INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL (MICKEY) KANTOR

June 28, 2002
Charlottesville, Virginia

Interviewers
James Sterling Young, chair
Erwin Hargrove
Charles Jones
Russell L. Riley

Assisting: Duane Adamson, Tracy Crehan
Transcription: Martha W. Healy
Transcript copy edited by: Stephen B. Evans, Jane Rafal Wilson
Final edit by: Jane Rafal Wilson

© 2014 The Miller Center Foundation and The Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History

Publicly released transcripts of the William J. Clinton Presidential History Project are freely available for noncommercial use according to the Fair Use provisions of the United States Copyright Code and International Copyright Law. Advance written permission is required for reproduction, redistribution, and extensive quotation or excerpting. Permission requests should be made to the Miller Center, P.O. Box 400406, Charlottesville, VA 22904-4406.

To cite an interview, please use the following general format: [name of interviewee] Interview, [date of interview], William J. Clinton Presidential History Project, Miller Center, University of Virginia.
Young: Why don’t we do a voice ID, just so you can introduce yourselves.

Kantor: Mickey Kantor.

Hargrove: Erwin Hargrove.

Jones: Chuck Jones.

Adamson: Duane Adamson.

Crehan: Tracey Crehan.

Riley: I’m Russell Riley.

Young: And I’m Jim Young. Okay. I’d like to welcome Mickey Kantor and put on the record our deep appreciation for his willingness to take a day out of a very busy life for the Clinton Oral History Project. We’ve been over the ground rules in our chat before and, of course, we all understand what’s said in this room doesn’t go out of the room, that nobody except the members of the Oral History Program have access to the transcript until Mickey has a copy, has had a chance to review it, edited it and placed any stipulations he deems appropriate on the release of it.

We did discuss the ultimate disposition of these transcripts and the timing of the release, and our policy is, first of all we don’t release anything except under the stipulations set by the respondent in any particular interview. But we don’t anticipate our releasing any of the Clinton project transcripts for such public use as each respondent approves until the completion of the project or so close to the completion that it would not jeopardize the completion of the interviews. This is a project that we expect to run five or six years, given the number of people, and we are very early in the game, having just begun a few months ago with our interviewing. And it’s probable that we will not have the opportunity to interview President Clinton or Senator Clinton until later in the project, so in any case we would not want to release anything. I think it’s appropriate that many people on the staff can feel, as Mickey does, that he would not like to preempt, see us preempt, would like the President to have a chance to have his memoirs done. So I think that’s not an issue that we will confront because we’ve got a long way to go on this project.
So why don’t you just tell us how you came to know Bill Clinton and what you knew, and then we’ll carry it forward chronologically.

Kantor: Sure, thank you and thank you all for taking your time, and what you’re doing. I think this is an important process, not only for the Clinton presidency, but other presidencies you have done or are doing, and the country is better for it and I hope I can be somewhat helpful. As I said to Jim before, as we were upstairs, I’m sure all of us will try to put ourselves in our best light, so take me with a grain of salt. My memory will be faulty only in those areas where I didn’t do so well. [laughter] It will be perfect in those areas where I think I was triumphant, so we all are victims of our own egos. I’ll try to be as objective and factual as I possibly can.

In 1978, President [Jimmy] Carter nominated me to the Legal Services Board. Hillary Clinton was already a member of that board. I had spent the early part of my legal career, all of it, concerned with legal services, either as a lawyer working with farm workers in Florida, in Washington, around the country, filing suits for farm workers, fighting for the independence of the program and by running something called Action for Legal Rights, and we wrote the legal services corporation bill and pushed it through the Congress. I thought that my highest destined calling—and I still think the most important thing in my professional life that has ever happened to me—was legal services, and therefore I was delighted to be named to the board, not knowing how it would change my life. I was confirmed, and met Hillary. I came to know President Clinton in late ’78, early ’79, after he had been elected Governor the first time.

I have had ups and downs in politics in terms of being successful, I think every Democrat has that problem. I spent years in California opposing Ronald Reagan, which is not the way to be successful in American politics. [laughter] I went to California to run a campaign for Alan Cranston, who was, of course, wildly successful himself in California politics, but in my years of politics I have made a number of pronouncements, most of which are wrong. I went back to California upon meeting Bill Clinton for the first time and said, “If he ever runs for President he will be elected and he will be President of the United States.” It is the only time I can ever say I was right about any person.

But I think as you look at the man and his presidency, and the events that surround it, I don’t think you’ll find any person who worked for him, or even those who don’t particularly admire him, who didn’t have the same reaction upon first meeting, and second meeting, and third meeting and so on. He is a stunning intellect and talent. I don’t think we’ve ever had anyone in American politics in my lifetime like him. That doesn’t mean that he’s perfect, far from it, and it doesn’t mean everything the Clinton administration did was successful. It wasn’t. It does mean that there is at least one thread among many that runs through the Clinton career and presidency, and that is everyone’s amazement at just how talented and bright and connected he is. Was and is.

We became social friends before we became political friends. He was Governor of Arkansas, then he was in private life for two years when he was beaten by Frank White. Then he came back and beat Frank White after two years out of office. The Arkansas Governor’s term was only two years at that point. From time to time, the President and Hillary would come to California and they would stay with me and my wife. My first wife died in a plane crash, my second wife then was Heidi Schulman, who was with NBC news, and we were just good friends. I would stop in
Little Rock from time to time, maybe two to three times over the next four or five years, just to stay at the Governor’s mansion, say hello, run with him in the morning, go back to California.

Around the mid ’80s, towards ’87, he began to think about running for President, and in 1987, as you recall, he was planning on running for President, but decided correctly that he was not prepared to run, either personally or otherwise. He had gathered a number of his friends—I was among them—in Arkansas to make his announcement. We had had a number of discussions the night before and then had a long discussion with him sitting on the back steps of the Governor’s mansion with Carl Wagner where he indicated he just was not able to go forward, for reasons now we know some of and some I guess we won’t know. Much had to do with his family, almost all of it. I think the single most important conversations which we now know that came out of these conversations was with Betsy Wright, who was his Chief of Staff at the time and was a very, very critical player to him politically in Arkansas for years. She was very important in ’92, much more important than she gets credit for, because people have left her out of their reminiscences because it takes away from their own roles and what they did or didn’t do.

That’s really my history up until in 1991 I, along with Hillary, and I think his mother pushed hard for him to run for President. My view and his view of it, and others’, Hillary’s, was that the real challenge was to win the Democratic nomination. We believed, probably in our naïveté, that if he could go head up with George Bush, regardless of George Bush’s elevated ratings at that point, which were around 80% or 90% after the Gulf War, that the American people would make a choice for a new, young, exciting politician versus George Bush. We probably were naïve, that sounds good right now, but we didn’t think it all the way through.

We did think through the process for the Democratic nomination. I’d had a fair amount of experience as well as others have—but no one was more thoughtful about it than the President and Hillary, or had thought it through more carefully. In July ’91 he came through Los Angeles. We sat in a car without the air conditioning on and talked for a long, long time about many things, none of which I will ever talk about, and he asked me to be chairman of the campaign, which I accepted. Of course, we began the efforts in late August in Washington gathering people together and he announced on October 3rd in Little Rock and we can talk about whatever you’re interested in. It was a very exciting ride for my family and me. At times it was more painful than I ever would have suspected, and at times the highs were higher than I ever would have understood. But if I had it to do all over again, I’d do it in a minute.

We’re all privileged. Those of us you talk to—all of you are scholars and understand this—anyone who has any of these jobs or goes through this experience is just privileged, Republican or Democrat, and I am deeply grateful for all of the experiences.

**Young:** Why don’t you walk through the high points, the low points of the campaign and we can ask some second questions.

**Hargrove:** Could I ask just one?

**Young:** Yes.

**Hargrove:** Is there something about this fellow, an X factor that binds people to him? Now, he has friends here, friends there, friends everywhere.
Kantor: He has the first friend he ever met and the last friend he just met thirty seconds ago.

Hargrove: But what is the—

Kantor: It is an X quality.

Hargrove: But what is it?

Kantor: He is the most connected human being I’ve ever met. Erwin, it’s hard to explain, but he actually is interested in every person he meets. You can’t fake that.

Hargrove: He’s present to you.

Kantor: He opens himself up, he opens you up. He gathers from you what you’re interested in and what you care about. But he does something else. I remember something that Hillary told a reporter in the New Hampshire primary in ’92. The reporter said, “Upon reflection he is much like Lyndon Johnson, he draws energy from people.” Hillary corrected the reporter and said, “There’s something different, he also gives it back.” That’s the difference. A lot of people in public life draw energy from people, they’re very good at it and I’m not criticizing it. He’s among the very, very few, I’ve never met anybody like him, he gives it back, and you walk away totally enthralled with him. It’s not a parlor trick, he actually does care about you, sometimes too much.

Hargrove: I understand.

Kantor: I don’t know all the psych—I’m not a psychologist, nor a psychiatrist, I don’t understand what goes into those factors, how you develop that talent, but it’s an incredible talent. It also, of course, binds people to him.

Hargrove: Um-hum.

Kantor: Very closely and for a long forever. But it also seems to create great animosity. His whole style, as we know, and we came to learn in a very difficult way later.

Jones: Are these the characteristics that led you to conclude this man was going to be President, or were there specific incidences in your first meeting him that led you to that conclusion?

Kantor: That’s the characteristic that comes out first, when you first meet him it’s overwhelming. Then when you spend more time with him you realize he is very thoughtful. He is as well-read as any human being I know. He devours information, material, books, on a wide range of subjects and is able to retain a lot of it; some say all. He seems to be able to multitask with his mind. One incident, the most stunning, and it’s not a divergence, it really gets to the ability—we were in Tokyo in ’93. We were trying to reach an agreement, a so-called framework agreement with the Japanese, and at the same time trying to negotiate zero-for-zero tariff agreements with the Europeans, the Japanese and the Canadians at the same time the G8 was going on. And he wanted an update on the talks with the Japanese on the framework.
Charlene Barshefsky, later USTR [United States Trade Representative], my deputy, was handling those minute-to-minute and she’d never met the President. I said, “Charlene, this is a great opportunity for you, come on up to the suite and brief him as to where the talks are.” So she came up and he’s sitting at the end of a table, like this, in one of these suites with a nice dining room table, and he has on just a very casual shirt and he has his half glasses on. He’s got, off to his right he has a crossword puzzle, he has a book he’s reading at the same time. It was Bruce Lindsey, myself and I’m not sure, there was one other person in the room and I just can’t recall.

Charlene comes in, she sits down, somewhat nervous as you would be, first time meeting any President. He says, “Hello. I’ve wanted to meet you, Mickey keeps you away from me,” blah, blah, blah. He’s trying to put her at ease. And then he says, “Tell me what’s going on, what are the factors?” and so on and so forth.

As she starts talking, he starts filling out his crossword puzzle, he’s reading his book, and Charlene, who is not shy, and very bright, I can see the red literally rising in her neck. This is something important to her, she’s been up all night. She’s working so hard, trying to move the Japanese, and this guy is seemingly not even listening to her and I’m thinking, Oh no, there’s going to be a blow up here. Charlene is not going to—she’s going to say something sarcastic.

About at that moment, this all happened within 35-40 seconds, he looks up and asks a very precise, incisive question about the negotiation, clearly indicating one, he’d heard every word she said, two, he had read every memo we had sent over to the White House, and three, he was very interested in what she was saying. She almost fainted. You could just see it. She just assumed he didn’t hear a word she said.

Well, after that, the conversation went on for about twenty minutes and we devised tactically how to try to approach it. He had his own ideas, and so on and so forth. At the end of the conversation he says, “Thank you, Stonewall.” And she says, “What are you talking—” He says, “Isn’t that what the Japanese call you?” She says, “Yes, but how did you know?” She went out, of course, she had read every memo we had sent over to the White House, and three, he was very interested in what she was saying. She almost fainted. You could just see it. She just assumed he didn’t hear a word she said.

Hargrove: Would he ever lose his focus though, or get off one important thing because he got interested in another?

Kantor: Yes, more in the first administration than later. He is very bright, but sometimes undisciplined. He is so interested in so many things, is the best way to put it. Another way to put it is just lack of discipline. At first, and this has been reported on widely, meetings in the White House with him were like graduate seminars. They went all over the place and seemingly had no beginning and no end. Part of that was inexperience on everyone’s part, too many people in the room, not enough briefing beforehand of the President before he walked in, and his own proclivity. He loves ideas. He loves to talk to people, he loves to hear what they have to say. He hangs it on pegs in his head and may use it a different way later or twelve months from that.
point, but it also made the beginning of the administration less than efficient. I think that’s a fair statement.

**Jones:** Also, it can be intimidating to staff.

**Kantor:** It’s more frustrating than intimidating. No I don’t think it was—look, all staff of all Presidents, by the very nature that they are there, should be very committed to the President.

**Jones:** Sure.

**Kantor:** But it can get frustrating. For the first years in the White House, the first couple of years were not exactly well oiled; it was not a well-oiled machine. After that it became better, as he became more experienced, people around him became more experienced. There were certain changes in personnel. It became a much more organized, effective, focused operation. I think no one doubts that.

**Young:** Let’s go back—

**Kantor:** Back to the campaign.

**Young:** Was the campaign efficient and how did that go, and what you had to do—

**Kantor:** It’s interesting, Bill Clinton in the campaign was somewhat different than Bill Clinton as President or as Governor, certainly as President the first couple of years. Bill Clinton in the campaign is very disciplined. He is a well-trained politician. He understands that when you’re running for office, you can’t get in the way of a campaign making decisions and moving ahead. He also is the best campaign manager I ever met, and I’ve met a few of them in my life. His ideas are usually very, very good. Not always, but usually, as opposed to many candidates who are good candidates but just have a lot of ideas that should be junked on first reading.

The campaign officially began on October 3, 1991. It began before that by bringing together people from all over the country. He had an advantage that no other Democrat had. He had friends everywhere. He had Governors who were devoted to him, who had worked with him in the Governors’ conference. He had a base out of Al From’s organization, the Democratic Leadership Council, which he headed before he ran. He had a clear idea, not only how to run, but what he wanted to accomplish, and he understood the Democratic nomination was not worth having unless he ran in the way he wanted to govern. Too many Democrats had run to the left during the ’70s and ’80s, tried to then shift their position in a general election and they had turned out not to be successful. He was bound and determined not to do that.

He believed in certain things, the most prominent of which were a middle class tax cut, ending welfare as we know it, and most importantly, probably for this discussion—but I think most importantly for his presidency because he understood it—how tied we were to the rest of the world, economically, politically and strategically. That change—we were in the information age—affect our jobs, affected our standard of living, affected our future, affected our security. And if you look back at both his speech in Little Rock on October 3rd and the two speeches at Georgetown that Fall, I believe you will agree with me that in the history of modern politics, in terms of winning Presidential candidates, he was more consistent with what he had laid out and
throughout his presidency than almost anyone. Maybe Ronald Reagan was the only one who might have been more consistent than he. He truly understood what he wanted to do and what he wanted to accomplish, both politically and substantively, and how to marry those together.

And if you read the Georgetown speeches, I didn’t happen to bring them here, there are some passages about trade that I think are prescient, but were not well covered by the press because the press in the U.S. doesn’t care much about trade. They care more today because they see it as part of foreign policy, therefore they are more and more connected to it. But it made a difference in the campaign for two reasons: one, everyone who came in understood what he wanted to do and where he wanted to go—well, three reasons; two, it changed the Democratic party, he altered the Democratic party; but three, he positioned himself to win the presidency. Once the nomination was his, he had credibility with the American people, not personally, that was a problem for us, but politically, because he was exactly where the American people were in their perception of the economy, their perception of the U.S. role in the world and their perception of what was needed to be done.

That is critical in understanding not just what happens later but also in understanding him. He had thought about the presidency. He had thought about what he wanted to do. Now, sometimes he was not disciplined enough to put it into action, but he had really, through his reading, through his talking to people, through his study, through his absolute focus on it, had really made himself, like a great athlete, made himself ready for the so-called season.

The campaign, I think we can go through it very quickly. Of course after the two speeches at Georgetown and campaigning in New Hampshire, the press fell in love with him. He was way ahead in the polls. And then, I think it was 11 days before the New Hampshire primary, the “Gennifer” [Flowers] situation, as we call it, arose. I was chairman of the campaign, but I had planned not to join the campaign full time. We had conference calls every day in the campaign, sometimes two, but I was in Los Angeles practicing law and I’d agreed with the President and Hillary that I wouldn’t come full time until probably after the nomination was secured unless it was absolutely necessary.

Well, I don’t know how many times we talked that evening, even late in the evening LA time, about what was happening and what could be done.

Young: This was in New Hampshire?

Kantor: He’s in New Hampshire, driving between two towns when he called me from a cell phone. Of course, I didn’t know anything about it until he called. You know what happened publicly, including the appearance on Sixty Minutes. Interestingly enough, my wife had already decided to cross the line, to leave NBC to join the campaign, and she was already planning going the next day to New Hampshire, so she went.

I didn’t truly understand how difficult this was for a few hours, then after 24 hours or 48 hours, I then took off for New Hampshire, with a friend, Harry Thomasson, who comes in and out of the President’s life many, many times, and is much maligned, unfairly, for his role. Then of course we get there and the draft letter hits and we go through, after Sixty Minutes, then we go through Nightline as you might recall. I think it was one of the—people talk about the best performance
I’ve ever seen anyone give. James Carville was right: the letter became our friend. Ends up, I go through so much in New Hampshire because this is really where he won the campaign.

On Monday night I went out to dinner. Heidi and I went out to dinner with David Broder, Dan Balz and one other reporter. Stan Greenberg, who was the pollster, called me and said, “You better get back here because I just got the results in of our poll and it’s over. There’s no way we’re going; we’ll be lucky to come in third.” Dan Balz had left the table, then he came back with the same news the Washington Post had done, or the Globe. I don’t know, probably a Boston Globe poll. I went back and I’m thinking, what do you say to a friend in this situation, how do you handle it, what do you do?

We gathered in our little room—Heidi and I were in a Motel 6, I think, a little motel in New Hampshire. There were about seven or eight of us or seven of us in the room: Eli Segal, James Carville, George Stephanopoulos, myself, Heidi, President Clinton—Hillary wasn’t there, she would not come to the meeting, which is characteristic of her. It’s not out of weakness, it’s out of strength. She just figures if you don’t know it, you do what you’re going to do anyway, you don’t need to hear these things.

So we talked. What was interesting about it, Stan was a terrific pollster, one of the few people I’ve ever known in the business who will tell the absolute, unvarnished painful truth. There was nothing good in the poll, nothing we could discern, and to his credit, Clinton first criticized himself for the mistakes he had made and so on. Said he wasn’t going to give up, that we’d go through tomorrow, keep our heads up, he’d go out and campaign in the morning and then we’d go south, try to win South Carolina and then “Super Tuesday” and was totally committed to the campaign. Never once did he mention quitting. Never once did it even come up in the meeting.

One thing that happened during the meeting was interesting. Stan said, “There’s something strange, though, I just have to mention. USA Today has a poll coming out tomorrow to show in the last 24 hours you’ve come back.” We, of course, thought that it was just Stan trying to put some happy face on the end of a very painful couple of hours. Went to sleep, woke up, he started campaigning. We get the first exit polls, which are now a staple of American politics. You call your friends at the networks to get them—and the networks have him winning, the first two exit polls had him literally winning. We, of course, were shocked, and delighted. We gathered about 6:30 or 7 in what would pass for a suite in this motel and tried to decide what to do. I’d been called early in the day by a man named Joe Grandmaison, great New Hampshire politician, ran a number of Presidential campaigns in New Hampshire.

Joe reminded me that George McGovern in 1972 versus Ed Muskie had gone out and declared victory early, even though he came in second. The networks had carried that, and that literally propelled the McGovern campaign, even though he didn’t win New Hampshire, as we know. And Joe urged me to do the same thing with Clinton, because, he said, “You’re never sure whether he came in first or second, but it won’t make any difference if you go out there first.” Paul Begala wrote, “The Comeback Kid.” The networks are going on at 9 o’clock. My wife, who understands television—and this was in the days when there were no handlers, no Secret Service—at one point Clinton is doing his usual—he’s delighting, he’s talking, he’s gabbing, and she literally grabbed him by the lapels and said, “You’re going downstairs and making that statement.”
Well, first of all, it was beautifully written. Second, he delivered it well. Third, the campaign policy, which I can’t take credit for, was there’d be nobody behind him. We never wanted politicians behind him when he talked. We didn’t want people to view him as either partisan or just another politician. But with only Hillary standing there, that was one of the most interesting, dramatic, effective statements—politically I’m talking about, not substantively—in our lifetime. From then on the campaign, except for the New York primary, was well in hand. New York was another question.

What that showed I think in New Hampshire was, one, his ability under the most extreme circumstances not to falter, and two, delivering comeback. He has done it time after time after time. It also shows his proclivity when things are going well that something will always happen that is terrible. You can just count on it with Bill Clinton. His whole career has been marked by that and comebacks.

Hargrove: It is what David Maraniss says, it’s inevitable.

Kantor: It’s inevitable and it happened during his presidency, time after time after time.

Jones: Oh oh, things are going well.

Kantor: Right, right, exactly. And those of use who have been around long enough used to say that to the staff in the White House, and they finally learned that was the way it was.

Riley: I want to ask a more general question about your approach to the campaign, because one of the things that you read occasionally about ’92 is that there was a sense on Clinton’s part that he really wasn’t expecting to win in ’92; they were angling to position him for a run later. My colleagues have probably seen this in the literature too. Is there an element of truth to that?

Kantor: Yes and no. Before he ran he would calculate, in his conversation, whether or not a run, even if unsuccessful, was in his best interest or not. Hillary wouldn’t do that. She said, “You run to win or you don’t at all.” After he entered, no. I don’t think any politician on earth ever runs to come in second or third, no one. Once he was in it, he was in it. So, yes, intellectually he would, as he does everything, would turn it over in his mind and in conversation, that’s where that story comes from. Once he was in it, no, not at all, and I never even heard that discussed. He wasn’t interested in running for Vice President. He wasn’t interested in just making a name for himself.

Look, to run for President and win, and to be President, you have to have an ego. If you don’t, you shouldn’t be in it. You have to perceive yourself as a President. His ego was such, he believed, given his ability, background experience, and how he talked about the presidency, he was better qualified than anyone else, and more talented. The first you could argue, the second you can’t argue.

So I don’t think that ever entered his mind after this thing started. And of course, remember, after it started officially, up until the Gennifer incident, it was nothing but a straight line up. At every first meeting, upon first blush, even the most hardened reporters were absolutely blown away by him. In New Hampshire we did the two town meetings on television. We only had one planned, and he did so well with the first we did the second. The press was absolutely, unbelievably moved by that, including a speech in between in Dover, New Hampshire, the “last dog died”
speech, which is the best off-the-cuff political speech I’ve ever heard. A lot of it was carried on television in New Hampshire. Many reporters would say it was the best they’d ever heard when he said that when he was in real trouble, “I’ll be with you till the last dog dies.”

So the town meetings, his ability to handle those, impressing us on the campaign, we understood that there was more talent than we thought here. Even though we thought it was quite large, he could more than handle these situations. His ability to connect to people, his willingness to campaign around the clock, his thoughtfulness about the presidency and about the campaign, all combined to the victory.

New York was the toughest though. It was a tougher primary than New Hampshire, psychologically, emotionally, and physically more wearing. We went into New York believing we could do the same thing we did everywhere else. Remember, Paul Tsongas had dropped out by then. Jerry Brown was the challenger, my old friend from California, and we believed we could run to the center in New York and play, not coalition politics, but play, erase the lines and bring everyone together as we’d done in other primaries.

