INTERVIEW WITH JAMES A. BAKER, III

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Interviewers

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Special Guest

Peter Roussel
Young: So we don’t have any list of questions to which we demand answers. What we’d like to hear is what you think is important about the ’88 campaign—and its relation to the Bush presidency, particularly your role in it.

Baker: I would begin by saying it was an essential element of the Bush presidency.

Young: It was a different kind of transition, too.

Baker: I think perhaps even you might say a sine qua non.

Roussel: I will make one comment … which you gave me a good line one time in the White House. You said, “You know, Roussel, sometimes around here if one doesn’t tooteth one’s own horn, that horn doesn’t get tooteth.”

Baker: If you don’t tooteth your own horn, the horn does not get tooteth, is that right? Well that was the election that President Bush, Vice President Bush, won to make him President, so obviously it was very important. What I think is interesting about it was that we were about 17 or 18 points behind in August. And the general thinking was we weren’t going to win that campaign. No incumbent Vice President had been elected President since Martin Van Buren. It just wasn’t done. And I must say that, looking at it objectively, we were rather pessimistic about our chances. Vice President Bush and I went up to Wyoming to get away from the Democratic Convention. We went on a pack trip on the north fork of the Shoshone River in the Absaroka Mountains in northwest Wyoming. We spent about three or four days up there fishing, so we didn’t have to listen to Ann Richards talking about silver foot in the mouth and all that. It was really a very good thing to have done.

And things began to fall into place, and President Bush clearly in my view won the debates, in fact all of them. I think we had two, or three—two. We negotiated two debates with Paul Brontus and Susan Estrich, and we really had the whip hand, and we had all the advantages. And when you have the advantage when you’re running ahead, it’s very easy to negotiate the terms of the debates. Today we have this Debate Commission out there pretty much setting the terms, and they’ve been able to acquire power over how the debates go, how many there are, when they take place and that sort of thing. In prior campaigns, we always made a big issue of the debate about debates. I mean, that was an integral part of the campaign, and we played that pretty much for all
Milkis: A lot of discussion about that campaign suggests that you played the role of savior, that the campaign was in bad shape, and you came back. I just wondered if you’d reflect a little bit about your thinking about the campaign before you came from Treasury over to it, and what kind of a place you were given before that, and—

Baker: Well, I went to give a speech in Mackinaw Island in Michigan in ’86. I went out there and spoke at the request of Pete Secchia, who was a big Bush man. And I remember being concerned about the degree to which [Jack] Kemp had organized out in Michigan. There were Kemp fliers on all the chairs and everything else. When I got back to the White House—I was Treasury Secretary—I called the Vice President, and I said, “I really want to talk to you about something, and bring Barbara.” The three of us met in his office, and I said, “You know, it looks to me like this guy’s really gearing up. I mean, I go out there, and this is a governmental event and everything—hell, there are Kemp campaign fliers all over.” It was something of concern to me.

That’s the first time I remember talking to the Vice President about the ’88 campaign. It was maybe more or less understood between us that I would ultimately go do that. We had a lot of to-ing and fro-ing on the issue of what we did about [Manuel] Noriega, where one time whether we offered him a deal. You can read all about it. It’s been written about. I remember meeting up in the yellow room in the White House, where only the Vice President was opposed to the idea that State had that they wanted to cut some deal with Noriega. I don’t remember all the detailed issues now, but I remember that the Vice President and I both spoke against it. I was speaking against it at that time primarily because I was concerned about what it would do to his chances in ’88, and it didn’t look to me like it was a major, it was that significant an event, that it justified going forward with it at great risk to his campaign.

That may have been one of the first times he separated himself from [Ronald] Reagan. And I don’t remember very well when this happened or anything. Shortly after this, the Vice President asked me to run the ’88 campaign for President. The Vice President and I agreed that I would approach the President and ask him to let me go over to the campaign to help the Vice President get elected, which probably was in June, July maybe. And I did, and President Reagan was not excited about that prospect. He basically said, “Well I think you can do him more good by keeping the economy going. We have it going well now, and you’re an essential part of that team, and I think it’d work better, perhaps.” But you know, it wasn’t one of those things where he said, “Absolutely no chance that I’m ever going to be willing to cut you loose.”

So I went back to the Vice President and said, “It didn’t work, pal. It ain’t going to work unless you do it.” So he did it, and we ended up having a meeting—I’ve told you this story—we ended up having a meeting in the residential quarters with Vice President Bush, President Reagan, Nancy [Reagan] and myself. And the President ultimately said, “Fine. If that’s really what you want, George. If that’s what you think, and you think you really need him over there that bad,
then I’m willing to let him go.” I left in August. I think we made the decision in the first week or two of August, maybe.

Zelikow: So this meeting with President Reagan would’ve occurred after your fishing trip with Vice President Bush? That fishing trip was around July, actually about mid-July.

Baker: Was it mid-July?

Zelikow: July 19th, if memory serves. Because there’s actually a diary … that I remember reading, where he actually talks about this trip. “I took a bath under an ice-cold waterfall…”

Baker: That’s correct. What’s the date?

Zelikow: July 19th. “Flew in a Gulfstream III.” I mean, it sounds by the way like a very attractive trip. So that’s mid-July.

Baker: I’ll tell you something now that I don’t want in the record, but I’ll tell it to you. We were going in to … our trip takes us right along the edge of Yellowstone Park, and I have a buddy named Steve Mealey, who’s always worked for the Forest Service. He was the head of the Shoshone National Forest, and he fly-fishes with me in Wyoming a lot. He’s a friend of [Richard] Cheney’s and mine. So we’re riding horseback right along the park boundary. And it’s wilderness on the other side, and you can’t take any mechanized equipment or anything in the wilderness, so we had to be close to the park, because the Interior Department could give you permission to get a helicopter in to evacuate the President if something bad happened, but you couldn’t do that in the wilderness.

Yet there was great rivalry between the Forest Service—Steve Mealey, who was with us, and some of these regional Forest Service guys, and the Park Service. And so we’re riding on our horses for the camp, and there’s an urgent call of nature. Everybody is instructed to go across this line, over into the park, instead of doing it in the wilderness. And I remember that from this trip because it was sort of a humorous touch. And I guess you’re right, Philip, maybe July 19 was the date of that trip, and I can’t tell you when the date of the meeting was, but it could’ve been just before that. When did I leave? You all have the dates.

Zelikow: Early August. Like August 6, I think, was the press announcement.

Baker: Well then it would probably have been tentatively agreed to before, just before that trip maybe. Even though there’s probably some stuff on the record where we say, “No, there’s no deal yet.” There wasn’t a formal deal. But President Reagan basically said, “OK, if that’s really what you … if you really know that that’s what you want instead of leaving him here in Treasury, then that’s what we’ll do.”

Zelikow: To kind of wind back a little bit, you mentioned the first discussion about the campaign with the Vice President in 1986, and to kind of move the story forward, you’re into ’87.
Baker: That’s the first one I remember; there may have been others. But I remember the one in ’86.

Zelikow: By ’87, of course, they’ve had to organize the campaign. And they’ve organized the campaign, and the key figures, I think, in ’87—

Baker: They had a gang of six, didn’t they?


Baker: But Teeley wasn’t a part of that.

Masoud: Is [Fred] Malek, or… ?

Baker: Malek? Malek might have been. I don’t know, Malek could have been. You can get all that, that’s all....

Zelikow: But Atwater, at least in name, is the campaign manager. They’re gearing up for the primaries, and meanwhile, let’s say, we’re now in the second half of ’87, you’re very busy. Of course now this is a fairly intense period in the exchange rate coordination work you’re doing at Treasury that’s going to end up having that little blow-up in October of ’87. There are some very tough trade stuff going on with Congress that goes into ’88 if my memory serves. Trying to fight back protectionist legislation in Congress and …

Baker: Yes, we had a lot to do.

Zelikow: And then there’s the budget that’s going to be announced in early ’88. You were now by this time fairly involved in budgetary issues, more than some Treasury secretaries. Again, if I’m right about that. And then there's the savings and loan business.

Baker: But the budget issues, I was involved in those from the beginning of my tenure as Treasury Secretary because I’d been the Chief of Staff in the White House—who was the point man on the budget for the President—so I had heavy involvement in budget issues, not that that’s important here. But I did not have anything to do in the primaries, other than to just basically unofficially pray and pull for him. I mean, there wasn’t much I could do as Treasury Secretary.

Zelikow: Did you give advice?

Baker: Not much. It’s pretty hard to do that, to do that and do your Cabinet job at the same time. I don’t recall doing much of it. I do remember seeing the Vice President on West Exec right after he’d lost in Iowa. Came in third, I think. And that was a very bleak day. But what could I do? The New Hampshire campaign was up. It was going. The die had been cast. There wasn’t a whole heck of a lot anybody could do at that time.

Zelikow: So you were not kind of a carved gray eminence, the cardinal in the background—
Baker: No. Contrary to the…. Well, I saw one reference in the press clippings that I was. But the answer to that is no. You can’t really do that. You can’t do both jobs. Just like you can’t be Secretary of State and deal with economic issues that are coming before the President. You can’t do it. One person can’t do all that. There may have been some times when the Vice President would call, and it was frustrating because I had a heck of a big job to do, and I was trying my best to do it. But there may have been times when the Vice President would come to me and say, “This such and such and what do you think?” But those were, I think, reasonably rare. He had to go out and campaign.

Masoud: So that “Ask George Bush” commercial wasn’t your idea?

Baker: That probably was, as a matter of fact. Those were very successful for us, both in 1980 and in 1988. And you know, the truth of the matter is, that’s exactly what [Al] Gore’s done this year. He’s gotten out of his Vice Presidential suit and off of his airplane and into some regular clothes and he’s gone out and done town meetings. Well, what’s the difference between that and what George Bush did? Not a lot.

Masoud: There’s a report in April that you had a meeting with Senators and privately told them—in April of ’88—that you told them, “Listen, I’m not going to leave Treasury.” And I’m wondering, was there ever a point in time in ’88 where you thought that you wouldn’t have to leave and join the campaign, or is that understanding with the Vice President there from the beginning?

