GEORGE H. W. BUSH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH HENRY CATTO

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Zelikow: Let me briefly review the ground rules again with you. We try to run these sessions in a way which encourages you to be maximally candid. To do that, we try to assure you that you have control over the final product that ultimately will appear. The tape of the session today will be transcribed. That draft transcript will be held in confidence. It will be furnished to you. You will then have the chance to edit that transcript, and when you edit it you can do several things: You can indicate things you need to revise because they don’t seem accurate to you. You can make some additions. We want to give you a chance to tell your story as you saw it and leave a record that generations from now someone may find insightful. Further, you can indicate that there is certain material that you do not want publicly released, whether it is a word, a phrase, a name, or a paragraph. You can indicate that any way you like, and you can place whatever restrictions you like. It’s your document until you wave your arms and say, “I’m happy,” or “I’m content. There’s nothing further I need to do with this.” Or, if you don’t answer our mail.

Whatever portion you’ve said can be publicly released will be publicly released. There won’t be a press conference for it, but the transcript will be held in the archives here at the Miller Center. And, if you agree, we will also be furnishing a copy of the cleared transcript to the Bush Library, and a copy will also be kept there.

Catto: I understand. I promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God—for the most part.

Zelikow: Your book is very helpful and provides a lot of information. Could you tell us about how you first became acquainted with George Herbert Walker Bush?

Catto: I first heard about George Herbert Walker probably in 1961 or ’62. I’m not sure exactly. I was toying with the idea of running for the county chairman of the Republican Party in Bexar County. I had heard about a new attractive political figure in Houston who had run for and been elected county chairman. So I called this fellow, whose name was George Herbert Walker Bush, and said, “I’d like to come over and talk to you about the slings and arrows of being the county chairman of a major county for a party that has no constituents and gets no votes, which is nonetheless rent by endless factional strife.” So he said, “Come ahead.” I went. He took me to lunch at the Petroleum Club high above downtown Houston. We hit it off very nicely.

Over the years, as he began to run—in 1964, I guess it was—for Congress first, and then for the Senate, I did what I could to help. Barbara [Bush], his wife, and Jessica [Catto], my wife,
became very good friends. When we moved to Washington in 1969, they were about the only people we knew, and they were very kind to us. So that’s the way it all began.

Zelikow: Staying in the ’60s for a minute. Were you active in Bush’s Congressional campaigns?

Catto: No.

Zelikow: For the seventh district in Houston?

Catto: I was active in the Senate campaign.

Zelikow: Nineteen-seventy?

Catto: It was ’64, wasn’t it? When he ran against Ralph Yarborough?

Zelikow: Yes.

Catto: And then he ran again, against Lloyd Bentsen, and lost again.

Zelikow: You were active in the ’64 Senate campaign?

Catto: In the Senate campaign I helped raise money, get out the vote, and that sort of thing.

Zelikow: Do you remember who was in charge of his fundraising effort back then, who you dealt with?

Catto: No, I haven’t a clue.

Zelikow: Then you were not really involved in his Congressional races?

Catto: No.

Zelikow: Then, by the time of his second Senate race, you were already yourself plunged into Washington life.

Catto: Yes. Was it ’70 that he ran against Bentsen?

Zelikow: Yes. He didn’t expect to be running against Bentsen.

Catto: No, he certainly didn’t. It was a great shock.

Zelikow: He expected to be running against Yarborough again. He thought, rightly, that this time he would beat Yarborough, but he didn’t get to run against him. But by that time you had already received an appointment in the [Richard] Nixon administration. How did that happen?
Catto: Well, I had gotten very active in the Republican Party and was a member of the bold, small squad of young Republicans who ran for the first time in the history of Bexar County for the state legislature. Four of us ran for the legislature and one for the state senate. We came out of the trenches and were mowed down sharply by Democrats, there being no Republican Party, really, to speak of at the time. And that which there was was, as I mentioned, rent with ideological strife. I, for example, ran against a fellow who had twice been indicted for murder. The only plank in his platform was to bring back pari-mutuel betting to Texas because he made his living by illegal gambling. He beat the heck out of me. But that got me interested, and I ran again for a special election for the legislature and got beaten again. Finally, I decided if the people don’t want to give me a job, there’ll be other ways to get into public office. So I got active in the Nixon campaign.

Zelikow: The Nixon campaign of ’68?

Catto: The campaign of ’68. Actually, in ’60, Nixon came down to San Antonio, and I met him then. We were running in ’60, this young Republican group. [Dwight D.] Eisenhower came in ’61. It was very exciting. Nonetheless, we all still lost. But by the mid ’60s, I was very much involved in trying to build the local party, although I never did run for county chairman. A cousin of mine did and was elected.

And so, curiously enough, a Nixon law partner by the name of Tom Evans was a classmate of mine at Williams College. I called him and said, “I want to get involved in the Nixon campaign.” I did. I went up to Washington every week during the latter part of the campaign, trying to raise money. When Nixon got elected, I let Tom know I hoped to serve in the administration, which I did, in a very minor position. But it turned out to be a good springboard.

Zelikow: Thinking back to Bush in the ’60s. He was known as a moderate Republican. Would you have characterized yourself the same way? Do you think that was a fair characterization of Bush back then?

Catto: I don’t know exactly what a moderate Republican is. He was a Bush Republican, and so was I.

Zelikow: Someone who wouldn’t spit at the floor at the mention of the words Nelson Rockefeller.

Catto: [laughter] I wouldn’t do that, if that’s the definition. I was not swept by nausea at the mention of Nelson Rockefeller’s name.

Zelikow: Is there anything you’d want folks to understand about what Bush was like back then—people whose image of Bush is just shaped by their images of seeing him as a President?

Catto: He was perfectly wonderful, relaxed, charming, funny—always funny. I tell the story in my book of the ancient Indian balloon. Did you run across that?

Zelikow: I don’t remember this.
Catto: The Bushes were over at our house for Sunday luncheon one day, and we went walking after lunch. George was carrying my son Will on his shoulders. We were wandering through backcountry—there was no development near where we lived. Willie said, “George, what’s that over there?” George looked down and saw a used condom and said, “Oh, Will, that’s an ancient Indian balloon. I think we’d better leave it alone.” [laughter]

Young: I’m glad he added the second.

Catto: Now that’s fast thinking.

Young: On the same note, sometimes it’s very interesting, and you get a fair amount of insight from looking at a President’s first political achievement or political experience in organizing something. That’s the second you’re talking about. He was establishing a moderate Republican Party in that county, in that area. Your observations on how he did that, what his strategy was—if he had one—for bringing the strife-torn local group together and building it up. I remember there was some kind of account—I think it was in one of the biographies—about a John Bircher there whom he appointed. There was a big row about that, as I understand it. But he said, “We’re all in the same boat.” Could you comment on his political style and his political strength?

Catto: Well, his style was to try to charm him. The right wing of the party, the John Birch wing—and they were really flat-earth types—they loathed him. Why? I shouldn’t speculate. I just don’t know. But they didn’t like Bush from the beginning. I remember a particularly scurrilous pamphlet that they put out—maybe during the first Congressional campaign, I don’t recall—it was headlined, “Look Who’s Hiding Behind the Bushes.” And it proceeded to list dangerous liberals who were supporting Bush and that sort of thing. How he organized, or focused himself to combat that, I really don’t know.

Young: Did he try to be inclusive of them?

Catto: They were so hard-lined for the most part, and so unpleasant, that that was hard to do.

Zelikow: When you first went to Washington, this was the job at the OAS [Organization of American States]?

Catto: Yes.

Zelikow: The OAS was headquartered in Washington.

Catto: The Organization of American States is headquartered in the most beautiful building in Washington, just about.

Zelikow: You said then-Congressman Bush was just about one of the few people you knew there, so you renewed your acquaintance with him and with Barbara. Any reflections on the Bush couple in Washington at that time? Any recollections that stand out to you from that period in ’69-’70?
Catto: They were active and popular. He was certainly very popular in the House, made good friends. They did a good bit of entertaining, especially Sunday lunch kinds of things. No, I don’t have any stories that would illustrate his style and activities.

Zelikow: Did he introduce you to other people in Washington? Did he help introduce you to a larger social set, or did you mostly get your bearings through your OAS work?

