

White House Interview Program

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INTERVIEWEE: LEON PANETTA

INTERVIEWER: Martha Kumar

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MK: There seem to be certain things that work, no matter whether they're Democrats or Republicans. They come in differently, but there are different things that will work.

LP: And they may have a different mindset on how they put certain things, but the basics are pretty similar.

MK: In coming in to an administration after it's been in operation, what kinds of opportunities do you have to really bring about change? You have a process, people in place. What can you do about them to change them?

LP: You're talking about a new administration or an administration—?

MK: Say, when you came in as Chief of Staff, you already had a process and people in place.

LP: Something in place.

MK: What do you do about that? How can you make changes in it, and what kinds of agreements do you have to have from the President in order to make those?

LP: I think it's absolutely essential in a job like Chief of Staff [that] you have to have the full support and confidence of the president, even beyond the respect and confidence of the First Lady and the Vice President, because you need to have the ability to make some very tough decisions and some crucial decisions. If you're worried that every step you take you're going to be undercut by those above you, because they don't trust your judgment, then you're in trouble. The first and foremost quality that is essential is trust. You've got to have their trust. To some extent, you have to build that trust because you're just going into a job, you have to prove yourself. But, ultimately, if you have that trust and you develop that trust, you can do the job.

So, number one, you need to have—when I went in as Chief of Staff, I went in and said to the President: "I have to have your full support, because there are some decisions that have to be made, and I need to make sure that I have your full support and trust in that process." I said the same thing to the First Lady, as well as the Vice President. Secondly—my situation may have been a little bit different because there was very little organization that was in place, other than job descriptions for people that were on the staff. There was really no chain of command. There was no organizational chart that you could point to. As a matter of fact, I asked the question about getting an organizational chart and there was none to be found. So, first and foremost, was the development of kind of a basic organizational chart. It's the kind of thing I used to do in the Army in developing a chain of command. The President is up here; Chief of Staff. How do I want to organize under the Chief of Staff. With deputies and then under them who should have responsibility. So, develop a real organizational chart as to who is responsible to who, and who supervises who, and to organize those responsibilities.

The second requirement was developing an organization chart, kind of basic organization chart that made sense with regard to responsibilities and personnel that were there. Thirdly, my view was that, before I kind of went in—I guess people can approach this differently. One approach is to just totally clean house and kick everybody the hell out and start over. My view is that, number one, that wasn't necessary. There were some very good people and they had good talents that were there. What I wanted to do, what I had to do because—you can imagine the position of chief of staff is a position in which everybody will test your authority. They'll test whether or not you've got what it takes to be chief of staff in a place where people on a political staff are always accustomed to try to see if they can jockey for position to try to gain favor with the president in one way or another. To a large extent, the knives are out, so it's very important to try to begin to build at least some trust with those that serve on the staff. As I said, one approach is to just totally clean house. I thought that was, one, unnecessary; two, there were very good people there; and, thirdly, I thought it created tremendous morale problems when I was trying to then rebuild it.

So I took the second approach which was basically to transition. In other words, to work with the staff, work with the people that are there, see what their talents are, see what their strengths are, see what their weaknesses are. Then, after a two- to three-month period to be able to kind of analyze who has it, and who doesn't, and how that fits. So I took kind of a transitional approach to developing that kind of approach.

[Interruption]

MK: Somebody who was at a lower level, not in the White House when you were there, but in a Republican administration—who was there actually a long time—was saying that he did the transitional thing, too. And he said the reason why, for him, was the White House is a no-fail place; that if you have a big failure right off, it can affect how you work the rest of the time. So what you want to do is really scope out the lay of the land. He felt that, as an organization, it was very, very different. He was pointing to [Sam] Skinner's case—this goes back to having not only the trust of the president but an awareness of the president—of what the resonance of his actions are. And right at the beginning, that Skinner said he was going to make some changes, and one of them he was going to make was David Demarest, who was the communications director. At that point, the President was going to Japan and Demarest was on the plane. So he [Demarest] walked up to the President and said, "I hear that I'm slated for the ax, and is that true?" "No, you can have your job." So this guy was saying he was dead right there, for his tenure.

LP: That's right. Exactly.

MK: In his case, probably the President didn't think about what the implications of that were. What kind of agreement did you have say with [Bill] Clinton? What kind of discussions did you have about the ways in which trust is demonstrated, what authority you had to hire, fire, and not get undercut?

LP: That's such a very basic question. How do you develop trust in that position?

MK: In a sense, you have to have it coming in but you were—

LP: To a large extent, the great advantage that I had was my experience in Washington, experience on the Hill, and even the experience I had as director of the Office of Management and Budget. So, as a consequence, the President had come to respect my

decisions on the budget and what I was able to do there, almost I think to the point where I had his total trust. There was almost nothing I recommended to him that he didn't go along with, and just trusted in my judgment. It was working, and he knew that I wasn't going to recommend something to him that was bad policy.

So, having built that, to then transition that into the larger job of chief of staff, I think what helped me is the fact that there were many issues that involved the budget, that involved relations with the Congress, that the chief of staff is involved with. So, the ability to work with those issues, and continue to develop his trust there, gave me some room on the personnel side, because he was actually very anxious to—a lot of presidents fall into this mold. They are people who basically go out and campaign and want to be liked by everybody. There are very few people—there are some in history—

MK: It looks like it's one hundred per cent so far, from people I've talked to. All of them talk about: they don't want to fire anybody.

LP: Their natural instinct, their natural passion, both from the politics as well as wanting to be liked, is that they don't want to be the bad person. On the other hand, they want things to get done, they want things to be reorganized, and they want to have the decisions made. But, on the other hand, they don't necessarily want to carry the blood on their hands in terms of what has to be done. And the President was no different. The President would often say to me, "We really ought to change that...", or, "We ought to wipe that person out...", or, "We ought to fire that person." I'd say to him, "Do you want me to fire that person? Do you want me to fire him today?" He would say, "You have to make the judgment." So I'd say, "Okay, let me work it through, and you can make the judgment as to what we should or shouldn't do." So, it gave me the ability on the personnel side to kind of work through it, although he oftentimes—if there was somebody he was frustrated with because of a problem or what have you—he'd want to get rid of that person that day. But that was just him saying that. It was not like it was real. So I think the way I ultimately built that trust was using my experience on what were very important issues, that went to the heart of what his administration was all about, and being very helpful on that front. And then, at the same time, making sure that I was able to begin to look at personnel, evaluate personnel, and develop the kind of organization chart that I thought would make sense, and ultimately presented to the President.

The other thing, too, that I should tell you is that it may be unique to this White House, although I think if there's anything that is probably as common a trend in the White House as presidents who don't want to offend people, it's that they have very tough First Ladies, who have been through a lot of the battles. And just by the nature of what they've gone through, are very strong individuals. And that was no different here. So one of the things I did was, on a weekly basis, I developed a briefing session with her to let her know what was happening—both in terms of issues, as well as personnel positions.

MK: Did you talk to her directly?

LP: Yes, and set up that meeting on a regular basis. Then eventually, however, what happened was that—as she herself gained trust in my ability and my relationship with the President—eventually those meetings kind of faded away. But for at least the first six or eight months, I was doing that, and then they kind of faded away. So that was one. That's another important key. Obviously that person is crucial to whether you develop trust up here.

