

White House Interview Program

DATE: November 2, 1999

INTERVIEWEE: ROMAN POPADIUK

INTERVIEWER: Martha Kumar

[Disc 1 of 1]

MK: It's on the record except where you want to go on background or off the record. Ultimately, it will end up in the library.

RP: This library?

MK: Yes. You get a choice of what library it goes into so I'm assuming it will be in this library. The project is trying to develop an institutional memory for seven White House offices, and Press [Office] is one of them. It's a group of presidency scholars that are working on the project. George Edwards is one of them. We will come out in March or April with a group of standards of a successful start, which are some elements that are common to successful transitions. Then the offices' material will be made available; some of it will probably be made available at the time the transition teams are put together. The full text of interviews will not be released until after a new president comes in.

RP: Okay. Sounds good.

MK: Starting off, can you talk about how you got into the White House, and how long you were? Let's start with that, and how you got in.

RP: How I actually got in to the White House?

MK: Yes.

RP: Well, it was back in February of 1985, but I didn't start in the Press Office. I'll give you a long story here. Prior to that I was in the operations [center] over at the State Department, one of the watch officers/editors I guess we were called, if I recall correctly. They were undertaking a pilot program, I was led to believe, where they would have some FSOs [foreign service officers] come over to the Situation Room at the White House because, at that time, they had National Security Agency-types culling the intelligence reports and doing the summaries for the principals at the White House: the President, Vice President, National Security Adviser, et cetera. And I was sent over; I was interviewed, and I was selected. So, that's how I got into the White House, working in the Situation Room. This was during the [Ronald] Reagan Administration.

What happened next was [approximately in May of 1986], about a year and a half after I came to work in that position, there was an opening in the Press Office. Ambassador Ed Djerejian, who went on to be our ambassador to Israel and Syria, was doing the NSC [National Security Council] press office job, and he needed an assistant. He knew me from the State Department, when I worked at the operations center. He was one of the briefers at State, before he went over to the White House. He asked me if I would like the job; I spoke to him about it. Larry Speakes was the Press Secretary at the time. I was brought up and Larry hired me basically on the spot, mostly on the basis, I think, of familiarity. He saw a person or a face that he didn't know personally, but had seen in the Situation Room, because

White House Interview Program, Interview with Roman Popadiuk, Martha Joynt Kumar, College Station, TX., November 2, 1999. Roman Popadiuk served as the representative to the Press Office for the National Security Council office in the administration of President George H. W. Bush.

President Reagan used to hold his secure meetings in the “Sit[uation] Room” downstairs in the West Wing. So on the basis of that I was hired.

By background, I’m a foreign service officer, a political officer. I had absolutely no knowledge at that time of press relations. But that’s how I got into the White House Press Office, the bottom rung, assistant press secretary type of thing.

MK: At what point did you start learning about the press?

RP: First day on the job, July 14, I think it was. What happened was then, within a week or so of being hired, Ed left to go back to the State Department as a “DAS” I believe, a deputy assistant secretary, for Middle Eastern affairs, and Dan Howard from USIA [United States Information Agency] came on to replace him. We were both new to the NSC Press Office, and new to each other. It was under Dan that I started learning a lot of the stuff. I learned very quickly you had to have a certain amount of humor about yourself, a certain amount of willingness to chitchat with the press, honesty obviously being a factor all the time, and just common courtesy; getting back to the press on deadlines and stuff. So, you just learned on the ropes. There was no particular course that you took or words of wisdom or anything that you read, quite frankly.

MK: Did you read anything coming in?

RP: No. I just went right to work, answering phones and answering questions, [and] trying to get answers to questions from the principals at the NSC. Have I disillusioned you already?

MK: No. Actually I’ve written on the White House and the press and spent some time watching both sides. A lot of people come into the jobs that way, not just the Press Office, but all over. It’s just all of a sudden that they do it. Is there a cost to learning one’s job on-the-job?

RP: In my case, I didn’t find a cost. There are certain costs in terms of mistakes that you make, but I have a feeling you would make those mistakes even if you took a course, or if you read a book, or you listened to somebody; because a lot of the decisions have to be made on the spur. And getting an idea of how much you should say or not say, and how much you understand—in terms of facts—and how much are you even trying to give context to a story—type of thing. So, yes, there are costs in that way, but I believe the costs are no greater by learning on the job than if you were reading a book or had a journalism course. I think it’s a unique experience, because you’re in a White House and you have to realize anything you say—one of the things we learned under Larry Speakes, first of all, was: “Anything you say is news...,” because you’re at the White House. So there’s that unbearable pressure on you, and you can’t get that from reading a book. I don’t know if you could really sense that when I tell you this right now and you’re taping it—the type of pressure. The eyes of the world are upon you, because you’re speaking for the White House. Nor did I understand it at the time.

MK: But you understood it when you went to work in the White House though, right?

RP: Yes.

MK: What pressures did you notice? In coming over from the State Department, what did you notice were the pressures that are perhaps unique to a White House, and which ones are not?

RP: I think Washington itself is a unique town. I think everything is more magnified in the White House, in the context of the White House, looking at the fact that the President speaks [with] one voice—because it's one person. The eyes of the world as well as the domestic press are on the White House for comment on anything, whether it's the international economy or the GNP [gross national product] here, or some issue in some state or some foreign issue. The eyes are always on the White House. What I found, basically in non-sequential order, is almost the first line of questioning is aimed toward the White House. You get comments from Commerce, for example; you want a White House comment also. So the White House is always on the spot to say something. You learn that. You also learn that the responses have to come very, very quickly—because if you start hedging on your response, or waiting too long, you're left out of a news cycle, or you're made to look like you don't know or care about an issue. So the pressure is greater to have as accurate a response, and as quickly as possible, in that kind of environment. The third thing you learn—very, very quickly—is that everything is political, more so than the Cabinet agencies because, if you say something wrong or don't respond, party X will criticize you. I'm trying to be non-partisan in this sense. If you say something else, then party Y will criticize you. So you're always caught between the two extremes, depending on what party you're in.

So you have to respond, and that is true—not only internally in the U.S., but also externally in terms of foreign affairs. When you're dealing with foreign affairs, if you say anything that's inappropriate, or misstate something, you have the pressures of the foreign countries responding. For example, many times Marlin [Fitzwater] would give briefings or statements and they would be issues of Taiwan or Jerusalem, which are very sensitive, obviously. And you have to have the exact wording. There was one time—he's spoken about this himself publicly, so I'll give you the example - you might have heard it—where he was giving a briefing, and one of the press people asked him about the “neither-confirm-nor-deny” nuclear policy that we have: that we neither confirm nor deny that nuclear weapons are aboard our ships as they make port calls. The Danes were very much against that. They asked him about the Danish position and he said, “Well, Danish means pastry to me,” which is a cute little joke for me and you as Americans. You get a cup of coffee and a “danish.”

The Danes were not amused. They protested; they sent letters. So, when you say something innocuous, or you feel is innocuous, there are ramifications overseas. I think we're more attuned to it domestically, because if you say something, the Hill leadership will respond. So, I would say those three or four factors were—. I became very cognizant, right off the bat, that you have to be very much in control of what you say—or understand what you're saying—and realize that your words are not just between you and a reporter; they have, or can have, major ramifications.

MK: Did you find that, sometimes, because you were going to be in the NSC area, you dealt with some of the same reporters? Like some of the people that you had known at State, might have called you at the White House?

RP: At State I didn't do press relations so—

MK: Did you still deal with reporters there?

RP: No, not in that position. In the positions I had at State, I did not deal with reporters. I should backtrack. When I started with President Reagan, I was an assistant press secretary.

- I finally moved up to the position where I took Dan Howard's position, which was the head of the NSC press office, and then I continued that in the [George] Bush years. It was in that context I made my initial contacts and friendships. I'm proud to say I have a lot of friends in the press now.
- MK: I was thinking maybe—
- RP: I can't do a comparison or anything.
- MK: I was thinking one of the differences is the press corps that one deals with at the State Department is it's more substantive than it is—
- RP: That would be true. Looking at my bird's-eye-view perspective from the White House, the press we find at the White House is more geared toward an immediate headline, and I don't want to say sensationalism, but the eye-grabbing or the ear-grabbing quote or phrase that can be used. The press, I think, covering the various Cabinet agencies, are a little bit more policy-oriented. They're a little bit more secure in what role they play, which is to get a story and the facts of a story and how they relate to a greater picture. At the White House, you have people that are more geared toward trying to see whether the President said yes or no on an issue—for the sensationalism of it, how much they could get into a seven-second sound bite, if they're a TV journalist. So, yes, I think the journalists are under the same kinds of pressures that I outlined, that the press officers are under. And that's because of the news organizations, I think.
- MK: It tends to be a political beat rather than a policy beat although there have been—say during this administration, anyway, there are more specialists—like financial people—that come over and spend time doing some reporting. But, generally, because it's a general assignment or political kind of beat, does that mean that you all were conscious that you had to bring the press along on stories, that you had to provide them with background?
- RP: Yes. I understand what you're saying. I think a lot of the personalities that we dealt with, particularly in the Reagan years—and I think they're now recurring somewhat in the [Bill] Clinton years—were very high-pressured personalities. I can give you a list of names that we dealt with in the Reagan Administration, for example: Leslie Stahl; Sam Donaldson; Chris Wallace; Andrea Mitchell, during the Bush years also; all very forceful personalities.
- MK: They're all television.
- RP: Right. They're all television. But they get their face on TV and push an issue very much so. I think you're right: in the past few years, a lot of those have gone off to different beats. I think Andrea went up to the Hill or something. Wallace has been doing special shows for ages now. Sam Donaldson I think has come back.
- MK: He's come back, but he's gone.
- RP: Back and forth. So you don't have those strong personalities, I think, which compound the atmosphere. But I think when you say that it's more political, I wouldn't define political in the sense that the journalists are pushing their agenda. I would define it in terms that it's political—in the sense that they would analyze everything as a cost-benefit for the President.
- MK: Right.

RP: Absolutely.

MK: So the other beats tend to be something of an institutional beat, where the White House tends to be a beat of the President, rather than the President's—

RP: Right. And a lot of emphasis is, as you see—I hate to keep pointing to Bush; I shouldn't just point out the TV media. But also, in analysis of the cost and benefits of a policy, they're expected to do that. Was the President hurt in his effort or not hurt in this effort? That's more geared toward the White House press coverage.

