Martin: My name is Paul Martin, with the Miller Center of Public Affairs.

Morrisroe: Darby Morrisroe, with the Miller Center as well.

Bagchi: Nitu Bagchi.

Martin: Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this project.

Espy: Sure.

Martin: We wanted to start with your early career, going back a little bit before you met Bill Clinton. I wanted to get your story about when you decided to run for Congress, and how those series of decisions happened.

Espy: I can’t pin it to an exact date, but the period of time was between probably 1980 to 1983. I didn’t run until ’85. I had never run for anything—well, maybe class president, and I was president of the senior class of Yazoo City High, co-president 1970-1971. I wanted to become a lawyer, to serve the clients here in Mississippi. I didn’t expect to return to Mississippi, to be honest with you, because my early history here was in the latter part of the desegregation of schools.

I graduated from high school in 1971. All the desegregation decisions, where they merged the formerly all-white and all-black schools, came around about that time, but my twin sister and I had to face a decision beforehand because we went to a private black school, a Catholic school, which closed down for lack of money. My parents had to make a decision to send the two of us to the all-black school or to the all-white school. This was around 1969, something like that. They decided to send us to the all-white school. Academically, it was a better school. We were in a private school, doing really well there, and they decided to send us to the all-white school. This is in Yazoo City, Mississippi, where I was born. You ended up with about six or seven black students in a student body of 800.

I had an awful time. I had to fight every day; racial epithets were sprayed on the locker on a weekly basis. Even the teachers, I recall with great detail, did not protect us, and in some cases promoted the ill treatment of us. Even teachers. I don’t know how you—I can be very specific.
Anyway, it was a very hard time. I knew that when I went out and graduated from high school, I would leave Mississippi, and I would not return. We just would not.

Half of that happened. I did leave and went to Howard University, my twin sister and I. I went to law school in California, and still had no intentions of returning, but my father died in my second year. My father ran a family business, and my mother—We have a large family, about six siblings. I can’t say she was all alone; I won’t say that, but I can say she asked me to return, and I did. I returned after I graduated from law school in 1978.

I took the bar exam and passed it, at a time when Ol’ Miss here was the only state-accredited law school. When you graduated from Ol’ Miss, you were automatically admitted to the bar. You didn’t have to take a bar exam. Those of us who didn’t go to Ol’ Miss had a more difficult time, because the pass rate, when I took the bar exam, was about 7 percent across the board. The African-American pass rate was about 1 or 2 percent.

**Morrisroe:** Was that a deliberate strategy by the state bar to keep out-of-state lawyers from practicing?

**Espy:** We think so. We think so, yes. It was a quota—a numerical—we think, but nobody ever challenged it legally. They did invite their first African-American bar examiner when I took it, and that did allow—

**[PHONE CALL—BREAK]**

**Martin:** We’re picking back up with your—

**Espy:** Yes. Father died. I returned to Mississippi, took the bar, passed the bar. I’m very happy about that, passed my first time.

I worked at Central Mississippi Legal Services. I was going to make that my mission, serving the impoverished people of Mississippi in a legal sense. It got overwhelming. I was elevated to managing attorney, and had two or three attorneys under me; I was 26 or something. Had a lot of open cases—200 open cases—and it was just overwhelming. I decided I was burned out, and began to get in politics.

The gentleman who had become Secretary of State had been advertising for a manager for one of the agencies, so I applied, and received the appointment of Land Commissioner, which was an assistant to the Secretary of State job. I’m answering your question; I’m about to answer it now. The Secretary of State’s position I was involved in had been an elected job. The State Legislature made it an important job. There was an opportunity to interact with people to a great degree. I really enjoyed it, the interaction. I was in charge of the Division of Public Lands, so anything
related to school properties or elderly properties, I had to go out there. I enjoyed the public interactions. I enjoyed the contact, and that began to whet my appetite.

My boss was very ambitious; he wanted to be Governor. He asked me to go out and head up an advance team, to see if he could become Governor. He gave me about four months’ time off with pay—I was paid by his campaign. I came back with a negative report, that he couldn’t be Governor. He took it out on the messenger, and—but I talked to everybody, through that. Through that event, I knew that I wanted to be a politician.