The other thing with the Vice President, that's a little bit different, again, is that I had a personal relationship with him that went back to 1976, when we were both elected to Congress at the same time. And it was much more of a personal relationship than I ever had with the President. As a matter of fact, he's one of the ones who recommended me for chief of staff. So, because of that relationship, there was no situation in which there was kind of an undercutting of my role by the vice president. So that helped as well. So that combination of things, ultimately, plus—I think I have to probably say in all honesty that, because of the way the place was operating—it had no place to go but up.

MK: And that certainly gives you a lot of credit to work with, too, because they've seen what doesn't work; and what they were a part of didn't work.

LP: I guess the best way to say it is: I am a control freak in the sense of wanting to make sure as Chief of Staff that I had my finger on everything that was taking place. So I wanted to funnel all of the issues and decision-making that ultimately had to go to the president through the chief of staff's operation. That helped a great deal because it came in kind of a vacuum, in which staff people and others weren't getting decisions on issues, unless they had to take it to the president. And there are a lot of decisions, frankly, that you could make that don't necessarily have to go to the president. One of the things you have to have in a staff operation [is enable] people [to] make decisions so they keep the place going. So my role was to make decisions. If they were important decisions, I would always brief the President on what was being done, so he knew. But having those decisions made whether it's scheduling, whether it's this, whether it's that, keeps that place running. People then know where they're headed. If there's indecision, then that can impact on what ultimately the president does or doesn't do.

MK: When you were structuring the organization, what kinds of decisions—did you have categories of decisions, that could be made by people themselves?

LP: Yes.

MK: Say, for example, in management and administration, you brought in Jody Tortkelson who you knew over a long period of time, and had confidence in, and you could know that's she's going to be able to do a lot of things there.

LP: Obviously, one of the big roles is to prioritize and to determine what are those issues and decisions that go to the president and the vice president for decision-making, and what are the ones that you can basically make on your own? You can get clearance from the president, but you don't have to go through a full-fledged briefing, and go through the time it takes to do that.

How do you prioritize those kinds of decisions? One of the things that I think that helped me is that what I developed was a kind of two-pronged staff operation. In the morning at seven-thirty, I would do a staff meeting with what I would call the upper echelon staff, national security adviser, national economic council director, the press secretary, the vice president's chief of staff, the first lady's chief of staff, the OMB [Office of Management and Budget] director, the head of the economic council. There were others.

MK: Was communications in there?

LP: Communications was in there. George Stephanopoulos, who was an assistant to the President, and working under the chief of staff job, but kind of knew the press operation—that kind of thing.

MK: Plus your own deputies.

LP: That's right, plus my deputies. My two deputies were there. And at that meeting, you kind of ran through a situation where you had reports—the first thing was you had a sense.... It goes back to your comment about where Podesta was, but probably got some of that from just the realities of that place. The first thing was to kind of ask [Mike] McCurry and George Stephanopoulos what's playing in the news that day, what's happening that day, what do they think are the big issues? Then I got a foreign policy report from the national security adviser, and got a sense of what the hot spots were. Then my legislative person in the White House talked about what was happening with the Congress, what's happening in the House, what's happening in the Senate, what's happening with regard to particular issues that are up there. In the course of that discussion, you can make decisions about: "We've got a key issue up there, are you talking with the leadership, are you talking with these key members of Congress - do this, do that..."; "...Maybe we have to have a meeting after this to talk about...", a particular issue.

But you're making decisions as you go through it, as to what are the areas where there are potential crises that you want to deal with, and potential strategies that have to be laid out. We talked about economic policy after that, and then usually had—by the way, even before that, usually at the top—I went through the President's schedule for that day, as to what we were looking at for the President's schedule. Again, some decisions might have to be made regarding the schedule as to these different places.

MK: For example, putting in "talking to the pool" [of reporters] if [the president] was doing something in the Oval Office and you needed a statement.

LP: Yes. For example, something happens. What's the best place to stage that for the President, the Rose Garden? Is it the Press Room? Is it to wait until the press goes in on an event and expect the question to be asked there? Those kinds of decisions don't have to go to the President of the United States. They're staging issues that you can make decisions on. And, again—I'll just kind of complete this. So I would do that kind of staff meeting, and you had a pretty good sense then, of what that day was going to look like—both from the President's perspective, as well as the White House overall: what would be the key issues that you had to work with?

At eight-fifteen, eight-thirty, I had a broader staff meeting, in which I brought the larger White House staff into play. That's the head of the environmental council, head of the science office, drug council, et cetera, all the other offices that are in the White House. And I went through kind of the same schedule, but also got input from them as to what—sometimes what you don't get in that first meeting, you get in the second meeting—as to things that are taking place that you have to pay attention to. But it also would give me a chance, then, to let the larger staff know what's happening with the president: what are the major issues?, so they were informed, they didn't feel like they were out of the loop as far as the process was concerned. Which is important. The presidential assistants want to feel like people are at least letting them know what the hell is going on in the White House.

MK: It's not a meeting that policy is hammered at.

LP: Yes. It isn't the same thing as the first meeting, but sometimes a policy issue can suddenly come up that wasn't covered in the first meeting, and suddenly you have to say: "Wait a minute, that's something new we have to deal with!"

Then what I would do is: take those first two meetings and, from that I would then go to the President. I was usually the first person to meet with the President in the morning—at nine-fifteen or nine-thirty, when he came over to the Oval Office. Or, sometimes I would go over to the White House and brief the President. I had usually a little yellow legal sheet that had all of my notes on it, and I would go through that with him. I would just hit the highlights of what was going to be taking place, or: "I've made some decisions, something is happening on the Hill...", and tell him what we were doing on the Hill. So that he was pretty well informed. Of course, he had things on his mind from reading the paper or discussions he had had, that he would share with me. So, from that kind of staff operation, it gave me the ability then to prioritize: "What are the decisions that I can make?"

Just to give you an example, clearly, national security issues where there were decisions related to what was going to happen in Bosnia? what was going to happen in Iraq? what was going to happen in the Middle East? Those are, clearly, issues that would go to the President. What I would do is work with the national security adviser and basically set up the briefing so they could make their presentation to the President. If we had a policy issue—like on healthcare or a major education issue in which we were going to make an announcement on education—then I would usually bring that issue to the President. And, because of the nature of this president, usually even on scheduling issues, you'd go in with a schedule. You'd present a proposed schedule to the president, but you would let him obviously comment on that as well.

So you began to have a pretty good—and I felt comfortable enough that if something happened where I thought this was something I have to immediately bring to his attention—then I would just go down to the Oval Office and walk in and tell him that. But, again, what I wanted to do was to make sure—whether it was an international crisis, whether it was a domestic crisis, whether it was a crisis involving some scandal or something that that was kind of flowing through the chief of staff's operation. So I had a finger at least on what were the main things that the President ultimately had to be aware of, or informed of.

MK: When a decision [was going to be made] and you knew it was going to be his decision, what structure did you put in place for information that was to go in to him, to make decisions? Did you have to whittle things down to alternatives that were sharp?

LP: Yes. One of the things that happened—again, it was kind of—before I got there what happened is that there would be briefings with the president, and sometimes there'd be a couple dozen people in the room. It would just go on and on and on.

MK: I remember seeing a picture in *National Journal* during that first year, where he was working on a speech, and there were thirteen people that were clustered around the desk.

