might be helpful in the future if they had people with legal background doing some speech writing, I suppose they were anticipating some of the Watergate problems and also I have a fair background in economics and they said it would be helpful to have somebody who had economics background.

SY: Could you – speechwriting is somewhat self explanatory –

BS: Well, it isn't really because I never the whole time I was here wrote a full, fully completed formal speech that Nixon gave, never did that once.

SY: What type of writing –

BS: I did proclamations, and remarks – like if he would land at an airport somewhere and he wanted to give five or ten minutes of remarks, which would not be a formal speech but would just set forth a few key phrases. I wrote an awful lot of them and then when he would send up a legislative proposal, it would have a message, which it would summarize, a legislative proposal, like when he sent up the proposal for operation, or for Project Independence, he had a huge message that went up with it about thirty pages long and I wrote that in cooperation with people from the departments and agencies and it just took me a damn long, just took damn long time. The way they had it set up I was the most junior of the speechwriters and they assigned the speeches to the people on the basis of their seniority and so by the time they got around to assigning a speech for me, Nixon had pretty much stopped going out and they did finally give me one formal speech that he was going to

¹ Ehrlichman was Assistant to the President for Domestic Affairs

² Flanigan was Assistant to the President and General Counsel for the Council for International Economic Policy (CIEP)

³ Gergen was a Special Assistant to the President working in the Speechwriters' Office

do and then they decided not to go do it. It was about cable television. But in the meantime I wrote a lot of speeches for Ann Armstrong⁴, a couple for General [Alexander] Haig⁵, one or two for Vice President Ford – then Vice President Ford – but the most important things I ever worked on I think by far were Nixon's taxes – and Nixon's – and the Operation Candor. I was a very, the only, I was an important figure in those projects. The first one was the taxes. Shall I tell you about those?

SY: Sure.

BS: I was at home and I was called up about eleven o'clock one night by my boss Dave Gergen, who worked late into the night every night, and told to come down and not to tell anybody why I was coming down there and he wouldn't even tell me why I was supposed to come down there [yawn] (excuse me). When I got down here he took me into an office that nobody was using and said "Now don't let anybody into this office when you're in here and if anybody comes in here, cover up what you are working on" and he took and brought out a big box out of the safe and there in that box was Nixon's tax returns and he said "I want you to go through these tax returns and I want you to learn about them and understand them and write out a little statement explaining why Nixon paid his taxes legally, especially why the gift of these pre-presidential papers was legal, we need somebody who can understand it and then write about it." Well, I started to work on it and I was there, God, Jesus, I was there until about 6:00 AM working on it. I was just exhausted and nobody else was here and it was very lonely but it was exciting as hell seeing the tax returns and seeing all things he contributed to and so forth. I came to the conclusion by the way that there was no way in hell that he could justify his gift – that his lawyers had screwed it up unbelievably and that he was not going to get the deduction for that gift and I wrote a memo to Dave Gergen telling him that the next morning, he told me not to put such things in writing. And then I got involved, there were some lawyers from Philadelphia [Kenneth] Gemmill and [H.] Chapman Rose, who said they thought they could justify it, so I worked with them for a long time trying to figure out the rationale for it and [yawn] (excuse me) we tried to put out some statements explaining why it was alright but I always knew that they were going to get us on that and they did. Now I don't think – I think the President should have litigated that because I think he could have at least gotten it negotiated for less than the full amount but it was his decision if he wanted to pay the full amount they assessed him. Then the other important project – and that took a long time because after that first night I spent a lot of time reading about taxes and talking to people about taxes and it all had to be done very secretly, couldn't work on it during the day time, so I would often have nothing to do all day and then at night I would start working on it after everybody else had left because they didn't want me to nobody was supposed to know what I was working on nobody from around here because they didn't want any leaks about it.