MK: With television, say, before foreign trips in both administrations, did you spend special time with television people?

RP: It's not only television people. We did more in the Reagan Administration than the Bush Administration. I think one of the reasons we probably did away with it in the Bush Administration is it was a lot of paperwork, and it involved agencies. In the Reagan years, I remember, we used to do a foreign briefing book for the press. For example, we were going to a country; we'd get all the economic data and all the issues that are bilateral between the two countries, things on exchange rates, the best hotels, and give that to the press. We'd also have a briefing for the press, a verbal briefing on background, to kind of clue them in to what the issues are going to be, the salient issues; what they can look for in terms of outcomes, and stuff like that. That book was vetted through the various agencies. If it was an economic thing, Commerce had to do it, Treasury. I think just the time line of all that led a lot of people to do away with that stuff in the Bush years. In the Bush years, we did have backgrounders. We would have selective backgrounders for the press, give them the same issues as we did in the Reagan years: what the reason for the trip was, what outcomes can be expected, what some of the conflicts could be, et cetera.

Now, in the NSC, we had a standard procedure for all of this. Every Thursday, I had a rotating system where Brent Scowcroft, the national security adviser, would meet with a tong or group of reporters, for twenty minutes, on background. That would rotate—I think I had six or seven groups. In other words, every six or seven weeks you'd get your group in to get—

MK: So they were rotated on an equal basis.

RP: Yes. What I did was, I broke them up—I'd have to see the paperwork—if I have them—to refresh my memory, but basically I would group them so they would be competitive to each other, not against each other. So I would have—[in] one group—the major newspapers, basically nationals: *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, for example. Then I would have regional papers, the Northeastern papers, the *Boston Globe*, that kind of stuff, so that they could be regionally competitive. So, one wouldn't feel they got taken advantage of in terms of a story. The magazines I would bring in that sequence also, but also—in addition—once a week they would meet with the deputy national security adviser, who was Robert Gates - mostly - during the Bush years. That was basically to give them filler, “tick-tock” as we call it: “What color suit was the president wearing?”, or, “What kind of coffee they were serving?” which they are much after. By that time the news cycle—everyone knows what the news is—but if they could get some “tick-tock” they would appreciate it. So we had that kind of rotating thing going.

- In addition we had special requests that were honored. If a newsperson wanted to see Scowcroft or Gates on a special issue, we would try to get them in. Of course, we'd have our general backgrounders by NSC staff on issues—if we were going overseas, for example. So we tried to be as accommodating as possible to the press, mostly on background.
- MK: But, before a trip, it would be pretty much equal? Or would television get special—?
- RP: Absolutely. It wouldn't be on camera. They would be brought in.
- MK: My recollection was, the television people—in the Reagan years—tended to get some special briefings before trips.
- RP: I don't know about trips itself, because I was new at that time, learning the ropes, in 1986. But I think television, the three networks—this is 1986, so CNN is fast coming up; it's still not exactly there, as far as I can recollect. The way cable is today, it was nowhere near that thirteen years ago. I think there was a preference for Larry Speakes to talk with the TV media, because they would give you the greatest impact right off the bat. You can see a standup story and then all the print journalists can chase it at six-thirty. I think that was his personal style. I'm not going to say whether it was good or bad, but that was his personal style—dealing with them and dealing with the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*—mostly because those were the two papers that could get the stories out, wide-range.
- MK: So, would you deal with the *Post* and the *Times* on the substance and mechanics of a policy that you were coming up with? And then, in order to get to television, because those two news organizations are going to have a lot of resonance to them, you be aware that what you told them was going to end up on television as well?
- RP: Let me make sure I understand this correctly. By telling the—
- MK: There are certain kinds of things you can deal with the networks directly on. But when you have a new policy, and when you want to go into the details of a policy, you would deal with the *Post* and the *Times* and the *Journal* as well? Particularly if it's a trade issue, because those three are going to be important for what happens—?
- RP: Without identifying any particular outlet, if there was a desire to get a particular policy out, and get an idea of public reaction, or media reaction, or editorial reaction to it, I think there obviously was a predilection to go to a wide-circulation newspaper. I would say, because, number one, a newspaper gives you the space to get the full story out, unlike television; and, number two, the newspaper also gives you a greater range of people to carry. Because, hopefully, you're picking a national newspaper, or one that has a wide reach of distribution; and, thirdly, a lot of regional newspapers—as well as radio and local TV stations—pick up the news from newspapers. You could hear on the radio that, “The *New York Times* this morning reported...,” or, “The *Washington Post* this morning reported...” and they would use the story. So, there's a multiplying effect. So, yes, absolutely. I think that's true in the Reagan years, and the Bush years, and it's true with the Clinton people now. I'm not telling you any trade secrets.
- MK: How did you judge how effective the briefings were, that you gave, and the various publicity strategies that you used?

RP: That's a very good question, and very difficult to answer. Except, I do have some ideas. We judged it basically by whether the story continued to have legs or not. In other words, if a story ran a day or two and then faded, that was a good job in terms of describing the events and explaining it to the media. If it had legs and continued going then, obviously, you were doing a bad job. You also judged it if you could take the onus off of the White House. A lot of times people would have a story, for example something on "Issue A," and they would want a White House spin on it or White House view on it: "What was the President's role in it?" "Did the President make a bad decision here?" If it could show that it wasn't a Presidential decision and buck it back to Commerce, then that's successful. Your job is to protect the White House and the President, so if you've been able to push it back to a Cabinet agency, or some other agency, then that was successful.

MK: What are some of the ways in which you can do that?

RP: I've always found that the only way to do that is by knowing the facts and telling the truth. There's only one thing that you have going for yourself, and that is your credibility. When you deal with the press, you establish two types of friendship: a professional friendship, where they respect you for what you do, and what you tell them. And then, some develop into true friendships—over time. If you could deal with the press in a forthright manner and you could tell them, "This is on background, this is on deep background," just to give them the color of the story and an idea. I found, in a vast majority of the cases, the press is not as onerous as the [public] like to paint them as being. They're reasonable; they're willing to come back a second day for a story. They're capable of following a lead into another agency.

In other words, let's say hypothetically: there was an issue on the environment and they were looking at the President's role in it. If you could give them the facts, that this was really an EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] issue, and, "This is who you should be talking to at EPA...", and, "This is why...", and stuff, they're fine. They're fine with that. I found, basically, just laying out the facts to them—and speaking forthrightly—and giving them stuff on background to guide them, and giving them stuff they can quote you on—

Because they always need a quote, on background: "A White House official said..." That really helps them with their editors, and with the credibility of their story. Then, giving them direction—where the real story would lie or how it's actually unfolding—I found that to be successful, in a vast majority of cases.

Maybe I'm just naive myself, but I found the press to be a lot more reasonable on a one-on-one situation than a lot of people give them credit for.

MK: Do you think that foreign policy and national security policy are areas where they will extend a little more willingness to listen, and to hold back, than in domestic?

RP: There's all kinds of examples going from James Reston [former *New York Times* columnist]: "...how the press has held back because President Kennedy or President Johnson asked..."

MK: Say in your experience. The President to Reston is one thing. On a regular kind of basis.

RP: I hate to just limit it to foreign affairs, because I've had it in domestic affairs also, as I outlined in the hypothetical case, where the press is a little bit more reasonable. I think, in foreign affairs, it's a lot easier to explain to them why it's important that you can't tell them

something or you try to guide them away, or can they give you an extra twenty-four hours? They understand that more readily, because national security rings all kinds of buzzwords—maybe not the exact same ones in my mind and in your mind—but basically it will say: “American soldiers at risk...”; “American interests at risk...” Someone can get killed. So it’s a lot easier for the press to understand that than trying to explain to them why they should hold off on an EPA story, for example. So, yes, I would say that there’s a little bit more truth to that. Although I think the way things have developed in the last few years, it’s probably becoming less and less so, and the press is almost—look at what happened in Somalia, when they [American news media] were on the beach when the troops landed. Look at when they were in Baghdad [CNN did broadcasts live from a hotel rooftop] when we did the bombings and we couldn’t get them out of there. Who’s to say now?

MK: Do you find that, while you want to be a straight shooter with the press, that you’re dependent for information that you get from White House staff, who may not be equally committed to providing the straight stuff?

RP: Yes. You know the old saying: “We’ve met the enemy and it is us?” Yes. I think there’s a lot of truth in what you’re saying. There’s an awful tendency on the part of policymakers, particularly the NSC staffers—I’m [not] talking about the deputy national security adviser or the national security adviser—to hold onto their information and to regard it as very, very secretive, sensitive—and can’t be shared with the press. That comes from a different side of the world. Where, I have to share things with the press, because I have to explain things to the press.

Since you’re [i.e., the White House 2001 Project] doing a transition job—anyone that may listen to this in the future—I think one of the most important things that any press officer has to undertake is: not only build a good relationship with the press, but he has to work just as hard on building a good relationship with the people on the NSC staff. And that means, basically, talking with them, gaining their trust. So, when you [are] give[n] information, they trust that you know how much to use, and what not to use. Because, their mindset is totally different.

I’ll give you a story on this thing. This goes back to the Reagan years. There was an issue—I forget exactly what missile it was—it was an arms-control issue, and there was a front-page story in the *Washington Post* on this. It’s a morning and we’re going to brief. So I go to the relevant NSC official that deals with this issue and I say, “I need guidance on this.” By guidance we mean: how much is true? how much is inaccurate? Just tell us the facts; we know how to devise a strategy to deal with it. And I gave the guy a copy of the story, and went back to talk to him.

He sat me down and he gave me the story, and each paragraph of that story was marked Secret, Confidential or Top Secret. I said, “What are you doing? This is front-page *Washington Post*. The world knows about this! You’re not going to start telling me, ‘This is Secret?’”

That gives you an idea of how they perceive the information. And their argument is: “Nobody knows that this is Secret, so if you don’t tell them it’s Secret, they won’t know that it’s Secret.”

It’s irrelevant to what I tell them. They’ve read it. They’re going to believe it. Because it’s in the *Washington Post*.

MK: So how did you deal with that, and how did deal with that particular person?

