INTERVIEW WITH BERTRAM CARP AND DAVID M. RUBENSTEIN
WITH ALICE ROGOFF

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Interviewers

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Young: I would like to welcome Dave Rubenstein and Bert Carp with thanks in advance for their willingness to take a beautiful weekend and spend it indoors or at least part of it for our project. I’ve talked about the ground rules of the session with both of our guests and the ground rules will be the same as those which Mr. [Stuart] Eizenstat asked when he was here. That is, largely for purposes of simplicity, the understanding is that after the transcripts have been reviewed by them we will, subject to those ground rules and commissions as to quotation and attribution and things of that sort, be able to use these as primary source material for the purposes of writing up some overviews of the Carter Presidency with the disposition of the transcripts. Beyond that, use will be subject to arrangements made with the former staff participant. We have a somewhat foreshortened session today and I talked earlier this morning with both David and Bert about some areas of which we need to fill some gaps here. I’ve also told them that what they think is important for us to learn in trying to assess the Carter Presidency and understand it is as important as any questions we might ask. I think to get right down to business I might ask each of you to give us a brief overview of your work and your responsibilities, what it was that you did, how you got involved so that we can be sure that we’ve got you properly identified and then we can proceed with some questions from there if you’d like. Who would like to go first, Bert or Dave?

Rubenstein: I’ll be happy to go first. First let me thank you all for inviting me and Bert down. This is the first time since January 20th last year that anybody has paid attention to anything that Bert or I has had said to say.

Young: Anybody else out in Washington.

Rubenstein: That’s right. It helps us relive our glory days when we hear people actually taping what we say. Let me tell you how I got involved and what I liked to tell people I did at the White House, and Bert can tell what’s different in his view. Since Stu didn’t tell us what he said, I hope we don’t contradict what Stu said about what we did. Historians can determine that.

I wanted to work at the White House since the time I had been in law school and set that as my goal. Although later on I came to be close to a lot of the senior Carter people and got to know the President fairly well, I can’t honestly claim now that I was determined to go work at the White House for Jimmy Carter. My goal in life, at least when I was in law school, was to work at the
White House because I thought that was a fun thing for a young person interested in policy to do. After law school I went to work at a law firm that had as a senior partner Ted Sorensen, with the view that he would show me how he managed to get a job at the White House at a young age and was able to coast on his reputation for some time afterwards.

Sure enough it worked. I got to know Ted fairly well and Ted recommended me to somebody who he said had an excellent chance to be President of the United States and had everything going for him. I went to work for Birch Bayh. After Birch Bayh got five percent of the Massachusetts primaries falling behind Ellen McCormick, the anti-abortion candidate, I called Ted up again and said, “Well, do you have any more candidates that I might work for?” He said, “I’ll tell you, I don’t think Sargent Shriver’s going to make it, but there’s a guy in Georgia that I’ve liked and his name is Jimmy Carter. I’ve talked to some of his people. [Milton] Gwirtzman, who used to do some work for us, is working for Carter. I’ll put you in touch with him.”

Gwirtzman came by to see me; I was working in the Senate then, as was Bert. Gwirtzman had been around as a lobbyist on various issues and he came by to tell me that there was someone named Stuart Eizenstat who would be coming up to interview people and would I be interested in being interviewed. I said sure. As you now probably know, about the time before the convention was held in ’76 Eizenstat had the authority to hire about fifteen young whippersnappers from Washington to come down to Atlanta to replace the couple of high school students who had up to then been doing all of Carter’s issues work and probably better than the whippersnappers from Washington would later do.

In any event, Stuart came up, interviewed me, hired me to come down. He didn’t know really what to do with me, so they had a leftover slot and I was given the job of doing the negative research on [Gerald] Ford and so I became an expert in the Ford administration. I would provide information for speakers and other things about Ford. Then during the transition I became an assistant to Stuart and then about a week before the administration was to take office President Carter got around to picking his White House staff, as you probably know. I think it was about ten days before that Stuart officially got the job. Very shortly after that he named two deputies, Bert and myself. We then went to work at the White House.

At the White House, my job was really to serve as a deputy to Stuart in the sense of making sure that many of the things that he wanted to do got done, and staff him personally. As the job evolved I took on a number of other responsibilities. I tended not to worry as much about what our staff was doing since that was Bert’s job. What I carved out as roles for myself were in addition to keeping up with Stuart and trying to keep him informed and happy and getting some of the things done that he wanted, which wasn’t easy, I tried to relate to other members of the senior staff and let them know what we were doing. We seemed to be having, in their view, many of the power decisions or powerful decisions to be made. They always were interested in knowing what we did. I also tried to create a role for myself where I would do certain other assignments like help prepare materials for the press conferences, which I did for four years, and help prepare materials for interview shows that the President would have.

I later carved out a role where I would do much of the same for the First Lady, especially during the campaign. I would brief her roughly every week on what issues were coming up and what
she should say about them. I got to the point of knowing the President fairly well towards the last
two years and so he would feel comfortable having me travel with him. We would always try to
have somebody on the trips who knew what the President’s positions were so that he could have
somebody who could answer a question quickly or could correct things that he had said. I tended
to travel a fair bit with him towards the end. In the last year or so, I sat in on almost every
interview he gave at Jody’s [Powell] request to make sure that what Carter said was not
inconsistent with what he was supposed to be saying, and if it was we would try to correct the
record fairly quickly.

In terms of policy I tried to read every memo that would come over from Bert’s [Lance]
operation and give my own comments on it, and then generally at the end of each day, Bert and I
and Stuart would get together and go through the major issues and each give our views. I tried to
keep up with all the policy things that were going on although it was so hard to keep up with
everything, and it was very difficult for me to get people into any one thing. That was one of the
problems I think I had in terms of digging deeply into things. It was just so difficult to get
enmeshed in any one issue. I would also try to know enough about it so that if Stuart would ask
me a question I would be able to tell him what my views were about given issues.

That generally was the role I carved out for myself and think in the end that it’s not a job which I
could have determined early on was going to turn out that way. It worked out because various
needs arose and I tried to fill some of them. I would say, just to end, that the system we
developed, which was unique in the sense of having two deputies, one to worry about the
operations and one to worry about the principle, I think worked reasonably well. I don’t really
know how one deputy could have done it or done both jobs, and because Bert and I got along
well there really weren’t any of the tensions that you might normally associate with a two-deputy
system. The relationship worked out and the arrangement was fairly satisfactory.

Young: Thanks you. Bert.

Carp: I told Jim on the way over here this experience is just a little bit like being embalmed.
Certainly a lovely mortuary you have here. I graduated from Stanford Law School in 1968 and I
came to Washington to work in the General Council’s office of the Department of Health,
Education and Welfare on civil rights issues, mostly school desegregation. The administration
changed in 1968 and a young fellow named Leon Panetta was appointed to run the Office for
Civil Rights. Leon’s now a Democratic Congressman from California but he was a Republican
former member of Senator [Thomas] Kuchel. I guess my immediate superior under the
Republicans was a fellow named Robert Mardian, who later became mildly famous in the
Watergate affair.

Panetta needed some sort of private legal advice because he and Mardian were off on opposite
ends of the civil rights argument. When they fired Panetta about a year and a half into the
administration they gave me the opportunity to go to Baltimore and become deeply familiar with
Social Security law. At that time I went up to the Senate where [Walter] Mondale was forming
an operation called the Senate Select Committee on Equal Educational Opportunity. I was a
lawyer on the staff of the committee and Senator Mondale needed a civil rights lawyer.
As things happened on the Hill—this was early 1970—I branched out into some broader education questions. I moved to his personal staff during his campaign in 1972. I became his legislative counsel. I more or less supervised his legislative work and over the last three or four years I worked for him I did all his work on the finance committee and all of his work on the Senate budget committee where he was a member from its inception in 1974 until his ascension. During the 1976 Presidential campaign I went down to Atlanta and ran a small group of six people who did issues and speechwriting for the Vice Presidential campaign. We worked very closely with Stuart’s operation, which was obviously somewhat larger than ours, and we had what was termed an integrated staff operation.

After the election Mondale broke both of Eizenstat’s arms and Stuart maimed both David and me. In order to understand the system that we developed it’s necessary to understand the seating arrangements in the White House and to think about them. What happens is that the important people are housed in the West Wing of the White House to demonstrate that they’re important, and their staffs are all housed a good block and a half away in the Old Executive Office Building. This creates an enormous separation and administrative problem. It’s my own belief for the little bit I know about the National Security Council that it explains a lot about the development of the National Security Council as well.

The problem that deputies have historically had is that if they sit with the principal everybody knows how important they are, but they never know what’s going on behind their backs. If they abandon the principal staff then they don’t know what’s going on behind their backs the other way. We basically developed a system under which I would manage the staff on a day-to-day basis and face out towards the rest of the government, and David would be responsible for staying on top of what was going on in that West Wing office and facing towards the rest of the White House staff. As David said, it is a system that can operate only if you have two deputies who get along and only if they have a pretty good sense of the way they’re sharing these responsibilities and don’t try to poach. I think that one of the things that I’ll always be proudest of is that we sat down, thought this out I think in a fairly rational way, and stuck to it for four years. I think it was a system that worked reasonably well.

Let me just talk for just two minutes, I’ve talked for too long, about the responsibilities as I saw them of the President’s Domestic Policy Staff. It doesn’t happen to be Mike Anderson’s operation now, but the first and most important reason for the staff—and there will always be one somewhere—was to summarize the paper that goes to the President. It’s the biggest reason you need some kind of a policy operation it the White House. No President could possibly read the volume of stuff that is given to him, because like scholars and lawyers, everybody in the government confuses length with importance. Of course nobody gives anything to the President that’s not very important and it’s very long. That’s the first and most important thing about the staff.

The second thing DPS did was to broker disagreements. One interesting thing is that a Cabinet officer is so important that they almost never focus on the paper that goes over to the White House. Assistant Secretaries are your last line of defense in the Cabinet system. If an Assistant Secretary has troops that feel strongly about the issue, it’s usually easier to shovel it over to what’s known as the White House than it is to look at GS 16s in the eye and say, “You may be
right, but I just don’t feel like fighting for it today.” If nobody does anything about it, people being what they are, the President will decide this issue, which is probably disagreement between a GS 16 and the Transportation Department and a GS 16 and HUD or something. Sometimes if you can haul people over to the White House they can sit down and work these things out. They can go back and say, “We went to the White House for you.” That was a piece of what we did to broker interagency disagreements. The third thing we did, which probably in many ways was the least important, was to give our advice on each Presidential decision that did go to him.

**Young:** Apropos your last statement, the third and I believe you said the least important thing we do was give our advice, was this routinized or was it on special request?

**Carp:** We always gave our advice. Always on every issue.

**Young:** Why did you say it was the least important aspect?

**Carp:** I suspect that our advice was taken a good 97% of the time and you can conclude from that that we were very powerful. Of course it’s one thing to be able to advise the President about what he’s inclined to do and it’s another thing to be able to make him do something that he’s not inclined to do. I think that’s important. Of course the distinction is lost on the agencies. They say, “Eizenstat didn’t come down on my side, therefore I lost.” Whereas the more correct interpretation often is, “You were going to lose and I just didn’t come on your side,” because we had the staff relationship to the President.

Our job, as he defined it, was not to be President but it was to advise him of the considerations that he wanted to take into account and how he wanted to make this decision. Certainly the way we structured the information we got, which is one, and the way we helped the government decide which issues would go to him, which is two, were far greater sources I think of real influence and impact on government than the actual advice we gave him in any particular situation, which is three. This is my own view.

**Rubenstein:** I would agree with Bert. The first two functions that Bert mentioned were essential and were they not provided, the system would have broken down, and had paper not been succinctly prepared, the President wouldn’t have had anything that he could read that was intelligible I think in many cases. Also, had we not brokered disagreements, then things would have come to him all the time that were not in a state ready for a decision. Had we not given our advice, the system still would have gone forward. In other words if we had just brokered the disagreements, put the paper together, and not given our advice, the system could have functioned. I think he would have preferred our advice, but I think the system could have survived without it.

The second point, though, is that when you’re in that position, I would say the President maybe did go with our position 97% of the time on issues where we were a major player. When Stuart would try to get into the national security area or try to get into politics or personnel matters, he tended to lose a great deal because President Carter, like many Presidents, compartmentalized people. Stuart was just Domestic Advisor and he’d take his advice in that area and not in other areas. One of the reasons why he took our advice, let’s say 97% of the time in the domestic
policy area, was not because we were so brilliant or so gifted in figuring out what he wanted to do, though that’s always a way of getting a President to go along with you, figuring out what he’s going to do and then sort of giving a recommendation that’s going to accord with what you think he’s going to do. It really was because when you see the disagreements and you tend to work out a disagreement you tend to come out with a compromise solution. When you come up with a compromise solution you offer that as one of three choices to a President. The chances are, unless he wants to get deeply into an issue, that he is going to go along with that compromise position. We had the advantage of being the people who knew what the compromise was because we saw all the sides and could be in the position to recommend a compromise, whereas the other players probably weren’t as familiar with what the compromise would ultimately be or wouldn’t be able to explain it in as succinct a way as we did.

One last point. We tried to tell everybody that we would give our opinions and everybody knew that we would give our opinions, but we also tried to make sure that everybody thought that the memos that went in were fair in describing their positions. That was a source of our strength, because we were not hesitant in letting Cabinet Secretaries or staff people around the White House see what the basic decision memo was and they could see that their positions were accurately reflected. If they thought that we were tilting those memos toward our positions so that our advice would be accepted, we would not have been as influential and wouldn’t have been successful in the first two functions that Bert mentioned. We gave our advice sometimes by putting it in that major decision memo and just saying Eizenstat recommends X position. When we really felt strongly about it, sometimes we would put a separate memo on top that nobody else did see, but that didn’t change the basic underlying decision memo.

Carp: The other point that we always gave these people was that when a Cabinet Secretary submitted a memo that goes to the President, we always sent it in. If it was a long memo, as it usually was, we would summarize it, but we would attach it, and the President, if he felt like it and certainly a reasonable percentage of the time he read more than our single piece of paper, he’d read it and check it over and make sure that it was fair. Because their paper did go in, they felt I think that the system was fair.

Rubenstein: Let me make another point on the paper flow. I don’t know if you’ve gotten into that yet, but in the White House charge of the paper is everything. Being in charge of the paper and knowing the paper flow is just so much a part of winning the system and knowing how the system operates. You may have read the newspapers that there is someone in the current administration whose name is Dick Darman who’s in charge of paper. He is said to be like the fourth most powerful aide in the White House. I always wondered why somebody in charge of paper would be the fourth most powerful person, because in our system the person who was in charge of making sure the paper got into the President incorrectly wasn’t that powerful. He was sort of a staff functionary.

One of the reasons that Darman is so powerful is that he does many of the things we did. He takes these memos that come in from Cabinet Secretaries and because there isn’t a strong domestic policy operation he summarizes them, he puts the compromise positions together, and puts the summary memos on top. That gives him a great deal of power because he is in effect
telling the President what the options are. In many cases that’s what we did and that was one of
the sources of our power.

**Carp:** There’s an interesting thing in the closing days before we left the White House. I was in
my office putting things in boxes and these two fellows who work for Martin Anderson came to
see me because I guess he ordered them to come and see Dave and me. The real reason I think
they came was they wanted to measure the drapes, but I said, “You don’t want to talk about
issues. First of all we don’t agree about anything, and secondly there’s no reason you should
listen to us, we just got licked. Let me just give you one piece of advice. Don’t lose the position
that we’ve given this office in the paper flow. Don’t lose your summarizing function.” These two
fellows looked me right in the eye and they said, “In this administration we get along collegially
and there’s no need for these kinds of arrangements.”

I don’t know what this had to do with getting along collegially. I figured this either meant that
they lost the argument or that they weren’t bright enough to see what it was. That office has had
no regularized method of participation; they participate only when some other White House
person brings them into a decision. The influence of that operation has just plummeted in its first
half. We’re not here to talk about the Reagan administration. I think it has hurt the Reagan
administration in demonstrable ways not to have people with a little substantive knowledge
reviewing these pieces of paper. The internal revenue code thing that went through was just one
eexample of a small thing that a decent staff operation would always pick up. I think you can see
the centrality of this. Out of the paper flow function everything else flowed, at least in our
operation. I think you can see from the way the staff operation has withered in the current White
House that that analysis is correct.

**Young:** Some of your colleagues who have been here and who were not concerned so much with
the substance of policy or policy development have characterized some of their problems during
the first few months of the administration as stemming from their own surprise that this was such
an activist President. This is on the congressional side. One of the things that is said about the
Carter administration is that it perhaps tried too much too soon or too much at once and
overloaded the congressional agendas and so forth. We can get more into this later, but I’m
trying to relate your perspectives on that myth or observation from the viewpoint of what you
were trying to do. Your function was not to block stuff from getting to the President, as I am
understanding it, not to keep him out of things, but to structure and make more orderly that
which would have come to him anyway.

**Rubenstein:** Let me give my perspective on that first. There’s nothing that either Bert or I can
say about that which is going to change the myth, and I suspect that myth will live for twenty
years or more.

**Young:** Not necessarily.

**Rubenstein:** Carter did too much and the fact that Reagan concentrated in his first year on one
or two things and was successful will perpetuate the myth that Carter tried to do too many things.
My view is that we did try to do a little bit more than perhaps we should have. I would concede
that. I just think people should go back into the context of the time to understand why we did
what we did. Carter had campaigned for two years and had promised virtually everything in the book, and after the election he asked Stuart who asked me to put together the list of Carter’s promises. When we put that together we realized we had promised an awful lot. When Carter, during the transition, asked Stuart for an agenda of what things we wanted to do, we looked at the promises, looked at the things we wanted to get done, and we proceeded to work on each of those facets.

You have to remember that even had Carter not promised everything in the book and had we not compiled a promises book and had we not had someone who is activist like Stuart or Bert or myself and wanting to do things, you had the pent up desires of Democrats for eight years who hadn’t gotten exactly what they wanted. You had a situation where members would tell us, “Look, we’re going to go ahead. Now that we’ve got a Democrat in office we’re going to push this thing we haven’t been able to push for years, and we want your support.” Very often what we would find is not that Carter was dying to send legislation to the Hill but we would either have to take positions on legislation that was rushing through or we’d have to send our alternatives up to have any say in what was going on.

There’s no doubt that I think we didn’t focus Carter early on in terms of things that we wanted to say were number one, number two, number three priority, or at least we didn’t get the message across. I think it would be misleading to say, though, that people who watched Carter’s campaign or Carter’s staff didn’t realize he was an activist and had many things he wanted to do, because if you look at what he was saying in the campaign it was clear he was trying to do many, many things.

**Carp:** This is probably something I won’t put on the record. Bill Cable, Dan Tate, and I were the most experienced and the longest people in Washington on the Carter staff when he came to office. We were no great shakes in terms of seniority. That is inherent in the Carter campaign. He ran as an outsider, he ran an honest campaign reflecting the frustrations of a southern Governor dealing with what the current President calls the factory, a real strain of grief out there, nice populism. He believe in it, as I think every Governor believes in it. Call the Governor in here and ask him what he thinks about Washington. People elected to sit at the head of this pent up feeling. I don’t think it deserved to be that pent up. Maybe we’ll get into that.

I think Nixon was more of a Democrat than Lyndon Johnson was in fact, but we had these pent up feelings and we had people with a very different perspective who we elected to office. We had to do what any new President has to do, which is put his best foot forward in his first year. People knew that. At the same time we were meeting this town and they were meeting us, and out of that I think came many of the problems of the Carter first year. Some these people, the ones who came in with Carter, are some of the most effective Washington operatives that there are because they’re bright people. I’m not sure it’s fair to level this as a criticism against Jimmy Carter because this perspective, this Governor’s eye view, is something he campaigned on for two years. It’s something that he was elected on and that he felt himself. That was the difference between Jimmy Carter and Birch Bayh, this unique perspective.

I think these tensions were inherent, and of course we didn’t do the sophisticated job of dealing with Congress in our first year that a Senator, for example, might have brought to those details.
Several Senators ran against this Governor and were elected. In a sense in the end in a democracy you’ve got to come back to the people. No one can have thought from the Carter campaign that he was the kind of guy whose biggest kick in life was sitting around with a bunch of members of Congress and figuring out how you gerrymander an issue in a shape that maybe wasn’t administrable and maybe didn’t make much sense but it would pass. That’s what he thought he was elected to come in and fight.

**Young:** I’m sure we’re going to get some more questions on this.

**Strong:** Yes, just a short question about the campaign. You mentioned, Mr. Carp, that the President’s and Vice President’s staffs were integrated, but your inflection suggested that maybe they weren’t so integrated.

**Carp:** I think they were both integrated and unintegrated. The Vice President has always wanted to maintain his own personality and he had his own history. We couldn’t simply deliver Carter’s speeches. We had voted for some things that I think Governor Carter was against. Mondale had a long record; I think we had a very close working relationship. We all sat together. We were both integrated and a little bit unintegrated.

**Young:** Along this same line you probably facetiously said the Vice President broke both of Stu Eizenstat’s arms. Are we to understand that in terms of recruitment you were recruited to Eizenstat’s staff in different ways? That is, you got interviewed through Gwirtzman and that connection and you, Bert, were suggested to Eizenstat by Mondale?

**Carp:** I don’t think I was the product of the nationwide talent search.

**Young:** How about the rest of the administration?

**Carp:** I’m sure that if Mondale had not been Vice President I would have probably not had that job.

**Rubenstein:** Bert is not being fair to himself. What happened was that Bert had been Mondale’s chief legislative policy advisor for many, many years. What Mondale I think adroitly wanted to do was to make sure that he was not like other Vice Presidents in getting cut off from what was happening in the system. He realized he wasn’t going to have a big enough staff to accommodate everybody that he wanted, nor did he have jobs that people at the senior levels that he had been dealing with would want necessarily, because staffing a Vice President isn’t as much fun as staffing a President and isn’t as desirable a job. He tried to get a number of people who had been helpful to him around in senior positions in the administration. David Aaron I think got to be the Deputy National Security Advisor to a large part because of Mondale’s urgings. Bert had, as I said, virtually more experience in Washington than anybody on Eizenstat’s staff and was a good addition.

What happened in the transition, though, was that because we didn’t know what was going to happen in the White House, it was contested who was going to be domestic advisor to the President. It wasn’t clear it was going to be Stuart, though I kind of thought it would be, but for a
while everybody was talking it might be Jack Watson or somebody else. Until it was decided for sure about ten days before the administration, Stuart really refused to focus on who his staff would be. He just didn’t want to seem like he was usurping the position already.

Until he was finally told, he wouldn’t focus on who was going to hire his deputies, how to structure the staff, who was hired for other positions. Once he was given that decision by President-elect Carter he then began to think about who he wanted. A lot of people recommended various people and I got there mostly by hanging around him during this transition. In a sense I became his assistant. I just refused to let him get out of my sight and made myself indispensable to him. Bert played more of a line responsibility in the transition. He was in charge in one of the areas. Stuart didn’t know me that well before the transition and he didn’t know Bert very well before the government because Bert had been working principally for Mondale and I’d only known Stuart for a couple of months. I didn’t work that closely with him during the election campaign. He was traveling and I was pretty much in the office. That’s sort of how it came about.

Young: We understand, have understood, and correct this impression if it’s wrong, that there was a very smooth working and tension-free relationship throughout the four years of the Carter administration between Vice Presidential staff people and White House staff people. Is that the correct impression?