LP: Part of it is his style. He loves to have people doing that, but it also creates chaos. So what I would do is—the other thing I would do as Chief of Staff is say who would go into the Oval Office for purposes of a briefing, so there would not be a "hundred people" in the room. So I would say, if it were an education issue, we want the Secretary of Education, we want the key staff person from the White House dealing with education issues. You wanted to

have myself and perhaps somebody who was looking at the PR [public relations] aspect of it. Maybe if it involved budget or spending, somebody from OMB or somebody on the economic side.

Anyway, you made a determination: who are the key people who need to be [in there]? What I would normally do, on those kinds of important briefings, is: I would meet in my office and have them go through the briefing. “What are the issues here? What are the options?” Sometimes the options had not been developed and what you would do is you would try to sharpen it to basically say, “One way the President could go is this, another way is to do nothing, and another way is to do this...,” whatever it is.

So, you’ve got three or four options here. Sharpen those options, sharpen those decisions so that when you go in and make the briefing to the President, you can say, “Mr. President, as a result of that, you can go these three ways...” You can make a recommendation, but at least give him all the options so that it was crisp and it was clear. Sometimes, the President himself would make another option or he would try to mesh different issues. But that’s up to him. But in the very least, the presentation has to be—you’re talking obviously about an office that is consumed by all kinds of things, and you have to keep the place running. These aren’t just bullshit sessions. You’ve got to sit down, you’ve got to speak to what the issues are that confront the President. What are the options? What are the politics of it? What are the problems? What are you going to face? And then we get to decisions. I would make a recommendation. I would say, “I think your course is this...,” and the President ultimately makes the final decision.

I kind of developed that process. We would do that, usually, in the late afternoons. We’d set aside time on his schedule.

MK: How long would it take for an issue, like an education policy, that may be something you were thinking about sending up to the Hill as a piece of legislation? How long would you try setting aside?

LP: How long would it take?

MK: Yes.

LP: Well, it’s an interesting question, in the sense that it happens differently, depending on what inspired the initial idea. By that, I mean this: let’s assume that on the schedule, he’s going before a convention with a speech, and one of the thoughts is that it would be great at that speech to be able to announce a new initiative in this area. So, to some extent, then, the date of that speech tells you how you have to pull the process together. For example, he was speaking at Princeton I think—.

MK: The Hope scholarships.

LP: That’s right. To some extent that developed in some campaign discussions, about different issues that would be attractive to go at. Then the decision was: “We ought to try to do these scholarships.” That’s good. It would be nice to announce them at Princeton, because we’re giving a speech there. What you then have to do—it’s one of the challenges. It’s tough enough in the Chief of Staff’s job to take the regular process and the regular pressures that are involved, and make it work. When you’re in the middle of a campaign, it becomes even tougher, because you have campaign types that are trying to push their own ideas. So I took the approach and I was pretty tough about this with the President, which is: regardless of

whether it's a campaign idea, or whether it's an idea that comes out of the administration, or an agency or department, that it has to be scrubbed the same way so that we know that numbers, what it costs, what's going to happen, are defensible, and we don't blow up by just throwing an idea out there.

So, on the Hope scholarships, the idea developed in some campaign sessions. He said, "Okay, I want the idea fully scrubbed...", and assigned it to a White House person to kind of oversee it but run it by Education, run it by OMB, do all the work that has to be done. They then brought the issues to me in a meeting in the Chief of Staff's job. I looked at the numbers, looked at the options. There were about three options that ranged from totally free education; to trying to provide some money; who do you provide it to, what do you focus on, et cetera. We then took those issues, brought them to the President, went over it with him. He made the decision, and we then packaged it and had it ready for the speech.

MK: How much time elapsed?

LP: I think, on that one, it was probably about the two-month period.

MK: Would that be Bruce Reed?

LP: Gene Sperling and Bruce Reed were both working that together. So that's an example.

Usually on foreign policy issues, it could be much more critical. Particularly if it involves the use of force, you then have to move it on a crisis basis. So that becomes kind of a full priority at your National Security Council meeting, coming up with their recommendations. To some extent, that process was pretty much in place with Tony Lake. That is a process that's there; that is designed to bring a clear briefing to the President; that provides some options. So I followed it as a member of the National Security Council, and made sure that it was being structured; but these were the people with the expertise, and to make their recommendations. So that kind of followed in its own track, with regard to national security.

MK: Is that a track that is set, that is fairly permanent, that seems to go from one administration to another?

LP: I suspect. With the strength that is now built around national security director, that person becomes very important to coordinating Defense, State, the other key agencies. So that is almost one element of coordination that does take place. Then they all have their opportunity, obviously, to make their views known to the President in the context of a briefing. But what your hope is, is that you can try to build consensus among that group before it gets to the President, so you don't have conflict.

MK: Is that something, as a chief, you can do? The NSC [National Security Council] really seems to be an area that has been very difficult for chiefs to get hold of.

LP: Yes. Some chiefs stay away from it. Again, because I felt it was important to—again, not based on foreign policy experience, but based on—just if I'm going to be Chief of Staff, I'm going to be dealing with the President and—I want to know what's going on. So what I did was make a point of being in the national security meetings. Tony Lake was great, in the sense that Lake would come to me and say, "I've got to meet with the President on this issue and this is what the issue is about." I would go with him, and be there when he'd brief the President. So I had a very good relationship with him. I think I had probably a similar

situation with Sandy [Berger]. Some might not be willing to be that cooperative with the chief of staff.

MK: Sometimes, I guess what happens is the president's relationship is a separate kind of relationship, in a way. If you look at the [Ronald] Reagan administration—.

LP: I'm sure there are two—you can have almost two structures. Again, I wanted to do this and have even national security issues. It's not say—again, I think Tony and I developed a pretty good relationship, although you always worry. You say, "Who am I to try to interfere with national security issues that are important to the President?" But, at the same time, I think it was because, again, of my experience on the Hill and the kind of political experience that I had. I think it was helpful to be a part of it, only because you could say, "These are the political consequences, these are the people you have to touch base with on the Hill," and the President would rely on that kind of advice. So I could always present a political side to the national security issues. But, on the substance of it, Tony would pretty much have a straight shot. I would be there just to make sure I knew what was going on. So we kind of developed that kind of relationship.

My sense would be, in past White Houses, that national security adviser is almost comparable to the chief of staff in the sense of access directly to the president without having to go through that.

MK: Right.

LP: And that can vary. Again, because of that I wanted to be able to know what was going to the President, everything that was going to the President. I wanted to have a role in it.

MK: Because that certainly has been the source of some mischief.

LP: Yes. It can be. You could suddenly find out about something that—the other thing too, which probably—. I don't know if you'd ever find this in a book any place, because it's not one of those things that you'd kind of immediately think of. But Tony was not interested in doing Sunday [TV talk] shows. Secretary of Defense, State, they just did not do a lot of the Sunday shows. Well, I did a lot of the Sunday shows. I would get asked foreign policy questions. So they briefed me. They'd come in and brief me. Because of that, it was also important that in no way should I be out of the loop when it came to those kinds of issues because, again, you're obviously one of the spokesmen for the White House and for the Administration.

MK: In doing Sunday programs, what are the advantages of doing it, and what are the disadvantages?

LP: The advantage is that when you are viewed as one of the key spokesmen for the administration policy, that that gives you greater leverage when you're dealing with both the Hill as well as your own staff. If you do it right, if you do it well.

MK: Is there a risk by being identified with a particular position that it becomes difficult for you to negotiate with people? That you're seen as a partisan, in a sense of a position rather than a process?