We got to New York and frankly, the first few days we weren’t doing very well. We did two things. One was the campaign and one was—he finally came to this conclusion, urged by Harold Ickes—one was to challenge Jerry Brown to debates, debate him as much as he’ll debate. We believed that in the end, Bill Clinton would be more attractive, even in New York, than Jerry Brown would be. And you had to play coalition politics in New York. It was impossible to win a New York primary, to carry New York City, unless you went to the Irish, to the Jewish community, to the black community, to the Puerto Rican community and talked about what they wanted to talk about. It was different, it was tougher, those tabloids every morning were just beating him to death over the second draft letter and other matters. He did it, he did it more brilliantly than anyone you can imagine, just like everything else he does. And we won New York fairly easily, we won four primaries that night and then that led to the 25 primary wins in a row and, of course, walking into the nomination.

Jones: It would help to sharpen, I think, your assessment of Clinton as a candidate if you compared him and his conception of the office—combined all of that, as a candidate, through to thinking of himself as President—if you compared it with the three others you had experience with: Jerry Brown, [Jimmy] Carter and [Walter] Mondale. Could you do that at least briefly?

Kantor: Sure, and it’s a good question. I had less contact with President Carter. One, I wasn’t their favorite person because I’d run Jerry Brown’s ’76 campaign which nearly derailed Carter in ’76. That was one. Two, he appointed me to the Legal Services Board, but I was not in the administration, that’s not really a part of the administration. So, for those two reasons, but certainly I was very close to Jerry Brown and Fritz Mondale.

I met Fritz Mondale as a legal services lawyer in ’69. He’s still a close friend, we’ve worked together on many things, including when he was ambassador to Japan and I was USTR. And of course, I ran Jerry’s ’76 campaign and chaired his Senate campaign in ’82 in California.

Clinton had thought through the presidency much better than Jerry Brown had ever thought it through. He had read more about it, had talked to more people. He had a very good sense of what
you could do, what you couldn’t do. He had thought through much of the limitations as well as
the opportunities. And therefore, he was much more prepared than Jerry Brown when Jerry
Brown ran the first time or the second time or the third time for the presidency. Clearly if you
compared Jerry Brown and Clinton, Jerry Brown is intellectually interesting, probably came up
with better, more new ideas than anyone else in American politics in the ’70s. Remember, small
is better, less government Democrat, concentrating on the environment and political reform were
all Jerry Brown. He was way ahead of his time, probably ten years ahead of his time. But he also
is, in some ways, a very cool human being, very hard to relate to, can be admired from afar, so
he is different, much different. He’s probably doing better as a mayor than he’s ever done in any
other office, which is fascinating to me.

Fritz Mondale was—it’s a personality difference. Clinton had appeal to one voter, ten voters or a
hundred thousand voters. On television, Fritz Mondale would put on that blue suit and suddenly
the Norwegian reticence would kick in and he would be a different person. In private he is one of
the most delightful, interesting, bright, fascinating, good-sense-of-humor people you’d ever
meet. You put him in public and suddenly the façade comes down. That’s one. Two, Clinton
understood that people admired leaders who were willing to beard the lion, who were willing to
take on issues, to be a little bit of an iconoclast. Fritz Mondale was a Democratic farmer-labor
politician. There’s nothing wrong with that, I love Fritz Mondale dearly. I think he’s wonderful,
but he grew up on the Hubert Humphrey and Orville Freeman, Gene McCarthy—successful DFL
politics in Minnesota where loyalty, adherence to principles and so on was number one, and
could not maneuver himself to take on any audience. I mean, Fritz Mondale, if he goes into a
UAW [United Auto Workers] convention, he gives them the red meat they’re looking for, or
AFT [American Federation of Teachers], a teachers’ convention, or a police organization.

Bill Clinton from time to time was more than willing to go in and take on the conventional
wisdom, the most famous of which is the Sister Souljah incident, but there are many, many
others, which he gets little credit for. He took on the conventional wisdom more than people talk
about or write about, including his bailout of Mexico in January 1995, which was probably one
of the most courageous things anyone could ever see a President do. So those are the differences
I see in him.

Hargrove: If you contend Carter was the first new Democrat, ahead of his time, Clinton must
have had that as an example. The Democratic Leadership Council comes out of that experience,
is that fair to say?

Kantor: Yes,

Young: These are legacies—

Kantor: Let me say “yes, but.” His loss to Frank White taught him a real lesson about purity in
politics. The great leaders have to be pragmatists. Franklin Roosevelt was the ultimate
pragmatist, Lyndon Johnson. Ronald Reagan. Ronald Reagan, I remember in California when the
abortion bill—when he threatened to veto any bill supporting choice—cleared the California
legislature, and Reagan says his feet are in concrete, he’s going to veto it. And when he—it is
only Ronald Reagan who could do this—he sat at his desk, the press surrounded, and he says,
somebody asked a question, he said, “I can’t quite hear you because all I can hear is the sound of the concrete cracking around my feet.” And he signed the bill. To move as Governor or President you’ve got to be flexible. You don’t, you cannot achieve everything in a straight line. There are ups and downs that you’ve got to compromise, sometimes you even have to back off, because it just won’t work, it’s just not time. And Clinton certainly knew how to do that.

Regarding Jimmy Carter, Clinton learned two things—one, some of the substance, but he also learned that Jimmy Carter was somewhat rigid.

Hargrove: Um-hum.

Kantor: And I admire a lot of it, he really was and is a man of great principle, but sometimes politically that doesn’t get you where you want to go.

Hargrove: The reason I mention the Democratic theme is it comes into the administration but in tension with other, old Democrats.

Kantor: Absolutely, and that tension was there, through the transition in the first six months of the administration. Some simplistically call it Bob Reich versus Bob Rubin. But, it’s really much broader than that and he was fighting with his own soul. Remember most of their really close friends, who we’d all describe as knee-jerk liberals, both Bill Clinton and Hillary Clinton. They were eastern, well-educated Democrats. Bill Clinton is certainly—there’s a lot of Arkansas in him, but there’s also, if you look at his friends, the friends he had prior to the presidency and outside Arkansas, I guess you’d call a lot of us effete, right? That’s where you come from. Therefore there was great tension in the first part of his presidency and through the transition.

One thing that’s never been reported, or not enough—there was an argument from the very first about Camp David, when he gathered the whole Cabinet at the first part of the administration, about do you go for health care stimulus package first, or do you go for welfare reform and political reform first? There were some of us in the room, not many, who believed welfare reform, political reform. If you got political reform, you’d take the guts out of the ability of the special interests including the pharmaceutical companies, insurance companies to gut health care, on one hand. And you would also appeal to the Ross Perot voters with both, you’d continue to build your power as you tried to get health care approved.

Everybody knew that would be the toughest thing to do. If you went for a stimulus package and health care first and some other things, you’d just look like a typical liberal Democrat. Some of that also was a result of the flap over gays in the military and there were many worried that he had already positioned himself in the eyes of the public. You need the public to move forward on these issues. So as a result, the first six months we did come out with a stimulus package as you recall. Thank God it didn’t go anywhere.

Hargrove: Is this the case —

Kantor: It would have been the wrong policy at the wrong time.
Hargrove: Is it the case at that meeting that Lloyd Bentsen suggested a more prudent route and Mrs. Clinton argued for the bold?

Kantor: Yes, but what we didn’t know is he had already committed to Tom Foley, George Mitchell and Dick Gephardt, at a dinner in Little Rock, that he would not go for welfare reform because they didn’t want him to do so.

Hargrove: I see.

Kantor: I didn’t know that at the time. Remember, I was a little bit in, what’s the word—

Young: Limbo.

Kantor: Limbo, right, in the transition, for reasons I don’t know today, and it doesn’t make any difference—and others didn’t know it either, weren’t quite aware of just how much he had committed himself. However, once he got the deal on the tax rise in August, introduced health care reform, he found his feet again and never really wavered again on the issues, or at least on the direction of his administration.

Young Chuck, did you want some more on the transition?

Jones: Sure. Where to start? Can you talk a little bit about this planning group that you headed up in advance of the election, and the work of that group and just the problems of a planning group prior to the election? You’ve got the campaign going on and that’s obviously priority number one, but you’ve also got to think about what if we win.

Kantor: You mean during September, October, the transition. What I call transmission.

Jones: So here’s this group off to the side people intimately involved with the campaign are naturally going to worry about because although they’re busy, they’re still thinking what if we win too and so forth.

Kantor: Right. If I’d have been more thoughtful I would have understood just how threatening that was to people and probably been more careful about it. We’d all agreed there would need to be some group preparing for a presidency. It would be irresponsible not to assume you’re going to win and therefore be prepared. The transition period is all too short. The demands of a transition are large and, of course, we did not have a government behind us to do a successful transition and to understand the various priorities and make the appointments, etc. I asked Gerry Stern, who was general counsel of Occidental at the time, a lawyer from Washington, Justice Department, in the Civil Rights Division, had slept in the room next to James Meredith at Old Miss during those terrible days, [and] worked for John Doar, an old friend of mine, to head it up. He did.

I’ve got to say, I probably wasn’t as thoughtful, or as careful, or as sensitive, or as political about it as I should have been in terms of—I didn’t pay a lot of attention to it. I didn’t know what kinds of concerns others would have, naturally so.

Jones: How did you get that job?
Kantor: Well I didn’t head it, I was chair of the campaign and it was suggested by Clinton and Hillary and others we put something together.

Jones: I see.

Kantor: I’ve got to say, I should have paid more attention to it. I paid less attention to it than I should have.

Hargrove: You didn’t actually run it, you got another guy.

Kantor: No, no, no, I didn’t run it at all. They were in a different building, in a different location in Little Rock. Today, there’s a personal reason of course that I’m upset with what I didn’t do, but more important I’m upset I didn’t pay much attention because the Clinton transition was not exactly a triumph. Most have written that and I think they’re right in their analysis.

At the end of the campaign, it should have been clearer to me, after the debates were over and it was fairly certain that we were going to be a victor—although you’re never quite sure, and remember we dipped on Thursday and Friday night, right before the Tuesday, and it became very close and then it opened up again. I think if you look at Presidential campaigns, you’ll find that always happens. For some strange reason, I think people want to kick the tires one more time politically. I didn’t recognize there were people upset with it. I thought that the people in the campaign should be running the transition, believed somehow that I’d overstepped my bounds, which maybe I had but it was inadvertent. But I will take full blame for my own inadequacies, and when the campaign ended I realized something was wrong.

There had been one incident, about two or three weeks out, where Warren Christopher and Vernon Jordan came to me and said that I should be Chief of Staff. They said, “We’re going to talk to Clinton, do you care?” I said, “Look, that’s up to you, but I don’t know if this is the time or the place.” Well, they did. Clearly, I should have recognized from his lack of response to it—like all politicians, if they don’t say “yes,” the answer is really no, even though they’ll never say “no” to anyone—I should have recognized something was wrong. Not that I did or didn’t want to be Chief of Staff, I should have realized that I was somehow controversial within the ranks of the campaign.

The campaign ended. Clearly, something was wrong. He told me the next morning I wouldn’t be heading the transition, he’d have me on the transition board, etcetera, would I do that? Of course you say, “yes,” but I was disappointed and concerned, not about the Chief of Staff as much that, clearly, there were real problems. The issue of economic conference came up very quickly because Vernon Jordan went on Meet the Press and said we were going to have one. We had not made a decision to do or not do so, but we were committed publicly, and Bill Clinton would never contradict Vernon. And so he asked me to run it. I made the decision to do so, but my wife thought she’d come back to LA, we had a good run, it was interesting, but I wasn’t going to be part of the administration, so why do this?

I, in my stubbornness,—I think I was being a little bit of a child, a little bit immature, I’ll show them that I can do things better than anybody else kind of attitude, a little bit childish, I guess. Well, I guess it is childish. The conference turned out to be a terrific success because of him, not anything I did. I think it is fair to say he mesmerized the press and the country during that period.
Then, as a result of trying to figure out how to place people in the right box in the Cabinet,
USTR was open.

Now, he had said to me at one point, early in the transition, he said, “Look, if there’s anything
you want, what is it?” We talked about a couple of things and he said, “You’d be the best at
USTR. It is negotiation, you’ve got to get your hands and elbows into it, you’d really enjoy it.” I
said, “Well, we’ll talk about that sometime.” And of course, out of the blue—I had gone back to
Los Angeles at the end of the conference, I finally thought my wife was correct. I was three or
four days or a week back into the law firm, I was literally going to the gym to work out, and my
wife called and said, “The President-elect is calling you from Little Rock, call him when you get
to the gym.” So I did.

He offered me the job. Just three days before, Vernon had called me and offered me head of
personnel, and I had said, “No, Vernon, I don’t want to do that. If I’m not going to be in the
Cabinet, there’s no—I love him dearly, I want him to be successful, I’ll always be a help, but I’m
not going to do that.” Of course I accepted USTR and the rest we’ll talk about.

Jones: The first conversation where the President-elect mentioned it was early in—

Kantor: In the transition, I’m trying to remember, about a week in, somehow we were alone and
he just raised the subject with me, I’m not sure what was in his head, because through the first
couple of weeks he spent an enormous amount of time picking the Cabinet. One of the biggest
mistakes made in that transition, which I think is generally accepted, is spending so much time
on the Cabinet and almost no time on picking a White House staff.

Jones: That’s right.

Kantor: And he, out of the blue, started talking about USTR. I’d paid almost no attention to
USTR except I think Bob Strauss had been USTR and Bill Brock III had been USTR. That’s all I
knew about it. I wasn’t a trade lawyer, which every USTR except Charlene has not been a trade
lawyer, which is sort of de rigueur for that post.

Riley: Do you have any idea why that was on his mind?

Kantor: I think two things. I think he saw me early on, probably still sees me, somehow as a
negotiator, and second, the negotiations over the debates in ’92 had gone fairly well, at least
from our point of view and I think that stuck in his head and he saw that job as, which is correct,
as a negotiating job.

Hargrove: Mickey, I had the idea yesterday, as I expressed to the boys, that there is a piece in
one of these essays that suggests the economic world had changed—lots of big players, tough
players—and export policy was going to require tough strategy and maybe you were just right
for that job. Maybe the President perceived you were right for that job.

Kantor: I don’t have any flight of ego here, I think he was right. One, I had some experience in
it, two, I was completely loyal to him which he realized and three, I think he perceived correctly
that I was probably not intimidated by the process.
Hargrove: Well, there’s the whole notion of export policy.

Kantor: He’s not a free trader in the classic sense at all. People—observers, authors, reporters—get it wrong. He’s an open trader, he believes in open markets, he believes in a rules-based system. But he also believes in order to move forward you’ve got to convince the American people of two things that we didn’t do historically: one, trade was in our interest to build our own standard of living, and that two, he wouldn’t give away our markets. That we believed in reciprocity of trade.

If you read his statements over the administration, you will see they come up time and time again. He also believed, third, that trade had become an integral part of foreign policy, that economic policy and foreign policy had become almost synonymous, that your connection to other nations in a globalized world that was interdependent was much through trade and you could use trade, both as a carrot and a stick, as you tried to move forward. And he also saw that economic issues couldn’t be successful, domestically, economically, unless he built real connections to and opened markets outside the U.S. He saw the jobs growing in the export sector and the import sector—remember, imports are just as important, maybe more important to our economy, it’s such a consumer economy—and he recognized, better than anyone I have ever seen, I think many people say that, how all this connects together economically.

Riley: Was that a function of his governorship, or was it something that he came by intellectually—

Kantor: Both. People forget that in Arkansas where it is chickens or trucks, rice or other things, they’re a fairly big export state. He had both been the beneficiary of it, and frustrated by inability to crack open markets in Japan and in other areas. He had traveled, not extensively but a fair amount, as Governor of Arkansas. This was not a typical small state Governor.

Young: So that when he talked to you early on, that you’d be good for USTR, he already had a well-thought-out position.

Kantor: Oh yes, if you go back to the Georgetown speeches—

Young: Yes, you referred to that earlier—

Kantor: Clearly, he had thought this out, where he wanted to go, and how important it was. There were two or three broad, issues. One, he knew he had to restore the domestic economy, the perception that he restored the domestic economy. The economy was getting better through late ’92 anyway, middle to late ’92. He believed you had to continue to promote that, and he believed that you had to educate at home as well as be on the cutting edge of R & D [Research and Development], and intellectual property, information technology, that’s where we were as a nation; that, two, you had to connect that ability to the global economy; and three, you had to open markets in order to continue to build jobs at home.

He saw how all that came together and how it affected both foreign policy and domestic policy. He talked about it in private and sometimes in public. His American University speech in February of ’93 is a good recitation of it, but he did it three or four times in the campaign. I thought the best of which—well, there was New York foreign policy, one at the LA foreign
affairs council, another speech at North Carolina State where he said “Yes, but” on the NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement]. He’d support the NAFTA, but with side agreements on labor and the environment. And then his American University speech, his speech introducing the NAFTA in ’93. Those show both a fleshed out thinking on his part, plus building on what he said in Georgetown in ’90, ’91.

**Hargrove:** Build jobs at home, very important. You’ve got a big labor constituency that’s scared to death about losing jobs, which of course was the issue in NAFTA, but he had a counter strategy as part of his trade policy in a sense.

**Kantor:** He didn’t agree with organized labor, he thought they were wrong, that they were on the back side of history.

**Hargrove:** Right.

**Kantor:** He believed that NAFTA, getting APEC [Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation] started, free trade in the Americas, building trade, bilateral regional, multilateral trade agreements was critical in a new world to building jobs at home. We could obviously in the short run lose some jobs. Industries were going to shift production overseas and labor-intensive industries would of course be more attractive than doing these things at home. Take apparel, apparel was clear. He said, “That’s going to happen anyway.” You’re not going to stop capital from moving. Capital flows across boundaries in a modern world. What we need to do is make sure that we can take advantage of that same phenomenon by opening markets for our goods and services, and I think that is now accepted wisdom.

**Young:** We’ll be talking about this more when you come to talk in depth about your work as trade representative and your relationship with his thinking and so on, but you said something a moment ago, that one of the biggest mistakes made in the transition was concentrating on the Cabinet. That was a question I had, and then Chuck also has something.

**Kantor:** Oh, yes.

**Young:** Why didn’t Clinton give more attention to the White House staff, or that early selection of those people?

**Kantor:** I’ve never talked to him about this, I’m going to make a guess here. I think two or three things drove him. One, he wanted to show a balanced approach in terms of philosophy, ethnicity, gender, in terms of his administration, and the most dramatic way of doing it is to appoint a Cabinet that “looked like America.” I think that’s number one. Number two, he wrongly perceived that the Cabinet would be critical to him in terms of advice, sustenance and running an administration. It’s just not true.

**Jones:** Wouldn’t be the first President who made that mistake.

**Kantor:** Absolutely thought you could run a Cabinet government. You can’t do it. I mean, it’s just not going to work. Those two things I believe—now, I could be wrong—drove him to do what he did. Second, one of the great failings of Bill Clinton is, when faced with the task of choosing someone for something, he does not want to make a decision. For two reasons: one,
he’ll think of fifty other people who might want it or be qualified for it. He knows too many people and therefore his head is like a Rolodex, he starts going through it. Second, he doesn’t want to make a decision, but third, he recognizes that for every person you choose, then twenty other people believe they should have it and be mad at you and the one you chose probably thinks they deserved it. You get no credit whatsoever, none. And it drives him crazy. I’ve seen him do it time and time—he just pushes those files away, he doesn’t want to do it.

That being the case it took too long and it took too much of his energy. There was too much conversation. There were too many people in the room, it just was a mass. So, I think he ended up taking me out of the picture with very good, talented people—Lloyd Bentsen, Henry Cisneros, Warren Christopher—very, very good people that he selected.

Let me just make one more—the closer he got to the end of the process, maybe this is it: he made a mistake with me and with White House staff. The more mistakes he’d make, the more he just became too rushed, not thoughtful.

Hargrove: Of course, Governors don’t have big staffs. They govern through their commission.

Kantor: Right.

Hargrove: So I’m not sure he really understood what a staff could do for him.

Kantor: You may be right. It’s interesting, now that you raise that subject, or raise that point. I think he, with all his reading and all his thoughtfulness, emotionally he believed that he could do more than you can do and he believed that his Cabinet could do more than they can do, and then you’re right, he never relied on his staff in Arkansas for substantive input that much anyway. He relied on them for political—

Hargrove: That’s, right, that’s right.

Kantor: Not substantive input. I think today he would admit that that was a mistake and he should have reversed it, spend some time on the White House staff first, then pick the Cabinet.

Jones: Did you have conversations with him about the transition prior to the election?

Kantor: Only—

Jones: Such that it would reveal some of his thinking about—

Kantor: No, no, only briefly and only about the process of it, not the substance of it, no, not at all. During the head of a campaign, the last thing you get to, in every meeting, every quick conversation, every pressured moment, is transition. He wanted it to be going on. He thought it would be helpful to him, so did I. But you talk about debates, you talk about states, you talk about where you’re putting money, you talk about television and you talk about what the polls say. You talk about so many other things—that morning attack by Bush on him, or what he’s going to say—that it becomes so minute-by-minute driven that you almost never get to those questions.
Jones: React to a notion that I had in looking at the transition, which I’ve looked at pretty carefully. A candidate who comes from far out of town is, almost in a classic sense, a dark horse to start with in those early stages when you’re putting together a staff and you’re thinking about what you’re going to do. In this particular case, there were candidates people thought were obvious, like Mario Cuomo or Al Gore, maybe Gephardt. There were some experienced staff waiting around to see what they would do at the time when you really had to start building a staff, the consequence of which is that eventually the real loyalists, people who are with you from the start, don’t have that much experience because everybody is from out of town. The real savvy, in-town Washington people either waited around or didn’t commit themselves to this outsider. The consequence of which, then, is an awful lot of people arrived in Washington needing some in-town advice, but they just won and you guys lost. Right? All of you lost, we won. Was there some of that to explain the problems in the transition?

Kantor: Yes, the combination of individual ambition, lack of experience or naiveté, the fact that Washington had not been very, let’s say, supportive of Bill Clinton, Democrats in Washington, during his run for the presidency. Remember, politicians—he’s just like everybody else in this respect. You remember the people with you in the toughest times, not in the best time. The Washington establishment did not want him to be the nominee of the party. So that combination of being comfortable with other people—they’re there anyway—and having some resentment to Washington press and establishment, which continued, by the way, during his eight years, led him to pick people, in certain cases, who were either not experienced, or too young or just not ready. I think he recognized it, as I said, about six months in that he had a problem.

I’ve always thought that it should be a rule, if you worked in the campaign at a certain level and up, you shouldn’t be allowed to be on the White House staff, you should go off and do something else. It would be okay to be in the Cabinet because the Cabinet is, as often said, an adjunct to the administration, which is fine, there’s nothing wrong with that. It’s a terrific position, hopefully some things you do are modestly important, but it doesn’t run an administration and shouldn’t.

So on January whatever, early, he appoints a White House staff. I’ve got to tell you, [Thomas] Mack McLarty called me, and I don’t know where I was, but I was in a hotel room in early January. I must have been in Washington because Clinton had named me and I was getting ready, trying to be briefed up at USTR, trying to learn something about trade. And, he asked me, “Look, let me talk to you about a few people, White House staff that you know well.” I said, “Mack, you mean you still haven’t made decisions?” He said, “No.” I said, “My God, it’s January—” whatever it was, it was already January and he said, “I know, it’s a problem.” I said, “You’ve got to tell him that he’s got to make decisions, you’ve got to get going, this is impossible.” I’m sure I’m only one of legions who told him the same thing, I’m obviously not the only one.

Jones: Well, I wonder if the delay isn’t part of the same phenomenon, that is, these are sort of your loyalists, you’re choosing among children for these positions, uncertain as to what their capabilities are in major executive management.

Kantor: That’s certainly well taken, and you’re correct, and I’m sure he had a lot of problems choosing between people for various posts.
Jones: It’s interesting that Carter did the same.

Hargrove: Yes.

Young: I was just recalling how similar the circumstances were. People very young, not experienced in Washington, for his own staff—but loyalists, the Georgia Mafia as they were called or something like that. People who were loyal to Carter and who knew him, the Cabinet. He knew very few people except Griffin Bell in the Cabinet. But they were picked in a belief that they would be very important people to his administration.