Carp: Yes. I think one of the reasons for it was the placement of these deputies. Not because we worked for Mondale. We didn’t. I’d known the man, I love him and I always talked to him but David and I worked for Zbig [Brzezinski] and Stuart. It was so visibly impossible under a system in which the Vice President was sitting in the West Wing and we could be where we were to contemplate a system in which he could be effectively excluded from the flow of information and therefore no one tried. Therefore he knew what was going on. I think this was an important symbolic piece of putting together a system in which the Vice President was fully informed, and only when a Vice President’s fully informed can he really be effective. A Vice President has to operate in the dark. If you know what the Vice President is saying to the President that’s pretty destructive. What if the Vice President suggests something to the President that the President doesn’t do? The President can’t fire Vice Presidents. It’s a very difficult kind of thing. Only by being completely plugged in can a Vice President, in those private moments that he has with the President, really be effective and give good advice.

Young: We understand further from Dick Moe and others that there was an early working out of their relationship between the President and Mondale.

Rubenstein: I’m not privy to that, but I’m sure that that was probably the case. Working those things out in advance and having them last for four years are two completely different things. The reason why the relationship worked and was sustained, I think, was first Carter was not threatened at any time by Mondale. He never thought that Mondale was a competitor with him for a job or a competitor for good news or whatever. He never felt threatened. Maybe had Carter hung around Washington ten years before he’d been President, he would have known to be more suspicious of Vice Presidents, but he hadn’t.

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Second, Mondale never embarrassed Carter. During the ’76 campaign as well as the ’80 campaign or principally during the four years Mondale never once got caught saying anything, and I don’t think he really said much, except maybe to a few people, critical of Carter, never said anything that was contradictory to the administration of policy publicly. That’s a pretty impressive statement if you can consider that none of the President’s aides were able to sustain that record. Every one from time to time was caught saying something embarrassing to the President. Mondale wasn’t caught in that, and that I think strengthened the bond.

Finally, Carter knew that he had many weaknesses. He didn’t think they were so overwhelming that he shouldn’t be President, but he knew he had many weaknesses and that Mondale compensated for those in terms of experience, in terms of having better contacts with the liberal wing of the party, and he therefore really needed Mondale and used him in that sense because he needed him. Someone like Lyndon Johnson would never have conceded that he needed Hubert Humphrey. For good reason Richard Nixon would never have conceded he needed Spiro Agnew.

Young: More than he thought.

Rubenstein: Carter really needed Mondale and that helped keep the relationship going.

Carp: I may be wrong you know, but to go back to David’s point about the initial arrangement. It’s my memory at least, you guys will know better than I would, that early in the Nixon administration Spiro Agnew had an office in the West Wing and was given the responsibility of intergovernmental relations. It wasn’t very long before he was back over across the street. I agree entirely with David, that the magic was not in whatever initial arrangement they started out with, the magic was in how they managed to sustain it.

Young: Yes, because from the outside it appears to be what you confirmed, that it really was a kind of tension-free relationship throughout.

Rubenstein: One last point about this and this goes in other areas that you may have picked up. I read a lot about White House staffs before I got the job that I did. It seemed to me that there was incredible petty bickering between senior White House aides all the time over turf and access to the President and credit for things. If you read the books that come out the Ford administration, especially the one by [Robert T.] Hartmann, it just reeks of tensions and conflicts. For reasons that are not entirely clear to me, although I think I have some sense of why it’s true, Carter’s staff just didn’t seem to have that. It wasn’t true of the Carter operation and Mondale operation or between the senior Carter operations.

There was hardly any badmouthing of one staff person to another person and I never, ever saw any real badmouthing in front of the President by one staff person of another staff person. Maybe privately Hamilton [Jordan] might have said this person has a weakness or Jody [Powell] might have said this person has a weakness, but there was almost none of that badmouthing. In part because I think the people knew Carter for a long time, had the relationship set and also because of the type of people. They weren’t experienced in Washington back stabbing so much, and had they been around a second term maybe they would have been more experienced. It was an incredibly tension-free place compared to what I read existed in other administrations.
Carp: One of the interesting things about Carter is that he really was both intellectually pure and very loyal to the people around him. A member of the senior staff could lose an argument in front of Carter and not be weakened in terms of the next argument. That helped to take a lot of this heat out. I’ve watched a lot of political offices in my fourteen-fifteen years in this business now, and a lot of places you don’t want to lose because it’s sort of just three steps back. Carter really was not like that. He could say, “Well, I’ve listened to your arguments and thank you very much. You’re wrong on this one.” Nobody would think that when you came back he’d say you’d be in some inferior position on the next issue. That was a very important part of his management style. I’ve seen some Governors too and I think it’s unique to the man. It’s a very fine quality.

Rubenstein: He tended to compartmentalize people in a way that led to that system. You read about [Franklin D.] Roosevelt or [John F.] Kennedy giving out the same assignment to two or three other people and in a sense having them compete. Carter didn’t do that. He had Jody having one function and Frank Moore another, Stuart another, [Jack] Watson another, and would almost never give the wrong person an assignment. He knew which person was supposed to do it because of the nature of the assignment, and wouldn’t give it to the wrong person. If you repeatedly give assignments that are in somebody’s area to another person, that’s going to cause tension and turf problems. Carter rarely did that. If he did it sometimes it was by accident and it was quickly corrected. But that was one of the main things that I think kept tensions from arising. There was just this compartmentalization and people knew what their turf was, they knew not to step on somebody else’s turf, and so things sort of went along happily that way.

Clinton: Were there other members of the Domestic Policy Staff who had come from Mondale’s staff or gotten there through his recommendation?

Rubenstein: No.

Carp: I want to emphasize this. I worked for Eizenstat. It’s a very important part of our staff. The core of the Domestic Policy Staff came off the staff that Stuart had assembled to work in the campaign. He was smart I think to get a lot of people who worked on congressional staffs to work for him. We got a core. I was responsible for recommending several people who wound up on the staff. I was careful not to recommend anybody who’d ever worked for Mondale because I didn’t want—not so much Stuart, but I didn’t want the world to see this as some kind of a Vice Presidential operation.

Young: That wasn’t the implication of the question. We’re trying to figure out what the sources of recruitment for the staff as a whole were for Eizenstat, and he talked a lot about that too. He had emphasized another source.

Rubenstein: There are a couple of sources as I recall it. We took a lot of people from the campaign staff and that was the best source of our talent in part because the people knew the President’s promises, they knew his positions by then, they knew how to work with Stuart, and that was a great advantage I think. We took some people who had worked in the transition. There were a number of people like Joe Onek or Lynn Daft who were respectively head of our health units and agriculture units who hadn’t worked in the campaign but they had been recruited and
I’m not even quite sure how, maybe by Jack Watson’s operation early on, to work in the transition. They did good jobs and we invited them to come join the staff. As the administration went forward we tended to get some good people we saw in the agencies or some good Hill staff people. They came from a variety of not unexpected places, some of the old boy network but generally it was people who were from the Hill.

**Young:** They tended to be younger people, is that correct? The preponderance of people, is this correct, tended to be those with some experience in Washington?

**Carp:** Yes. That’s right.

**Rubenstein:** I saw one of the articles that you have about Eizenstat calling us the kiddie corps and we were criticized for having too much inexperience. I don’t know if you can have too much inexperience. We were criticized for lacking a lot of experience. The reason was in part because the top people, Stuart, Bert, and myself, were fairly young and it’s hard to be in that situation when you’re in your thirties and have fifty-year-old people reporting to you. It just doesn’t tend to work out as well as you might think.

Secondly, we tended to hire people we knew and our generation tended to be in the thirties and late twenties and also we wanted people who had some campaign experience. People who have fresh campaign experience tend to be younger people. Lastly, we did not do what the NSC [National Security Council] traditionally does. NSC goes out and gets the most famous China scholar and brings him in, most famous Middle East scholar and brings him in. The Domestic Policy is not quite that way because we need more than scholarly skills in our view to do the job we did. We tended to get people who had been Hill staffers or political campaign people and those people tended to be younger.

**Carp:** I would make two points about that. I believe if you add up the numbers we had an older and more experienced policy staff than Ford or Nixon did, although we had fewer older people. The ones we did have ran a lot so they were young.

**Young:** You were also doing a very different job.

**Carp:** The second point that I wanted to make is that we put this staff together in order to function within the parameters of Carter’s very strong commitment to the departments. That meant that we were process managers not program designers. You couldn’t design a program in the White House, it would have come from the wrong place. The Cabinet officer would go into the President and say, “What are these guys doing?” We had to have people who were process managers. That is a different kind of thing and I, having worked in the Senate all my life, obviously was inclined to see this staff as analogous to some operations in the Senate.

I think a close model for where we started out from was the Senate Budget Committee, which had to have people who understood the issues, understood who the key players were on the Hill, in the academic community and the rest of the place, and could perform an integration function. You wanted both to have some notion of where the thing ought to come out and some ability to
manipulate the process because we could not command it. That required a different kind of a person.

Rubenstein: One last point on that. The White House staff that Reagan has picked, or the one Marty Anderson picked, those people tended to have fairly large independent reputations of where they took their jobs. Let’s say the person who is in charge of welfare on the White House staff now is Bob Carleson. He was in charge of welfare in the Reagan administration and was a major figuration dummy before. He was in the Reagan gubernatorial administration, and I think he served in HEW [Health, Education, and Welfare] in the Nixon or Ford administration. He has a major reputation in that area and is the kind of person that, had we put him on our staff, somebody who had such an independent reputation would have intimidated a lot of Cabinet officers early on because they would have seen somebody as such an important person as sort of usurping their authority. We had a lot of anonymous young staff aides and initially the Cabinet Secretaries weren’t afraid of having that kind of thing at the White House. Later, they learned.

Young: You had a follow up?

Clinton: Just one. You said you wanted people to look at campaign experience. Why did you feel that was important?

Rubenstein: When people hire other people for jobs they always tend to think that their own experience is the best and since Bert and I had campaign experience we always thought campaign experience was good. That’s a natural function. Also, having been through a campaign you tended to know that you get people who were sensitive to political realities. When you’ve been through a campaign, especially a Presidential campaign, you just sort of know that government is to a large extent politics and we didn’t want academics who would be, we thought, less concerned about some of the political realities. Bert and I, our background tended to be more political and we therefore tended to want people who could talk the same language as us and when we’d say, “Look, we’ve got to do this whether or not the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations] wants it,” they wouldn’t say it’s not the right policy for the country.

Young: We won’t get into a discussion about mutual stereotyping by academics and politicians, but we understand what you’re saying.

Carp: Academics with campaign experience were terrific. As Hubert Humphrey proved at one point.

Jones: I’d like to go back, just to clarify something on this matter of advice giving. It’s not clear to me whether your placing that as less important was self deprecating or something else. It strikes me that to identify the compromise position or to know the man well enough to offer the option most likely to be accepted is pretty important and in a sense bundles the other two.

Carp: It can’t exist without them in this operation. First of all, a President can get along without advice, they could never get along if they had to read all these memos, which is why they’ll always hire somebody to do what we did. There’s a kind of a circular thing. People’s advice gets
taken for various reasons and I think in the domestic policy area certainly the structure that our staff had was important. Our advice was taken because we were engaged in one or two. Because we were engaged in one or two we were in a position to do three. Some people are Presidential advisors for other reasons and you’re in a better position to analyze why these people were Presidential advisors. We were Presidential advisors and whatever value our advice had came out of those first two functions that I described, in my view.

I believe that deeply, and anybody who wants to advise a President about domestic policy who doesn’t have a piece of those functions had better have some other handle and look at it very carefully, in my view. I know you’re interested in the structure of White Houses and I really believe that the function doesn’t need to be consolidated. You can look at other White Houses where the staffing function was much more dispersed. If a piece of those two staffing functions doesn’t go with the job, then in my judgment the job won’t be effective and the position won’t be effective unless there’s some other very strong link. For example, Eleanor Roosevelt was married to the President. That’s another kind of a handle. When that handle is open then I think the reality of day-to-day influence is probably not going to be there. I may be wrong about that. That’s a deeply held view and that’s why I say it’s less important, because everybody says, “Oh, you give advice to the President, therefore the world is at your feet.” It’s really backwards.

Jones: I think I understand. There is advice giving and there is advice giving and what you’re saying is that you set the context within which your advice giving occurred and the context was that you were in control of the paper and you were familiar with the paper, regulated that and it was in that context that led to the setting of the options.

Carp: The three things that I said to you and in that order was what I said to our staff. Every time that I thought they were getting a little bit porky I’d call a private staff meeting and I’d say it to them again. We were paper-shufflers. We were compromisers of issues. We were presenters of advice to the President. In that order. The advice we gave to the President was very intimately linked to our ability to do these other things. We were the President’s fingers out there in the government. If we hadn’t had our fingers out there in the government we would have been unable to do that. We operated on the narrow line between substance and tactics. It requires a very delicate balance to get there, but I think an operation that took those three things and saw them in a different order would have been less effective, but it would have been a very different operation. That’s just what I believe.

Rubenstein: Let me make two points on that. When you were in control of the system you prepared the paper and as I said before, “You have three options, Mr. President, here’s the compromise that everybody agrees to.” Once you are responsible for putting that compromise together, I don’t think that then recommending that compromise is all that earth shattering. Therefore because the President takes the compromise in picking your advice, it’s not the same as coming out of the blue and just saying, “Do this, Mr. President,” and he says, “I agree because it’s your opinion.” You’ve come up with a compromise, so therefore he goes along with it.

I would contrast that with a lot of economic policy decisions and national security decisions where we didn’t control the process as much and Stuart was another player, like one of four or five other people. We didn’t write the memos as much and Carter didn’t listen to his advice as
much in part because of the compartmentalizing view that Carter had. The point here is that in pure domestic policy not economic, we had a major impact because Carter viewed us as being—and we were—the only substantive people at the White House. Everybody at any White House can always offer political opinions about what you should do, and Carter would get reams of political advice. Every time a memo would go in he’d get lots of political advice.

Carter tended, at least in the first two years, maybe even in the fourth year too, tended not to want to make decisions that were seen as political. He always said, “I want to do what’s right.” Whether he was trying to fool us or fool himself I don’t know, but he always said, “I want to do what’s right.” He would tend to think that if the policy experts came up with a recommendation, that was the right policy decision, and he didn’t want to hear at that point from Hamilton or others about what was the right political decision. That helped us enormously. Had we had a more political President and had Stuart come up with these great policy compromises Carter might have abandoned them because he wanted to do a political decision. We tended to be viewed more as the policy decision people and there were jokes around the White House amongst the political people about how we were just policy people and knew nothing about politics. In fact, the people in the agencies viewed our operation as being much too political. A lot of the political people in the White House viewed it as being much too apolitical.

**Jones:** It sounds as though the President would never have been hired as a staff person.

**Rubenstein:** As Bert said, the job that Carter really wanted was Stuart’s job because he liked to read all these papers.

**Strong:** Yes, I have a question about your expectations at the outset of the administration. You said on one hand that Carter campaigned on this Governor’s perspective, this anti-Washington theme. On the other hand there were the pent-up demands of people in Congress, people in Washington or the of traditional Democratic agenda. I guess both those things were in the promise book. Did you expect at the outset that there would be some problem between those two elements of the campaign? Did you have some sort of strategy for dealing with it? Or more generally, what expectations did you have at the outset for domestic policy in this administration?

**Rubenstein:** Let me try first. I was much less experienced than Bert and therefore don’t bear any of the blame for what went wrong. I think that I fell into the same trap that many people who go through an experience of joining a Presidential campaign, winning a Presidential campaign, having everything you think and say and people you work with be on the front page of the paper. You think, *Gee, if we won this campaign we surely know what’s right and what we’re going to come up with is going to be stuff that’s right, and the Congress is now going to listen to its new Democratic President and things will work out.* We weren’t so naive even in my case to think that everything was going to be passed the way we wanted it. We knew it was going to be difficult, but I think you tend to have a sense of too much of yourself when you get elected to the Presidency or being part of the operation.

The same thing happened to Reagan. When Reagan got elected, his people said, “We’re going to pass this and this and this,” and, “We’ll do all these great things,” and now these people have a
real sense of what they’re up against. They hit it about the same time that we did. I don’t say that there was any great plan or we thought that we were going to pass it all. Carter may have been more naive than most people on his staff in the sense of believing that a lot of this would pass. He was really shocked that a lot of this stuff didn’t pass the way that we proposed it.

**Carp:** The first year of any Presidency is largely dictated, unless they’re dishonest people, by their major campaign commitments. Beyond that, the major tactical decisions that affected the first year were made during the transition period and they were really tactical, they really involved the transition staff very much. For example, during that period of time Carter gave a commitment to send welfare reform legislation to the Hill before national health insurance legislation. That was one of the critical tactical decisions of the Carter Presidency. He developed the outlines of the economic stimulus program that we sent to the Hill with the congressional leadership during that period of time. It was basically a congressionally designed package, and he endorsed it, that’s not a criticism. I believe that was an enormous tactical decision that cost him politically more than people will ever know.

We did put out enormous amounts of money in that successful initiative, which went to liberal causes. Because of the way it was done, because nobody ever had to come and ask him for it, because it was so easy to get out, there was a sense on the part of the mayors and the Governors and different civil rights groups and different constituencies that it never happened. It went so quickly, all his attention was on this fifty dollar rebate thing and the domestic base went like this—ten or twelve billion dollars. We gave twelve billion dollars away to the left wing of the party, to look at it in political terms. That was our chance to begin to choke off the phenomenon that resulted in the [Edward M.] Kennedy candidacy. It didn’t happen. With national health insurance, we gave away so much of our budget margin there without making it both a political and a substantive event. Those are just two examples of critical decisions.

There’s a second phenomenon to bear in mind. Every White House goes through about a six- or eight-month shake down in which people’s roles are developing. I think we are to be credited by having a sense of how we wanted the Domestic Policy Staff to function, which changed remarkably little over the course of those four years. However, we had no idea we were going to make it work. We had to define relationships with Watson’s office, we had to define our relationship with the Vice President’s office, Stuart had to define his relationship with the President, we had to define our relationship with all these Cabinet Secretaries.

At any point we were consumed, as most White House offices will be I think during the first six months, with both taking care of our substantive responsibilities and with our own tactics. The first six months may be critical for a Presidency, but the first six months are also critical for each of these White House offices. That’s a phenomenon to bear in mind. That doesn’t mean you don’t do anything. If you don’t do anything then you’re not going to solidify your position either. You’re a little less likely to be a know-it-all and a little more likely to mind your own personal politics during this period of time, and quite properly so. That’s not a criticism of us.

**McCleskey:** I’d like to continue this discussion of the policy role that you all played. I want to phrase this in a way as much as anything else to get a clarification for the record. Looking at it abstractly one can imagine a policy staff that on the one hand might concentrate on just the
substantive issues, saying to a President, “If you want to deal with this problem of civil rights or whatever, then this is the way to go about it.” Looking at it pretty much in the context of here’s a problem and here is objectively speaking a solution to it. Or one could imagine a staff that is really performing pretty much the yes-man function, anticipating what the decision will be. I’m interpreting what you’ve been saying to suggest that what you all did falls in between that.

You were looking at what you took to be the administration’s overall goals and program objectives and trying to develop the compromise positions, the alternatives that would be consistent with that. Is that a correct inference? And if so, then did you at the same time also try to negotiate a settlement among the various interested parties out in the agencies, so that if the President bought that option the problem so to speak was already solved so far as the agencies were concerned?

Rubenstein: Yes, you’re correct in that we generally had a sense of what the President would accept, and we tried to find a solution within those parameters. Stuart was probably better than anybody else at guessing what the President would accept in the domestic policy area. In part because he knew the President and had worked for him for a long time, but also when you’re at the White House and you’re dealing with the President every day, you see him every day, many times a day, so you know what his latest thoughts are, his latest interests. No Cabinet Secretary can compete with that. Therefore, at any time, that’s why White House aides are always going to beat Cabinet Secretaries out because they just know the moods and the interest of a President up to the hour. They could frame a set of recommendations that are going to accord with what a President wants.

You try not to be a yes-man in the sense of just putting in an option you know the President’s going to want. Then there’s no point in really doing the job. You do try to put it in between certain parameters. I think that one disadvantage of the system that we had—although I don’t know of a better system—is that what you often do is lock a President into an option, in a sense. Let’s say the President doesn’t want to know about welfare reform until you have the papers ready for it. We will be out there with the agencies and knocking heads together for two months until we finally develop a compromise position. We give the President the compromise as well as two other positions. He can reverse the government in a sense and not adopt a compromise, which causes all sorts of convulsions in the government and all sorts of bad press stories, or he can go along with the compromise position. At that point and because of the way our Presidency works, he really has very little choice.

I think that’s one of the reasons why he got so much press out of Reagan’s decision not to go ahead with tax increases recently, because the whole government decided you had to do it and he reversed it at the last minute. He was using the right that Presidents rarely invoke any more to reverse the government. I think Carter rarely did that because he tended to be very much of a line manager or like a military officer. The system bucked up a certain decision and this was the recommendation he would go with. Of course he had certain personal views, which were so well held that he couldn’t tolerate certain compromise decisions. Generally when the compromise decision went up to him he would go along with it.
Carp: I hope it’s come out of your discussions but I suspect it won’t because there’s really only two stages. It’s difficult for you to see the government from the point of view of the White House. We talked about the power of White House staffs. No White House staff member will ever have the impact on public policy or on people’s lives that a Cabinet Secretary who cares about his department will have. We don’t make grants, we don’t publish regulations, and we don’t order the basic staff work that creates the momentum for projects. Caspar Weinberger and Elliot Richardson created this big welfare reform and pushed it through. Their ghosts are still rattling around the government. It’s very important in terms of power and in terms of influence over events in America.

A Cabinet officer who cares is always going to be more important than any White House aide no matter how powerful. That was true in the Nixon administration when [John] Ehrlichman and [H.R.] Haldeman were at their heyday. And that’s why Cabinet officers are given such deference on the Hill. That’s not what we’re talking about now. These parameters in which decisions are made are influenced by Cabinet officers. Sometimes the previous President’s Cabinet officers, because there’s an awful momentum to this life. The Cabinet in those big departments set the agenda to a very large extent. What we’re really talking about here is how a President decides to react to that.

Cabinet members are never going to be the most influential factor on a President’s decision about how to react to the Cabinet members, except in those very few situations in which a President is such a close friend of a Cabinet member that he might call him up and say, “You’ve recommended this, what on earth am I supposed to do with it?” Generally speaking that’s not the case. You deal with conflicts between Cabinet members, or you deal with conflicts between Cabinet members’ proposals and the overall goals of the administration or political reality, which you’re in a better position to see, or conflicting legislative goals.

The reason that the White House staff is very powerful in dealing with Cabinet Secretaries is that the White House staff was created to deal with Cabinet Secretaries. It’s a mistake to listen to this conversation and believe that I would rather be Stuart Eizenstat’s deputy than Bill Miller over at the Treasury Department, or that I am more important or that Stuart was more important. I think it’s very important to keep that balance in mind. White House advisors advise Presidents on how to perform their functions. One of the President’s functions is figuring out how to deal with all these competing claims that are being posed by these departments. I think that’s a very important thing to bear in mind as we conduct this discussion.

It is even more important in the Carter administration because in the Nixon administration and in the Johnson administration White House aides were given command authority over people and agencies. They were given the right to pick up the phone and call someone in an agency and tell that person to do something. None of us ever had that authority on any issue. Not even to demand a piece of information. That’s a very important thing to remember about the staff, there was no one in the government except for people who worked on our payroll who I could pick up the phone and say, “Do this, make this telephone call, get me this memo.” That’s a very important thing to remember about our staff.
Young: We’ll come back to this. I think we’re not quite as naive about the nature of the power relationships and the scope.