RP: With that particular person, you got all the facts, explained to them why you have to give some of this information out, and then they basically feel comfortable. What you do then, in a situation like that is: when the press pursues it even further—and I don't remember if we did it in this case, but in similar situations, what you would do is—probably have a background information—that that official feels comfortable giving a background briefing, so it's unnamed. That way, it keeps the “secretive” subject, because it's unnamed sources and stuff; so there are ways you could deal with it that way and keep the NSC happy, keep the press happy, and keep your own integrity.

MK: Is there something that you need to do, on a regular basis, with White House staff to try to bring them along, not just when a particular situation arises, but on a regular basis?

RP: Yes.

MK: How do you do that?

RP: Well, I made a point always talk to them in the hallways or anything. It's basically socializing with the NSC staff, either over the lunch table in the dining rooms where many of them would have lunch, to when you get a heads-up on a story, giving them the heads-up, calling them. And they appreciate that. Even when you didn't have a briefing, you just needed information. Calling them so you keep current on affairs—that you don't necessarily have to deal with the press on but you have to know yourself. If you use those two or three methods, I found the press—that the NSC was pretty good.

Here's another key thing for those who may be going into this press thing: it's extremely important, in that position, for the press officer to have the confidence of the national security adviser. The person who deals on Africa only enters that office when dealing with Africa. The person who deals with South America only enters that office when dealing with South America. If the issue is Bosnia, those two people are not going to be there. The only person who has access across-the-board is the press officer. And the NSC staff knows that. And if your principal, the national security adviser, trusts you to sit in on sessions or shares information with you, then that has a ripple effect. That kind of gives the signal to the rest of the staff that this person can't be ostracized because if he or she is ostracized, and it goes to the boss, the boss says, “You have to help out.” So that's very, very important also, in terms of the mechanics of the job.

I always made a point of hanging out in Brent's office every day, just to stop by to say hello. And the NSC staffers would be sitting there to go in, standing there to go in. I would cut the line sometimes, because I had to go see Brent, and Brent would say, “Let Roman in first, before the policy guys come in, because I had an urgent query from the press I have to deal with.” So, when they see that kind of stuff, that's very important. And just to stop by and say hello to the secretaries, and share a piece of candy when he comes out of his office, or something. That I found was very, very important: to have that good relationship with Scowcroft. I thought I had it with him. I enjoyed working with him. He's a great guy. For anyone who goes into that position, the press is one thing, your principal, the national security adviser, is another. And that has ramifications on how the NSC staff itself will view you. But this is the mechanics of the job.

MK: Which I'm interested in, because we sure want to build that. How important was it that Scowcroft had been in the White House before, and had a sense of the press?

RP: I think it was important, because he realized the importance of the press. He remembers very well the [Gerald] Ford "thing" [misstatement] on Poland during the debates of 1976, I guess it was, and how the press took that issue. So he, I think, understood the nature of the press and the role that I could play for him. Scowcroft, however, is a very calm, self-effacing individual who doesn't seek the limelight and therefore didn't regard himself as necessarily having to [go] out there and deal with the press all the time. As a matter of fact, I think the first year we were in office, in the Bush years, he didn't do any TV, or things of that nature. He left it to Jim Baker to do most of the stuff. It was only after the first nine or so months that he started doing some of the TV.

MK: Did he do any regular backgrounders?

RP: Yes. Every Thursday, for twenty minutes, he met [with reporters]. I had a rotating schedule of six or seven groups that came in. Then we would bring in special groups or individual [news]papers that had special requests.

MK: Did he also have a group of individual reporters that he might deal with on a regular basis? Say a *Times* White House correspondent, a *Post* correspondent? Like, say, Ann Devroy?

RP: Each of the national security advisers had two or three people that they themselves would deal with.

[Interruption]

RP: There were a number of press people in the case of Brent Scowcroft, who had a very high-profile before he came into office in 1989, on various advisory boards, and testimony on the Hill, that reporters had relied upon for comments. Michael Gordon, for example, from the *New York Times* is one, and Michael would call him at home directly.

MK: He wouldn't go through Marlin [Fitzwater]?

RP: No. Or through me. Michael would call me; we'd talk on the phone. I'd said, "Michael, I've helped you as much as I can." He says, "Well, I think I'll call Brent tonight." Or he'll tell me the next day, "I called Brent..."—type of stuff. So the press shares that with you. To the best of my knowledge, he never went through Marlin to try to set up something like that. I don't know about Ann Devroy [*Washington Post* reporter] in that situation. But I know Colin Powell, for example, when I worked for Powell in the Reagan years, he had a few people he would return phone calls to, but he would always write me a note or buzz me and say, "I've just spoken to so-and-so, and I didn't tell them anything." So they would try to share so I wouldn't be blind-sided with it.

But, yes, they have their own personal people. In the case of Scowcroft, he was so long out of office, he had built up a reputation, and he had these contacts and relations with press people that he felt almost obligated sometimes to speak with them. And they didn't abuse it.

MK: Did you have any White House staff that, in particular circumstances, misled you in some way, and that you had to deal with it to try to convince them, in the future, not to do so? Say Speakes had the Grenada incident where [John] Poindexter did not give him the straight stuff.

RP: The answer to that is “No” and semi-“Yes.” No, I never had an NSC staffer tell me an outright lie that led me to lie, that I know of. And I would have been caught eventually. So I feel comfortable that all the information—I’ve had NSC staffers tell me, “Don’t tell the press this but I’ll tell you...” type of stuff, and they tell me. So they rely on my judgment. But I’ve never had anyone say, “It was black” when it was actually white, and I was led to say it was black, thrown off the cliff. I’ve never had that.

The closest we came to that was probably in the Iran-Contra debacle which broke in November, back in 1986, the first week in November. Larry Speakes was not getting all the information that he needed to get. At that time I was [not] in my current position; I was still an underling, kind of. This is one of those ironies of history, because I had worked in the Situation Room where we had dealt with [Marine Corps Colonel] Ollie North, hostage situations; we had all the compartmentalized information kind of stuff. And I remember the day the story broke, Speakes was on Air Force One out in California someplace—they were on their way back—and the story about a cake and all this, [Robert] McFarlane and arms. Everybody was laughing.

MK: The key.

RP: Right. The key. I called Air Force One and spoke to Dan Howard and told Dan, “Don’t say anything; be careful what you say.” Dan understood what that meant; watch out; there’s something going on here. That’s the time that Speakes went to Poindexter and got a written statement—but the point was: I remember they came back. Larry Speakes came into the office after they had gotten back from the trip. He came in—this was November and I had just started in July—and I said, “Larry, this Iran story is breaking.” He had a habit—he had a baseball bat in the corner and he’d just pick it up and swing it as he’s talking. I said, “Larry, what do you think?” He said, “Don’t worry about [it]. The story will go away in twenty-four hours.” I said, “Larry, you’ve been at this job a lot longer than I have, but I don’t think this story is going to go away in twenty-four hours.” The reason I sensed that was because I was in the Situation Room so I had an inkling of what had actually been going [on] before I went to the Press Office.

I remember when the issue of [TOW] missiles was coming up and [Speakes] would go to Poindexter’s office and he’d keep me in his office. He’d run back and tell me what Poindexter said and, in order to protect me, he would say, “Just give me a yes or no; am I on the right track?” And I’d say, “I think you need to go back and ask him a little bit more.” That’s how he found out about missiles and things that fly. So, to a great extent, the NSC was not telling us what had actually transpired. That was the only time, I think, in my press experience that I was really faced with something like that. But I was protected because I knew a little bit more than the NSC thought anyone outside of it really knew because I had worked in the Situation Room and we had seen some of these messages and stuff like that. Not that we knew the policy but we had a little bit more of an idea than they would have thought. But Larry was not being told everything at that time.

MK: Just being there, and knowing the individuals: did that make a difference, because you’d have a sense of the range of the kind of things they might or might not do, the range of interests they might have? You could sense who might get themselves into trouble?

RP: In the NSC?

MK: Yes.

RP: Absolutely.

MK: Say, North. When a report comes in that's going to deal with him, you think, "Now there's a possibility."

RP: You always had a sense that someone was running at the mouth too much, or trying to sell themselves a little too much, or trying to sell their view of policy too much. You always had a sense of those individuals, whether it's in the Reagan years or the Bush years. There's always one or two on the NSC that you could say, "Well, you know where this came from" type of stuff.

MK: So, one thing you really have to have a sense of is, in addition to a sense of policy, you have to have a sense of people, because you have to have a sense of what they're like because that in part will—

RP: Some people are very talkative; some people are very quiet and reserved. You get a sense of that immediately. That's why it's important—I think I made a point in the Bush years to go around and introduce myself to all the NSC staffers, if not in person then by phone or something, just to get [a] gauge of them and so they could see who I am. You do need that personal contact just to get an idea. Another way you would do that is eventually somebody would want a backgrounder with that individual so you sat in on the backgrounder. You had your tape recorder to protect him or her and you gauged them sitting there for a half an hour, what kind of person he or she is, how forthcoming they are, how relaxed they are. There's a lot of human study involved in this job, absolutely. It's a twenty-four-hour-a-day job, seven days a week.

MK: What were the hours?

RP: Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

MK: When did you come in? And how did you prepare yourself before you came in? Did you read the papers in the morning? What time did you get in?

RP: Most of the time when I started coming in the *Post* had not been delivered, six-thirty. Sometimes it was there; sometimes it wasn't. I'd usually get in a little before seven a.m., say ten of seven; I would stop in the Situation Room to see what was going on overnight in terms of intelligence, things of that nature. I would pick up a White House news summary and skim through that, see what the print media and other media are reporting for that news cycle; obviously listen to the radio on the way in, also. I would also go up front where Marlin's office is—and I'm sure you've been up there—right outside the door, sometimes Marlin was in, but sometimes he wasn't. Usually, he'd come in around seven-ten, seven-fifteen-ish. Helen Thomas would usually be there, and some of the other reporters, and they would start peppering me with questions: "Well, what about this?" So, from that amount of sources, I usually got an idea of what was going on. A lot of times what I would do is go out the door there, into the hallway. Not down to the Press Office, but where you would go to the Roosevelt Room. And I would sit there in the hallway. Marlin would wander in around seven-ten, seven-fifteen, and I would say, "Marlin, here are the issues. This is what Helen is asking already."