SY: So the only people, you were the only person, you talked about it directly with Dave Gergen –

BS: No, I talked about it with Chapman Rose and Kenneth Gimmill and also with the President's accountant, Arthur Black, who was in and out at the time talking about and also Jonathan Rose who used to be the General Counsel CIEP⁶ had been drafted, to work on them. But like I wasn't allowed to talk about it to John or the secretaries and they kept asking me what I was working on

⁴ Armstrong was Counsellor to the President for Special Affairs and Women

⁵ Haig was an Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff, after the departure of H. R. Haldeman

⁶ Council for International Economic Policy

and I said “Secret,” and I wouldn’t dare to tell them. And then the next thing I worked on which was enormously more trouble, difficult even – not more difficult but more aggravating was the problem of the ITT. I was put in charge of drafting an ITT white paper and I worked with two lawyers on that: Cecil Emerson and Mike Sterlacci. And they were very difficult to work with, they were very suspicious of me for some reason, I think mainly because I had lots of contacts within the White House and they sorta, they always were thinking I was going over their heads whenever we had a disagreement and perhaps I was but it was just like pulling teeth to get them to any goddamn thing on it, so that took a long time and I learned some very interesting things about how the government runs from doing that and I learned that many people who think, of the press who thought I was being dishonest, people who were really very honest people, like especially my good friend Peter Flanigan, was just astoundingly honest and conscientious person, and people like [Charles] Colson⁷ are obviously just crooks of the first order.

SY: Would the files of these two major things you are talking about you worked on because of their legal nature would they be included in the files?

BS: They were in the files that I gave that skinny guy from the Archives office, his name I can't remember.

SY: Well, we had a whole crew of archivists coming down to help us go to the offices and pack the material and so forth.

BS: I can't remember –

SY: Well, I can't imagine who it was – we had about sixteen people helping us with that stuff. Did all of your files go together and if they came down and packed –

BS: I gave all the files except I had a sensitive ITT file because it said some things that had not been brought under the public yet and still has not been brought out and I turned that over to Mr.[James] St. Clair⁸ and I don't know what he did with it.

SY: Well, his files were boxed and Malcolm Howard handled this.

BS: Oh, I see – well, so he's got those alright.

SY: In taking other more routine cases where you worked on messages or proclamations, how were you given the assignments, was it a matter –

BS: Dave Gergen gave them to me.

SY: Was it a matter of assigning them according to subject categories of areas that you may have had more experience in –

BS: I think so, yes. He generally assigned, I think it was fair to say he assigned the most complicated things to me because he thought I had a good – he didn't think I was that good a writer – but he

⁷ Colson was a Special Counsel to the President who was convicted of obstruction of justice.

⁸ St. Clair was Special Counsel to the President working on Watergate related litigation

thought I was very good at grasping technical details of things and that's funny because as it happens I am leaving here to go to a very prestigious writing job and where they think I'm a great writer but he never thought I was that good a writer but I was good at getting out messages and things like that but not as good a writer

SY: What about the speeches you did for people other than the President were they also routed through Gergen – was that assigned through –

BS: Yes, again Armstrong would say to Gergen "I need a speech about so and so" and Gergen would frequently give it to me, often he would give it to John Coyne⁹ but between me and John Coyne we did a hell of a lot of speeches for Ann Armstrong.

SY: What were – other than the legal matters that you mentioned – what were the general subject areas that you did have assigned?

BS: Well, I did the pro – as I told you I did the Project Independence thing – that was a real bitch. I did the house – the New Housing messages, that was a terribly complicated project – let's see what other things did I do? I had some other economic things I can not remember, they are no longer in my files but pretty much I would have some economic things come up – if it was not a speech, the President's speech they would have somebody else do it but if I, like if they wanted some kind of message to accompany some piece of legislation that had to do with the economy. I'm trying to think, it's funny, I'm trying to think of an example but I can't. It must be in my files though. I remember I was constantly looking up what the GNP figures were and what the unemployment figures were, always seemed as if I was writing some message or speech or other.

SY: Did you ever request to be assigned to any particular speeches or –

BS: I did at first but then I stopped doing it. But then when things would get quiet I used to go to Gergen and say "I knew the situation was desperate about Watergate and I would like to help" and he would give a tremendous chuckle because nobody around here volunteered for anything. But I really felt very whole heartedly in favor of Nixon and wanted to help him out of his difficulties, so I used to go to him like a little boy scout volunteer, which is very antithetical to my normal to my normal personality but I felt extremely deeply about Nixon and still do.