Kantor: Right, exactly.

Young: The same, and both of them outsider Presidents, very different from the way Reagan did it.

Jones: Or Bush.

Kantor: Reagan frankly is very impressive in the way he did it, and Bush had people helping, had much more experience and was more thoughtful about and understood the presidency much better than in our case.

Hargrove: There is a distinction though, I think that Clinton’s expert White House staff was quite good, Anthony Lake, Robert Rubin.

Young: Not campaign folks.

Hargrove: No, but the clinical people. That’s where you draw a distinction. Somehow he found his way to Rubin, and to Lake, and to others who were out of Washington.

Kantor: Yes, he saw—

Hargrove: And Sandy Berger—

Kantor: Right, Sandy was an old friend and an excellent mind and very experienced and a terrific person. Yes is the answer to that. He did very well in that, and picking up the idea of a—I’m having a senior moment here—

Hargrove: Well, Gene Sperling—

Kantor: I’m trying to think of the—the National Economic Council was one of the smartest things done in the administration for two reasons. One, it was a good idea, but second, of course, Bob Rubin was spectacular, so was Laura Tyson. They both did terrific jobs in heading that.

Hargrove: He had heard from somebody these are good people and he said okay, but then on his own, political side—

Kantor: He had a hard time, and a lot comes from having young or inexperienced people in those slots.
Riley: I want to go back and pick up a loose end that relates to his earliest personnel decision, and that was Al Gore. You were involved in that process and we got press reports indicating that there was a meeting in April where you went with Warren Christopher to sort of brainstorm.

Kantor: There were many, yes—

Riley: Can you tell us about that meeting and the process?

Kantor: Clinton and I would discuss the idea of starting early, after the New York primary, putting the process together for selecting a Vice President. He was absolutely convinced that the way it had been done by others with walks down the driveway and making it public and trying to appease every element of the Democratic party by having people in the process publicly that were not either serious candidates or would not be chosen, which embarrassed them and embarrassed the campaign, was absolutely the wrong way to do it. That one, this was serious, and two, he needed someone not only who could serve as President but that he could work with, and three, we should throw out all notions of what the criteria politically had been in the past and think about this from a new perspective.

We talked about who should head this, and he said, “You and Chris are such good friends, and Chris is so well organized and straightforward and smart and experienced, why don’t we have Chris head it and you work with him and let’s put the process together?” I sat down with Christopher, with Chris, and he agreed that that was the way to do it in a careful, considerate, thoughtful manner, which is the way Warren Christopher does everything. I mean, that is his style, that is the way he operates. He’s incredibly impressive in doing it.

We put together a number of lawyers who to this day, to their credit, have never, as you said earlier, used the word “blabbed” about what they did and who was considered and how it was done. We met with President Clinton in, was it Tallahassee or Gainesville, Florida? God, I can’t remember now, in one of the two.

Jones: It was forgettable actually.

Young: Both forgettable.

Kantor: You can’t say that, my older brother lives in Jacksonville, and if you say anything he doesn’t like about the Florida Gators, he goes crazy. You said that, I didn’t say that. But sat with him and we had a list of sixty Democrats from all kinds of backgrounds who might be considered, including some people who would be quite unusual. We talked it through, we narrowed it down to, I think, about twenty-five, I can’t remember now. We did an initial run and built a book of background on the twenty-five. Narrowed it down to about ten in another meeting. Narrowed it down to three.

He met with three in Washington and other places, in secret. Christopher was in Little Rock, I was somewhere else, I couldn’t be there, but we talked by phone two or three times at night with Hillary and the President and I think Bruce Lindsey must have been there. I don’t know if George was there or not and that’s when he said Al Gore was his choice and he called Gore in Carthage. I’ve got to say that although Christopher and his team did the background work and we discussed it all, this was really his decision. Decisions like this are so personal to a President
or Presidential candidate that you don’t—He knew where he wanted to go and he believed, more important in the age of the primacy of television, in the information age, that regional lines had been blurred and that all this balancing of tickets really didn’t make any difference at all. He believed that what you portrayed in terms of consistency on the issues, who you were as people, and whether or not you could get along in a presidency—because he planned to and did use his Vice President more than any other President before him—were the critical issues.

And then Gore became the obvious choice. They really didn’t know each other very well at all. They’d had a very good session, longer than they imagined they would have, when they met in Washington. He was impressed by Gore’s intellect, by his experience, by his commitments, by their similar views and by Gore’s discipline and ability to work hard, focus. He also thought, and this was his thought, that two guys like them—new, fresh, young, vigorous—would be such a contrast to George Bush and Dan Quayle that it would make a huge difference.

If you’d asked me at the time I’d say, good choice, solid choice, I’m not sure it would make a lot of difference. It made a lot difference. I would have been wrong about that. If you remember the Time or Newsweek cover, the two of them walking out of the Governor’s mansion together, I mean, you could see it happen in the polls, as soon as they covered it. The American people took a preexisting notion, that George Bush wasn’t connected, to the notion these two young guys were—that they were good looking and vigorous, vital and vibrant, and this was exactly what the country needed. The bus trips made that very clear.

Hargrove: The bus trips—

Kantor: I really want to talk about those. People take credit for them who shouldn’t deserve it and people who deserve credit should get it.

Young: Why don’t you talk about it?

Kantor: The first architect of the bus trips was Carter Wilkie, someone most of you don’t know, the son of Curtis Wilkie, who was a Boston Globe reporter. Now he’s a professor at the University of Mississippi. Carter was in our political unit in the campaign. He said the election will be won or lost in the Ohio River Valley. If we could hold that whole region from Pennsylvania to Missouri, that we will win the election, that it’s over. Bev Lindsey and Mort Engleberg came up with the idea of a bus trip. The idea was that the way to go through there, after the convention, was to head through that and try to, on the ground, show that they were different, that these guys really could connect to the American people—again, a stark contrast to Bush. Any President in the White House seems isolated, not connected, and I think unfortunately George Bush seemed—he’s a very nice man—seemed even more disconnected.

Young: He also had Quayle.

Kantor: He had Quayle, which was—and I’ll come back to that, why they didn’t do certain things. I still don’t understand to this day why they didn’t do certain obvious things. They may have won the campaign if they had.
Many people on the campaign fought this trip, saying you can’t put two southern guys on a bus, they’re going to look like hayseeds. Mort Engleberg and Bev to their credit stayed on my back, day after day, saying this will work, this will be great. Frankly, they were such pains in the rear, I said “Enough is enough, let’s just do it.” I’ve got to say, I did not see the power of this. I wish I could sit here and say—people who say they saw the power of this are just not telling the truth, they’re just not telling the truth.

Got on the buses, started out through New Jersey, got into Pennsylvania, came back into New Jersey to spend the night. We knew this thing was larger than life. You built the crowds along the way during the day and early evening, and they were huge, but campaigns build crowds. You go on the radio, you’d put out flyers, they’d just won the nomination, you expect that. They were a little bigger than we expected and it was great. But when they went back, got back to the hotel about two in the morning, there were thousands of people waiting. We didn’t do anything to build that crowd. Had no idea. We knew we had something different and unusual and powerful on our hands. Well, it just got better and better as they went through the Midwest and ended up in St. Louis with a huge rally in downtown St. Louis.

That plus the debates were the seminal events of that campaign. That put him on the road to victory and the debates sealed the victory, especially the people’s debate in Richmond. I think that’s what locked it in for him.

Young: Were you involved in the debate preparation?

Kantor: Yes. I organized it, but the person who deserves the most credit is Tom Donilon, who later worked for Warren Christopher, Chief of Staff. Fabulous talent, one of the most talented people I’ve ever met in American politics. I called Tom, got him involved, he got the people involved, organized it and so on. The first debate was in St. Louis and we prepared for that in Kansas City, as you may not recall, it’s probably not that important where we were.

I will tell you one vignette out of the first night. We believed that Clinton had been so far away from town meetings and debates, particularly debates, that he was out of shape so to speak. We thought the first night we really had to bring back reality, bring him back to reality. So Bob Barnett played Bush. Bob’s a lawyer in Washington, very famous lawyer, represents a lot of news people and authors and so on, very talented guy, had Bush down pat. We gave Bob Barnett—and Mike Synar, who played Ross Perot—the questions ahead of time, so they could be prepared. They slaughtered Clinton. They tore him up one side and down the other. He was stunned and upset because he couldn’t believe it, that he couldn’t—I mean everything he came back with, they had a better answer because they were prepared for it. We did that and I think it was the right thing to do. It was the idea of Michael Shaughnessy. He was helping us with the debate preparation, he was a terrific guy, and then the next couple of nights did it straight and of course he got better and better.

The first debate, if you remember, Ross Perot stole the show. Ross, interesting personality, he didn’t do a walk through like everybody else did. He didn’t have a lot of staff. This is the God’s honest truth. It’s about 30 minutes before the debate and Clinton is being made up by a makeup person, and a few of us are sitting there, talking to him. [knock knock] “Clinton in there?” [laughter] It’s Ross Perot, and I go to the door and I say, “Ross, you know he’s getting made
up.” He says, “Mickey, could I talk to you?” “Sure.” He said, “How do I walk in here?” Absolute God’s honest truth.

I said, “Well, Ross, haven’t they told you?” He said, “No, no one’s told me anything.” So I walked him through it, told him how he walked in, what he did. He absolutely was walking as loose as he appeared to be. This to him was just another show, just another thing. I think that President Bush and then-Governor Clinton were probably too uptight, too tense, this was so important to them.

Young: [imitating Perot’s voice] Where’s Larry King?

Kantor: Exactly, exactly. I mean, Heidi was with me, my wife, and she couldn’t—I told her stories. I had met with Ross secretly a lot during August, his people now in New York, and I was just completely befuddled by this attitude and this ability not to show any concern whatsoever for what he was about to do.

Well, we realized after the first debate that Perot was a factor, number one. Number two, our key was going to be the people’s debate, which was the second debate in Richmond. Went to Williamsburg to prepare and he then did an amazing job, which he was prepared to do, including walking up to that woman after Bush couldn’t answer the question and answering the Bush’s question in a way that just was the metaphor for the entire campaign. And then of course the picture of Bush in the back, looking at his watch. That was the end of that campaign for all intents and purposes.

When he walked up to the woman, we were sitting in the green room—Stephanopoulos, Carville, myself—we were all up and cheering. We knew as soon as he started toward it, this was it, he was prepared for it, he knew what he wanted to do. We insisted on the remote mikes. Harry Thomasson and Heidi, my wife, insisted, because they knew if Clinton could move around, indicate his comfort with people, it so contrasted with Perot and Bush that it would make a difference. And they were absolutely right. Here were two people who understood television, Harry understanding drama to some extent. They took the best advantage of his abilities and it did make a difference.

Riley: These meetings you had with Perot, is it worth getting you to elaborate?

Kantor: Not really. Felix Rohatyn set them up; he was a friend of Perot. Perot wanted to meet with me and just talk through—Perot had quit at that point, remember, and I was trying not so subtly to get him to support Clinton. He had said nice things about Clinton when he had dropped out, as you recall, right before Clinton’s speech on the Thursday of the Democratic Convention, and so we thought there was a fair shot, as long as it didn’t become public. It did work out that when he got back into the race, we maintained our relationship, interestingly enough.

Remember, we had that strange meeting in Texas where the two campaigns were trying to convince the Perot people—As I look back in retrospect, not a smart thing to do on either campaign’s part, to sort of prostrate yourself in front of Ross Perot and his people. I think it was the best group of people, everybody from Vernon Jordan to David Boren to Lloyd Bentsen, I just happened to be one of them, but we should have appealed to all the Perot voters. And of course, it made no difference, he was going to get back in no matter what. We weren’t going to keep him
from getting back in. So we really just made ourselves look silly. In the end it made no difference, and in the end, Ross Perot probably took about the same amount from each person, probably didn’t take any more from Clinton than he did Bush or Bush from Clinton.

Hargrove: That seems to be the evidence.

Kantor: He hurt Dole in ’96 but not in ’92.

[BREAK]

Jones: Getting into the whole trade position, by your talking some about the transition there—that is, obviously President-elects have transitions, but so does everyone who is appointed to major positions. How did that go, the relationships with the outgoing folks, Carla Hills? I think it’s important. That’s not talked about enough, it’s not written about enough, and if you could talk a little bit about the details of that, how it went.

Kantor: My guess is that this transition was no different than any other non-incumbent coming in and transitioning to positions of the incumbent they have beaten. It is always a little bit tense. I had some advantage with Carla. We had known each other in Los Angeles, both been attorneys there. We’d been in competing law firms, but firms that were very close to each other. She was at Munger, Tolles & Rickershauser and I was at Manatt, Phelps, Rothenberg at the time. I had great respect for her, have great respect for her. I hope it was shared. I think it was. However, it is never easy.

Now, I had a lot of folks who were and were not officially on the transition team, who were knowledgeable in the area of trade, who were briefing me, preparing papers, trying to convince me of what the priorities should be. I did a lot of reading, thousands of pages of trying to get ready for that position, but most of it came from people either in the transition or in Washington, who were Democrats, who either I knew or I knew of, or other people I knew would bring them in.

I used a friend of mine, Steve Engleberg, a very close friend from Memphis, who I’ve known now since I was eleven years old. He worked for Mondale, was a lawyer in Washington, was politically sophisticated. He really helped me tremendously, put together the right people to both brief me and get me informed. Barry Carter, who is a professor at Georgetown, also was tremendously helpful. One notion overrides all others in that period of time, from late December—I was named I think on Christmas eve or the day before—to the 19th or the 18th when my hearing was. It’s your hearing, it’s the committee, it’s your visits to the committee, it’s trying to get yourself confirmed.

And what that does, of course, is focus your own priorities, answering questions. Obviously you do learn a lot in the process, but it’s not a perfect way to do it because you are concerned about the politics of the committee, the political questions—political questions with a little “p,” how to deal with the major concerns of the committee, not exactly the major concerns in USTR that the
administration might have. It’s first things first, and if you can’t be confirmed, it makes no
difference that you had this wonderful concept of how to run USTR.

Ron Brown and I had a wonderful conversation, funny. Ron and I were old friends, knew each
other quite well and Zoë Baird got in trouble—some of her own making, some not, unfortunate
for her, she’s a terrifically talented person—but Ron called me one night right before his hearing.
He said, “Thank God for Zoë Baird because no one is going to pay any attention to us,” which of
course was true. Zoë Baird’s hearing was the same day as mine. I mean, I was delighted that 45
minutes into it that Rhode Island Republican—

Young: [John] Chafee.

Kantor: Chafee. John said, “We’re going to vote for him anyway, why don’t we just go on.”
They just were not focused on me, thank goodness. They could have been. There was some
concern in the transition. I was chairman of the campaign, I was not a political unknown, there
could have been—but once Democrats were in control, thank goodness, of the Senate, the Zoë
Baird situation was taking up much of the political oxygen and therefore I was an afterthought.
Stumbled my way through the hearing.

Jones: How about the passage in your own mind, so to speak? If I think about the people I knew
in the administration, my former boss, Donna Shalala, would be on one end of the continuum of
confident “this is the job I wanted and I know I can do this.”

Kantor: You just have to get Donna a little more enthusiastic. [laughter]

Jones: Somebody once said she suffered from terminal enthusiasm, and Bob Reich on the other
hand, was confident in his own mind about his intellect but uncertain about—Where did you fit
in that sort of continuum? Was this a passage that you thought: this is something I can do and I
want to do?

Kantor: I was uncertain about the substance, not very confident about the process. Only
uncertain about the substance because it was so new to me, but I had the arrogance that many
lawyers have, unfortunately. I will admit to that fault. Of course, lawyers believe that there is no
substance they can’t learn, that if they understand the process they can handle whatever the
assignment is. It’s arrogant, it’s sometimes not productive, but I believe that. Now, was I
supremely confident? No. It was new to me. Except for four years as a naval officer and as a
legal service lawyer, I’d never been in government. Certainly nothing like this. So it was pretty
thoughtless on my part. I probably should have been more frightened and more concerned.

I’d had only brief conversations with the President, with Ron Brown, about positioning roles to
play, how we moved at first, how we reintegrated the Uruguay Round. One call with Clinton I
had before the inauguration, we talked about a couple of issues, but the most prominent of which
was how to position. I told him what I believed I needed to do, what role I had to play if we were
going to move NAFTA in the Uruguay Round. The Uruguay Round was moribund. You may or
may not recall, Carla Hills and Leon—now Lord Leon—Brittain, had come to loggerheads in
January, couldn’t move the Uruguay Round at all. I told Clinton that unless we were extremely
tough and public about it, and showed a resolve that we were not going to move the Europeans
one way or the other—and second, that we’d show the Congress that we’d stand up for the
interests of the American people—then we could not be successful in restarting those discussions. And I said I had to be the bad cop. I said, “You’re going to be uncomfortable sometimes with what I do. Ron ought to be the good cop, that’s what the Commerce Secretary should be anyway.” And I said, “I cannot negotiate our way to the end of this year and get these done unless I break some furniture early on in this thing. They’ve got to think I’m probably a little too hot to handle.”

People look at me and say, “Gee, he must be a tough guy.” I’m really not. I thought I was a lawyer with a client. My client was Bill Clinton. He needed to get these things done and we had an economy that we needed to be successful in order not to harm any recovery. It wouldn’t have helped, but psychologically we couldn’t harm our recovery. We had to show progress. And I recognized from my readings, and people briefed me, that the American people really were skeptical if not cynical about trade. We’d given away our markets in the cold war in order to build the economies of Europe and Japan. Right policy at the time, but the American people really understood it perfectly, we gave away our markets in order to strengthen them, and therefore trade agreements were not helpful to the American people. I had to show that this President was going to stand up for their interests. I guess it worked fairly well. But I think it was an obvious strategy. I don’t think it was so smart on our part. That was one part.

The second, we believed that if we could show we were moving on NAFTA and on APEC, which nobody had paid much attention to, we could frighten the Europeans into saying we’ve got to go multilateral, we’ve got to make the Uruguay Round work or these guys are going to eat our lunch in trade. They’re going to go out and make deals, regionally and otherwise, that are going to make them even more powerful than they are. So that was second. We had to push those things, along with being tough.

Hargrove: This was before Clinton had decided on NAFTA.

Kantor: No, he had decided on October the 5th at North Carolina State what he was going to do. Now, he wavered in June, in July of ’93, but he had decided he was going to move forward at this point.

Hargrove: Okay, yes.

Kantor: At least, if you ask me what was in his head—he works on so many levels, he may have been thinking he would have to back off ultimately with a Democratic Congress and the animosity towards NAFTA. Because what would you say to your USTR? Even to me, as close as I was to him, he wouldn’t have said it to me even if he thought it. I don’t know if he thought it or not.

Now, June and July we’d had real discussions about it because of health care and how it related or didn’t interrelate. So what Ron and I agreed on, we’d go after steel, and after European discrimination against U.S.-made heavy electrical equipment and stuff that GE makes, generators. Big generators, steam generators. We hadn’t sold a steam generator in Europe since the Second World War, they had literally locked us out of the market. It was really a GE thing.

Well, six days in we sanctioned the Europeans. We didn’t implement it, but we announced sanctions. We went after the steel issue. Leon Brittain came over to the U.S. In our first meeting,
then the second meeting he was breathless, he couldn’t believe we had done it. He was very upset. Leon is a very bright, able guy and we have become good friends, but he was just beside himself. I finally sat down with Leon and Jacques Delors and we worked out an agreement. If they would go zero for zero on tariffs, to reengage the Uruguay Round, and support that, we would then drop the sanctions if they would just allow our heavy electrical equipment and so on in. Agreed. That was major. Two things happened because of that. One, I think it occurred to Leon, who is very bright, and to Delors, who is also very bright—these guys may be more subtle than we think they are, they’re not just cowboys running around threatening people, and two, they’re committed to getting the Uruguay Round done.

As we got through that, we were heading towards the G8. Domestically we had lost the so-called the stimulus package, worst moniker ever given to any bill, awful moniker. It should have been delivered in a plain brown wrapper. And Clinton as you know took a dive in the polls—“don’t ask, don’t tell,” the stimulus package, looked like he didn’t know his way, Styrofoam coffee cups, running in shorts, you name it—things were not going as well as they should. He was getting a lot done, more than anyone suspected, on education, other things, but he was getting no credit for it.

We got to June and July. He had agreed with Bob Rubin we had to go for the tax rise and what I’d call fiscally responsible economic package. It was in the Congress and we needed every Democrat we could find, and we wanted to introduce health care. NAFTA ran against both. At least, on the surface you look and say, “Wait a minute, NAFTA is counter to our strategy, as an administration, because we lose Democrats. We can’t afford to lose Democrats. How are we going to do this?” We talked it through. In fact, I had a meeting with Hillary, we just sat outside of the White House.

Young: By “we” you mean the President and you—

Kantor: We had one big meeting in the White House. I’d talked to the President privately, this conundrum, we had one big meeting where I said, “Look, if you weakened….” Maybe I shouldn’t be doing this but I will say it, it’s clear. I said, “Look, if in fact we can’t get the stimulus package done and get health care introduced—” which was so important to the administration—“NAFTA will go bye-bye because all I have to do is be so tough on the environmental side agreements with Mexico, and Canada will never agree. We’ll look good to Democrats, we can hold our votes.” I said, “I don’t believe that is in the best interests of the country, in terms of trade and so on. I could argue this is a political decision that has to be made.” And we talked it through and never said, “No, we can’t do that. It wouldn’t be responsible to do that.” We actually had a discussion about that, there were maybe fifteen people in the room.

Then the question was, how do you sequence the three? It’s July, the stimulus package is coming up in the House. At that point you wouldn’t have predicted we would have won. In fact we ended up winning by one vote in the Senate.

Jones: You mean the budget. Not the stimulus.
Kantor: The budget, not the stimulus, I’m sorry, the budget. And we talked about that and finally it was a common agreement, I didn’t come up with this. I said, “Look, the way to sequence it is to keep your negotiations going. Be public about them, because you want to continue to push the Europeans. At the same time we’d reach agreement with G8. All this is going on at the same. Don’t finish negotiations before this budget package gets through the House and the Senate or we’ll lose. Don’t do it, just drag it out.” And as Clinton said to me, “I know you can do this, Mickey. Just go ahead and just drag them out.”

So we met at the Madison Hotel for days and days and days. And I at one point told Jaime Serra Puche, “We watch the House vote, I want you to watch this with me, and you’ll see what I’m doing.” He was the trade minister for Mexico, very bright, Yale graduate, wonderful guy. And Jaime sat there and watched Marjorie Margolies-Mezvinsky walk down that aisle and he said he’d never seen anything like that in his life, particularly in Mexico at that point. One vote, on the biggest thing the President had. And I said, “Now you understand why I can’t finish this until—we have got to get this done. You don’t want this President weakened or we’ll never get NAFTA through the Congress.” I took him into my confidence because he had to understand that we just could not, we just couldn’t keep it going.

Riley: You were about to mention a meeting with Hillary and I didn’t know whether—

Kantor: Well, Hillary was right between Tokyo and all that was going on and the meeting with Charlene I told you about, and the budget bill. Hillary and I had to sit down and negotiate when they could introduce health care, when we could introduce NAFTA and how in the world this was going to work. Because they were contradictory in the sense we needed Democrats on health care, we were losing Democrats on NAFTA. So we came up with—it worked to a great degree but I’m not sure it was very smart. It was just like sausage being made, these kinds of compromises which everybody talks about, it’s old, trite but true. Introduce NAFTA, stop, don’t take the President’s time. Introduce health care, take the President’s time for one month, go back to NAFTA and try to get it done in November. It was probably—only people who are not familiar with Washington could have thought that would work. Could have even believed it was possible to pull the Congress back and forth that way. It worked, strangely enough it worked. And there was no genius on anyone’s part—it was probably from lack of experience we thought it would work. So we did that.