Baker: It wasn’t there from the beginning. When I made that statement, I wasn’t talking about the general election. And my statement to the Senators was probably relative to the primary process, the nominating process. I don’t think anybody else had ever run a general election campaign for Republicans other than me. John Sears, way back, way back when. John Mitchell, who by then had died. Because I did Ford’s and I did Reagan’s ’84. Bill Casey was campaign chairman in ’80, and he’d died by that time. So there wasn’t anybody out there who’d ever run a national campaign for President for a Republican. So it sort of stood to reason that I would, that I might have to do it in the general, and as it turned out I did. But I don’t ever remember thinking I ever would be drawn into it in the primary.

Zelikow: But when the early primaries were so discouraging, I mean you were very busy and preoccupied but here’s your friend taking the buffeting. You must have been hearing at least some gossip in the campaign, a little bit of finger pointing. But you were still, you just couldn’t really intervene to get involved in that.

Baker: I don’t believe I ever attended a meeting of the so-called group of six. I probably was getting calls from Brady, or Mosbacher, or somebody from time to time if there were some problems, maybe. But I honestly don’t remember a lot of dialogue with the Vice President about it. I just don’t remember.

Zelikow: So then by the spring of ’88, Bush has been able to weather the opposition, Super Tuesday, and kind of gets through, he clears through. And it’s pretty clear by, certainly by late
March, late April, that Bush is going to be the nominee. Unless my memory deceives me. And
the Democrats are still having their arguments. The nomination on the Democratic side is not
quite settled. It’s down now to a three-man race by April. [Michael] Dukakis, Gore and [Jesse]
Jackson, I think. And there’s some press reports of dissension in the campaign, Bush’s position
in the polls, what should the Vice President do? And this does seem to crystallize a lot in May of
’88. And there are two things around which it crystallizes. One is this Noriega statement, which
is around mid-May, late May of ’88, and the second is the resignation of Teeley. There is some
press stuff about that. And about Teeley is forced out, and there’s campaign dissension and
Teeley—

**Baker:** I think Teeley was the press person at the Vice President’s office rather than at the
campaign. I bet he was at the Vice President’s office, because Teeley’s problem was with Fuller.

**Zelikow:** Because the argument was, as I think Teeley said at least, “I was urging the Vice
President to be more forthright, to distance himself more,” kind of “the Vice President’s being
too passive.” And Teeley resigned but also he had a feeling from the press, and it’s not really
formally out there, that there’s already a sense of “who’s in charge?” And a lot of factions are
emerging. And I was just wondering, you already mentioned that you did take an interest in the
Noriega question.

**Baker:** Yeah, because I was on the NSC [National Security Council], I was Treasury Secretary.

**Zelikow:** And if there’s anything else you remember about that period and about the faction—

**Baker:** I remember that one of the main reasons the Vice President talked to me about coming
over to the campaign and began to talk to me in the early summer of ’88 was because you can’t
run a campaign with six people. I mean, you can’t have six heads. You’ve got to have someone
in charge.

**Zelikow:** Well, let me pursue that for a moment. Because here’s Atwater, he’s the campaign
manager. [Ed] Rollins might have been worried that he was having problems in the primaries,
but they’d gotten through the primaries. So why not, say, Atwater?

**Baker:** Because Atwater was not, Atwater was probably subordinate to these others in the
hierarchy of the campaign, to be very honest with you. He would be the manager and he’d be the
political strategist, but he wasn’t—

**Roussel:** Probably be interested to hear you say that.

**Baker:** Well, he would admit that. He would admit that.

**Zelikow:** Not subordinate to Teeter, but Teeter…. And Fuller is in kind of a different chain—

**Baker:** Yes, but Lee was sort of the hired gun. Lee was someone with tremendous talent. We
used him in ’84, brought him over from the political office of the White House, and he became
the liaison between me and the Chief of Staff’s office and the campaign. Rollins takes a lot of
credit for the ’84 campaign. He had nothing to do with it, to be brutally honest about it. We sent him over there to get him out of the way, and we put him on TV to respond, and that’s what his job was. And Atwater was the guy—

Zelikow: And of course, the TV watchers think, this is a central man in the campaign.

Baker: That’s exactly right. And Atwater was the guy we really used. Atwater was the talent. But Atwater was not, you know, he was sort of the hired gun in this lash up with six or seven people. There really wasn’t one clear person in charge. You’re not going to get the others to say OK, Lee’s the man; we’re going to take our direction from Lee.

Zelikow: Well then how’d they get through, who was in charge in the primaries?

Baker: They had a hydra-headed operation, didn’t they, Pete, for a gang of six. And that’s the reason I had to come over in the general.

Zelikow: Well it’s interesting, just to draw a brief comparison to the present. If you look at the Gore team he has in the primaries, there’s also, it’s not clear to me who’s in charge of that team. There’s about six people, there’s, but between [Robert] Shrum, [Donna] Brazile, and [Carter] Eskew it’s not obvious to me who’s really calling the shots.

Baker: It isn’t to me either, but I don’t want to—

Zelikow: Because it’s striking to me that here they’ve had a successful primary campaign, battled through this, and yet having battled through that successfully, there’s a feeling that we can’t make this work in the general. We have to overhaul this for the general.

Baker: Yes, because they couldn’t come to the Vice President with one recommendation. They all had their different ideas about what ought to be done. You didn’t have one person there pulling it together and making the point I made in the talk yesterday. There’s some issues that don’t have to go to the candidate, or to the President. That the Chief of Staff has to resolve if he’s going to properly serve the President. Same thing is true with the campaign chairman. A lot of this stuff never had to go up. The Vice President shouldn’t be bothered with Teeley and Fuller’s personal conflicts. But Lee wasn’t sufficiently senior, mature to—I mean, he was a good political operative, but that’s what he was.

Zelikow: I take the point but in ’76, you were not an aged, seasoned operative in ’76 yourself.

Baker: No, but I was aged and seasoned. [laughter]

Milkis: Do you remember, besides taking command when you stepped in, do you remember some of your thoughts and actions as you came into the campaign?

Baker: I remember Lee was very concerned about it, and I went to see him. I said, “Look, Lee, you’re going to come out of this better and stronger by virtue of the fact that I’m coming over here than you would otherwise. We’re going to do it in a way that preserves your dignity and
your credibility.” And we did, and it wasn’t ten days later that he was talking about how delighted he was that I was there and that somebody needed to come in there and make sure that things were done in an orderly fashion. I didn’t get in the way of—I mean, I didn’t impinge upon or detract from—his ability to do the organizational and political strategy work that he’s good at. That really wasn’t why I was there.

Young: I wonder if you could talk about what you saw as your first priorities in terms of getting the campaign organized, or getting the signals straight, when you came in.

Baker: That was 12 years ago. I don’t really remember. We started having regular staff meetings in the morning. We put Fuller out on the airplane with the Vice President.

Zelikow: So he was in charge of the body.

Baker: Well, we were in charge of the body. But he was out there to help the body. And we worked out an arrangement whereby we had a constant contact from the airplane to the campaign. I can’t remember, but I think it was Margaret [Tutwiler] to Fuller, where we could act fairly quickly on things.

Zelikow: Who would you describe as your inner circle when you were running the campaign, and what were their roles? You know, you had these morning meetings. Who did you kind of consider your top aides, and how would you describe their jobs?

Baker: Well, we had a number of them. Teeter, I think, was in it. He was the pollster. We had a press secretary. Who was it, Pete? Was it that young fellow, Mark [Goodin]?

Roussel: Yeah, and didn’t you have, wasn’t Steve Hart in there at one point, too?

Baker: We had a campaign press secretary, and then we had somebody out on the plane with the President. I can’t remember who the press person on the plane with the President was. We had Janet Mullins, who was doing the TV buys. We had Roger Ailes, who was our communications guy and media person. [Stuart] Spencer. We had Spencer for [J. Danforth] Quayle. We had [James] Cicconi working with Quayle, too. We probably had ten or twelve people around the tables.

Zelikow: [Robert] Zoellick was doing issues?

Baker: Zoellick would’ve been there, yeah. Zoellick came over from Treasury with me.

Zelikow: Atwater?

Baker: Of course.

Zelikow: Who was in charge of speech writing?
Baker: It’s interesting to hear these questions. They meld together. I can picture the guy, but I can’t remember, I can’t give you his name. He was someone we brought on. He was sort of a new guy that we brought on. God. He did a good job, too. Do you remember who I’m talking about?

Roussel: Yeah. Not Demarest.

Baker: No, it wasn’t David Demarest. But Demarest was in the campaign, and he came to some of these meetings Demarest would, because he was sort of assistant in communications.

Roussel: It wasn’t Jim Pinkerton, was it?

Baker: No. No, no. But Pinkerton was Atwater’s guy. Pinkerton never attended our senior staff meetings; he wasn’t senior staff. But Pinkerton helped in the campaign significantly. Who is this guy that wrote, that we hired?

Zelikow: People can find that out. I’m just trying to get a sense of who you relied on, on your key issues of strategy. And you came in, I think, before the Republican Convention.

Baker: We, for instance, all the ads that we ran had to come through our group. All the buys, all the expenditures of money, the schedule, of course, what we did, where we went, what issues we were going to concentrate on that day or that week. All that was decided around that table in my office in the morning, and then the airplane got their directions from us, and the rest of the campaign was sent out to implement. That’s the way that worked. The same way it worked in ’84 in the White House for Reagan’s re-election.

Zelikow: If I can just, just to organize this a little bit. So in a sense you’ve got issues of where does the candidate go, where do the candidate’s TV ads go, what does the candidate say, what do the candidate’s TV ads say, and of course, when.

Baker: You generally like to have the candidate saying roughly the same thing that the TV ads say. But that doesn’t always work out. But where does the candidate go, and where do the ads go, that’s all a part of your political strategy. What states are you going to concentrate on, where’s your electoral vote, what are you going to count on to pull together your electoral vote majority?