Catto: Well, we mostly got our bearings through people my wife’s family had known or just our own activities. We knew a fair number of people in the national press, which turned out to be helpful, people who had been stationed in San Antonio when [Lyndon] Johnson went to the ranch. He’d post the press in San Antonio. My wife was appointed the chairman of the committee to see that the press was happy, and so we made some friends there. One thing led to another, and we ended up knowing a lot of people.

Zelikow: The story of your appointment to El Salvador follows a different chain. And then, of course, you’re out of the country for most of the time between ’71 and ’73 while you’re posted in Central America. You come back to Washington again, however, in ’73 to become Chief of Protocol. Can you reflect briefly on how it was you came back to Washington and to that particular job?

Catto: Well, it was partially because the schools that our children were attending in El Salvador were not particularly good. We decided that after two years we’d better get them back. We knew we wanted to go back to Washington. I knew that the job of Chief of Protocol was going to come open. I don’t have any recollection of the act, but I’m sure I wrote George or called George and said, “I’d like to do this” to see if he would give me a recommendation.

Zelikow: I’m trying to remember. I think he’s at the RNC [Republican National Committee] at that point, in ’73.

Catto: Could be, I don’t remember. I think he was. But, anyway, the choice fell to Henry Kissinger, and Henry, in a burst of good judgment, chose me.

Zelikow: That was Head of Protocol not just for the State Department, though. You had your duties extended to the White House.

Catto: Well, sort of. The commission that they give you reads “Chief of Protocol for the White House,” but basically it’s a State Department job. The Chief of Protocol does not do the seating at dinners at the White House. That’s done by the social secretary at the White House.

Zelikow: But you handle a lot of the protocol for state visits.

Catto: Yes, we did. We handled all of it except for the White House state dinners, which they did. They chose the guest list.

Zelikow: That’s a hectic job.
Catto: It is a hectic job. It is, however, a fun job. You meet everybody in the world as they come trooping—frequently with their tin cups out—to Washington. In my day, the Chief of Protocol not only greeted them and helped arrange the schedule and dealt with the Ambassador to plan it all and so forth, but you traveled with the guest. As a routine in protocol, we used to travel around the country wherever they wanted to go, giving one a terrific chance to get to know people. In my book, I describe my excitement at the prospect of being eleven days—or thirteen days, whatever it was—with the Emperor of Japan and thinking we would become first-name chums. I was wrong. Very wrong.

Zelikow: You have some very good descriptions in the book about what it was like dealing with Kissinger and some of the other personalities of the Nixon administration. You came back to a Nixon administration that was already in growing turmoil. These were difficult times for Republicans in and out of the administration. Did you have much contact with Bush at all during this period while you were working in protocol?

Catto: No, not a whole lot. He went off to China some time during that, I think.

Zelikow: I think—if I’m remembering the chronology right—he may have been at the UN at the time you came back, and then went off to China later.

Catto: He was at the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] first, wasn’t he?

Zelikow: He came back from China to do CIA.

Catto: I remember him being mad at Henry Kissinger for not clueing him—he, Bush, being in Beijing at the time—to the fact that Kissinger had been slipping in and out of China and that there was a big deal under way. I don’t think he ever forgave Henry for that.

Zelikow: There’s a list. He can sign his name on the register. Not a problem you had to suffer when you were Ambassador in London, I believe.

Catto: No.

Zelikow: After the turmoil, Nixon’s resignation, [Gerald] Ford taking power—you have again some material about this in your book, and you and I were discussing a little bit about that last night. I would like you to just repeat—although I think you may have had some of this in the book, too—the story you were telling me about how Ford quickly had to let people know that there was a new President in town.

Catto: Wonderful. In little ways, of course, I thought Ford’s Inaugural speech—“The national nightmare is over,” or however it was he phrased it—got us off to a very good start. Then, very shortly after he was sworn in, we went on a major trip to Asia—to Japan and Korea and then finally to the Soviet Union. Vladivostok.

Zelikow: In November of ’74, right, just a few months after he took office.
Catto: Yes, that sounds right. Anyway, when we got to Japan, there was a special part of the hotel dining room set aside for the staff—the luggage handlers, the State Department officers, the CIA guys, and everybody else who was on the trip. The first morning, I think it was, we looked up, and in walked Gerald R. Ford, President of the United States, and plopped down and got his coffee and munched on his bagel or whatever. I just thought, *My God, you just can’t dream of Richard Nixon having done something like that.* But Ford made a whole lot of friends among the traveling party by doing that. He was just so wildly different from Nixon. It was refreshing in many ways.

Zelikow: Did you get to know Nixon personally or feel that you did?

Catto: No. Al Haig filled me in when I first took the job on what he liked and didn’t like. Al said, “Don’t ever talk to him just before a speech because he’s in another world. And don’t ever talk to him just after a speech because he’s deconstructing and remembering. Really, don’t ever talk to him when you’re on the plane going on a trip because he’ll feel that he’ll have to come back and speak to you, and that throws him off stride.” So, no, I didn’t get to know him very well. [laughter] I would see him when we would take foreign Ambassadors in to present their credentials and that sort of thing. He hated doing that, incidentally. We overlapped so briefly that I’m not sure he ever remembered who the hell I was. It was not cuddly.

Zelikow: What was Ford like on protocol matters?

Catto: Easy. He completely changed the way Nixon did the reception of foreign Ambassadors at the presentation of credentials. For one thing, he ended the herald of trumpets when the Ambassador came into the White House, which he thought was pretentious. Of course, he ended the absurd uniforms that he had made some of the White House staff wear. When Nixon had a credentials-presenting ceremony, the whole thing was done standing up: How do you do? Welcome. We’re glad to have you.” Gives him the papers, and then out the door.

Ford would sit down, and sometimes he’d have the Ambassador’s family in, enabling the Ambassador to cable home, “In an informal meeting with the President this morning, he told me this, that, and the other thing.” Major change.

Zelikow: At this point you might have gotten to know some people whom you would see again later—Dick Cheney, Brent Scowcroft. Bush also comes back to join the Ford administration in Washington at CIA after the great shake-up of the fall of ’75. Do you have any impressions of Cheney and Scowcroft and some of these other personalities from the Bush Presidency from the Ford period?

Catto: Yes, Cheney was particularly tough. Indeed, he ended the grand habit of having the Chief of Protocol go on Presidential visits, which I was very sorry about. Scowcroft was always wonderful for me to deal with. If I had a problem, he would help solve it. He became my patron when I left Protocol in ’76 to go to Geneva. He was the one who made that possible. I was always very fond of Brent.
Zelikow: Who was your operational point of contact in the White House on a day-to-day basis in solving problems of seating and schedule, the hundreds of issues involved in state visits?

Catto: Brent for crises. The White House social office for ordinary detail planning.

Zelikow: But the NSC [National Security Council] side, not the Executive Secretary.

Catto: It was Brent.

Zelikow: Then you went off to Geneva. It doesn’t sound like this was a period in which you and Bush were having much chance to interact with each other.

Catto: No.

Zelikow: Then the [Jimmy] Carter administration comes in. You go back to San Antonio.

Catto: No, go back to Washington.

Zelikow: Tell me again what you did in Washington during the Carter years.

Catto: I rustled up some consulting clients, an Australian publisher called Rupert Murdoch, a Swiss banker. I’ve forgotten who all, but I had enough to keep the wolf from the door. I enjoyed being a Washington rep for various and sundry foreign countries.

Zelikow: When did you become acquainted again with Bush?

Catto: Well, I guess maybe it was in late ’78, when he first began to get to twitching about running for the Presidency. We had, I think, the first fundraiser party for him at our house in McLean—big, highly successful dinner party, to which a whole lot of people came. Then I stayed, not involved in the inner circle, but trying to raise money and doing what I could to help him get the nomination.

Zelikow: Did he ever discuss with you the basic question of whether he should run for President?

Catto: No, he did not.

Zelikow: So he told you or you learned he was going to make a go at it?

Catto: Yes.

Zelikow: Going back to ’78. Did you think this was a good idea?

Catto: For him to run for President?

Zelikow: Yes.
Catto: Sure, why not? He had a hell of a good résumé. He was hugely attractive, a fine politician.

Zelikow: This is not like a low-risk venture. He has no standing in the polls whatsoever. He’s going to set himself out to be a Presidential candidate. Yes, he has a good résumé, but so do other people. This is a risky venture.

Catto: Sure, it was a risky venture.

Zelikow: But there was no doubt in your mind that he would be a good candidate for President.