Carp: No, I was really speaking to the record because our own comments tend to give this aggrandized impression.

Young: We’ll come back to this when we ask you some more about Carter’s own working style. It is conceivable that you would have a President who says to his staff, “Your job is to keep me out of this and to get all the claims off my back.” That was not mostly Carter’s working style. He wished, as we understand it, things to come in to him, and that defined a very important role particularly for the Domestic Policy Staff in this administration of what you call process management. I think we were getting that understanding pretty clearly. I have some questions of my own that I’ll defer which concern your role and the kind of political work that that necessitated to be a process manager.

Kettl: One of the things we’re interested in is trying to get a sense of how a very large staff actually operated on a day-to-day basis. In particular, one way perhaps to get into that is the question of how they and you decided what they were going to do. On the one hand, you suggested that a large part of your work was reactive to the kinds of things that came bubbling up out of the agencies. On the other hand, you suggested earlier that one of your functions was the role of keeper of the promises. I was wondering if you could tell us a bit about how the work of your staff people came to be organized and in particular how the agenda came to be set. Would you make some distinction perhaps between those two different functions?

Carp: Let me try to lead off on that. The first year’s agenda was basically set by the President in his campaign, so we didn’t really confront this issue until the second year. Because we had a system in which we had no command authority to the extent that we were going to have a role in agenda setting, we had to create one. Something happened that helped us and we had to create one. We were given some help. I like to think that we applied bureaucratic judo, but there was this long on-going study of reorganizing the White House and in some very confused way they wanted to defend Cabinet government by making us more like the National Security Council. That always boggled my mind. You want to make us more like the National Security Council, fine. They’re the people who communicate with the President. Nobody ever knows what they’ve said.

We created something called the Domestic Policy Review System. The Domestic Policy Review System was a system under which anybody could have an idea, Cabinet officer or us. They could circulate this idea and then they could send the idea to the President together with a plan for agency or interagency development of it, and the President would sign off on it. Of course once the President had signed off on it we were in a position to monitor and participate in the development of it. That was our handle for having some influence over the agenda. There were a number of these things that were important. One of them that I worked on a lot and which was very close to my heart was the youth employment in Domestic Policy Review, which resulted in a piece of legislation that almost got passed. I think it was very innovative, and good. I think it was a national example of the system working at its best.
The second thing that happened was that a lot of White House officers and the President saw that we were not in a very good position to respond to Congress’ agenda. They could send this stuff out whether we’ve asked for it or not. We put together by the second year of the administration this agenda setting process that was conducted under the aegis of the Vice President but on which the basic staff work was done by our staff and by the National Security Council staff. A part of that was a survey of what was going on in the Congress. Because we were the principal explicators of that to the President through the Vice President, who changed it and added his own views and things, because we participated in that agenda setting process also without delegating command authority, we had some influence over how the White House saw all the pieces fitting together. Our pieces, the Congress’ pieces, and what priority was attached.

This was a process that involved the agencies on a relatively open basis but in which decision-making was then tunneled to the White House, in which we participated. The Domestic Policy Review gave us the opportunity to initiate things, and the Vice President’s agenda setting process gave us the opportunity to help shape and organize the view of the world.

Rubenstein: Every White House staff that comes in likes to say that they’re going to be smaller than the previous guy, and we were no different. We campaigned against the bloated White House and then proceeded to bloat ourselves, but we initially found out that Carter was going to impose a 30% reduction on whatever we inherited. While there was some uncertainty about what the real figures were, Carter said during the transition it’s going to be a 30% reduction, there were no ifs ands, or buts about it. We tried to get as high a number as we could for the previous staff and come in with a 30% reduction. We added up all the detailees and everything you could find on the Ford domestic operation, came in with a 30% reduction and got that approved, although I think Carter still wanted it reduced even more. I think at times we probably had maybe 25 professionals or 20 professionals.

Carp: It depends on how you count the drug policy staff. The Congress during the Ford administration mandated a drug coordinating unit in the White House. We managed, as part of this White House reorganization, to get it abolished. One of the compromises we had to agree to in order to get rid of this statutory mandated office was that we would obtain an identifiable drug policy staff and that Stuart would report regularly to the President on it. We had this unit, which I think wasn’t all professional people. It had ten or eleven people, which we had to carry on our rolls. They were a distinct office. I always tried to know as little as possible about what they were doing. They reported directly to David, to the extent they reported. Usually you didn’t want to know what they were doing. They were always off someplace with Lester Wolf. That was one of the things that made our operation look somewhat dispersed.

Rubenstein: There were 20 professionals, maybe 20 secretaries and a couple of detailees down there. We never thought it was that big but we always knew that we had a bigger staff than any other operating at the White House except the NSC. Therefore we tried to keep people focusing on the size of our staff as little as possible because it is something that we didn’t want to do. You didn’t want to go to Hamilton Jordan and let him know you had 40 people working for you when he had maybe three or four or five or whatever he had. One of the ways we were able to hide it to some extent was that we had the great advantage, thanks to John Ehrlichman, of not being on the White House payroll. Only Bert and myself and Stuart and I think maybe a secretary were on the
White House payroll, which was the famous 550 people that you always hear about; 300 of whom are career people and about 100 or so are really the political people.

Most of the people were buried in the executive office of the Presidency budget as you know, and ours were not buried but they were not on the White House payroll. Politicians make the mistake and reporters make the mistake of focusing on that 550 number or the 480 or whatever number is around that range and never really realize that the focus should be on the fact that you have 2,000 people in the Executive Office of the President and that’s the real number to worry about. Anyhow, our budget was separate and therefore we could bury people or hide people or not have people focus on what our size was. We had to get annual appropriations from the Congress. When they were looking for cuts in the White House staff to try and get it down, they didn’t focus on us as much because we were beyond their control.

Carp: On the other hand, we had a place to put people, so again it depends on the size of your core staff. This just reminds me that Esther Peterson was on our payroll and so was Nelson Cruikshank. They did policy stuff. I will say hidden is too strong a term. We had a line item that was appropriated to us. If you look at the total number of people we had and you count the people who were around us, including the aging advisory, the drug staff, and the consumer affairs office, at times we did get fairly large.

Rubenstein: I’ll show you the contrast between the current administration and ours, which I love to do. Stuart took very seriously the fact that we were authorized by the Congress. We changed the name from the Domestic Council to Domestic Policy Staff but we were still authorized and every year he would dutifully go up, even though he was a Presidential assistant, and testify on his budget. He was very, very kind to C. P. Moore’s staff, who knew what the budget requirements were. Of course the members who were on the committee were often flattered that somebody as important as he would come up, and they were trying to get various legislation through Stuart’s operation in many cases, so it was a very good relationship. Marty Anderson, by contrast, refused to go up and testify on the budget. He thought it was inappropriate, and not something to worry about, and his budget was slashed accordingly. I think it’s not a great situation when a Presidential assistant has to go up and testify for his budget, but that’s the kind of system we inherited, and Stuart participated in it.

Kettl: Could you explain briefly to us how the people you had working for you were organized?

Carp: Yes. I had one management tool. The staff was organized into clusters. We had a human resources cluster, we had a one- and sometimes two-person agriculture cluster, we had a national resources and environment cluster, we had a cluster that dealt with trade and economic issues, and we had an urban transportation cluster. We had a law enforcement group. I’ve always been a great believer that everybody should have a title, and so our staff was basically divided into associate directors and assistant directors.

Because I had to direct these people I suppose I was basically responsible for trying to depend on a staffing relationship. I developed as a control mechanism this blue-slip system that said “cleared by Bert” and I had Joanne Hurley who was Stuart’s first executive assistant secretary and Kitty [Katherine Schirmer], who was his second. Anything that came over without one of
those blue slips came back and wouldn’t get seen by either David or Stuart. That was a pretty
good control mechanism. There was a bottleneck, and I was a bottleneck.

David and I had a relationship with our staff where if they had worked on a memo we wouldn’t
put our names on the memo. It would go over to the President from, say, Eizenstat and Kitty
Schirmer, because I’ve always thought that people ought to get credit for their work or they
won’t have an incentive to do it. And also because if the agencies had that kind of perception,
that would help strengthen them in terms of their relationships. There’s no way David and I
could have done everything that needed to be done even if we had been inclined to do it, so you
had to adopt a system that would promote the intergovernmental perception of these people’s
importance.

I always told our people that I wouldn’t rewrite anything they insisted on until it got to the West
Wing. I didn’t have very many arguments with people, but to the extent I did I’d let the piece of
paper go over the way they wanted it and I’d put a note on there saying I think we all ought to sit
down and talk about it. We’d have it out on that basis. Over time I think I won more arguments
than I lost. I didn’t have a lot of trouble with that and most things that went over there went over
there the way that I wanted them to.

Rubenstein: One follow-up. I assume Stuart explained the fact that he puts his staff members’
names on because that was a great incentive for staff people to produce good memos. Zbig never
put anybody’s name on it except his own and I always thought that was a mistake on his part.

Thompson: There were some earlier statements concerning your hierarchy of functions. I
wondered if we’re talking about two White Houses. Not in this project but on an earlier occasion
Griffin Bell talked about the disappearance of government by heads of departments at some stage
in the Carter administration. It seemed to me as I listened not necessarily drawing too much on
what we’ve heard within this room but what we read in the literature, that the hierarchy of
functions of the Domestic Council that you described—namely summarizing, brokering, and
advising—almost gets turned on its head when one studies the NSC. The different concept of the
role even of staffers seems to come through so clearly in the discussion. Without in any way
trying to deal in personalities, what I wondered about is: was your function as you’ve described
it in part because you dealt with so many departments, whereas NSC, although theoretically dealt
with many, dealt primarily with two? Was there something else about the nature of your
functions?

Rubenstein: There was something else. What you’ve mentioned is one of the major factors
dealing with so many agencies made it more difficult for us in a sense. Much of it stems from
different personalities. Stu is a fairly open, accessible sort of person, who always wants to be the
quintessence of fairness, and he felt that if everybody saw what was going in to the President and
everybody knew what was happening, in the end that was the best way to be on everybody’s
good side. He came out of a political background and political backgrounds tend to want to be
accommodating, tend to want to involve everybody in the process, make them part of the
process, so that if a decision goes wrong you can’t just blame the President’s advisor.
Everybody’s part of it.
Zbig came out of a different background. I don’t want to sound too anti-academic, but Zbig had an academic background, hadn’t had a political background to speak of, and he tended also to be part of the tradition that we often find in the White House, and which people like Bert and myself often are opposing, which is an inordinate amount of secrecy associated with the National Security Council operation. There was a of sense that what they’re doing is more important than what happens on the domestic side, and the result is you have to be kept very close and that very few people have to know about it. There has to be a separate way to get the paper in to the President, a separate way to get the paper out of the President, and Zbig tended to play that up.

Carter, I think initially being somewhat struck by the enormity of the job and how important the national security part was, tended to let Zbig get away with letting nobody else see what was going in to the President on national security matters except Zbig and one staff member who wrote the paper up for Zbig. The Cabinet Secretaries involved would not see what went into the President. Secretary of State [Cyrus] Vance wouldn’t really know, and that tended to produce a lot of bad friction and a lot of ill will I think. I guess what I’m saying is the personalities of Zbig and Stuart are different and that accounted for it to some extent. Also, they came out of different traditions. One out of a mass security tradition that emphasized secrecy and greater sense of importance in the national security role, and Stuart had a more political tradition and was more accommodating, I think.

Carp: I pretty much agree with what David said, but in fairness it is different that there are really two departments there. I never worked on this stuff and it would be a good kind of thing to explore with David Aaron if he ever comes down here because he was sort of our counterpart on that side. The national security apparatus is a place where Secretaries of State and Defense and CIA directors can operate unleashed from their departments. They represent large institutional points of view. Particularly the Defense Department is rooted in very complex congressional politics. They all have commitments out abroad, the Defense Department for example, and finding out what your Secretary of Defense or your Secretary of State really thinks is probably a fairly complex process.

There’s one thing he wants his committee chairman to know about, there’s another thing he wants his Joint Chiefs of Staff to know about, and there’s another thing he wants his foreign Ambassadors to know about. It’s a very complicated process. The disagreements are clearly very real. The national security process is a kind of a back door. I know that Carter never refused to take a phone call from the Secretary of State and he never refused to take a phone call from the Secretary of Defense. Anyway they all read the newspaper. So any President who reads a newspaper also knows about these questions. They tried having an open system and now they’ve gone back to it. It’s got to serve more people’s interest than the National Security Advisor’s interest alone. I think that’s an area that you might want to probe. I’m not sure to the extent to which these people are so unhappy with the process and the extent to which they’ve been very unhappy at the resolution that was reached. Sometimes Zbig had arguments where neither Secretary agreed with him and sometimes the President agreed with Zbig. I’m not sure that’s a process point.

Young: I’d like to propose that we talk about a policy matter and distinguish it from the President reacting to the agendas of Congress or departments. Let’s discuss a policy issue in
which you were involved or not involved and differences in the two cases. Let us look at the role the Domestic Policy Staff played under those circumstances when the President himself had a particular goal or high priority one in mind, whether it’s out of the promises book or something else makes no difference. I think it’s important for you to walk us through a case of that time so that we can look at the problems encountered defending it, the kind of process that developed around that, and the role and the work of the Domestic Policy Staff.

We’ve gotten some sense of that from Stuart in his comparison of energy one and energy two. We might want to talk a little bit more about that. Perhaps also welfare, if that would be an example of something that the President wanted to push and is not a success story like energy two was. Maybe there are better examples. I’m just groping to get a picture on the side of the President not necessarily reacting to somebody else’s agenda but rather initiating a high priority of his own.

Rubenstein: Let me give just a couple of general comments and then Bert might want to talk about his major role with the welfare policies. Generally the President’s style in any of these major policy matters was to read as much as he could, so we would give him a lot of paper. He’s been criticized for wanting to read so much and perhaps that’s a justifiable criticism. He really wanted to be on top of it and get into the meat of the policy decision. Typically in a major decision such as national health insurance, welfare reform, economic policy, he would get a number of major memos going back and forth with him outlining the views of the Cabinet Secretaries and the staff people and then he would tend to want to have a meeting on it.

I think earlier in the Presidency I had the sense that he felt he could make the decision based on the paper. He could sit down, read these thirty-page memos, check off what he wanted, and send them back, and that would be the policy process. If he had a couple of questions he’d ask Stuart for some more information. Toward the end of the last two years of the administration I think he had a sense he really needed to have more than just the paper. Also towards the end he was much better educated about how the federal government operated. In the beginning he had to read an awful lot because he didn’t know that much about how a federal government operated. Towards the end he would read the paper before he would see the Cabinet Secretary or the staff people in action advocating a certain position.

We tended to have a couple of meetings on major policy with him. We would tend to want to talk to members to Congress. We didn’t tend to talk to outside people all that much. We weren’t that big on bringing outside experts in to meet with the President or have him talk with them, except occasionally in energy. Generally he would stick with the system of dealing with his Cabinet Secretaries. He dealt with them through the staff line system. He’d rarely deal with an Assistant Secretary or Deputy Secretary when the Cabinet Secretary was available. He would deal with the committee chairman and the relevant White House senior staff people.

He tended not to go around the system. It was very rare that he would call up our agriculture expert on agriculture matters. He maybe did it once or twice in four years even though he knew the person’s name, but he just always felt the system is one in which you go to Eizenstat. You don’t call up Lynn Daft. This was the same with the Cabinet departments. He would know that Dick Holbrooke was in charge of China policy but he wouldn’t call Holbrooke, he’d call Vance.
That’s a good staff line system, I guess. It also has some deficiencies sometimes, but he tended to operate that way. I think generally as the system wore on he tended to need less paper and he wanted more personal contact. I think he got a little bit more cynical about what could get passed and a little bit more wise about what could be passed and what couldn’t be passed.

Lastly he tended to worry much more in the last couple of years about what the public reaction would be and what the political impact would be. Early on he was very much, “I only want to know what the right thing to do is. I only want to know what the best policy is and I’ll worry about the politics of it later. You give me the best policy.” Later on those kinds of bravado statements tended to disappear and he wanted to know what he could pass, what could we get through, what did this committee chairman want, what did this interest group want. That was a function of worrying more about the reelection as we got closer to it.

Carp: Yes, let’s talk briefly about welfare. Carter knew a lot about welfare, having been Governor of Georgia. He campaigned for a welfare reform plan that would be simple and fair, by which he meant primarily that everybody who was able to work would work, and which would be cheaper than the existing system because in his view there was so much waste in the system that we ought to be able to help a lot of people and still save money. He did believe, as a lot of people do, that such a program could be designed.

Unfortunately his simplicity goal conflicted with his demand that people work. Because perhaps it’s simple to write somebody a check but it’s not simple to make them work. Bureaucratically it’s not simple to make them work, but it inevitably brings the Labor Department in. Now we’ve got a two-department bill and we’ve got some kind of work mandate. We want to make the system more fair. The system was primarily unfair because once you got on welfare there were incentives to work. You got to keep some of your cash if you kept working. What that meant was that if I got a six thousand dollar a year job and I’ve never been on welfare, I get my six thousand dollar salary. If you’ve got a six thousand dollar a year job and you’ve been on welfare, you may be looking at eighty-five hundred dollars because you’ve gotten to keep a piece of this welfare as an incentive to keep you working.

There are two ways to correct this situation. One is to do what Reagan did, which is to knock you off. That’s not fair. Then the other is to have a system that through the tax code or some way gives me some dignified supplement to put me on equal level with you so you’re not making eighty-five hundred and I’m making six thousand. It’s pretty hard to do that in a way that’s simple. It’s awfully hard to do that in a way that’s cheap. We could go into this more, but the goals of this program that were quite acceptable and don’t make this President a dumb fellow by any means just turn out to be inextricable. You couldn’t make people work without making the system complex, and you couldn’t make the system fair without spending more money.

Unfortunately, when he had a chance to effect this process, I don’t think Secretary [Joseph] Califano understood that either. In a meeting that the transition staff had with Carter I told him that he ought to go to an incremental plan, not a comprehensive plan, and even so it was going to be expensive. He just looked at me and said, “You know, it’s people like you that I’ve been sent to Washington to shape up.” Which was true. It’s an important thing to bear in mind. That’s absolutely true.
We went to work. We put together an interagency process, we sent a memo to the President outlining our work plan because he was desperate to get it out. I can’t remember, you’ll have to go back and look at the record, but we put a few month time limit on the damn thing and then managed to announce the time limit. The President insisted on announcing the time limit because he thought it would be an action-enforcing event, and so we all went out to wrestle with the bear. The first thing that happened was we tried to have a briefing with him where Joe Califano came in and told him he had to spend some more money. They went through the preliminary work and had lots of charts and he just got quietly furious.

**Young:** Who got furious?

**Carp:** Carter. Just as mad as he could get. I think he said to Joe, “What you’re really telling me is that for the money we’re spending on the existing welfare system it’s the best we can have.” Now that’s probably true but how many people agree with it? Probably most of you won’t agree with that. We went back to the drawing board. We went through this very agonizing process back and forth with the President. In the meantime it became more and more public.

**Young:** Could I interrupt just a minute? You referred to the interagency group you put together and then you went to this meeting for a presentation that was made to the President. Could you just identify who were the leading actors in the center ring?

**Carp:** Ray Marshall, Joe Califano, and then their respective Assistant Secretaries for policy, which was Arnold Packer in the Labor Department and Henry Aaron who’s now at Brookings.

**Young:** Were there any Treasury or IRS [Internal Revenue Service] representatives?

**Carp:** Only and up to a minor degree. We did indeed finally line up with a little tax vehicle that they objected to on the grounds that it was complex. While technically they were part of the review, they were not major actors.

**Jones:** [Charles] Schultze?

**Carp:** Yes, as always. I won’t go into all the details. What we finally did was to work out a very complex but possibly workable relationship between jobs and cash, between these two agencies. We did use a tax credit to paper over some of the problems and then we did what the President wanted to and cranked out how you would do all this with less cost. Of course what happened was that you had to slash benefits terribly. Then we bargained the President up and in the process of bargaining him up we also came up with a presentation of cost that, while it was honest internally, was not altogether honest externally because we couldn’t bring in this grizzly bear in a tomato can.

We sent this bill up on the Hill. Even then it might have had a chance because it was the President’s first year and it did make the system better. It was still probably the best possible welfare reform that could have been designed. The speaker made an effort to help put together a special committee composed of representatives of several different committees to take a first
Look at this bill. There were going to consider it and then report to their respective committees, basically Ways and Means and Education and Labor and Agriculture.

Young: Energy also.

Carp: Yes.

Rubenstein: Not quite as strong though.

Carp: What happened was that in an effort to help, we or the speaker or his people did learn some things from that. They really didn’t appoint a cross section of the House. They appointed a cross section of House moderates to liberals to this committee and instead of getting smaller, which it probably needed to do in order to pass, the program actually got bigger in the subcommittee, and that killed it because none of the committees wanted to take the responsibility for cutting it and none of them could move it at its increased cost. I’ve oversimplified this and if somebody is really interested in getting to it for a case study or something we can go through it at some later time. I’d be glad to do that for anybody who’s interested in this tragic history and other things have been written about it.

From the process point of view it really showed Carter just determined to do his best anyway to meet that campaign commitment and to make Washington fit this mold. It certainly demonstrates that he is far from a weak man and not a stupid man. He did not want to be in a position of going out and announcing to the American people that he wasn’t smart enough to fix the welfare system. This was a fairly shrewd, effective, strong politician at work. He ought never to have picked that issue. Of course he wasn’t a Washington insider and maybe because he had the courage to pick some issues like that he got elected. It’s a tough scramble. That’s a good example of Jimmy Carter meeting Washington and learning that in fact that welfare system that we have probably is the best welfare system that you can get for the dollar that’s being spent. How would you like to be a politician and explain that to anybody?

Jones: I just wondered what happened to the interagency process when it got on Capitol Hill. Did you continue to orchestrate some kind of lobbying effort?

Carp: We met and there were some interagency lobbying efforts, which worked fine.

Jones: Was that out of your office?

Carp: It was basically our office because we had the staff to be able to spend more time on it. I coordinated meetings. I could help some of that because I’d been up there so long and I had very close relationships with Bill Cable and Dan Tate. I didn’t regard that as a Domestic Policy Staff function. It was just something that we did sometimes and that took the burden off. It was always clear between us that while we had contacts with the Hill so that we’d know what was going on and be able to make a judgment, that we didn’t try to lobby. We didn’t. Sometimes we would break that rule, but we had always considered ourselves as doing it at their request.
It’s fairly important for those two functions to be separated because the lobbyist has to have somebody back at the ranch that they can blame. They’ve got to be loved. We’d never say no, we’d always say fine. It’s a very bad idea to mix those functions. If you send your substantive people up there to lobby on one issue you’re just inviting people to hog roll on other issues. We tried to avoid that. When you had interagency legislative efforts, we had a conference room and we had institutionally more time in our small congressional relations operation, and if there had to be regular meetings we would hold them. They would come when they could or send some younger person and we would communicate informally.

Jones: Did you get the feeling that the departmental liaison people were actively working for this as well?

Carp: Yes. This is one of the advantages of an interagency process. If there’s not an interagency process, major disagreements over strategy emerge between the departments. The Labor Department wants more money to go for the Labor Department, HEW wants more money to go for HEW than they had. These translated into some clearly significant and substantive differences. We worked very patiently through all this. There was an interagency commitment to the bill that I think translated into a good working relationship between the agencies.