MK: Who else would be in, besides Helen?

RP: There would be—

MK: I guess TV people would be in.

RP: Well, the camera people, but not necessarily Sam Donaldson. But the crews would be in.

MK: But some of them, did they do stand-ups then, at seven, for the morning news programs?

RP: It would be—not too many. I can't recall too many of the Sam Donaldsons being there. CNN would obviously be there.

MK: Say Ann Compton, instead of Sam?

RP: Yes. I always keep thinking of Sam. By then, if it's a hot issue, I would have made a phone call to Richard Boucher at the State Department, who was a spokesman, and talk to him to see what the facts of the situation were, or what State might be saying preliminarily, or we'd try to work out something; or I would run over to Brent's office and say, "Brent, this is hot; Marlin's going to be seeing the press. What do you think we should be saying?" So I had all these sources. And, if I was lucky, the NSC staff would be in by then, also.

MK: So this was around seven?

RP: This was between seven and seven-fifteen, seven-twenty. So, when Marlin walked in the door, I told him in the hallway, or I walked him in to his office. So he knew the issue, which he probably already knew listening to the radio, but he knew what the facts were, what Scowcroft would want to say or not say, what State is saying, what Boucher and I might have worked out, or not have worked out, that could be said.

Then, Marlin would usually come out, and go to the senior staff [meeting], which was at seven-thirty. After that he'd come out and give a little statement; it's ten to eight, he's already good to go. Sometimes before senior staff he would say something. The good thing is, if he held off until after senior staff, that gave me an extra twenty minutes to half an hour to keep doing what I was doing, plus he would have Scowcroft in that senior staff meeting to go over an issue, plus the Chief of Staff. Then we'd compare notes and he'd open that door and walk out into the little alcove before he went into his office and preached to his guys.

MK: The "gaggle" [informal press briefing].

RP: Yes. By ten of eight he had it and by five after eight it's on the wires and the State Department knows what the White House is saying. But that's, basically, how the day started.

Then, after that, I would go back to my office and I talked to the two staffers I had, plus my secretary—Bill Harlow who was from the Pentagon, Navy, and Doug Davidson who was from USIA assisted me. We'd all go over to Marlin's staff meeting and we'd go in depth on all the foreign stories we thought [were] out there, and all the domestic stories, what would be [inaudible], what would be pool coverage, what the President would be doing, and that kind of stuff. So we'd run down that. Then we'd prepare for the briefing.

MK: How did you all prepare? Say in the NSC area, how did you divide it up?

RP: I had the world divided functionally and geographically between Doug and Bill. Then I would take the high-pressure issues.

MK: How would they do it geographically and functionally?

RP: I forget what the exact breakdown was, but I think Bill had arms control and Europe. So, if there was an issue of: "What is our policy toward Euro-dollars?" just off the top of my head, that would be Bill's job. So he'd have an hour or an hour and forty-five minutes to talk to either Treasury or Commerce, the State Department, the NSC staffer, put the question down, write up an answer, put down the possible follow-up question, and write down an answer. We'd sit down and review it; then we'd go over to Marlin's office and Marlin would have a stack of papers on foreign policy issues.

MK: For each one, did you try to get it within a page?

RP: Absolutely.

MK: So you'd have a page on each one.

RP: Yes. So Doug might have two or three pages and Bill might have two or three. Then I might have two or three—depending on the big issues: "Is it true that [Mikhail] Gorbachev is going to have a summit with Bush?" That would fall on me. "I have to talk to Scowcroft; I have to get this all lined up, what we have to do." We'd put it all together; we'd go to his office and he'd do his domestic thing, he'd do his foreign policy thing. On the foreign policy thing he'd look through and say, "This is great," or, "I don't understand this." And then we'd explain it to him even more.

What we would do a lot of times is, after we did the briefing—and, if it was a foreign policy issue, it would fall to me and my guys—is as he was getting ready and putting his jacket on, we would pepper him with questions, and then he would respond. Then I'd say, "You don't want to say that." and he'd say, "Why not?" And I'd explain it to him; he'd say, "Okay, I won't say it this way but I'll say it this way." That would go on for five or six minutes, just banter back and forth, just like you and I are. I'd throw questions at him. I'd say, "Marlin, what's the response to Gorbachev?" And he'd say, "X, Y and Z." "No, you don't want to say that. You want to be positive and send a signal, things like that." And he'd say, "I don't think we want to be positive, and we'd debate why and that kind of stuff. Like we had the debates about calling him a drugstore cowboy.

MK: He talked about that.

RP: So we'd go back and forth on things like that.

MK: He said you all tried to get him not to do it but he just couldn't help himself—by the end of the week.

RP: Sometimes you have to do that kind of stuff. But we would banter that way. Then he'd be prepared for his briefing; he'd go out. He'd have his little sheets so he knew the parameters within which he had to stay. Plus all the verbal stuff. Marlin is very gifted. He could understand it very quickly and grab it. And he could give you a very, very good answer in the Briefing Room. He was very gifted in that respect. That's why I enjoyed working with him, because he could internalize it very quickly. We would sit—there were chairs along the side there, as you saw.

MK: There still are.

RP: I guess they're still there.

MK: The same three; probably the same stuffing, even if new fabric. They just now have aluminum ladders all along the wall.

RP: Do they? And he would do the press briefing. When he would get stuck on a foreign issue or domestic, he would turn to us for support. A lot of times he used us as a foil to a great extent. If it was a foreign issue, he'd say, "I really don't know," and the press would say, "Does Roman know?" And he'd say, "Roman, do you know?" I would start giving an answer and he'd say, "Well, I don't think that sounds right. He doesn't know what's he's talking about. I think I better look into this one."

So he'd lose the train of thought; it was his way of getting the questioner off the question and not giving the answer and giving us more time. So he would use us as foils a lot of times—at our expense sometimes—but that goes with the nature of the job.

MK: In the State Department, the briefer has a notebook, and no matter who it is, it seems that has been a tradition, and they will really go through that notebook. At the White House, it has been less so, although—in foreign policy—it seems that one sticks to the notebook much more.

RP: There is no notebook.

MK: Well, you have the sheets of paper.

RP: You've got the sheets of paper and, 99 per cent of the time, Marlin would not read the sheet of paper. He would just read it and then paraphrase it, unless it was something like: "Should Jerusalem be the capital of Israel?", or, "Is Taiwan China?" Then he would try to read verbatim. But Marlin, as I mentioned, is very articulate, easygoing, and has a very good, retentive memory, and was able to handle those situations without being totally scripted. So he would have those as backups, if he got stuck, but I found at least that most of his comments were paraphrasing stuff that we had given him.

MK: He said that he generally liked to have an opening statement. That it was an advantage. That he tried, in preparing for a briefing, to know five particular points and five things about those five points, and he figured he couldn't lose in a briefing if he did that.

RP: What he would do in the sheets that we gave him is he would mark what he would want to say. It may not necessarily be in the order we had given him. He has big handwriting, so he would mark it. While we might have three or four questions, he might lead with question number three, either response to three, and just move it around the way he thought it would flow better. So he preempts questions he thought—but that's a standard thing of anyone I briefed. I'd like to have an opening statement.

MK: [Joe] Lockhart tends not to. Something that's happening now—it's a different kind of situation, in a way, that the White House is trying to move information all day long to such an extent that by the time the briefing comes they've already given out a great deal. So there's an informal meeting, the gaggle, which is moved from outside—where Marlin talked—to Helen and Terry Hunt and others. Now, that's inside. Any regular day the press secretary must have, whether it was [Mike] McCurry or Lockhart, at least thirty people at a

- minimum. So you're moving things that way. And one of the things they've done, as well is—in order to get a story to go for two days—they give it as an exclusive to the *Times* or the *Post* and they get it. Then the other news organizations get it. So it moves for a couple of days. So there's an advantage in taking that kind of strategy. What happens is, by the time of the briefing, you don't have anything, and so it tends to be responsive to what reporters have.
- RP: You could always have something. Marlin would—a lot of times—just do the President's calendar. I always led off with the President's calendar for the day: "At two o'clock he's going to see the Thanksgiving turkey...." Anything.
- MK: They do that in the gaggle, doing the schedule. Also in the gaggle today, some of the kind of negotiation that you all probably could do in a regular briefing—. Because it wasn't on television now, in a way, has to be done in the gaggle, because it becomes such a formal thing.
- RP: We had it for camera but not for sound.
- MK: It was just the beginning.
- RP: Just the first three or four minutes and then the cameras went off after that, also. There's a big difference when you're doing sound and camera, a big difference. Marlin did like to start off—anyone that briefs, I've found, likes to start off [with a statement]. It gets you a little bit into the mood; it calms the press down. They have to sit down and listen, because you might say something important. You never know. So they try to listen; they get settled down. Everyone is more relaxed. You get the first few words out, so your jitters are out and you're in control now. The other thing is: if you get a statement out on an issue you know they're going to be asking about, then you've got the comfort of going back and saying: "I just answered that in my statement," or, when the transcript comes out, you can read it again. You say it in a nice way, but you're basically saying the same thing: "Go back to my statement." So that helps immensely, rather than having to wait for a question to come at you. That's always a comforting position to be in. So, yes, Marlin did have the statements. I think it's a calming effect for the press, a calming down. It seemed to work.
- MK: Did you generally go by topic? Even though there are going to be a lot of people having a lot of different pressures in a lot of different areas, did you try to get everybody to finish off one area before you went in to another?
- RP: Questions would start—let's say the question would be on arms control, for example. If there were three or four questions, you'd keep going. But if somebody raised their hand and said: "About the budget now..." we would usually say: "Hold on, are there any more arms control questions?" We would ask, and people would say: "We're done; let's move on to something else."
- MK: Did you ever try, or have a sense of playing the room; that if there was an issue that you all had to deal with, that you prefer not dealing with, and you're getting hounded, that then you could call on some people that would have predictable kinds of questions?
- RP: Absolutely. I'm sure when you spoke to Marlin, he probably laid out the whole scenario for you. You always looked—two ways. One, as I've said, "I've already answered that question." You hope that nips it in the bud. And then, you'd always look to the back of the

room for Sarah McClendon or someone else, Trudy Feldman, to ask a question that's totally irrelevant to anything. Sarah would always raise her hand: "How about this, this and this?" I'm saying this out of admiration. Of course, no one would understand what the issue was, [not] Marlin nor I, nor the press. Usually, those reporters go on for a while trying to explain what the issue was in their question. So that was a good way—.