LP: Well, it depends on how you handle it. Obviously if you're very partisan in attacking the other side, you could undercut your ability to even communicate with the other side. If you

kind of respect other people's positions and you can do it in a way that's diplomatic, then it can help you in terms of dealing with the other side, because you could actually say: "This is where I think the differences are. Not to say that they can't be dealt with, but these are the differences, these are the issues." I think, number one, it does give you greater authority to deal both with your own staff as well as with others. Secondly, it almost requires that nothing out there takes place without your knowing it, because you're the person who is going to be on the spot that Sunday. That's where you're going to be asked that question. So even somebody who might try to protect their own little issue, to try to get it out on their own timetable, knows that if they don't let me know what's going on and I get blind-sided by a question on it, I'm going to take it out on them.

MK: Would it also work that bad news is more likely to surface within the staff—

LP: That's right.

MK: —because, for the same reason, they don't want you to get caught?

LP: The whole thing on the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] files, somebody from the counsel's office came in and said—this was on a Saturday I think. It was right before a Sunday show. It was "Meet the Press." They came in and said there's this file problem, finding these files..., and blah, blah, blah. I said: "You immediately have to tell me what's happening here?" "Why did it take place?" And, "I need to know, by late afternoon, what's the story?" They came in and said it clearly was just a screw-up, and nobody was kind of looking over files. As we now know, it's been confirmed. I went on "Meet the Press" and the first question out of the box from Tim Russert, I think, was: "What about these files?" And I apologized. I said, "I'm sorry, it shouldn't have happened." I apologized to the people involved. But it was not intentional; it was a screwup. It was the right thing to do, but I probably would not have found [out] about that if I'm just Chief of Staff and not going on a show, and doing that kind of stuff. It might have been a while before somebody had the guts to come and tell me that kind of screw-up had happened.

MK: In doing the shows, sort of what is the pattern of what happens afterwards? Say you do "Face the Nation" at ten-thirty. Well, it airs at ten-thirty. Is it actually filmed at ten-thirty? Or "Meet the Press."

LP: "Meet the Press" is one where you film it earlier, about nine o'clock, but it doesn't show until usually about twelve or twelve-thirty. "Face the Nation," I think, used to sometimes go on live and the same thing with "This Week," the Brinkley show. I can tell you, for purposes of sleeping on Sunday morning, it was much easier to do "Face the Nation" and "This Week" than to do "Meet the Press." You had to get up pretty early.

MK: Did you choose them for particular reasons, or is it just rotating?

LP: It's probably an unwritten requirement: that you rotate from show to show, so you don't pick and choose between the different Sunday shows.

MK: What would you expect afterwards? For example, there's a piece of legislation you have up on the Hill and there's jockeying back and forth, so you go on and talk about it. Say, maybe, education, or the Hope scholarships, or whatever. What do you expect to happen next and how? In a way you're communicating through the media. Does the answer come back through the media as well?

LP: It can.

MK: Say, in Russert, you might have somebody that's there at the same time.

LP: But if you've got Republicans that are coming on after you, or somebody on the other side of the issue, you can get feedback pretty quickly as to what the reaction is. On the other hand, oftentimes, it depended. If you were in the written press on Monday morning, the *Post* or the *Times* with whatever you said, then generally you might get feedback later in the day on that kind of thing.

MK: Would people call from the Hill?

LP: Yes. They'd say: they're either with you, or, "Why is the administration taking that position?" because it wasn't Leon Panetta telling what I think. It was usually reflective of the administration's position.

MK: So, generally, when you went on, it was to move something.

LP: Generally, if you went on, there was something that was kind of the centerpiece of the attention and you wanted to make sure that you developed a common-sense position for the Administration.

MK: What kinds of other communications things did you do?

LP: You met with press in the Roosevelt Room, to brief them on issues. For example, if we were putting out a budget, or putting out a major issue, either economic issue or major domestic issue, and you wanted to make sure that the press would give it the kind of emphasis that we wanted, you would do briefings. Sometimes, it was a briefing in the Roosevelt Room. Sometimes I was part of a briefing in the press room. Then, sometimes, I would do a one-on-one briefing with a reporter in the Chief of Staff's office. And it varied depending on what the issue was. I didn't do that for everything.

MK: Did you do any regular meetings, say, with the news magazines?

LP: Yes. We would try every few weeks to have a session where the major magazines, *Time*, *Newsweek*, et cetera, or we'd do the networks, the network reporters.

MK: Did you do tongs?

LP: Yes.

MK: How often would you do them? Just depending on an issue?

LP: Yes. Sometimes it could be as much as once a week, depending on if it's a busy period, sometimes once every two weeks or three weeks. But we had regular tongs that came in.

MK: It seems being down in the basement there were some tongs that were used more than others.

LP: Sure. That's probably true.

MK: In dealing with legislation, how much of your time was taken up in dealing with people on the Hill?

LP: More than probably other chiefs of staff. I don't have much of a historical context. I would deal with some chiefs of staff when I was on the Hill.

MK: On the Hill, how many of them did you deal with regularly? Who were the people that you would see?

LP: The ones I dealt with were Jim Baker, because of budget issues. I dealt with John Sununu, because he was involved—we had so-called “budget summits” during that time, so I probably had more contact with chiefs of staff than others, by virtue of that. Howard Baker. But I think, because they were White Houses that were in the other party, you don't have as much contact. If I were—as a Chief of Staff in the White House with some Democratic congresses, you get a lot more contact from your own party, particularly me, because I knew most of the players up there. I would go up and brief our caucus. I would brief our Democratic caucus on the House side, and I would brief the Senate Democratic caucus.

MK: How often?

LP: I would go to their luncheons. I'd go to their meetings. That could be—usually we tried to tie it to major issues there [that] were coming up; major votes that were coming up, so that we could make the case for why they should support the administration.

MK: How often would you go up?

LP: I spent a lot of time on the Hill. Again, probably because budget issues were on the forefront. So I was actually doing a lot of negotiations. I would suspect—as OMB director with McLarty, McLarty basically let me do the negotiations on it, because he wasn't that familiar with the issues. I think that even now, I think John Podesta probably lets Jack Lew do a lot of that. They'll be there, they'll be involved in some of the key decisions, but in negotiating actual appropriations bills, I got involved as Chief of Staff. And they would ask me to come up and get involved in negotiation. So I did a lot of that. I did a lot of meetings with the leadership, because I knew Tom Daschle and Dick Gephardt. I would try to stay in contact with them, just to make sure they were on board with what we were thinking, and also to get feedback from them as to what they saw taking place on some issues.

MK: So, how often would you talk with them?

LP: I have to say, certainly, once, twice a week. If there were some crucial issue coming, sometimes every day.

MK: What are the advantages in doing negotiating on the Hill as opposed to bringing people in to the White House, into the Oval Office? When would you use that? I'm thinking back to the government shutdown, and all the issues there, and it just seemed that the Oval Office was used as a resource.

LP: And that's probably what goes into the decision about whether you do it down there or whether you do it on the Hill. If you want to high-profile any kind of discussion, take it down to the Oval Office, because even if you try to keep it away from the press, the press will find out about it. And people who have access—that are walking in and walking out—people are going to know, with some exceptions of late, but generally they know high-profile

people are walking in and out. Usually the people that come down from the Hill, they always like to be able to ride up there and have the press see them walk into the West Wing.