Zelikow: So you have to decide where to organize, where to commit your resources, field organizing as well as your ad buys.

Baker: Sure. How much you’re going to commit, too. I mean, those decisions are made right there. You can imagine having six relatively equal people there, and how are you going to get all those decisions made? You need somebody to make those decisions. They can’t go to the candidate. One reason Gore got into trouble this year is because he was trying to do all that stuff.

Zelikow: You came onto the campaign really just before the convention. I think the convention was mid-August.
Baker: I really didn’t have much to do with the convention.

Zelikow: And the Peggy Noonan speech that the Vice President gave?

Baker: I think it was probably already written before I got there, or at least it was in the mill. I think [Richard] Darman came over to the campaign, too, with me, didn’t he, from Treasury? I believe so.

Zelikow: But the “Read my lips” pledge that the Vice President issued at the convention, did you sign off on that speech?

Baker: No.

Zelikow: Really?

Baker: Oh, on the acceptance speech?

Zelikow: Yeah.

Baker: I’m sure I did. I’m sure I saw it. I don’t know when I came … when did I come on board?

Zelikow: August 6th.

Baker: And when was the convention?

Zelikow: A week after that.

Baker: I’m sure I saw it.

Masoud: Do you remember any discussions besides strategy about substance and how Vice President Bush would define the campaign, and in particular, how he would define himself in comparison to the Reagan administration. Was he an heir apparent, or were there “kinder, gentler” discussions?

Baker: I don’t remember a lot of discussions about that. The reason I was tentative on the acceptance speech is because I don’t think I did sign off on the acceptance speech in ’92, because I came so late in ’92; I think I came the day the convention began. But in ’88, I’m sure I saw that acceptance speech. I don’t recall a lot of discussion about how we were going to position ourselves vis-a-vis President Reagan. I remember the Noriega issue. There were obviously some other discreet and specific issues. But the truth of the matter is, we were quite content to campaign on the idea of a continuation of the policies of a successful two-term Reagan presidency.
Zelikow: Well, how did you want to frame the campaign broadly, between the Vice President and Dukakis? What did you want the campaign to be about?

Baker: Well, we wanted it to be about the same issues that the Reagan-Bush administration had been pursuing. We wanted it to be about lower taxes. We wanted it to be about strong defense. We wanted it to be about the very same issues that we were pushing at the end of the second Reagan term. And we wanted to brand him [Dukakis] as a liberal, which we successfully did, and someone who had absolutely no idea about foreign and security policy, which we fairly effectively did with the tank ad.

Milkis: You put him in that tank, right?

Baker: And we had a pretty good opposition research department. We had people who found the prison furlough stuff, but that wasn’t the only thing we nailed him on. We nailed him on a lot of other things, because he basically was a very liberal candidate. We were lucky to draw him. And he was a lousy debater. So he blew that lead.

Masoud: I’m thinking when you come onto the campaign, the convention’s a week later, and one of the first things you have to deal with is the Quayle selection. I wonder how much input you had in selecting Quayle.

Baker: Nobody had any input in terms of, well, input. That depends on what you mean by that. The Vice President made the selection. He made it clear he was going to make the selection. He made it clear he wanted to do it in a way that did not subject the potential candidates to undue prying or embarrassment or that sort of thing. So we compartmentalized the review process that Bob Kimmitt ran. I picked Kimmitt for that. He did a great job, I think. But nobody saw the material that the potential candidates supplied Kimmitt, except the Vice President. And he didn’t make his selection until either the day before or on the airplane going down to New Orleans. He obviously was coming to that conclusion, but he didn’t really, I don’t think he really finally did it—I think he’s written it somewhere that he did it that morning. And he told us about it on the plane. We hit the ground, he told President Reagan. I think he only told me about it on the plane. Maybe he told a couple of others. But I think he told me then because he wanted to tell President Reagan. And then he met President Reagan and whispered it to him. Then we went to our hotel and he asked me to get Dan on the telephone, which I did.

Milkis: Do you remember your reaction when he told you?

Baker: Yeah. My reaction was not negative, contrary to press reports. I’ll tell you what started all this was, my reaction was definitely not negative. I mean, I saw it as a— We had a generational issue in this campaign. And the feeling on the part of many of us was that Quayle—I’m not telling you that I was out there lobbying for Quayle, because I really wasn’t lobbying for anybody. People have written that I was lobbying for [Robert] Dole. I wasn’t lobbying for Dole. I wasn’t lobbying for anybody. And if you ask George Bush, he’ll tell you. He’ll say that I didn’t come down in one particular place or another. Because in the first place, I came to it late.

Zelikow: Did he ask you for a recommendation?
Baker: No, not for a recommendation, but my views on the various—

Zelikow: But not for a bottom line recommendation?

Baker: No. And I gave him my views on the various candidates, and what their relative strengths and weaknesses were. And then the night that the selection was announced, I was asked in a press interview if he was the most qualified person that was on the list. And I said something like maybe not the most qualified, but he brings other attributes that are extraordinarily important, which was an honest answer. Because in terms of qualifications, you had other people on the list who were more qualified in terms of their experience and background, than Dan. But I, and I marked the quote, because this is what, in my view, started the whole damn thing. And I’m glad you all put this stuff in your— First of all, it says here in two places, it says that I floated Quayle’s name in an early news report in order to shoot it down. Baloney! That’s such baloney. I mean, that’s the kind of stuff that happens and then once it’s reported, you can’t ever get a retraction and it gets locked into the lore. I didn’t float Quayle’s name. Quayle might have floated his name. Somebody did. But it wasn’t me.

And then it says, “After Bush announced his selection, Baker offered this delicate assessment: ‘The issue is not who might have been the very best qualified to be President, the issue is getting someone who is extremely well-qualified to be President, and who might have some other attributes as well.’” Because the question I got on television that night was “Is he the most qualified? Is he the very best qualified to be President of all those under selection?” And I answered it honestly and correctly, I think. And from that time on, everybody reported that I was against the Quayle selection. That’s not true. I wasn’t out there flogging the idea of selecting Quayle. But it’s not true that I was against the— And if you ask the President that, I think he’d tell you the same thing.

Zelikow: Well, the press has the candidates for that as having been Dole, Quayle, [Peter] Domenici, [Alan] Simpson.

Baker: Domenici was out of it. He took himself out. He called me and said I don’t want to be considered.

Milkis: [Jack] Kemp. Was Kemp?

Baker: Kemp was in there.

Zelikow: So the real candidates were Dole, Quayle, Simpson, Kemp? Is there anyone else you remember as being an important candidate?

Baker: You don’t have Clint Eastwood on there. Make my day. Did you know that Clint Eastwood’s name was thrown out at one point?

Masoud: No, I didn’t know that.
Baker: When we were way behind. Honestly, it was suggested in not an altogether unserious—Well, he was a mayor. He was a Republican mayor. Anyway, it was shot down pretty quick. [laughter] But we were looking at an 18-point deficit.

Masoud: Was Paul Laxalt on that list? He was not one of the ones—

Baker: No.

Roussel: Was there any female on that list at any time?

Baker: I don’t remember, Pete. I don’t think so. Who would it have been?

Milkis: Elizabeth Dole? I did see her name mentioned once. I don’t remember if it was exactly in that context.

Baker: I think [Bill] Plante’s the guy that asked me that question that night, and I will tell you today, that was an honest answer. Very best qualified to be President? No, but he is extremely well qualified and brings other attributes as well. The generational thing, the boyish charm, the whole shmear. And I want to tell you something. As I’ve said in other interviews that you don’t have in here, I worked with him when I was Chief of Staff on the Armed Services committee matters and on the joint…what was that job training partnership? Job training partnership stuff. And Dan was on top of his game. I mean he knew all that stuff. He was smart. And he knocked off a pretty big name in Birch Bayh.

So I think that Teeter and Ailes were probably very strongly in favor of that. They had run his campaigns. They had seen him campaign before. I think the way we announced his selection was a mistake. Nobody should ever do that again, where you spring it on the press at the convention because then that’s all they’ve got to write about is anything they can find. And that wasn’t Dan’s fault. It was really our fault, but we couldn’t do it any other way. We didn’t know who it was until the day of the convention because that’s the way the Vice President wanted to make the selection. He wanted to keep it really “close hold.” So that was the news at the convention. Some people say, “Well, you’ve got a dull convention. We want the news to be the selection of the Vice President.” And I’ve had this conversation already with Governor Bush’s people. Don’t do it that way. Don’t worry about a dull convention. Whatever you do, don’t announce your Vice Presidential pick at the convention. You see what can happen.

Zelikow: What would you recommend instead?

Baker: I would recommend that you do it early before you get to the convention site. Let it come out, or just go ahead and announce it the way Dole did Kemp. That’s probably a lot better.

Masoud: Reading some of the stuff that’s been written about the President and this episode, the biography by Herbert Parmet of the President. He had some access to the President’s recorded diary. And the President says in regard to the Quayle selection, he says, “It was my choice and I blew it.” Did you get that sense that he felt he had blown it?
Baker: No. Not at that time. Maybe later. Maybe later, because the coverage was so uniformly negative for the four years that I think he would’ve been pleased perhaps even to see Dan volunteer to step down in ’92, but that wasn’t to be. And he certainly couldn’t take the ax to him because the press would say, “Hey, you dummy, the problem is not the Vice President. It’s you. That’s why you’re running low in the polls.” So he couldn’t do that. In fact I think [Gerald] Ford made a mistake when he let [Nelson] Rockefeller go. And if it had been Ford and Rockefeller, I think they would’ve won that election in ’76, instead of Ford and Dole.

Roussel: I’ll add just one footnote to the convention part because I was there in a media role doing commentary for two stations. And first on that afternoon of that announcement, it was our call a couple of hours, it got leaked—

Baker: That it was Quayle.