MK: Like Miquel, the guy from Cuba?

RP: Miquel. Or Lester Kinsolving, his questions.

MK: Not so long ago at one of the East Room press conferences, Clinton called on Miquel.

RP: He did?

MK: Yes.

RP: He did ask about Cuba, I assume?

MK: Well, he mentioned Cuba. It was hard to understand just what he was talking about. So the President was trying to deal with it, but he's looking around the room for other questions and there was a reporter, Bob Deans, from Cox, who raised his hand and said, "Can I follow up on his question?" And Clinton laughed so hard: he said, "That's so good that I'm going to call on you...." Because nobody could quite figure out—I guess you always have those.

RP: There's always a few people—god rest her soul—like Naomi, who would be there. She would always be there: "Marlin, what about this?" So you're exasperated with the hard questions, you go to one of those reporters.

MK: Of course, if you didn't answer it right she might get after you with her umbrella.

RP: That's true. She'll hound you with her little cart, starting running up the ramp toward the press office.

MK: How long would the briefings, typically, last? And how many people would be there?

RP: What are there, forty-eight seats? I've forgotten how many there are.

MK: Yes.

RP: And usually, I'd say—

MK: Were they usually full?

RP: Not all the time. On a typical day, they weren't always full, and you'd have other people sitting there who didn't have seats. So there'd be five or six seats empty, I'd say. I think the average briefing was twenty minutes. I don't know what Marlin's recollection is, but you could have some of those good old ones on Iran-Contra that went an hour, forty-five minutes, fifty minutes. But I'd say, over the length of a year—twenty, twenty-five minutes a briefing would be.

MK: The Iran-Contra ones and some of the other ones—let's just say in Iran-Contra—. Did you all feel that it was going to be important at some place in the White House to just let

- reporters let it out, and keep asking and hammering, so that it was best done in a briefing and best done in the press office—because they needed to vent a lot of steam?
- RP: Well, I don't recall any particular meeting with that kind of particular strategy, because obviously the only point of contact—
- MK: Just regularly in the briefing, so that Marlin did not try to cut off those questions, but just let them go.
- RP: Yes. We just let them go. Those things were an hour every day, it seems, at the height of Iran-Contra. Absolutely. What that did was helped us also, in terms of what they were interested in, what was the line of thought, what individual they may be after, what angle they were after. So that was informative for us, also. We understood that was a briefing where you couldn't say: "That's enough!" because they just had to vent themselves, all their adrenaline, in trying to get as much information as possible.
- MK: Was it helpful, within the White House, when those kinds of briefings come and everybody in the White House, the staff people that you're dealing with regularly, see that kind of briefing? That they have much more of a sense of how important it is as an issue, even though they wish it were not, that it becomes somewhat easier for you to get information?
- RP: No. My general feeling about this, or view of this, was two-fold. Anyone that was on the policy side and listened to this would say, "Gee, I wouldn't put up with that stuff! How could they hound you and be so rough on you? I wouldn't tell those guys anything. Who are they?" Well, that's very easy for you to say. You're behind closed doors—type of stuff. But it was very seldom—. They would say, "You did a good job...." But very seldom, "I can understand what your job is about, and now I've walked in your shoes. I'm going to help you from now on." No. I didn't get that kind of stuff.
- Maybe Marlin was lucky, but I didn't get that kind of feedback. It's a whole different world. The policy guys just don't see it. They see the press as an adversary to a great extent and, when the press is meticulous about its job trying to get a story, they see it as an attack and the first inclination is to put a wall up around yourself. The first wall they want to throw up is you: "Go out there and tell them to get lost. Tell them nothing." Well, you can't do that. Unless you've actually done it, I've found that most of the policy guys didn't have that empathy that, "Wow, you've really helped us a lot"—type stuff. They'll thank you, don't get me wrong. But I don't think they have a feeling that this is something that really has to be done.
- MK: Did they learn that over the course of time?
- RP: Some of them do, over a course of time. They learn that, and of course some of them that learn it very well, start doing their own backgrounding—without telling you.
- MK: So that creates a whole series of issues?
- RP: That's right. That creates a whole series of issues, and you wake up in the morning and a high White House official said X, Y, and Z and the Chief of Staff wants to know who it was. I'm not going to go looking for who it was.
- MK: Will the Chief of Staff want to find out? What are they going to do in trying to—?

- RP: Whether it's the Chief of Staff—one of the first things is something that is unauthorized. What's unauthorized in Washington? Something comes out, a story: "Who did that? Find out the person who did that. Find the person that did it." And usually the person that did that is pretty high-level anyway. It's not some "munchkin" running around that says, "I want to talk to the press." And nothing really comes of it. I don't think anyone—I think they might have caught one or two people, and nothing was ever done to them anyway. They were NSC officials, if I recollect. I can't recollect exactly, but nothing was ever done.
- MK: What about when the President wants to track down who released something, or who was talking to the press? Was that something that would make its way down to you?
- RP: Well, it would make its way down to Marlin, and I can't remember any specific events. But, generically—and you might have spoken to Marlin on this; you can correct me if I'm wrong here—Marlin's view of these kinds of situations was, whether it was the president or the national security adviser or the secretary of State: They're always going to be ticked off on a story. Marlin's view was: you always tell them, "Yes, sir, we'll look into it," knowing full well there's nothing you can do about it. Usually they forget about it, anyway. They're too busy to be, "Did you find out?" So Marlin, I think in the majority of cases, took the phone call and said, "Uh huh," and let it die its own death, to a great extent. I don't know if you've spoken to him about that, but basically, that's it.
- MK: It's like, what happens if a president has an idea on a policy that probably is not too wise.
- RP: "That's a great idea, sir; we'll look into that." That's basically what it was.
- MK: In looking at the operation of the office—and we were looking at time, too, when you came in and how it worked—we got to the briefing. What happens after the briefing?
- RP: After the briefing, we would go back to Marlin's office and do damage control assessment: "Was there anything wrong I said out there on the foreign policy side or the domestic side?" "No." "Are there any other follow-up questions you see coming on this?" "Yes." "No." "Is there anybody that I need to talk to who didn't get the right spin or idea because of the way the question asked?" That kind of stuff. If there was an affirmative response to any of those, then we would see what we had to do next. Many times, if we would come back and say, "Marlin, you misspoke on this one issue...." "I think we're going to have a problem here because you made it sound sharper than we really wanted...." He would go back out to the press and light up his cigar and say, "Hey, I know I answered a question, but I want to make sure you understand what I was trying to say." And that type of stuff. So he'd kind of schmooz them and try to walk it back a little bit. So he would do that. If there was something pressing, we would call and give a report to the relevant person. If it was foreign policy, I would walk back, or he would call Scowcroft and say, "Brent, I just gave the briefing. They're really after this X, Y and Z issue so you better give some thought about what we're going to be doing on this." He'd notify the policy guys.
- MK: How quickly would the briefing transcript get around to people?
- RP: Usually within an hour or an hour-and-a-half we had a transcript, a draft that would be looked over by Marlin, and then the final would come out after that. But usually within an hour-and-a-half.
- MK: How broadly would it go around the White House?

RP: All of the West Wing—

MK: Did it go electronically?

RP: No, it was hand-carried. These are the days of paper still, which is fine. It was hand-carried. My office would get one; all the West Wing people would get one, to get an idea. NSC officials. They wouldn't read it, but they'd get transcripts. That would take place. Then the rest of the day was used up answering telephone inquiries, setting up the briefings—

MK: The special briefings?

RP: Yes. Having reporters come in. Then, usually Marlin and I would sit with the domestic counterpart and catch the early evening news, at six-thirty out of Baltimore, and see what the stories were going to be like. If they were okay, fine. If they weren't okay, we'd call the reporters from that agency, ABC, CNN, wherever, and say, "Gee, I think you got this wrong..." or, "You might want to deal with this issue..." A lot of times the President would stop in around ten or seven or something like that, on his way back to the mansion from the Oval Office, and ask how the stories are coming for that night. Marlin: everything's okay; no problems, or, they're hot on this issue or this issue seems to have died out. So we would chitchat. So the day usually ended up about seven-thirty-ish in the evening. Then you'd go home, shower, and come back.

MK: Did you get many calls at home?

RP: Yes. Two types of calls. Each one of us, except Marlin, was assigned press duty week.

MK: How many people were duty officers?

RP: I'd say about a dozen, off the top of my head, if I recall correctly. About a dozen. So you'd have it about four times a year. For a lot of the younger people on the totem pole, it was a chance to get quoted in the newspapers, so it was nice; but they dreaded it also. But outside of that, I don't think there was a day or night that I didn't get a call on foreign policy issues.

MK: Was it something breaking, or would it be background information?

RP: Both. Somebody would be doing a story—a lot of times it would be a colleague [for example] for the *L.A. Times*. Someone at the *L.A. Times* would be doing a story, but they don't know me personally, so they'd have one of the White House guys who knows me personally call and say, "Joe Blow is doing this story but he would appreciate any help you can give him..."—that kind of stuff. It would be those kinds of things. It would be, "We just got this story; we're going to go with it. Can you tell us if it's true or false?" Those were the horrendous nights, because then you'd have to call Marlin and say, "Marlin, we've got a problem here. There's this story breaking. Do you know anything about it?" "No." He'll say, "I'll call [John] Sununu; you call Scowcroft, and we'll get together and get the story." Marlin and I would have to talk and get guidance written up. Then I would make a statement to the reporter, either "No comment" or something, whatever the issue was. There's always something breaking: "Korea did this," or "Japan did this," or "Brazil did this, what is your response?" And the wires are the most notorious for that. They're constantly trying to update their stories. So they would call. And I'm sure for every call I got, Marlin got three or four. By no means—absolutely.