So, if you want to give the meeting a higher profile and you want the press to know that the President is doing this, and who he's meeting with, or who you're meeting with, et cetera, you usually have it down at the White House. If you want to low key it and really talk business, I found that it was just much better for me to go up to the Hill.

MK: It seems that, when people come into the Oval Office, there's just a different kind of factor that comes into play, that people are less willing to be argumentative, to tell what their true feelings are, and that sort of thing. But, in some kinds of negotiations, I just remember the pictures during that time: people sitting ramrod straight on those couches. You had a sense that they were at a great disadvantage. So, in some ways, you would wonder why people came down there, that they have to know their own nature, that it's not going to be to their advantage, in that setting.

LP: That's true. But that's part of the power of the presidency. The President of the United States asked you to come down to visit. Even though you may be an arch-enemy, just out of respect for the office—maybe even that's changing these days, I don't know, like everything else. Clearly, when the president made that kind of request, out of respect for the presidency, you go down and you do that. At that time even, I think, the Republicans had suggested, "If we just [go] down to the White House and meet with him at the White House, we can resolve this." So it was almost at their invitation as well. And I think they regretted that, in the end. If the President, for example, now lobbying on the China trade bill—if you bring a member down to the White House, into the Oval Office, one-on-one with the president, it's a much more effective way to lobby a member than to have your presidential assistant for legislative affairs go up there, or even the Secretary of State go up there. It's just much more powerful in trying to convince a member. Out of respect for the president—and there is an ambivalence. There aren't a lot of people who tell the president to "go to hell" when they're in the Oval Office. Because of that, it's a very effective tool for the president to use when he's trying to lobby a position.

MK: Is he aware of the impact of it? In some circumstances, people say they're going to come in and really give the president what they think is the straight story on something, and then they end up not doing it. Is he aware that that factor exists?

LP: I think he is aware. I think there are some presidents that are better at using it than others. I think Lyndon Johnson, it seemed to me—I was a legislative assistant at the time, but it would seem to me, walking into the Oval Office to talk to Lyndon Johnson: he was a closer. He damn well wanted to know where the hell you stood on the issue. That's true for a few other presidents. This President, again, is very kind, very cordial, likes to talk to people, and will listen to people. Sometimes, people walk out of that office thinking the President is with them rather than them being with the President. So part of it is how you use that. Now it still has an impact, even if you don't close on a vote. It still has an impact by bringing that person in, but oftentimes the President, just because he was willing to listen to the member, listened to their view, and even sympathized with some of their concerns about a particular issue, sometimes left the impression on the member that the President actually was okay with them opposing him.

MK: John Harris [*Washington Post* reporter] wrote an interesting piece at the time of the Wye river accords [Middle East peace initiatives] about that quality of Clinton: how you really can't separate out the good Clinton from the bad Clinton, that it all comes together.

- LP: That's right. Even in the budget negotiations, he was totally convinced, when we sat down to talk to Newt Gingrich, that somehow this thing could be resolved, and it could be done. They could get an agreement. Those of us around in those discussions just constantly said Gingrich was unable, you just knew was unable to make a deal that would be acceptable to us.
- MK: In his dealings with members of Congress—politically he's just so effective. You'd think that, for somebody coming from a small state, into the presidency, that that would be very difficult to do.
- LP: It's an interesting [inaudible]. A lot depends on the personality and the ability of the individual. Jimmy Carter came into the job and, I think, kind of took his attitudes toward the Georgia legislature and kind of translated that into Congress and developed bad relations almost from the beginning, because of that. Bill Clinton, again a different kind of person, different kind of nature, generally worked with the Arkansas legislature but, more importantly than that, had a respect for people that were there. He respected their views, respected their opinions, so, as a consequence, I think was better able to try to develop better relations. Although I think his relations could have been even better than they were, because one of the things he never did do, was develop the kind of personal relations with members that I think ultimately are the best—when you really want to get things done. Because then you know you have their loyalty, even when the going gets real tough.
- MK: In your role on the Hill as a member, which presidents were very good at doing that—that you knew?
- LP: Carter was not good at doing that.
- MK: What about Reagan?
- LP: Reagan actually was very similar to Clinton in the sense that you would go there and talk with him and he was a nice person to talk to. He wasn't a heavy. He didn't kick you around. He was basically very nice to talk with. The other thing is, Reagan also had a tremendous relationship with the American people, and his ability to use the “bully pulpit.” So he could bring an awful lot of pressure down on you, by going directly to the public, probably more so than almost anybody I've seen, even including Clinton. The ability to generate in the public—suddenly the willingness to call a member of Congress or do something as a result of the speech. We'd always wait and see that kind of onslaught coming. So a combination of his personality, plus his kind of relationship with the American people, was very powerful. George Bush didn't have the same relationship with the American people, but he was very personable. As a matter of fact, he was one of the few presidents who would actually have members [visit] and take them upstairs in the White House and actually see the family quarters, and that kind of thing. He had been on the Hill and knew a lot of the members personally, as well, so he had a pretty good relationship with members. I think if you had to kind of look at who developed the best personal relationships on the Hill, I would say Reagan developed some of those. He developed them with [Dan] Rostenkowski. He developed them with some of the chairmen.
- MK: With [Tip] O'Neill, I guess he did.
- LP: Yes. With O'Neill he had a good relationship, even though they disagreed on issues. Bush had some pretty good relations, as well with some members. He developed them. Clinton knew some of the people from Arkansas, the senators from Arkansas. He had a close

- personal relationship with them, but I don't think [they] developed the deep personal relations where he'd kind of invite somebody down to have a drink with him and just really kind of know that that person is going to be with you through thick and thin.
- MK: In that kind of case, the president is not going to be the "closer". Who is the "closer"? Is that the chief?
- LP: Well, you need to have somebody who, in fact, can bring that down. Yes. To some extent, what we would do is: Have the President talk to them, and then immediately go back to them and say: "Yes or no? What do you need? What's the story?" —and try to get closure. Usually, it would either use the chief of staff or, if you had the minority leader or majority leader on your side, whoever it was, you'd ask the Hill to make closure as well. So you had as accurate a vote count as possible. The key [was] to make sure you knew within three to four votes how the hell people were going to vote.
- MK: Now, did you do that through your own operation or through—?
- LP: Through both. Our legislative operation would do a vote count and they would match it with people on the Hill, the whips on the Hill. So you would start to develop an accurate a list of where members were.
- MK: It seems today it's very different than in Johnson's time—as far as members being willing to pony up the information on how they actually were going to vote.
- LP: I think that's true. I think it's probably become much tougher. In those days—and it's also the nature of the members. In those days, people basically said it. If they weren't with you, they weren't with you. If they were, they were. Presidents wanted to know. Gradually, over time, what's happened is that members have become less willing to let their position be known, and you have more undecideds going into a final vote than you've probably had in the past.
- MK: One of the things it seems difficult to do in this process, even though you can set up a process, it's difficult to get Clinton to do things that are way down the road, things that have sometimes failed. Like CTBT [Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty] failed, in part because that groundwork just didn't get laid, that he seems to move seriatim from one thing to another and that it's hard to run some different tracks.
- LP: Part of that is I think that's poor planning. You've got to know. You can't just drop in on those issues like Normandy. You've got to lay groundwork on major issues and set some timetables, knowing these things are happening. You basically knew what the time frame was, you basically knew what you were going to have to do, and you kind of have to work toward that.
- MK: That seemed to be the one that really worked well, that required that kind of work. You also look at WTO [World Trade Organization].
- LP: This one is a little shakier.
- MK: Right.
- LP: But you really ought to—even in the healthcare thing, which was kind of a question mark: Do we do healthcare or NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement] and what were

the tradeoffs here? You've got to be careful that—on Capitol Hill there is this kind of reaction that says: if two votes are coming in, in pretty close proximity to each other, and the administration is basically doing two big issues, the members will basically say, "I'll give you this vote but I'll vote against this. I gave you one. Don't ask me twice." You don't want to create that kind of ability for Members to bail out on you if both the issues are important to the Administration. So you really do have to try to schedule those. Sometimes you can't.