**Morrisroe:** Was that your first set of interactions with Democratic Party organizations in the state?

**Espy:** Yes, yes. No question. I made speeches on his behalf. I talked to party leaders on his behalf. I went all over the state on his behalf. He’s a Democratic politician; some of the issues were issues I cared about. The people liked me, I could tell. I thought that perhaps in my future there would be this opportunity. I returned to him and told him he couldn’t be Governor, a very frank assessment. He ran anyway, and after six months decided to abandon the campaign. He ran for Attorney General and won. That was the next logical step he could see.

Once he became Attorney General, he appointed me Assistant Attorney General, in charge of consumer protection. I filed a bunch of lawsuits on behalf of the elderly. We sued a lot of companies; we won a lot of money. It was very public. That was when I began to see that it was indeed possible, because it was a very populist type of an office assignment. I enjoyed it.

**Martin:** Some of the earlier accounts about when you were working with the land use, with the schools, made it suggest that you had a very precarious job, in that you had to go into situations where you had to tell people that they didn’t own the land that they thought they owned.

**Espy:** The most dangerous job I’ve ever had, even today. Because in Mississippi—I don’t know about Virginia, but in Mississippi—all the property is divided into townships. Every township has 36 sections. Sixteen sections, a mile square, are dedicated only for the financing of the public school system in the county. In Mississippi, lawyers had given a fee simple title ownership to people of that land, and that was impossible. I was the one designated to go, in an educational, informational campaign, to tell them that they didn’t own the property. Imagine me, about 27, 28 by this time, having to tell people that the land they have a deed to is null and void. It was very dangerous, but I enjoyed it. I enjoyed going out there in the country telling people that they didn’t own their land.

I wrote a bunch of articles about leasehold interest. We also owned the land above mean high tide. In Mississippi, that’s public property, where the casinos are now in the Gulf Coast. I had to write documents and articles, and a legal memo to the Governor, saying how Mississippi could look forward to an increase in income if it would lease that property for commercial rates, and they did it. The gentleman I worked for didn’t, but the one who succeeded him did, and got the credit for increasing the amount of money coming into the public school system.
Fast-forward to the AG’s [Attorney General’s] office. I was only there two years, and Robert Clark—and this is the answer—Robert Clark, who had been the first black state legislator elected in Mississippi, very popular, had run twice for Congress, and had lost twice for Congress. He ran against Webb [William Webster] Franklin, the same gentleman I defeated. The district, the first time he ran, was probably 48 percent African-American. It was redistricted to become 51 percent or so, and he ran again. Everybody thought he’d win, but he did not. Webb Franklin won. The third time, which would be 1986, he announced he would not run. Because the most popular black guy in the state couldn’t win twice, no one else who had a better political name than I had, nobody else, ran. I said this is my chance. I’m unknown; I can sneak in under the radar screen. That’s when I decided to do it.

But for someone like me, who had no money and no name recognition but who had a lot of energy and passion, I would need a lot of time to do it. I resigned just before 1985, quietly. I ran for a year for that job even before the Democratic primary, just planning and executing. I didn’t have a large staff. I ran against the Governor’s, Paul B. Johnson’s, grandson, Pete Johnson, and Senator [James O.] Eastland’s nephew, Hiram Eastland, for the primary, and I beat them. Then I beat the incumbent.

Sometime around ’83 or so, I decided to do it, because I liked it. I liked the interaction. It was something I thought I could do. I could make a contribution. It was furthering the mission of helping the poor through the law practice, and I had all the contacts by then. I didn’t know—Had I been older and wiser, I wouldn’t have done it.

**Martin:** Why is that?

**Espy:** Oh, it’s just so difficult. So difficult. The district is very large. If I had internalized the negatives, which one usually does when one’s older, and they say wiser, I would have overly weighted the negatives, but I was naïve, and thought I could challenge a mountain, and I did.

**Martin:** Did you do any analysis for why the previous gentleman had lost twice?

**Espy:** Oh yes. Yes.

**Martin:** What was your understanding of that race—those two races?

**Espy:** The older gentleman was not—The older gentleman didn’t fly. He raised $1.2 million, but he never got on an airplane. I saw right there that I could be a more efficient candidate, because in Mississippi, the people who were giving money to him, and therefore who would be likely to give money to me, could not afford to give. The people who’d vote for us couldn’t give.