SY: Did you ever work any with Ray Price¹⁰ or [Howard] Tex [Lezar]¹¹

BS: Yes I worked my last – during the last two weeks that Nixon was here I worked for Ray Price. Tex had already left and I was to take his place, even though Tex is younger than I am. Ray knew that we were going to have very rough times ahead – although he didn't know just how rough – and he wanted a lawyer to help him out. Well, the President wasn't doing many speeches so we were all just sitting around twiddling our thumbs. Dave asked me if I would move down there and help Ray Price for a couple of months. Well, of course, I saw this but by the end of any more a couple of months Nixon wasn't going to be President anymore and I told them I would and so I went down there and I helped ("Gosh, it brings a tear to me eye to think about it"). The last project I ever

⁹ Coyne was a Staff Assistant in the Research and Messages Office

¹⁰ Price was a Special Consultant to the President in the Speechwriters' Office

¹¹ Lezar was a Staff Assistant in the Research and Messages Office

worked on for Nixon was a rebuttal to Article I of the impeachment charges and I was the one who wrote the part about that we were going to send up to Congress saying that the charge that the President misused the CIA was the most ridiculous charge to – of all and the easiest to disprove. That was one of the last things I wrote while Nixon was President. But then Ray said that I didn't need to go forward with that, to hold off on that for a while and he said – he was working like a maniac and he wouldn't tell me what he was working on – he was a secretive son of a bitch, really secretive, I mean really secretive, and he wouldn't tell me what he was working on but I kept nagging and so he would finally say unlike the day before it became general knowledge that Nixon was going to resign – he said – "Write a speech which will turn the tide of public opinion" and I thought oh, my God this is my chance to be great man, I'm going to write a speech, and I wrote the speech and I was going to have Nixon saying, "I'm terribly sorry I've committed all these crimes and sins, and I'm terribly sorry but all I can say is that other people commit crimes too and I've done my best and I – and if you will forgive me it will show how great you are as a people and I'll feel I think I will feel forever chastised and it's not necessary to impeach me, but I have been punished enough and you can't imagine how much suffering, let me go forward to work with peace" and so forth. So I wrote that and Ray said Nixon would never give a speech in which he apologized. Then we learned I guess it was a Wednesday Nixon was going to resign. And Ray told me that he had just given me that assignment to divert me and distract me keep me out of his hair while he was working on the resignation speech, which was a pretty mean thing to do. That's about the meanest thing anybody here ever did to me.

SY: It would be rather difficult. When you were working on a speech in a particular subject area you mentioned you did a couple things on the economy or on – did you work with the substantive people in Domestic Council?

BS: Sure – the Domestic Council, I worked with my father on the Council of Economic Advisers or for the Secretary – Treasury, Secretary of HEW, Secretary of HUD, people from OMB, they were the best people of all, they always have the answers, without them the government would fall apart they're terrific.

SY: Did you use the research staff that is connected with the speech writing unit?

BS: Yes, but not for anything complicated. Like if I wanted a statistic I would ask them for it but if I wanted a concept explained I would get that myself.

SY: Were you pretty much given your own freedom on whom you would contact about a particular speech –

BS: Yes.

SY: Or did they on occasion when a team was already.

BS: They would say talk to – they would say you got to clear it with so and so and so but like they would have a long list of about fifteen people – just about everything – they'd have – Secretary of the Treasury, Secretary of HUD, Secretary of HEW, Office of Management and Budget, Bill

Timmons,¹² Frank Zarb,¹³ Secretary of Commerce, there was a regular list, General Haig, [Ronald] Ziegler,¹⁴ there was a regular list of people who you would always contact.

SY: Did you usually work directly with the Secretary or was there someone –

BS: Yes, no it was the secretary; they almost all knew me anyway. Those were great days.