Remember Carter and Gerald Ford and [George] Bush came to the White House, we also had the Israeli-Palestinian handshake, it was a great couple of days. Clinton made a stunning speech about NAFTA and trade, after which Bush said now he understands why he is on the outside looking in. We then went to full stop. We didn’t do a thing in the Congress. People in Congress were screaming at us: “Pro-trade Democrats—what are you doing? Why aren’t you introducing health care?” Hillary, remember she had those great hearings up on the Hill where she stunned people with her knowledge and so on and so forth. That’s before it became a 14 million-page bill or whatever it turned out to be. [laughter]

Then we went back to NAFTA. We were in terrible trouble when we started in terms of votes. Terrible trouble. And the President, through sheer force of personality and brilliance of presentation day after day, brought Democrats and Republicans down to that White House and convinced them they had to do this. We did some horse trading. We opened the candy store, we
gave away everything we could find in order to make this pass, but the fact is it was the President’s—you have in your book it passed on December 8th. I think he must have signed it on December 8th, it passed in November because it passed before we went to APEC.

He went to APEC in triumph and met with people on trade, which is one of the interesting things. The whole time I was negotiating the Uruguay Round and doing NAFTA, and trying to put APEC together, was one of the most exhilarating, exhausting, interesting times of my life. Everybody has those things, but that was very important that the Europeans see all this going on, and of course, it was critical that we won and NAFTA passed. It passed in the House 232 to 200 as I recall.

Jones: Could you reflect on whether your experience in the campaign, the skills required in the campaign, were transferable to what you’re describing now?

Kantor: Yes. If you don’t have some political background, experience, sagacity and understanding as well as interest, you cannot handle any of these jobs as well as you should. Sheer brilliance or experience in the substantive areas or knowledge of the issues will not get you there in a democratic form of government. It just will not do it. You’ve got to deal with the Congress, you have to deal with the press, you’ve got to deal with interest groups, you have to deal with foreign countries, you have to deal with foreign press. You have many different constituencies and my political experience was invaluable, to me at least, in terms of trying to understand all those the best I could, and to stumble my way through it. I don’t believe I could have done it, or been able to get some things done if I hadn’t had that experience.

Jones: How do you manage that? I mean, I think it is of interest to more than professors who hole themselves up in libraries or offices and work, don’t want to have lots of distractions, but clearly you’re describing something where you can proceed with oftentimes too little information and where a decision is required too quickly. Just how do you do that?

Kantor: Audacity. You don’t have any choice. We were talking about it earlier upstairs. The modern presidency and modern government are both the beneficiary and victim of information and the 24-hour news cycle, the complete connection to the world in terms of news and contact. And it makes you not as contemplative or as reflective as you should be. You make decisions on the fly. You clearly don’t do things as well or as thoughtfully as you probably should. You have no choice.

Hargrove: You’d lose control otherwise, wouldn’t you?

Kantor: Yes, you lose control, and you won’t accomplish as much as you should. What runs through all of this—let me just say this as a caveat to anything I have said before and will say further in any of these sessions—all of us there push the ball forward a little bit, hopefully. None of us are great heroes. You hope you’re fairly effective, but no one should say that we changed the world. We didn’t change the world. You hope you can move it forward to some degree and hope you can make some progress, and I think we did. But it’s a terrible burden that you have. Not in terms of your own—your adrenalin is pumping so hard, as I think I said before, that you don’t feel it is a burden—in fact, you’re energized by all the various stimuli and things you have to do, of necessity. You have no boring minute, much less boring hour or day. Never.
On the other hand, because of those pressures, my guess is you make some mistakes. You offend some people and you make some tactical or strategic errors; you don’t do things as well as you should have or think through some issues as well as you should have. I guess it goes with the territory. I don’t know how else to do it under these circumstances.

Hargrove: I think you said early on, as quoted in one of these pieces, “My job is to get Clinton re-elected.”

Kantor: I think that is taken out of context. I was frequently charged, sometimes correctly so, with being too political and too loyal to him and continuing to think about how what we were doing affected him, and to some degree I have to plead guilty to that. However, I cared and care deeply about these issues in trade and how it fits into foreign policy and jobs in the U.S. and I took it seriously. I think the record is such, 200 trade agreements in four years, that it is fairly impressive. But I saw that fitting in to what he was trying to do, not being counter to it.

It wasn’t inconsistent at all. I thought every Cabinet officer who owed their job to only one person should put this motto on the wall behind their desk: “I didn’t get here on merit.” We owed not only our allegiance but our commitment to him in terms of his reelection, in terms of his success as a President. But, to the person, I think everyone took their job seriously and no one would have dumped on an issue just to be political. Now, should you have backed off on NAFTA because you had serious other things and it was getting in the way? Maybe, but that’s another question, that was substantive. But if I was too political at times, yes, I have to plead guilty to that. I probably was.

Riley: Were you in the White House with the President when he was meeting with members of Congress trying to sell—

Kantor: Yes.

Riley: Can you tell us a little bit about his operating style with these members, how he would talk about opening up the candy store, but a lot of this—

Kantor: That was only part of it, that was really as much as anything the Florida delegation, a couple of other things, the NAD [North American Development] bank and so on, which brought around the others, especially the Hispanic caucus. The Florida delegation being the most critical, we worked on tomatoes and fruit and so on, and some other environmental issues. His command of the issues, political and substantive and understanding their needs politically—I’m not talking about what they needed from him, what they were faced with, especially in terms of organized labor—was nothing short of brilliant. He not only understood the country, he understood their districts, he understood the people. He could draw them out and talk them through their problems.

It was like a master at work. That same thing you saw in campaigning, where he would draw from you, Erwin, and give back, it was the same thing and he’d give back in terms of what he was thinking about, what he was concerned about. And it was a tour de force. I sat in on all the meetings and from time to time [David] Gergen or others sat in. People just sat there, were amazed at how good he was at it, and now he had great experience. He’d worked with the
Arkansas legislature, he’d been preparing for this all his adult life. He was great, and that’s really what did it.

There was a good business community lobbying effort, which worked well. There were a lot of other things that happened. Bill Daley did a terrific job. He came in to nail it, but in the end it was him. In the end he moved the people.

**Riley:** Can you tell us a little bit about how you were thinking about building a coalition with Republicans? You didn’t have Republicans to deal with in Arkansas, this was a different—

**Kantor:** Yes, Republicans by their very nature had a tendency to be for this of course, philosophically, NAFTA was George Bush’s—remember NAFTA was signed December 17, 1992. It was already signed, we added the side agreements. And so in some ways they were committed to it. They had a political—they did not want to pass the thing, help Clinton. Democrats voted against it and Democrats campaigned against them in their district based for supporting NAFTA. In other words, the worst of all worlds. So Newt Gingrich insisted we get a hundred Democrats to vote for this so Democrats could not make the serious statement that it was a Republican bill or that Republicans, only Republicans, were for NAFTA.

We got 102 Democrats to vote for it. That was critical to us, and Clinton understood their political needs, and his political needs. Clinton would make a great USTR, because one of the things you have to know, when you get to the table, is first, what does the person on the other side need, what is their problem? Because if you can’t both walk away winners it is a terrible negotiation, you have made a big mistake, either if you’re a loser or the other side is a loser. And he understood that both intuitively and by experience, and was able to convince them he could get the 102 Democrats. And number two, that it was in their interest, their political interest to support NAFTA as well, that they were committed to it politically, except for the very right wing of the Republican Party.

**Riley:** And how were you dealing with Gephardt and David Bonior in this case?

**Kantor:** Oh, Bonior. David was on the other side from the get go. We had innumerable, interminable conversations with him. We tried to use the side agreements and other reasons to move him and just couldn’t do it, no matter how many commitments. Remember at the end we had the Mexican government and the Canadian government made some concessions to us as well. When Jean Chrétien was Prime Minister-elect, I had many conversations with his chief of staff, who was Eddie Goldenberg, and others, about how he had to help us, he had to quit making these statements about they were going to walk away for certain things in NAFTA, that he had to support us in this, he had to look like the Canadians were going to be supportive and then NAFTA would work. Chrétien had run on anti-U.S. because he had been convinced that was the way, and he was right, to win his election in Canada. So it was sort of running against the grain.

So we were engaged with the Mexicans and Canadians, at the same time engaged with the Florida delegation, at the same time trying to move other members of Congress, at the same time trying to build 218, which is your majority, in the House.

**Jones:** Were there key Democrats—
Kantor: Did that answer your question?

Riley: Well, I suppose so. What I was trying to get a bigger picture of is how, if you’re dealing with somebody like Gephardt and Bonior on a major issue like this where they’re for whatever reason going to go against the President, how you sustain the collegiality and the partisan ties that you’re going to need to go forward from there. It may be a big question.

Kantor: No, it’s a good question. Part of it is just due to personal relationships. Part of it is you’re going to need them the next day, they’re going to need you. You can get some heated arguments, but you also understand. In some ways Gephardt could not support this. His base is organized labor. It was then, is now. He couldn’t go against; organized labor had become more and more adamant about this. There was no way he could do this. Now, Dick Gephardt is probably delighted with the outcome. He opposed it but yet it passed. One Congressman said to the President, “If we had a secret vote ballot in the House, it would pass 400 to 35. Almost no one would oppose NAFTA, everyone knows it’s the right thing to do. The problem is our politics.” And secretly, that’s the way—I think it was the best of all worlds for Dick Gephardt. He didn’t take any blame for it going down and yet he was loyal to his base constituency.

Jones: Were there key Democrats that you knew, if you got X, then others would follow, given that the main, principal leadership was on the other side?

Kantor: Yes. I’m trying to remember now who were the—first of all, even though he was in trouble, Danny Rostenkowski was critical to this. I had never, and have not to this day, met anyone who was more able by sheer force of personality and presence to get something done in politics, more than Rostenkowski, at least in the Congress. And he was a major factor in moving people, along with Clinton. But he was for it from the very first. You had a bunch of pro-trade Democrats, Bob Matsui of California and others, who were for this.

Those Democrats who were somewhat more concerned and we were worried about their politics, you just had to pick off almost one at a time. You had to convince them in their own district they were okay. That’s where Clinton was so brilliant, he would go person-to-person, district-to-district, issue-to-issue. There was no one Democrat where you could say, “If you get this person you’ve got it.”

Now, the Florida delegation was different. They were a solid—Democrats, Republicans, what they wanted and what they needed—but that was strictly, as I termed it, opening the candy store, and you had to do that, that was the only way. They had real politics. This is not just phony baloney going on. They had real concerns and their agricultural community had real concerns, so we had to address those. That’s why you had to get the Mexican government back in, particularly, and do some convincing that they had to move on certain issues, on tomatoes, or move on sugar for other purposes, Louisiana and Minnesota because of sugar beets and so on.

Jones: What you’re describing about Clinton and his face-to-face lobbying and his knowledge of the districts, almost role-playing in the sense of I know what your interests are—and bear in mind I fully appreciate that—is a set of characteristics that described Lyndon Johnson.

Kantor: Completely empathetic. As empathetic as any—
Jones: But without, in Clinton’s case, without the legislative experience himself.

Kantor: Right. It is a great talent. Johnson knew them all personally and had known them for years and had a powerful personality, as we all know. Clinton did it from just understanding politics and understanding what moves people in politics, translated his Arkansas experience to a Washington battlefield. Remember, he had met a lot of these people along the road in ’91 and ’92, and he remembered about their district, about them, their background. He doesn’t forget who your family is and about the kids and whether someone is in their first term or their fifth term and what do they want to do later in life. I mean, he keeps all that in his head.

Hargrove: Does his congressional staff help him there?

Kantor: Oh sure, helps a lot. But he is briefed beforehand, and let this not be that it is all him, of course it’s not. But you have to be able to carry it out. In the end, there’s only one actor on the stage. Republicans used to rail at Newt Gingrich, telling him to quit going over and negotiating with Clinton during the budget fights, because every time he’d going over there he started agreeing with Clinton. Clinton was completely empathetic with Gingrich. Gingrich is a very bright, interesting, creative guy. I don’t know if you’ve spent any time with him. I mean, I don’t agree with him on much of anything, but he is full of interesting ideas, and loves intellectual discussion, and of course, Clinton is terrific at that. So Clinton used to just wow Gingrich with that.

Clinton intuitively understands where you want to go in a conversation and what’s going to impress you—that’s just a talent he has.

Young: So one of the things I get out of this is that Clinton’s special gifts in dealing with people were employed in the campaigning and in the governing and that there was a straight connection between —

Kantor: Should have been employed more. One of the real failures of the administration, of him, was a failure to use the White House. Not for dinners of fifty, they did every night, but dinners of one, of bringing that family over. Johnson did that a lot, other Presidents have done that a lot. Clinton did not build a personal constituency in the Congress that was deeply loyal to him and would, as I say, putting it euphemistically, run through brick walls for him. And because he didn’t do that and didn’t do it with the press corps, it was not helpful to him in times when he was not as popular or got in trouble.

Hargrove: Fascinating, wonder why.

Kantor: I’m just guessing. As I said probably an hour and a half ago, I think there was a lingering resentment both to what he considered to be Washington establishment and the press corps, from the campaign, and he believed they’d never accept him. A little like Jimmy Carter, I think.

Hargrove: And Mrs. Clinton felt that—

Kantor: She felt it even more, and that, we’ll just overwhelm them because we’re brighter and smarter, better, more motivated, better plans and so on.
Hargrove: That sounds like Carter. But what about coalitions in the Congress, didn’t he see the need—?

Kantor: He saw it, he understood it intellectually. Emotionally, though, he couldn’t bring himself—it was one thing to have fifty people at the White House every night and doing what he does brilliantly, touching everybody. But it is not like bringing Dick Gephardt down there, alone, two or three times, with his family, without family, sitting down, having dinner, talking things through. It’s just not the same. You don’t build that personal commitment, loyalty.

Jones: Then of course in ’94, the Republicans are in charge.

Kantor: Well ’95, starting January ’95.

Jones: So, ’95, as Russell points out, the experience of working with the other party was not something he could carry from Arkansas as a regular thing, even though that’s come to be characteristic.

Kantor: It was very tough for about six months there after the election, he was reeling. His presidency and he were reeling from the defeat. He took it personally, he was upset about it, he blamed everybody including himself. He thought the Congress had run away from him and that was a mistake in their campaigning. He thought he had made some mistakes. He knew he was in trouble. Remember the question whether he was still relevant.

Hargrove: He said he was—

Kantor: Right, right. After some hesitation I think. It was a very bad time. He was unsure, unsteady. I’d never seen him like that before or since.

Hargrove: Now, the paradigm here with his loss as Governor?

Kantor: I think somewhat, yeah, right, right, some of that. Remember part of it was blamed on Hillary, he really reacts violently when people criticize Hillary. I mean, he really gets angry, you can just see it. He literally gets red in the face. That congressional loss, because he saw what it did to his presidency and how difficult it was going to be—he related it to his own reelection two years hence, it was rejection of him, rejection of Hillary. I mean, you name it, everything that could go wrong did go wrong in his mind.

We went to APEC right after that. I remember sitting with him in the ambassador’s residence in Indonesia and Jakarta, up in the bedroom, he and I just talking. He was venting about how upset he was and how concerned. Then he said, “You don’t know Dick Morris, do you?” And I said, “No. I know who he is, I know he worked with you early on in your campaign.” He said “No, I’ve never worked with him. I want him to call you and you can’t tell anybody. I’m going to bring him back in, I need to work with somebody I think that is smart enough and will understand and can figure out where we need to go.”

At the time, of course, I had no idea the impact that that would have, both positive and negative. I didn’t know Dick Morris at all and I said, “Sure, of course, I’ll be glad to talk—” and he said, “Look, whatever you say to him, you’re saying to me. Morris will be criticized by a lot of
people, but the one thing is—” this turns out not to be true— “he will not reveal that he talked to you, so you can be totally candid with him.”

And through the next number of months I talked to Morris a lot. The first time Morris called me, I wish I could tell you, but I can’t remember today what it was. He said something that Clinton had said that sounded so weird, I said, “This can’t be true, this is hyperbole, this cannot be true.” So I called the President and said, “Dick Morris just called me and he said you said the following.” He said, “Yes, word for word that’s true.” I said, “Okay.”

**Hargrove:** Does Clinton, very good on tactics, does he lack a strategic sense? Does he get over-committed and need somebody to sort out things for him and get him on track again?

**Kantor:** Sometimes he does, sometimes he doesn’t, that’s a hard question to answer. It’s a good question, appropriate. During this period he desperately needed a security blanket, someone who would try, who he was confident enough in. Morris if nothing else was not likely incompetent, could help him sort out what he needed to do and where he needed to go.

**Hargrove:** He seems to lack that faculty for himself.

**Kantor:** He certainly did during this period. I would say sometimes he doesn’t relate tactics to strategy very well, as much as he should, but this was a particularly bad period, just because he was so upset emotionally about what had happened.

**Young:** The result was very unexpected to him.

**Kantor:** Unexpected and also a rejection, just a rejection. And it hurt him. He felt like he had messed up, people around him messed up. All Presidents get this way, I’m doing it all, no one is helping me, oh poor me. Everybody, I guarantee you, every President gets into that, I’m the only one here working, the rest of you are having fun. No one cares about me.

**Hargrove:** I can give you a good Lincoln quote if you want it.

**Kantor:** What’s that?

**Hargrove:** Well, just Lincoln sitting in the White House on a couch and he says, “Nobody is helping me, everybody is against me, what am I going to do?”

**Kantor:** Exactly. I bet you every President goes through those periods and goes through that. Of course Lincoln was prone to blue moods anyway.

**Hargrove:** Yeah, but he also was resilient like your friend.

**Kantor:** Clinton though, if he had a blue mood, it didn’t last very long. He is like a goose waking up to a new world every day. It’s amazing to watch him absorb things, the worst blows, it would just knock somebody, anybody else out, he comes right back. He figures out a way to deal with it.

**Hargrove:** Do you want to go to lunch? I just have one more question if it’s possible.
Young: Yes.

Hargrove: My friend Bill Galston argues the progressive point of view, should have done welfare reform instead of health, shown where new Democrats down the line will consolidate, win elections.

Kantor: That was the argument at Camp David, rejected.

Hargrove: Rejected?

Kantor: If we had started with welfare reform, pushed health care down the line, listened more to the Congress on health care, we would have gotten both. We would have gotten both. We wouldn’t have lost the ’94 —

Hargrove: That’s right.

Kantor: Of course, that’s easy to say now, but we wouldn’t have lost in ’94 and he would have been reelected just as he was. It would have made a huge, huge difference. He ran against his own strength.

Hargrove: That’s right.

Kantor: By the stimulus package, by health care, by not understanding why he was elected and what people, how people perceived him.

Riley: I wonder if I could throw a question out for you to be thinking about then at lunch, and that is you’ve mentioned Mrs. Clinton on several occasions. I’m wondering, as a close observer, the value of placing her in a very front line position on something that ultimately became such a stumbling block for the administration. And on a personal level, if he is inclined to take attacks on her very personally, as any husband would, how that sort of played out in all of this decision making, if it became impossible for him to think clearly on this based on that.

Kantor: Two or three things and I think they both would say the same thing. One, he did take it personally when she was attacked, whether it was the campaign or otherwise, and it made his reaction to it sometimes not as effective as it should be. I mean, you can get mad for purpose in politics, but you shouldn’t get mad just because you’re mad. You should try to figure out why.

Two, as has been said, you can’t fire your wife. And as two people, forget that they’re married and a couple, forget all the other stuff that surrounded their marriage and so on, they worked together better than any two people you can imagine. They’re very close. I’m talking about on substantive matters and talking it through and going back and forth at each other. But Hillary had the bit in her teeth, as she should have, and he was right there with her and he was going to support her and he was off on fifty other issues and on health care too.

And third, even if he had thought she was on the wrong road, what was he going to say? How was he going to bring it back? And so, in retrospect, of course it was a mistake. It’s easy now to say that. Looking forward it wasn’t so easy. Anyone in the administration you would have picked, she probably was the brightest, knew him the best, understood the subject. I mean she’s
the most—have you ever heard her speak? Full sentences, full paragraphs, organized, never needs a note. Unbelievable talent. She’s a terrific lawyer. So he thought this was the best possible person, and looking forward she probably was. We didn’t, he didn’t, others didn’t think, unfortunately, about what would happen if things go wrong, how do we pull it back.

And also, people are very reluctant, almost everyone, with few exceptions to say to him, to say to her, “This is wrong. You’re really—” Because both would turn on the person who said it. He has great facility as a politician, usually you can say almost anything to him about anything and he will listen. There are other politicians you can’t, you’ll never be invited back if you disagree with them. You can disagree with him. When it comes to Hillary, you can’t. It is the one thing you can’t do. Anything else you can say, you can go in and say to him, “That is the dumbest thing you have ever done, how in the world could…?” And he will listen. He will be thoughtful; he will think it through. Not about that. And that’s the whole history of that of course.

Young: Okay.

[LUNCH BREAK]

Young: What do you feel were the most significant accomplishments, and some of your biggest disappointments? We’d also like not to leave your stint at Commerce unmentioned, and then your observations on the administration from the outside once you left. We don’t intend to cover anything concerning the attorney-client, those relationships—

Kantor: Right.

Young: But you might have some observations on how—

Kantor: Outside of that I can, yes, I’m willing to talk about it. I know you’d respect that. I will not and cannot, as you know I never talked to the press about it and I won’t ever talk about that, my relationship.

Young: You’ve talked about how the sequencing and the management—or attempt to manage—the conflicting imperatives, political imperatives of the different commitments that the administration has made. Why don’t you talk about carrying out some of those commitments, now, on the trade front? I believe you said the commitment to restart and complete the Uruguay Round and the NAFTA thing were givens. So, why don’t we go into some detail about how you managed that?

Kantor: To lead into that that were driving forces. First of all, going back to the President’s speeches in Georgetown and so on that I cited, New York Foreign Policy Association, Los Angeles World Affairs Council, his NAFTA speech at North Carolina State, American University, clearly he saw two or three things. One, you needed a strong U.S. economy based on a recognition that change had come, that we were in the information age and that part of that was
our ability to impact and be part of foreign markets. The combination would affect our relationships and our foreign policy and they were mutually reinforcing.

Number two, that so many jobs were tied to trade one way or the other. That three, the way in which you connect to foreign leaders in this new generation post-cold war, technologically driven, globalized world would be through trade, it would be a major discussion-point item on everyone’s agenda and, as it turned out to be, correct. Therefore, the willingness and ability to move some of these forward was not just nice, it was necessary.

Ergo, the concentration on trade issues, particularly in ’93, ’94. I went through the political sequencing. On the substantive side, in every trade negotiation things, first of all, should be win-win. You want people to walk away from the table not vanquished. You have got to take as well as give. It requires some balancing of interests because there are enormous economic and political interests involved in any one of these sectors.

Example: in the end of the Uruguay Round, the question was, what do we do about European, particularly French, discrimination against American media or media products in France? The Europeans had a directive, which required certain European content and a certain percentage of movies, television, etc. It was frankly obnoxious to us, as a philosophical issue as Americans. Also, the copyright industries in the United States involving movies, music, books, etcetera, employed millions and millions of people and it’s growing quite quickly. In an information age it’s important. It’s not just important for what it means symbolically to a country, it really is—employment is at stake.

On the other hand, we needed to deal with the French on agriculture. We needed to protect our aerospace industry, which is one of our largest export products—chemicals, aerospace, movies and media. And we came down to the end of the Uruguay Round trying to figure out how to balance off a good deal of aerospace, a very good deal overall of the Uruguay Round for the United States, meeting both our time deadline and our substantive commitments, but yet, the Europeans stuck on the issue of media and what they called the cultural exception.

When we got to the end of the day on the 15th, we moved into the 16th—you say in your book we did not end on the 15th as we were supposed to—we announced it on the 16th because we went all night as we had for three or four nights in a row. I literally didn’t sleep, I think, for three or four days. I did it all in three and a half days. I called the President and Jack Valenti was with me. There was a whole group of folks representing the studios there and I said to the President that Valenti is here, here’s the tradeoffs, here’s what we can do. We can finish the Uruguay Round, and I believe we had one other thing to do on financial services, to take what they call an exception to it, but that’s another question. I said, “I think we can finish. On the other hand we’d have to, in effect, dump Hollywood at this point.”