Part of the problem is—if you're a Democratic president with a Democratic Congress, then you have the great convenience of being able to schedule these things. If you're a Democratic president with a Republican Congress, or you've got a party in the opposition that controls the Congress, you may not have as much say as to when these damned issues are going to hit. As a result—I don't know if that was true on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, but sometimes, if they suddenly throw these issues on the floor, you're going to have to deal with them when they come up. Now, there are parliamentary ways to try to delay it, and block it, and what have you. If you're working with Democrats on the Hill, you can try to set up barriers to try to delay it, but what you should do is—the basic point is: you can only go to the well so many times. So you better damn well save those moments for the most important issues that face an administration.

MK: Now, how far ahead of the event, of the year, do you look and try to see where those are and where does the president come in?

LP: Well, you really ought to—I'd recommend you do this under any circumstances, but, usually, at the beginning of the year and, to some extent it's kind of tied to what you do in the "State of the Union" [message].

MK: So, in a sense, your year begins in December.

LP: That's right. December really begins with the budget and the decisions that are made on the budget. So, by December, late December, you've got a pretty good idea of what your key priorities are going to be in the budget. Now it doesn't always reflect some of the national security issues you may have to vote on, or some of the other things that may have to be voted on, or nominees that you may have to have tough votes on. But you certainly have a pretty [good] sense of the basic agenda for the administration as far as: "What are the key initiatives it's going to push, where are the resources going to go, and what are the key themes then, that a president is going to want to set for the country?" So that's done in the budget. It's repeated in the State of the Union in, again, setting the tone. Then what you want to do within the White House is say, "All right, okay, if you're looking at a calendar, first and foremost, we'll do the budget and the budget battles on the budget appropriation up to this point. Then you've kind of got the appropriations part that takes you up to the end of the year. So you know generally what are going to be the kind of repeat agenda items that you almost always have to confront.

So, then the question is on top of that: if you've got major legislative issues as well, for example, reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, that has to be done. When do you want to get that done? Do you want to try to get it done before the budget process, or do you want to try to get it done during the appropriations stuff? Or do you want to save it for negotiations at the end, if you have gridlock on the budget and try to negotiate into a final packet with the Congress? There are all kinds of tactical decisions that you have to make. If you're smart, you try to say, "We want to get the budget, we obviously want to get our appropriations and our priorities. On top of that we want to get elementary and secondary education done. We want to get minimum wage done. We'd like to try to

- push on gun control.” Then you try to figure out what are the other major items you want to push. Again, if you’re not in control of the Congress, what you’re trying to do is constantly bring pressure on the Congress to take up these issues. What has happened today—I’m sure you’ve noticed—and it’s part of probably what you’re looking at in the relationship between the White House and the press. Because of the greater confrontation that takes place between the White House and the press—by that I mean you now have a situation in which the press that morning develops what are the issues that we want put on the front page and the White House is obviously developing its message. So there’s this kind of constant friction.
- MK: Except reporters are pretty willing—news organizations, if you set it up right, they’re pretty willing. You have a sense of how to do it. Like *USA Today* does computers, it does medical stuff.
- LP: And you feed that.
- MK: You feed that, and then it goes to the networks.
- LP: Well, in that kind of relationship, if there’s a vacuum up here, then these are the issues that will predominate: What’s happening with e-mail? What’s happening with the scandal? So what obviously has developed—I think what this President has done probably will set a standard for future presidents. I think that [a] president then sets a message agenda for almost every day that encompasses some issue that the president wants to get out to the public. So you very much schedule, over a six-month period: “What are those message events the president is going to present? What’s he going to do on education? What’s he going to do on unemployment? What’s he going to do on training?” Some of it’s tied to foreign policy trips. Some of it is tied to other events, invitations. So, over a six-month period, you have a pretty good idea what are the key events and the key messages the president is going to be getting out and, to some extent, then, those messages may very well fit the legislative agenda. If the president is going to do gun control stuff regardless of what the Congress is doing, you set an agenda to keep throwing bombs and keep trying to put pressure on Congress to enact it. Sometimes you don’t care if Congress enacts it or not because you’ve developed an issue with the American people that you’re making points on.
- MK: Like “gun control” is today.
- LP: Yes.
- MK: So, in a sense, Clinton’s legacy doesn’t end here. Clinton’s legacy goes on, number one, with Gore and the groundwork he lays for issues, and keeping the Democratic party in the center, as he had put it.
- LP: Exactly.
- MK: Now, in dealings with the Congress, are there certain rhythms? That you have a different kind of attitude at different times of the year that brings about different sorts of strategies? So, at the beginning you’re laying out legislation, you’re laying out initiatives that call for certain kinds of things and by Fall, when you’re doing the budget and you’re in negotiations, it’s going to be a different kind of thing?
- LP: It does. There are rhythms. There are seasons in the way you deal with the Congress. The first part is kind of the season where both kind of set this broad—what is our broad message

agenda to the American people—in very broad terms. Because, to some extent, what they're looking at, particularly in an election year, is: you're trying to set the fundamental themes that will represent that party, and then carry you through to the election. So, that first part is really almost kind of laying out—for a couple reasons. One is: the Congress usually takes a couple months to get off their butts and do anything of substance anyway. They're jockeying and organizing, although there may be some issues. If it's the second session of a Congress, there may be some issues they can take up more immediately; but it's usually kind of—that's a period when it really is setting the tone, setting the themes.

There's kind of a second period in which what you're trying to do is to at least get through, to actually get some legislation accomplished. One of the reasons I think that the WTO or the China vote is coming up now, is because it's in that period when you're not in your theme period and you're not in your political confrontation period. But you're in this period where you might just be able to have people do things based on statesmanship, rather than partisanship. So there's this hiatus period where you try to get at least some legislative things done. If you could do [an] elementary and secondary authorization bill, a major authorization bill, a major environmental bill, this becomes a good period to do it in, because it isn't normally a period when the cannons are going off.

Then, as you get into the third period, which is what I would call a period of confrontation, if you had to look at present congresses, it isn't always true. But if you're looking at present congresses, this is a period where clearly you're having battles on appropriations bills. You know that none of this is going to fit or work. The president is going to be vetoing some of these bills and, ultimately, you are heading toward October 1 and the reality is that most of the appropriations bills are not going to be done. So, there's an awful lot of jockeying being done here to figure out what's going to go into a final package.

So that becomes what I would call maximum confrontation, and it can play out several ways. It can play out so that, ultimately, both sides have to compromise to get it done. And that's what's happened in the last few years, that ultimately the Congress knows that it can't shut the government down, and they can't pass bills over the president's veto, so they ultimately have to give the president some things in that area. And the president knows that if he wants to get some of his initiatives funded, and do some good for the country, that that's the place where he can make some tradeoffs. But it's probably a bad way to do business for the country. This should be a smoother path, but that's the way it works these days.