- Your life is not your own in that job. When you're doing the press duty, a lot of times what I would do—if there was nothing pressing going on in the world—it was just these calls people would make every ten minutes: you just tell the White House operator to stack them up, like four or five, and then you'd take them every hour rather than being nicked and dimed every twelve minutes. So you'd do that.
- MK: But they'd have to have a good sense of—
- RP: Yes. You have to say, “Unless a cabinet officer has stolen something, don't call me. If it's just for reaction on the latest budget figures, just stack them up.” But the White House operators were pretty good about that.
- MK: What about Saturdays? What did you do on Saturdays?
- RP: Well, on Saturdays—in the Reagan years—we had the radio address. I remember coming in for that quite a bit on Saturdays.
- MK: Was it done on Saturdays?
- RP: Yes.
- MK: Well, it's often taped on Fridays in this [Clinton] Administration.
- RP: The hard copy was released on Saturdays and when he was at the Camp, Reagan, he would do it live from camp a lot of times. I remember being up there once with him for the radio address. He'd sit in a conference [room] up there and just read it. He'd hold his watch and he'd say a double-spaced typed page was a minute and half. He knew it was a minute and a half. One time he held his watch like this, he put it halfway up [his] wrist sideways; he'd look at it and then when it was a minute and a half he'd look up to say, “See, I told you.” But we'd have to release the hard copy of the radio address and it would play in the briefing room. Then, after that, you hung around for a while and answered some questions, and left.
- MK: In looking at the radio address, because Reagan was the one that developed it, do you have any sense of what he saw the advantages of the radio address as being, and then what advantages did you all see in both administrations—of the radio address?
- RP: It gave the President a format to address an issue without getting questions. Obviously, Reagan used it a few times during Iran-Contra to speak on [Caspar] Weinberger and [George] Shultz without being exposed to questions. So it's an opportunity to get your story out and at the same time not being exposed to the pressures of questions. It helped also set an agenda, quite possibly, for the Sunday morning shows—to a certain extent—because the President has made a statement or a proposal and this would be the lead for the Sunday newspapers sometimes; if not the lead, it's some place in the forward sections. Invariably, someone will pick it up in one of the talk shows.
- A lot of these radio addresses were inconsequential, let's be honest about it. They weren't earth-shattering policy things; but in some cases, they did set an agenda for the news cycle over the weekend for you.
- MK: Did you ever look at how they played out at the state and local level, in those newspapers?
- RP: I did not. That might have been the communications office, or Marlin.

- MK: It seemed to me, one of the advantages of those in 1998, for the [Bill] Clinton White House, was while the [Monica] Lewinsky story was running everywhere on the front pages of the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* - say in the *Wilmington News Journal* in Delaware, where I come from. The radio address was always in the "A" section and it might be on page two or three. So it would have the President talking about a policy; it wouldn't have Lewinsky in it, and it usually didn't have much criticism from the opposition.
- RP: This goes to a broader question though, because this happened in the Bush Administration also. I think every administration finds that the White House press is very insular and single-minded, as we spoke about earlier, in terms of what they want in the news. I think as cable TV and access grew and satellite transmissions grew, we even started in the Bush Administration to do a lot of local TV and radio stuff—interviews. Because that took us out of Washington, basically. And I think the Clinton Administration perfected it to an art, to a great extent. By the same token, presidential travel as Clinton has demonstrated in his case—if you go to some place out in Iowa, population five thousand, and Air Force One lands—that's the story! It isn't Lewinsky. "What are the chances of a President of the United States ever coming to this town again?" So your whole news cycles for that area—and it's going to be forced on national TV also—is the President getting off Air Force One, being met by some curly-haired girls with flowers, and the Mayor and bands and stuff, very presidential. I think it's nothing new to the Clinton White House, or the Bush White House; I think a lot of people realize that. The technology, from the Bush years on, has made a lot of this more used—I'm not being very articulate at this point—more used. And I think the Clinton Administration has leap-frogged Washington to a great extent—or tried to anyhow, absolutely. But we did that in the Bush Administration, also.
- MK: You all had a studio in the Old Executive Office Building. How often did the President use it, and how often did other people use it for local interviews?
- RP: I don't know the answer to that one. I never got involved in setting those up. That was Marlin. I didn't do the mechanics of this kind of stuff. I know what you're talking about; I just can't recollect.
- MK: I remember seeing it at the very end of the Bush Administration, the set. It was not a very large room. That set had the Barbara Bush part, that was next to the George Bush part.
- RP: I've been in there with him as he was getting made up and stuff and other things. I know the question: "How many times did he do it?" I just don't know. I never got involved in that side of it. Obviously, very little foreign policy. And unless I was assigned specifically to domestic issues, I really didn't get involved in the mechanics of setting up the interview, those kinds of interviews. I did the foreign policy interviews and, obviously, press conferences, if he was going to have any.
- MK: Can you talk about both of those, setting up the foreign policy interviews? How would you decide who he would speak with, and how often?
- RP: We didn't have that many, but basically I used to do briefings at the foreign press center. Once a week I'd go over and give an on-the-record-for-sound-and-camera interview to the foreign press. U.S. domestic press could attend, but could not ask questions or report on it because it was [not] for them. U.S. press really didn't attend; once a year one U.S. press person attended.

MK: Where was the Center located?

RP: In the National Press Building; I forget, it was the eighth floor or something. That press is credentialed to the White House, and they always wanted access with the President. We would do a number of things for them, whether it was in the Reagan years or the Bush years. I don't remember how many we did in the Bush years, if any, in terms of written—sometimes they would submit written questions and the President would give written responses for them. That was mostly during the Reagan years. In the Bush years, I remember at least on one occasion where I did get a group of them together—I think this was the trip to South America. I got a group of South American reporters together in the Roosevelt Room, and he met with them and spoke with them and answered questions. But those were few and very far in between.

MK: Did the White House press corps object to that?

RP: They'd love to have been in there, but what we did was, when we traveled to those countries, we released the transcripts to our press, also, so they had the transcripts. So they would get an embargoed transcript, so they'd know what the President said in those situations. They were covered that way. The only problem was they couldn't ask the questions. So we did try to make use of the foreign press in that sense. Since the foreign press was my bailiwick, I don't think we did enough of it because the emphasis was on the domestic press. We did as many as we could, and the reason for that was they set a tone for the stories, so that when we arrived there, our press had to report on something he had already said because they had the transcripts and things like that. So that gave our press something to do, or report on. It also set a good tone in the country we arrived in, to see that the President of the United States had said "X, Y, and Z." So we did a lot of work, but not [as] much as I would have liked to.

MK: How many of them did you do, do you think?

RP: Don't ask me. I have no idea. You're really pressing your luck here.

MK: On your once-weekly meeting with foreign press, what did you see coming out of those? Did you ever look at their copy?

RP: I always got—yes. Some of them would give me copies, particularly the Mexican copy, because of the relationship between the United States and Mexico. They would send me copies of the stories. I speak Spanish, so I was able to read the stories and find out what was going on. Their line of questioning was very specific: they asked only about things pertinent to their continent and country. That's it. You could have the greatest arms negotiation going in the world; if it was a guy from Chile and he wanted to know about a poison grape scare or something; that's all he wanted to know. I'm just using that as an example. He couldn't care less about the missiles and stuff. That's why I loved them. "Can you tell me about salmon in Chile...," or something, or "...grapes in Chile—what the American view of that is?" It was fine.

MK: What kind of preparation did you do for that meeting? Did you have clips that you regularly looked at from those papers?

RP: No. I would usually call the head of the press center or, if I didn't have a chance to call ahead of time, I would walk in and meet with him beforehand, and he'd tell me who's in attendance: "There's an Israeli reporter so you're going to get Israeli stuff..."; "...there's an

- African reporter, so you're going to get Africa stuff"; or, "...there's a Soviet reporter, so you're going to get some summit stuff." "Okay. I got you." And then we'd just go in and do it. I'd call on them.
- MK: So there was nothing that you had to do that was particularly special, to prepare for it?
- RP: In terms of preparation? No, because the preparation would have been done during the course of the day, leading up to Marlin's briefing. And, sometimes, the questions were based on Marlin's briefing: "Can you give us any more information?" Of course, those were the easiest ones: "No, I can't. As Marlin said..." and you'd just repeat what Marlin said. No specific—sometimes they would come up with questions like, "Can you raise the quota on goods?" I don't know the answers to some of this stuff. So you'd just have to take the question and say, "I'll get back to you."
- MK: The technique of people providing their stories to you or their practice of doing so in foreign policy, foreign reporters—what about domestically? Say a reporter from the *Dallas Morning News*, the press office is not going to get that paper. Maybe they'll get some items for the news summary, but people may not know what stories they've written. Or, say, somebody from the *Baltimore Sun*. Would they drop—if a reporter who was a White House reporter was working for some while on a story, would they generally give a copy to the press office, to you all, that you know about?
- RP: A story that's already run?
- MK: Yes. A story that they did, that they would like the White House to know about.
- RP: Trudy Feldman would always give her story. I'm sure Marlin told you that. Trudy would always give her story from the *Daily News* or the *New York Post* or wherever it was from. She would give her story. I can't recall, off the top of my head, those kinds of situations. There were instances, though, where—as they're writing a story—they would send it to you to show what the angle is so you could help them with the story.
- MK: And sort of warn them if something was not right?
- RP: Yes. This is egregiously out of line here. Sometimes you can't deal with it on the phone too much. Or they would send you an early copy of a story that's already been okayed. Now, you have all those modern gadgets. Before, you got it printed in hard copy; they had it on their wire service; they'd send you a copy of it as a courtesy, so you see what's coming out in hard-copy newspaper. I had instances of that, but I don't recall anybody saying, "This ran two days ago, maybe you missed it." Our news summary [a clip sheet] was pretty good on getting the newspapers. I'm sure you've seen the news summaries. It pretty much covered everything. I can't recollect off-hand; Marlin might have been getting some of those papers.
- MK: How did you learn the differences on what you could say? For example, say on a story that a reporter brings to you, you couldn't tell him things to add to his story. But, on the other hand, you could say, "You might want to work on that second paragraph, or search around a little more on that paragraph."
- RP: That's exactly how we would say it sometimes.
- MK: How do you learn that kind of thing? How you do that, of what you can and can't do? In a way, it's almost a group of tacit understandings of what some of the rules are there.

RP: First of all, there were negatives, and there were positives. You could either add to a story, which I didn't mind at times—saying, “You forgot some points here,” or, “Your story would be fuller....” Or negative, saying, “This is really off the wall, and I'll tell you why.” So it worked both ways. I operated under the personal notion of full disclosure, to have the reporter have, without giving away “state” secrets or things of that nature, as much information as possible. Because I felt that made a better story for us; built a trust by the reporter and me personally, and in my office, and as a result of that gave me more credibility in the future with that reporter. If I needed something deleted, I could argue.