The President said, “Look, we need to finish a round, it’s very important.” He asked what I thought. I said, “I think we’re going to have to make this compromise. We’ve got too many things that we won on agriculture, on services, on aerospace, on chemicals, which is the largest U.S. export. It would make no sense in the world to—” And here I was, very politically tied in to the movie industry because of my twenty years in Los Angeles and politically, as they’re very
close to Democrats. He says, “Look, call Lew [Wasserman], see what Lew thinks and then call me back.”

It’s about four in the morning in Geneva and it was about 9 at night, 8 at night in Los Angeles, so I called Lew Wasserman, who was an old friend of mine, and said, “The President wanted me to call you.” I explained the situation. This is an interesting statement not only about Lew Wasserman but about how people react. He said, “Mickey, isn’t this the largest trade agreement in history?” I said, “Yes.” He said, “The movie industry is just fine. We have 80% of the market in Europe. Technology is going to override anything you would do or not do there. We’ll be just fine and we shouldn’t stand in the way of this agreement.” He said, “I appreciate your call, tell the President thank you, but go do what you have to do, go get the agreement.” I told Valenti what Lew had said. Valenti blanched.

I called the President. The President was relieved, because it would have been foolhardy on our part not to take what we had and it would have been a disaster if this had failed, if this negotiation had failed for the world. And of course then we were able to push through, we pushed the Japanese and Koreans to open their rice market at the last second. They dropped all insistence we change our trade laws, especially the dumping statutes. We got just about everything we wanted as a result of that from the Europeans.

The reason I mention every one of these negotiations, there is no such thing as a perfect trade agreement. Anyone who says they’ve got one is lying to you. There are tradeoffs, it is difficult. As I said, you never vanquish an opponent, you shouldn’t. They have to be win-win. And all you try to do is make the next step forward, which we were able to do in this case. NAFTA then was a success, Uruguay Round and now, had not been approved by the Congress. That’s the fight that happens in ’94 and we got it after the election in ’94. We made an agreement with Bob Dole, if we held up and didn’t push it in the Congress, didn’t make them vote before ’94, he would support it after the election of ’94. I think it was smart of the President to do that, because we won big on the Uruguay Round, we didn’t need another NAFTA fight in the Congress before the ’94 election.

We then turned our attention to that point, once we had the Uruguay Round in hand, the next question was, we had to pass the Uruguay Round, we still had problems with the Japanese, we had problems with the Chinese. We needed to keep our credibility in Congress. The Democrats in Congress particularly were really frosted over what we had done in terms of making it more difficult with them and organized labor. So we turned to, again, I guess the bad cop, and I think suddenly it made sense. Chinese piracy of U.S.-made software and movies and CDs was rampant in China. It was hurting our industries terribly. Not just movies and music, I’m talking about software, Microsoft, everyone else.

The Japanese had not really implemented the framework we had reached in ’93 and so we decided to, among many other things going on, to concentrate—we sanctioned the Chinese, got an agreement in textiles, apparel. We then threatened sanctions on intellectual property and piracy. We started working on an agreement within. We tried to move forward APEC and free trade area of the Americas at the same time. The free trade area of the Americas came together in Miami in December of that year and at the same time we were trying to get the Uruguay Round through the House and Senate. So again we had a full agenda in ’94.
As I recall, I could be wrong but I think I’m right about this, at one point we were going to go for fast tracking, in ’94. We decided not to because there were just too many Democrats who said, “In an election, don’t you dare make us vote on another trade issue.” Of course we listened to them because we were concerned about the congressional elections. We didn’t need it really, we had everything we needed in terms of what Congress could do or would do. We could sit, we could wait until next year. And so we concentrated on bilateral relationships, implementing the NAFTA, etc.

We were successful in the Uruguay Round. We negotiated with the Japanese in the fall and moved everything but auto bills, autos and auto parts. Could not move that in ’94. I negotiated with Yohei Kono, and my friend the trade minister, Ryutaro Hashimoto, for hours and hours trying to get all the framework implemented, and we got all of it done except autos and auto parts. We got what we wanted, what we called—they wouldn’t ever adhere to this language—numerical targets. It’s really not the right way to put it. It’s a way to assess the success or failure of those agreements using numbers, actual numbers.

When we had come into office, the business community and my ACTPN [Advisory Committee on Trade Policy Negotiations], as they call it, convinced me and then convinced Clinton, who came to our first meeting, that he needed to deal with the Japanese situation and there needed to be some numbers put behind these agreements.

Jones: Numbers? What do you mean by numbers?

Kantor: In other words, we were convinced, we said, “The way to assess the success or failure of the agreement which you’ve implemented is—” For instance, if our percentage of the flat glass industry in Tokyo is—I’m guessing at a percent, I don’t remember the numbers now—is 11%, 10%, whatever it was, “we ought to lay out what it should be in five years.” We did that, the Bush administration did a terrific job with the semiconductor agreement, which was one of the more successful trade agreements we ever had and it had real numbers. I mean, you were required to reach certain numbers. This wasn’t a requirement, it was an assessment. That was the compromise we made on it, the Japanese would not agree to a requirement in numbers.

Jones: So both percentage and—

Kantor: Percentage and time, right, trying to bring them together.

Hargrove: You’re talking in this instance about American cars—

Kantor: At this point we’re talking about flat glass, insurance, percentage of market, there were a couple of areas, gosh I can’t remember—

Hargrove: You want to sell American cars in Japan.

Kantor: And then we still had the pressure on us and that went into the ’95 dust up with the Japanese and in Geneva with our agreement. So we ended that session in the fall of ’94, we had the FTAA [Free Trade Area of the Americas] coming, we had behind us NAFTA, we had the Uruguay Round, which would be ratified by the House and Senate after the election, we were trying to move forward with China on intellectual property or anti-piracy agreement. We had
moved the Japanese somewhat on our framework agreement itself, and we were trying to get into the next stage of our multilateral negotiation which was an information technology agreement, a financial services agreement and a telecom agreement, all three of which have been implemented now or will implement in the next couple of years. These taken together were as big as the Uruguay Round themselves, frankly, in terms of what they represented, because financial services, telecom and information technology is so important to our future.

People don’t—it is one of the weaknesses and one of the problems we always had, dealing with trade issues and getting the press to focus on them. The American people and the press aren’t interested in trade issues because they never saw trade as being an important part of the American economy. It is. It is 34% of our economy, not as big as other countries. We’re the only country in the world where it is not a front-page issue. Trade in other countries is always a front-page issue. I’m still more recognized in Japan, not that I’m any big deal, but going through an airport or anywhere I go, no one here knows who in the hell or cares, why should they? There, because trade is such a big deal, everybody does, because of the intensity of our discussions, negotiations and so on. All during that period of time, we had congressional elections coming up, Clinton focused on his health care plan, and a sense among Democrats they didn’t want to be bothered by trade anymore because they felt they had been burned by the NAFTA situation.

And so we found ourselves going to the APEC meeting in Bogor in Indonesia in late ’94, after the election, with Clinton in a state of some disrepair emotionally because of the loss of the election and upset about it. Concerned. Losing some of his equilibrium, I believe, during that period of time.

Jones: Leading to his violating the silly shirt rule?

Kantor: Exactly, exactly. But moving APEC forward. Suharto—for all the other concerns any of us might raise in another discussion about Suharto—banged through working with Clinton, a movement towards free trade in APEC, 2010 for developed, 2020 for underdeveloped. Now you could say, well, that’s a long time. The fact is, it was a huge move in one direction for an area where a free trade agreement would have been unheard of.

As we’re making progress there, then we moved into ’95—well, ’94 we had the Mexican peso. Right after the free trade agreement, the peso goes down, on December 21. Then I think was one of the finest hours of the Clinton administration, when Larry Summers, who should get credit for this, and Bob Rubin convinced Clinton that he had to support Mexico or there would be a domino effect throughout Latin America, maybe throughout the world.

Jones: Were you involved in that?

Kantor: Only in a couple of discussions, I was only peripherally involved. I think that it was, they did some polling of the White House, 85% of the people said we shouldn’t do it. No one in Congress wanted to do it that we could find, although, Bob Dole and who else? Bob Dole stood up for Clinton, Bob Dole and someone else I can’t remember, maybe Gephardt stood up for Clinton and supported him for doing it. I mean, that was really important, and he did it. They used the funds out of the Treasury Department. We made money on the deal with Mexico. Mexico came back quickly. It was very smart, very well done, Summers and the President
deserve a tremendous amount of credit for that. But it took real guts. This was one that, if it went south, if this literally went south, he would have been in deep trouble, because it was 18 billion dollars if I’m not mistaken, and America didn’t want to do it, didn’t understand why we would have to bail out Mexico.

Anyone who didn’t understand the global economy and how all these things are linked, including political and strategic issues, to economic issues, probably wouldn’t have made that decision. You’ve got to look at Clinton and say, whoa, he really did understand, he really got it. And he was fully consistent with everything else that he tried to do. Again, not perfect, not always triumphant, sometimes politics overrode good sense, but not in this case.

Hargrove: But they gave him some confidence that if he did it, it would work.

Kantor: Yes, yes. I mean, Summers is brilliant, Larry is brilliant, and Bob Rubin is one of the most analytical and, I don’t know how to put this, one of the best people to work with you’ve ever worked with in your life. He checks his ego at the door. He listens to everybody. He is very calm and rational. Of all the people in the administration, the one I think Clinton would listen to most in any discussion was always Bob Rubin, almost without exception, just because he is just very thoughtful, very able. So, that was done.

What I was concentrating on was really Asia, because of Japan and China and because we thought that Asia—both economically and politically—was both a hot spot as well as an opportunity. By that point, Clinton had gone through his “butchers of Beijing” problem with the primary and had changed his policy in ’94, had de-linked, as you recall, trade from human rights and proliferation concerns, which are legitimate concerns. But he went to a policy of engagement. Smart. Bush had done it. Every President beyond this will do it. It is the only policy. You’re dealing with the world’s not only most populous, but the world’s second-biggest economy in fifteen years, and the stability of Asia is at stake in the way you deal with China.

Came to the conclusion, the right one, that in the post-cold war world, what you want is strong nations, not weak nations. In a cold war world we wanted a weak Soviet Union or a weak China, that’s exactly the opposite in a post-cold war world, where you have many different poles of influence. You interact with each other. You are truly interdependent. It is the difference in the way Bush looks at the world and Clinton looks at the world. Clinton really believes in interdependence. In other words, whether it’s terrorism, environment, disease, war, economics, we’re mutually dependent upon each other, and in fact, any country or any region, no matter how small they might appear, can profoundly affect you, and you can affect them. You must be interdependent, there has to be a reciprocity in how you deal with all these issues, with them.

I think Bush is a globalizer, but doesn’t understand interdependence. In other words, it’s okay when he needs other nations to build as he should—I think he did a good job with the international coalition on terrorism in Afghanistan. But if it comes to a Kyoto Treaty or an international criminal-court treaty or a treaty on small arms, or any other treaty, he not only disagrees—it is one thing to disagree and try to fashion a treaty in the way you would like to see it—but you don’t walk away. Because what you do is leave others to their own devices and it appears to them that there is no reciprocity here and it hurts us. It makes us look arrogant. It hurts us as a nation. It makes us less able to work with them on other issues that are important to us. It
should not confuse or surprise us that we are going to have a hard time with the Doha Round and other trade agreements because others see us as not being sensitive to their needs, and it’s a real difference in these two guys. I mean, everybody writes about the personality differences, or Clinton being so articulate and Bush mangling. That’s really not the difference. They’re both good politicians.

The difference really is in the way they look at the world and the way they perceive what is necessary in the kind of new world that we live in. Clinton, I wanted to say this, if you asked him what was the legacy of his administration—the bridge to the next century? Remember this, people laughed at it. It was a bridge, he understood the bridge from the U.S. to the rest of the world, and he understood that the bridge went both ways. He was a transition President. The world profoundly changed at the end of the cold war, the rise of technology, the rise of globalization. He understood interdependence and he had to. If we didn’t have him at that point, we needed to invent someone like Bill Clinton. I think it is about the most important thing he did. And it is at every level, not just trade. It is political and strategic issues as well, it’s understanding a Mexican bailout, it’s understanding that China needed to be engaged. With some embarrassments, say I was wrong, I was wrong in my speech in Los Angeles during the campaign, I was wrong; you’ve got to engage China. We have got to become, I thought partners was a little strong, but at least involved with each other. We may disagree on many things, but we have so many common interests and common needs in terms of stability in Asia.

Jones: Was this perspective common within those key players in the administration? Or were there people who either didn’t comprehend that or actively—

Kantor: I think it became more and more, in fact, I think he articulated it better as he went along. In Georgetown, he really articulated it well. I think it was that people in the administration intuitively or consciously understood it and operated in that fashion. Certainly a Sandy Berger, Tony Lake understood it.

Young: Warren Christopher?

Kantor: Chris did, although Chris very much understood that trade was a part of foreign policy, not just a domestic issue. The State Department folks were not quite as forward thinking as he was on the issue and frequently were not as cooperative or as helpful as they might have been in melding these issues together. Ron Brown certainly understood it and Jeff Garten, who ran ITA [International Trade Administration], understood it. So I think it was generally understood and appreciated within the administration. Now, as I said, sometimes we didn’t act that way, sometimes we were sidetracked by other issues or by certain politics or things you couldn’t get done, but generally, if you looked at the reach of what he did, I think you’ll see that that was a major part of his approach.

I watched him with world leaders and, this is in support or a footnote to this, clearly they understood that he understood, and clearly they appreciated it. I mean, his first few meetings with foreign leaders, like the one with Jiang Zemin in Seattle was a disaster, it was awful.

Jones: Can you say more about that?
Young: This was the President of China.

Kantor: President of China, President Jiang Zemin. Their first meeting, Seattle at the APEC, sitting in a room there, sitting in two chairs, the acolytes on one side, the acolytes on the other, and I would have sworn that by the end of the meeting we might be at war with each other. I mean, it was the old Communist rhetoric versus our hard-nosed rhetoric, both didn’t deviate one iota from their talking points. It was the most stilted, awful meeting I’ve ever seen Bill Clinton have with anybody. Part of it was the President at first was not comfortable with foreign leaders. He felt somehow that was different than politicians at home, you couldn’t engage them the way he engaged—once he realized they were just like him, once he realized they were just politicians, he was terrific, and they got it.

Young: How did he come to that understanding?

Kantor: Just by experience, by finally loosening up a little bit, I think it was just a matter of experience.

Young: But at the beginning, pretty awful.

Kantor: At the beginning it was not very good.

Riley: And did the transition occur perhaps because he found people with whom he had something greater in common than the Chinese?

Kantor: I think just by continually meeting and traveling. The experience, being exposed to it finally got him to that point of view.

Hargrove: Did he have European friends, and Mrs. [Margaret] Thatcher was there, she’s not going to be a buddy particularly.

Kantor: No Major was there, John Major.

Hargrove: They got along all right.

Kantor: Well, they started, yes, they did.

Hargrove: Not at first—

Kantor: Not at first, because remember—

Hargrove: The campaign.

Kantor: The campaign and the, was it the passport? Something.

Hargrove: They were sending—

Kantor: Anyway helping Bush, exactly, trying to help Bush, but they did, and it was interesting. The first meeting with [Edouard] Balladur—Balladur, in fact, never met anyone he thought should be in the room with him, and I’d gone with Lloyd Bentsen to Paris, we’d met with
Balladur and we told Clinton, “You’ve never met anybody like this,” and Clinton admitted afterwards we were right. But finally, when Clinton loosened up and began to get off script, and draw these folks out, and engage them as he would any other politician or political figure, it worked. Plus, then they realized this guy not only could lead, his ideas were correct. He really did want a reciprocal relationship, he really did want to understand their problems. He would respond when they had needs. That it wasn’t just a one-way street with him.

**Hargrove:** Are the French a special case?

**Kantor:** Always.

**Hargrove:** That would be my impression.

**Kantor:** It’s just difficult. They believe that we are all part of the French colonial empire and that they’re brighter and more powerful and more committed and have more integrity than the rest of us. But everyone has trouble with the French. There are some wonderful people there, obviously. It’s a great place; it just can be difficult, very, very, very, difficult. They have their own drummer out there they’re marching to. I hate to talk about a whole—honestly, I’m engaging in unfortunate rhetoric—but the fact is it’s true, and everyone that you talk to who has negotiated with them or engaged in any kind of discussions with French leaders says the same thing.

Clinton became better and better and so good at it that a lot was done at the Presidential level that is usually not done there. During the last of the Uruguay Round he had many conversations with Helmut Kohl, François Mitterrand, and Tony Major, and was very helpful in getting it done. He was beginning to realize that he could actually pick up the phone and call them, just like he would call Bob Dole, and they could have a conversation and go through things and try to move things along.

**Young:** This is again on a minor comparative note, this is rather interesting because it appears that Bush 41 found the relationship with other leaders very natural. He was acquainted with most of them and by reports at least his interaction with other individuals, not other sovereign representatives, was quite strained, quite distant in some ways. So what I’m understanding, do correct this if it’s the wrong interpretation, is that you’ve noted how Clinton had these natural gifts of communication and empathy with people. He came to see that the same thing could happen with members of Congress and then he came to see, not starting out there, that this same dynamic, these same gifts, or the same persona could be used for serious work, and serious accomplishments with other state leaders. Am I seeing a constant theme here?

**Kantor:** Yes, he had a couple of examples early on in his term where he should have seen that with world leaders, with Boris Yeltsin for instance, where they got along famously from, I think, the get-go. Yet he didn’t seem to translate that very well, at least at first, and this is just my observation now, I was at a number of those meetings. But after the first year—sometimes it’s my impression that staff of the President try to keep them away from certain issues or people. In the Clinton administration it almost was too much. Everybody believed you didn’t have to do a lot of pre-briefing of him or pre-work because he’d just handle it. He was so good he’d just deal with it. It was a mistake; sometimes we probably should have done more briefing. But, like
everyone else, you’re so overwhelmed by his ability, you just sort of let it rip. But clearly he was very effective on that stage.

**Young:** Did Clinton demand to be briefed? Was that a requirement of his preparation or thought processes, because sometimes you said that “we made a mistake, we didn’t brief him.”

**Kantor:** Others will have a better sense of that than I would. He would read everything sent over to him. I mean, I would call him from time to time—probably shouldn’t have done this, and I got criticized a little bit for it, people have written that I’ve back-doored it, and I admit probably I was, hopefully I didn’t abuse it—but I used that relationship to get things done when I got impatient when things were moving too slowly, and probably deserve some criticism for it. But even I should have known better and briefed him more, because he’d jump on things so quickly and had so many reference points, you’d think he’s got it, there’s no problem here, you don’t have to worry any more about that issue, whatever the issue happens to be.

**Jones:** Were you ever privy to a conversation between Clinton and foreign leader X where they talked about political, personal, leadership problems, how are you handling pressures on you?

**Kantor:** Yes, and I can’t tell you—One in particular with Tony Blair had some foreign policy and bilateral implications as well as other very candid conversations about each of their political problems. I guess this is not violating lawyer-client: I was representing the President and Mrs. Clinton at that point, our law firm was, it was during the Monica Lewinsky situation, and we happened to be up in the residence and a call came in from Blair. That’s one I remember vividly because it was clearly such a good relationship. Clearly, he was talking to Blair like he’d talk to me—which is really unusual no matter how comfortable you become with someone—really unusual. These are just personal reflections, I mean, I’m sure there are much better examples. This is showing the comfort level.

When Hashimoto first became Prime Minister, he visited Clinton. I happened to be out of town, I was in Denver on some business, so and they called me and woke me up. Clinton as you know works very late and stays up late. So you know, especially if you’re staying in the White House, he’ll keep you up talking forever. They woke me up and, of course, the conversation was a rollicking, raucous conversation between three friends. And I’m thinking, my God, I’m talking to the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of Japan and we’re talking just like three guys sitting around after playing 18 holes of golf. But it was that ability to get that kind of relationship, to build that, that really makes a difference. Because once you pick up the phone, you’ve got a real problem. There is a trust involved there, a comfort level, that makes a difference, and he was very good at that.

**Hargrove:** When did he sleep? He got up in the morning like everybody else.

**Kantor:** A little bit later, but not much later. He didn’t require as much sleep, although he probably required more than he thought. He would from time to time get really upset and very tired and irritable, and like all the rest of us, when you’re really tired, you’re subject to making mistakes. He just gets wound up more. I don’t know about you, I get up at five in the morning. I’m at my best about 5:20 in the morning and from then on it’s downhill, I’m in terrible trouble about 9 o’clock at night. He doesn’t seem to have that problem, just gets more and more wound
up and about 11 o’clock at night he’s really going. I don’t know if you’ve read some of the [Winston] Churchill books. I guess Churchill was much like that.

Hargrove: But he took a nap in the middle of the day. So did Johnson.

Kantor: Clinton rarely ever did that. Rarely ever. Clinton is just basically turned on by life, by his work, by politics, and just keeps going. Even today, I don’t think he’s slowed down one bit. He has a huge energy level and it’s something. It’s difficult for him now because there’s not as much. With the presidency he just about met his energy level.

Hargrove: I’m just going to say this aside, but I’ve always been curious about these discussions back and forth between Blair, Kohl, and Clinton. These little groups about being New Democrats, New Labor, all that. Do you have any insight?

Kantor: I wasn’t involved in any of those discussions. I really can’t speak to them.

Hargrove: I don’t know what they ever came to or—

Kantor: Third way. It seemed to me it was always, people have been doing that forever. Roosevelt did it. The third way was just taking both ends of the spectrum and trying to stay in the middle of the political spectrum, which is where all elections are won. I mean, I always wondered how the press bought into a third way when it is nothing more than politicians have been doing forever.

Jones: How we win.

Kantor: Exactly, exactly, and how do you balance all these various interests and stay in the middle of the spectrum where American politics is played? And now British politics as well.

Jones: I think we want you to evaluate what you judge to be the most satisfying of the accomplishments, but in that same vein, what you judge to be the most satisfying in regard to these efforts, the most satisfying interaction with the President in regard to your work as the trade representative. Really two things or maybe the same thing, I don’t know.

Kantor: No, no, they would be quite—you mean the administration’s accomplishments, not mine certainly.

Jones: No, I really mean as a trade representative. What did you judge to be the most satisfying of the accomplishments and then secondly, as I say, it may be the same thing, the most satisfying interaction you had with the President with regard to your job.

Kantor: As far as I am concerned, and maybe this won’t surprise you, it’s our dealings with China, because I believe that what we were able to do from a tiny little trade office with China had some impact on the overall relationship in a positive sense. And I am convinced that the trade relationship was a strong connecting bond between the U.S. and China at a time when we needed it, particularly in late ’95 and early ’96. As you recall we had one IPR [Intellectual Property Rights] agreement, we’d reached a consensus on an apparel agreement, we had reached some agreements on some market access, and then Lee Teng-hui came to the U.S., went to
Cornell, which was a big mistake, big, big mistake. After Warren Christopher had told the Chinese that that wouldn’t happen, the Senate voted 99 to nothing that a resolution that Clinton—and this is not the high point of our administration—decided to allow him to go to Cornell.

The Chinese, of course, reacted extremely badly to it, wound up with missiles being shot off at the north and south coasts of Taiwan, U.S. ships in or near the Taiwan straits, a real confrontation between the U.S. and China. All that we had tried to build from the spring of ’94, when we de-linked trade and human rights, to the spring of ’96 looked like it was going down the tubes. I believe what we did in China on trade in that spring, and where Charlene Barshefsky takes over, ’95, ’96, the second IPR agreement which finally came in June I guess—I had gone to Commerce—the ability to keep those lines of communication open, the APEC discussions we had in ’95 as all this was going on with Wu Yi, made a difference. Now, I hope this is not a flight of ego, but I think it helped. I see China as so critical, not only to stability in Asia, but to stability in the future of the world in terms of politics and strategic issues as well as economics, that I think that made a difference, not a big one, just a part of the process.