His money was raised in Detroit, among the unions; in Washington, among the Democratic leadership; in New York, among Jewish donors; in California, among the Hollywood elite. I looked at his FEC [Federal Election Commission] report, and could see where his money had come from. I thought, If they’ve given to him, they’ll give to me, if I can just get to that point, but I’m going to fly there, so I don’t have to waste any two, three, four days driving. That was the main thing. The second thing was that the way he spent the money was, I thought in some
cases, not practical, in that if I would pay attention to the rudiments of a campaign and not have to buy balloons and confetti and all that, I would be OK.

I knew he did not have an organization, and that I would spend a year putting together an organization. It’s hard. It’s even benefited my nephew, who is today running for Congress, for my seat, and the election is June sixth. Yes, it’s still there. We put together a precinct and block captain organization. They were paid for most of the year, precinct and block captains. The precincts were highly organized, whereas if it were a rural community, where you didn’t have an urban location at all, then we had zone captains. We put it together. That I knew he didn’t have. If he lost by 2 percent, I figured if I put more time into it, if I—

This was my job; I took my pension out of the state system and put it into my own campaign. I paid myself a salary from it. This was my day-to-day job. I drove 2,000 miles per week, and 80,000 miles that year, in 1985, looking for donations. I met Barbara Streisand in Hollywood, I met the Jewish—all the Jewish donors. I met everybody. I figured if I could take his model and do it better than he did it, then put on top of it an organization that he didn’t have, I could overcome the incumbent’s two-year sense of—by that time, six-year sense of—invincibility. If I could come in under the radar screen, I would disguise my potency, and it worked. It worked, so I won, but it was intense, intense for about a year and a half.

Martin: The district is known as being the poorest district in the poorest state. What kinds of special difficulties does that pose for putting together a political organization?

Espy: The Democratic Party’s ability was no help. They’re willing; they will pour out their heart to you, but they cannot help finance that thing. In Mississippi, we have a weak Democratic Party, and the Democratic Party can’t afford to give—if you run as a Republican, you get a very generous party donation, even when you’re the nominee. In the Democrat Party, even today, you don’t. Everything you do is pretty much on your own.

Also, it’s tough because you have to pay everybody. Not only can’t they give you anything, you have to pay them. I don’t mean this in a—I mean it in a sense that they have to work. They have to have income; they can’t afford to loaf through a political season, especially the ones who are very capable and can get a job elsewhere, but you need them. I needed them at the very least part time, to help me put together the campaign. They needed to be paid, so I had to raise the money to pay them. It wasn’t high pay, but it was a wage. They can’t afford to donate, and they can’t afford to work for free, so you have to raise money. You have to pay them to do what they want to do anyway. You have to subsidize them, and you have to raise money to do it.

The needs are so very great. The way that translates into the political sense is that you have to have good financing. In my case, as I said, my state pension wasn’t high, but I took it all, and invested it in myself. I hope I showed the public confidence that I could win. I didn’t mind flying to raise money. I raised $1.4 million. Most of it came in after I had run in the primary, but I did raise a couple hundred thousand while I was running in the primary. That was enough.

Martin: Was the DCCC [Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee] helpful?
Espy: After I won the primary, they were very helpful. Tony [Coelho], who was a Congressman in California, became my mentor, and was very helpful. I don’t think he’d mind me using his name. I’m still known as one of his protégés in Washington. Yes, he put together the campaign. The idea was that I would become a member of the Agriculture Committee. Jim Wright was then the Speaker. Jim Wright wrote a letter, saying that were I to become a member of Congress, he would appoint me to the Agriculture Committee.

Agriculture’s very dominant in the district. It still is, but it was very—There was really nothing else. We had no casinos then as we do now. We didn’t have a lot of industrial diversity, and agriculture was it—either agriculture or education, that was it. I had to become literate on both. Tony and the DCCC were very helpful. As soon as I won the primary, they sent money, $50,000, $60,000, $70,000 or more. He brought in Senators who had had a favorable reputation in the area of agriculture to endorse me, and he came personally. They did a lot; I had to make it through the first hurdle myself, then the troops came.