Catto: I don’t recall the slightest doubt. He was just a first-class human being who knew how the government worked, so why not? Been in the Congress, been an Ambassador, been the head of the Intelligence Agency, why not?

Zelikow: So you began hosting fundraisers and helping in the fundraising operation.

Catto: We did. I also became the chairman of his effort to win one of the early primaries, in Puerto Rico. I made contact with a Washington lawyer of Puerto Rican descent and went down there a good bit, and, by God, we won the Puerto Rican primary, hands down. It was great fun.

Zelikow: Did the candidate ever make any appearances in Puerto Rico?

Catto: Negative. It was all done by remote control. It was, I think, the very first primary. Nobody paid any attention to it.

Zelikow: I don’t think that was the source of the “big mo.”

Catto: No, that wasn’t the source of the “big mo.” That’s exactly right.

Zelikow: Little mo.

Catto: A little mo. It didn’t hurt. I remember Jimmy Baker called and asked if I’d do this, knowing that I was a Spanish speaker. He thought that might be useful, which of course it was. That’s where I got to know Jeb [John Ellis Bush], too. Jeb was involved in that.

Zelikow: Jeb Bush?

Catto: Yes.

Zelikow: Who did you deal with on the fundraising side in ’78? Who would you have interacted with in the campaign?

Catto: I haven’t a clue. I just don’t remember.
Masoud: [Robert] Mosbacher?

Catto: Perhaps. But I don’t recall any particular closeness to him.

Zelikow: In that circle, who did you already know? With whom were you already friends? Did you already know Mosbacher, for instance?

Catto: Yes. I’m sure I did, but not well.

Zelikow: Did you know Jim Baker?

Catto: Yes. The Bakers had a wedding party for my wife and me in 1958 when we got married, in Houston.

Zelikow: So you knew Baker before you knew Bush, well before.

Catto: Yes, I did.

Zelikow: How did you become acquainted with the Bakers?

Catto: My wife Jessica’s family knew the Bakers, and Jessica had known Jim when they were kiddos, and one thing led to another.

Zelikow: They’d been friends.

Catto: Family friends, the Hobbys and the Bakers.

Zelikow: So you had kept up that friendship.

Catto: No, we were not intimate at all. But, as I say, they gave a very nice party for us, on a boat, as I remember. Jessica got seasick. Oh, well.

Zelikow: In ’58. It’s now 20 years later. It’s 1978. Bush is running for President. You are already committed to supporting him. You have hosted a fundraiser for him on the east coast. You have become Bush chairman for the Puerto Rican primary, which is a success, ’78. Now we’re already into ’79 and even early 1980. Did your role with the Bush for President campaign change at all?

Catto: No. I made calls to people I thought might give money and raised as much as I could.

Zelikow: Do you remember who would suggest the calls? Would they be your own ideas, or would you get a call from somebody else saying, “Here are four or five people you might know”? How did you coordinate? How did that get organized, if you can remember any of that?

Catto: I really don’t remember. Was Shirley Green involved back there? Does that name ring a bell?
Zelikow: Not to me.

Catto: I think there was some woman who sort of organized it all, made sure you called on whomever you were supposed to call. I just don’t recall.

Zelikow: Was it hard raising money for Bush?

Catto: It’s hard raising money for anybody. These days, when I say, “I think that the limit on campaign contributions should be raised from $1,000 to something much more realistic,” inevitably people who are givers say, “I’m not so sure. I kind of like that low maximum, because I don’t have to spend all my money.” But no, it wasn’t unusually hard, because he knew so many people after all those years in government. He had been touted as a candidate for Governor of Texas, and just generally he got around.

Zelikow: These were just thousand-dollar pitches? You weren’t raising heavy money for the RNC?

Catto: No, I raised some money, if I recall correctly, for the Fund for America. I think that was what they called it—the Fund for America’s Future, maybe.

Zelikow: The PAC [Political Action Committee]?

Catto: Yes, where you could give more than the thousand dollars. How that segued into the official campaign, I don’t remember.

Zelikow: People who have not done this will not understand it. Would you just demystify a little bit about how the fundraising process works? Somebody calls you up, or you talk to somebody who says, “Here are some likely prospects.” Maybe there are five, six, seven people, and either you judge—or other people judge—that you might know these prospects, and that you can strain your friendship yet further with these people. Just help folks understand how this happens, how this works.

Catto: Well, it’s not very complicated. You first dial their telephone number and tell them what you’re doing, and that you really think they ought to join the crusade, and this is a good man and so forth. Either they give it to you or they don’t. I’ve never found it particularly onerous, and I’ve raised money for a lot of people, most recently for Lamar Alexander in 1996. And, in his case, for the most part, the names came from me, people whom I knew in San Antonio who were able to give and interested in politics and were not beholden to Bob Dole.

Masoud: In ’78 you come in and support Bush. But say Bush had not been running. Would you still have been active? Was there somebody else that you liked in ’78, ’79?

Catto: No. I didn’t know Governor [Ronald] Reagan at all, feared for his electability, which gives you some idea of the state of my prescience in political matters.
Zelikow: Since ’76, you had been, of course, a stalwart Ford man.

Catto: Sure, in ’76. That was easy.

Zelikow: You had not defected since then.

Catto: Defected to?

Zelikow: The Reagan camp.

Catto: No. No. I remember getting really annoyed at an old, old friend from San Antonio who was going for Reagan. “How can you possibly think of throwing aside somebody as practiced and as able as President Ford?” But no, I did not defect.

Zelikow: All right. So in the ’80 campaign, Bush is defeated in the primaries. Were you at the convention?

Catto: No, I went to one convention, 1964.

Zelikow: The Cow Palace.

Catto: The Cow Palace, and listened to them booing Nelson Rockefeller, which I felt was just so stupid. But I guess it wasn’t, as things turned out. Maybe it was, who knows?

Zelikow: Well, it was not the peak of the Party’s enlightened popularity.

Catto: True.

Zelikow: So after the ’80 convention, Bush is on the ticket. Were you involved then in fundraising or other work in the general election campaign of 1980?

Catto: No, I don’t remember doing that at all. The Reagan folks obviously ran it, and I didn’t know any of them.

Zelikow: So how did you come to work for Cap [Caspar] Weinberger?

Catto: I had a friend named Bill Walker who had been in the Ford administration and was part of the Cheney mafia. And when I was sent off to Geneva, the Walkers lived there, where he was the deputy trade representative. We became very, very good friends. At some point— [Frank] Carlucci, I think it was—said to Bill Walker, “Do you know anybody who’d make a good Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs?” Walker says, “Catto knows everybody in the press in Washington. He’d be terrific.” I went and interviewed with Cap and Frank, and they liked me and hired me.

Zelikow: So before that you were not personally acquainted either with Weinberger or Carlucci?
Catto: That is correct, or certainly not with Reagan.

Zelikow: That is remarkable. In your book you describe your experiences at the Pentagon, although not at great length. Through your Pentagon work, did you stay in touch with Bush at all?

Catto: Sure, we’d see them from time to time. But our career paths didn’t really cross that much. I do remember I was anxious to get into the Reagan administration, and I asked Bush to see what he could do. He was very, very reluctant to do that. What I really wanted was to be named Ambassador to the United Nations. He just was so anxious to solidify his relations with the President that he did not want to be seen to be pushing Bush types into jobs. I don’t think my experience was unique. A lot of Bush types had thought that the Vice President might have some clout. And he might have if he’d chosen to exercise it. But he didn’t, at least not to my knowledge.

Masoud: Am I correct that you did spend some time at the United Nations at the very tail end of the—

Catto: Of the Ford administration, yes, in Geneva, as Ambassador to the UN offices in Geneva.

Masoud: So that was an experience that you could have brought to the job in the Reagan administration.

Catto: Yes, exactly. It looked good on a résumé. Plus the OAS experience as training in multilateral diplomacy. It helped.

Zelikow: It would have been a very different appointment from Jeane Kirkpatrick.

Catto: Yes, it would have. She was better than I would have been.

Zelikow: Perhaps, perhaps. That’s a tough judgment.

Catto: Thank you, you’re very kind.

Zelikow: You’re very kind to Ambassador Kirkpatrick. Did you talk to Jim Baker at all, try to get his help in placing you in a job in the Reagan administration?

Catto: Not that I remember, no.

Zelikow: Using his position at the White House. Did you have much contact with Baker or Bush as the press spokesman at the Pentagon?

Catto: No, not really any at all.