I believe had the President not reacted well—Sandy Berger particularly reacted well—that if we hadn’t been cool and handled that, it could have been a real problem in Asia. The Taiwan Straits is still the most dangerous place in the world, regardless of what’s happening in the Middle East, or regardless of what’s happening in Afghanistan.

Young: So the—

Kantor: NAFTA, all the rest—auto agreements, framework with Japan, free trade area of the Americas, two hundred trade agreements—I’m delighted I was there to be part of that, but I think, in terms of the trade office and relating to him and relating to the U.S., that was the most.

Young: Kind of a lifeline at a bad time.

Kantor: Yes, and the connection held.

Hargrove: And the human rights people softened to some degree, didn’t they?

Kantor: Well, softened in the sense that they saw we could walk and chew gum at the same time. The Chinese could multitask, they could understand our concerns with human rights, our concerns with the proliferation at the same time we could cooperate on trade and economic issues, that we had common interests that we needed to follow and we had disagreements that we needed to express, and there is no reason not to pursue both, but they shouldn’t get in the way of each other while you’re trying to do it. That’s why I was worried when Bush started calling China a strategic competitor. I thought that was not helpful, and now he’s backed off of that, he’s understood like every other President, you’ve got to have this relationship. And you can see what happened with China, North Korea, they cooperated. They cooperated with Bush with regard to terrorism, because it’s in their interests to do so.

We look at this relationship now, just a few years later, and say we’re very comfortable with our relationship with China, they’re moving towards a market—really, it’s almost there, a market economy. They’ve been a force for real progress in Asia on many different fronts. We may still
have concerns, but, my God in heaven, look at the difference in the relationship from—and this is a very short period of time, from ’89 Tiananmen to now, 13 years later. Big difference.

**Jones:** Do you have any sense of what led to the decision during the campaign to use the rhetoric that he used in regard to China, was it just a way—

**Kantor:** Campaigns unfortunately aren’t governing, and decisions are made somewhat on the fly and you try to distinguish yourself from the person you’re running against. It was, frankly, it was too easy a softball to hit, and no one was thinking long term. Remember when that speech was made. I’m thinking back now, we were running third in the polls, behind Perot and Bush. Perot was running first, this was May—

**Jones:** The early spring.

**Kantor:** —of ’92, and therefore there was a sense of real—even though we were winning primary after primary—a sense of real doom here. Is this going to be worth the paper it’s written on, meaning the nomination, and therefore I think it drives you. I mean I can’t give you, I wasn’t involved in writing the speech so I don’t know, but my guess is it just seemed easy. Unfortunately, I’m being critical, but I probably would have done the same thing. I’m sure I wouldn’t have been thoughtful enough to say we shouldn’t go this far, and I think the President in spring of ’94 at a town meeting in Florida made an admission, “I made a mistake. I’ve not been dealing correctly with China.”

**Hargrove:** I asked a minute ago about did Christopher change a bit on the human rights? Winston Lord changed a bit, the congressional leaders change a bit.

**Kantor:** Well, Winston Lord, his position seemed to change many times depending on where he thought the White House was going—I’m being critical. Winston never, at first he started out very tough opponent of China, and here’s someone who had wide, certainly more experience than any of us almost with China.

**Hargrove:** Right, right.

**Kantor:** He seemed to change his position and then was critical of me, and others, for being too hard-nosed later, when what we were doing is what you do in a normal trade negotiation. Maybe I was too hard-nosed, maybe I should have stemmed the rhetoric a little bit, maybe I could have been more thoughtful, but my goodness gracious, it was nothing like what had happened in ’93 in the administration, in human rights in China and what the State Department was saying. And so, yeah, there was a real shift. Once the President shifted, the administration shifted.

**Hargrove:** That’s what I’m suggesting.

**Kantor:** Yes, yes.

**Young:** I think Christopher said in his book on the China trip that he felt kind of put out on a limb, that he was doing this because he thought it was administration policy in that first harsh line he took.
Kantor: Yes, it was a terrible trip.

Young: And he came back to find out the situation had changed.

Kantor: Right, right. He went out there, and he also had a problem. John Shattuck is a good friend, a terrific guy, who had gone out and met with some dissidents. That had upset the Chinese and when Chris came, they took it out on him. His rhetoric was harsh. It was a terrible trip, as Chris will tell you. His book said that. It was not one of the high points in his career where there are so many high points. But the President changed, and the President understood that our priorities should, probably would, make sense.

Hargrove: The President triangulated a lot on trade toward the end, didn’t he?

Young: He did what?

Hargrove: Triangulated.

Kantor: In what way?

Hargrove: In regard to trade. Well, I can’t sort all this stuff, but he was talking ad hoc through the remainder of his administration, maybe more second term than first, talking about politics and trade. Nothing to that? Triangulation didn’t come into it the way it did with Morris and playing Democrats and Republicans off against each other? On trade?

Kantor: I’m trying to think what might have come up in ’95 and then particularly ’96. I left the trade office on April 12th, the President named me as Secretary of Commerce. I guess you could say, although it’s real interesting—remember the Mexican trucking incident? NAFTA said by December 31 in ’95 we were supposed to implement the NAFTA provision on trucking and allow all Mexican trucks just twenty miles into the entirety of the border states, and we had a series of meetings.

First of all, Federico Peña had done some tests at the border, found out a huge percentage of Mexican trucks could not pass U.S. safety standards. Second, the customs, CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], DEA [Drug Enforcement Agency] were very worried. They thought that up to 70% of all drugs coming into the U.S. were coming across in Mexican trucks. Trucks out of Mexico. Third, there was a worry that the last thing we needed—if you put one of these unsafe trucks on the road and then, in Eureka, California, ran into a school bus, you’d pay hell for that and we should. Basically, it was almost unanimous, with some exceptions in the administration, over our dead bodies were we going to open up until they can assure safety, assure driver competency, and would do something about the drugs so we could test these trucks at the border for all kinds of issues, including drugs. As you can see, we’re finally opening up now. It has taken that long to get to this point.

This is one where the politics and the substance did come together. It would have been irresponsible and everybody said, “Well, it’s the Teamsters. You guys have fallen victim, the Teamsters are on your side.” I forget his name, the guy right before James P. Hoffa. Ron Carey. And it had nothing to do with Ron Carey. He had been screaming at us for two years about Mexican trucks and even the twenty-mile zone, and we had listened but not reacted to it. This
was one where we should have done what we did. It was not acceptable. So that’s one where you would have gotten a triangulation, or the playing political games with trade. I’m trying to think what else.

**Hargrove:** Well, there was mention of it in here, but I can’t recall the chapter.

**Jones:** I don’t understand the term in relation to trade policy because you begin with essentially the need for cross party majorities, anything you’re going to deal with Congress, right? That’s a given. I don’t understand the term in that relationship.

**Hargrove:** That is putting Democrats and Republicans off against each other mostly in domestic policy. I just can’t tell you what it was.

**Kantor:** Yes, yes. Frankly, in ’96, there weren’t enough big issues. Now, I’ll tell you where they may—it was ’95 when I knew. Bill Archer and I were trying to get an agreement on fast track, where we pushed, we should have, labor and environment onto the trade agenda and tried to make it part of fast track. We never finally got to that. So I don’t know what in ’96 would have been a big enough issue in trade, one which the American public would even be aware of and make a difference. It might have been, there were other issues probably, so-called triangulation. Everything from school uniforms to other things, but I don’t think that was one of them.

**Hargrove:** So your relationship with Dick Morris had to do with—

**Kantor:** Strict politics.

**Hargrove:** Strict politics.

**Kantor:** Oh yes, oh yes. Morris would call me in. He would ask me about things that had happened when he wasn’t around, in ’92, or my view of certain things in the administration, what would happen, who would react to it and so on. It was that kind of thing. From time to time he would come over to my office and I would just, we’d go through certain things.

I was part of these Wednesday night sessions at the White House up in the residence, on politics, where to some degree Dick would hold forth, the President and Vice President and so on. He is a brilliant savant. Maybe that’s redundant. A savant is brilliant in one area. And the area is politics. He even speaks in 28-second bites; in other words, in the same time it takes a commercial. It’s very interesting. I have admiration for that talent. I don’t have admiration for him in other ways, which are pretty obvious. But when it comes to political analysis, without any foundation whatsoever—in other words he has no foundation. I can’t perceive any beliefs that he has. In one way it is both brilliant and helpful because there is nothing to constrain him in terms of where you should go on any particular issue. On the other hand, it can be quite dangerous, because it is too clever by half. It helped Clinton, it gave him an anchor, it gave him some confidence, it helped him think through things, but it caused enormous problems within the White House itself.

Morris would, as I understand it—I was sort of an observer of this and people would call me and bitch and moan—he put his nose into many things that he shouldn’t have.
Jones: Was it your impression that he understood Clinton as well as he thinks he understood Clinton?

Kantor: I think he understood certain aspects of Clinton as well as anybody, yes, I do believe that, especially the political Clinton. I think he can give cynicism a bad name. I mean, we all see everyone through our own prism, don’t we?

Jones: Sure.

Kantor: Therefore he saw—and he is cynical and manipulative and looks at people in that way—and so I think he saw Clinton as that completely.

Jones: Certainly a lot of the description in his book squares with your description of him, Clinton, in regard to his strengths as a campaigner and a person who reads polls and gives new human meaning to polls, to the numbers, seems to all square with his description.

Kantor: His talent for understanding the political side of Clinton is just—and Clinton was right to bring him in, from that point of view. Although, on the other hand, it was a very heavy price to pay because it was upsetting and difficult. Those sessions on Wednesday night were, if nothing else, they were tense.

Hargrove: People like Leon Panetta would be there.

Kantor: Panetta, George Stephanopoulos—

Young: These were the Wednesday meetings?

Kantor: The Wednesday night meetings.

Riley: Only after ’94, or were these going on all through the—?

Kantor: Well, I only started going after ’94. I think they only started after ’94.

Young: You mean after the election.

Kantor: After the election and starting in ’95 at some point, I can’t remember when.

Jones: What were the intellectual tensions, intellectual/political tensions?

Kantor: Well, they were on the part of Morris and the President to some degree, with Gore bouncing in sometimes. The rest of us might as well have been chopped liver sitting there. You had Stephanopoulos and other people in the room, very bright, able people who had been through a lot with Clinton and understood the administration and what the administration did, Harold Ickes, been in politics for years. I mean, we were sort of a backdrop to the play going on.

Hargrove: You weren’t advocates against Morris on his strategy or anything?

Kantor: No, and to a certain degree there was a lot of agreement on the strategy itself. There was just the tension that you couldn’t get a word in edgewise and if Dick didn’t think of it, it
wasn’t relevant to the conversation, and so it made it difficult. People have egos, people feel like they have their own ideas to contribute, and you didn’t have a lot of shrinking violets in the room and it made it a little bit difficult.

**Young:** And the President turned to others and said, “What do you think about that?” Or was he always listening?

**Kantor:** He was listening, he’d reflect on it, he’d have his own reaction, and rarely would he, sometimes he would say to Henry Cisneros or to George or something, “What do you think?” But it was literally the Dick Morris show. And I don’t say that with any bitterness. He won, regardless of what happened in Chicago or what was revealed during Chicago, we overcame that as we did all other kinds of incredible events that occurred, and maybe we would have come to the same conclusions as Morris did. But he didn’t do it, let’s say, in a very diplomatic or collegial way. And he got involved in people, in things that he shouldn’t get involved in, both substance and politics inside the White House. It made it very difficult.

**Young:** You’re referring to Morris?

**Kantor:** Morris did, yes.

**Jones:** That’s what I was going to ask, whether it went beyond that to affecting, as kind of a stone in your shoe, affecting the staff work and relationships otherwise in the White House, quite apart from how the meetings went.

**Kantor:** I think it did, I think it affected it adversely. I think he was a little bit of a bull in a china shop. All those relationships are really delicate, between Cabinet officers and the White House and the White House and each other.

**Jones:** With essentially no place in the organizational structure—

**Kantor:** None. Free floater.

**Jones:** Because of his connection with the President—

**Kantor:** Exactly, exactly.

**Hargrove:** And David Gergen had some of the same problems, to a much lesser degree, or some of the same?

**Kantor:** This is when it is hard for me to react to—during ’93, ’94 and ’95, while David was there, I was so busy, had so many trade things on my mind, so many other—I literally didn’t pay a lot of attention to what was going on over there unless it affected me. Probably it is the right way to operate, but I just couldn’t have, I didn’t have time.

**Riley:** Do you remember being surprised at his appointment to that position, given your experience as a Democrat?
Kantor: Not really, no. I think Clinton felt he needed balance and experience and he wasn’t getting either. I sort of felt that was a smart thing to do, I think it was the right signal to send. That’s why we were shifting back to where he had been in the campaign. I was deeply troubled by where we were in terms of what signals we were putting out, where we were positioning ourselves in early ’93.

No, I wasn’t troubled at all. Again, when I think back, I say, “What in the world was I doing? Why didn’t I pick up the phone and call?” Because I was in Japan, I was in Geneva, I was in London, I was back in Washington, I was at NAFTA at the Uruguay Round, I had Japanese framework—and I was new to the job and I was literally trying to keep all the balls in the air without completely falling apart. I guess it means you can’t cause much mischief if you’re busy.

Hargrove: But the Clinton rescue is the Clinton pattern, with Morris in Little Rock, Morris again, even when you come back to the White House. It is the Clinton pattern, isn’t it?

Kantor: Well, it is a Clinton pattern to get in trouble when he is doing better. I think everybody in life—you turn to people you really trust when you think can handle the problem when you really are under the gun. You tend to turn to people you have great trust in and have a great relationship with, and you’re lucky if they have the ability. We all in our own small ways do it, he did it in his big ways.

I can tell you, every time some incredible event would happen, really incredible, he’d pick up the phone and call Harry Thomasson or me, and you’d go see him, because he had that—but I don’t think that’s unusual. I don’t think that’s just a Clinton pattern, I think we all do that to some degree.

Jones: Ask Jim Baker for young Bush in Florida.

Kantor: Or Jim Baker. I remember he came back to the White House during the campaign in ’96.

Hargrove: Right.

Kantor: Tried to put that together. Presidents tend to do that.

Hargrove: All right, fair enough.

Riley: Did Mrs. Clinton participate in these Wednesday night meetings?

Kantor: Almost never, if ever. I don’t remember her being in one. She doesn’t like to sit around, she had her own input, she didn’t have to come to these meetings. She correctly sometimes saw—during the campaign in ’92 she’d rather read a newspaper, or watch television. She said it just muddles your mind when you start listening to other people tell you what you ought to be doing. Very interesting take on how to deal with this. I remember, after the first draft letter was read in New Hampshire, and he went on Ted Koppel, on Nightline—I told you about that—but she went over to the studio with us. We’re about to walk in to a room where we can watch him, he’s in a glassed off place in this little New Hampshire TV station, and she said, “Mickey, can you find a room? I don’t want to watch it.”
I said, “What do you mean you don’t want to watch it?” She said, “I don’t want to watch it. I don’t need to see what he—” She just came to comfort him. She wouldn’t watch it. Maybe it was out of nervousness, it’s very interesting. As much as he needs people, needs to draw from people, needs to bounce ideas, needs to validate them, or not validate them, needs to hear. Just the opposite. She needs to think for herself. You can’t think of two more opposite people in the way they will take a problem and deal with it.

Hargrove: Does that mean she doesn’t consult?

Kantor: In a lot of ways she doesn’t. Now, as a Senator, my guess is she operates a little. I talk to her once every couple of months. I have the feeling that she understands now that you’ve got to consult and you’ve got to talk to people and so on as a political issue. But when it comes to making a decision, she has great confidence in her own thoughts and her own judgment.

Riley: Did you get a sense about how she felt about Morris’ influence and return?

Kantor: Boy, that’s a good question. I think she was ambivalent. I’m not—you’d have to ask her. It is a good question, and I really can’t speak to it directly except I had the feeling she was uncomfortable, thought he was not a good influence on the President. Believed he drove the President to being absolute—too political and too cynical about politics. I’d ask her, but I think she was not a great advocate of Dick Morris coming back.

Young: Did the President get over—if he became too cynical at that point, did he bounce back from that, or did that—?

Kantor: Yes, he has a great facility; I’ve always likened him to —

Young: When things went his way—

Kantor: The clowns you buy for your kids that have sand on the bottom, you can hit them as hard as you want, they’ll always bounce back up. That’s exactly what he is. He has the lowest center of gravity of anyone I’ve ever met. Sometimes I just can’t believe that he could absorb what he absorbs in punishment and pain, some of it justified and some unjustified, and just bounce back, and have a great attitude toward most things, it’s quite impressive. I couldn’t, I mean, most of us would be puddles by the time we’ve gone through the kind of things he’s gone through. And we’ve seen politicians—most fold under these circumstances, just can’t deal with it.

Young: Sure.

Hargrove: Right.

Kantor: Can’t get him.

Hargrove: Want to move on to Commerce? I just want to ask you, what’s it like to suddenly be confronted with a Cabinet department, which has a lot of agencies that run themselves? You’ve got to decide what you’re going to do, don’t you pretty much?
Kantor: Yes, it’s totally different than USTR, and I will say absolutely, up front, if I had my choice, I’d go to USTR every time. It’s just my personality. You preside at Commerce and you’ve got to pick just certain priorities, you can’t have yourself involved in even close to a majority of things that are going on there. You can only read reports or have meetings with the top staff, the undersecretaries running the various agencies in Commerce, and just listen. You can make some observations, but that’s about all you can do. It’s a 33,000-employee behemoth.

He picked me for a couple of reasons and I went for only one reason. He picked me because one, he believed because of my experience at USTR and because I was close to Ron Brown, I’d be more accepted by the people at Commerce who were in terrible emotional shape. I think he picked me second because it was an election year, Commerce was under tremendous pressure from Republicans in the Congress who wanted to break it up, it had become a political issue. He probably, he didn’t say this to me, he probably thought I’d be able to deal with it better than anyone in the Cabinet or anyone he could bring in from outside. Outside was impossible, because you had to hit the ground running, you had to understand the emotional content, what had happened and how it needed to be handled.

I took it with great reluctance. I loved USTR, I enjoyed what I was doing. I finally understood it to some degree and thought I was doing okay. But I couldn’t say no to him under the—Ron was a friend, it was a terrible time for Clinton personally. He was shattered by Brown’s death and that tragedy for the rest of those folks, and so there was no choice for me but to go do it.

Jones: Was it also the case that you would be better than some others in this immediate term to take over Brown’s team, in essence—

Kantor: In a lot of ways, because I knew them all, and a lot of them over there I’d been friends with for years, like Stuart Eizenstat. I mean, we’d been friends, because USTR and Commerce work together quite a lot, and that was helpful. I think also that Clinton believed that Alma [Brown] and the family would be happier if I was over there. Somehow they saw it as Ron’s successor would be someone that Ron liked rather than—I don’t know that for a fact, I’m just guessing.

Anyhow, it was an interesting few months. My leaving government had nothing to do with whether or not I liked Commerce, that was totally personal, but in the second term, had I decided to stay, I would not have stayed at Commerce. We had talked a little bit about what would I do in the second term, just barely. Then I realized I had a daughter who was in the ninth grade and I’d already missed four years and I did not want to miss high school. Once they go to college, as we all know, they’re gone and I didn’t want to do that. I thought that would be irresponsible, and I’d wake up fifteen years later and say, “Why did I miss that last four years?” I missed it terribly, I enjoyed what I did but I made the right decision, literally made the right decision.

Commerce, the first fight was to keep it together, not let the Republicans politically tear it apart. For all kinds of reasons having nothing to do with me they backed off. I think they saw it as not a big political issue. In the wake of Ron Brown’s death it was emotionally not something you could really take on. You’d look like you were attacking someone—because it was so personalized to Ron—attacking someone who had died a tragic death.
All I tried to do is calmly walk people through it, Republicans and Democrats, and try to convince them that I could run the department during these next number of months, so that they wouldn’t be embarrassed by it, and that I would listen to them. I think I had a reputation on the Hill of listening to people, of listening to members and being responsive, and that literally was my number one: keep the department together, make people there feel good about what they were doing, try to salve over the terrible wounds of the tragedy, not let the Congress get the department, and wait for the second term.

Young: In the meantime continue some of the—you went back to—

Kantor: Yes, I tried to help Charlene; I then became the good cop, as Clinton said when he named me. It was more pleasant, going over, being nice to people, and trying to promote U.S. businesses and so on. I first took a trip to Asia, three countries in Asia: Korea, Indonesia and Thailand, I think. The one thing I was concerned about, because there was just so much, there were so many allegations, I didn’t know until they gave me the list who was going to go. I said, “I do not want to see it, I don’t want to know.” I wanted to make sure that leaders of the business community who had been involved in APEC or in those countries, did not come in to me and ask for somebody to go or not go. I said, “I am not getting into that. That is none of my business as Secretary. I’m too political, perceived as too political to do that.”

Hargrove: Who made those decisions?

Kantor: We had a business liaison unit—

Hargrove: Right in the shop.

Kantor: Right in Commerce, and they made the decisions. It turned out to be a terrific trip, good people. I bet you 90% of them were Republicans, I bet you 90% contributed to the Dole campaign and never supported the President. Then I did a second trip. The President had one criterion for me which, of course, I would have done anyway, which was to finish Ron’s trip, to go back to Bosnia and Croatia and finish, which I did, which was terribly emotional, but a really wonderful trip.

Started, what did we call it, the trade room, that was a good thing, where we promoted U.S. businesses. We tried to meld together foreign, commercial services understanding of and knowledge of contracts, all over the world, putting in computers connected up to U.S. businesses who had contacted us, and then advocate. We’d make calls, hundreds of calls daily into foreign countries, trying to promote U.S. business for those contracts. I went down a few times and made phone calls. Most of that was symbolic of course. That’s the problem. Everything at Commerce was symbolic. I wasn’t really involved. And I was used to USTR, where I would see everybody in that building once every three weeks. Everybody. We only had two hundred people. In four years, I worked with everybody pretty intimately on something. I was involved in almost every agreement, up to my elbows. I loved that, that was great, actually felt like I was moving something forward.

Commerce, or any other—you’ve just got to learn to preside, you’ve got to learn to pick priorities, you’ve got to learn what you’re going to be involved with, you’ve got to learn that you are a figurehead to some degree and you’ve got to learn that so many people are going to give
you something to read—I read only one speech my entire four years at USTR, everything else they’d put notes down. I knew the subjects, and hopefully I knew my brief, and I’d go in and talk. I don’t read well, I mean, I don’t speak very well either, but certainly, I thought it was the most boring thing to an audience to walk in there and read a damn speech to them.

**Hargrove:** It is.

**Kantor:** Why not hand it out and leave. Everybody could go home and enjoy themselves. And in Commerce I couldn’t do it because frankly I was not familiar enough, nor was I there long enough to know enough about it. I mean, I tried to learn, but it was hard. You try to get into it, the campaign is going on, and you’re doing this, you’re doing that. So somebody says, “You’ve got to go speak to the Electronics Industry Association and here it is, on high tech.” Jesus, I was bored, they were bored, I’m sure the whole world was bored.

[BREAK]

**Young:** Do you have some things you want—

**Kantor:** I thought that maybe you might want to go over your list of questions, see areas we haven’t hit.

**Hargrove:** I was going to ask you about Commerce. Does Commerce have any tensions, perennial tensions with other departments, State or—

**Kantor:** Oh yes, there are tensions and you remind me—for instance, with Justice, the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation], we had a real run-in going over the 56 bits, the encryption fight.

**Hargrove:** I remember that.

**Kantor:** The FBI, of course, did not want us to do that. They thought organized crime or drug dealers or so on would use encryption to protect them from breaking into their computers and so on and capturing email and so on.