Martin: Did they provide any technical assistance, campaign help, organizational support?

Espy: Yes. You get all that. From Washington, you do. From Mississippi, you don’t, but from Washington, you do. They brought in two or three people to help. By then we had a steep learning curve, and we made it.

The primary was—Let’s say I ran against two white candidates, so honestly I had to hew to the black side of things. I had a radio campaign, and we built a network of precincts and blocks. As I said, my election in the primary was on a black basis, then I had to expand to run more to the middle. That’s what they helped me with. They would bring in people who had moderate reputations. They helped me with that, so I did well on my debates. They helped me to train for debates, debating a Congressman who had been there four years, on the Agriculture Committee.

It was good, I could go on and on about it. There were a lot of spiritual anecdotes. There was a lot of—even some mysticism involved in the thing, but I knew that I would win. After two or three episodes of things I couldn’t explain, I knew I would win.

Martin: How did you forge this biracial coalition, shifting from—You said at the primary you ran toward black folks, then you had to combine black folks and white folks.

Espy: We did a poll. We did a poll of whites. Blacks, it was clear that they would just be proud to elect a black person in that office. They had tried before; they had come close with Robert Clark. There were other black candidates who wanted to run, but they wanted to run because they believed a black could never get elected. They wanted data for a lawsuit. One of them was Henry Kirksey, who was a mapmaker. He died recently. I consider him a hero, a civil rights hero, in Mississippi. He wanted to run—he was a state senator, and he wanted to run because he wanted to file another lawsuit, to expand the district and to increase the black voting age population in the district. He was going to run. Had he run, I couldn’t have run, because he was better known than I was, so I told him—I met him at a church one Sunday night, and I said, “Look Henry, I understand you’re going to run. If you tell me today you’re running,
I’m going to back out tomorrow, but we’re running for two different reasons. You’re running because you don’t believe you can win. I’m running because I believe I can. If you back up and allow me to run, we can accomplish both of your purposes. If I don’t win, I’ll be your star witness in your lawsuit. If I win, we win.” He agreed with that logic, and backed off, and I was the only black person. I knew I’d get the lion’s share of the black vote.

Coming toward the general, we took a poll, just in the white community, by gender and age. There were four quadrants: I got high ratings among young white males 25–45, very high; very high ratings among older white women 46–70; lower ratings, very low ratings, among older white men 50 and above; very low ratings among younger white women. What’s the reason for that?

The older white men had more of a racial orientation. They weren’t going to vote for anybody African-American, no matter what. Young white men, though, were more practical. They were more forward thinking. At that time, we had five Congressional districts. Today we have four; then we had five. They said, look, Mississippi is almost 40 percent African-American; there will be one day be a black Congressman. It might as well be this guy, who we can work with. He seems to be OK. He will open his door to us. He will talk to us about our projects. We’ll be welcome in his office, or so he says. Let’s give him a shot. They deserve one out of five. That’s what they said, so I started hewing to those kinds of groups, young farmers.

The older white women said, he’s well spoken, he looks good on TV, and he’s educated. He will be a good role model for what they called “rowdy black youth.” This is an exact quote from the poll. He’ll be a role model, and maybe he’ll teach them something. I started going to those groups and speaking. The young white women, they had no clue. They were following their fathers rather than their husbands. They didn’t care. I started doing younger white men things, and older white women things. With the black vote—It still was a challenge, because the district—Although it was 51 percent black voting age, which is a marginal majority, still the turnout was important, and it still was not classically a black-majority district, so it was very difficult, but I won, and it was a good day.

**Martin:** Was there any push back from the black community when you started opening up and doing more of a biracial campaign?

**Espy:** Little bit, a little bit, but I’d say I had the lion’s share of support, and still do. We did a poll for my nephew, just to see where he would stand, and I’m still known for that. Just to tell you, in this type of district, my rating is like 86 percent now; we did the poll two weeks ago. That’s higher than anybody else. People know you. My brand, I guess, is known as inclusion, and reaching out. Yes, there was some push back. There really was push back in the Congress, among the [Congressional] Black Caucus.