Roussel: Yes. Because in the media village it ran through there like a brush fire, and there was a lot of surprise, given who it was. Then, I did some lobbying of you, I guess, to get an interview, which was granted the next morning with the Vice President with my two stations there. And already, here we were the next morning, and already, there was already talk that Quayle was going to withdraw himself. I mean, it had already taken on that proportion within 24 hours. I do remember you had some concerns the next morning when we showed up for the interview. I thought you were going to cancel it, in fact, because it was the first interview, really, to discuss it, and I thought, well…. 

Baker: But you see we’d been up all night with the damn National Guard thing. And I’m sure that Kimmitt researched that. I’m sure we had the data on it. But we were not in a position to I guess prove a negative, which is what we would’ve had to do: that he did not get any help to get in the Guard. Kimmitt had only I guess Quayle’s word, and maybe he hadn’t even asked that question–probably hadn’t asked that question, as a matter of fact.

Masoud: Maybe it was looked at as an asset, even, that this guy had been in the National Guard.

Zelikow: But not his service record.

Baker: But now that I think about it, he probably had not asked the question, “Did you get any help to get in?” Anyway, so we were up all night with that. It just validates what I said a minute ago. Don’t ever pick your Vice President, don’t ever spring your Vice President on the press as a surprise at the convention because you’re anticipating a “dull” convention. I mean, that’s a terrible mistake.

Young: Once you’re into the campaign, there’s a lot of press reports about the problems with Quayle, Quayle’s problems with—

Baker: With the campaign, yes.

Masoud: And with his own handlers.
Baker: Yes, I’ll talk about that. Let me first though say that on this question about the Parmet book and “I blew it”: He didn’t blow it. I mean, we won that election. Bush and Quayle were President and Vice President, right? So he didn’t blow it in that sense. And I don’t know when he wrote that. Was it at the time and not later?

Masoud: I think it was at the time.

Baker: Well, OK. But I thought President Bush sort of denied that after the Parmet book came out.

Young: Parmet didn’t give you the context though, so it’s a little bit difficult.

Milkis: It’s not clear whether he feels like he blew it the way it was done, or whether he blew the—

Baker: The way it was done, we did blow it. We did blow it. And I bet that’s what President Bush meant. I think that’s what he meant. Because we won that election. Now, were there problems? Yeah, there were problems between the Quayles—not just the Vice President, but there’s a very strong other Quayle there, too, as you know. And as the difficulties mounted I think there was a tendency—first of all they weren’t getting along with the people, with Spencer and [Joe] Canzeri. Spencer’s a damn good political pro, you know. He did Ford and Reagan and he knows his stuff. But as the task got tougher out there on the campaign trail, it was I think a tendency to blame the problems on the handlers. And it’s carried over even to this day in 2000 where the first thing Quayle said when he announced he was going to run for President, he said, “It’s going to be different this time because I’m going to run my own campaign.” It was different.

Masoud: But you yourself apparently found the need at some point to discipline Quayle’s handlers.

Baker: Did I?

Masoud: Well, the press reports were saying that you know, you had to tell them to stop leaking and things like that.

Baker: No, what I was doing was trying to knock down some of the leaks that were coming—by that time there had been—yes, there was some really bad blood, and I think I know where that was coming from. That is true. Well, we couldn’t have that in the middle of a campaign. And it stopped after that.

Young: Well what was the substance of the problem there with Quayle? Was he a bad campaigner?

Baker: No, I think Dan is a good—

Young: He didn’t coordinate well with the Bush—
**Baker:** No, I think he’s a good campaigner, but he went through so much hell there during the, because of the way the selection process went, that he didn’t become a negative, but it’s just there were not too many places where we could send him with good effect. That’s what the problem was. And you know, he, people say he lost that debate with [Lloyd] Bentsen. Well, I don’t know, that one remark, maybe he did lose it. But he certainly did a good job of debating Gore in ’92, and he handles himself, I think, very well. But I can’t tell you what the problem was other than what I’ve just said. I mean, I don’t know that—Anyway, we finally got the handlers off of him, and they were just sort of turned loose, if I’m not mistaken. You have to check that.

**Zelikow:** We’d like to do a session with Stuart Spencer.

**Baker:** Have you had Stu?

**Zelikow:** Not yet.

**Baker:** Well, you’ve got to have Stu, because he’ll lay all that on you and it’ll be blood and guts. [*laughs*] I have to remind you guys, we won, ok?

**Milkis:** We know that.

**Baker:** So, don’t knock the handlers too bad.

**Zelikow:** Wasn’t there an earlier question that you promised to address, but you wanted to get back to the Bush diary, and I’m trying to remember, I was looking forward to the answer to that question. Now I can’t remember who asked it and what it was.

**Zelikow:** So after the convention, you’re still down in the polls, although after the convention—

**Baker:** It was only about eight or ten points.

**Zelikow:** It’s narrowed a little bit. You weathered the very worst of it. But what was your analysis basically of what the challenge had to be, what you really had to do to close that gap? You talked a little bit about overall strategy, about how you needed to identify Dukakis and fill in the picture. The Vice President’s reasonably well-known, but what did you see as the key states?

**Baker:** We had to win the debates. Well, that’s all in the documentation, Philip. I can’t remember it all. But I’ll tell you in any Presidential election, the key states are always the same, generally. And it’s the swing states of Michigan, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Illinois, Ohio, and oftentimes Washington and Oregon.

**Zelikow:** You didn’t mention California.

**Baker:** No, it’s not a swing state.
Zelikow: That’s interesting. And you didn’t mention Texas and Florida.

Baker: That’s because they’re ours. We own Texas and Florida. The Democrats recently have owned California. I think we have a shot at California this year. But we didn’t have much of a shot back then. What did we win? Did we win all but ten states in ’88?

Zelikow: I would have to check.

Baker: Well, you all ought to check that.

Milkis: The Electoral College was pretty substantial.

Baker: Oh, it was a big win. It turned out to be a big win.

Milkis: Can you shed some light on the preparation for the debates, the thinking going into the debates? Were you, did you think that Dukakis would be a better debater? You said before he was a lousy debater. But were you worried about that going in?

Baker: He turned out to be a lousy debater. But we didn’t know that at the time. But we won the debate over the debates, because by the time that took place I think we must have been in the lead, weren’t we? They needed to debate. But we were sort of the incumbent because we were the incumbent Vice President. But we won the debate over debates. They had Susan Estrich and Paul Brontus and Tom Donilon. Tom Donilon later came in to be an assistant to Warren Christopher for Clinton.

Zelikow: And on your side it was pretty much just you?

Baker: Me and Roger Ailes and Frank Donatelli, I think, went with me. But I can’t remember who else. I think there was one other.

Zelikow: Zoellick?

Baker: No, Zoellick wouldn’t have been there.

Zelikow: Now, this is in September that you’re negotiating the debates. What did you think the key issues were that you wanted to win? I mean, when you went into that negotiation, what were your—

Baker: First of all, we wanted to have the format be what it ended up being, and I can’t remember exactly what it was. But we didn’t want any of this free-form stuff the way we got it in ’92, which we couldn’t do much about. We got what we wanted on the time—I don’t know whether it was an hour and a half debate—two one and a half hour debates, which is all we gave them.

Zelikow: They wanted more?
Baker: Oh yes. They wanted more debates. And probably we got what we wanted on the format. What, did we have questioners? Yeah. We had Bernie Shaw. And they weren’t allowed to address each other. We had a fairly closed debate that year—I mean, sort of a very sterile format.

Zelikow: About the time you had the debates, were you still sure it was in your interest to have them at all, if you thought you were beginning to open up a lead?

Baker: Yes. First of all, they really wanted them, and if we’d said no, we’re not going to have any debates, they would’ve nailed us. You can’t just refuse to debate at all. You have to appear that you want to have a free-flowing exchange of ideas, whether you do or not. You’ve got to look like you do. And you take a lot of water when you don’t, when you’re not willing to debate. We made an effort to control the debate about debates in ’92, but by then this commission had gotten in there and the Democrats were able to say, “Well, we’ll do whatever the commission says.” The commission had Republicans on it, and so for a while we said, “No, well, we won’t.” And they had this guy very effectively dressed up in a chicken suit, if you remember, going to our rallies. Chicken George, he won’t debate. Well, you don’t mess around with that for very long, I’ll tell you. So there wasn’t any issue about not debating. We just wanted to maintain control over the format and the number and the length and that sort of thing.

Young: Could you talk a bit about President Reagan’s role in the campaign?

Baker: Yes.

Young: And how that worked with the Vice President campaigning?

Baker: President Reagan genuinely wanted—First of all, he genuinely likes George Bush, and he wanted to see George Bush elected. And he wanted to do what he could to help. But I’m not sure that his staff were as helpful sometimes as they could have been. Particularly right after I’d gone over to the campaign, we had some problems getting dates and times lined up. And I think they were probably—at that time, we were behind, and they may have been saying, “Well, we may not want to get too close to this.” I don’t know that that’s true, but I suspect it. But when he finally did, he did some events for us, and they were effective, and I think he cut some television for us. I can’t remember.

Young: He seemed to have a great talent for campaigning. He himself.

Baker: Yes, he did. Well, he likes to campaign. And he genuinely liked the Vice President.

Zelikow: How about the Vice President as a candidate? Strengths and weaknesses as a candidate.

Baker: I don’t know. I’ve always admired George Bush because he was willing to do things that were long shots. You know, you’ve got to really admire somebody who’s willing to get out there and do what he did in ’79. There’s an asterisk in the poll; nobody knew who the hell he was. I remember when we first started, and I wrote this in my book. He said, “Do you think I’m crazy doing this?” We were flying out to see Reagan and Ford to tell them that George was going to
run for President. Or he was thinking about it. And I said, “No. Hell, I don’t think so at all.” People will remember this very well, because in those days in Texas, man, you’re crazy to sign up with George Bush. I had run Ford’s campaign. I was the only Republican in the country who had run a national Presidential campaign, and I’m signing on with an asterisk? And you’ve got John Connally here, who’s Central Casting’s idea of President of the United States? Have you taken leave of your senses? I mean, wasn’t that the way it was, Pete? We just got hammered. And yet we went out there, we started from nothing and we got some delegates, and we got on the ticket. George Bush is a good campaigner. People say, “Oh, well, he comes from a privileged background. He’s reserved, and he’s too much of a gentleman for the hurly burly.” I don’t buy all that stuff. He can get in there with the best of them. He doesn’t come across on television, in my opinion, as well as he does in person, in the flesh. Would you agree, Pete?