MK: But it seems there are rhythms. So the Congress dominates in the period from January to Easter, in laying out themes. Then you can do commencements and do some broad themes, do a service academy's commencement, do technology, MIT or whatever. So you have some of your broad themes. Then in the summer, you go into G-7, and then you have UN [United Nations] sessions, so you're going to do some foreign policy stuff. Then back to the Congress again, and be doing those. So you can really anticipate it.

LP: Yes. That's why, really, in any presidency it is extremely important to do as much advance scheduling as possible for two reasons: number one, to avoid chaos rather than just doing it on a hit-or-miss basis; two, because you have more of a role in setting the agenda than having others set the agenda by doing it; three, it allows you to have maximum staff preparation for the events that are coming up; and, four, it is from the president's point of view—in the middle of this there are going to be crises of one kind or another that can dominate and throw you off stride. By having that kind of schedule, it always puts you back in rhythm, back in stride. So it's almost like a safety net, so that, when crisis hits, you always can make the argument: You're "doing the business of the country."

MK: Into this mix also seems to come interest groups. If you have a schedule laid out that you know what you're going to be doing, and your priorities are clear, one of the things it does is it keeps some groups at something of a distance. They know there isn't a vacuum that they can come in and fill. That means your allies as well as your enemies. One of the things that's changed a lot, the elements in Washington that have changed a lot since you've been there, but not connected to your service, is the increase in the number of interest groups and the power of those groups. How is it felt within a White House?

LP: Well, part of this process is: if you look at—you talked about the rhythms. Well, part of the rhythm that's beating as you're trying to do the business of the country and these other issues is the political drum that's beating, and the political rhythm that's beating throughout all of this. A lot of your scheduling is fund-raising operations for the president. The president of the United States is for the party that that president represents, the chief fundraiser for that party. The more you can move him around, the more dinners you can move him around to, the more money you're going to be able to raise. This President has literally been willing to go to almost any dinner, anywhere, anyhow, anytime and do that. That obviously makes scheduling that much more frantic in terms of, if you're going to San Francisco or Los Angeles, you're not just going to do a school or college, a speech, a Jewish conference. You're also going to do five or six fund-raisers packed into the same trip.

So, the first point is: the president's role as far as fund-raising has, I think, increased considerably from what it used to be. In the past, presidents might go to one big fundraiser for the year, or something, and campaign for members, but never become the fund-raising role that you have today. Secondly, as a consequence of that, presidents are now exposed to more and more of those key interest groups showing up at those fundraisers and that are giving large contributions. So it isn't just a question any more of going to a fund-raiser where people are coming in for fifty bucks or a hundred bucks and being part of an event. These are the kind of big players who are always around. They are always there. They are at every fund-raising dinner. They are constantly the people you turn to, because they have the money for these events. I think, as a result of that, there is without question a greater sensitivity to the issues that they are involved with, whether it's unions on the Democratic side, whether it's education groups on the Democratic side, whether it's certain corporate types, Silicon Valley computer technology groups, or whether it's on the Republican side, National Rifle Association, or tobacco, or whatever else they're using to fund their dinners. There is a greater sensitivity to that. Now, does it control policy, which is the major question in the minds of the American people? Does it control policy? Not necessarily, but it sure as hell has an impact as far as decisions that are made. It is a factor and it's a growing factor.

MK: Is it felt through access, that people would have access to talk to policy people, and come in and talk? Do people come in and talk to you?

LP: There is no question. As Chief of Staff, I was very sensitive to meeting with anybody who just wanted to come in. Now, having said that you are going to events, you're going to White House dinners, you're going to White House events, you're going to political events, where people can always come up to you and make a point.

MK: And do.

LP: So it's not like you're isolated from that. You see more of the same faces, obviously, at the same event—time and time again. And they know it. I think the reality is, that they know by virtue of always being there, of always being someone that the president of the party can

rely on for a contribution, that when they really face something that's important to them, they'll at least have access. Whether they get support on their issue, that may be very different, but at least they have access.

MK: In another way, interest groups have become far more sophisticated in the way in which they generate support for themselves and their issues. For example, one of the people I talked to was somebody who had worked in a White House and is currently working in a large interest group. His interest group has sixty-five people who work on polling. All of that goes into generating pressure that can be felt by the Administration.

LP: Yes.

MK: Did you feel a lot [of pressure], and have you seen a difference over the time you've been in Washington, of that being directed and being directed at a White House, whether it's trying to create support within the media...?

LP: It's much more sophisticated than it used to be. When I was first in the Congress, two people might come in on an issue, and meet with me, and say, "We need to have your vote," and this is why. That was pretty much it. Whether they gave you money down the road or not, it was not like the end-all of anything. It was more like they came in, made their pitch and went out. Today it's a much more sophisticated operation in that they basically build strategies around what they want to do, similar to how a White House might build a strategy on passing NAFTA. Corporations and businesses now basically develop strategies as political strategies, and they do it in consultation with the lobbyists they hire in Washington for a hell of a lot of money, plus the consultants, plus the PR. And they basically sit down at a table and develop huge comprehensive strategies that are made up of a PR campaign, a message campaign: "How we're going to get this across to Democrats and Republicans who we're going to try to get to make the pitch to." They do it with pollsters. They do it with consultants. They do it with ads. And it becomes a multi-million-dollar operation. So, when you go at it, a member who has to cast a vote can be immediately subjected to ads in his or her own district that may kick the hell out of them. Or, if it's the president, nationwide ads by an industry that's trying to set a theme. This healthcare stuff; you can see it happening on the patient's bill of rights. You can see it happening on prescription drugs. These are big operations that are putting together a message operation.

So it is much more sophisticated, it is much more powerful. And the end result, in my personal view, is that it feeds into gridlock on Capitol Hill. What happens is members, because they are so worried about [these] kind[s] of special interest constituencies that are out there, are not particularly interested in taking any risks that might involve compromise on their point, to find solutions. It's much easier to represent that special interest position and not have legislation producing.

MK: I was thinking of the ads. The budget ads you all produced in 1995 that played around—not in Washington but played outside—were particularly interesting. I guess one of the things they did was they were both negative and positive—

LP: That's right.

MK: —which was unusual but they certainly framed the issues. How did that come about, the development of the ads, and what impact did you all see from them?

LP: Well—

MK: In a way, that kicked off the campaign.

LP: And it's a bigger picture than just what happened then. I'll just take you through the history of what I think went into that. Number one, it goes back to the 1992 election. I think at the time of the 1992 election there was a sense that one of the newfound vehicles for candidates to make their point was what we called the "town hall forum" where you put yourself down in the center of an audience and have people ask—

MK: Like Hillary Clinton did recently in New York with Wolf Blitzer?

LP: That's right. So the "town hall forum" became one of the vehicles. Clinton always thought that that was his forte. He always was very good at it, and obviously beat Bush at it pretty badly. He always felt that one of the keys, obviously, to winning an election is whether or not you get on the cutting edge of whatever new technology, new vehicle is out there.

In the healthcare debate, there was always a sense that—. The President felt this: whether rightly or wrongly, the President felt he never got ahead of the message on healthcare and that his opponents basically put together a devastating negative attack on healthcare. They did it through television.