**Martin:** Let’s talk about that then.

**Espy:** Yes. That’s the most depressing thing. I came in, and I had support of the National Rifle Association. That seemed to be a point of contention among the Black Caucus. The National Rifle Association is known as a very conservative group, but I tried to explain to them that this
district, where I’m from, is rural. I was one of the first rural, black rural, members. I had to cut through a lot of the stereotypes and a lot of the myths. As you know, most of the CBC [Congressional Black Caucus] members are from central, urban communities. They were used to a way—a certain line—of thinking. I believe the people down here hunt. They believe in owning guns. I didn’t think that was a contradiction, or something that we should be ashamed of.

In fact, when I was at Howard University, I became a member of the rifle association because I was president of the Rifle and Pistol Club. I used to shoot competitively in Washington. The best rifle range was on Rhode Island Avenue, in the basement of the National Rifle Association. You had to be a member to use the range. I had been a member from the ’70s, and I had kept the membership up. I had the membership, then tried to tell my friends in the Black Caucus it’s not like that. I’m not—I didn’t pander. They thought I was pandering, and I said, “No, I’ve been a member of this for a long time.” Back during the Black Panther movement and all that, when you talked about protection of communities, you had to know how to shoot. I knew how to shoot, and that seemed to be OK.

I believed in welfare reform; I believed in principles of entrepreneurship among very low-income people, and ways to gain wealth in the lower-income communities. I believed in homeownership. I can’t say they didn’t believe in homeownership, but they believed in the status quo, using the federal budget to maintain urban tenements, and large block projects. We don’t have that here in our state. I’d say, “We’re not Chicago; we don’t have that. We have some projects, but they’re very small. You find very few of them over three stories, very few.” I believed in homeownership, so why can’t we shift some of the money for some of the projects into homeownership of single-family homes?

That meant I was an advocate of taking money away from what they were used to having it put toward, and putting it toward something else. They didn’t like it. I would say I was a guy who got white votes. I was a guy who enjoyed getting white votes. I was a guy who was known for bringing catfish into prominence. There was only one black catfish processor plant, the rest of them were white. That’s not my fault. All I can do is try to help more blacks get into the industry, but don’t blame me for that. I believed in welfare reform, which was different. That’s how I ended up at DLC [Democratic Leadership Council]. All of that, all those theories and themes, I already believed in and they didn’t. It was a little difficult.

I was known as the most conservative black Congressman there. I wore it as a badge of honor. [Gillespie] Montgomery died here last week. The Black Caucus wanted to make a point of engineering a vote to defeat a sitting chairman, and he was probably the easiest to pick off, Montgomery. He came to me, and asked me to help him. I told him yes, because here was a guy who had been there 30-some years or more. He was the chairman of the Veterans’ Affairs Committee. He authored the Montgomery GI Bill, which allowed soldiers, once they returned from war, to get a college education for free. He was a valued member of our Mississippi delegation, and he needed support. I told him OK.

Because it was a secret vote, I went and met with several younger African-American Congressmen, and they pledged me their support, as long as it was secret. He won, and gave me credit for helping him win, but my efforts were not obvious. I told him I had to, because he was a
member of my state delegation. It would be distressing if this man lost, and I had to help him. I wasn’t secret; in fact, I made a speech on the floor in his favor, but I was going against the grain of what were common themes. It cost me a lot.

**Martin:** What repercussions would there have been if the Congressional Black Caucus decided to ostracize you? Did they have anything that they could do to you?

**Espy:** No. What they could do to me was cause me discomfort in the body, but they couldn’t do anything to oust me in the state. No, I was well ensconced by then. I was winning with no opposition. I had black support, very high-level white support, and growing at a very high level, around 50 percent. No. I was being touted for Governor and all that by then. The only thing they could do was start whisper campaigns.