SY: Well, I think – are all of your speeches and messages and the background material that you gathered together to work on on a particular speech or messages is all of that contained in your files?

BS: Yes, all the stuff I gave them, yeh.

SY: Did you receive any kind of direct feedback on the speeches that you did?

BS: Yeh, what we would do – I would do a draft and then I would give it to Dave Gergen and he would revise it usually fairly substantially although not always but usually fairly substantially, he would then circulate it to say these fifteen people and get their comments on it and they would be told to call me back and give me their comments and it was my job to harmonize all of these comments into one document and there was often quite a bit of conflict between OMB and the department that was most directly affected, and especially on the fuel thing on the energy crisis there was a lot of conflict between Interior OMB, FEO¹⁵, and the Treasury and I would have to reconcile all those views because they would have – depending on the way a speech was phrased it would be more or less power for their agency or department so they would fight like all night long. When we had these things we used to start our meetings on these messages at midnight and it would just be whoever could stay up latest. I would be like, I would come back and go to sleep and wait while they argued about it for a while. And often they would say we just can't resolve it we are just going to have to go talk to General Haig about it.

SY: Did you work on any – you mentioned messages, of course, but did you work on any of the statements – fact sheets and materials that were prepared to explain the Administration policy?

BS: Oh, yes – traditionally I would work with on the fact sheets too, when I worked on a message I also worked on the fact sheets.

SY: And what was the eventual disposition of these fact sheets?

BS: They would be handed out in the press room.

SY: Okay, what about the press releases you were talking about?

BS: Yeah there would be a message and then there would be a fact sheet summarizing the message

¹² Timmons was Assistant to the President for Legislative Affairs

¹³ Zarb was Associate Director of the Office of Management and Budget

¹⁴ Ziegler was Assistant to the President and Press Secretary

¹⁵ Federal Energy Office

SY: Did you ever work with Ken Clawson's office¹⁶ in preparing a type of fact sheet which would –

BS: We worked with him on preparing statements about the Watergate. The day they released the transcripts – that was on a Monday – the Sunday before that they called us all in and said "We are going to release the transcripts, we're going to put Watergate behind us, the transcripts are going to conclusively prove that Nixon was innocent." I don't know if they fooled themselves, they didn't fool me and they didn't fool Dave Gergen. And we wrote some speeches, some facts, some statements to be put out explaining the transcripts, explaining how they proved the President was innocent. Ha. Ha.

SY: Did you ever do any speaking on behalf of the Administration?

BS: Yes, I did – quite a bit.

SY: And was that done in coordination with the Speakers Bureau?

BS: With Pam Powell¹⁷, I spoke to (I can't remember their names, its funny I spoke to them more) she told me I spoke to them more than body else had ever spoken to them, I spoke to them about six times within a couple of months.

SY: Spoke to whom?

BS: A group, groups of high school students who would be visiting Washington.

SY: And was that speech done in the White House theatre to groups coming into the White House?

BS: No, one, I only spoke to one group in the White House theatre. The others were at various hotels, the Sheraton Park. I think another one might have been at the Mayflower. I think another one was at the Capitol Hill Club. I can't even remember where they all were. Pam Powell would know the name of the group. I can't remember what it was.

SY: Would a record of all your speaking be in your files?

BS: No, no – no record of that.

SY: Well, the speeches that you gave?

BS: I just wrote them and made them from notes, they are all the same.

SY: What was that general –

¹⁶ Clawson was Communications Director to the President

¹⁷ Powell was a Staff Assistant in the Office of Ann Armstrong

BS: Oh, it was that Nixon was innocent, that he was being hounded by a Democratic liberal press establishment, that his accomplishments were sensational and that he was a strong leader.

SY: It was more of a political type –

BS: Oh, yeah, they're all political speeches.

SY: Did you do any other – than for the groups that Pam Powell arranged?

BS: I did one for a group of Israeli high school students that was arranged by Len Garment¹⁸ and that was in the White House theatre. That was like the week after Nixon resigned. I could barely speak I was so choked up. It was very interesting though, it was a group of Israelis and their American hosts, they were staying with various American families and the Americans would sorta hiss every time I mentioned Nixon and the Israelis would all sorta cheer every time I mentioned Nixon, the Israelis just loved Nixon.