MK: "Harry and Louise."

LP: Harry and Louise. They put together \$300 million and, as a result, killed healthcare, and it couldn't even get off the starting blocks. In the Congressional races of 1992, essentially, Newt Gingrich understood that: suddenly, talk shows; getting the information out; being able to do the thirty-second think piece and doing it well; putting money into that and getting it out, was the strategy that they used. They put together more money and they did more television. Of course, budget, gun control, some of the other issues that members got chewed up at that Democrats just never had much of a chance. I think as you went into the 1996 race—I'm sorry that was 1994.

MK: Leading up to 1994, right.

LP: So, going to 1996, the President always said, "The key is to get ahead of this."

MK: Get ahead on technology.

LP: Get a jump on technology. That, to some extent, while in 1992 he was ahead of it, suddenly the Republicans had gained the upper edge in 1994. So he said, "That's not going to happen again; it's not going to happen in 1996. If it does, I'm gone." So the key was then, if you're going to basically get the edge, what you've got to do is immediately get your message out, you've got to use television, do your polling [inaudible] and that's what led to the decision to start these kinds of ads much earlier than normal. I think [it] started even in December or the Fall before the election, almost a year before the election. We started targeting ads in different places.

MK: I remember, I saw them in Philadelphia. I never saw them in Washington, but I saw them in Philadelphia.

LP: This is Valhalla for the consultants because, it's like, "Give me money."

MK: Have you been reading the *[Washington] Post* series?

LP: Yes. I have been reading some of that. That tells you a lot. So the consultants are saying, "Give us enough money, we can produce enough television, and we can basically manipulate the American people on most of this stuff." So that's what resulted in the early ads and the focus on putting out these ads as early as possible. I have a different approach on this. I think [inaudible] proved you can have all the ads, you can have all the money in the world, but there's got to be more to it that's there. To a large extent—it's my personal view—I think the turning point was not on the television, I don't think it was on the money, and I don't think it was on the ads. I think the turning point was the shutdown of the federal government by the Republicans.

MK: That's the message, really.

LP: That made the message, the message at home, and you could do that any way you wanted. Obviously, television helped, but it wouldn't have helped if the fundamental message was not there.

MK: But you really had to shape that message.

LP: Yes.

MK: If they had been very clever, if the Republicans had been very clever, the President could have been blamed. By getting out early, you have a much higher degree of success in making sure that you frame it.

LP: They lost it. Also, the players, people like Newt Gingrich, were the perfect people to use as the devil.

MK: It's hard to generate too much sympathy for him. It's a pretty tall order.

When did the residence meetings start? Were they in place when you came?

LP: No.

MK: Were they a campaign thing?

LP: They started with the campaign, and they started again in the late Fall, the year before the election in 1995.

MK: How did they come about? What was your role there? Who did you bring together?

LP: Well, to some extent, it was that the consultants were doing polling.

MK: Now, they would do that all the way along the line, wouldn't they? Throughout the presidency?

LP: Yes. But it was like the President felt he wanted to have a group of people regularly meeting on that, to evaluate what was happening with the polls, and what were the strategies that had to be put in place as a result of that? So he selected them and started with a very [few] people, but the President kept adding people to those meetings.

MK: There're also some natural forces at work there on such a meeting, where people want to attend.

LP: Of course. People want to be a part of it. Gradually, we kept adding people and the meetings got bigger and bigger. But to be truthful I think these were more "Dick Morris shows" than anything else. Dick Morris presented polls, presented this, presented that and then he basically would say, "As a result of where these polls are, this is what the ads ought to look like."

MK: What about putting the agenda together? You didn't put it together?

LP: The only time I put the agenda together was after Dick Morris left. We did the same things, and then we put the agenda together. I put it together, and actually ran the meetings, after he left.

MK: How did these meetings fit in with everything else that was being done in the White House?

LP: They were late at night. They were after a full day of going through everything else I've talked about. Then, usually nine or ten o'clock sometimes, we'd start these damned meetings, and wouldn't get out until one o'clock. Goofy.

MK: I don't know—there was a funny piece recently. I can't remember what the meetings were on, but they were these long meetings. So people started figuring out where they wanted to sit, because there were nuts in a particular location. And they knew they weren't going to be able to eat, so they'd head for those positions where they could get at the nuts, because these things would last so long. Were other things coordinated? I guess whatever you're going to do is going to be coordinated with the campaign.

LP: As you know, one my deputies, Harold Ickes, was really involved with running the political operation because of his experience having run nationwide campaigns. From the beginning, I said, "Harold, I'm much more an issue person. I'll be working on substance and issues. You do the political stuff." He was very good at it. He was basically the main coordinating point with the DNC [Democratic National Committee], with all of the different political pieces that had to be put together. He always kept me informed. Again, Harold when he had to meet with the President, he came through me and [inaudible].

MK: When you came in, had you decided before you came in, you wanted to have two deputies?

LP: I really didn't—

MK: Divide it up by operations and politics?

LP: I really didn't, no. I'm trying to remember. I think there were two deputies at the time but there was no focus.

MK: Right.

LP: But after I got in the Chief of Staff's job, and after I looked at what were the different areas that had to have some oversight on them, I thought it made sense to have two deputies, to try to cover both scheduling and personnel and all the issues involved with that, and putting

that together. And then, somebody who could follow the political stuff as well as some of the substantive issue stuff.

MK: What offices do you think it's critical for the chief to control, in terms of the head of the office? And, then, are there others, where you put somebody in at a second level? For example, say management and administration is one that the chief has to control, the staff secretary being another. Communications seems to be one, also, that goes back and forth.

LP: I have to do this from memory. Clearly there is this seven-fifteen or seven-thirty upper-echelon group. You want the press secretary to have direct access to the Chief of Staff because that person is dealing with the press out there and obviously presents the president's positions. So, Mike McCurry would talk to me about: "What should I say?" If it was a question, I would bring him in to the President to make sure he was saying the right thing. Your national security adviser, that is an area that you shouldn't just let a deputy try to cover. I think that's something that ought to go directly through you. The NEC [National Economic Council], I think again—and it may be different now. Bob Rubin was in charge of that. That was a very high-profile economic council. It was really important. There was not a deputy I had that understood those issues as well as I did, and I wanted to deal with him directly. The national domestic council, again because of the issues that were covered, you'd want to deal with that person directly. The NEC.... The counsel to the President? Again, dealing with a lot of very sensitive issues, you want the counsel to relate directly to the chief of staff. The OMB director, that's somebody who can relate directly to the chief of staff. So those are some of the key positions that you want to have somebody in charge of. Now, under the deputy positions, like—probably communications. I would probably put communications director up here, too, because that was the person that fashioned.... But, under the deputies, you could put people that were in charge of outreach, people that were in charge of—the other person is legislation. And that was just my own view. I wanted the legislation director to be able to deal directly with me.

But outreach, public groups—

MK: Political affairs.

LP: — Political affairs would work under the deputy.

MK: What about personnel?

LP: Personnel, I had a deputy in charge of personnel, Evelyn Lieberman. Basically, Jodie worked through her.

MK: And personnel, in the sense of filling appointments throughout.

LP: Bob Nash. Generally, the way Bob would work is: he would go through a deputy.

MK: He would go through Ickes.

LP: Right.

MK: In those positions that you—

LP: Those were kind of a lower-echelon group that reported through deputies and they kind of kept their own.