**Hargrove:** You didn’t know they had old computers then, did you?

**Kantor:** Right, we at Commerce believed it was a somewhat outdated notion. One, you could send over the Internet, you could send encrypted programs in the U.S. or out of the U.S. for as many bits as you wanted and therefore all we were doing was losing the market to the Israelis and the Europeans. Number two, somebody could put one in their briefcase and take it to Europe with them and so what? The cat was already out of the bag so to speak that technology would overwhelm anything that they might want to control, that they were just going to have to learn to deal with it as they had to learn to deal with telephones. At least the same arguments were made with telephones, shouldn’t allow telephones to be used because people could organize
themselves in a way that the police would have problems with, and they learned how to tap telephones.

I still think that we were in the right. It ended up in a meeting with the Vice President over in the Executive Office Building, next door to his office in a conference room where he took the Commerce side, the side we were on, and decided they would try to work something out with the high-tech industry. We worked out what you might call a protective key scenario where you’d have a third party hold the key to the encryption. Where law enforcement with the proper judicial authorization could get the key and then open it up, in effect look into the program or look into the communication. The industry was supposed to work with Commerce, come up with standards and so on. We thought we did. It got into a fight. The industry wouldn’t accept it. They now admit they were wrong; they should have taken what we had done and run with it, because it’s still a problem. So that was one fight.

The other fight we always had was with the export of dual-use items where the State Department, especially the unit involved with proliferation, would always fight anything that we wanted to approve over at Commerce. That was the tension between security and, of course, trade or economic activity.

Hargrove: State and not Defense?

Kantor: Not Defense. Defense was never a problem as much as State was.

Hargrove: That’s interesting.

Young: As trade representative, how did this work? I mean, you had NEC [National Economic Council], you had your congressional committees, you had your constituency groups, you had other departments, State Department, NSC [National Security Council], and your foreign—

Kantor: And my counterparts in other countries, and then foreign press as well, and then they had their constituencies—

Young: That’s a big political—

Kantor: As I said, you dealt with seven or eight different constituencies all the time and you had to keep thinking about how what you were saying—we were in a world where you’re talking to everyone at the same time, everyone hears the same rhetoric, so therefore you have to be careful what you say and you have to make sure you’ve got at least a majority of those constituencies. Sometimes you would, infrequently, but you talk to your own administration through the newspapers on occasion. It happened in our administration and I’m sure it’s happened in others.

Most of the time though, first of all the NEC was a great idea, Bob Rubin did a terrific job. The principals actually showed up at those meetings, Bentsen, Christopher, Rubin would chair them, myself, Laura Tyson would come when she was head of the Council of Economic Advisors and we, the principals can get a lot done—

Young: Would budget be in there? OMB [Office of Management and Budget]?
Hargrove: No, not when we were talking about trade, economic policy and so on. When we got into budget they were there, but those meetings were not only helpful, the way in which they were handled was productive and it led to less in-fighting and less consternation than might have been the case under other administrations. We were quite fortunate that both the idea and Rubin came together. That didn’t mean everything was perfect all the time. At one point, Bowen Cutter, and Bo and I are friends, decided he wanted to become operational in terms of Japan and negotiations. I was not entirely happy that he had had a couple of meetings, and we decided he wouldn’t do that anymore.

The White House staff at its best operates with Bob Rubin as a coordinator, as a conciliator, as the conduit to the President, and as a person who keeps the President up to date, briefing him and so forth. When they become operational it is a very big problem, because it tends to step on everybody’s toes.

Hargrove: Like the NSC.

Kantor: NSC at times has become operational in many administrations. It is not always helpful—Tony Lake meeting with his Chinese counterpart. What it does is two things: one, the people who know the most about it are cut out of the loop, that is not a smart thing to do. As annoyed as you can become at how long it takes to get something done, and you have to build a consensus in the administration for the most part, it’s important that you do it and it’s important that you listen to people who know what is going on. That’s number one. The second thing is, you’re quite likely to do something, because you’ve cut them out, that is adverse to what has been going on because you’re not fully briefed. I have got to say that I thought the White House staff was pretty good about this, didn’t do it very much, at least not in my area that I could see. There were times, now, that we didn’t agree. There were times when, as I said before, I went around the White House staff because I became impatient and thought I had to move something. Probably was a mistake. I frequently had meetings with Ron or I’d have breakfast with Chris and talk things through and that was very helpful.

I think the President was, as much criticism as I gave them in the way they picked the Cabinet first, the fact that they picked people who knew each other, could work together and had worked together before, really made a difference. I mean, Chris and I, we’d known each other in LA for years, we’d worked together, we’d never been on different sides on any issue. I have tremendous admiration for him. He is truly a great person and gets less credit than he deserves. I mean, if Chris called and thought something should be done, I’d generally do it. We rarely would disagree. And he was very good to me. I’d go over there and walk through problems and he generally would say, “I agree.”

Ron and I talked frequently. Rubin was, as I said, terrific. The less you knew someone and the more you had potential overlaps, the more difficult it becomes. There was that, sometimes, and the administration people were getting frustrated or clashed. Cabinet officers frequently get frustrated by White House staff, thinking things didn’t move fast enough, or they weren’t listened to enough or they weren’t brought in—typically not being brought into a meeting was the biggest thing. A meeting in the White House is organized, they talk about something, you find out and you, you’re under pressure anyway, then you say a stream of expletives because
your people are also upset, they’re saying something is going on they don’t know about. You’re trying to protect them, they’re loyal to you. You’re trying to keep them in the loop.

It didn’t happen to me much at USTR. First of all I had two chiefs of staff, Tom Nides and then Peter Scher. It was fortuitous but also thought through to some degree. I knew them, they worked on the Hill with all these young people in the White House, with almost all of them. They were connected in to all the gossip, all the phone calls, everybody liked them. And so I rarely was out of the loop, rarely didn’t know what was going on. They always would protect me by saying, “Look, you’re stepping on somebody’s toes and did you realize…” because they were so good, Nides and Scher. Terrific, terrific people. I was really fortunate.

Steve Engleberg deserves a lot of credit. I had a great staff of people, really very, very able, bright, and have gone on to greater glory, because no one could do those jobs without them. Nides and Scher kept me involved with the White House and making sure that we knew what was going on, and keeping me involved was really a very important aspect of the job. Bob Strauss called me when I first got the job. Strauss and I have known each other for years, he’s been very helpful to me over the years and said, “I’ve got two bits of advice for you. One is, motion is not movement.” In other words, you can be on the airplane all you want, but if you’re not moving anything it doesn’t make any difference. Don’t go flying off around the world until you had something you needed to get done. And second, he said, “The first time you should be with the President and you’re not on a trip, you go over with your resignation letter in your hand and walk into his office and it will never happen again.”

And I’m thinking, boy, this is a tough game. I was fortunate, it never happened, mainly because Nides and Scher made sure that it never happened. I’m sure that there were times out of inadvertence or even advertence I was forgotten or left out on purpose, but they wouldn’t allow it to happen. Strauss did that to Carter. First G7, Strauss was supposed to go too, and they left him off the plane, didn’t have him on the roster of people to go. He just went over to Carter with his resignation, said, “I hope you find somebody else, obviously you don’t need me.” Only Strauss would have the chutzpah to do something like that. Carter of course backed off all the way across the room, right? That’s the last time they ever left Strauss off a roster.

Young: One other thing I had meant to raise earlier. Vernon Jordan had a special relationship apparently with Clinton and I don’t know when it started. He’s already in the picture by the time the campaign is being thought of, and I’m—

Kantor: Early ’80s they became friends. I don’t know how or why that started. I knew the story at one time, and for the life of me I’m trying to dredge it up now, I can’t do it. So there’d been a long, long acquaintance and relationship. It’s interesting, Clinton and Vernon were true friends, like Ron, true friends. And I say this, take the two, Clinton was never more comfortable, more connected or more involved then on issues that involved the black community or campaigning with African-Americans. It never even—I’ll tell you a story, this is the best example I can give about this, about him:

In ’96 he wanted to have a small transition team. Leon Panetta, Erskine Bowles and I are standing there and he says, “The three of you, we should get Vernon, Vernon will be the fourth.” And then he looks and says, “You know, God, we ought to have somebody from the black
community on this.” True story, and we all broke out laughing and suddenly he realized what he had said. Well clearly, he is quite remarkable when it comes to that, and it is reciprocated, of course, in the black community. As Maya Angelou said, “He’s the first African-American President.” Vernon and he are close and have been close and will always be close. There’s a great camaraderie there and great affection as well as comfort between the two of them.

I’ll never forget, I got another one, I’ve got to tell you these things, because they’re so much fun. This is apropos of nothing. Vernon and I, he wanted to meet with us and I forget what the issue was, it might have been about the ’96 transition, in fact, I think it was. So we’re down on the first floor of the East Wing right below, waiting to be hauled up. I don’t know if he was working, I don’t know what he was doing. One of the stewards came in and said, “Do you want something to eat?” and Vernon says, “I haven’t eaten, yes, I’d like something and do you have any wine.” The guy said, “Sure, Mr. Jordan.”

Comes back and puts a bottle of wine down and Vernon looks and says, “God, this is a good bottle of wine.” It is a red wine of some sort, cabernet, and it was French—I didn’t know. Vernon said, “This is great. Mickey, have a glass.” I take a glass, he takes a glass. Called up, Vernon says, “Let’s take the bottle with us. Let’s get the President.” We go, they put the bottle down. The steward brings the bottle. Hillary looks at that and says, “Oh, no.” Vernon says, “What’s the matter?” She says, “I was saving that for our anniversary.” [laughter] I thought she was going to cry, or kill Vernon, one or the other. I mean, it must have been a multi-hundred-dollar bottle of wine. Oh, God. Oh, well.

Young: Why don’t we move to the ’96 campaign and then afterwards—

Jones: Could I ask a question, while we’re just in the Cabinet so to speak, just to get your reaction. I thought that there was great continuity in the Clinton Cabinet, so I looked at all of the Cabinet secretaries for Presidents in this century and found that the Clinton Cabinet had the highest median number of months served, the third-highest average, but they were all very close together, and the most number who served the full two terms, four served, so it confirmed my impression. But at the same time you have a presidency and indeed a Cabinet in which there are four, what, five investigations of Cabinet officials, some indicted, an impeachment, scandals on a regular basis and so forth. Do you have any reflections on that continuity? Does it go to what you were saying before, that your relationship with Christopher and others was a comfortable relationship?

Kantor: I think, first of all, yes, I think it is the President and the First Lady themselves. I think there was great loyalty to them. Again, let me go back. I know this is going to sound like, and I apologize for the repetition, but I think it’s important. He has the first friend and the last friend he ever had. It is very rare to have anyone abandon or criticize him—although some have. On only the rarest of cases has that happened. They felt connected to him, the Cabinet, and loyal, and enjoyed both his leadership, what he stood for and the association with him. It was exciting, it was comfortable, it was supportive, invigorating. It made a huge difference. People didn’t feel—he makes people feel included rather than excluded. He makes you feel like you are really important to him even if you don’t have that much contact with him, a Cabinet officer from day-to-day obviously doesn’t. But I think that’s the major reason.
Second of all, I think he chose people who had a genuine commitment to public service and had indicated that over the years. And third, I say this only somewhat sardonically, we’d been out for so long with all this pent up desire to serve and so people were ready to do so, although I say that somewhat facetiously. But I think the combination does make a difference. If you look at the people, they have a rich background in public service. Donna Shalala you mentioned, Bruce Babbitt, Lloyd Bentsen, obviously Ron before he was killed, Carol Browner. You look, in case after case after case, each had in their own way showed a tremendous—Warren Christopher clearly, Madeleine Albright—they were interested in and concerned with and connected to public issues.

**Jones:** I wonder also if it is, as is so often said of Clinton, that he is a policy wonk, that the wonkishness meant that all Cabinet folks felt connected, in the sense that the President knew about your issues and indeed might reach down into your department and pull—

**Kantor:** I think that’s a valid point and a good point. Yes. I don’t know of a person in the Cabinet who didn’t say, “He knows as much about my issues as I do. When he calls he knows exactly what’s going on, or I called him.” Whoever the person might be. He is all over the issue, on top of it and has three different references to other things he’s read, either memos you’ve sent or books he’s read. I know this doesn’t sound right, this is hyperbole, this couldn’t be. It is true, and so therefore I think that also—look, it’s very ego satisfying, the President of the United States called and really understands your issue.

**Young:** And is interested.

**Kantor:** And you could tell he’s interested, he’s excited about it, wants to know more about it, not less about it. Doesn’t want, seemingly does not want to get you off the phone, is willing to sit and talk about it.

**Jones:** Which may have resulted in the point of view of a Cabinet secretary that it is truly a job and not just a position, if you see what I mean, that I’m here and I can facilitate something happening because the President—I just was curious.

**Hargrove:** Early foreign policy he’s said to have put aside, didn’t have his national security briefing as often as he should have, didn’t meet with Christopher as often as he should have. There were complaints coming in. Is there something to that?

**Kantor:** I think there is. I mean, this is by observation only on my part, it’s not by experience. And I don’t want you to think he was totally absorbed in the domestic issues and learning the presidency and seeing the limits of his power, which is one of the things you learn all too late in your term. We were talking once, sitting outside the Oval Office, out in the little office he has, a nice little patio where you can sit and talk and the sun was shining. I forget when it was. And he was saying, “You know what the worst part about this is? The things you don’t expect. The tragedies, the events, the Oklahoma Cities, the World Trade Centers, the Ron Browns. The things you never—you see so many people die and so many tragedies. It is the one thing you’re not prepared to do in this job.”

In going back, everything from Waco to the World Trade Center, wasn’t that in ’93, early on?
Riley: Yes.

Kantor: If I’m not mistaken

Hargrove: The first year.

Kantor: Not doing well with the Congress on his economic package. All those things I think contributed to his—

Riley: Vince Foster.

Kantor: Oh God, what a—I mean, these were just highly personal tragic things. The Vince Foster thing was just devastating. I’d known Vince for years. I used to go to the Rose law firm and I’d had a case with Web Hubbell, I didn’t meet Web through the President. Everybody thinks I met Web through the Clintons. I met Web because we had a trial together, on the same side. And I met Vince because of that. And of course then Hillary and Vince and Web were very close friends and I knew Hillary too, so that’s my whole involvement. Those things I think, one, took a lot of his time and emotional energy. Two, I think for a guy as confident as he is, he understood domestic issues, he wasn’t sure he understood foreign policy issues. Intellectually he understood them, but I’m not sure he internalized them like he did later, just like with world leaders, he wasn’t quite as confident as he was domestically. That’s two.

And I think three, and I said to Chris on a few occasions, you ought to push yourself more, you ought to go over there and see him. He wants to talk to you. I said, everybody else does this and unfortunately he has a completely open door. At times, it’s not good in terms of getting things done. And I said, “Chris, you won’t do that, you wait for him to call you. You ought to be over there.”

Chris is a very appropriate, proper, thoughtful, in some ways very cautious person. So he didn’t do that. And Tony Lake is somewhat reticent. Tony is not as outgoing, forceful a person as some others are. It didn’t fall by the wayside, but it certainly was not on the front burner like it was later on at the time. I think that’s a correct observation.

Jones: Are we going into the campaign?

Young: The ’96 campaign and after, and then some reflections. Who’s got the ’96 campaign questions?

Hargrove: Well, they’re written down somewhere.

Young: Or do you need to have any questions to talk about it?

Kantor: Well, first of all my involvement, except for the debate negotiations, was fairly—as a Cabinet officer I campaigned like everyone else, I went to the Wednesday night meetings. I wasn’t involved in the campaign itself and so therefore, it wasn’t like ’92 when I was eating and sleeping and breathing the campaign, although obviously I had more than a passing interest in what was going on.
The debate negotiations, I guess that’s become a subspecialty of mine, now that I’ve done it twice. That probably was one of the easier negotiations I’ll ever have in my life because when they decided to engage in negotiations the President asked me to represent him, we were in such strong political shape, and by contrast the Dole campaign was in some disarray, that we walked in and knew exactly what we wanted and would not accept anything but what we wanted. This is one where my saw about everyone wins at negotiations—this wasn’t a trade negotiation. Campaigns have an end to them. Unlike trade negotiations and relations between countries, this had an end to it. Bob Squire was there who is unfortunately now deceased, Carroll Campbell headed their team of negotiators, Don Rumsfeld was there who I once worked for at OEO [Office of Enforcement Operations], long, long time ago when I was a legal services lawyer. And negotiation didn’t last very long and we got everything we wanted. We only wanted two debates, not three as had happened in ’92.

We wanted to make certain there was at least one town hall or people’s debate, which we got. We wanted to make sure that the President had long enough to answer, we didn’t want cross conversation between them. I’m trying to think of other factors that went in—and this is not any great skill on my part, I’m suggesting they were in such a weak political position, they had no real argument. They put themselves from the get-go in the negotiation, which you never should do in a terrible position. They publicly said how they didn’t want Ross Perot in these debates; they’d been fighting with the debate commission. We were in a position, we really didn’t care. If the truth be known, if we had our druthers, we probably wouldn’t want Perot in the debates, but it really didn’t make that big a difference. But we had a good political issue because one could charge them with trying to keep Perot out, therefore alienating the Perot people at the same time we had a huge, huge matter to trade off, because we kept saying publicly “it’s okay with us, it’s up to the debate commission,” as we’d taken that position in ’92.

So they made a classic mistake going in to give you a huge chip to play with. Never had thought through, Well, wonder what they think? And I wonder how important this is to them, and are they going really to insist on it? And the fact that we wouldn’t have, but they made it such a big issue, they gave us—so in the end, it turned out, and I think this has been widely reported, we got what we wanted. I’m not sure it made a lot of difference, because I think Clinton by that time was so good and so on top of his brief and so impressive, that it wouldn’t have made a lot of difference in that campaign. And, as Jeff Greenfield once wrote, most campaigns are predetermined before they ever start. The issues are such and the movement is such and the population and so on, there’s nothing you can do to change the outcome.

**Jones:** Have you ever reflected on what if the economic numbers had been like they were in 1980? In other words in the sense of predetermination, the economy was in such good shape that it didn’t make much difference what Dole—

**Kantor:** Oh yes, if the opposite had happened, I don’t know what we would have done, I don’t know what Clinton would have done to be able to win. I just don’t know how you’d position yourself to run effectively, economics being so important to the American electorate in the election. Unfortunately that was not the case, the economy could not have been better, or seemed better to the American people. It’s the perception of the economy, by the way, it’s not the actual. In ’92 it was the perception of the economy, not the actual.
Jones: But you were in the same position, somewhat the same position as Reagan in ’84, the perception was that things were going well.

Kantor: Exactly.

Hargrove: How about Gore, same thing for Gore, wasn’t it? He let a good economy beat him.

Kantor: Well, of course, he ran away from his strongest suit.

Hargrove: I know. That’s what I mean.

Kantor: Which, taking credit for what the Clinton-Gore administration had done and by not allowing Clinton to campaign, actually gave people the impression that he wanted to be disconnected from it. I think it was a major political mistake.

Hargrove: And he got no credit for the good economy.

Kantor: Of course not, because he didn’t take credit for it. On a Monday night in the convention he let Clinton make a terrific speech, and take credit, and then he, Gore, on Thursday I guess it was, in Los Angeles, you would have thought that he wasn’t even part of the administration.

Hargrove: Well, Vice Presidents sometimes do that. Nixon did it. They often do it. But, he and Dole liked each other, regarded each other well, didn’t they?

Kantor: Yes, yes.

Hargrove: I wonder if that made any difference. I was in England so I hardly ever saw a thing in the paper.

Kantor: He liked Dole enormously; you cannot help but like Bob Dole.

Hargrove: That’s right.

Kantor: He’s an engaging guy, a good guy and I think Dole had a hard time not liking Clinton, it’s the same thing. I’m not sure that made any difference.

Hargrove: Didn’t take the edge off, soften?

Kantor: No, I don’t think so, I don’t think it made any difference at all.

Young: Clinton gave Dole a medal, didn’t he, soon after —

Kantor: Yes, yes.

Jones: Medal of Freedom?

Young: The Medal of Freedom.

Hargrove: Yes, afterwards, yes, and sent him on assignments.
Kantor: Dole was always easy to work with in the Congress. I worked with him on a number of issues. Of all the people to work with, Democrats and Republicans, he was the easiest person to work with and the most effective. You’d go in with him and you’d have a fifteen-minute meeting, you really could get something done, and whatever he said, that’s what he did. There was no backtracking.

Young: Was it the same with Gingrich?

Kantor: Gingrich was all over the place. It was hard to get to the subject. It was hard to get him to commit. Part of it was he was just thinking about fifty million other things and was interested in a lot. Part of it was I think Gingrich, unlike Dole, was such an ideologue. It was very difficult to get him to work with someone like me or anyone else in the administration. I think he was very suspicious. I always had the feeling that he thought somehow I was trying to gain a political advantage, when to me most of the issue was just straight trade issues, nothing else, and Republicans were some of my best friends on trade issues. In fact, I was guileless in those things. I just thought the issue was the issue. But I had the feeling that he didn’t fully trust me.

Jones: Well, Dole was a legislator, Gingrich is not, never has been a legislator in the classic sense.

Kantor: That’s an interesting observation, yes. Dole truly believed he was there to get things done.

Jones: Which was also Dole’s problem in running for President. Effective Senate leader, works the halls, waits. Candidates have to make—

Riley: You left Commerce, though, and are you at that point in periodic communication with the President about items under the second administration?

Kantor: Left in ’97, January 20, whatever. Went off to practice law and do some investment banking, make some speeches. And during the year, ’97, we go back to the White House for some social events, talk to him, not that often, once a month, at most, maybe even that’s an over-statement.

Hargrove: You’re living in Washington now.

Kantor: Living in Washington, and talked to Charlene some, talked about her both triumphs and tribulations of a fast tracker, triumphs in China, trying to move the Chinese and so on and so forth. I talked to Bill Daley some at Commerce, obviously, but really not that much. I’m trying to build a law practice, and then of course in January of ’98, it hits. Let me correct something in here, because I was never asked to come back into the White House. The President and the First Lady hired the law firm, and hired me to represent them. They wanted someone in the mix who was an old friend who understood them and what had happened, and could work with all the lawyers and sort of put that perspective on the situation. Also, there was a sense that in some ways he might feel more comfortable talking to me about things than some other folks. But it was never—the last thing I would have done is gone back into the White House or the administration for this.
I made a pledge to my wife, who was not entirely happy that I was doing this, throwing myself back into something this heated, this controversial, that I’d never talk to the press about it. I’d never talk to anybody about it. That this was truly something I would do as a lawyer and only as a lawyer. I wasn’t going to go out there and advocate anything, I wasn’t going to go out, as some did—I’m not criticizing, thank God some people were willing to stand up, but that was my trade off because my wife was not entirely happy about this. It was a very difficult number of months. I did not enjoy one minute of it, I don’t even have to give reasons. It’s astonishing the country went through that. I can talk about this—it has nothing to do with that—such aplomb, such ease stuck with him the entire time. From the very first moment two things were clear in the polls.

One, they did not believe him when he said he did not have sex with that woman, Ms. Lewinsky; and two, they did not want him removed from office and they supported him as President.

Hargrove: That’s right.

Kantor: And it’s interesting. Most politicians never understood that, that the public had always differentiated between Bill Clinton personally and Bill Clinton the President. The latter they supported and trusted with the presidency. The former they always saw him as the errant little brother with the glint in his eye and you just had to put up with him. We won the presidency in 1992. Our trust number was at 33%. If somebody had said to me your trust number would be 33% on election day, are you going to win? I’d say, “Not on your life.” You can’t win any campaign when people don’t—yet those people were able to—voters are much smarter than we give them credit for. They actually pay attention and they actually understand. They may not like politics, they may think all politicians are taking advantage or most are, but they do get it: who people are. So that never changed, and of course, if that had been understood correctly, even inside, or by the President, he wouldn’t have been in as much trouble as he got into.