I do remember what I really hated. I recall that I was on the floor, giving a speech endorsing Jack Kemp’s homeownership program, called HOPE, Homeownership and Opportunity for People Everywhere. I remember it as having some little difficulty in passing. I’m on the floor, speaking from the well of the House, on the Democratic side, at the podium, and I’m being booed by two or three CBC members. They’re on my right side; I’m hearing it. They’re doing it quietly. You know that C-SPAN is focused on you; the C-SPAN camera doesn’t move, so they’re on you. But I’m hearing that. I’m thinking, *Wow, here I am speaking on homeownership for people everywhere,* which they saw as a conservative initiative to move people into homes.

Jack Kemp, who was then Secretary of HUD [Department of Housing and Urban Development], was in his office, and heard me speaking. As a former member, he had floor privileges. He got in his car, and the next thing I know, here’s Jack Kemp sitting in the front seat by the time I finish my speech. They called for the vote and we won. He hugged me and we’re friends today. He heard the boos, and he was there. I hated that, because I didn’t understand it. Maybe it was because I was supporting a Republican Cabinet member’s initiative. I think that was it more than the initiative itself. I really hated that, because of the lack of foresight and the narrow thinking. I always hated that.

I don’t think I am excessively partisan. I don’t think I ever have been. People who are excessively partisan limit themselves in such material ways, because you cut yourself off from resources and friendships and money. You cut yourself off voluntarily from that, and I never understood that. I’m not here to say there are only permanent interests. I’m not saying that. You can be known as a member of a party, but also open your brain to ideas outside the ambit of a party. I’ve always been like that, and I hope I always will be. Sometimes though, it’s discouraging. I knew then that I was much different from the rest of the members of the CBC, and that I would not be comfortable. I stopped going to CBC meetings. I supported their initiatives, but I just didn’t feel comfortable. I backed off and started doing other things. I think that’s what led to my acceptance of the opportunity of leaving, and doing something greater.

**Morrisroe:** Your first election, and your subsequent elections, were taking place at a time when there were interesting things happening for the Democratic Party in the South, in terms of losing membership to the Republican Party. At the same time, the DLC was generating an alternative approach for the Democratic Party. Could you talk a little about what your observations were
about what was going on in the Democratic Party in the South at that time, what about the DLC appealed to you, and when you first got involved with that organization?

Espy: Yes. There was a book by a gentleman named [Peter] Brown that was called Minority Party: Why Democrats Face Defeat in 1992 and Beyond. The theory on that was that the Democratic Party was changing, and was becoming extremely liberal. That was for a reason; they were reacting to the conservatives gaining hegemony in the South. That was about race, mainly. After the Civil Rights Act was signed and, I guess, the Richard Nixon Presidency, and the success of his southern strategy, moving those white men whom I mentioned, who wouldn’t vote for me or any black, moving them solidly to the Republican Party, there was a reaction. The reaction of Democrats was to move more to the left, and thereby gain the solid foothold forevermore in the minority community. It was happening. For every action, there is a reaction. It was obvious.

To me it’s also arithmetic. In Mississippi, we were 36 percent to 40 percent and losing population. We would become the numerical minority unless somebody could bridge the middle as I had been trying to do, popular in the black community, but also someone who could get 30 percent, 40 percent of white votes based on a strategy of hope and inclusion, doing well for everyone. It’s not a zero-sum game, this doing well for everyone. If you improve the economy, everyone does better. The economy was agriculture, one of the things I was trying to promote. I tried to get as close to the right side of that left movement as I could, but it kept dragging me more and more to the left.

Morrisroe: Was the Mississippi Democratic Party moving that direction?

Espy: No question. There’s no question about it. We had some progressive Governors, but I would say yes, without a doubt. I did what I could to try to stop it. In fact, there was a move here—This would be about 1989, 1988. We were about to redistrict again. The district at that time was 50 percent black. When I won, it was 51 percent. There was a movement to move it to 62 percent black, and I opposed it. I opposed it on the grounds of being a Democrat. They wanted to move it to make sure that a black Congressman could always have the seat in the Second Congressional District. I was saying, “A black Congressman has it now. Obviously we can win it, because we have it now.” They were saying, “Well, you’re a different kind of black Congressman. You get white votes. We can’t ensure in the future that that will be the case.”