Roussel: That’s always been true.

Baker: Always been true. Reagan, on the other hand, comes across better on television, even, than he does in person. But I know George was a better campaigner than Dukakis. Better. And turned out he was a better campaigner than [John] Connally and Howard Baker and all these guys he beat in the primaries in 1979, if you measure it by the end result.

Milkis: He did pretty well in the ’88 primaries against people like Kemp and Dole. I remember those debates, and talking about Kemp’s kooky ideas.

Baker: I loved it when he was up there with Pete [Pierre] DuPont, and DuPont was lecturing him on something, and he said, “Let me help you out with that, Pierre. Let me enlighten you on that, Pierre.” Pierre. Reminds me of an Alfalfa [Club] dinner when Sam Nunn was president, and we’d just come to town. George was the Vice President, and Sam wrote his jokes around Herbie, he called him “Herbie.” George Herbert Walker Bush. “Herbie, let me tell you something. Herbie, this is the way this town works.”

Roussel: The thing you have to remember about Bush as a candidate, too, by the time he ran for President in ’79, in addition to all his résumé, which everybody talked about, which he did have, which nobody in modern history ever had that spread of experience when they ran for President, but he’d also, he’d run twice statewide in Texas as a Republican back when–what you’re talking about is true– when it took a lot of courage to be a Republican. So he’d been through some pretty tough campaigning already.

Baker: And he’d run two successful congressional races.

Roussel: He wasn’t any novice to the tough grind part of it.

Zelikow: Well, let me ask kind of a tough question. If that’s true, how come you have all this sense in the early summer of ’88, disarray. Sure hope Baker comes over. Somebody’s got to take charge of this. Why doesn’t the candidate take charge?

Baker: You asked me what kind of a campaigner he was. You didn’t ask me what kind of an organizational person he was.
Zelikow: Well, strengths and weaknesses as a candidate.

Baker: That’s not the way you put it. [laughter]

Milkis: I love to watch two lawyers go at it.

Zelikow: Can I rephrase, Your Honor? [laughter]

Baker: Let me answer that question by saying this: He finally got it taken care of, as he should have. You can’t run a campaign with seven, six, five people. Or no heads. The candidate can’t be his own campaign manager. It’s like the lawyer who’s his own client, or the client who has himself as his lawyer. He’s a fool. The lawyer who represents himself has a fool for a client. Well, the candidate who thinks he can run his own campaign is crazy. You don’t have time for that. That’s why Gore got in trouble earlier this year. He’s off of that now.

Young: Is that a problem, that was a real problem in the re-election campaign, wasn’t it?

Baker: Real problem what?

Young: In the re-election—

Zelikow: In ’92.

Baker: Of ’92?

Young: Yes.

Baker: What, running his own campaign?

Young: No, no, having the need for some organization that didn’t seem to be around. Too many cooks.

Baker: Did they have too many cooks in ’92, or was it just that they didn’t have—too many, was it? Teeter was the campaign manager, and you had Charlie Black, you had the usual suspects over there. It was Teeter and Black and [Mary] Matalin and— You didn’t have these people, close friends of the President the way you did in ’88. In ’88 you had this gang of six, which was very unwieldy and unworkable. In ’92, you had the problem that we had in ’76, of the White House and the campaign fighting with each other, particularly while [John] Sununu was there. And to a lesser extent later on while [Samuel] Skinner was there. So you did not have one central focus and point of control, which is what you’re talking about, which is the reason I ended up resigning as Secretary of State and going over there.

Masoud: So, had Sununu stayed on as Chief of Staff, you don’t think that that would’ve solved things?
Baker: It was a problem between the campaign and the White House. Now, in the ’84 election, we didn’t make any secret of the fact that we were running it. We ran it out of the White House. We complied with all the FCC requirements. We put speech writers on the payroll of the campaign. We did all that. But the decisions about what the President was going to say and where he was going to go and what he was going to do and what our themes and all that were, were worked out around our table in the Chief of Staff’s office in ’84, just like they were in ’92. In ’88, we did that over at the campaign, because he was a Vice President.

Zelikow: But in ’92 it really didn’t happen that way until you became Chief of Staff.

Baker: Right. Not ’til I went over there. But that gave us a central focus, where everybody knew the decisions that had to be made, that the President himself should not be called upon to make, about campaign strategy and priority states, and how much TV, and how much you spend. Those were all made in the Chief of Staff’s office, after I went there. Now why did I go to the Chief of Staff’s office in ’92 and not in ’88? Can anybody answer that question? [laughter] But since we’d been so successful in ’88, when I left as Treasury Secretary, I went over to the campaign and ran the campaign, why didn’t I do that in ’92? Why didn’t I go over to the campaign instead of having two locations, when you’ve been having fighting between the campaign and the White House? Why didn’t I just do the same thing I did in ’88 and go over to the campaign and run it from there? You all don’t know the answer.

Milkis: Skinner was so ineffectual as Chief of Staff, you had to.

Baker: No, no. Not at all. They’d passed a law in the meanwhile that said you couldn’t deal with anybody that you’d been in the Cabinet with. I wouldn’t be able to speak to any of the Cabinet. If I’d left the government, so there was no option other than to go to the White House. You all should know that.

Milkis: OK. End of interview.

Baker: So, what else?

Zelikow: Well, you know, I was just thinking if some folks were listening to this conversation, what might they not like about it. Well they might say, Oh, you guys are all interested in process. Where is the discussion here of great ideas, what people want to do as President of the United States? And so I’ll just be sure to ask you the question, to think about— Vice President Bush is defining his message. And he’s thinking, too, what does he want to tell the American people as to why he wants to be President?

Baker: He wants to cut regulations. He’s not going to increase taxes. He’s going to continue to maintain America’s military strength. He’s going to continue to see to it that we are respected by our allies and feared by our adversaries. I mean, it’s the same old stuff that you’re going to see—

Zelikow: Crime?
**Baker:** Sure. Crime, violence, safe streets. We hadn’t gotten to the point that the federal government has reached now, where you have a little micro-initiative every day: uniforms for kids in school, or whatever the hell it might be. Or five million dollars here for something because it sounds good in the polls. We did the big stuff.

**Zelikow:** But you—to summarize what I’m hearing, and tell me if this is right, because it sounds like you’re saying, “We were still able to run an election where the Vice President could put himself comfortably in the traditional Republican-Democrat division.”

**Baker:** Absolutely.

**Zelikow:** And he could continue to maintain traditional Republican themes, and label the Democrats as traditional Democrats, and then find out which the American people want. Which does create a question about ’92. Because an easy inference would be that a big problem in ’92 was that the rules of the game had fundamentally changed.

**Baker:** They did change, because the Cold War was over. And where we made our mistake—Let me tell you what you want to hear. We’re going to get to ’92 sometime. I’ll tell you why we lost in ’92? We lost for three reasons. And I’d like you to argue with this, if you will, because I’d like to know if you think there was any other. We lost, number one, because we’d been there for 12 years, and change is the only constant in politics. If you can’t show that you’re an agent for change, you start out way behind. And the press were tired of us. Washington was tired of us. We’d been there in power for 12 years.

Secondly, we had Ross Perot taking two out of every three votes from us, and there’s no doubt about that. Don’t believe that baloney that he puts out that he didn’t take from us any more than he took from the Democrats. He took, our polling showed it consistently, two out of every three. He got 19 percent, we got 38 percent. Take two-thirds of 19 percent, and we got 51 percent.

But another major reason, which was our fault—those two were not our fault—well, and I didn’t mention the economy, which was not really our fault either, I don’t think. So we have four reasons. So three of them were not really our fault. I would argue that the economy was not our fault, that it was the fault of the savings-and-loan debacle which put us into a one-year recession.

The fourth reason was our fault, and that is we did not go up to Capitol Hill in January of ’92 when George Bush was enjoying a 90 percent approval rating, and propose a domestic economic program around which we could build a campaign. Call it “Domestic Storm,” OK? “I’ve taken care of Saddam Hussein and Desert Storm. I’m going to turn my attention now to the domestic problems facing this country.” That’s what Bill Clinton campaigned on. He didn’t give a flip for international affairs, and therefore he was a lousy foreign policy President for quite a while. And we made a terrible mistake. Even though the President’s economic advisers were telling him that the economy was going to come back, and indeed it did come back, and they were right, we needed something around which to build a campaign. We didn’t have it. And that’s our fault.

**Milkis:** Why do you think that didn’t happen?
**Baker:** Well, it didn’t happen because the President’s economic advisers were telling him he didn’t need to. The economy was going to come back. All of them. [Michael] Boskin and Darman and Sununu and Brady. “Mr. President, the economy is coming back.” It did come back in November of ’92, which was just too late for George Bush.

**Young:** The perception, I mean the figures weren’t in the public perception.

**Baker:** No, they weren’t. That’s what I’m saying, they came back too late. This is a major, this was a major error and we should’ve done it.

**Milkis:** You don’t think any of the fault lies with the President himself, and this just not is his strength?

**Baker:** Well, I don’t know. You can argue that the President should’ve seen that. Maybe you can, I don’t know. But I think really that John Sununu, who understands—when did John leave the administration?

**Milkis:** Ninety-one. December of ’91.

**Baker:** So we had already locked in to what we were going to do in the State of the Union. You know, we wound up the State of the Union with some damn little old transportation initiative or something. John is a good enough political operative that he should, I think, or somebody should’ve recognized in the political operation in the White House at that time, “Hey wait a minute. We’ve got to run for re-election next year, and what are we going to run on?” Now then, what did we end up running on? We ended up running on those issues that I laid out in my departure speech from the State Department. If you go get that speech, that is what we built our, tried to build our campaign around, but it was too late to come with that stuff. There’s some good stuff in there.