Young: Was it a totally united front?

Carp: Oh yes, it really was. People had been through this. It’s interesting if you compare. The Carter administration tended to go through these long, bleeding, interagency processes. If you’d get a lot of bad press, which is a real disadvantage, it took forever, and sometimes it didn’t get shined up quite as well as it could have. We did usually come out of that with a pretty good commitment on the part of the agencies. I think the commitment that carried over into planning worked for administering these things as well. The other kind of operation that was much more efficient is sort of the Lyndon Johnson approach. Joe Califano lined up a couple of guys, put them in a room, and said, “Get me a bill.” They often wound up creating new agencies, I think because they realized that there was so much resentment of that and you wouldn’t want to assign it back. That’s probably not good. I think there are both advantages and disadvantages to this interdepartmental kind of process.

Young: This was before Anne Wexler’s group came on. Was anything done substantively in that area to try to sell this outside?

Carp: Yes, we spent a lot of time, as we always did, in development. Anne’s relationship with the constituency groups was more tactical. You could almost say that when we put the initiative together we built a coalition, and then Anne would take them over and make them hum out there on a day-to-day basis. We had good support for this bill by the end, in fact it was one of the considerations that weighed on the President who would support it. While some people said it was too cheap or didn’t have enough fiscal relief, we all supported it and said it was too cheap or didn’t have enough fiscal relief. I think everybody who was working for this bill was kind of shocked when it got more expensive rather than less expensive in that subcommittee. Given that you’re trying to cram a grizzly bear into a tomato can, the outside references were not there. The thing hung on.
We came back with a more incremental plan the following year and the constituency coalition that we put together settled for much less later. I think we had done a fairly effective job of building the kind of political support network that you need. Basically it was what the country wanted. What the President wanted, what the country wanted, if it could be done, no welfare technician in the country was smart enough to be able to tell them how to do it. Now we’ve got an administration that’s made a decision, they don’t care about work incentives, they destroyed the work incentives, they don’t really care about simplicity, they haven’t made the system simpler, but they have cut the cost by removing the work incentives that are there very substantially. They’ve tried to do a different thing and they’ve been successful at it because there is a conservative mood out there.

**Young:** At what point in this process of development did the congressional liaison people begin to get principally involved?

**Carp:** After we sent it to the Hill.

**Young:** Was the leadership on the Hill knowledgeable about what was coming down the line?

**Carp:** Yes. There’s something you have to understand about consultation. There a small number of members of Congress who are issue fanatics. These people may be able to predict the way an issue will be handled in Congress. Tom Foley is one. Tom Foley could have been Stuart Eizenstat. You put Stuart Eizenstat in the Congress, he’d be another one. There are a bunch more. Most members of Congress don’t know how something is going to go or whether they’re going to support it until they get to smell it and feel it.

Consulting with Congress is a very complex thing. You have to have people who know a lot about the issue, you have to talk to people in Congress who know a lot about the issue, you have to make some educated guesses. People say, “Let’s consult. We’ll get all the committee chairmen in the room and we’ll ask them whether our legislative program will pass.” These guys are going to look out the window. They’ll say, “Yes, you might as well,” or “It doesn’t sound bad.” They want to see how this dog is going to hunt.

It’s not that they’re not hard working expert people, they are. They’re not going to become experts in welfare reform so they can react to it. They go through a process of hearings. They’re attuned to a whole different process. Legislation just started on this thing. That’s one thing I kept telling my people, because you know we’re not going to write this legislation. They hold hearings and they listen to these groups. You can tell a lot more about how a committee is going to respond to a piece of legislation by figuring out what the interest groups are over the long term that they’ve listened and talk to.

It’s a complicated process, so that the process of consulting with the world before you send a piece of legislation up ought to involve primarily substantive people. That doesn’t mean that if we go up to see Carl Perkins that you wouldn’t ask Bill if he wanted to go or ask him to set the meeting up. That’s not primarily where there are experts. Now where their expertise is valuable is when this thing starts cooking along and there’s an amendment, and we don’t like the
amendment very much, that’s when you say to Cable, “Bill, go up there and come back and tell us whether we can fight for this thing and win.” That’s where their expertise really becomes valuable. They don’t have the time and it would be an enormous duplication of effort for them to learn enough about all this to really be able to react initially. When you get into the second and third year of an administration and you’re dealing with issues that have cooked around, then people whose basic job is to get along with members of Congress become much more valuable in the process of sorting through this stuff.

Young: The simple part of my question was whether, in view of the steps taken by [Thomas P./Tip] O’Neill, this was an issue that, apart from consultation about the substance of it, came by surprise to him or not.

Carp: I don’t think it would be very unusual for the speaker to consult with anybody from the executive branch about who do you put on a special committee or not. I don’t know what all the considerations were that went into it.

Young: He knew this was on the agenda and coming?

Carp: Oh, yes. He did this basically as a favor.

Rubenstein: Just a couple of points. What do you get out of the welfare bill program as a lesson in the Carter Presidency or in the policy process? First, this is an example of a type of comprehensive policy that the President was given to early in his administration. I think in part it was out of inexperience or naiveté about how things can get done in Washington. It was also out of a sense that he had a campaign commitment and he had to honor it. He was driven in things like energy, welfare reform, national health insurance to have a comprehensive policy that he could hold up and say, “I’ve honored my promise, here’s my policy.” Early on I think he had a sense that if he came up with the right policy, the best policy, that he could sell it to the American people because he had determined it was the best policy, having had all the experts in the administration determine that was the best policy and his having invested in it, and it would be something he could sell.

I think later on he realized that he did not have the abilities to sell programs as well as he would have liked, either to the country or to the Congress. At this stage when welfare was first introduced, which I think was August of ’77, he really had a sense that he could master the selling job. He was more concerned at that point with the policy. We made the mistake early in the administration with a lot of these comprehensive policies, which we corrected later on, of trying to come up with the best, best policy and then figuring once we came up with the best, best policy to then go sell it. We didn’t spend as much time because Anne wasn’t at the White House earlier on and there were so many other things going on, of trying to develop a marketing strategy as we were developing the program. That wasn’t the way he tended to operate initially. He didn’t want to know about marketing and he didn’t want to know the politics of it. He wanted to know what the policy was.

The second point is, Carter in this early episode clearly spent too much time in my view on the details of policy. He didn’t go to Stuart and say, “I want the best, best, welfare policy and I want
it in thirty days and give me a summary of it and I’ll sell whatever is the best policy.” He wanted the memos, he wanted to know the dollar figures, he wanted everything. He wanted to get deeply into this thing in a way that usually Deputy Assistant Secretaries get into it. He got so deeply wrapped up in the thing that I think in very many cases he worried more about what the policy was rather than whether or not he could sell it. He spent an awful lot of time trying to arbitrate the disputes between the agencies, between Ray Marshall and Joe Califano and the other people involved. He tended to play less of the traditional Presidential role of having a meeting or two to hear things and then get on with the announcement than he later did.

The third and final point is I think that as a lesson in his situation, had he handled this later in the administration, let’s say the fourth year of the administration, had he said, “I’m going to come up with a welfare policy” for the first time, I think he would have dealt with the issue much differently. I think he would have tried to have a program that was more scaled back, one that he thought he could pass and therefore have as an accomplishment. Early on I think he felt that announcing his policy was the accomplishment, almost. “Here, I’ve honored my promise, here’s my welfare program,” as opposed to saying, “I’ve got it signed into law.” He was almost more worried about the former than the latter early in the administration with some exaggeration but I think it makes the point. I think later in the administration he also would have spent much less time on some of the details. I think later on he was willing to delegate more and more of the policy stuff and details to Stuart and to some of the Cabinet people and sub-Cabinet people because he was worried about other things.

Finally, he would have worried much more about the politics of it on the Hill and in the country than he did early on. I’m not sure had we waited later and done it differently we would have passed it. Welfare reform was not something, as Bert knows, that has an overwhelming national constituency. It’s a very limited constituency, and given the cost I think it was never big enough to get through the Congress. I am fairly pessimistic about reform ever happening the way we passed it.

**Young:** In a sense many of the things you wanted to do did not have that overwhelmingly obvious national constituency I think. Bob Strong has a question.

**Strong:** In talking about these early comprehensive proposals and the problems with them, are we talking about Carter or are we also talking about the White House staff? And specifically on welfare, was he getting good political advice about just how difficult that issue was going to be and did he choose to ignore it?

**Carp:** Yes. It always happens to a President. These guys are not as cynical as you think they are. He went out and campaigned for two years on the principle that the welfare system could be made cheaper, fairer and more work intensive. He believed it. Here’s Jimmy Carter just elected and we came in and we said, “Mr. President, this thing you’ve been telling the American people for two years is not the case.” I thought it was a professional responsibility to do that, and Joe Califano told it to him too. He said, “I’m not inclined to accept that.” Nor would you be.

It is true that a system that was simpler, fairer, cheaper, and more intensive would have been very easy to sell on the Hill. The trouble is that nobody could come up with a program that was
simpler, fairer, cheaper, and more work intensive even though I would bet that 95% of the college graduates in this country deeply believe that such a program can be created. Presidents are victims. They tell this old story about Clarence Long, who promised somebody a sales tax increase and that he’d build them a hospital. He got in the Governor’s position and they all came and said, “Where is our sales tax increase?” And he said, “I can’t get a sales tax increase to build this hospital,” and he told his aides, “Well, you go out there and tell them I lied.”

There aren’t a lot of politicians today who operate that way. You operate under a set of constraints. The same thing is largely true with Reagan. I’m not convinced that comprehensiveness was what was wrong. We just had some losers. There were some things that were campaign winners that just turned out to be losers.

Rubenstein: This brings up a very good point. When people are campaigning for the Presidency, even in the latter stages of it, what tends to come out as their campaign position tends to be something that’s not the product of many geniuses in that area. Early on Carter was campaigning with virtually no policy staff. He had someone who had just graduated from college as a chief policy advisor staff person, a couple of people who had just graduated from prep school, and one person who had graduated from college. That was the whole staff, about four people, until Stuart came on board in May of ’76, I think, full time.

Reagan had much the same situation although he had been more of a national figure. Many of the things that he adopted as his campaign positions were things he had been saying for years and years with no real analysis of whether it could be done or it could be implemented. When these guys tend to say something, as Bert says, after two years they tend to believe it and don’t want to be told that it can’t happen. You get Presidential aides early on who don’t want to tell the President, “This can’t happen,” so they tend to say, “We think it’s going to be difficult, Mr. President,” or “We’re going to do our best, but you should realize it’s not going to be that easy.” And the President says, “Oh sure, sure, but if I can really make a big effort here I think we can make a difference.” Presidents early on tend to think that their personal presence can make major differences and can move interest groups in ways that I don’t think often happen.

Jones: I wonder if we could pursue this matter of taking initiative in a little different way. Were there cases where the staff was able to get out front? You mentioned youth employment. Was that a case of where the staff decided to get an item on the agenda and work it through? Can you say a little bit about how that worked?

Carp: Yes. Yes, we felt that substantively this was an important area to be involved in. It was an area that I’ve worked on for a long time off and on.

Jones: This came quite a bit later.

Carp: This was something that began in ’79 and was reflected in the ’81 budget. I thought it was important substantively and that it was an area where it might be possible to legislate interestingly, and I also thought it was something that where for a relatively small amount of money we could have a significant political impact. A lot of people are concerned about minority youth unemployment and for a couple of billion dollars you could really make a difference in
terms of dramatically increasing what’s going on out there. We tried to pick a problem that was manageable in terms of our potential budget and that would have some political value, and that would be substantively interesting.

We sort of agreed internally on our staff that that would be interesting to do. We felt that it was an initiative that ought to involve both the Department of Education and the Department of Labor. I had a belief we were kind of establishing a dual school system for the CETA [Comprehensive Employment Training Act] system. We had all these CETA-run programs for people who had dropped out, and no special help for people who had stayed in school, and how much sense did that make? We called the agencies in. I must admit that they weren’t all that enthusiastic, but we said, “We’re going to go to the President with this and you folks can either support it or not, and I don’t think it’s going to look too terrific saying you don’t want to work on this together.” People agreed to put this initiative together.

We then did something unique in these domestic policy reviews. It is something that I would do as a standard matter, I think, if I could design the perfect system. We involved the Vice President. We got him to agree to chair a task force and we got the Labor Department to put up some money. That gave us a small staff. We used that staff not to engage in the substantive operations, which would have offended the departments, but to work solely on a pre-adoption of policy outreach. We funded some conferences, we held a bunch of roundtables around the country where we’d get teachers in. We’d get Stuart to go to one, and I went to one, and David may have gone to some, and we got different Assistant Secretaries to go to them. We had this government reaching out because we had some time and we wanted to do it right. If we used that money to put together a substantive staff, it would have ended up being Joe Califano. Everybody had fun. We had Assistant Secretaries from HHS [Health and Human Services], some good old advance people in there, and we really did it right. They got some fun out of it and they learned because they were good sessions, substantively well set up.

While these things were going on we had these interagency policy deliberations, which were influenced by that. We spent an enormous amount of time wooing these two departments trying to get them interested in this. We tried over and over to make the point that you may think these other things are more fun and more basic to your party but you’re not going to get more money for that. Pitch in and help us work on this thing. The more they worked on it the more interested they got. By the end we had a consensus recommendation for the President. Of course the only thing we didn’t have was the President’s commitment to spend any money on it, and my neck was fairly out there. But he did come up with substantial funding for this program. We did well congressionally. It almost passed in lame duck session, but it clearly would have been enacted, but we had just lost the election. Remnants of that program were still being supported on a bipartisan basis up there. It was an example, I think, of something that was basically done right.

It raises one problem with the Carter Presidency. On those issues that were not part of his basic campaign speech he had a very open mind. And because he had a very open mind he tended to make his basic decisions late in the game. For example, are we going to decontrol natural gas all or fifty percent? Are we going to have an excise tax or an oil import fee? There’s nothing wrong with that from the point of view of the policy process. But it sure as hell gets in the way of sales. These issues are not debated only within the government; they’re debated in other places.
It’s sometimes possible for you to go to other public actors, whether they are members of Congress or whether they are important interest groups, and say, “Listen, we may be leaning in favor of an oil import fee and against a gas tax, so you might not want to get too strung out on that.” If you sort of know where you’re going you can chart a path that helps to get you there. You can say to a member of Congress who is having these hearings, “You might want to poke it this way because this is where we think the old man’s going to come out,” and you can manage the process not wonderfully but better than if you never know until the last minute what it is you’re going to do and where it is you’re going to come out. What we did with the youth employment was just to assume that he was going to come up with a significant amount of money and to behave over that period of time as though he would.

You certainly couldn’t do that on every issue. I think it did dramatically improve because we were able to condition people to how much money they might get. It was not five billion dollars but it was more than a few million. You condition expectations. Otherwise people feel like it’s an invitation to come in and lobby for more and more, and then they’re inevitably disappointed. That was one real tactical problem with the operating style that we had. We almost invited people to raise their expectations and raise their demands in the hopes of influencing the final decision, which was not vaguely in an outline as early as it might have been.

Rubenstein: Can I make just a couple of related points? Leaving aside the fact that Carter had certain things that he was committed to in the campaign, I think that generally when you deal with the subject of how did you get Carter to take positions on other issues that were not thought of in the ’75-’76 campaign, they were a new matter or problem that had cropped up. Generally, of course, you had a sense of what Carter was interested in, and you had a sense that generally you could sell Carter on things—I’ll describe a certain way in a minute—and you tended to work towards that process of giving him a memo with a proposal. To avoid the embarrassment of having the whole government spin on its wheels, Carter would probably have been asked by Stuart or been informed in a weekly status report we gave to the President about what we’re up to, that we were working on something in these areas, and if he had no interest at all we would stop it. Generally he would not do that.

We had informal ways or less structured ways of letting the President know what we were doing and what issues were coming along. We tended rarely to get in a situation where you had worked up a great big and new initiative that he hadn’t endorsed in ’75-’76 and then you plop it on his desk and he says, “I have no interest at all in this thing. Why would you give me this?” We had some notion of what he was interested in, but I think that I could predict, and so could Bert, nine times out of time what Carter would agree to support. He was generally in the mold to support anything that was sort of reformist in nature. Anything that was of the great tradition of reforming the government, making it work better and helping people.

I guess you could use the word liberal, although Carter would never use the word liberal in describing himself. One of the problems he had was that the conservatives in this country thought he was too liberal. Carter thought of himself as being conservative. In fact I think as I look back on it he tended to adopt what I would call in part the common cause type liberal reform agenda. And without consciously thinking that he was doing that, he tended to be for
things that were for reform and fixing the system. If you had something that’s going to fix the system, let’s say deregulation, and it wasn’t going to cost him any money, he would generally be for it. Carter was the kind of guy who would say, “I don’t want to spend any money. Give me something that fixes things that doesn’t spend any money.” You could always get him to endorse your program.

It’s very rare, as Bert pointed out, that you can find something like that, so we’d go in and say, “It will only cost five hundred million dollars.” Carter would bitch and moan and complain, but he was generally the kind of guy who was rational and you could deal with him. He wasn’t an ideologue; you could generally convince him that he could spend the money. That’s one of the reasons why spending tended to go up a fair bit for some programs, because while he hated to spend money—he was as cheap as you could possibly imagine—in the end when he would look at each program on its merits, you could explain to him that he should spend some money for this, and very grudgingly he would do it.

The way not to get him to support new programs was to tell him that an interest group supported it and that this was their biggest thing. If you told him the AFL-CIO made this their priority for the year, it was the best way to make sure he wouldn’t support it. If you told him that Russell Long thought this was the greatest idea and Russell Long was a committee chairman and you had a deal with him, it was a way not to convince Carter. If you told Carter this was going to help him in X state or Y state, except for the nine months before the election, he wouldn’t support it. Also, if you told him that the deal had been cut and we were bringing something to them that had been less than a deal, he would not sign off on the stuff. Generally what you wanted to do was to give him something that was going to fix the system, this really needed to be done and was going to help people. Also, it wasn’t going to cost much money. If you avoided the things I mentioned, you could get him to go along with it. Of course, we had some indications from time to time that he would support it from our weekly reports.

One final point. We very often would take issues that Carter had supported in ’75 and ’76 and it was our job to try to make those issues come to life—even though Carter’s support was there, it wasn’t enough. Let me give a good example: airline deregulation. Airline deregulation was something that Carter supported. He didn’t know anything about it really in ’75-’76. It was the kind of thing that was deregulatory and everybody was for deregulatory things then. Kennedy had really taken the lead in airline deregulation. Carter couldn’t convince his Cabinet Secretary really to support airline deregulation. Brock Adams basically didn’t think it was a good idea. I don’t know whether it was because he was too close to the airline industry or whether on the merits he thought it was a bad idea.

We had a young staff person who must have been 28 or 29 at the time, maybe even younger, who had worked on the Hill. Her name was Mary Schuman and she just took this under her wing and did nothing for about a year except airline deregulation. Most people on our staff would have five or six things floating from time to time and it was a matter of juggling. She was very single minded. She said, “I’m going to do airline deregulation, I’m going to get it through.” She did the Hill lobbying, getting Brock Adams to file papers, orchestrating a memo to the President, orchestrating the interest groups, orchestrating the press. It was a real maestro type performance. The result was that Carter got airline deregulation, although he spent very little time trying to get
it. It was a role that our staff had to perform in some cases because Anne Wexler wasn’t on board or because Cabinet Secretaries weren’t really that supportive. We would have to do a lot more than just the advice giving or the other functions that we mentioned earlier. This was a classic example of how something that was a campaign position would have died had not somebody in our staff really pushed it to the end.

Jones: Or as a campaign position permitted some latitude to your staff.

Rubenstein: Right. On airline deregulation you could convince Carter that it should be done a certain way. He didn’t have preconceived notions about how airline deregulation should go, but he really wanted it and we could take great advantage of the fact that his Cabinet Secretary wasn’t supporting him. It gave us greater control over the operation because Carter tended to trust us on the issue more than his Cabinet Secretary.

Carp: It was also an issue that didn’t directly affect the Department of Transportation’s jurisdiction. That put it in a slightly different context because it dealt with an independent agency.

Rubenstein: The lesson I got out of that is that if you are a staff person at the White House, and worked on our staff, and you want to get something through the Congress and you want to master an issue, find the focal point in the city on an issue, you could do it because we had the access to the President through Stuart and we were at the White House. It’s a matter of really taking the time and doing it. That was one of the great things about working with our staff. They thought at a young age that they could affect policy and they were right.

McCleskey: I simply want to follow up on Don Kettl’s question about how the promises were kept. In response to that I think you mentioned that the agenda of the first year was set by the campaign. I still want to know how those campaign promises were developed into policy alternative. Was it the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretaries and their departments to pick up those campaign promises and run with them, or did you all in that first year say to them, “Look, here’s what we’re committed to doing and we want to get started on this”? 

Carp: For the most part, the campaign promises that Carter cared about most were the ones he regularly spoke about. He knew what those were and so did everybody else. There was great eagerness on the part of the Cabinet to implement them. That’s under category one. These were the campaign promises that Carter really believed that he had made and he was just bound and determined to try them. He thought it was his obligation, and I think maybe it was.

There’s another whole host of campaign promises that I’m sure the President thought were made more by the campaign than by him. Every campaign does that and it was generally speaking our job to call that to people’s attention. There again Carter took the unprecedented step, which we certainly never recognized, of making David compile his campaign promises and releasing a book of them. Under those circumstances it really was not an enormous effort to get an agency to get working on something that had been promised. You might have different interpretations of a promise and you might even have disagreement as to whether it should be implemented, but by and large because he’d taken the step of having his promises book published as a White House
document, we had a lot more trouble stopping promises that shouldn’t have been implemented at
the moment than we did as a general rule getting people to work on it.

**Rubenstein:** I think you make a very good point in that people tended to emphasize the promises
book and how many promises Carter made. The truth was that there were ten or fifteen promises
that people associated with Carter that Carter had in his mind. Those were the major promises he
was worried about. The other hundreds and hundreds of things that I put together and listed as
promises were either so minor that Carter didn’t even know he had said them, or they were said
in campaign letters or statements or they were said to get interest group support. They were not
major focuses of his concern. He was concerned about the ten to fifteen that everybody knew
about and each Cabinet Secretary knew those one or two in his or her area that they really had to
do something on.

Let me just take two minutes to describe how the promises book came to be. Carter, after he was
elected Governor, sat down and went through all his speeches and typed up himself his campaign
promises. He claimed that he used that as a guide to what he was going to do in the
administration. I don’t know whether that’s true but that was the story that I got. Three days after
his election he called Stuart and said, “I’d like to do the same thing now. I’m too busy myself to
go through the stuff and type it up this time. Why don’t you do it.” Stuart said, “I’m too busy too,
but I’ve got a young guy who will do it.” He asked me to do it and I said, “I’m too busy, but I’ve
got a bunch of interns here.”

I hired these interns left over from the campaign before we closed up the campaign headquarters
and said, “Go through everything.” We went through everything. But a lot of Carter’s tapes were
lost and things he said were never transcribed. We did the best we could with public documents,
and we came up with a book that we knew was really not a very carefully done thing. It wasn’t
all that precise, but it was really designed to show him the enormity of what he had committed to
more than anything else and to scare him in some way. Unfortunately it didn’t work. I’m told he
never read it. He never read the thing.