SY: Were there any other projects you worked on, other than writing that were just as a result of your being here, were you on any task forces or –

BS: Well, I was originally on a, I was originally on a task force for Operation Candor that was supposed to be much broader than ITT, it was supposed to cover Jimmy Hoffa, supposed to cover the wire taps. We originally were going to put out ten white papers. For some reason they decided not to, I think they should have but they decided not to, so I was on that Task Force for a while and I was working with the lawyers, I spent a long time working with the lawyers, Jack McCahill¹⁹, Mike Sterlacci, that idiotic Cecil Emerson, various people.

SY: Would there be any documentation of your work in any of these other files?

BS: No, they are the files.

SY: And they would be just the ones you mentioned?

BS: Yeah.

SY: Did you attend any regular meetings?

BS: No, I wasn't a member of the Watergate Defense Task Force. We used to have regular staff meetings here that I used to go to, but –

SY: Dave Gergen's staff?

BS: Yeah, I still have a note interestingly enough (if you will allow me to move your microphone) I still have a note here which I will always treasure. This is my notes from when I went to that staff meeting that Haig called, the Monday before Nixon resigned. I have notes of that meeting, I just have these little bits notes. He walked in and said "I am a harbinger of horror, I have a tough task

¹⁸ Garment was Assistant to the President and Acting Counsel to the President

¹⁹ McCahill was a Staff Assistant working on Watergate litigation

of bringing you some bad news. Nixon has been reviewing the tapes, all the tapes except one are consistent with previous explanations, so sufficient gravity to warrant a brief” –

SY: Were there any magazine or newspaper articles that published articles about what you were assigned to any of the areas specifically about you that are of a particular note –

BS: No, I have had, I had people occasionally call me and ask me what I was working on and asked if they could interview me now and I always said “no” because I didn't want, I thought it might be embarrassing having two members of the family working at the White House at once and so I never talked to anybody about myself, I tried to keep myself inconspicuous as possible. That was more difficult than you might think because Carl Bernstein's parents were my parents next door neighbors, so they knew right away and Carl was always calling me and asking me for various hot tips but I would never give him any.

SY: As I said we are not going into much depth on these interviews but we would like to try and pin down some of those areas that people think they might like to talk about in more depth in an oral history project, if there is one.

BS: Well, if you ever have one I would like to talk about Julie's reaction about this, because I'm very close friends with Julie and I used to talk to her just about every day, in fact she is out in California today but if she weren't I'd probably be talking to her today, I usually talk to her about this time every afternoon.

SY: Did you ever do – that brings up a question too, did you ever do any speech writing or any work for the other members of the family?

BS: No, she had a very good speech writer – Patty Matson.²⁰

INTERRUPTION

SY: Where are you going when you leave the staff?

BS: I'm going to the Wall Street Journal in New York.

SY: Do you have a permanent mailing address?

BS: Do you want me to give it to you?

SY: Yeah.

²⁰ Matson was Assistant to the Press Secretary for Mrs. Nixon

BS: The Wall Street, no, Ben Stein, Editorial Page, The Wall Street Journal, 22 Cortland Street, New York City, New York 10007.

SY: And, also it's very useful to know sometimes who your secretary was that would be most familiar with your files that you turned over.

BS: Oh, Christ, they never did any goddamn filing, I did it all myself, they were very good filers, er typists, but they never did any filing.

SY: Okay, well then I guess this –

BS: They were good secretaries and they are good girls, but they never did any filing, I had just gotten into the habit when I was with the FTC of doing my own filing.

SY: So if there were any questions about your filing –

BS: They wouldn't know a damn thing about it.

SY: We would have to come to you. Well, that's about all we're trying to cover on these and hopefully they will get back sometime with a more –

BS: In ten years to come –

SY: more in depth interview and thank you

BS: Well, you've been very kind.

END OF CONVERSATION