**Zelikow:** And then there was the Detroit Economic Club speech.

**Baker:** The Detroit Economic Club speech of the President’s was taken, pretty much, from my resignation speech at State. And give Zoellick some credit: He wrote a lot of that. Others contributed. And that was a good message. It was a good speech, but it was too late for us really to build a campaign around.

**Zelikow:** You’d already been defined.

**Baker:** Yeah. Defined as not caring. Defined as out of touch. Defined as not interested in the problems that businessmen were having. Defined as being off his game from Graves’ disease, or whatever the hell else it was.

**Young:** You think it’s, the President did not get this advice?

**Baker:** There was a discussion, as I understand it. I don’t know this to be the case, but there was a discussion about whether to go up with more than just this, and the decision, for whatever
reason—and I wasn’t there and I don’t know how that discussion went—the decision was made that it wasn’t necessary to do that. Someone even used the term “Domestic Storm.” I think it was Darman. But these are questions you can ask those guys. I mean, I was off flying around the world somewhere, and I don’t know when that happened or how it happened. But we should’ve been up there with something.

**Milkis:** I know you were very busy in another place, but when the President, perhaps for good reasons, broke his “no new taxes” pledge, did you anticipate that was going to be a serious problem? Do you remember thinking *Oh, my God?*

**Baker:** Go pick up Quayle’s book, and you’ll see that during the transition I told—Quayle writes some things in there that are not particularly flattering to me, but he says this: “However, I’ll give him this. He told me during the transition, ‘You’ve got to watch Darman and Brady, because they’re going to try and get the President to break his ‘no new taxes’ pledge.’” And Quayle was a good enough politician to understand that if he did that, there’d be one hell of a high cost to it. Now we talked yesterday at lunch about that issue and how that all happened, and I think it was a case of being too cute by half. And you guys can check that, but I think that’s what you’re going to find.

**Zelikow:** It’s interesting, what seems clearer to me now, listening to you discuss it, is in a way almost the combination of the fact that you break the “no new taxes” pledge, you alienate your base, which by the way helps create the conditions in which Perot can decide to run. And then the combination of breaking the “no new taxes” pledge and then not having the economic program—that hurts you on the right and the left. You haven’t had a new program to sell to—

**Baker:** And then we compound it by going out and saying it was a mistake to—later he said it was a mistake to break the “no new taxes” pledge. You remember that?

**Zelikow:** No, I did not remember that.

**Baker:** That really didn’t help, either.

**Zelikow:** But I remember the winter of ’91, ’92, I remember this very clearly, because I was talking to people. And there were people at the time who were very anxious about this, who thought that this winter was crucial. This was a winter that was going to determine the fate of the campaign. And this is not all 20/20 hindsight. People were talking this way at the time.

**Baker:** No. You talk to Mosbacher in particular, and he’ll tell you. He was in there trying to make the case. But I’ve got to tell you: Even if we’d had an economic Domestic Storm up there, a domestic economic program, we’d been in power 12 years, and we had Perot out there. I’m not at all sure that we could’ve turned it around, even then. We never moved off of 38 percent, except that last week that we had good movement for four days. And then Walsh indicted Weinberger, and that killed us.

**Zelikow:** That was four days before the election.
Baker: I thought, finally we’re moving. And that stalled it out completely. But even so, to overcome the 12 years in power and the Perot factor would’ve been very tough.

Young: Was the Perot factor—let me put it another way. The divisions are in opposition almost in some of the congressional Republicans to the present. The divisions within the Republican Party apart from Perot. Was that a factor at all? [Newt] Gingrich?

Baker: Well, the fact that Gingrich didn’t go along with the—Darn right it was. Because that helped alienate the base significantly. And when Gingrich first agreed to that deal and then walked away from it, that’s when the base said, “Ooh, terrible. You’re breaking your promise.” It was terrible. You can’t make a promise like that, though. But the President did something very good substantively when he did that. He put those caps in, that’s the deal he got. And that has enabled us to overcome the deficit and severely curtail and restrict spending. Even some of the economic writers are writing today that that budget deal is responsible, has played a large part in the prosperity we’re enjoying today. But politically, it was costly. Because that “read my lips” had been such a major part of—

Zelikow: Bush had created a strong character for integrity.

Baker: That’s correct, and this went the other direction.

Zelikow: Although I think you’re certainly right on the Perot, it’s not even just that, it’s much more than the two-for-one split, it seemed to me. It was the whole dynamic of the campaign change, that if you have a one-on-one campaign, the way Bush can portray himself, the way he can run, and Clinton cannot raise the whimper. He cannot do that. So Perot’s going to do it for him. And that changed the whole dynamic in which Bush can position himself.

Baker: In that debate, Bush was out there against two people.

Zelikow: Did you agree, and just one more in ’92 and then I want to come back to ’88, there are—because I remember some arguments about just how fast can we run away from foreign policy, and not run any ads, except maybe one near the end that mentioned the President’s foreign policy record. Don’t say anything about foreign policy in the campaign.

Baker: I don’t remember that. But it was just not a salient issue. It wasn’t a cutting issue. There weren’t any foreign policy problems. You seem to forget, as I said yesterday, when we ended up, everybody wanted to be friends with the United States. We had the best foreign policy situation that this country’s seen in a long, long time. Everybody wanted to embrace free markets. Everybody wanted to embrace democracy, with the sole exceptions of North Korea, Cuba, Iran, Iraq and Libya. Everybody was ours. Everybody wanted to come on board. And they all admired us, too. They liked us. They didn’t think we were arrogant. They didn’t resent us. They didn’t think we were bullying. And they didn’t think we’d go off here and bomb some sovereign nation just because we were outraged at the way they treated their minorities when we didn’t do it in other cases. I mean, I know you and I are on a different wavelength on this, but that cost us so much in terms of our foreign policy relationships.
Young: Nothing fails like success.

Baker: And look what’s happened now. The Serbs are ethnically cleansed. They’re still killing people over there. How long are we going to be in Kosovo? We spent 30 billion dollars on Bosnia and Kosovo; 30 billion dollars?

Zelikow: More expensive to us than the Gulf War was, by quite a lot.

Baker: Sure. Of course. We didn’t pay for the Gulf War. We got that paid for. This is outrageous. We’re in there and there’s no national interest whatsoever to be served by being in there. We’re in there because we pander to the editorial writers of the New York Times. And because you can’t make the case against not going in because humanitarian excesses are so egregious. So you have to, so now in today’s world of CNN and all these people keep pushing you, finally the President says, “Oh, my God, we have to do something.” So you go in.

Zelikow: Well this is a perfect segue back to the 1988 campaign. [laughter]

Baker: I’d rather talk about Kosovo.

Milkis: Think he wants to debate you on Kosovo.

Zelikow: The Secretary of State, of course, was Michael Dukakis’ foreign policy adviser.

Baker: That’s correct.

Zelikow: Going back full circle to 1988. Let’s talk about media buys, Roger Ailes, Atwater, negative tactics, Willie Horton. I think we need to work through that. Yesterday in your speech you were asked a question about the Willie Horton issue. I guess rather than recapitulate your answer, let me let you answer the question. Did you think—the basic question is, was the campaign too negative, did the campaign cross the line from the kind of attacks that are legitimate?

Baker: No. No. Of course it didn’t. I mean, we didn’t do as much, and certainly no more than Al Gore had done in the primary campaign that year against Dukakis. We pointed out that this guy had a prison furlough program when he was governor of Massachusetts that let killers out on furlough. People don’t like that. That is a legitimate policy issue. We never ran pictures of a big black guy with a beard looking very menacingly at the viewer. We never did that. We had a prison furlough ad that we constructed around my table that was quite legitimate. It had a rotating door—

Milkis: Which one appeared first, was it the Americans for Bush ad, or was it yours?

Baker: I don’t remember. But we did everything we could, if you’ll look at the news accounts at the time, we did everything we could to get that Americans for Bush ad withdrawn. Everything we could. We filed a suit even. Because we didn’t want to be associated with those creeps. And
yet we were. A lot of the liberal press associated us with them because they didn’t like the fact that this prison furlough business cut so hard against their boy.

**Milkis:** What’s your view of these kind of wild-cat, as you—I don’t know if it was you or someone else who called them wild-cat organizations that are—

**Baker:** Meaning independent—

**Milkis:** Yes. I respect your answer. I’m not challenging the sincerity of it, that you, that the campaign was upset about those ads. But do you think the Willie Horton issue would’ve been as powerful without that wild-cat organization putting that ad on television? You think it would’ve worked as well for you?

**Baker:** I think it would’ve worked better, because I think the fact that the wildcat organization put it out meant that we were subjected to a big backlash in the press that wasn’t justified. So I think it would’ve been better. Our ad would’ve really been—it’s a perfectly legitimate ad, nobody’s ever attacked that ad—and it would’ve been out there without the countervailing argument that it was dirty campaigning, which it wasn’t. It made the ad an issue.

**Zelikow:** If I was in an adversarial mode, I would say, well, the gossip was that folks in the campaign were winking at what Americans for Bush were doing. You have the PAC [Political Action Committee] founder ostentatiously saying, “Well, if Mr. Baker would come out and publicly say he’s mad at us, of course we’d stop.”

**Baker:** I did. I did.

**Zelikow:** Well, you sent Ede [Edith] Holliday out to say it.

**Baker:** No, no. I did it. I wrote him a letter, and I filed suit against him. Wait a minute, you’re just leaving now? [*laughter*]

[BREAK]

**Baker:** No, I can’t think of—Pete, you might. What am I missing? That campaign went amazingly well, when I went over there I thought well maybe this is it, I’m—

**Zelikow:** There was a little dust-up where Fred Malek had resigned.

**Baker:** Yeah, that’s on that Jewish thing, that’s right. But that was no big deal. Oh, we had a big problem with Derwinski, or was that in the ’92 campaign?