Zelikow: You would, I guess, have had more contact with your counterparts at the White House and State Department.
Catto: Yes, of course, a lot of contact with—

Zelikow: Jim Brady for a short time until he was hurt, and then Larry Speakes after that, I guess.

Catto: We used to meet at the White House every Thursday to try to foresee what the crises would be in the coming week. We talked every morning in a conference call. Interestingly enough—this was the public affairs people at the White House, State Department, and the Defense Department. Interestingly enough, we talked on an open line, and nobody ever really worried about the fact that the Russians could, if they chose to, pick up on that. But we did it.

Zelikow: What were your relations like with Weinberger as his press spokesman?

Catto: Well, as a man, I thought and think of Weinberger very, very highly. Of course, there’s a postscript to the Weinberger thing that comes at the end of the Bush administration, which I tell about in the book. But Weinberger’s theory of an approach to public affairs didn’t mesh with mine. He thought that a public affairs officer who didn’t know anything couldn’t tell anything he wasn’t supposed to tell. I had a hard time finding out what was going on and, indeed, finding out what he really thought.

At his morning staff meeting, I sat at his right hand, but he was operating left handedly then. I didn’t know what was going on. I remember before I’d go to a briefing in utter panic, clamoring for five minutes to get guidance on topic A, B, or C. But, as I say, he was always a lovely gentleman, was a joy to be with and to travel with, which we did a lot of.

Zelikow: So then after ’83—why did you leave the government in ’83?

Catto: A couple of reasons: one, a certain amount of frustration with the job. It’s a job that has no victories. It’s always defensive. My wife’s family business needed a representative from the Catto side of the equation, so I got involved in that and stayed there until the Bush administration. But we continued to live in Washington.

Zelikow: The book is very good on the Bush administration, both from London and the USIA [United States Information Agency] post, but I would like you to recapitulate a few things. There’s a little bit that’s in the book, but you might want to add on one or two points. First, if you could just summarize your involvement in the ’88 campaign.

Catto: It was pretty peripheral. I again raised money, but that was about it. I don’t think we saw the Bushes at all. Of course, they were a little busy. I raised some money, and that was it.

Zelikow: At the end of the campaign—

Catto: We would go over to the Vice President’s house from time to time for dinner, but governmental-wise, we just didn’t get involved. And I was not involved in the campaign, although I remember calling on him, at some point, in his office in the White House and saying, “I would be willing to go full time for anything you’d like for me to do.” He thanked me very
kindly and didn’t call on me. There are always more volunteers than there are jobs to be done. But that happened.

Zelikow: After the election, before the President-elect contacted you, did you have your hopes fixed on any particular post?

Catto: Bill Safire, in a column in late November, early December, suggested that I would be a natural for the Director of the USIA, and I liked that idea and rather hoped he would consider me for that. But he didn’t. He gave me something wildly different and very exciting.

Zelikow: Well, you describe in the book that President-elect Bush basically comes to you and says, “Take your pick, London or Paris.”

Catto: I didn’t say that in the book, because I didn’t want to—

Zelikow: I’m confusing our conversation.

Catto: —I didn’t want the fellow who was named to Paris to think he was second choice. But he did say that, at a party at the Vice President’s house, a Christmas party in December in 1988. I saw him over in the corner talking to my wife and wondered what was going on. I went over, and he turned and said, “What would you like to do for me, go to Paris or London?” And that was an easy choice, because my English is infinitely better than my French, among other reasons.

Zelikow: Were you floored?

Catto: Yes, I was floored. I had no idea that was coming, none at all. And, of course, it was fabulous. My grandfather was a Scot who came to this country and never became an American citizen, although he lived here for 50 years, raised a fine family. So it was wonderful to go as the U.S. Ambassador back to the old motherland—great fun, very exciting, very gratifying.

Zelikow: Now again, looking back at this, help other people understand the question that they might ask. Catto is clearly a qualified fellow. He’s done some interesting stuff. He’s held these good jobs in the Nixon administration, Ford administration. He did some brief work for Cap in the early Reagan period, but then not much more in public office since then. He’s helped Bush, but it’s not like he’s Bush’s right-hand man or an absolutely critical figure in the campaign. Then Bush turns to him and offers him the largest plums in the whole fruit basket, at least as far as diplomatic postings are concerned. Someone who doesn’t know you well might find this just on the surface a little bit odd. So can you help that future reader solve their possible puzzlement?

Catto: I think it sprang from a feeling that I was a Bush guy and that he could count on me. It was just a typical George Bush thing for somebody he knows for a long time, and he has been sure I would not embarrass him. So he did it. I don’t know whether that’s a very good explanation or not.

Zelikow: He remembers who his friends are.
Catto: Yes, he remembers who his friends are.

Zelikow: He has a lot of friends.

Catto: He does.

Masoud: Was the hand of Jim Baker involved here?

Catto: I don’t think so.

Zelikow: Baker would not have been inattentive to the question of who would be Ambassador in London or Paris.

Catto: No, indeed he was not, and I told George that day that he asked me to do this, “Let me sleep on it,” because it presented some problems. My wife was very much involved in her own business, and pulling her up would be difficult. So we had to talk about it. The next day I called Jimmy Baker and said yes because Jessica said, “You ought to do it.”

Zelikow: When you told Baker you wanted to say yes, Baker clearly seemed to know that Bush had made you this offer.

Catto: Oh yes, absolutely.

Zelikow: I don’t take it for granted that Bush had cleared this with Baker before he had a conversation with you.

Catto: He did.

Zelikow: That in itself is a little bit revealing. This action by Bush, then, was not an impulsive gesture of friendship at a Christmas party.

Catto: No, no, no. This was not the result of champagne and gemütlichkeit. This was not an accident.

Zelikow: Were there any difficulties in the confirmation process?

Catto: No, none whatsoever. All my kids came, and my wife, of course, and Jesse Helms—wonderful southern type that he is—said, “Ladies and Gentlemen, some of Mr. Catto’s family is here, and I certainly do wish they would all rise and be recognized because they’re all very attractive people.” So they all rose. Of course, my wife makes the sign of the cross when she sees Jesse Helms, [laughter] but nonetheless he was very courteous and quick at getting me confirmed.

Zelikow: Now you describe in the book very well a little bit of life in London. You were also very good on Bush’s visits to London and so forth. But let me just get you to focus on a couple of things. One of those is, as Ambassador, tell me how you tried to communicate with the White
House. You go out there, and the British think to themselves, *Catto, Catto. Who’s Catto?* They look him up. They see Catto had done this work with Latin Americans mostly. They hadn’t encountered him very much.

A few people would remember you from the protocol days, I’m sure, but, in general, they would quickly recognize “friend of the President.” So their assumption is, “This is good if and to the extent that his friendship with the President allows him to communicate with the President about matters of significance.” My guess is that you feel that pressure a little bit. You feel that you need to be able to communicate with the President because this is an asset that folks assume you have.

**Catto:** True. And prior to our arrival, there was a huge amount of publicity in the British press about who was coming to be the new American Ambassador. And, he says modestly, it was very good publicity and very, very favorable It was just assumed that this was a real Bush buddy coming over, and that was going to be good for Anglo-American relations.

As it turned out, I think I called the President only once, direct, about a problem. I believe I talk about it in the book. But I never felt I had any problem—or ever would have any problem. Maybe I called him twice direct without going through the State Department. Baker and [Lawrence] Eagleburger on one of those occasions just went ballistic.

**Zelikow:** I remember one occasion you mention in the book. You faxed a letter about the way the Bush administration had been beating up on the British government for the forceful repatriation of [inaudible] You had weighed in directly, saying essentially, “Understand this and lay off a little bit.” In the book you recount some annoyance with the State Department.

**Masoud:** The other time you mention Larry Eagleburger and Bob Gates are coming, and they’re going to have a meeting with Margaret Thatcher—

**Catto:** And they try in typical Kissingerian fashion to cut me out. George did not—remembering perhaps his own experience with Kissinger. He said, “Nope, you’re going to be at the meeting.” And I was, and it was wonderful to watch Thatcher, every hair in place. She had on so much hair spray she could repel small arms fire. She would sit there like this and say, “Now, Larry, tell me precisely what it is you want to say.” And then she’d pop in the cassette that she would run through her head and start telling, “I know what you’re going to say, and I don’t like it, and here are the reasons why.”

**Zelikow:** Was this the second Eagleburger-Gates mission, or the first one?

**Catto:** I don’t remember which one it was.

**Zelikow:** There was one in May of ’89 for the first conventional arms control and another one in January of 1990 for the next arms control.