**Young:** He just saw how many pages there were.

**Rubenstein:** We gave it to him dutifully three weeks or so after it was signed and I’m told he
never really read it. He sort of knew, as Bert said, what his ten to fifteen big things were and he
didn’t need to read this book. The problem was that word got out about this and it was called
*Promises, Promises* after the Broadway play, and the reporters wanted it. About one month into
the administration Jody said, “It causes us less of a problem to release it than not release it,” so
we released it. People had plenty of problems. We tried to talk Carter out of it but Carter at that
time was Mr. Open and was naive about how it was going to be seen, and so they released every
darn promise and it was something he was ridiculed for. I should say as a parenthesis after the
last campaign I helped put together Reagan’s campaign promises and they have been released as
well.

**Devaney:** Some of the functions you’ve described are functions that would normally be
associated with OMB [Office of Management and Budget]. I was wondering if you could take a
few minutes to describe the division of labor between yourself and OMB and to tell us why that
division came down the way it did or came up the way it did. Also, could you tell us if it changed over time and what would have caused the changes?

Carp: I think that the office manager of the budget is a line agency. It has always been a line agency with a mission of its own in terms of management improvement and increasingly in terms of budget control. When the Congressional Budget Act was adopted, a couple of other significant things happened. The budget director was elevated to the Cabinet level and made subject to Senate confirmation, which was an intentional symbol of his broader responsibilities. At that same time the role of the budget director in terms of a spokesman for both the administration and his agency’s policies was changed in a fairly dramatic way.

The OMB of the late ’50s and early ’60s was a largely career organization, but one that tended to face the President and interact with him, and my impression is that this implied that he had a confidential and almost personal staff kind of a relationship. This has changed. The Office of Management and Budget now is much more like other agencies. Although it has its own oversight committees, it has its own institutional concerns and the rest, OMB’s position is increasingly public, at least in part because of the pressure of this process and oversight committees and everything else. This competition between agencies and the Office of Management and Budget is often public. The Office of Management and Budget is more and more in the position of being one of the agencies among whom the President has to decide, although it has a special intimate relationship with the President and much less in the position of being a real piece of Presidential staff.

Hundreds of times I’ve heard OMB officials talk about their institutional position. Sometimes I’ve seen OMB directors submit one recommendation for the agency to the President, another recommendation personally. We have a situation here where OMB, like every other agency in government, has got responsibilities it thinks it might want to perform, and where most OMB directors now would say, “We don’t expect the President always to agree with us. We’re making agency recommendations to the President. We’re not trying to say these are our recommendations to the President.” That being the case, it creates the need for a mediating role, which we played.

On the other hand, it ought to be pointed out that unlike other kinds of decisions, the budget process was not run through a system in which we controlled the staffing or the economy or anything else. We attended some meetings with the President, and Stuart made his own views known on the major budget questions. It’s a different kind of a thing. It’s not like a policy issue where we would control the situation and OMB would participate very actively. In the budget process OMB would control it and we would participate much less actively than OMB would participate in a straight policy decision. On major budget questions, since OMB was almost intentionally taking tough positions in order to flush out issues, I think our view about where the real agreement ought to come out was a significant factor. That’s half a try. Maybe Alice would like to talk about this.

Rubenstein: Could I make a point first concerning the OMB institutional position? The question is relevant now in part because you see a great deal of contrast between what happened in our administration and what happens in the Reagan administration. In our administration, you heard
all the time about Stu Eizenstat, he was the person who was quoted in the papers and he was the person who was on national TV. You heard very little about Jim McIntyre. The contrast now is you hear a great deal about [David] Stockman even before the *Atlantic* article, and leaving aside the *Atlantic* article he’s the major policy figure that you hear about. You hear very little about Marty Anderson, who is Stuart’s counterpart.

What that makes me think is that the institutional things that Bert talked about are very true but there is a thing that you just can’t overlook, which is personalities and personal styles. Stuart’s style tended to be one that he wanted to be involved in everything that was touching his area. He wanted to get his views to the President fairly quickly. He also wanted to make sure that political bases were touched on everything, and he tended to operate in a different way. Jim McIntyre tended to look at things more institutionally and he also had more difficult problems to deal with than Stuart. Stuart had a staff that was fine-tuned and in a sense they would work around the clock to get a memo in to the President. They weren’t bureaucrats in the sense that at past six o’clock they’re gone. While during the budget cycle OMB people would work around the clock, generally they were more career type people and you didn’t see them working the hours I think our staff did.

Secondly, our people were much more political and gave a different perspective to things. McIntyre didn’t have that kind of expertise as much, and Carter of course wanted some political tinge in some of the recommendations he got. In addition, I think that the policies that we were dealing with were different in a sense. We were dealing with an activist President in the sense that we would have so many policies that we were coming up with, and they weren’t rightfully things that McIntyre should have been a dominant figure in.

In the current administration, the major thing they’re doing is budget and that’s the major domestic policy, and therefore it’s natural that Stockman will get much more time in the press and with the President. If the situation were such that Eizenstat was put in the Reagan administration in Marty Anderson’s position and McIntyre in Stockman’s position, I suspect you would read much more about McIntyre’s views, though I still think that because Stuart is a much more forceful personality than Marty Anderson and very active, you’re still going to hear a lot about him even though his areas wouldn’t be as important in the Reagan administration because there wouldn’t be as many new initiatives and policies.

The major point is that personalities determine things so much more than institutional factors, at least in this case. We were playing a major role in part because our leader was the kind of person who enforced on us quick turn around, some political input, a sense of being involved in everything, and OMB took a more institutional traditional position. It didn’t feel it had to be involved in everything. It didn’t feel it had to have its recommendation to the President on everything and didn’t feel that it needed to control the process as much as we wanted to control a lot of policy areas. Now we can hear the OMB position.

**Devaney:** Do you think it would have been different if Bert Lance had stayed on?

**Rubenstein:** Bert Lance had one advantage over Jim McIntyre in that he was Carter’s best friend in the administration. He was the only person in the administration who was Carter’s age and
Carter could sit down and actually chew the fat with. He didn’t do that with Hamilton, Jody, or Stuart. Hamilton and Jody were more like sons or younger brothers, but Lance was somebody he could really sit down and talk with very candidly, and Carter did that with very few people. For that reason if Bert wanted something done he could get Carter to do it and could bring OMB along. Bert didn’t feel a great passion for OMB per se. He used to sit in meetings with the President and say, “That’s the OMB position, Mr. President, let me give you my view.” This is why he was the head of OMB.

His sense was that he was more of a personal advisor to Carter, and the role that he really wanted for himself was to be the liaison with big business and with the business community and the President. OMB was a convenient place for him to be and gave him an important institutional role. I don’t know that on all the day-to-day budget issues Bert would have expended his political capital with the President to try to win all of his issues because he couldn’t ever get deeply involved in issues. Certainly OMB would have won more things if McIntyre had remained as the deputy and Bert had remained as the head, though I don’t want to claim that we would have done things a great deal differently because I think in time Bert’s role would have been more to be a business person and a liaison and less of the OMB person, in my sense of it.

Young: Were you going to say something, Alice?

Rogoff: I agree with everything that’s been said. When I went to work for McIntyre in 1979 I remember a time shortly after I arrived when we learned that a memo that he had sent to the President on a matter that he felt extremely strongly about that was insignificant in budget terms but he felt very important as a precedent in some area of policy had not gotten anywhere near the President and had been put on hold by some White House staff guy who worked for Hamilton Jordan and was sitting on someone’s desk for three or four weeks not going anywhere. That was the kind of thing that McIntyre had to spend a really disproportionate amount of his personal capital on.

That just could not have happened to Bert Lance and it happened to McIntyre time and time again. It was an enormous source of frustration to him. There was very little that he personally could do about it. He couldn’t rely on the political people who worked for him to solve these kinds of problems for him, because those political people were a real anomaly. They were political in the sense that they were supposed to owe their loyalty to the President and his policies. On the other hand, they all had their own political agendas and they were very different from McIntyre’s. There would often be times in which they, as associate directors, knowing what the institutional OMB position on an issue would be as it came up through the courier ranks, would in advance of decision time go to Bert or David or to their staff and work out their own private compromises without ever having cleared them with McIntyre, thereby forcing the leadership of OMB into a really schizophrenic position in the end having already compromised and diluted out the facts before it got to the President. Again, I’m giving you McIntyre’s perspective.

Carp: There is no doubt that that’s his perspective.
Rogoff: That explains why it was so tough for McIntyre to force his way into positions where Bert would have had no trouble.

Carp: In fairness, the difficulty that McIntyre had in overcoming that demonstrates that the system in fact was working reasonably well given the constraints put on Jim. All the people were trying to do was to keep poor old President from more involved in making these budget decisions. I want to make a point about Lance. I think it is fair to say that he wasn’t interested in the stuff of budget policy in the Charlie Schultze tradition. My impression of Lance was that he was an enormously serious force in the administration before he ran into trouble. He alone of the people close to the President—Mondale was constrained—had the size and the presence and the intelligence and the ability to deal on a personal level with senior members of the press, with senior members of Congress, with the leaders of the business community. I’m speaking for the President, not just for myself. He was a figure close to the President, but not the President, who could get out there, and a figure who had in his personal qualities all those things that people have said that Carter lacked, a sense of horse feathers and all the rest.

I believe it was a very serious thing for the Carter Presidency when he left and when no one else was found to take that position, which didn’t necessarily have to be OMB but it would have to be somebody else in an operational part of the government who had those skills. Lance in the brief time I watched him there was very instrumental in the kind of thing we could never do. If there was a twenty million dollar decision that was needed for some large important thing, he could go in there and say, “It is true that this is not a good thing, but on the scale of life it’s a small thing and we’ve got to worry about some big things, so let’s do it.” That’s what this administration was short on, and I don’t think we ever recovered from losing it. That’s my view.

Rubenstein: Two quick things. One, on the political appointees: while the people who ran OMB were called political appointees, their level of political experience was very limited compared to our staff, and that’s why when it came to political matters they really couldn’t bring to bear the kind of perspectives that we might. In our memos we would put some political input into them and it’d be things that we thought Carter could relate to more. The OMB people didn’t have to work in campaigns to speak of, and more importantly they didn’t know Carter as well. Our staff people got in to see Carter a lot and had fairly good feedback from Stuart about what was going on. I think the OMB people didn’t quite often have that perspective.

Carp: There really is an institutional role here. Maybe this wasn’t necessary, but OMB has sort of become the baseline for the entire town. That certainly was true during the Carter years. In other words, this had nothing to do with our position, but any line they drew was going to be the least that was going to be done on this issue.

If they got in the business of drawing that line too high, they could foreclose not just the President but the entire political process in Washington from considering things. That’s a very heavy burden on them. They do have an institutional responsibility. They have a responsibility to come in year after year and say the impact aid program stinks. That does not mean that in any given year a President has a constitutional obligation to go out there and try to wipe out the impact aid program. There’s a real institutional difference here.
It’s also true that the administration of OMB has such an enormous job doing the technical side of budgeting and monitoring all that stuff and managing those accounts every year that OMB as an institution tends to spend a lot of time looking at the government and worrying about a lot of within-the-executive-branch issues. Although the leadership of OMB is pulled up on the Hill all the time, as an institution it doesn’t have a very good sense of the kinds of bargains that will happen. There’s a need, I feel, for a President to have some additional perspective, and I think you’ll see that Reagan this year has gotten into totally unanticipated problems in some specific areas because he hasn’t had that other look, despite the very political nature of his own people.

Young: Did you have a follow up on that?

Rubenstein: Just a quick point on the paper flow. One of the sources of our power I thought was that we not only, as I mentioned before, controlled the paper that we wrote, but the people who were running the paper flow system, Rich Hutcheson and his operation, had worked in the campaign. Their main focus in life was politics. They just wanted to do things to help the President politically. They weren’t in a sense interested in making certain everybody’s views were before the President equally if it was going to hurt the President politically. They were very political in their approach.

That helped us because if anything about domestic policy came along that was in any way shape or form connected with something we might know something about, they would call us to say should this go to the President, or should you look at it, or should we summarize it because they would trust our judgment. These people never trusted OMB because OMB was viewed as apolitical. If OMB sent a memo over they would call us up and say, “OMB has sent this memo over, do you want to do something with it, do you want to summarize it, do you want to hold it?” And that gave us a fair amount of discretion to get things with a more domestic policy tilt before the President. In other words, we weren’t ambushed or surprised by what the President got to see, whereas other people may have been sometimes.

Young: Ken, did you have a question on this line?

Thompson: Yes, it’s a follow up to the Lance issue. I’ll just ask it quickly and if you want to hold it for later you can. A couple of weeks after the election—we didn’t learn this here, I learned it some other place, we’re not trespassing on our rules about security.

Young: We don’t tell the visitors of the day what others said. We don’t tell tales to each other.

Thompson: No, this comes from another source. But two weeks after the election, President Carter called a very respected public figure to Plains and they talked about the area this man had competence in. He gave him a list of thirty things that he thought he ought to talk about, but then when he finished he said, “The single most important thing is to have somebody who will say on a given issue, don’t make a fool of yourself on this question. Wait a minute and think about what you’re going to do. Everybody else is going to be telling you things they want you to do in their area. But there’ll be very few people in your administration, or in any administration, who will say, think twice, worry about what the consequences of this are and don’t be a fool.” I gather Lance could have done that. This goes beyond the specific OMB question. Was there anybody
else in the Carter administration that at any point in the four years could do this with the
President?

Rubenstein: I think so. Remember Carter did not have a lot of friends when he came to
Washington. He didn’t leave with that many more. He was not a person who made a lot of
personal friends. He didn’t bring a whole coterie of people up from Georgia with him who were
personal friends. He brought some staff people, of course. The only friend he had was Charles
Kirbo. Kirbo was thought to be initially a man of enormous power because he was the closest
friend of the President.

I always thought that Kirbo’s role was much reduced from what the press said, because you can’t
be advising a President if you’re not around, and he was just not around very much. He would
come up once a month for two days or so and sniff around and give Carter some views. You just
can’t be that effective, I think, in trying to give advice on complicated and major policy matters
that way. I never thought he was that effective though. I think on a major issue where he got
involved he could sit down with Carter and say, “You’re going to make a fool of yourself if you
do this.” I think there are other people who could do that. Hamilton tended not to be a person
who got involved with day-to-day things. He viewed himself as being a person who could sit
back, look at things from a different perspective, and give Carter a long memo saying, “You’re
going in the wrong direction.”

The only two other people who would do that I think were Pat Caddell, who prided himself on
telling the President he was going in the wrong direction even if Carter wasn’t going in the
wrong direction. Pat loved to play that role and he was very skillful at it. I’ve never met anybody
as skillful at it because he had the data. He would do a poll and have a fifty-page memo based on
that poll that nobody else could understand, but it was so brilliantly written that you had to
believe that he knew what he was talking about. He would come in and he would harangue the
President for two or three or four hours and just convince the President he had to do something
difficult. He had an enormous effect on the President. He had an incredible effect and he was the
one responsible for the Camp David domestic summit. The whole thing was all Caddell.

The last person would be Bob Strauss. Initially Carter didn’t even offer a job to Strauss. He
didn’t like Bob because Bob was running DNC [Democratic National Committee] for [Henry]
Scoop Jackson in ’76 in Carter’s view, and Carter didn’t give him a job in the administration. He
couldn’t find anybody to fill the trade job that labor and business would agree on, so finally they
said, “Ok, let’s give it to Strauss.” Little did they know that Strauss would quickly take over the
whole operation and make a success of that operation, but also become probably Carter’s closest
person in Washington who was his age with whom he could talk.

Strauss was around, he didn’t need a job, and he had an independent reputation and didn’t have
to worry. He would love to go in and tell Carter to make a fool of himself, I’ve heard this from
Ham, I’ve heard this at Duke Zeibert’s, I’ve heard this on the Hill. He took pride in going in
there and telling Carter that stuff. I don’t think Carter took his advice as seriously as Strauss will
tell you, in part because Carter thought Strauss was too political for Carter’s own good. I think
he did listen to him a fair amount in that sense. There are others you may know about.
Carp: I don’t know. Maybe Mondale on occasion. Carter was not an inaccessible man. I think his biggest problem was in feeling comfortable letting some things go that were less than ideal because they weren’t very important, or being comfortable with the kinds of quid pro quos that you have to go through in this life. I got the first phase one energy stuff out of the House Rules Committee by promising somebody something, and I never would have considered running it past the President for fear he would have said no. And then it was presented to him. The whole senior staff kind of got together and said somebody did this. It worked, so it was all right.

That was a serious operation. We got a piece of legislation that was very important to the country, and we did a small thing that we would have preferred not to do. That kind of dealing was so much of what he felt like he’d been elected to combat. It was a very difficult thing for him, and he was always concerned that he was going to wake up some morning and find out that he had turned into Lyndon Johnson. That was something that he did not want to do. He could always be talked into doing the sensible thing and he was very accessible on that point, but it took an awful lot of talk to persuade him and that was probably a good quality.

Kettl: You talked to us about the importance of your contact with interest groups in particular both for trying to develop sources of political intelligence about what the likely political effects were going to be of different strategies you were proposing, as well as trying to gather political support for the decisions that you were trying to reach. Could you tell us a bit about your contacts with the interest groups, the kinds of people you talked to, how often you talked to them? In particular, were there certain interest groups or people plugged into different parts of the political life of the town that you saw on a regular basis?

Rubenstein: My own view is that interest groups pretty much run Washington. That’s not a novel theory; it’s been around for a long time. When I first came to Washington I couldn’t quite believe the extent to which it was true. I found that members of Congress will do what the interest groups are concerned about on most issues unless they get real constituent concern. Nothing pleases a politician more in Washington than having two different interest groups involved in an issue agree on something and presenting that politician with a compromise which he can then bless. The best thing for a politician is not to have to take a difficult position.

In the White House we tried to keep up very good relations with all the major interest group players in town, and there are many of them. We tried to do it by, in Stuart’s case, meeting with all of them or as many of them as we could on a regular basis by letting them know in advance of things that were happening in their areas. We always tried to make them feel part of the process. It obviously didn’t work because we lost the support of a lot of those groups during the course of the four years. I would say that the major groups that we tried to keep up with were the unions, and that principally meant the AFL-CIO and the UAW [United Auto Workers], which we had a special relationship with. That was before the UAW merged.

On the business side we tried to keep up relationships with the business roundtable, which we found to be the only major business group we could talk to. The Chamber of Commerce was just completely off the wall, there was no way to deal with them and NEM [National Energy Marketers] wasn’t all that much better. The roundtable meant that we got to deal with first class people like Reg Jones or Herb Shapiro who were the head of it for much of the Carter
administration. That was our main contact with the business community. They had their lobbyists in town. Whether it’s environment, energy, or health care, there are two or three key interest leaders in that town that we had to get to know very well, and part of our job was to make them feel that our policy was going to be something that they should support, and they blessed it before we announced it and after we announced it they would go lobby for it.

After we announced the policy, part of what Anne Wexler was designed to do was to get these interest group leaders, whether they supported it in advance or didn’t support it in advance, to support it, to get them organized, to get them to go fight for the program. One of Carter’s failings I guess is that he did not enjoy that part of being President. If you grow up in Washington and you come to political life in Washington you will know the 25 most important lobbyists and interest group leaders in that town on a first name basis, you’ll have dinner with them, lunch with them, you’ll see them everywhere, and you become friends with them. Gerald Ford’s closest friends were the US Steel lobbyists and the Ford Motor Company lobbyists. Those were his closest friends when he was President. He had spent 25 years with these people.

Carter didn’t have that long history and so he didn’t tend to view lobbyists as people that you can use and people that you can work deals with. He tended to view them as off at the other side and people you had to deal with but reluctantly and he didn’t like very much meeting with these people, so we had to do it at the staff level. Of course if major things were going forward, he would meet with the most senior people in some of these interest groups. It wasn’t something he looked forward to.

Carp: I don’t have much to add to that. Except that one of the things that Anne Wexler did for us was to keep up the continuing relationship with these people. They’re citizens too and sometimes they’ll give you a little extra bit if you see them all the time, if they get to come over to the White House, if they begin to feel like they’re honored or at least respected commensurate with their actual ability to do you harm or ill. I think one of the things that is propping up Democrats in the House now is the fact that most business lobbyists in Washington are in fact fairly liberal Democrats. That’s an important factor in keeping a flow of corporate campaign contributions in to these people in a system of campaign financing that unfortunately depends largely on corporate contributions. It’s very important to recognize the way these people are built into the system and try to give them the impression that they’re viewed as responsible citizens. The more we did that, the better we did.

Rubenstein: There really are two different types of interest groups in Washington. There are those that can control the membership and those that can’t, those that you cut deals with and those you can’t. You might want to talk about that problem.

Carp: We had enormous difficulty with the environmental movement, which was a source of great frustration to the President because he really was an environmentalist. He was a card carrying, dam-hating, straight old-fashioned wilderness society admitted environmentalist. He was more so than anyone I’ve ever known, including most environmental groups and lobbyists. As hard as we tried, these people were a receding horizon. I went through a very frustrating experience in the energy mobilization board where I actually had a compromise with the
environmentalists. Both in my office and in a meeting in front of a member of the Senate, who will remain nameless because I owe him that, and they just went right out from under me.

I got to thinking. The environmentalists are effective because of their members, and they’ve got a lot of highly committed agitators and letter writers out there in the country. They have a major impact on members of Congress because they know that these votes have been carefully watched and that they’re regarded as terrific litmus test issues. What that means is that when the time comes to compromise, environmental movement representatives in Washington are powerless. They can’t tell the people that it’s an issue of good and evil and black versus white on Tuesday, and then try to come back on Thursday and say we’re going to settle for three quarters of the loaf.

The clearest example of that was the Alaska Lands Bill. That was a very important piece of legislation to them, a piece of legislation in which they were successful beyond all measure. It was ready to be passed before the election, it was 90% of what they wanted, and twice what their people in Washington ever thought they’d get, I think that’s fair to say. Yet they couldn’t agree to give up that 10% and pass the bill before the election. They actually had to take the risk of losing the bill in a lame duck session rather than make that compromise. If they were competent professionals, they knew that they’d never get more. In fact they were lucky. They got the same bill in the lame duck session that they turned down in the regular session. They took an enormous risk. Their people in Washington are competent professionals, they knew what they were doing, but they just built this tidal wave.

The opposite to that is the AFL-CIO. The AFL-CIO communicates very well with its members about its legislative issues. They don’t have good communication with their members on their legislative issues and consequently they’re not nearly as effective as they could be. When members of Congress go home, they don’t get beaten up by the union members. On the other hand it’s easy enough to compromise with them because they don’t have to explain their compromise to anyone but themselves. I never believed this the whole time we were in the White House but if I use my own analysis, groups like the environmentalists ought to be listened to and respected and treated for what they can do, but reaching a result they can bless ought not to be an objective. I think if you look back, those of you who follow the environmental movement legislatively, I can’t remember a piece of legislation that they’ve been satisfied with. They’re sort of professionally unsatisfied. The people who are by and large the legislative heroes of the environmental movement are people like Gaylord Nelson who can come out there and support their amendments, and they usually are people from off the jurisdictional committees because of this problem. There are other groups like that.

Jones: If they’re satisfied with the legislation, they’re bound to be unsatisfied because it can’t be administered.

Carp: The thing that’s too bad about this is that since their business is building tidal waves, they spent four years educating their membership that Carter was just as bad from their point of view as Ford and Nixon had been, because that’s how you build up this tidal wave. They took the guy who had the most pro-environmental record in American history and put themselves in a position
where as much as the leadership tried, they could not mobilize their membership in that election. They absolutely slit their throats.