So I always operated on the notion to have the parameters as wide as possible. I can't tell you how you learn that. It seems logical to do business that way because, first of all, you're building your credibility, you're building trust and you have something in the bank for the future. Many times I've had to tell a reporter, “Don't do that; don't print that; you've got to help me out on this one,” and they say, “Okay, we'll take care of you.”

MK: What kind of circumstances would that be on? Can you think of any?

RP: Well, I can give you a generic example that you'll recall very quickly: “Air Sununu” stories. [Stories about Bush Administration Chief of Staff John Sununu using government aircraft for personal business.] [General Brent] Scowcroft, I think, took one or two flights in a similar vein; they could have been considered personal. But I had cultivated the press very assiduously on his behalf and [it] worked very nicely, and as far as I know his name didn't creep up [negatively] in any stories. But you know what happened to John Sununu.

MK: Yes.

RP: In those kinds of things—if I had more time to think about it, I'm sure I could think of specific examples. But that's the kind of thing I'm trying to tell you. You shared, “Brent did X, Y and Z, but you also forgot A, B, C.” That kind of stuff. That, I found, built a credibility and protected you when the going got tough, because they felt that you've been so good to them—Mike McCurry was a classic case. When Mike spoke on—I forget which issue—it was about a year into his job. What was the issue? And there was a story that he shot himself in his foot, his credibility—. What was the issue? You should know this; you're doing research.

MK: Which one? He came in in 1995, 1996.

RP: It was about a year, year-and-a-half into the job and there were the stories about he's going to have to resign because of his credibility, and yet he survived, and everybody forgave him—because he had been so outgoing and forthcoming. It's the same rationale. Check your files; I'm sure it will come out. You'll walk down the staircase and say, “I remember.” But look up in McCurry's file.

MK: There was one, although he was on vacation at the time, on whether he had said that the President would sign a bill to pay the legal expenses for Billy Dale's {travel office figure} lawyers.

RP: I don't know which one it was, but there [was] a spate of stories about his credibility, and he survived very nicely.

MK: In that one, he said he had leaned too far forward on that, saying that the President had said he'd sign it. But reporters, almost to a person, felt that the President had said it, and that just simply somebody had to walk the plank and that—

RP: That could have been the story. Anyway, he walked out of it very nicely. And that's basically what I'm trying to say. The more forthcoming you are—and of course, you have to protect yourself with certain rules. You don't do everything “on-the-record.” You do “background,” “deep-background” type of situations.

There's a funny story—at least I consider it funny. This was during the Reagan Administration. There was a *Washington Post* reporter, who shall remain nameless—just to protect that reporter—who was doing a story on hostage release. In that story, you have me quoted by name; in that story you have - I think - a “senior administration official” quoted. I'd have to check my files; I think I kept the story. And then you have a person with knowledge of the issue—deep, deep background. And that person was me in all three cases. So you have to throw the parameters out to help the reporter but you also have to know at what level—on the record the parameter is this big; on background, it's this big; on deep background, it's this big.

MK: Where did you learn it?

RP: On the job. You just do it and find out. I can't explain it. I think you learn it mostly on the job by listening to guys like Marlin or Speakes when they briefed but mostly by kind of feel, what you feel is right or wrong. Let me put it this way: I can tell you where I didn't learn it much easier than where I learned it. I didn't learn it from books; I didn't learn it from any one single individual. You just kind of learned it on the job. I'm sure there probably were a lot of mistakes before I really got it down to what I considered a comfortable science that I could deal with reporters on this level.

MK: Having served in two administrations, what did you see as the continuities and what did you see as the differences as far as the way in which the press operations worked and the inter-relationships?

RP: The continuity is basically the importance of the press. It helped to have Marlin as the boss in both instances. We realized the importance of the press and the importance of the press in getting the President's agenda out, and even shaping that agenda. That was very much there.

The major difference between the two administrations I saw in terms of the emphasis that the principal, in this case Reagan and Bush, put on how they should deal with the press. Reagan was more—I don't say this in a pejorative term—malleable in terms of—you've heard the scripts and things like that. We had elaborate East Room press conferences where he'd walk down the red carpet and look very presidential. He liked that kind of stuff and I think the people that dealt with him liked to do that kind of stuff. Bush tended to be less scripted. He liked off-the-cuff comments. He liked to walk into the press briefing room and hold his news conference. I think during Bush we only had one East Room press conference, if I'm not mistaken.

MK: There certainly weren't many.

RP: I think there was only one. Everything else was either in room 450 or off-the-cuff talking to the press or impromptu or, even if it was scheduled, it was in the briefing room.

MK: What were the differences say in the outcome of a press conference and the kind of publicity it gets—depending on its venue? If you have a press conference in the briefing room, what kind of treatment is it going to get even in print, not just television, as opposed to—?

RP: I'm of the belief that, whether it was in the East Room or in the briefing room, you got the same kind of coverage. You still got the same kind of coverage. The difference in the East Room was it gave you the visual effect of the President being very presidential. That was less so in the briefing room because in the briefing room it was very informal. It did work to your advantage sometimes when you had a president there looking dignified and you had people yelling; the East Room was a little more dignified. They yelled but they stayed in their little chairs and that kind of stuff. So I think in terms of press coverage, it didn't make a difference. In terms of the visuals, I think, the East Room type of setting that Reagan had gave the American public a sense of the presidency a little bit more than we did in the briefing room appearances. And I think that's important also, to a certain extent. But Reagan was geared to that kind of stuff. Bush is more relaxed about that kind of stuff.

MK: What kind of preparations were done for press conferences and for different types of press conferences?

RP: In the Reagan years there were two things that we did. Number one, we prepared a briefing book for the President which basically had major issues in bullets—kind of apartheid in South Africa?—three points he should make. Usually what the President did is take that up to Camp David with him every Friday afternoon and study it or review it during the course of the weekend. Then a day or two before the press conference we'd have two days of mock briefings with President Reagan. We'd hold that in the family theater in the East Wing of the White House. Each day we'd have domestic and foreign. One day we'd do domestic first and then foreign; the next day we'd do foreign first and then domestic, that kind of stuff. You would have the senior staff and sometimes a relevant cabinet member come in and sit in the theater seats there. The press officers, including myself, would sit at a table; the President would stand at a podium actually, and we'd ask him questions.

MK: Did you ask him as certain people?

RP: No.

MK: Did anybody try to be Sam Donaldson?

RP: No. We just asked him questions. I tended to be a little bit more tenacious because I would always interject, interrupt him or ask a follow-up question to try to stumble him. So you had those preparations for President Reagan. He handled those very, very nicely.

For President Bush usually what it involved was Marlin would say give me a list of the top ten questions, for example, or top five foreign policy questions that the President could expect.

MK: Where would you get them from? From the briefing?

RP: From the briefing that day or from what the press was asking or just what I felt was in the air with the press and from talking with the State Department and all. Usually I would get those questions typed out, run them over to Marlin; Marlin would look them over and say, "Let's add a sixth or seventh; let's drop these two. He thinks this is a little more important than that." Then we would amend it. But most of the time they would go just as they were.

Then he would take them in to the Oval Office—sometimes I would go with him—and sit there. Scowcroft would be there and [Bob] Gates [CIA Director] and Marlin, and the President would take the sheet, lean back in his chair and read each question aloud and muse to himself, “I think I’ve got that one.” Very seldom would he say “Gee, number three. What’s the answer on this?” Very seldom; hardly ever. Maybe once or twice in his whole presidency would he kind of fidget what the answer on that one should be or is. And that was the preparation.

MK: Would he say what he was going to give as an answer?

RP: Yes. And he’d say, “Brent, is that what we should be saying?” Scowcroft would usually say, “Yes.” That would be the preparation.

MK: How long would it take?

RP: If it took more than five minutes I was surprised. You just walk in; here’s the paper; boom, boom, boom and you’re out. We’d give the signal for the press conference, the two-minute warning and he’d walk out and do the briefing.

MK: How were decisions made on when a press conference should be held?

RP: Events drive that very easily. Obviously if we have something to announce and we want it to be the President, that’s the easiest one. Just like when we had the augmentation in troops levels before the Gulf War, the President went out and made that statement in the briefing room. Whenever we felt that a major world leader, in this case Gorbachev, the Soviet leader, made a new proposal or something like that, we felt the President—we ourselves can’t deal with it; people want presidential reaction. Or an event took place, like the Berlin Wall or something; we’d have a pool come in and talk to him. So it didn’t necessarily have to be a press conference in the briefing room; it could be a White House pool going into the Oval Office. I’m broadening the definition to any kind of press exposure.

So I think the events basically drove us to make statements. The Berlin Wall is a good example because, obviously, it was the end of an era; you needed presidential reaction. But then we got criticized that he wasn’t emotional enough in making that statement in the Oval Office. But it’s that kind of stuff I think that drove us to a great extent. Very seldom because Bush was so good at talking to the press did we say, gee, he hasn’t talked to the press for six days, I think it’s time for him to maybe go out there and say something. That was very seldom, just for the sake of having him out there.

MK: Was there a feeling that if a president doesn’t come out that there’s a certain amount of steam that builds?

RP: Yes. They do it to cover the White House and the White House is the President, not the Press Secretary. Absolutely. They want to talk to the President. And that’s why they always hung out by Marlin’s office, because sometimes he’d walk by and they’d start shouting, “Mr. President, Mr. President, how about this?” Absolutely. That’s why I was saying sometimes there was no specific reason, but if he hadn’t been around for six days you kind of do something just so they could see him.

MK: What about with Reagan, because Reagan didn’t meet as frequently with reporters? How did you release some of that steam?