**Masoud:** You go to the UK [United Kingdom], and obviously you’re seen as a great friend of the President. You’re going to be relied on to communicate messages to the President. But the typical problem most Ambassadors have is that they get left out of communications between the...
country they’re in and the White House. Since there’s no language barrier—and I assume that the President talked with Thatcher quite often—how did you get clued in on those conversations?

Catto: Well, that’s interesting, because the British had a system whereby whenever Maggie would call George, or vice versa, they would brief their Ambassador in Washington what went on. We did not have such a system. But I came to know a fellow at the National Security Council named Philip Zelikow, oddly enough, who would fill me in on those things, for which I was very grateful. When I came back to Washington, I’d go by and see Philip and find out what was happening.

Masoud: How did that arrangement come about?

Catto: I don’t really remember.

Zelikow: I don’t either.

Young: Somebody started it.

Catto: I started it.

Zelikow: The way it would have to work is I would not volunteer information to an Ambassador overseas. If the Ambassador asked, I would then have asked Brent. Or somehow there would have been a communication in which Brent or the President made it clear that it was okay, and gave a green light. I do recall that this was not a problematic case. It was not so hard to debrief you on a Bush-Thatcher phone call because, while they happened regularly, it was not like they happened three times a day.

Catto: No, hardly.

Zelikow: The Scowcroft-[Charles] Powell communication channel is one that I keep learning about.

Catto: Well, it was a total mystery to me. I had no knowledge of that whatsoever. But I realized at some point that these conversations did happen, and that I didn’t know what went on. It was horrible to be at the foreign office and have some Brit say, “What did you think of Maggie and George’s conversation this morning?” I’d say, “What the hell are you talking about? I don’t know about it.” I went to see [Robert] Blackwill first, and I remember him saying, “I count on you to keep me informed as well as vice versa.” Then, of course, I got to know you, and I felt much more comfortable.

Zelikow: What did you find frustrating, if anything, about the relations between President Bush and Prime Minister Thatcher? You have a lot of the detail in your book. What was difficult or frustrating for you as an Ambassador or as a member of the Bush administration?

Catto: As I do point out in the book, it was frustrating to know, not from anything other than body language and knowing George Bush, that when Maggie would slip the cassette in and talk
at 300 words per minute with gusts to 500, he really didn’t like that. He wanted dialogue, not monologue. Eventually, as I believe I mentioned in the book, I sat down with Powell at lunch one day and told him that if I were he, I would suggest that she be more receptive to letting him have a word edgewise and not be quite so forward. Ronnie was happy to have her do and say whatever she wanted, but Bush wasn’t Ronnie. It was just a different thing, and she had to readjust her thinking, which she did.

**Masoud:** By the way, how do you know that Reagan was comfortable with the monologue?

**Catto:** Because I was there and saw it. At a dinner party at 10 Downing Street for ex-President Reagan, sitting next to him and listening to her—she was on his other side—tell him what to do and how to do it and when to begin and when to stop, all the while with Nancy benignly smiling on this, knowing that Ronnie was in the very best of hands.

**Masoud:** You mentioned that when you first became Ambassador, your goal was to become known as quickly as possible. You describe the incident of wearing the Stetson hat. Why is that? Why did you want to become known as quickly as possible? How did that happen?

**Catto:** A high profile, I thought, gave me more ability to call easily on whomever I wanted to call on. It’s awfully easy in a country where there are 170 embassies—I’m an American Ambassador, not likely to be forgotten, but you really can become sort of a minor blip on the British screen. And I didn’t want to be a minor blip. An Ambassador doesn’t make policy anymore. The only thing an Ambassador can do is to try in the best way he can to influence the public opinion in the country to which he is accredited and thereby hope to make the American cause more sympathetic to the people of that country. No longer can an Ambassador say, “We’re going to do this or that” and then send a letter that takes three months to get across to Washington and then have it ratified or not by the American foreign policy people. Policy is just not in your hands. You’re lucky if you know what the hell it is. So you become, in effect, a salesman and the face of your country in the country where you’re posted.

**Masoud:** But when you got there, you were a little more than a salesman. Did you go there with a list of priorities or of issues that you were particularly concerned with?

**Catto:** Not so much issues as a list of people I was anxious to get to know. I wanted to call on the Catholic Archbishop and the Archbishop of Canterbury and the head Rabbi, which I did in short order, plus, of course, all the Cabinet and the press people just generally—the thing you do when you’re an Ambassador.

**Young:** You mentioned that when you were in the Department of Defense you were constantly starved about what you were going to say, because you weren’t in Weinberger’s loop, or else he played things very close to his chest. Is it correct to say that if it hadn’t been for this connection through Philip after you opened it with Blackwill, you might have been in the same position, with respect to Bush as Ambassador? That is, you would not have known very much what was going on.
Catto: I wouldn’t have known the details of conversations, that’s correct. But I did get feedback from the State Department. The British desk officer became a good friend and kept me posted to the extent that he could. And when I’d come back, of course, I’d see the higher State Department officials, get some idea of what was going on.

Young: Did the President ever call you directly on a matter?

Catto: I don’t remember.

Young: Either to ask advice or to inform you of something?

Catto: I don’t think so, no.

Masoud: Did he give you marching orders before you went to the UK?

Catto: No.

Masoud: What strikes me as interesting—it’s been described in some of the press clippings that we’ve been reading, and it’s also described in your book—is that there were “frosty” relations between the embassy and—by extension, I guess you could say—the Reagan administration, and the Labor Party. And you set about changing that. It seems like a change in policy. Did you have a discussion with Bush about it?

Catto: No.

Masoud: This is just something you thought was a good idea.

Catto: Something I thought was a good idea, that someday the Labor Party is going to be re-elected, and we ought not have them just bristle at the idea of an American Ambassador.

Masoud: Did it scare Thatcher?

Catto: Probably. I know it scared some of the people in Parliament, because I remember one back bencher running into me. I was opening a factory or doing something one day, and this back bencher comes up to me and gives me the wiggly finger and says, “How dare you meet with these Labor types! That does great damage to Anglo-American relationships.” What can you say? You can say plenty, but I didn’t.

Young: In the earlier times, of course, the making up of instructions to an Ambassador was a very important part of defining the person’s job and policy role. That’s when they, in fact, did have a major role in the making of policy. The marching orders were nothing like—there weren’t any, really. The usual stuff.

Catto: There was certainly no A, B, C, and D—these are the things you must do.

Young: A program.
Catto: I knew, for example, that an Ambassador can waste a huge amount of time in calling on his colleagues, which is traditional. But with so many Ambassadors there, I said, “The hell with it. I’m going to call on the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] people and the Russians and the Chinese and Israelis and let it go at that.” That was my decision, not the State Department’s.

Zelikow: I’d like to jump ahead a little bit because the Gulf War material in the book and the portrait of the famous meeting at your home in Aspen is very important, but it’s also pretty thoroughly described in the book. Is there anything about that episode that you left out of the book, or that you’d like to comment on? Or do you think it’s covered well there?

Catto: I think it’s pretty well covered there. I remember going to a book party once and having some young fellow after my brief talk say, “Mr. Catto, did you ever lie in your book?” Not that I know of.

Zelikow: I was only speaking of omissions. Also, you made the point in the book that the business about Thatcher suggesting, “Don’t go wobbly, George,” is actually a line Bush was quoting back to you as a line of hers that he liked. I think that’s the way you referred to it in the book.

Catto: I don’t think so.

Zelikow: It said, “She used this line, which Bush liked, that she had used with him at their meeting in late August.” This was in mid-August as she was coming back through Washington after the Aspen meeting.

Catto: It’s been so long since I read the book that I really don’t remember.

Masoud: I think it’s described in the book as having been said at Aspen.

Catto: That’s my recollection of it.

Zelikow: I don’t think she used the famous “Don’t go wobbly” line in Aspen.

Catto: Oh, I think she does.

Masoud: It’s on page 3, Rocky Mountain High. The Woody Creek Summit had begun and then the next one, “Mrs. Thatcher, never at a loss for words or reluctant to give advice said, ‘This is no time to go wobbly, George.’”

Catto: That is my definite recollection of where that happened.

Zelikow: Did you take notes at the time?

Catto: I did.
Zelikow: So this is from your notes.

Catto: Yes.