**Kettl:** You get a sense of continuing frustration. On the one hand working with interest groups and building up a coalition on a particular bill, but then not being able to get the same coalition together on a different one. And in the end losing the support of any of these groups when it came time for the general election in 1980.

**Rubenstein:** There are certain groups in Washington that virtually have national constituencies, like the environmental groups. It’s very difficult to compromise with them. Also it’s very difficult to cut a deal with them and to convince their membership to go along. I would say the environmental groups were like that, the women’s groups were very much like that. It was very difficult to work a compromise out with them, they were a hundred percent or nothing type groups. The Jewish groups, certainly on the question relating to Israel, were a hundred percent or nothing. Black groups tend to be more sophisticated. They would take their public position that was a hundred percent or nothing but privately, unlike the women’s groups or environmental groups, they would tell you what they could really live with. They really learned how the system operated, I think. Business groups I found to be the best to deal with because they were businessmen and that was their life. They made deals all the time. If our philosophical positions were different from theirs in so many cases, we weren’t cutting as many deals with them as we would have liked.

**Carp:** I think it’s very important to recognize that the process of working with interest groups to pass legislation is very different from the process of getting these people’s political support in an election, and the two just ought not to be confused. I’ll bet you that 85% of the registered lobbyists in Washington vote for Carter; 95% of their boards of directors voted for Reagan.

**Young:** The fact that some of the people from these interest groups were appointed to the administration didn’t help.

**Rubenstein:** It helped. I think it helped. First of all, if we hadn’t appointed them, we would have never heard the end of it because we had promised those kinds of appointments and those people were offered up as talented people and they were from interest group friends, and a lot of them were people we knew very well. I think it deflected a lot of the criticism. Certainly there were cases where Ralph Nader would still attack his own former people like Joan Claybrook. Generally I think it deflected some of the public criticism for a while, but towards the end of the administration the interest groups saw the situation as that they weren’t getting the positions that they wanted, and the fact that their old friends were a part of the system now didn’t make that much of a difference.

**Clinton:** This morning you said that Eizenstat’s advice, when he offered it, on foreign policy issues was not as successful as on domestic policy, but he did offer it on some foreign policy matters. I believe you said that he wrote some of the memos that went to the President on these issues. Could you tell us what kinds of issues Eizenstat got involved with?
Rubenstein: Sure. First, Israel has to be treated as a case unto itself. Stuart took enormous personal interest in matters relating to Israel. In fact, he worked out a formal relationship with the President such that he would be the main contact point for the Ambassador from Israel to the White House. So the two Ambassadors that we had when we were in the White House did not go to Zbig when they came to the White House. They came to Stuart and Stuart was in charge of transmitting their views. For that reason he was also viewed as the Israeli lobby’s point man in the White House, and so he would spend a lot of time on those issues, and anything related to the Middle East he would try to get deeply involved in.

On those matters I think Stuart was not as completely successful in front of the President as he would have liked or as he was on domestic policy, because Stuart was viewed more as a special pleader in those cases. Carter knew that what Stuart recommended would be the position of the Israeli lobby to a large extent, and while sometimes Carter would go along with it, he wasn’t getting from Stuart the dispassionate sort of compromise position that Stuart was providing in the domestic policy area. Carter recognized that, and while in some cases he would do a favor for Stuart and go with the Israeli position, I think generally Carter would have Stuart on the Israeli side and then you’d have the entire State Department, OMB, if they were involved, on the other side. Therefore a compromise position tended to be somewhere between Stuart and those people. He wasn’t as successful there.

On other foreign policy matters Stuart tried to get involved in things that affected domestic policy, like international economic policy and trade policy. Sometimes we were the principal memo writers, sometimes we were not. International economics is an issue that no White House has ever learned how to deal with very well because the Domestic Policy Staff people are not really quick to do it. NSC people are all geopolitical types and they don’t know anything about economics, and so these things always fall in the crack. Our solution was to name someone like Henry Owen as the international economics person at the White House, but that didn’t completely solve the problem. There was a void there, we tried to fill it, Carter went with us sometimes, sometimes he didn’t.

Finally, whenever there’s a major political thing going on in foreign policy, if it was the Iranian situation or the Panama Canal Treaty, or SALT [Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty], Stuart would always lob in a memo or two over the transom that was completely unsolicited but which gave Carter some different perspectives. Sometimes Carter went along with it, but Stuart tended not to be part of the National Security Council process unless it was really an Israeli matter or unless Carter specifically asked him to do so in rare cases.

Clinton: Were these memos seen by Brzezinski?

Rubenstein: No, they were specifically not seen by Brzezinski. We would put them on the President’s desk. At night I would go in the President’s office and put them on his desk, eyes only, nobody sees it, sealed up, and if Carter liked what he saw, then he would send it to Zbig. If he didn’t, then Zbig wouldn’t know.

Jones: Were these domestic implications in foreign policy?
Rubenstein: We tried to say, yes.

Jones: Back to this matter of groups. You mentioned the President didn’t like dealing with groups, he didn’t like that part of the job too much, which is what a lot of people say. Was he good at suggesting strategies in getting their support?

Rubenstein: No.

Carp: He wasn’t. That’s one reason that we’re here. That’s one reason why we hired Anne Wexler. He really was not interested in that. To understand President Carter, you have to understand that he felt that decision-making was the most important part of his job. The whole need to engage in sales was more a reflection on something wrong than it was about something right. I have enormous respect for the man. I think he’s got it exactly backwards myself, but that’s the thing you have to understand about him. He came to Washington to make the right decisions, he thought it was the responsibility of the Congress to implement them, the responsibility of the press to report them accurately, the responsibility of the interest groups to patriotically stand up and support them, and he refused to accept the view that the adversarial, nasty, pretentious business we have in Washington is a constitutional system for ironing out the wrinkles in people’s ideas. The whole area of sales was something that he would participate in, but he would not actively participate in thinking it out.

Young: I think this is a fairly important point because you put together two things: the President’s disinclination to invest his time even if he had the taste for that sort of thing, and on the other hand the enormous investment of staff time in those things. I do not know of a previous Presidency in which this kind of staff effort was made to that degree issue by issue by issue.

Rubenstein: We spent a lot of time at it and I’m told that the Reagan staff doesn’t do this quite as much with lobbyists around town. Republican lobbyists, business types, complain that they can’t get in to see the President’s people or they don’t know who to deal with or they don’t get briefed as well. I would make one point about Carter. Carter didn’t enjoy doing any of the public relations things or the sales things that Bert mentioned. If you hit him over the head enough he would do them but he would do them in a sort of perfunctory way. If Carter would get a memo saying you have to do these ten meetings to sell your policy, he would bitch and moan but he would go do eight of them or seven of them. He would religiously show up on time, stay the full time, give a very good speech and leave. I think some people knew it was perfunctory and he didn’t enjoy it and he didn’t enjoy the real give and take, but he would go ahead and do it. That was the style he had.

He was like this in his relationship with Congress. Carter, as Frank Moore and people may have told you, almost never initiated a call with a member of Congress. If you gave Carter a list of 150 members to call by tomorrow morning, he’d call every one of them. He’d call them all and give his thirty-second pitch, say goodbye, and go on to the next one. I think the members began to sense it wasn’t a true give and take. They sort of knew that he was calling because he’d been told to call and didn’t get as much out of his calls, and the same was true with the interest groups. He didn’t get as much out of those meetings. Carter would come in, give his pitch, listen to them for a second, say, “Thank you very much, I understand what you’re saying,” and then leave.
**Jones:** Let me clarify something. We’ve heard consistently I suppose about this matter of politics and Carter and that Carter suggested to many people, “Leave the politics to me. I don’t want to hear about the politics.” Does that come down then to saying that, “The politics should not be discussed in front of me but you people should go off and do it and not let me hear about it”? It seems to be a very curious thing, “Leave it to me, but I won’t deal with it.”

**Carp:** You have to sit down and read the collective 1974 to 1976 campaign speeches that Jimmy Carter gave. He believed 97% of the words that he uttered in those campaign speeches, and the reason he got elected was because people sensed that he did believe it. The man who believed those speeches believed, which is certainly true, that there’s something kind of fundamentally corrupt about the governmental process in Washington. You can either say it’s sort of the reflection of our country, it’s part of our constitutional system, but you’ve got to work with it, sort of the Lyndon Johnson view of government. Be positive but keep your values.

Or you can believe that it is something which can be reformed and replaced with something Jeffersonian. Not the way Jefferson operated—I guess he was as much of a wheeler-dealer as anybody—but the way Jefferson wrote about this kind of stuff. Carter definitely followed in the Jefferson scholar mode, not Jefferson the politician mode. He was a common cause monarch. He believed in procedural reform, he believed that we ought to be discussing the issues, and certainly for the first two years of his Presidency he tried to conduct himself in that manner, I think. It’s a great tragedy because I think the biggest lesson of his first four years, and he learned it, is you can’t change the game too radically. I believe he learned it, and I think it’s a tragedy that he never really had a chance to put his exceptional intellect to work on it.

**Jones:** Let me just ask the question a little differently. What do you think the President meant when he said, “Leave the politics to me”?

**Rubenstein:** I don’t think it was like the driver saying leave the driving to me. I don’t think it was quite like completely, 100%, leaving the effort to him. But Carter made those kinds of statements, I think in the first one and a half years to two years in the administration. I hardly ever heard him say that in the last two years. I think after those first two years he basically knew that he wasn’t going to sell these things so easily and that the politics were much more important than he thought. I never could figure out early on when he said that whether he was playing a game to himself or was he playing games in front of his staff. We all knew that he had to sell these things and we all knew that these things were political, but I didn’t know whether he didn’t like to open up in front of a lot of people and talk about the politics of it or whether he truly believed that he had the best policy and that in the end he could make a speech on TV and get it sold.

I think he believed the latter. I don’t think he was trying to fool us because here’s a man who came from nowhere to become President of the United States based on his doggedness, his skills of the campaign, or his skills in selling ideas. I guess he believed that once he had been elected to get those ideas into being and once he had the substance of a great proposal to Congress, he could do the same thing he had done in the campaign. I think he misjudged that. I think towards
the last two years of the administration he didn’t say that so much. You could get his attention much more on politics.

**Carp:** He said that a lot. What he meant by that was I’ve been elected, so when I tell you I want a welfare reform bill, don’t you come back and talk to me about politics. I got elected. He had to blunt his spear as anybody would, I think. I’m sure Ronald Reagan will have a very different view about this town in about five months than he did five months ago. It is also true that if any President took a hundred percent of the politically sound advice that somebody like me would give him, he would never get anything done.

**Jones:** If I could make one more connection with what Jim said. Is it possible then that the position that he took resulted in your having to do more political work than might have been the case if in fact the President really liked this and decided we should talk about the politics associated with it issue by issue?

**Rubenstein:** I don’t know that we would have had more work to do. What realistically would he have done? All he would have done is been more successful with things that he ultimately did. He did go through the motions of making the speeches, having the meetings with members of Congress, and it didn’t have the effect. Sure, we had to go do things in conjunction with his doing those efforts. I don’t know that we would have had to do too much more.

**Carp:** No, but you can’t take a snapshot of this guy. Remember it took two years to get Anne Wexler in the White House. That was his decision to bring Anne in there. That’s the other thing to remember about this President. We could all sit around and figure out a game plan, but he made all these decisions himself and it was not a White House where everybody dared to take responsibility for doing anything significant that he hadn’t cleared off on. There was a real evolution in his style, which is natural. After all, he had put four years in this town when he left.

**Rubenstein:** The whole staff was extremely deferential to his decision-making prerogatives. You would not have anything like what you have in the Reagan administration where people make the decisions if you just let them know about it. Carter really wanted to make decisions, and he made sure that that happened by occasionally reversing things that came up, usually as a compromise, or let his staff people know his anger at not having been involved earlier in the process. They involved him all the time. Too much probably.

**Young:** Presumably he also wanted to know the positions that people had weighed in on all the shades of the process. As a footnote, I wouldn’t say that the outcome of the seasoned Washington hands that had preceded him in the Presidency particularly commended to him, even if he had been inclined, the efficacy of playing politics with Washington. Johnson was a past master in that, and look what it did to him. Nixon was a past master, and look what happened there. He was also an outsider, as you say.

**Carp:** This is something for you to reflect on, not so much for us to talk about, but there were forces in the country that I think were important. Assuming my analysis of the things we did wrong is correct, if we’d done all the things we did wrong right we would have had the world’s best legislative record and been swept to reelection.
Young: My guess would be that if he had been extremely attentive to that side he would have never developed most of the programs he developed.

Rubenstein: People like Stuart Eizenstat were not viewed as a political mastermind. He was used in the campaign of ’76 as very apolitical, as very substantive but very apolitical. They tried to keep Stuart out of political decisions, Hamilton, Jody and others did, that didn’t involve any campaign strategy. I still think that may have been some of Carter saying to Stuart and Stuart’s people, who didn’t know all that well, “Look, I’ve got political advisors here, don’t give me your judgment about what the politics are, give me the best policy. I’ll talk with my political advisors and we’ll decide with people whose political judgments I trust how to handle the politics of it.” There may have been some of that.

Young: This is an important question that Chuck has raised. It may have been in part Carter’s compartmentalization, his reading of his own strengths and weaknesses. Who knows?

McCleskey: Could I follow this up. Drawing on your previous experience in Washington, drawing upon the White House years, does a successful President have to have, in addition to some other things, a liking for politics? You mentioned earlier that he didn’t enjoy sitting down and talking with people in a way that Tip O’Neill or Gerald Ford or others might have. How important is that instinctive enjoyment for the political process for any President?

Rubenstein: Look at Reagan as an example. Reagan, for everything I’ve been told, does not enjoy politics, but he has managed to persuade people he enjoys it and enjoys some of those things he has to do. He’s done very well in terms of the politics of his first year in terms of what he got through. It was fairly successful for him, even though he doesn’t like politics or like what we call politics. I’m not sure you have to like it. I think what you have to do are two things. One, you have to convince people that you like it and enjoy it. Mondale seems to me a guy who loves to do this, the hand shaking and the table-hopping and the speech making that you have to do in politics. I don’t know and I don’t want to know whether he deep down really likes it. He gives the appearance of it.

The second thing is you have to do this and do the politics without appearing to be just one of the guys. If you get down to their level and they can see you almost as an equal, then you’ve lost a lot of the mystique. You have to do it in a way that makes them think you’re enjoying the politics of it and that you enjoy their company, enjoy talking to them, but you always have to make sure that they know that you’re the President. I think towards the end Carter lost a lot of that because they saw him as just sort of a weak figure and not somebody who is super human, and Reagan has been able in the first year or so to make himself seem very Presidential and a larger figure in life than Carter was.

Young: Reagan is a role player by profession, and Carter wasn’t a role player from everything I’ve heard. There is that difference too.

Strong: You were part of a staff that didn’t change very much during four years, either in its senior personnel, its organization or in its agenda. As observers of the White House, what would
you draw our attention to as important turning points in the administration? Would they be the
ones that were widely reported in the press? The Camp David meeting, the Cabinet firings, and
those sorts of things that we all know about from reading about the Carter administration?

Rubenstein: Bert.

Carp: I believe we made at least two very serious mistakes before the administration took office.
One was to propose the economic stimulus program. It turned out in retrospect to have been a
substantive mistake, and it was not handled skillfully politically. I think if I could go back and
change one thing, I’d do that. Second was to make this decision to place so much emphasis in the
first year on welfare, in addition to energy, when anybody could have said how important the
odds are against being able to accomplish all this. I think had we acted more skillfully in that
early stage we could have left ourselves with more cards to deal.

I think the Lance thing had an enormous effect. It just burned up an enormous amount of capital
and it demonstrated that we were both vulnerable and that we were unable to cut our losses. In
other words it exposed us on a very important issue as not cool and professional. We may have
been successfully honorable, and I think in a lot of respects Lance got a bad deal. The way we
handled that made us look vulnerable. It’s a town of sharks and we didn’t look good there. There
was blood on the water after the Lance thing. I think those things set a pattern.

The other very significant thing in terms of his political base was that we allowed his relations
with the Jewish community to suffer just horribly during that first year. He came out of that first
year with his fundamentals badly hurt. I actually think that, after what I regard as a very bad first
year, even though the public impact of it wasn’t all felt at once that we did a better and better job
of working with what we had left from that point on.

Rubenstein: A couple of things. Before we took office I would say there were two major turning
points or mistakes that were made that really hurt. One was, in my view, giving away the
government to the Cabinet officers. Carter let them pick their sub-Cabinet people, and to me we
had so little control over them it took us about two years to get that rectified. For such a long
time we just couldn’t control what was happening in the Cabinet departments because we
couldn’t control the Assistant Secretaries. Carter gave that away in part because of inexperience.

Secondly, during the transition he also picked a very weak White House staff in my view. It was
weak for three reasons. It had a lack of real Washington experience, and I recognize that
Washington experience is certainly by no means a gift to the world, but I think it would have
been of some value having more seasoned people. If we’d had Anne Wexler and Lloyd Cutler
early on I think it might have made difference. The second mistake in terms of picking the White
House staff was that he refused to have interest group people in it—in a sense he wanted to have
generalists. I don’t want to have somebody for Jews, for blacks, for environmentalists, for
consumerists, for white ethnics, for Hispanics. Of course, at the end of the administration we
wound up with that. Had we had that at the beginning, I think we might have avoided some of
the political problems that we had in the first couple of years.
The third mistake is he had this concept of the spokes of the wheel to operate the White House staff that we had been sold to some extent by the Ford people but more apparently by Carter’s notion during the campaign that it was a bad thing to have a Chief of Staff. We didn’t have a Chief of Staff and we had no real structure. Everybody sort of reported to the President loosely, and as you may have picked up by now what happened in the first two years or so was there was no Chief of Staff and each person handled their own agenda with the President.

Early every day Zbig would go in to see the President separately, nobody else. Frank Moore would go in maybe with one of the staff people, nobody else. Jody would go in separately. Hamilton would go in separately, and occasionally Stuart would go in separately. It took us about two years to realize that maybe if we had one meeting with everybody there Carter wouldn’t have to repeat himself and it might lead to greater coordination. Not having a Chief of Staff early on left the White House staff, in my view, very unstructured. It’s one thing not to have a Chief of Staff, it’s another to have a very loose organization, which is the kind we had. I think it got us off to a very bad footing.

In terms of what happened when we got into office, there are all the traditional mistakes that you’ve heard about, I won’t go through them—Camp David, Bert Lance, all that. One that you may not have focused on is we tended to let our image get out of hand. I don’t think we realized the extent to which we were offending the American people by some of the things we were doing. Hamilton Jordan posing in construction boots and blue jeans at the White House with his feet up on a desk was something that I didn’t think was a good idea. Knowing Hamilton, I didn’t think it was out of character, but it was many years later before I realized how offensive something like that was to people around the rest of the country and how they viewed people like Hamilton as buffoons when in fact they weren’t. We let that image take hold. We had a sort of cockiness in the first two years. That was something that I think really hurt us and we never really recovered. There are other major mistakes, but that’s just one of them.

Young: I’m not sure the country didn’t like seeing somebody with boots on a desk. Washington certainly didn’t. They couldn’t even dress the part.

Rubenstein: We heard an awful lot from people who said, “People who work in the White House should wear coats and ties, it’s a position of honor. How dare these guys walk around in blue jeans at the White House?” Now that the Reagan administration has taken over you’ll get these articles that come out of Washington, saying, “Now we have a touch of class restored to the White House people. Women wear dresses in the White House now and skirts, no more pants for women. We have people dressed properly.” There are a lot of people now who say, “Yes, that’s the way it should be.”

Jones: You sort of indicated along the way almost two Presidents, particularly when you were discussing this matter of politics. Is that the case, or were there more than two Presidents?

Rubenstein: I think every administration goes through different phases. I guess I’m using a shorthand of saying that during the first two years a lot of learning was going on. We made major changes in the staff towards the last two years and I think everybody was more experienced in the last two years. I would say it was probably a dividing point, but there were
many dividing points that you could talk about. I do think the President was a much different person towards the last part of the administration. He picked up some things that were more political, which in my view was a plus, but he picked up some negative things as well. It’s a balancing thing. I wouldn’t say that the result of the second half was that we were just so superb that we deserved to be reelected because we were so much better in the second two years. We made a lot of mistakes in the second two years. Carter took on some problems in the second two years in terms of his changing the way he operated that didn’t work out as well.

**Young:** I’d like to know what those changes were in the way he operated. On paper, a Chief of Staff was established. Carter apparently did that reluctantly. As soon as that was done, Hamilton was concerned with other things and Al McDonald joined him. Was the Chief of Staff function in effect performed or not? Should we think of that as a major change or not? Did it solve anything? You said that one of the early mistakes was not having a Chief of Staff.

**Rubenstein:** He never did have a Chief of Staff system until Jack Watson became Chief of Staff, but by that time it was too late and too much of the power had been diffused, and the major problems that Carter faced when Jack Watson became Chief of Staff were not related to the government. There was Iran, which Jack couldn’t do anything about, there was the economy, which Jack couldn’t do anything about, and there was the campaign, which Jack wasn’t in charge of. By that point it was too late.

Hamilton Jordan, and I would say this if he were here and I’ve said it to him many times, should not have been Chief of Staff. He didn’t have the qualities and characteristics of a Chief of Staff. He was a symbolic figure, Carter’s closest confidant in a sense, but he had no administrative abilities. That’s why he brought Al McDonald in to compensate for that, but it didn’t quite work out because Al didn’t have the political backing, nor did he have the support within the White House staff to be able to carry that function off. I think if he’d had a strong Chief of Staff early on, we could have avoided a lot of mistakes. When Hamilton came aboard he made a lot of to do in the first couple of weeks, but they all backfired. Staff evaluations backfired, the firings, which many wish never had occurred but were talked about, and Hamilton of course got diverted.

**Carp:** I think it’s important to call a spade a spade when we’re talking about this Chief of Staff function. I think those people who have advocated the Chief of Staff, and at various times I’ve been on both sides of that argument, really said we see some strengths in this President and we see some weaknesses in him. We’d like to see a 45- or 50-year-old man in here to forcefully argue with the President over those places where he is not strong. I don’t think it is an administrative issue at all. I think the White House worked fine administratively. I think it was an important reform to get the President to meet together with everybody.

Hamilton is both a truly brilliant thinker and probably the most modest person I have ever seen in high places. If he’d wanted to he really could have tried to be the Chief of Staff and told Cabinet officers what to do and everything, and he knew that wasn’t his role. While he had very strong opinions about personnel and other things, he always confined himself to telling the President that. The issue that’s posed is would we have been better off if we’d have had a James Baker? It may be that we would, but I don’t think it has anything to do with the administration, which is why we brought in a whole layer of bureaucracy there when Hamilton was named Chief
of Staff, which so far as I could tell just made more meetings for people to go to. It just didn’t change anything because the issue wasn’t an administrative issue.

**Young:** You’re talking in terms of the function, not the office of the Chief of Staff? Do you think some of those problems would not have been as acute as they were if Burt Lance had stayed and his role had developed? He wouldn’t have been a Chief of Staff, but he would have been an old advisor.