- RP: Well, he did have quite a number of the East Room news conferences, not every week obviously, but every so often he would have that. And as we who worked for Reagan beg to differ with you because every time he went to the helicopter there was an opportunity for the press to shout at him.
- MK: They could shout but he could choose which questions he wanted to take or how he heard them.
- RP: Or he could cup his ear and say that the rotors were going and he couldn't hear them. I think there was a certain amount of frustration probably with the press because whenever he appeared, he appeared in more formal settings, and whenever it was informal it was like going to the helicopter and stuff. But I don't think he liked doing the kind of off-the-cuff type of situations with the press. Don't forget we also had—not necessarily press conferences—but had all those Rose Garden events both with Bush and Reagan, where either a cabinet member would be announced or a resignation would take place, or the Thanksgiving turkey was being presented. You'd be in the Rose Garden, you'd make the comments and then the press would shout a question or two. Reagan would answer a question or two; Bush too. There were all kinds of opportunities. I think the frustration level might have been a little higher with Reagan, but not noticeably, not in the sense that I would say there was a great difference.
- MK: What about the organization of the office, under Speakes as well as Fitzwater, and then Fitzwater I and Fitzwater II?
- RP: The same throughout. The only difference is, Speakes I remember used to have two briefings, like a nine a.m. and an eleven a.m. briefing. Marlin went to the one briefing, which made sense. There was no sense in having two briefings; it just was murder on the staff. You basically had your foreign policy side the same way. You had a guy that was the head of foreign policy; under Bush I was the head of foreign policy and my office was divided, as I mentioned, with Bill Harlow and Doug Davidson functionally and geographically. Each one of them had duties concerning issues and countries. I had a secretary, Natalie Wozniak. So that stayed basically the same irrespective of who went into that job. We had interns also, that we introduced, to come into the office and help out to answer phones and stuff. On the domestic side, which was the bigger side, you had two deputies, a principal deputy and another deputy. Then you had a whole slew of assistant press secretaries, the younger kids as we used to call them, who are fifteen, twenty years younger than us, working down in the lower press office. They ran the pools. They put the lids on for the day; they put the paper releases out. They were the first ears in terms of press grumbling or press inquiries. They would report to us. The meetings were the same. We would meet in the mornings. We would have an evening meeting. Marlin would have an evening meeting at, I think, five-thirty—I forget what time exactly—to kind of summarize the day, just looking to guidance for the press duty officer, what can be expected and to look to the next day type of stuff. So I think structurally it was the same across administrations except for the number of briefings.
- MK: What do you think the consequences are for the press secretary and for everybody in the press office that your constituents are in the building? There is no other office that is in a similar situation.
- RP: You're always exposed to them. You're talking about the press?
- MK: Yes.

- RP: It's tough. I was protected because my office was in the OEOP so I could leave whenever I wanted to. Marlin was always sitting there; they knew he was in there, and they'd just sit out there and wait. It's tough. You can't go to the men's room or the ladies' room without running into them. You can't walk out to go upstairs to talk to somebody or to the Chief of Staff without running into them. You can't get a candy bar in the back without running into them, because all the machines are in the back. So basically your life is not your own in that respect and you're always running on a sense of adrenaline and always trying to be on your best because even when it's friendly banter, there's always a question in there. Now Marlin would try to take a lot of that pressure off by lighting up a cigar and going into the briefing room in midday some time and just put his feet up and smoke a cigar and just talk nonsense with the press and kind of defuse the whole situation. So a lot of them were just gathered around him, five ten, fifteen and at first they'd think he was doing some briefing then they would filter out and you have four, five, six sitting around just talking, inconsequential stuff. They'd try to fit a question or two in there but that helped immensely for Marlin to get his blood pressure down and to calm everything because they're always on the prowl. They always expect a story.
- MK: Now there has to be a benefit for the White House having them there or they wouldn't be there. It isn't just a matter that they would kick up such a fuss which obviously they would do.
- RP: There's always been a thought of moving them over to Jackson Place.
- MK: Well, the Park Service plan for a redo has them underground.
- RP: Once they're there it's like a First Amendment right and you're amending the Constitution if you take them out of there. I've always said—and I think the Clinton Administration learned the hard way. They tried to close the door the first few months. Wrong move; can't do that. Once that precedent is there—they're so used to being able to walk out of the briefing room into the lower press office, go up the ramp and walk around by Marlin's office. You can't walk that back. You just can't walk that back. As a result of that they're always on the prowl, and you're always on guard.
- MK: Are there any benefits to it?
- RP: Yes. There are benefits because you can touch the world immediately; there's no doubt about it. You can correct a story immediately; you can also create a problem easily, too, if you misspeak. So it's a two-edged sword. So I see it more as a benefit in that respect. It also builds up—if you're willing to mingle—Marlin, I mentioned, would smoke his cigar. I would go back to get a candy bar or something; I'd just walk by the booths and say, "How are you doing?" I'd also make sure to walk downstairs—because CNN and the radio people downstairs always felt left out—just to visit, just to say, "Hi; I'm not spinning anything; I'm not bringing news; I just wanted to see how you were doing?"
- MK: So would you get from that what they were working on?
- RP: Absolutely. So you get an idea of what they're working on; you get to know them a little bit better. Sometimes they had colleagues visiting from the bureau, and you get introduced. So that's another person that you are beginning to know, and it's important. So I know there are definite benefits to that. I know they've spoken about doing away with that but I had no problem, mostly because I was in the EOB. If I had to hide myself—I spent a lot of time at the West Wing and walking around there. I learned a lot from them; you establish that

personal relationship which is so very important and you learn some of the issues, what they're thinking.

MK: In looking at benefits, what about the benefit of working in a White House? In a White House the work is tough because you have so many things coming at you all the time, different things, you're working much longer days than most people do. What are the benefits of it?

RP: The benefits are, if you're a kid from Brooklyn, the chances of you ever working at the White House were so farfetched that, when you have it, you're thrilled. I think it's just, I don't want to say honor, the challenge; this is the top of the government. To work at the White House you feel privileged and you get your benefits out of that. Not many people get a chance to work at the White House. I don't want to sound arrogant or anything but I'm a kid from Brooklyn. I grew up in Brooklyn, got out of Brooklyn, and worked in the White House—not for one president, but two. It's just mind-boggling to see that.

And you get a sense of that when you go into the Oval Office. You get a real sense of it if you're there alone. There'd be times I'd walk in and the President would go to his study or something, to get something, and you're left alone standing in the Oval Office in the middle of the rug. You look around the most powerful office in the world—remember your textbooks and everything—and you kind of say, "I'm here; what a unique opportunity to serve your country." It sounds kind of corny to you but it's true; it really goes through you: the sense that you're really helping serve your country; you're doing something very useful and you're proud to be part of it, part of history. Whether it's doing a Gorbachev statement or something like that. The psychic rewards are just phenomenal, I think, in that sense. And the memories afterward are just great. I don't know if that answers your question in an articulate way but that's the best way I could answer it at this stage.

MK: Is that feeling the same throughout the whole time period, that you have that feeling of the uniqueness of the experience?

RP: I had that feeling throughout and I was in the press office from July of 1986 through I guess—I went over to Ukraine in June of 1992 but I started filtering out of the press office a few months before that. That feeling really never leaves you. You get to a point where you get a little bit more tired because you're getting older and stuff doing that kind of grinding work. But that feeling of having that kind of position and doing that kind of work, I think, stays with you day in and day out, whether it's the first day or the last day. The main thing is not to have an ego about it. The main thing is to be able to recognize that you were privileged to work in that kind of environment and then when your time comes, you leave. You can't be full of yourself and have a big ego, although Washington is full of people with big egos. You just accept what's there, you do your job and you go on. And that's it.

MK: How do you know when it's time to leave?

[Interruption]

MK: —When one knows when it's time to leave or senses it's time to leave, how do you do that?

RP: In my time, I was told to leave. I was being appointed ambassador to the Ukraine so that was very easy. I got nominated by the President to serve as our first ambassador to the Ukraine. So my time came in a very nice way. So I can't really answer that question how other people—I left in a very nice way.

MK: It seems that there are a lot of people that leave in that way, from that spot. That's true in the Clinton Administration, too.

RP: I think that's true in any presidential administration.

MK: They take ambassadorships.

RP: Not just ambassadorships. They're appointed to cabinet agencies and things like that. I think one of the reasons for that is there is a certain level of trust that builds in a president and it's time to—I'm a foreign service officer, for example. So I think there was a point in time when you said, "This guy's going to be going back to the State Department"—I'm just surmising what the thought process is. "This guy's going back to the State Department eventually, because I'm not going to be President forever, whether it's one or two terms. He's served his country. Well, why not reward him now so he goes back to the State Department in some kind of honor, rather than going back on the bottom of the totem pole?" So there were a lot of people at the NSC who were foreign service officers who got ambassadorships. It is a high-profile job. There is a lot of tension and you do serve the country as best you can in the circumstance. I think there is a sense of duty on the part of the President irrespective of his or her party; that there's a sense that these people need to [be] rewarded with something back in their own field. So that's what I feel happened in my case. I was very proud and very happy for that nomination. So the exit was a lot easier for me.

MK: Does it help that in that job you also have relationships with all parts of the government, so if you then go into an ambassadorship you then have that behind you?

RP: Absolutely. You know people in USTR [United States Trade Representative], for example. Obviously, you know people at the State Department, because that's my home agency. You know people at Treasury because they all come through—you know people on the Hill. All of those things help immensely. That's one of the benefits you don't learn about until you actually leave a job like that, the number of contacts and people you get to know. Then the people that you yourself work with in the White House, when they spread out to the private sector, if there's a lost election, for example, or there's a second term and a lot of people leave. When I look at it now I know people everywhere—some place—the head of this or the head of that, and that kind of stuff. You don't think of that during the time that you're doing that job, but it dawns upon you when you come out and you look around. So yes, absolutely, the contacts that you establish in that position are very great.

MK: What were the White House units that you most often dealt with, and then the agencies around the government?

RP: The White House units? You mean like the NSC stuff?

MK: Yes. NSC.

RP: NSC, obviously; public liaison at times because of ethnic liaison with [American ethnic groups and what this could mean to] foreign countries, foreign policy issues; Office of Communications in terms of speech writing. We didn't do any speech writing but helping out as best we could in certain situations. During Iran-Contra, I was the press contact on Iran-Contra between the Counsel and Chief of Staff's offices. I did a lot of interacting with them on that particular issue. It depends on the issue. I was fortunate or unfortunate—

depending on how you look at it—in terms of Iran-Contra, because I got to know a lot of people in the Counsel's office and did a lot of work with the Chief of Staff, Don Regan, who was there still. So the opportunities are endless.

MK: Thank you.

[End of Disc 1 of 1 and Interview I]