Zelikow: I remember her using that line later in the context of arguments over the rules of engagement in the embargo and so forth. There was an argument about whether we should be willing to fire on Iraqi ships, and there were a number of these fairly complicated conversations later in August and then in September. I remember some of that kind of talk then, but at the Aspen meeting I did not remember—They both seemed, from the very start of the meeting, quite firm about—

Catto: They were—

Zelikow: And so I didn’t really have the sense that she was trying to hector Bush into kind of “Stand up now, stand up now.”

Catto: She was. She was always hectoring him—not hectoring him, but saying, “This must not stand” kind of—

Masoud: The conventional wisdom—and I think this is what Philip’s getting at—is very much that Bush may have gone wobbly had not Thatcher been there to stiffen his backbone.

Catto: The conventional wisdom is just flat wrong, because twice at least he left the meeting to go into our bedroom and talk on the secure line to foreign heads of state. I think maybe he talked to King Hussein [bin Talal] and King—

Zelikow: May have been [Prince Bin Abdul Aziz] Fahd of Saudi Arabia, or [Hosni] Mubarak. I was actually helping to arrange those calls, and I can’t remember who they were placed to either.

Masoud: But the point is he didn’t really need her.

Young: She was preaching to the converted.

Catto: You know, a little later, I think, he said some things—I remember this from one of the papers at the Hofstra conference that I went to—that might have been interpreted as him being wobbly, but, listening to them talk, I got absolutely no idea that he had anything in his mind but full speed ahead.

Zelikow: She did not want him to go to the UN then or later. She did not think the U.S. should seek UN resolution. This was actually a point of contention in the administration, too. But it’s a slightly different issue. You’re aware that you’ve heard this perception. My sense is that there are a couple of Thatcher people—I have never heard the Prime Minister herself put matters this way, nor have I heard Charles Powell put matters this way, because Powell was present at the meeting in Aspen, and he knows very well what was said. But I have heard other people suggest
that the stalwart Bush of Desert Storm, using terms like “backbone transplant” and so forth—and that kind of assertion pops up quite often.

**Catto:** These are British.

**Zelikow:** I think the assertion originates with some Brits, and it is frequently repeated by Americans who like this image very much. I guess you were in a good position to know about this matter, better than I. I was in on some of these conversations, but you were in on some more, including some to which I was not party, and so it’s useful to get your view of it on the record.

**Catto:** At the meeting in our living room in Woody Creek, Colorado, there was simply no doubt in my mind that he was affronted and intended to do something about this, that it just wouldn’t do. And the British, I think—pulling Uncle Sam’s beard a little bit—wanted to make it look as if it hadn’t been for Maggie—and I just don’t believe that.

**Zelikow:** Looking back on the late summer and fall of 1990, there are a number of areas in which Anglo-American relations were triumphantly strong. Can you recall any areas that you thought were points of real concern, or stress, or strain?

**Catto:** Oh, like what?

**Zelikow:** I can’t think of one, frankly. I’m just asking the question. There may be some things that you’re aware of that I don’t know of.

**Young:** Anything on the Irish matter?

**Catto:** No.

**Young:** One of your early acts was to visit—

**Catto:** In response to a promise made to Senator [Joseph] Biden, I went to Ulster, and shocked the State Department by speaking out strongly against the IRA [Irish Republican Army]. But the British would stop me on the street and say, “Good work, mate.”

**Zelikow:** The Bush administration was an anti-IRA administration.

**Catto:** Unlike some that we could name.

**Zelikow:** We were clearly much too one-sided in our approach to this very difficult conflict (he said smiling). It is worth going over again the Weinberger pardon material at the end of the book. I was intrigued by some of your comments about the ’92 election and that conversation you had with Baker where he pulled out the disturbing map. I actually thought that the book almost becomes a set of diary entries for the period while you’re at USIA. There’s a lot of material there, and at that point you’re a pretty close observer of the Washington scene and some of the time at which the Bush team is running on empty, by ’91 and into ’92.
Catto: Present company excepted, who is the best spokesman on the Presidency, extant?

Young: Well, the name right now, and the senior person, is Richard Neustadt, who wrote a book that in 1960 was called Presidential Power, The Politics of Leadership. It’s now called Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents, and he has done a new edition up to Reagan. He swears he will not do any more. His spouse is Shirley Williams, who was in the House of Lords and was the head of the Liberal Party. In fact, they were here just last week, and Dick is going to participate in the interview with President Bush in June. He lives half the time in the UK and half over here. But he’s the sort of the senior famous person—

Catto: What about people that you see or read, John Lewis Gaddis, or [Michael R.] Beschloss or some of those. Are they parvenus?

Young: They’re not parvenus, but they’re not known as Presidential specialists.

Masoud: Gaddis certainly is a Cold War historian, not really a Presidential specialist. Beschloss bills himself as a Presidential specialist. I used to work with him at the News Hour, and he’s actually pretty good. But he doesn’t have the formal training.

The role of an Ambassador interests me, and what you’ve done interests me. It seems particularly on the issue of the Vietnamese boat people and the repatriation, you had policy differences with the President.

Cotto: I did.

Masoud: Could you elaborate on that? How open was the President to hearing your suggestions? Were there other issues on which you had policy differences?

Catto: No, there were no other issues that I recall. We were at Camp David one weekend with them, and I caught him in a moment alone. I said, “You really might want to think about letting up on the Brits on this because they have a real problem. They can’t control the numbers, and it’s just a tough situation.” He came back and said, “No sir, I don’t agree with that at all.” It was just clear that he wanted to keep American pressure on the British to accept them and to accept the fact that they didn’t want to be repatriated to a repressive, primitive, Communist country.

Masoud: But there were no other issues like that on which you—

Catto: No, there were not.

Masoud: Okay, should we get to the move to USIA?
Young: You were brought into the Agency—I was interested to hear that you thought that was what you would like to do at the beginning, before the Paris or St. James opportunity came up. The press also refers to this as an Agency adrift or in trouble—

Catto: Troubled was the adjective that always appeared when you mentioned it.

Young: And it seems as though USIA has been a bone of contention almost since the beginning. Who wants to control it? Should it be independent? Could you describe the experience of coming into this Agency, what you found, and look back a bit on the experience? You said some things you did accomplish. The public diplomacy for it you felt did not go far enough. You hadn’t fully succeeded.

Catto: When I got there, the reason I was brought in, [John] Sununu had mentioned this to me in London long before it finally came to pass. Of course I was interested. I loved London, but USIA is a bigger, more challenging, and worldwide job. But they just made a mismatch. The White House personnel office made a terrible mismatch in the director of USIA and in his subordinate, the director of the Voice of America. They got Bruce Gelb and Dick Carlson, who just got along not at all. They behaved like children. Strike that.

Young: You’ll have the opportunity.

Catto: They didn’t speak to each other, and that kind of thing, which I find incomprehensible. So they rewarded each of them with an embassy and got them out of there and brought me and Chase Untermeyer in as the two directors. Of course, Chase and I got along fine.

Young: Was that the whole of the problems that the Agency had had, relations between the VOA [Voice of America] and the Agency director?

Catto: There were jillions of problems: problems of budget, problems of a sexual discrimination lawsuit—which you may have read in the last couple of weeks has been decided against the USIA. There are always problems in a big Agency like that.

Young: Who did not want USIA to be entirely independent, or who did not support the public diplomacy role?

Catto: Who in this administration?

Young: Not names, but what forces in the government?

Catto: The State Department was never happy to have an independent foreign affairs Agency not beholden to the Secretary of State. And, as I mentioned, I think, in that book, Jim Baker was probably not terribly pleased to have to ask me to give him a couple of million dollars to help pay for the Madrid summit on the Middle East that had not been budgeted—which I did. My guess is that had the Bush administration been returned, there might well have been a move for an anschluss between the two. But there was just the usual bureaucratic backbiting and what have you that goes on.
Young: What about the Congressional relations here?

Catto: If it hadn’t been for Jesse Helms, this never would have happened. I think Madeleine Albright was so anxious to appease him that she went along with it, and, of course, I’m sure she’s glad that it happened as well. But I think generally it was pretty popular to have it independent in Congress, although, of course, they did vote to approve the amalgamation, which I refer to as *anschluss*. I was writing a farewell for the Agency—as all the living ex-directors did—and I used the word *anschluss*, and they came back at me just absolutely horrified. They said, “You can’t say that.” “Oh, I can’t? Why not?”