**Carp:** If the need had developed he probably would have found one.

**Rubenstein:** There’s one thing you have to remember as well. Let’s say you have ten people who are key and all of a sudden you say, “Ok, one of you is now Chief of Staff.” That just can’t change existing relationships very much, especially when the main relationships are directly with the President. If somebody fresh has been brought in and a lot of new White House staff people and a whole new situation has developed, then maybe a new Chief of Staff in the middle could have changed the process somewhat or had that role that Bert was talking about. But just giving Hamilton the title that many people had informally given him anyway, which was top aide to the President, didn’t do anything, especially when he didn’t take advantage of that by making people send memos through him. He still didn’t want any memos to go through him and he didn’t have any personal staff to sit on top of people. Nothing really changed. All that happened was that Hamilton was given the title, and as it turned out that hurt us I think in the press because while the job wasn’t performed any better, people said, “How can Carter name this guy, who had this bad public image, as a Chief of Staff?”

**Carp:** I think it is a mistake to believe that politicians are shaded by their personal staffs. I don’t believe that that’s correct.

**McCleskey:** Why didn’t it make a difference then when Watson took it?

**Rubenstein:** I don’t think it made a difference. In a sense I think Iran, the economy, and the campaign were going off by themselves. Having to watch Jack operate, I saw that had he had the strength within the administration early on, I think he could have been a very effective Jim Baker-type character because Jack wanted to be involved in everything. He wanted to know about everything, he wanted to see all the paper, he wanted to sit in on all the meetings with the President. If you’re going to be a Chief of Staff you have to sit in on most of the meetings to keep up with what’s going on, you have to have control of the paper process, you have to have staff people to help you. Hamilton didn’t want to do that and Jack wanted to.

**Carp:** I just think that Jack Watson who left the administration would have been a fine Chief of Staff at the beginning of the administration.

**Rubenstein:** In the beginning Jack was too weak to do that.

**Carp:** He didn’t know enough about Washington. That’s a question of chemistry and other things, which would be hard to work out. I think it is always true of anybody who has any weaknesses that if he had somebody he listened to who had none of those weaknesses, he’d be
better off. Would Lyndon Johnson have been better off if he’d had a foreign policy advisor he listened to who had seen through the Vietnam War? Of course he would have. Does that mean that the way that the Johnson White House was organized to deal with foreign policy created the Vietnam War?

I’ve always thought that, looking at this as a bureaucrat, Ronald Reagan has so far as we can tell a disastrous economic policy. He has a Chief of Staff. Does Ronald Reagan have a disastrous economic policy because he has a Chief of Staff? No. Ronald Reagan gives great speeches. Does he give great speeches because he has a Chief of Staff? No. On the other hand, Ronald Reagan mobilized the business community pretty effectively to work on behalf of his tax program. Does the fact that he’s hired a lawyer who really knows big business and has some experience in Washington help him do that effectively? Absolutely.

Devaney: Bob’s last question is one that’s usually asked, and unfortunately whenever the answer comes back it usually includes a long list of bad things, of negative turning points in which you felt power flowing out of your hands. Were there any turning points that worked in the opposite way, where you could actually feel the power coming back to the White House? Are there any things that you saw, that you did, that could then be parlayed into something bigger on another issue or something more effective?

Rubenstein: You mean other than the day that Bert and I were announced for the jobs we had?

Carp: Stock market went up.

Rubenstein: There was one that everybody I am sure will tell you, which is Camp David. There was a sense of electricity connected to the White House when that happened, although neither Burt nor I was remotely involved in it. It had helped because people tended to look at Carter much better after that, at least for a while.

Jones: You mean the Middle East Camp David?

Rubenstein: The Middle East Camp David. Any time you passed a major piece of legislation it was helpful in terms of giving a charge to the White House and increasing our power. I think our general complaint at the time was that we never got enough credit for passing these bills because we would get the bills passed after a long, arduous effort. The press story would be “Carter gets compromise bill” or “Congress passes bill,” and then the bottom line would be “Carter submitted this bill a couple of months ago and worked hard for it.” We never felt we got enough credit for it, but we tried to promote it and I think generally we would feel there was some benefit out of passing these big bills that we did. I don’t know that there was any time in the White House where I felt that this thing is really taking off and we’re just going to charge through. I think it was a steady process of attrition and wear and tear. We knew it wasn’t ever going to be very easy. Bert, do you disagree?

Carp: No. I think in general Presidents get weaker. The only thing that will reinvigorate a President is winning a midterm election. I think we gained in influence all through 1980 as it sank in on Democrats in Washington that they were going to be stuck with running this. We had
a much more pragmatic approach to that year certainly than we did to our first year, and we knew people on the Hill. I think we had a reasonably business-like way of dealing with an excruciating set of problems. We may not have made all the right decisions, but I think the decisions of which I was a part were made in the right way with the right considerations after the right kinds of consultation with an accurate assessment of the kind of deep yogurt we were in. I felt better in the sense of believing that you’re a part of a professional operation doing the right thing in the right way. I felt better about 1980 than about any of those years. By then anybody with a pair of eyes in his head could see what a tall hill it was. I think we did a good job and I think we got stronger through 1980 in Washington.

Young: You didn’t feel that it was downhill from the first year?

Carp: I think that until 1980 there was a perception in this town that we were not doing as good a job as could be done. When you get very close to the election, they’re kind of imponderables. Who knows if we had the right kind of debate strategy? We certainly had the right kind of approach to deciding what was the right kind of debate strategy. I felt like the operation was doing its best in 1980 and that there weren’t any obvious ways to improve it. You can always question anybody’s judgment in this business. I thought we ran a good White House in 1980. That’s the only year about which I would say that.

Rubenstein: That’s the only year that Bert wants to take credit for.

Carp: No. It was a disastrous year, but I think we were doing a good professional job of dealing with both substantive and political problems that were just excruciating.

Rubenstein: If we’d had the experience we had by 1980 in 1977 and the staff people we had in ’80 in ’77, I think our first couple of years would have been much, much better and much easier. But unfortunately we didn’t.

Young: Is your underlying assumption that it was a failed administration?

Carp: No. Nobody would be able to judge the administration. Our job was to pass legislation and to get him reelected. We didn’t get him reelected. I don’t feel very good about that.

Young: Actually the legislative record, comparatively speaking, wasn’t all that bad.

Carp: That’s right. You guys will have to judge the administration.

Young: We hear so much about the problems and we like to ask questions about what your sense of accomplishment was.

Carp: However historians judge Jimmy Carter’s Presidency, I don’t think he had the Presidency that he had within him. If it was good, then it could have been terrific. If it was terrific, it could have been super. I really believe that he never really got that megaphone working. That’s why we’re so frustrated as a group.
Rubenstein: There is an undercurrent that you’re referring to, that we’re talking of the failure and therefore we see this as a failed administration. I think that’s unfortunate, but the reason that you may pick up that tone is because the question that historians have to ask about Carter, and will spend a lot of their time working on, is how did somebody who came in so well in ’76 and so popular in a sense—had such high popularity, had so many good achievements, the Middle East Camp David, a lot of good legislation, a lot of solid achievement—how did he happen to lose 44 states to 6 states? That’s the question which to me is one that people have to grapple with.

Carp: Ask another question. It may be that Carter was badly served by his party. That’s no comfort to me. I doubt if it’s much comfort to Stuart. There are a lot of us who are sort of professional Democrats and I find it much easier to judge Democrats in Washington over those four years than I have in judging our present Democrats in Washington. If you look at the performance of the group, it was just stupid. Carter was certainly right on big questions. For four years he said to Democrats in Washington, “You’d better look over your right shoulder because there’s a truck coming here.” Nobody listened and everybody got smashed in front of the truck. On the big question Carter was right. On the other hand, I at least considered myself, and most of us do, part of a larger enterprise, and you look around and find Carter vindicated. The IQ of the Senate dropped by 50%. People are losing food stamps. It is not a terrific feeling.

Young: It is kind of a puzzle, but it’s important to get several perspectives on it. There is a loudly proclaimed train of thought that if only this administration had not been incompetent—you’ve heard that word until you’re sick of it, I suppose, but that was a press judgment propagated on the image of the Presidency. If only it had been better in technique somehow, none of this would have happened. The other end of the spectrum is that given the state of the Democratic Party, the backfire from within it, inflation, oil prices, and the loss of Iran and the hostage situation, and the President who chose to have an unpopular program not geared particularly to vote getting, what difference does technique make? I’m just posing extreme views.

Carp: You said that the press view was that he was incompetent. The press got that from the Congress and they got it from Democrats in the Congress, and when people in your own party say you’re incompetent that’s an important thing to remember. In other words, Democrats sat down here for better or for worse, and bitched to each other for four years and now are retired in unprecedented numbers. Having worked on the Hill and having worked in the White House, the blame certainly deserves to be at least equally divided. People who lost their seats to conservatives pushed Teddy Kennedy to get into the ring. The failure of political judgment by elected officials on the left of the party in the Senate and the House was one of the more phenomenal things I think that we’ve ever seen here. Carter didn’t have a lot of help up there and I think it is unquestionable, whoever’s fault it was, that the American public kind of hung us all together. Tom Foley likes to say that what we have in the House is a “crisis of followership.” There is some of that generally in the Democratic Party and Carter was certainly a victim of it.

Rubenstein: I do think that your role as historians or political scientists is to analyze the one big question, which must be in people’s minds, which is how could a guy who came in like a lion go out like a lamb? There must be something wrong. You must have done something wrong. All the
very negative things that have been said about Carter over the past year are much more negative than I ever found when we were in office. Now people feel a freedom to criticize Carter and to contrast his failures with Reagan’s successes. That wasn’t the case and I don’t remember it as much when we were in office. Carter is sort of open target for a lot of people because having lost so badly, people don’t see anything to hold them back from criticizing them.

Newsweek has prepared a story for Carter had he won the election. I’ve got the cover picture, and it has a very smiling Carter rolling up his sleeves, and it says “Starting Over” or something like that. They had written the text of the story and they were going to fill in some blanks. They had written the text as if Carter had won. The text basically talks about all his accomplishments, tells how he had some problems but pulled everything together, and was able in the end to overcome Iran and do all these things.

Had we won the election, the perceptions would have been so much different. I think that the fact of that 44 to 6 loss has just so been ingrained in people’s heads as such a disaster for Carter and he must have done something wrong, and therefore they question it. Political scientists and politicians must analyze what did he do wrong, and let’s make sure nobody else does it again. That’s just unfortunate. If the election had been reversed I think we could easily be sitting here talking about how Carter accomplished so much in his four years. Nobody seems to want to talk about those things.

Young: Suppose there hadn’t been an election yet and you were talking, would you have changed anything you said or the way you said it?

Rubenstein: I’m sure I would have changed a lot of it because I’d want to go back to my job.

Young: Assuming you had, for reasons having nothing to do with anything else, left the job and were free to talk, would you have thought that there were substantial accomplishments?

Rubenstein: I would have said and I still say that Carter accomplished a great deal. One of my jobs at the White House and one reason I can talk about the accomplishments is because I was in charge of putting together his list of accomplishments. Whenever you saw this list of accomplishments coming out in categories it was prepared by me or people working for me. After a while I began to get tired of going out and going down the list of all our accomplishments and I won’t bore you with them all.

I felt that Carter had made some real accomplishments in terms of legislative things we’d done, establishing the Department of Education, the Department of Energy, deregulation legislation, trucking, railroad, air. The energy policy I saw as a major accomplishment. I saw some of the increased funding for major programs that we thought were important as accomplishments, the SALT negotiations, though we didn’t get it ratified, the Panama Canal treaty, the Middle East peace, the opening of China, all those things I saw as major accomplishments.

I don’t think a lot of them are going to unfortunately stand the test of time because Reagan has done away with a lot of those or proposes to do away with a lot of those things. Presidents whose accomplishments stand the test of time are those whose things are left unchanged by their
successors. If there is no Department of Energy or no Department of Education five years from now, then my going around talking about what great accomplishments they were all seems silly. It’s hard to really know how many things that Carter did will be left standing in four years. At this rate I’m not sure many of them will be.

**Young:** Every one of these except for the Camp David accords involved a major legislative initiative. Is that correct?

**Rubenstein:** Yes.

**Young:** Very little that he was trying to do that could have been done without a major legislative push.

**Rubenstein:** In the domestic area it’s hard to do anything without Congress these days. In foreign policy you can’t do much of anything anyway. Even the Camp David accords were dependent to a large extent, after the peace treaty was ratified, on getting the approval for the aid to Israel and to Egypt, which was enormous. Had we not gotten that, the whole thing could have collapsed. There are a very limited number of things that Presidents can have as great accomplishments that they can do without the role of Congress nowadays.

**Young:** Nowadays you contrast it with the [Dwight D.] Eisenhower days and the early Kennedy days.

**Carp:** Within our political party the poor guy had problems. Johnson was tough.

**Jones:** Bert, I’d like to go back to 1980. You liked the operation; you thought it was doing well. What was it about the operation that you thought was really working smoothly in 1980?

**Carp:** It was the first year in which I think we accurately identified what the problems were. We knew what the legislative problems were, we knew what the political problems were, and we had a realistic notion of how you put together a plan to deal with it. We had a sense of who was good at it and who was bad at it. I think we deferred more to OMB where they deserved to be deferred to—in the budget process, for example—and told them to sit down and shut up very effectively in some other areas.

There was a lot less wasted effort. I think we were able to use the process at the beginning of the year to get some sense of what our problems were and some sense of how we were going to work towards solving them. I don’t think that was true in any other year and actually it was just because we’d all been together long enough. In every other year I think there was never any clear kind of notion of how we were going to go about this. I thought that the Carter White House people in 1977 could never have run that convention. You never get any credit for a political campaign you lose. Those kids just did an incredible job running that convention. That was a very difficult thing. Again you can say, “You made the wrong decision,” I’m not talking about that. The decisions that had to be made, the way the strategy decisions were arrived at, that was a major logistical thing.
We had a very good year on the Hill in the sense that nothing bad happened. For the first time Bill Cable and I were able to go up on the Hill, kill a couple of very controversial pieces of legislation, just go and talk to people in their office and say, “The President doesn’t want this.” Finally we were able to get consensus in the White House. We just were beginning for the first time to do the things that a White House ought to be able to do well, which is largely tactical. It ought to be a tactical place. I thought we had a very good year. I was really proud of us and I would be interested in Alice’s impression because she was not really part of the White House but she sure worked with us. What do you think?

Rogoff: I would say that’s definitely true, especially contrasting ’80 to ’79. The piece that most stands out in my memory is the piece that had to do with decisions that had to be made in conjunction with OMB over very small spending items that you and others considered to be very important politically. I think that by and large everyone agreed that those decisions were made as they should have been and without any undue amount of anger.

Young: This was in the retrenchment?

Rogoff: I would say it started early in 1980 and the whole government began to crank up looking toward November. Exactly. An enormous amount of it went on and I think it was handled as well as it could have been in the circumstances.

Jones: How do you explain this? Was it simply the operation maturing? Then if ’79 was not at all successful—

Carp: I think it was partly the operation maturing and I think it was partly the fact that we had a clear objective. The election coming up wonderfully focused everybody’s minds.

Jones: Including the President’s mind.

Carp: Including the President’s. We finally had a big thing. We could finally agree what the big thing was, and this being the big thing, we could identify the little things for the first time. I believe this was the biggest problem we had that permeates the whole history. It’s not necessarily the President’s fault and I don’t know whose fault it is. We had a lot of trouble trying to separate the large important things from the smaller lesser important things. Nineteen eighty was the year we began to do that.

Rubenstein: I think that you can’t underestimate the ability of the election to focus people’s minds. Everybody had a common objective, from the lowliest Deputy Secretary to the President. It enabled Bert and me and others in the White House to run around the government saying, “We need this to get elected in this state,” or “We’re not going to this primary unless we do this.” People would say, “What can I say? The President’s reelection is more important than anything else,” so it was very useful. Unfortunately our political judgment wasn’t as good as I guess some other people’s.

Young: I’m struck by the fact that you haven’t referred to the hostage crisis in this testimony.
Carp: It was just a fact.

Rubenstein: I don’t know that I have anything unique to say about that. It was a great advantage.

Young: What was working in the White House?

Rogoff: There was enormous weight on all of our shoulders and we couldn’t possible get out from under, and therefore I think most of us just chose not to worry about it. We were not involved in it, and couldn’t do anything about it.

Young: Was the President’s attentiveness and involvement less because of that in your area?

Rubenstein: First, we weren’t going to the President all that much in 1980 for major, major new comprehensive decisions. Most of the policies had been set. After the budget was set for that year we had to go back and redo it in March, but we weren’t going to the President with these gigantic memos any more. Most of his time was taken up with foreign policy, principally Iran, and the campaign. We tried to interfere with him as little as possible. The memos were smaller; the time we took up with him I think was smaller.

Iran started on November 4 of 1979 and went through for a year. Everybody talked about it all the time. We always had ideas about what we should do, but nobody really had enough information because it was kept very close about what was happening. Nobody to my knowledge knew at the White House about Hamilton’s trips. I was dumbfounded when I heard about it on TV that first night. Hamilton was the kind of guy you couldn’t get regularly during the weekdays, and to think you could get him on the weekends was sort of crazy anyway. The time he wasn’t around on weekends never caused anybody any stir. Except for a very few people who had to know, almost nobody knew. We were just kept out of the picture pretty much and just had to go about doing our business. Politically, of course, the thing helped us initially and then it turned. It started turning dramatically toward the point where it was just killing us towards the end and in the general election campaign it was just devastating.

Young: I want to get back not to what you know about Iran but to how this changed the working situation and whether the President’s distraction by that was responsible for any of this change. Or was it just the maturing of the regime?

Carp: If you think about the President, here is a guy who lives in the same building where he works, has a complete staff to attend to his every domestic need and whose only job is to make major decisions. You can spend as much time doing that or as little time doing it as you want to. I’m sure that he was bothered by Iran. I don’t think foreign policy took up the larger share of time, his actual fiscal hours during that period, than it did earlier, or certainly only on a sporadic basis.

Young: I was just going to observe that I believe you said the upcoming election, the campaign, had a wonderful focusing effect. The President was not actively involved in that.
Rubenstein: He was in the sense that there were meetings that were held with him once every week on Monday nights at five o’clock and they would spend two hours going over campaign strategy. Carter trusted his campaign people—who had gotten him elected before—enormously, and he just said, “Look, Jerry [Rafshoon] is in charge of advertising, Pat’s in charge of polls of strategy, Jody press, Hamilton organization,” and let those guys do it. Carter didn’t want to get involved in that any more. He was above that at that point. He was more worried about governing and Iran and other things.

While Iran went on for a year, each day he didn’t have all that much to do on Iran because there was not much going on for a long time. Occasionally when things heated up, of course he was involved, but it wasn’t as if he was having marathon sessions on Iran every day. He needed to give us some domestic policy, maybe an hour of his time on the average a day either with a meeting or with reading memos. We got that time, and I never once heard him say, “I can’t focus on this because I’ve got to worry about Iran.” Maybe that was a problem, but he never mentioned it, and he never used it as his crutch.

The last point in terms of his workload, in the beginning of the administration he had to learn what he was up against and what the Government was all about, and he read all these enormous memos that everybody was producing. He was there every night. He would leave at eleven o’clock at night and get in at six in the morning. Towards the end of the administration, during last two years, he paced himself much better. He would basically leave at three o’clock, three thirty, every day, go exercise, and spend time reading or doing some work in the mansion. He never came back in the evenings towards those last two years or so, last year and a half. He just didn’t have to do as much reading and a lot of the work he did was on the phone, which he could do from the residence.

He also spent a lot of time not working. He would relax and that was useful. He used to see on an average 200 movies a year, which was not a commonly known factor. He’s a movie freak. We’d go to Camp David and watch four or five movies a weekend and see two or three a week in the residence. He also made a practice, he told me, about reading three books a week. Novels, or historical things. That strikes me as an awful lot of books, since that was about how many I read during the entire administration. He said he read about three a week and he did a lot of things that weren’t working. He was able to do all these things I’ve described plus learn how to fish, bike ride, cross country ski, and jog during a period of about two years, took them all up. I don’t think he was killing himself on Iran. There just wasn’t that much he could do day to day. Did people contradict what I just said?

Young: No, no. I’m just observing that the President may have been damaging himself by not being more out on the campaign trail.

Rubenstein: That was the major problem. We quickly went into this mode of saying we’re not going to go out and campaign until Iran is over with. As you probably have heard, everybody thought that would be a week, maybe two weeks, three weeks. As it dragged on we just didn’t know how to handle it and finally we came up with this half-baked excuse of why we were coming out. We campaigned only one day in the primaries.
Young: I’d like to ask some more questions and invite some about Carter. You said at the outset that you spent a good deal of time with him during the last two years. You traveled with him and so forth. My first question is when you were out on the road with the President, did you see characteristics or qualities of him that you didn’t see at work?

Rubenstein: I may have overstated what happens when you’re on the road with the President. When you travel with this President the way it was done was you take the helicopter from the south lawn, he gets in his part of the helicopter, you’re back in the staff part, you don’t talk to him. He would read the newspaper. When he gets on the plane, he goes immediately to his cabin. Everybody including the senior staff goes back in the staff part or with the press or with the VIPs. Carter, without exaggeration, unless he had to come back to give us a speech he was working on to have it typed, would stay in his cabin the entire flight by himself either working on the speech, reading, thinking, sleeping, until just about the time we landed.

Then with about three minutes to go he would come back, do a quick hand shake with the VIPs, have a two- or three-minute discussion with them as we were taxiing. Occasionally he would send a note back asking how many tons of wheat were grown in Iowa last year, when we’re about to land. You call back to the White House, find that information, give it to him and that was about it. He tended not to be what I always thought he was going to be like where he’d say, “Well gee, I’ve got a three-hour flight here and I don’t really want to read. Let’s have a bullshit discussion about what the government’s doing or what’s wrong with my administration.” He just never let his hair down like that.

Young: Were these town meetings you went to public speeches or what?

Rubenstein: The town meetings were his best format because he answered any question very well because he was on top of every matter. He had an opening statement that was designed to make headline news around the country, which about one third of the times did. Usually it didn’t because we never knew what events were going on around the rest of country that we were playing against. Some of the times his opening statements were dated by day in the sense that the news people had lost interest in what he was saying.

It was news when he misspoke himself or said something he probably didn’t really intend at one of the Q&A sessions. That’s where he usually got in trouble. He didn’t need much preparation for the town hall meetings. We would give him a Q&A book. He would have local information and national Q&As, but he knew the stuff well enough so that he could answer the questions. Afterwards Jody or the press person who was there or I or whoever was playing the role I would play would clean up a couple of mistakes he would make and then we’d go on to the next city. You rarely ever had a chance when he was on the road to talk to him in any way. I can’t say that he acted much differently in the White House.

Young: But you observed him?

Rubenstein: Observed, sure.
Young: In the speech itself. Were these sorts of things regarded by him as things he liked? Were they chores? Was it the kind of obligatory meeting with the Congressmen on this and that or did he have a real feel for these meetings?

Rubenstein: Carter was a routinized person. He enjoyed following a certain routine. When you leave the White House you break up your daily routine. In that sense he was worried about the papers he was leaving back or the things that he wasn’t doing at the White House. I don’t think he enjoyed getting out all that much. I also think that he didn’t enjoy some of the political handshaking he had to do and all the smiling and such. Once he got in the give and take of a Q&A session, I think he enjoyed the challenge of showing people how smart he was or how on top of situations he was or how complicated things were and how well he understood how complicated those things were.