**Roussel:** What was the issue?

**Baker:** Veteran affairs guy. He had to step down, didn’t he? I don’t remember. I don’t recall the ’88 campaign as being a particularly—I don’t recall a negative about the ’88 campaign.
Zelikow: Just because, you know, I always try to notice the dogs that don’t bark.

Baker: Sure. What dogs?

Zelikow: Well, here are some dogs I’m not hearing you mention.

Baker: Let’s hear.

Zelikow: Candidate won’t stay on message. Candidate is too wedded to things he wants to say, or geese that he wants to chase. Or we can’t keep our story straight.

Baker: We didn’t have that problem. We started out 18 points behind, and we consistently moved up until we took all but about ten states. Everything worked quite well. Dukakis, thanks to Dukakis—lousy debate performance, the tank—the tank, that really cut him up.

Milkis: The Pledge of Allegiance.

Baker: The Pledge of Allegiance, yes. And we were criticized for that, for crying out loud. Unfair campaign. Pledge of Allegiance. Go into flag factories. But it works. I mean, if you’re patriotic, you like the flag. Most Americans are patriotic.

Masoud: Did you think the press was unfair during the campaign, the whole wimp factor thing, for example? The article in Newsweek.

Baker: Well, Vice President Bush sure thought that was unfair. But that was one article. Yeah, that was unfair. Here’s a guy who was shot down over the Pacific, a war hero, Congressman, Ambassador to the United Nations. Tough, tough guy, courageous as I said to you earlier. Who the hell would get out there and do what he did in ’79? They call him a wimp? Come on. That’s George Will. Came right from George Will.

Roussel: I'll send you an Op-Ed I did in the Washington Post at the time that addressed that and made those very points.

Masoud: Because if you read the article, it’s actually very flattering. Margaret Warner wrote a great, flattering article, and it’s just the cover that said “Fighting the Wimp Factor.” That was the—

Baker: You think the article was flattering? You should tell President Bush. [laughter]

Young: No, you shouldn’t.

Baker: We used to kid about some other ads that we could put out on that. You remember that, with Roger Ailes? You remember those ads? What was the thing that we ran across in the research—Oh, damn, I wish I could remember.
Masoud: You know, Willie Horton, that whole thing to me was that the campaign ad was no more misleading, it wasn’t misleading, than you’re “Had enough” from ’78. You know, people said that was misleading, too, but it was perfectly legitimate.

Baker: That’s right.

Zelikow: Do you have your own kind of sense of what lines are proper? How you draw the line between what an ad should be—

Baker: I think it’s changing. There’s been such a reaction to negative ads that what used to be OK is no longer OK. In other words, I think contrast ads are fair. My line is if you’re contrasting policy positions, it’s fair. If you’re not lying, if you’re telling the truth and you’re being scrupulously honest and objective, to contrast policy positions is plenty fair. I don’t care almost how you do it. I mean, and that’s a negative ad, a contrast. I’m for cutting your taxes, he’s for raising your taxes. If it’s honest and truthful, what’s wrong with that?

Zelikow: And what ads would you consider improper?

Baker: Oh, I think ad hominem ads, or ads that are clearly untruthful and slant the facts, misrepresent the record.

Zelikow: Well then let me flash forward a bit then to ’92.

Milkis: Before you do, I just want to ask one quick thing. I thought your speech here, that we have in here at the press club, was really interesting in many ways. The substance was interesting, and also that you gave it before the election, which you make mention of, in I guess the preface to that speech. Could you talk, do you remember anything about that, what your thinking was, why you wanted to give it before the election? Was it to set the record straight?

Baker: Yeah, it was to set the record straight.

Milkis: In terms of some of the things we’ve been talking about?

Baker: Yeah, because they were misrepresenting our approach and intent and what actually happened. They were misrepresenting, in my view. So that’s why we did it.

Zelikow: Just on the ’92 campaign, because here you have a campaign in which it’s kind of hard to really portray a choice without getting ad hominem. And this is an issue the Vice President really had to confront, because you could tell he personally—well, I don’t want to say you can tell, but it looked as if he was frustrated that the American people weren’t seeing a clear difference in character, that was obvious to him.

Baker: He was. We all were.

Zelikow: And so if you’re not going to run an ad hominem attack that makes that point directly, you’re just kind of relying on people to guess at it with their own judgment.
**Baker:** You’re hoping that the press will pick it up. You’re hoping that they’ll pick it and run with it. But as I said yesterday in the Q&A, we tried our best to make character an issue, and we weren’t able to do it. We were right. But they didn’t want to hear about character.

**Zelikow:** Did you try your best? Because I’m trying to remember TV ads.

**Baker:** Well, we talked about it, and we did the draft, we morphed his face. We had a negative shot. We made him look really awful. And I don’t think we ever got into the bimbo stuff. But you know the press had it on tape, of Gennifer Flowers. They had her. They had it all right there on tape. His voice, for gosh sake. Well, you can just say that they didn’t want to use it. And so what did we end up with, we end up with an impeachment. Because he figured he got away with it then, he can get away with it in the Oval.

**Masoud:** How do you reconcile thinking that ad hominem ads are really sort of crossing the line but that character can be an issue in the ads, because—

**Baker:** Well we didn’t run the ad. We didn’t do the ad hominem attacks. That’s the point that Philip is making. I think character is definitely going to be an issue this time, even if it’s subliminal. And if I were Governor Bush, let’s fast forward to late October of this year, and you’re in a tight race with Gore: I’d have a lot of footage of him standing on the White House lawn calling this guy the greatest President we’ve ever had, the day he was impeached. And I would say, “This is what the Democratic candidate said on the day that President Clinton was impeached. ‘He’s the greatest President we’ve ever had.’” Is that ad hominem? No, I mean, you could think of a lot of things I think you could do that gets to personal integrity and character. Al Gore—this is way off the subject—but Al Gore accused us of criminality in ’92 and Iraq-gate, of which there was no such thing. There wasn’t any such thing as Iraq-gate. He’s out there accusing us of criminality. I mean, he’s willing to throw stuff out there that he’s, he’s showing his true colors here with [Bill] Bradley; he’s cutting him up, cutting him to ribbons. And a lot of it—read the *Washington Post* this morning. Read the *Washington Times* this morning; I saw them both. And they have in there, pretty much particularly the *Washington Post*, by Tom Edsel, chapter and verse, where these attacks are factually incorrect. And so I think we can expect that this fall.

**Milkis:** One thing we haven’t talked about, which I was hoping we’d talk a little bit about, anyway, is the transition after the election, you going to State and the choice of Sununu and any light you might shed on that.

**Baker:** All I can tell you about that is that there were a lot of reports subsequent to John’s choice that I somehow didn’t have a great deal of enthusiasm for that. That’s quite contrary to the facts. The President talked to me, the Vice President talked to me, before we’d even won about who I thought, and he raised Sununu’s name as one possibility and I said I thought Sununu would be excellent. And I happen to believe Sununu was a fine Chief of Staff for President Bush, until he got in trouble. Now, when I say fine, I mean he was smart. He was I think loyal. He was a little bit too inclined to appropriate unto himself and Darman all economic policy power. And that may not have served the President particularly well in the final analysis, because that’s where the
tax pledge, the recanting of the tax pledge happened. But I was strongly in favor of Sununu as Chief of Staff, and I think he did a good job for the President for a couple of years.

Milkis: Was it, how was it decided that you would go to State, was there discussion—

Baker: Well, that’s written about in both my book and President Bush’s book in detail.

Milkis: So there’s no additional light you could shed on that.

Baker: We both go into it in great detail.

Masoud: Well, I don’t know if this question was asked, but following up on the Sununu thing, and I don’t want to give anything away, but the conventional wisdom seems to have been that if only Sununu had been around in ’92, then there would’ve been somebody running things. He would’ve been a great help in ’92 to win.

Baker: Could’ve been. I don’t know. I mean, who knows? Maybe so. Maybe if he hadn’t gotten himself in trouble or discredited, maybe he could’ve made the campaign and the White House work together. But they were not working together very well when he was there. So I don’t know that you can come to that conclusion. But let me tell you something, John was bright; he did a good job for the President. I really mean this. He did a good job for a couple of years, until the arrogance of power got to him. You don’t take a Presidential helicopter to New York to get to a dentist’s appointment. I mean, Ronald Reagan would’ve—we would’ve been fired.

Zelikow: The record should reflect that an expression of incredulity crossed the interviewee’s face.

Baker: But there were some suggestions I didn’t approve of his selection. That is totally wrong. In fact, I thought he was the best choice. There was also, I read in your stuff here, this deal about the deputy President story, which I think came from Ed Rollins. It was a story that Rollins put out, not necessarily to do harm, but just because he really felt like I was that close to the President. But that was never going to be the deal. I mean, you don’t have any such thing. Anybody in the Cabinet or the staff who thinks you’re going to serve as a deputy President isn’t going to last very long. And I’d been up there a long time by then. I had been up there a long time, and I knew that. I mean, that’s just crazy. And it went away very quickly. I think the President announced my appointment the day after his election because he was grateful for the fact that I’d resigned at Treasury and come over and done the campaign and helped him get elected. And I’d been with him since he started running for President, so I think all that entered in.

Zelikow: Tarek had another question, but it’s kind of a hard question, so since it’s kind of hard, I’ll ask it for him, but I just wanted to be sure he gets credit for the originality of the idea. It is a hard question, which is that we’ve heard from other people we’ve talked to that Bush is not the same campaigner in all of his campaigns, that in ’79 and ’80, he’s actually a lot like George W. now. He’s feisty, energetic, you know, just tremendous verve; that is, that he’s perhaps not quite
as energetic, say, by ’88, that in that campaign he’s not the same kind of campaigner in ’88 that he is in ’80. And then in ’92, that a lot of the fire is banked or gone. Is that an unfair perception?