“Well, because the Secretary of State will read it, and she will be very, very unhappy. Furthermore, she will be unhappy with you having said that the USIA’s budget might be affected by the Secretary of State wanting to paint her office, or something like that.” They just went to pieces. I got I don’t know how many telephone calls saying, “Please change it, please change it.” So I finally in my statement eliminated the word *anschluss*, but not the idea of it. I said, “I cannot believe that this woman reads things like this.” “Oh yes, she does, she does.” She’s not terribly secure-feeling, I guess.

Young: Did you have budgetary problems?

Catto: Of course, everybody has budgetary problems.

Young: With Congress or with the OMB [Office of Management and Budget]?

Catto: It was both. The biggest problem I had was with the Inspector General, who was a very difficult guy and was accused of mistreating his employees. It brought the whole issue of what you do when you have a rogue Inspector General and creation of—what’s the phrase?

Masoud: Hostile work environment.

Catto: Hostile work environment, that’s it. We tried to lean on him, but of course the election came along, and it became moot. Although I wanted to fire him, he had the joy of living on beyond me into the [William J.] Clinton administration.

Masoud: But you were back in D.C. for a lot of the upheavals of the second half of the Bush administration, the biggest one being the Sununu firing. Were you plugged in, and did you have an opinion about what was going on?

Catto: No and no. I was not plugged in. I was glad to see them fire Sununu. I think he had been the creator of problems. It all went a little bit to his head. He was a difficult guy, a strong guy, smart guy. Actually, he could be fun to be with, but I thought he was harming the administration and should go.

Masoud: Through his tactics or because of that episode of the plane?
Catto: Well, the episode of the plane, and just a general aura of arrogance that hung over his head. Being a strong guy and somebody capable of saying no, he made enemies.

Masoud: The word often used when describing President Bush is a gentleman. He’s loyal not only to those who were above him in his life, but also to those who worked for him. And the adjective most often used with Governor Sununu is, as you said, arrogant. Was it surprising to you that the President would have chosen this guy whose style is so different from his own?

Catto: No, you’ve got to have a no-sayer. You’ve got to have somebody like [H.R.] Haldeman who can shoot down bad ideas that have good support. And I think Sununu did that job well for a while.

Masoud: Did they get a no-sayer in [Samuel] Skinner?

Catto: Well, I don’t really know. I like Sam Skinner very much. I’m sure he was able to say no, but he was no Sununu.

Masoud: There were some people who were hoping against all hope that Jim Baker would come in and take the job. Were you one of those?

Catto: No. Jim Baker was very good where he was.

Masoud: Did you give the President any advice, either when Sununu was fired or when Skinner was fired as to who should come in?

Catto: No, none whatsoever. That’s the kind of hive into which one does not wish to put one’s hand.

Young: Philip asked you a question about your relations with the White House and his own role in keeping you briefed. Was there any comparable point of operational contact that you had at USIA in the White House? Or was it restricted to more or less budget issues?

Catto: No, I suppose when I needed to talk to somebody, it would be Brent. But other than trying to fire the Inspector General, I didn’t have all that much to deal with at the White House.

Young: And, on that issue, with whom would you deal?

Catto: I went to the OMB and got them lined up and somebody else, a woman.

Young: Cabinet Secretary, would it have been?

Masoud: Would it have been Ede Holiday?

Catto: Yes, I think so. My memory is quite vague. Of course, that was a long time ago. Anyway, we were moving in that direction but were overcome by events.
Young: And you at the Agency had your own Congressional liaison—

Catto: Oh, sure.

Young: —or staff.

Catto: We had a fair-sized staff.

Young: Was it particularly difficult for you, dealing with a Democratic Congress?

Catto: Well, you had to do it. There were a lot of them I didn’t like, starting with [George] Mitchell, who I thought was brusque to the point of being rude. I didn’t like him at all. And [William] Bradley. I went to call on Bradley once upon a time, and he was, it seemed to me, so out of touch with reality that I described him as a luftmensch, which is a good Yiddish word meaning somebody whose feet are firmly planted in the air. And I met [John] McCain, whom I liked, and then a whole slew of Congressmen.

Young: There was not only the opposition Congress, but later in the Bush administration there was also a split in the Republican Party within Congress—[Newt] Gingrich and so on. Did that create some particular problems for you?

Catto: By the time the Gingrich revolution came in 1994, I was long gone.

Young: But he was coming up, as soon as Cheney left.

Catto: That was over my pay grade.

Young: None of these things impacted all that much on the actual substantive work?

Catto: Not that I’m aware of.

Young: You weren’t fingered or on somebody’s agenda, a partisan agenda?

Catto: One thing I did do was take care to cultivate Senator [William] Fulbright. Although retired, he was viewed as one of the fathers of some of our programs, especially the scholarship named for him. I called on him about day number two. I called on Lane Kirkland day one and on Fulbright day two to get them sympathetic.

Young: And Kirkland wasn’t?

Catto: Kirkland was a friend, a poker-playing friend. But when it came to wanting to let go of some of the vetoes that he had over who would represent Labor at international meetings or something like that, he wouldn’t give an inch. Some of the Labor people that he put in were just outrageous. I fired one or two of them. I’ve forgotten the details of all of it now, but he went to the Congress and had what I had done overturned. So I learned that you don’t mess with Lane
Kirkland and the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations] successfully.

**Young:** Who is the constituency for USIA? Did you have a definable constituency interested in the work of the Agency?

**Catto:** Well, we certainly had a constituency in the volunteers. We had a constituency in the alumni of the thousands and thousands of international—foreign constituency. We had the International Visitors, the Fulbrights. I never heard anybody say anything but wonderful things about the Fulbright scholarships. And abroad, the same thing held true with the International Visitors Program. People loved to come over here and be the guest of the U.S. government. It does more good than anything that we do. It’s phenomenal.

**Masoud:** If we could just briefly dial back to a couple of questions I had about the Ambassadorship, and then maybe we could talk about the ’92 election and particularly the Weinberger pardon. Just one question. You can probably answer it yes or no. Interestingly, when the change occurs from Thatcher to [John] Major, Mrs. Catto wrote an op-ed, I guess, in the *Washington Post* about that.

**Catto:** Yes, she did.

**Masoud:** Is that problematic at all for the wife of an Ambassador to write an op-ed really criticizing the political culture of the country in which you’re based?

**Catto:** Not in my family.

**Masoud:** Did anything happen as a result of it?

**Catto:** No.

**Masoud:** Okay, just a question.

**Young:** She wasn’t fired.

**Masoud:** State didn’t call you frantically and say, “What’s going on?”

**Catto:** Have you read her article?

**Masoud:** Actually I hadn’t. I was going to pull it up.

**Catto:** It’s damn good.

**Masoud:** I’m sure it is. Philip is quoted saying “spot on.” It did seem right. Ninety-two.

**Young:** Go ahead.
Masoud: Your general impressions of, I guess, what went wrong in ’92.

Young: Things seemed to just go downhill on all fronts.

Catto: Yes, they did.

Young: And it’s a puzzle, because this President had had the highest approval ratings ever. Long after the Bush administration is gone into history, this is going to be a question that a lot of people are going to be trying to figure out. Of all the different explanations that have been made, and all the different possibilities, how it could happen that the election could have been lost, an incumbent President. We’d like anything you have to enlighten future generations on this as well as us.

Catto: The thought that came to my mind was that the administration, perhaps mostly Sununu, felt that a high rating was like gold that you could put in the bank and draw on and spend it as you wish. But gold it’s not. And they chose not to spend it on anything—is fungible the right word to use? I’m not sure that’s right, but anyway, what they thought was gold had disappeared when they opened the vault, and that was that. I think there was a certain amount of arrogance. The President once said to somebody, “If you’re so smart, why aren’t you President?”

Young: Was that somebody who was trying to turn him in a different direction?

Catto: No. I don’t even know if that had to do with the campaign. I don’t think it did.

Young: That’s your reflection on some of his advisors?

Catto: There was a certain amount of smug security that proved to be unwarranted. And, of course, the Democrats were relentless in talking about the economy, which, by the time of the election, was definitely on an up-tick, but it came too late.

Masoud: You’re a man who spent a lot of time dealing with the press. Did you think that the administration had effectively gotten its message out about the economy being on an up-tick?

Catto: I don’t really have any way to judge that. But clearly they didn’t do a very good job, because they just didn’t get the message across. I’ve also wondered if it didn’t have something to do with—what was that strange disease that both George and Barbara—

Masoud: Grave’s.