If you had said to Carter, “You don’t have to go on this trip today, what do you want to do?” Every time I’m sure he’d say, “I won’t go.” It’s sort of symbolized to me by his expression or by the mannerism he had. When he was about to do one of these things, he would take a deep inhaling breath and sort of just sigh like oh, I’m going to go ahead and do it, there’s not much I can do, and so it was like a sigh of resignation. I know I’ve got to go spend eight hours doing this campaign chore. I don’t really want to do it, but I’ll do the best I can. That was not unlike many things he did in the White House. He didn’t want to have a lot of the meetings we set up for him, but he went ahead and did it because it was part of his job.

Young: As you think back on your years in the White House do you see more clearly or see in a different light how you think this President saw what his staff was doing for him, what he used staff for, what he needed them for? Almost every President has a different way of dealing with staff and different ways of using them. I’d like to get you to talk about what you thought he thought of the kind of staff he got and what they were doing for him.

Carp: I think he had an accurate notion of what our staff did, who they were, from about the fourth week that we worked for him. I don’t think that changed very much after about the seventh week. He understood our first and third functions. He understood that he was getting these materials summarized. I think he had a lot of concern about that in the beginning. He checked it a lot but he never had any reason to believe that we weren’t doing it fairly. I think that concern pretty quickly evaporated. He knew we were going to give him advice that would include enactability and our judgments about the political impact of things. I think he appreciated it and the more times we turned out to be right, the more that he came to rely on that. He’d never had anybody quite like Stuart in the Governorship. I think we defined our jobs and he basically accepted it. What would have happened if we’d designed it some different way, I don’t know. I don’t think our relationship with the President changed very much over time.

Rubenstein: I think generally on the subject of staff, Carter did not like staff. That was something that drummed into me by people like Frank Moore, Hamilton, and Jody. According to Frank, Carter basically thought that he and Rosalynn won the election by doing it themselves. All the thousands of people out doing other work for him he just didn’t focus on, in part because as Governor he had a very tiny staff and he did so many things himself. He was so much into the details of things that he didn’t understand what staff did.
Had he grown up in the Washington system where a Senator has 30 aides or maybe 10 legislative assistants, or had he seen the Washington bureaucracy and known their staff controls so much, he might have used staff differently. I think he had a fairly distrustful attitude towards staff in general. I think subconsciously that was one of the reasons why he always would like to deal with the senior staff person—as if not to acknowledge to himself or anybody else that there were many people supporting that senior staff member. He didn’t want to have to acknowledge it in other people’s presence or maybe to himself that there were other people who were actually doing all this work. He hated to think of how many staff people were involved. In part because he liked to think you didn’t need that many people, and in part because he thought that staff basically leaked.

Young: Didn’t they?

Rubenstein: They did. Not our staff, of course.

Young: It looked that way from the outside.

Rubenstein: Carter had a view that our staff was one of the bigger leakers in the White House in part because we knew so much about what was going on and he didn’t know a lot of our people. He knew that we knew what was going on so I think we were suspected for a lot of the leaks, and Carter just thought *the fewer people who know about things, the fewer leaks there’ll be, and the better off I’ll be*. Generally I would say his attitude toward staff wasn’t healthy to begin with. It got better and I think he respected good staff people towards the end. I wouldn’t say that he ever felt that we needed as many staff people as we felt we needed.

Carp: I think it’s fair to say that the vast majority of the leaks about the White House came from senior staff. When you get very much below David’s and my level there’s not all that interest in it unless there is some definite reason for you to know why. I think there was a concern about leaks and there was a concern about confidentiality, even what somebody might say to a distinguished group like this some day. I think that’s legitimate. I don’t criticize him for dealing with a small circle of people.

Young: His idea of what a good staff system was did not apparently include the notion of a strong hierarchy, though it did include an idea of compartmentalization, as you put it.

Carp: He was the Chief of Staff. You have to understand we had a Chief of Staff system and he was the Chief of Staff. If people complained about the Chief of Staff, what they’re really saying is you should have had a Chief of Staff who knew more about Washington and was more politically attuned to the Congress and the country or something. We can debate that. I don’t know if he lost the election over it.

Rubenstein: Carter did have a hierarchical staff. It was Carter at the top tied to the top staff person and then about six or seven aides as the next hierarchy.
**Carp:** In this whole Chief of Staff debate that I read through, I don’t think anybody has found any administrative problems.

**Young:** I’m trying to ask the question in a sense to try to see the staff as the suit that suits the President. I’m asking about what the President, not as an administrator, but how one should look at this staff as reflecting in the way it worked, what Carter wanted.

**Carp:** Yes. He had an enormously orderly mind. He got what he wanted and he wanted two perspectives. He knew Jack Watson wasn’t head of intergovernmental affairs and he didn’t want Jack’s view on something that we were doing. You’d always get Watson’s view and take it into account; if you were working on something, Carter would ask him about it. It was totally predictable when he would ask him and when he wouldn’t. It was very organized. This has got to be the best-administered political staff that I’ve ever been within a hundred miles of, in the sense that it worked well, it was orderly, decisions got made in a calm way.

Sometimes people had the sense that the right things weren’t on the table. That’s not an administrative question I think. People periodically went in and said we’ve got to find some way to get these things on the table, and in a very orderly administratively sound way decisions would be made not to do it. The President does read the papers; not only does the President read the papers but all his senior staff read the papers, and the question about whether a James Baker figure ought to be there was one that was endlessly debated in the presence of the President. We weren’t stupid.

**Jones:** I am interested in this matter, of EOB [Executive Office Building] versus the White House, being located over in EOB versus being located in the White House. I’m more interested in whether the staff in the EOB orients itself entirely to the structure in the White House or whether there develops a community within EOB.

**Carp:** I think yes and no. In other words each of these executive offices of the President units faces the President through its West Wing office. On the other hand, that kind of co-location helps because sometimes there’s a lot of lobbying back and forth, and at least we tend to understand each other’s positions better. I think the single best administrative decision that was made by the Carter administration wherever we did it was to pull the congressional liaison people out of the East Wing and put them over with us. It was a big difference running into people on the job and walking back and forth with them and sharing cars to the Hill and all that kind of stuff that happens when you’re co-located. It just increases the amount of cross-fertilization.

Bill Cable and I were very good friends when we worked on the Hill. During the first two years of the administration I’ll bet we didn’t talk more than 40 times. The second two years of the administration we had a drink together every evening and talked about the day. That made an enormous difference. If you ask, “Would things be much more fragmented if you took each of those staffs and put them in a separate building?” I think the answer is unquestionably that would be the case. I guess there is quite a bit of fraternizing and informal sharing of views that probably couldn’t take place if people weren’t located together.
Rogoff: I agree with that where you all are concerned, but there were some staffs in the EOB who were totally disconnected from the West Wing. Either because they didn’t have senior staff or because the rest of their organizations were spread around town or in the new EOB across the street. That was really downright dangerous a lot of the time.

Jones: For example?

Rogoff: I won’t name names, but there were reasonably senior people at the deputy assistant level who had offices in the EOB who were really independent agents and made all sorts of public statements all over town on the issues they were concerned with, that weren’t ever cleared by anybody because there was often no one to clear them and keep a leash on them.

Young: Was there any consideration given to imposing some discipline on that sort of thing?

Rogoff: That was what Al McDonald was supposed to do, but it didn’t happen.

Young: But the President himself didn’t take an initiative in this?

Rubenstein: Carter always tried to get people to toe the line publicly. Every President tries to work on that and every President fails and you go on to more important issues.

Carp: I think that’s a relatively minor point. In other words, you can either have special constituency representatives in the White House who will continue to pay by special constituency representatives, which is the reason not to have them there, or you can just decide to put up with that because in fact it’s better to have them here than to have this kind of symbolic issue. It wouldn’t help you to have a special assistant for this or that who didn’t go out and try to fraternize.

Rogoff: The only point of that is being located in the EOB physically does not make one closer intellectually, mentally, to the work of the West Wing or what West Wing’s concerns are. It makes light years of difference.

Strong: I want to ask another question following your line about Carter. You mentioned that he didn’t have a great many close friends and he is a President that’s harder than usual to understand and come to grips with, and I’m not trying to psychoanalyze him or anything like that but just characterize him. You would read in the papers that he was politically naive, didn’t understand elections, and then later he that he was totally politically motivated and didn’t have any principles. There were people who said he was a conservative, people who said he was a liberal, and he used to introduce his speeches with that long catalogue of things that he was. It’s a hard list to make sense of. Did you have trouble understanding the President, or are there things that you can tell us that would help us understand him?

Rubenstein: I’m not sure about the latter. One thing that I would make as a preparatory comment is that it is very interesting to me in hindsight seeing how people who weren’t working with him had a sense of what Carter was about, which was probably better than those who were working with him. The image Carter was sending out to people and people were picking up in
the country was one that those who were close to him, those who worked in the White House, often weren’t picking up. We were so close to it that we didn’t see the sort of failures or failings as quickly as a lot of people did on the outside. Working with him day to day, nobody would dare say that Carter was inept because you could see he was a bright person, he didn’t do things that were inept. But that sense got around the country and it was a sense that we had to deal with later on. It’s very interesting how these perceptions take hold and people in the White House don’t really feel these things. Later in some cases we began to see the things that people outside who were distant saw earlier.

In terms of Carter’s qualities I would say that he was not an ideologue, and while he had firmly held views, they weren’t ones that were easily characterized all conservative or all liberal. Therefore, the press didn’t know how to treat them. While Carter believed in things very intensely and would like to fight for them, I had a sense that after about a couple of years into the administration he learned that he couldn’t fight intensely for these things because he wasn’t going to get them. So he had to compromise, and then he got into the mode of compromising and then that was called flip-flopping. Then every time we made a change of position it was a flip-flop. Once you’ve had that reputation, you could never escape from it. I would say that he was not a passionless person, but he was unemotional in the sense that he wouldn’t raise his voice and he didn’t yell at people even if they’d done things wrong. He would just handle it in other ways. Bert.

Carp: He was to an astonishing extent a self-made man. I might conceivably order the great books but I wouldn’t read them all. He’s ordered them and read them and taught himself Spanish off a record. We just don’t do things like this. He’s a man of great determination and great self-possession and great intelligence. He is, to a very large extent, a self-taught man. He’s very well read but has really done it all himself. He’s obviously very private and a very stubborn guy. I think you can get a sense that he didn’t fit into Washington and decide whose fault that was. It caused enormous frustration for those of us who worked for him because we would have liked to see him bend more elbows and because we thought that we could do better.

He was not a man who liked speeches or the public side of the Presidency or who was good at them. It was very unfortunate that the things that he was good at, which were Q&As in whatever context, presented this unfocused view. In fact, this highly disciplined fellow I think was unable to focus public attention on the few issues that he wanted to have public attention focused on. We just tended to do that and that was our greatest problem. I think it’s important that he is going to wind up having been the most honest man ever to have sat in the White House, certainly in the 20th century. I think you can learn an enormous amount about him by reading the speeches he gave in the 1976 campaign, because they were largely self-written. They weren’t the product of government writing his speeches for him.

You can also learn a lot by reading his Q&As in press conferences and town meetings where he was off the cuff. I always found him to be just enormously honest except on those few kinds of questions where you could tell for reasons of state or politics he wasn’t being totally open. By and large, he was overwhelmingly honest as compared with any other President I’ve watched, including Ford. It was kind of Eisenhower in fact. You can find out what’s on Carter’s mind by reading his public statements.
Rubenstein: While Carter wasn’t an ideologue, he was what I used to think of as the supremely rational man who would look at every single issue separately and on every separate issue give it whatever at that particular time was the most rational, reasonable interpretation and decision. When you add all those things up and you’re looking at things over a four-year time period, you tend to get a blurred image because what is conservative at one time or liberal at another time tends not to be later on, and what is reasonable at one time and pleasing to one group at one point in time isn’t later on. Carter tended to look at each issue separately and that was one of his failings and one of his strengths. He didn’t approach things with an ideological bent, but he also tended not to give people a sense of what he stood for over time.

Carp: I think it’s important also to get a sense of his politics. Carter believed that he was a southern Governor, came out of the South at a particular time, and I once heard him say that all a Democrat has to do to get elected is to appear to be conservative. With the kind of Governor that Carter was, you gave a speech for the Chamber of Commerce and then you gave some substance to your liberals who were desperately concerned about real problems. I’ve got a lot more experience with northern politicians where you give a speech to liberals but make sure your bankers know you aren’t going to do anything too upsetting.

He spent four years here and he spent an awful lot of money and did a lot programmatically for the downtrodden in American society but he never gave the ABA that speech they wanted. He didn’t understand, I think, that the ABA would have taken the speech; they could have cared less about the programs. That’s a bit of an overstatement, but he didn’t understand that hypocrisy that lies close to the heart of successful modern politics. He wouldn’t play that game. He probably did understand it because he was so smart.

Young: He did it by inadvertence.

Clinton: Did you see it as part of your job to give the President a sense of the connection between one issue and the next?

Rubenstein: At the level at which we were operating, it was kind of difficult to go in and tell Carter that sort of thing. I don’t know that his senior advisors even could do that. It’s a very philosophical, very difficult point to make, and also making the point doesn’t do any good. Going in and saying to Carter, “We’re not presenting a right image,” and Rafshoon would do that or Caddell or Jody, “We’ve either got to be more conservative, we’ve got to be more liberal.” The problem was figuring out which one we had to be, which we couldn’t quite do because we didn’t know. At various times we were trying to appeal to different constituencies.

Let’s say we decided we’re going to be much more conservative because that’s where the country really is. Carter would agree to that and try to give that image out more. That might work in giving one speech and then maybe a follow up press conference, but then when the next issue comes along you tend to treat each issue on its merits and you tend not to have that philosophical bent pushing you. It’s very difficult to discipline yourself for six months and have everything go through the same prism. We weren’t able to do that and I don’t think Carter would ever allow
himself to be handled in that way. Knowing what the problem was and going in and telling him
is one thing, but actually implementing it in that way is more difficult.

McCleskey: I’d like to come back to what was said a moment ago about the perception of Carter
in the last two years as flip-flopping on the issues once he had become a little more
compromising. How do you account for that, since one would expect that every administration
would have to do some compromising? Did that perception have something to do with the timing
or with the way it was done?

Rubenstein: My thought was that he had the impression of being fuzzy on the issues and of
trying to have his cake and eat it too from the ’76 campaign. Voters had that sense of him and I
think they were waiting to pounce on him for that. When he flip-flopped the first time on that
fifty-dollar rebate, reporters said, “Ha, this is the real Carter because this is the Carter we saw in
the campaign, couldn’t make up his mind, tried to have it both ways and he changed position.”
From that point on, I thought we did much more of the flip-flopping than we were accused of in
the later few years. From that point on the reporters tended to look for those incidences because
they tended to fulfill a sense that Carter was like that.

Reagan, by contrast, didn’t have an image problem in the ’76 campaign and so when he changes
his positions people tend to look at it as not part of an overall flip-flop problem. Let me give you
another way of explaining of it. With Carter, he was seen as being terrible in terms of
congressional relations although we passed all these bills. The general perception, if you ask
people around the country, was that Carter couldn’t handle Congress. When you pass bills, I
think one of the reasons that we didn’t get a lot of good publicity for it was because it didn’t fit
within the general press notion, general public notion that Carter knew what he was doing and
could get bills through.

Reagan by contrast is thought to be a terrific handler of Congress. When he screws up in
handling Congress on particular matters, you tend not to get as many stories about how this fits
within Reagan’s inability to handle Congress because the general perception—which often takes
a year or two to change—is that he handles Congress well. That whole problem of a mold
existing and reporters trying to fit things within a mold was our flip-flop problem. The mold
existed from the ’76 campaign. Any time a flip-flop occurred it fit into the mold, and as they
built up towards ’79–’80 every little flip-flop, every little change that you inevitably do during a
campaign just became bigger and bigger.

Young: Returns aren’t in on that yet.

Rubenstein: I’m doing my best here.

Young: Bert, did you want to say something?

Carp: I don’t know. I think the thing that he suffered for most from the press was an impression
that he wasn’t in control. The press reported a lot of these changes of position, sometimes quite
accurately, but sometimes inaccurately as being things that were dictated to him rather than
dictated by him. In other words, it’s ok to change your policy, but you should do it when you still have a choice.

We certainly did compromise legislatively. I think it’s not changing positions. Whatever people say, it’s not changing positions that hurts, it’s this impression that you’ve lost control. The ability to give the impression that you’re in control even when you’re not created that. That’s what did the damage. Nobody cares if you’re changing positions, but if it looks like you’re being dictated to then that’s not good. I think there was a period of time there where we allowed it to appear as though we were being dictated to. I think Reagan has got a problem with that now. How he repeals the third year of his tax cut, how he does this little dance will tell a lot about Reagan as a congressional politician.

**Young:** Did you have any sense when you first came in that you were being gunned for in Washington?

**Rubenstein:** I wouldn’t say that initially. We had some problems with the transition. The transition was one of the most difficult times of my life and one of the most difficult times in everybody’s life—you had all these people descending upon Washington who thought they were going to get jobs because they worked in the campaign, and it was a transition effort unlike anything Washington has ever seen before. It reminded me of the Andy Jackson experience. Everybody descended on the White House at the time of the inauguration. It was that sort of thing. Nobody knew who was going to get what jobs, and the people making the decisions were sitting down in Plains. You had no way of getting to them because most people didn’t know who they were really and how to get them or where it was. Getting to Plains was quite an arduous task.

I would say that even though we had a tough transition, I didn’t feel people were out to get us or anything. I felt that the Democrats were happy to be back in power, we knew that they didn’t like Carter and he wasn’t their first choice by a long shot, he wasn’t their second or third or fourth choice initially. He was clearly the guy who pulled it off and I think they wanted to give him a chance. I don’t think that they set out initially to do him in. I think that came later.

**Young:** The expectations of him were pretty high.

**Rubenstein:** Expectations were high and we deserve a lot of the fault for making them high. We promised too much, but also what we should have done when we got in office was dampen everybody’s expectations as soon as the transition period started. We didn’t know enough to do that. We kept talking in comprehensive terms. I think Carter was still thinking he was part of the campaign early in the administration, and he kept talking about these things we were going to do and it tended to inflate expectations.

**Young:** Your mentioning that word comprehensive brings something else to mind. This was apparently a theme in Carter’s legislative or policy proposals, comprehensive solution this, comprehensive program that. How did that come about? Was that his or was it yours? How did he get into this doing things comprehensively?
Rubenstein: Carter’s personality. He’s the kind of person who likes to do everything clean and properly and in a very systematic way and a very complete way. His way to explain in the ’75-’76 campaign that he was going to solve a problem was to say we would solve it completely.

Rogoff: Boldly.

Rubenstein: Boldly. We had a lot of words that he would use that we used to make fun of. Boldly was one of them, superb was another, adequately was another, comprehensive, all these things he used to say over and over again. Comprehensive in his mind was synonymous with complete solution, and in his view a complete solution was the kind of thing the American people wanted because they wanted to change things completely. So he kept saying comprehensive, comprehensive. I don’t think it was out of the guile that somebody might accuse me of if I were in his position—that guile being that if I propose a comprehensive I’ll get half of what I want and therefore that’ll be pretty good. That would be my approach if I went for comprehensive, thinking I’d get half a loaf. Carter didn’t think that. He thought he would get a full loaf and he talked about a full loaf and thought that was what people wanted.

Carp: He came to Washington believing, as most Americans probably do believe, that our national problems are some combination of stupidity and banality. He believed that if you demanded intelligence and honesty you would solve these problems. That led to the point we’re not going to have these little things here. That’s what’s wrong with the system. Letting these subcommittees run government, having 12,000 programs or however many he said we had. Although I suppose as long as there has been American government, people out in the country have perceived that the problems were due primarily to stupidity or to banality. Although there’s undoubtedly a lot of that to go around, problems we have are not primarily due to either one of those. That type of thing created a problem in the inception.

In other words I never agreed with common cause. Common cause believes if we change the way we do things we’ll have a better world. I believe if we change the way we do things we’ll be doing things better but doing things in a better way won’t necessarily be doing better things. There was that problem in analysis and it was a way our party had avoided a lot of its conflicts. By saying if we just do this under better procedures these conflicts between interest groups, these conflicts between economic groups, these conflicts between racial groups really don’t exist. Whereas in the real world you’ve got a choice between busing and segregation, just to pick one choice. You can’t have integrated schools without busing. Most issues turn out to be like that.

McCleskey: What I don’t understand is how anyone who had been Governor of Georgia could have that kind of perception, that is that banality, stupidity per se.

Rubenstein: If you had ever heard Carter talk about the Georgia state legislature you would know. His view was that they were mostly all banal and those who weren’t were stupid. He had a very low regard for them in part because I think there was a lot of that there.

Young: I can testify to that. I’m from Georgia.
**Rubenstein:** He had a very low regard for legislature and people correctly perceived that he thought that Congress was not unlike the legislature. He learned differently, but initially he thought that Congress was going to be like the legislature. People could be bought, people were not well intentioned, and people were not very bright. He learned differently of course. The way the Georgia legislature operated was a very lasting experience on him. His ability to move that legislature to do things that he thought were right convinced him that if you are right and if you are honest and you are doing the “right thing,” you can overcome those bad forces.

**Carp:** I’m not an historian of the Carter Governorship, I don’t know anything about it, but he viewed himself as having successfully imposed comprehensive solutions in areas ranging from reform of education—

**Young:** He did do some things of that nature.

**Carp:** He viewed them as having been comprehensive is my point.

**Young:** In Georgia he did do some major reforms.

**Carp:** From reorganizing the agencies to reorganizing the way they did their state education financing. He viewed himself as having pulled those characters in the Georgia legislature into shape by having big concepts. It may be that that was right. By coming with these big concepts they couldn’t pick them apart.

**Young:** Another part of that was his being given to long-range solutions too, which may have been appropriate or not with energy. I don’t know.

**Rubenstein:** To the extent that he did not have comprehensive and big solutions in the Georgia state legislature he came to convince himself that he had. After spending two years on the stump talking about what he had accomplished as Governor of Georgia he came to believe that he had accomplished a lot more than he actually had. When I was working for Birch Bayh I was amazed that Carter was able to get away with talking about what his Georgia record had been. When I came to work for Carter, one of the first things that Stuart asked me to do was to go down and talk to somebody named Jim McIntyre who was then [George] Busbee’s budget director, had been Carter’s, to find out if we could defend any of these things in the general election that Carter had been saying he had done as Governor. Sure enough, we couldn’t. We told everybody not to say all those things anymore. He kept on saying them because he had convinced himself that he had cut the administrative costs by 50%. There was no way to justify it. He said he had reduced all these agencies down to 22, which he really hadn’t. I think he actually came to believe in his own mind that those comprehensive solutions were there and in place and he could impose them in Washington as well.

**Young:** We’re at the end of our time and I try to keep to schedule. Do you have any last words?

**Rubenstein:** No. I appreciate very much the opportunity to come down and talk to you about what was one of the best times of my life, though I’m afraid that the tone that we may have set may have been more negative than we intended. I think what I brought to this was that I wanted
to try to answer for you the questions that I think are the major ones, which are why we are not in office, what did we do wrong? What we did right I think that needs to be written about a great deal, and I hope that you will get to that in your work as well. You will be reading a great deal about what went right in the forthcoming books of Jimmy Carter, Rosalynn Carter, Hamilton Jordan, Jody Powell, Griffin Bell and Bert Carp and Dave Lewis.

Young: You’re going to write too?

Rubenstein: After everybody else has said what they’re going to say, so that we can correct.

Young: You’re going to have the last word.

Carp: Our book will be entitled If They’d Only Listened to Us.

Young: Right.