Baker: I think it’s an erroneous perception with the possible exception of ’92, and I think what you had in ’92 was a feeling on the President’s … First of all, and Pete would certainly second this, you have in George Bush one of the most competitive individuals I have ever known, and I’ve always been competitive myself. He is a competitor. And he and I used to—I’ve told you, I think, this in other connections—but we were tennis partners. That’s how we became friends. We won the Houston Country Club tennis doubles on a number of occasions, and nobody fights harder. I mean, he just doesn’t believe in giving up. When he gets into something, he’s in it to win.

He didn’t want to quit in ’80, even though we didn’t have the numbers, and even though if he’d gone into California, I don’t think Reagan would ever have put him on the ticket. Didn’t want to put him on as it was. He tried to go to Ford and everything. But the President didn’t want to leave in the lurch the people who had organized the late states for him. He’s that kind of competitor. He was that kind of competitor in ’92, but I think a combination of the fact that he had had that Graves’ disease problem, which is energy-sapping, and in his book—I don’t know whether it was in the book with [Brent] Scowcroft, or whether it was in the Parmet book, but he himself says something about, “I don’t have the energy that I’ve had before.”

So I think it’s an erroneous conclusion, with the possible exception of the possibility of it in ’92. And I don’t know that it’s true in ’92. I saw him working his butt off in ’92. Working hard. But the stars were against us. It was very, very tough. And I suppose no President—well, I don’t know, maybe Bill Clinton—really enjoyed running for re-election. The President had done a good job. I think he felt like he deserved to be re-elected, particularly over the person he was running against, and so maybe some of that crept into it. You have to talk to Burt Lee or somebody like that about whether there was any Graves’ disease effect. I can’t answer that. I didn’t see him slacking in ’92. I didn’t see him slow down in ’92. I’ve heard from people what you just said, that he just didn’t seem to be concerned about their problems or that much interested and committed to the campaign. Then they cite the looking at the watch in the debate, and all that stuff. I can’t answer that. I know it’s not true in ’88. I would tell you absolutely, he was the same candidate in ’80 as in ’88, as far as I’m concerned.

Zelikow: Well, in ’92, I guess perhaps, there was no question that he was working really hard in those last few months, certainly, I thought, after the convention, it really goes into high gear. And I wonder maybe it’s a medical thing, maybe not. But one thing I also noticed is he hadn’t worked out in his own head what his message was. He clearly believed, and I thought rightly, because I worked for him, that he deserved re-election. But he had not worked out, by the end of the year, even the beginning of the primary season, what is the message I want to take to the American people as to why they should re-elect me? And maybe that’s because, as Jim pointed out, there’s no failure like success, and he had not worked out that he needed to have an economic message. And I wonder, maybe that’s part of it. He didn’t have the passion because he hadn’t really figured out what message he wanted to put out there. I don’t know.

Baker: I can’t answer that.
Zelikow: Or what he wanted to do in his next term.

Baker: I’m not sure you can say he didn’t have the passion. See, my view is that he did, and that his competitive spirit was every bit as much engaged in ’92 as it was in ’88 or ’80. And the only thing, the only possibility I’m raising for you, is the possibility that the Graves’ disease could’ve had some impact on his energy level. And I can’t answer that. That’s something you’ve got to talk to—you ought to look at the Parmet book. There’s something in it about that. I don’t know what it is. And you ought to talk to Burt Lee, or whoever.

Young: In the Parmet book, it mentions something from this diary again, after the Gulf War and after the successful conclusion, there are words to the effect that he did not feel the elation. He was tired.

Baker: He didn’t have the energy level. That’s what I’ve heard.

Masoud: And you observed that.

Baker: No. That’s not what I’m saying to you. No, sir. I did not. No, siree. What I’m saying to you is that’s the only thing I think it could’ve been. Because I’ve heard—even then I heard from people—that he didn’t seem to be going at it with the same zest. Well, boy, as far as I was concerned, he was. And we were working ten-hour days, maybe eleven, and he was out there on the road knocking himself out, and wanting to win. So I can’t speak to his energy level. I don’t know.

Young: Of course, in ’88, unlike the earlier run, he was then running as Vice President and was associated with another administration. Sometimes people think that campaigning and governing, there are tensions between the two. And that there are constraints, besides the legal stuff that you, like spending money and so forth. Do you think that it was difficult for him to be President and also to campaign?

Baker: No. I think that he tends to compartmentalize the two. One is governing, and the other is campaigning. When he asked me to come over from State in ’92, he said, “You know, I would think you ought to come maybe right after Labor Day.” I said, “No. If we’re going to do this, we’ve got to get going a lot earlier than that.” But we couldn’t do it much earlier, so we did it in, I think August 20, something like that. But his idea is the campaign begins on Labor Day. Well, I mean, governing up until that time. So he does compartmentalize to that extent. I think Pete would tell you that from his days with him in the Congress and at the UN and all the rest.

Zelikow: Of course, the campaign was almost over by Labor Day, in some ways.

Baker: Ummm, no, it wasn’t.

Zelikow: You’d been defined by Labor Day. You’d had the Detroit Economic Club speech in August. Your resignation speech in August.
Baker: No, but the President gave his in September sometime. Maybe gave it the second or third week in September. I mean, we began to move, as we just were talking here. We got some movement toward the end. It was good movement, too. We’d been sitting there at 38. We just couldn’t break out of 38.

Roussel: The other twist, I’m always amazed when people say, “Do you think Bush really wanted to win that election.” And I think, why would a person stand for re-election if he didn’t? Why didn’t he just say, “Hey. I’ve done my thing and I’m outta here.”

Baker: There’s no doubt about his desire and his competitive spirit. I mean, it was all there. Now, you have to get somebody else to tell you—it’s either got to come from him, or maybe his doctor or something—about whether the Graves’ disease affected his energy level. But he was busting his ass out there.

Zelikow: Did you feel any awkwardness—I mean, there was also some press commentary, kind of reminiscent of the press commentary in ’88, kind of, “When’s Baker coming over? We need Baker.” I can remember myself hearing folks around the White House, even in the spring of ’92, there was already gossip: “Isn’t someone telling, well he doesn’t want to come.” Can you shed any light on that?

Baker: No, I can only tell you that he asked me in July, and I came in August. You can’t very well go—I don’t care what your relationship is with somebody, how long a friend you’ve been—you can’t very well go, if you’re his Secretary of State, you can’t very well go into his office and say, “Your campaign is thoroughly messed up, and I’m the only person who can save it.” You don’t do that. If it’s the President of the United States, you particularly don’t do it. And also, I don’t think that he relished the idea of having to ask me to do that again. He didn’t.

Zelikow: But there were not any signals or reluctance on your part if he asked you—

Baker: Of course I was going to go if he asked me. Absolutely. I mean—

Zelikow: No, I understand his reluctance in having to ask.

Baker: And what an ingrate you would be if you didn’t. I mean, I was—

Roussel: I would equate that, which has always been your philosophy, with back to ’76, when you were Under Secretary of Commerce, and I was down in Texas on the night of the Texas primary when Reagan wiped out Ford, all 250, and you called me. I was down there, and you said, “What’s going on?” And I said, “Nothing good.” And you said, “Well, I’ve got some news for you. I’ve been asked to come over and take over the campaign.” And you said, “What do you think I ought to do?” Then a long pause on the phone, and then you answered your own question by saying “You know, when the President of the United States asks you to do something, you’ve got to do it. You either do it, or you say thank you for having—”

Baker: Yeah, well, particularly in this case. Good gracious. We’d been together a long time. And so there was no doubt about that. I’ll tell you when I first thought it might be a possibility was on
the night of the New Hampshire primary, and when I mentioned a number of things that led to
our loss, I didn’t mention—Pete reminded me at the break—I didn’t mention what [Patrick]
Buchanan had done to scar him up. I was flying back from the Middle East or somewhere and
we got the New Hampshire results. Thirty-seven percent for Buchanan and I thought, uh-oh. This
doesn’t bode well. Right in the aftermath of a 90 percent approval rating. So, that was pretty
much a wake-up call. But he asked me when we were fishing at my ranch in July, and I said,
“Absolutely.” That’s when I said if we’re going to do it, we’ve got to do it before Labor Day.
And we did.

Milkis: How much did Perot throw the President off stride? I don’t mean, I know we talked
about his eating into your support, but I mean just getting his goat, so to speak, in a way that
might have affected—

Baker: Well, when we were out there at my ranch, he was asking me to come over, but that was
when Perot got out of the race. He got out in July, you remember? And we called him from one
of these military units from the stream where we were catching fish. And the President talked to
him and said, “You know, I’m sorry you’re out, and I just want you to know I’d love to have
your support, and I think we’re closer on principles and values than you are to the other side,
and….“

But Perot is a bitter man. He’s bitter. You know where all that came from?

Have you heard that story? He wanted to go to Vietnam, because he felt sure there were some
live Americans there. He came in and made the request to the Reagan administration. We looked
into it really thoroughly, the Defense Department and everybody else, and concluded, first, that
there were absolutely not any live Americans—and they’d been going after this issue for years—
and secondly, that it would be a mistake for Perot to go over there, given the state of our
relationship with Vietnam. President Reagan made the decision that he shouldn’t go, and we’re
sitting in the Oval Office, and it’s just the President and Vice President and me. And President
Reagan says, “I don’t think he should go.” He said, “You guys are from Texas. You know him.
Why don’t you tell him?” Well, I didn’t know him, and the Vice President did. He said, “I know
him. He’s a good friend.” He was a friend of the Vice President’s. He had helped the Vice
President in his other races, and so the Vice President called him up and said, “I’m sorry, Ross,
but President Reagan doesn’t think it would be, you know, we don’t think it’s a good—”

Zelikow: You called.

Baker: No, no. Vice President Bush called him because I didn’t know him. I never had talked to
him in my life. And said no, it’s not something that we— And he shot the messenger is what
happened. He held a big grudge about that. That was part of it. And then you know he went out
after doing what he did in ’92 and went out and opposed George W. in his race for governor in
’94, and I don’t know what he did in ’98. I think he may even have done something against
George W. in ’98. He did something against Jeb in Florida. He’s a bitter guy. It’s a personal
thing. Personality thing.