Catto: Grave’s disease, and the dog. I read somewhere that the dog had it too, at the same time. I wondered if that didn’t sap his strength and his vitality. I remember my wife, as we watched one of the debates, noticed that he was looking at his watch. She thought, That’s a bad sign. He feels insecure and unhappy and wants to get out of here. Maybe she was right, I don’t know.

Young: If I understand you correctly, Bush got some bad advice about how to approach the demands of a second campaign. Or else people believed he had such a high rating that he was
invulnerable until it was too late. But with the opposition party beating up on the economy—and there had been a downturn in the economy, which might have fixed people’s perceptions rather than the latest figures—there is nothing that I can remember or find in the record of an attempt to go public, when the economy wasn’t so good, and assure the country that something was being done about it or stay the course. Reagan went out and did that once. There was some advice, we understand, from some people in the Bush administration, in the Cabinet, that the President should take note of this and go public with it. But it was never done. This suggests again that there was perhaps some misperception about the President’s prospects on the part of the people advising him. But you would think that the President might look beyond the close circle.

**Catto:** That’s all over my pay grade. I don’t know.

**Young:** You knew President Bush as a person. You’d seen him probably in good times and adverse times, and I was just wondering, was he too loyal to his advisors?

**Catto:** I don’t know, maybe so. I remember being over at the White House for lunch with some of his old friends, and somebody brought in jokes that he might want to use in talking about Ross Perot. He read them out to bounce them off the luncheon guests and see how people felt. A number of them were too sharp, and we booed those down. They were all pretty funny. But in the end he used anodyne kinds of things. It was interesting to watch him, and he was relaxed and having fun. But this was very much during the campaign.

**Masoud:** Was he the same George Bush you had known?

**Catto:** Yes, he was. Funny and informal—

**Masoud:** Verve, and he had zip.

**Catto:** He had zip again.

**Masoud:** One question that I think Philip alluded to, but I’m going to ask in a vulgar, direct way. When Bush was starting out in politics in Texas, he was seen as a moderate Republican. Certainly the President came from—I don’t know if you could call them liberal roots. But, for example, his father was a supporter of Planned Parenthood and this kind of thing. Later on, obviously, Bush is not that way. Did you discern a change in his political orientation throughout the time that you knew him?

**Catto:** Yes.

**Masoud:** Can you elaborate on that a little bit?

**Catto:** Well, he had an epiphany, I think, with respect to the question of choice, as far as abortion is concerned, that coincided with his joining the Reagan administration. He changed his mind. I think it cost him in his own re-election bid, not certainly in his election. And having him invite—or let Patrick Buchanan talk at the Republican convention—I think that Buchanan is just
out of control and over the top, as the British would say. And I think that was un-George-like, but he did it, and there it is.

**Young:** I believe the first speech he gave after his inauguration was to an anti-abortion group. I was surprised at that.

**Catto:** Was it?

**Young:** I was surprised at that. Why would this be his first? They were having a meeting in Washington.

**Catto:** He changed his mind in the Reagan administration.

**Young:** I had not realized that, so I was quite surprised.

**Masoud:** In that vein, as you were discussing, I remember doing some research out at the Bush library, and some of the letters that had been sent to the President very early on were by supporters who wanted him to ease up on abortion. They were all pro-choice, in other words. The President wrote them a very strong letter—and you could see this letter was drafted on his typewriter—saying, “My mind is made up on the issue.” I kind of dismissed the letter at that point and then was very interested to see that when the book of letters came out, he included that letter, which spoke to me about the depth of his commitment.

**Catto:** Conviction.

**Masoud:** That was very interesting. The other letter that mentions you in the book—I don’t remember the exact date, but it’s right after the Iran-Contra stuff starts bubbling up. He wrote you a letter. It’s in the book where he says, “I believe that we’ve got to get all the information out there as quickly as possible and no cover up,” etc., which leads me maybe into the end of the book and the discussion of the coda to the Iran-Contra story and the Weinberger pardon. I was wondering if you wanted to talk about that.

**Catto:** I’d be happy to answer any questions I can. I pretty well covered it, I think, in the book.

**Masoud:** Yes, you did.

**Catto:** I was simply so horrified by—what’s his name?

**Masoud/Young:** Larry [E. Lawrence] Walsh.

**Catto:** By what Walsh was doing. It looked to me like it was just pure blackmail, saying to Cap, “If you’ll rat on Reagan, we’ll charge you with a misdemeanor. If you won’t rat on him, we’ll hit you with a felony.” And when they came by my office at USIA with a transcript of a press conference I’d held ten or eleven years prior, I knew that they were trying to denigrate Weinberger’s character.
Young: It was about—

Catto: Jack Morgan, another historian of note.

Masoud: And this is a month and a half after the loss.

Catto: Yes, yes.

Masoud: He still hadn’t gotten over—

Catto: I had never seen anything like it before except for Mrs. T, who was so down after her own party turned on her and threw her out of office. Anyway, we sat down in the yellow oval room, and I said, “Here’s what they’re doing to Cap Weinberger, and I think you ought to know about it.” He listened and made no comment and said, “Write me a memo,” which I did the next day. Whatever the reason, he, of course, pardoned Cap.

Masoud: Was this a memo, sort of, “Tell me what I should do,” or “Tell me what’s going on”?

Catto: No, just a “Tell me what happened,” which I did, all the details of Walsh’s assistant coming in—

Masoud: [James] Brosnahan, I think.

Catto: Yes, that’s right. You know more about it than I do. Or you may have read the book more recently than I have. And that FBI agent with him there to serve me—I didn’t like it. And then I talked to Cap, and he was very much against my doing anything. And his lawyer was, too.

Masoud: [William J.] Bennett?

Catto: No, I talked to Bennett.

Young: Bill Clark was—

Catto: Bill Clark I talked to. They just thought it would confuse things and muddy the water and so forth. But what happened, of course, to make the President decide to do that, I do not know. But for whatever reason he decided to do it, I’m sure at least what I had to say had played some small part in it.

Masoud: And it happened the next day, right, the pardon?

Catto: No, I don’t think so. I think it happened before Christmas.

Young: Christmas Eve or something.

Catto: Maybe, yes, I believe that’s right.
**Masoud**: Within the week.

**Catto**: But anyway, it brought it to George’s mind.

**Young**: You have long experience from many different posts and perspectives on the press and the media. I wonder if you’d like to reflect on the press and the Bush administration.

**Catto**: There is no politician that I’ve ever known of who thinks they get a fair break from the press. You listen to the Clintonites, and they just go berserk—he’s been nailed to the cross. But then everybody feels that way.

**Masoud**: That’s right.

**Catto**: And, indeed, I think George Bush, in many respects, had a more sensitive feeling that if you treat these people as human beings—whether they are or not—they will respond. You know, I think things have changed. There was not this “go for the jugular” attitude early in our career in Washington. Sure, they dog and what have you, but it wasn’t quite as personal before Watergate as it was after. Everybody decided that they wanted to be the new Bob Woodward, and the only way to do that was to rip out the guts. It’s not as nice as it used to be.

**Young**: Do you think that Bush was treated okay by the press, as things go?

**Catto**: Yes. Well, of course he got furious at Maureen Dowd.

**Young**: Who doesn’t?

**Catto**: She can be very funny and very—

**Young**: —very cutting, too.

**Catto**: Yes. I think he got as fair a break as anybody does, at least.

**Young**: Nixon seemed to really feel that he was being totally victimized by the press. President Bush said in an interview with David Frost that he’s no longer a press basher.

**Masoud**: Just one last question. If you can think about, if the President had been re-elected, what would have been different in a second Bush administration, either in terms of your own role, or if you want to speak more globally.

**Catto**: Well, I really don’t know that I’ve fantasized on that very much.

**Masoud**: Would you have stayed as USIA Director?

**Catto**: Oh, I think so, for a while. I loved it. It was great job and with wonderful people to work with—educated, broadminded, interesting people. I think I would have had to try to fight off an attempt to amalgamate the Agency with the State Department, or to try to. But I believe James A.
Baker III was very interested in having that come to pass. [laughter] Who was that Congressman from Miami? Italian name, whom I got along with very well. He got redistricted out of business, a Democrat. He dropped me a warning that there were people out there laying for my Agency, to beware. And I’m sure as I can be it was Eagleburger and Baker. But all of that was not to come to a head on our watch.

Masoud: Okay, great.