Hargrove: Could you describe the climate, the milieu when you first went in, was there a lot of confusion, a lot of ignorance?

Young: In the—

Hargrove: White House,

Young: In the staff.

Hargrove: Yes. I mean, nobody really knew anything, did they?

Kantor: Fear, confusion, wild rumor after wild rumor. They didn’t know anything, and we were staring at a civil case, criminal case, possible impeachment at that point. You can imagine how upsetting this was and what kind of chaos it created. It was not fun. Not fun at all.

Jones: Can you say something about a subject which I’ve never quite been able to get my mind around, and that is the whole matter of White House counsel, but then hiring a private law firm and just how all that works, structurally.

Kantor: Part of my role, the only role that I played, which really was important, other than trying to be legal counsel to the two of them, was to try to keep all that together. Because you have White House counsel. That’s one role, to protect the presidency, as Chuck Ruff correctly
perceived it. Chuck Ruff was, unfortunately he passed away, an incredibly impressive, able man and a port in a real storm for everybody in the White House. He was a real hero in this thing. There were very few heroes, but he was one of them. David Kendell, Nicole Seligman did magnificent job from Williams & Connolly, Bob Bennett handled the civil case. Each had their own view. Williams & Connolly had one view, and Skadden, Arps, Bennett had another view, you had White House counsel, and there were times when there wasn’t complete agreement. I think that’s an understatement, how best to handle this, but the confusion, yes, was great at the White House, particularly at first.

**Young:** As to who does what? The White House counsel of course is, as you say, the presidency’s lawyer and is at great risk, but it’s hard to completely separate that from being the President’s lawyer. It’s hard to do.

**Riley:** Can I ask what your reaction was to, you would have still been a private citizen I guess when the Supreme Court ruling in the *Clinton v Jones* case came down. Do you remember? It’s possibly impossible to separate your partisan as opposed to your professional sense about the merits of that opinion and the evident inability of the court to see what was about to happen as a result of the decision.

**Young:** This is the decision where they said it would not sufficiently affect the presidency.

**Kantor:** Right. I can’t believe, I’ve never been so stunned in my life. As a lawyer. To this day I’m stunned. I can’t imagine that the Supreme Court of the United States said that the needs of the presidency and of the country are such that you could hold the statute of limitations and if there was a lawsuit it could be after the President leaves office. I mean, unbelievable.

**Jones:** And 9-0.

**Kantor:** 9-0. To this day I cannot understand it.

**Riley:** With one concurring opinion. [Stephen] Breyer did say that he thought the others were being a bit cavalier in their treatment of this case.

**Kantor:** And I think the record now shows, without getting into—this affected the presidency, affected his ability to run the office, both, particularly in time, just in time, and then emotion, circumstance and so on. They couldn’t have been more wrong, couldn’t have been more wrong in that decision.

**Riley:** You go back and read the oral arguments and [Antonin] Scalia is talking about seeing pictures of Presidents out fishing and thinking, well if the President has time to go out fishing, then certainly something like this is—

**Kantor:** Can’t imagine that Scalia believed that. I can imagine that he had, and this is not a criticism, that they reached a conclusion then tried to justify the conclusion. But you could have knocked me over with a feather.

**Young:** I think to any student of the presidency, it sounded kind of absurd.
Hargrove: Did they cite any relevant law? Was there any law to cite in that case? There wasn’t really, was there?

Riley: Some very loosely related precedents, not anything direct, one on Nixon, I think.

Kantor: Unbelievable, and I think we’re going to pay a price for that one day.

Jones: But it is because of that decision that I asked the question earlier about the President having private representation, private lawyers and the White House counsel because it is open to another such situation, isn’t it? Open to a civil suit in the future.

Kantor: Absolutely, absolutely.

Jones: And so the prospect of this occurring again—what you went through will be a precedent, and I hope there will be something written about those relationships among the government’s lawyers, the papers, the—

Kantor: Well, the whole thing created chaos and took away from the ability of the U.S. government to function. The ability of the presidency and the White House to function. It is not even arguable. Not even arguable. It had a huge effect, not just on his presidency in terms of how people viewed the presidency, but on his ability to get things done.

Jones: Correct.

Kantor: Just out of the sheer expenditure of time, not to mention the loss of prestige, but the sheer expenditure of time. It cannot even be argued. I don’t know how anybody can keep a straight face and argue otherwise. I watched it happen and it was devastating to see that. Now, he did it himself. Let me make it clear here as a lawyer, and I’ve said it to him privately, no one held a gun to his head. He made the mistake and then he built mistake upon mistake. It’s not like he was victimized by someone else. He made the mistake. Now, did others exacerbate it? Did others who had been after him for years use it? Did they deal with it unfairly? Yes. But at the core of this is his own lack of discipline.

Riley: I want to ask a question and if you can’t answer it, don’t answer it. There has been a lot of political speculation subsequent to this time that had the President come out very, very early and gone to the American people and said, “I made a mistake,” that much of what transpired afterwards would not have happened. I’m wondering if you are of the opinion that things would have been materially changed politically if that had occurred.

Kantor: [deep sigh] As a political matter, I think that’s probably correct. I can’t speak to that; that would violate lawyer-client, as to where the other parts were, but as a political matter, in retrospect, it would have been better. Clearly, in retrospect the American people would have accepted a Bill Clinton who asked for forgiveness, admitted the mistakes, talked about his own weakness. Yes, I think so.

Hargrove: There still would have been the legal question, obstruction of justice. Starr had a whole impeachment machine rolling, don’t you think?
Kantor: Could have. I really can’t get into this. Let me just say there were things you could have done at that point legally that would have, could have helped with that issue.

Young: But would Congress, with the impeachment movement in Congress—

Kantor: I don’t think it would have—I think it would have dissipated fairly quickly. That’s just a political reaction on my part.

Young: I just remember seeing on a few vehicles around Charlottesville, right after his election, soon after his election, in his first year, “Impeach Bill Clinton.” There were several such stickers you would see very day.

Hargrove: They were professional haters, Clinton haters.

Young: Yes, well I don’t —

Kantor: Everywhere, people gave hundreds of thousands, millions of dollars into going after the Clintons in every way possible. That’s not paranoia, it is now a matter of record. Clearly though, he gave his enemies the ammunition.

Hargrove: Yes, but hasn’t he always had a small band of people who hated him from the beginning in Arkansas?

Kantor: Oh yes, in Arkansas. From day one.

Hargrove: I don’t quite fully understand that, frankly.

Young: It is very hard for us to understand. Did it start as an Arkansas phenomenon? Or did it start when he started making Presidential noises?

Kantor: Oh, it was an Arkansas phenomenon at first.

Young: When I go out there now, I see the same thing.

Kantor: It was always a small but vocal group of Arkansans who were haters and were after him from day one. I am not totally comfortable or confident in assessing why that is and how that—because he seems to be so attractive on so many levels. He’s certainly not a wild-eyed radical. It’s interesting. There are some who believe no matter what he does or what he says, that he’s a committed knee-jerk liberal, that given his druthers he must be on the Left. He is not who he appears to be. And I think that’s part of it. I think people always saw him as stealing the issues, not believing in the issues, as invading their territory. They consider him like a snake oil salesman, that what was in the bottle was not really what he was saying it was, and that he repackages himself. I think they see that, that he manipulates, that he’s too good, almost too slick, “slick Willie,” too articulate. It’s fascinating.

Hargrove: Ideological conservatives have to have an enemy, and that’s stronger and stronger and stronger in our national life, that ideological conservatism. They’ve got to have an enemy, a visible enemy.
Kantor: But there was something special about that. Something special—

Hargrove: Yes, I think—

Kantor: Part of it in Arkansas started with, and I think that Hillary even used her own name, Rodham.

Hargrove: Yes, she was part of it.

Kantor: Both their backgrounds, eastern schools. She had run the legal services program in Fayetteville at the law school, in the university. None of us would probably see as radical but it is. It seemed like he was the golden boy, but he wasn’t what he made himself out to be. Here he married this woman who’s anti-war and anti-Nixon and so on and so forth. I think there’s a lot of that in it.

Young: It’s almost as though he, from the little I’ve seen of this, stuff that still goes on in Arkansas, letters to the editor and hate sheets and so forth, it’s as though he were an outsider, a carpetbagger or something—Rhodes Scholar, Yale, whatever, and wife of the same kind—who came in there and tried to make Arkansas their plaything or something. I just wondered. It’s like he’s an alien, you know, and he’s a native boy there.

Kantor: And as he grew up in Hope and Hot Springs, he was always considered to be the golden boy. Everybody was very proud of him in Arkansas. I mean, he was really a tremendous achiever and so obviously and so on, it was, Bill Clinton and Jim Guy Tucker who were always considered to be the two of their generation, the best of the best, and people were very proud of them. My guess is it has to do with everything from the McGovern campaign to Yale law school, to Oxford, to all these things.

Young: Draft dodging so to speak.

Kantor: Yes, that came up later, but he’d always been accused of, did he smoke marijuana. The draft-dodging thing had, I guess, come up before in gubernatorial campaigns, but they never had any evidence or any account of it. Cliff Jackson and others always raised that issue. I can’t explain it.

Hargrove: No.

Kantor: Maybe the same kind of body heat, like a Jack Kennedy, who had real haters. I mean, Jack Kennedy, people loved him, and it’s hard to be neutral about Bill Clinton. It’s hard to find anyone who is neutral about him. I’ve never found anybody. It’s either one way or the other.

Hargrove: True for FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] as well. Magnetic personalities may rouse deep ambivalence.

Kantor: Right. Exactly.

Jones: You can’t underestimate the importance of the evangelicals and their view of him that was common, rumor and fact, I suppose, in his personal lifestyle.
Kantor: That’s a good point we haven’t put in.

Jones: And success, and then his—

Kantor: It was almost as if you couldn’t touch him. It’s frustrating. It’s like Democrats felt with Ronald Reagan, although you can’t dislike Ronald Reagan. It’s very hard to. You might not like his politics, but it’s hard to dislike Ronald Reagan. He is such an affable, gracious person. But Clinton, you see, it didn’t matter what you charged him with, you couldn’t beat him. He kept winning and winning and winning. He dominated Arkansas politics and no matter what he was charged with, in terms of personal life, it seemed to make no difference to people. Well, that’s frustrating.

Jones: Especially evangelical, if there is a price to pay.

Kantor: You’re absolutely right.

Young: But that doesn’t entirely settle it, because, being from Georgia myself, and Jimmy Carter was from Georgia, the evangelical movement in there was this core of the haters of Bill Clinton and he was a born again Christian, he was one of them, and except for lusting in his heart, there’s not a blemish on his record. I thought, there, it had something to do with his extraordinary closeness to the blacks in Georgia, especially in Atlanta, and I just saw it as part of the old wool-hat haters.

Kantor: That’s an interesting point. Of course Clinton was extraordinarily close to the black community in Arkansas otherwise. That’s an interesting parallel.

Young: When you see Carter in his campaign, or in a black church, he’s like nobody you recognize on national television. He’s with the audience. It’s back and forth, it’s, “Have I got a witness?” and so forth. He’s talking their language, he’s really extraordinary, but he really had very strong Carter haters.

Kantor: That may be part of it as well, that’s an interesting point, very interesting point.

Young: There’s going to be a lot of thinking and writing about this in the future; we don’t have any answers.

Riley: How do you explain his resilience in that period of ’98 and ’99? You’re somebody who in your own personal history, as you mentioned earlier, you went through some terrible times personally and managed to come through those. I’m wondering, in having a close eye on somebody who is going through something extraordinarily public, humiliating like this, what does he tap into to get through this?

Kantor: He really has an absolute belief and a commitment to what he is trying to accomplish. He is emotionally locked into what he believes in, what he thinks he’s supposed to be doing. It’s unshakable. And when faced with these things, that’s what draws him back, his sense of optimism or moving forward, progressing towards the next goal. That doesn’t mean he doesn’t have times of anger or despair, we all have those. But he shakes them off, rids himself of them more quickly than anyone I can ever imagine.
I guess the way in which he grew up, which was not an easy life, stepfather and alcoholism, stories are now legend, has something to do with it, because he’d been through those kinds of tough times most of his life. I just have to keep falling back on the fact of his absolute belief in himself and what he’s doing—he also is so good at building an aura, or a sense of what he is and what he’s doing, and convinces himself. He is so good, he sells himself on it as well. It’s very interesting, I have seen other people who are very accomplished but have large egos do that, too. I think you have to do that to even pretend to be President. I’ve seen others who have done it and some even lose a sense of reality. They’re so good at convincing themselves something is either true or should be, that’s also a part of it. I don’t know how else to explain it.

Hargrove: How about simple biology? By which I mean, he was programmed to be a hard charger. He was programmed with resilience, he was programmed genetically with optimism. I mean, the longer I live, the less psychoanalytical I get and the more genetic I am.

Kantor: DNA.

Hargrove: I’m not kidding. There’s this long study of John Kennedy’s Harvard class by George Vaillant, a Harvard psychiatrist, and he concludes finally that vitality of this kind and adapting to life may very well just be biological and he was born with these and he cannot forsake them. He cannot forsake his own genetic heritage.

Kantor: Well, we know a lot of depression is chemical—

Hargrove: But this is not—

Kantor: No, but the opposite may be true as well. That you have—we know he has a huge energy level. Who can account for what adrenalin can do? I don’t know.

Hargrove: Plus on top of the nurturing he had from his mother and his grandmother, those two things together. He started out life in a buoyant way and I think that’s his nature, no matter what happens.

Kantor: Well, it’s certainly, that’s the way it’s manifested.

Hargrove: He does appear to be at loose ends now, without a task.

Kantor: Well, I think once he finishes his book, it’s going to be a real challenge to him.

Hargrove: Theodore Roosevelt never got himself together.

Kantor: I think, and without revealing—here is this enormously energetic, young—God knows I’m 63, I think he’s very young—guy, with all this experience and this ability and still can move people and so on, and trying to figure out what do ex-Presidents do? It’s a very difficult question.

Jones: You realize that he will have seen six Presidential elections by the time he reaches the age that Reagan retired at.
Hargrove: Right. He doesn’t want to duplicate Jimmy Carter; I don’t think he wants to do that again.

Kantor: No, he doesn’t want to do that. But he wants to have some impact though, and he’s trying, desperately trying to figure out how to do that and maintain some dignity. He feels very strongly that he has an obligation to the presidency itself. This thing about the television show that came up, he never would have considered doing a talk show, that’s not what he was thinking about. He was intrigued by the amount of money being thrown around and so on, and they did have a meeting, but there was no way to put together what he would do and what they wanted.

Jones: You’ve been giving us bits and pieces on this question but let me ask you directly to evaluate Clinton’s growth during the time that you’ve been acquainted with him. What have you seen that really represents maturing and developing through this time?

Kantor: As I’ve watched him he was a much more focused person as the years went on. I’ll give you two examples, which anyone in this room would say, of course, that’s the right answer. Both happened in 1980. He had lost. First, he calls me and he wants to run for DNC [Democratic National Convention] chair, against Chuck [Charles] Manatt. Well, Chuck Manatt was my law partner. I was chair of Chuck’s campaign for the DNC, which he won, and I said at that point, “Bill, why would you want to do such a thing? One, you can’t win, but two, the worst thing is if you would win. You can’t ever go back to Arkansas as a national Democrat.” Those were the days when you could not be a national Democrat. I said, “Bill, why would you want to do such a thing? One, you can’t win, but two, the worst thing is if you would win. You can’t ever go back to Arkansas as a national Democrat.” Those were the days when you could not be a national Democrat. I said, “I assume you want to run again.” He said, “Yes.” I said, “Why would you want to do it?” It showed a lack of thought. He just needed something to do. That may come to the question where he is now: something, anything to do. Couldn’t stand not to be part of the action. That’s number one. Easy question to answer. I mean, he didn’t even have to call to ask the question, shouldn’t even have thought about it.

Second, Jerry Brown calls him: “Why don’t you come be my Chief of Staff?” Jerry was still Governor at the time before Jerry ran for the Senate in ’82. How could be Jerry’s Chief of Staff and have any credibility left in Arkansas? Jerry Brown? The DNC? Just stop and think about that. That’s a true story, I couldn’t make that up. And, of course, I disabused him of that notion, too. But he knew that, he didn’t need to ask me the question. Anyone would have said, “Of course you shouldn’t do that,” given his career, where he was, who he was, what he wanted to do. Of course you wouldn’t.

As the years passed, he became more and more focused on what he was, what he could be, and how he’s going to get there, and much more resolute about not being taken off on all kinds of other things. Now, you’d say, well, the first year he was in the White House he got taken off in meetings, didn’t he? Well, that’s a meeting, but in getting there he was straight on, a focused, pre-disciplined, campaign. I mean, starting in ’91, every day, he was on top of it. He knew what he wanted to accomplish and how he wanted to get there. I saw it. That’s part of the maturation of Bill Clinton.

Second, you know he’s a terrific father? He’s a terrific father. They get some credit—they both are terrific parents—but when he was Governor, he used to take Chelsea to piano lessons every Thursday or whatever it was. He’d drive her himself, which is a danger to mankind, he’s the
worst driver in the world. He talks when he drives. He wants to talk, he’s looking around. He used to take me to the airport and I’d get scared to death, we’d both be dead, I was more worried about myself, that’s his problem. I saw that maturity as a human being, with a child, with the family, more purposeful as a human being. And I also saw him mature in terms of, and this is something that is an interesting quality, as he went to the next level he was able to leave behind people who were not quite up to the challenge of the next level. It’s a harsh thing to say, but everyone in politics, business, law, academics, you do that. If you progress, people get left behind. He was able to do that. It showed a great maturity and growth on his own part in understanding what he needed and what he didn’t need.

Also, and this is going to sound strange, and you’d have to ask him, I think I saw some maturity in their relationship, as difficult as it has been, as many fits and starts as they have had. Certainly it’s not the only relationship in the world that’s had that. We all know as mature adults how difficult any relationship is, much less your spouse and the years as you get along. But they relate to each other and in very important ways. So as a person, as a politician, a leader, he has truly matured. You say “well, he was always focused, he was always sophisticated.” Well, not really. I remember, in ’84 at the Democratic convention Heidi and I were talking to Hillary and the then-Governor. He was making a speech and he said, “You know, Roger Mudd wants my speech and, God, I’d love—I wonder how I’d get it to him?” I’m thinking, he’s Governor, all he has to do is send a staff person up there, up to the booth.

So I called over, I remember, Matt Tyrnauer. Matt’s now an editor of Vanity Fair. I used to call Matt “Mr. President” because he was 16 years old and in the Mondale campaign. I said, “Mr. President, you take this to Roger Mudd and do not hand it to the person at the door, don’t hand it to a producer, don’t hand it to anyone, you must hand it to Roger Mudd and we’re going to watch you.” So Clinton said, “How can this young....” So Tyrnauer goes around, goes up the ramp, you can watch him in the San Francisco convention, and we lose him as he’s walking past all the booths. We see the door open, Matt goes walking in, 16 years old, walks up to Roger Mudd, and Clinton is aghast, Roger Mudd looks around, he hands it to him, he says something to him, Mudd says “thank you,” you can see it, and that’s it. I know that sounds silly, but there’s a certain naiveté and certain lack of experience—all that went with the years since they won.

His decision not to run in ’87 was a pretty mature decision. Pretty mature decision. With all the people around him, it was embarrassing. Once he called everybody down there, everybody thought he was going to announce the next morning, but it was the right thing to do, and it was tough to do it, but he made the tough decision.

**Hargrove:** How about the pardons?

**Kantor:** Huge mistake. I think of all the things he ever did, ever, all the charges, draft, Gennifer, Monica Lewinsky, you name it—anything—it is the one thing that has bothered his base of constituency, the people who admire him, bothered them the most, been the most devastating to them, because it is so inexplicable. Now he will explain it and he will tell you that it has to do with Ehud Barak and Israel, the Marc Rich pardon. The first question is, why pardon anyone at all if the Justice Department hasn’t given you a recommendation? Why would you dare do anything like that unless the most extreme case. Number two, even if you decide you’re going to
pardon people, why would you allow any outsider to have access to you in discussing it? Three, even if you allowed everything to happen, if your entire staff says no, wouldn’t it occur to you that it’s a problem?

It is the single most inexplicable, devastating thing he did. He was going to leave office with a 75% approval rating, the highest of any President in any memory, Reagan, Eisenhower, anybody. He was at the top of his game, the economy was in great shape, and just like he’s always done, he did something that was, it’s a terrible fall. I can’t explain it, I am not the one to explain it, I have no idea. Because this had to do with government, with policy, with judgment, where he is so good. This is not a personal peccadillo that we’re talking about where he has made his mistakes. I don’t get it. And it is so easy not to have done it. This is not like it’s a close question.

**Jones:** Can’t blame late nights.

**Kantor:** He and I have argued about it. I love him dearly, I’m still his friend, I will be his friend forever, but this is one thing we disagree on. He gets mad at me every time I raise it and start, but he still doesn’t see it. Still fighting it.

**Hargrove:** That tells you something about his mood doesn’t it? Once you make a decision, some kind of vacuum of his own.

**Kantor:** He created it himself. I mean, as I understand it, I read the papers just like you do, except I’ve had some conversations with him about it. His whole staff left that night thinking they had knocked that down. They were worn out, exhausted, but they thought that this was one that just wasn’t going to happen. I can’t explain it. I have no idea.

**Jones:** It is also, given the timing, real difficult to come back in a sense from that, because it was over.

**Kantor:** Well, there are so many third acts in American life. We really are the most optimistic people in the world, we’ll accept. Who would have thought Richard Nixon, for goodness sake, after Watergate? By the end of his life he was back and a fairly well thought of figure in American life. He did it through books and being serious and so on. Jimmy Carter, thoroughly, not disgraced as a person, came back, has been a wonderful ex-President. There’s always a third act.

And what’s interesting about Clinton now, that’s sort of faded away in the background. But I think where he lost, I think it’s people like around this table who admired his presidency, didn’t really care about the personal stuff. That’s not to say that in your own life you’re not moral, just that it’s not any of our damn, sort of sordid—it’s personal, like you’re looking through somebody’s bathroom window. I don’t want to be involved in that. But this was professional, this was government, this was something that—

**Hargrove:** Very public.
Young: How do you think, when the next round of looking back on Clinton and evaluating him, how do you think he ought to be evaluated, this presidency? I’m not talking about next year, but I’m talking way down the line.

Kantor: When I was driving in I thought of a couple of things that I knew would come up at some point, if I could just look at my notes here.

Young: Is there a particular document you’re looking for?

Kantor: Well, I had been writing notes on—maybe I didn’t write it this time. I guess I didn’t, I thought I’d written it down; I guess I was thinking it.

Young: Was it on your yellow pad?

Kantor: No, no, I didn’t have it out. One, he’s going to be remembered I think as a transition President who understood the fourth economic wave of information age connected to, as I said before, this is repeating, the globalization and the end of the cold war. And that he understood it. He moved us as an economy and as a people into that information age in a way that we took advantage of it. That’s number one. I think that’s an important aspect.

Number two, he understood how to connect the rest of the economy to foreign economy, to economic and political issues, foreign and domestic, in order to mesh them together to make the country stronger. Third, and this is something he talked about but I think he did it—and he did it not by virtue of just legislative, but by virtue of his own stance—I think he gave hope to people in this country who had been left out. I think he gave them a sense that the government was on their side, that they could depend on him, that he wouldn’t abandon them, particularly in the African-American community, but I believe with Hispanics as well and other minorities. Women who felt they were powerless. I think women felt empowered by him. Those who had just been left out of the process, had been discriminated against. Those are the three things I think he did and I think he did them well.

Fourth, I would add, this is all too long a list, he changed the Democratic Party. No doubt about that.

Hargrove: Did he change it for good?

Kantor: I think for good.

Hargrove: To the center.

Kantor: Made it to the center and allowed other thoughts to come in where conventional wisdom was no longer purity, you didn’t have to be pure anymore, you could have balance.

I think he did a fifth thing, by bringing a diverse group of people into the government.