I told them I’m no different. I can raise money. I know how to use modern campaign techniques, and I appeal to different people. Don’t say I’m unusual; let’s just say that the tactics and the strategies can be applied to others, but I lost the argument. I said, “What you’re going to do is—if you move the district, if you want to pack it with 62 percent minority base, obviously they’re coming from District Two, Jackson. You’re then going to turn this district Republican. You’re going from five seats, where you have three Democrats and two Republicans, to the reverse.” But I lost it. While I was a sitting Congressman, there was a vigorous fight, and there’s some resentment down here against me, because I tried to keep the district 53–54 percent African-American, and keep the delegation Democratic.

Martin: Where is that resentment coming from?
**Espy:** Far-left members. Anyway, I lost it. The district was redistricted, and is now 61 percent African-American. The immediate result was that the Congressman who ran as a Democrat switched to become a Republican. It was immediate, within six months he switched. While he was in office, his name was Mike Parker, he became a Republican. Obvious. Then he ran for Governor later as a Republican. His policies and his voting record became a lot more conservative. It was obvious. We get so shortsighted when we do things like that. But anyway, I lost it, a lost effort. It cost me a little bit, but I believe today I was right on that because now we have four, and we have—it’s two and two, but the Congressman who is in the south part of Mississippi is very conservative, and the Congressman in this district, the one we’re running against, is very liberal. Anyway, it was moved.

**Morrisroe:** At what point did you see the DLC as a place where your perspective about how the Democratic Party should be moving ahead was going to be an ideological home for you?

**Espy:** They came to me. It had become dating, let’s say. Again, I don’t remember the exact time, but I involved myself in legislation that they admired. I was involved in a task force that had a bunch of hearings on welfare reform, and IDA, Individual Development Accounts, and moving renters to homeownership. It was called the Empowerment Caucus or something like that. I’m not sure of that name, but I was a leader in that effort to bring poor people new strategies for wealth development. They liked that. Then, obviously, my record in Mississippi is one of being able to get white votes, and they liked that. Al From, one of the founders of the DLC, began to come to my speeches. He began to talk to me, and began to come to my office. He began to talk to me about this effort to create the Democratic Leadership Council, which was a moderate wing of the party. The party was moving too far left. The party wasn’t able to field the middle. This guy named Bill Clinton might run for Governor under the flag of the DLC; pay attention to him. Did I know him? So I began to pay more attention to Bill Clinton.

Then they asked me to become, the second year it had been established, one of the VPs [vice presidents]. They had three VPs of the DLC. They asked me to serve as one vice president of the DLC and I agreed to. I began to go to their conferences. I would never miss one. They seemed to me to be a breath of fresh air. They knew how to raise money. They knew how to promote ideas. Their ideas were rooted in sound policy. They had a think tank; the think tank was aggressive and new and they had begun discussing themes that I had never heard of before, that I admired. I said, “Look, this is my home. This is a place I really feel comfortable, and I will do anything I can to promote its tenets.” I’d met Bill Clinton before then, but I really began to pay attention to Bill Clinton after then.

**Morrisroe:** Why don’t you tell us about your first meeting with him, and your impressions, then how that changed or developed based on further interactions?

**Espy:** I’d heard of him forever. He’d been attorney general in Arkansas, but I didn’t know him until I became a member of Congress. The first time I met him was after I had authored the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Act. I authored it in the House, and Senator [Dale]...
Bumpers authored it in the Senate. In conversation with Senator Bumpers, we talked a lot about Bill Clinton. Senator Bumpers and I crafted it, but there was a curious result.

The commission had seven members. There were seven states along the Mississippi River that we were trying to promote. The bill passed; I went to Jamie Whitten, who was chairman of Appropriations, and he funded it. We even got some money appropriated to the effort. A lot of people thought we wouldn’t, but we did. Then all the Governors appointed themselves as commissioners. I was against that, because all the Governors are white men, and this commission was set up to promote racial harmony and economic development among the lower-income people. The fact that all the commissioners were white men, no matter if they were Governors or not, to me was not something that would promote the purpose of it, so I was against it. I went to Bill Clinton and said, “Look, it’s not—” He was the chairman! He was the chairman; Ray Mabus, Governor of Mississippi, was vice chairman; and they even put the gentleman I defeated, Webb Franklin, as a commissioner. [laughter]

Martin: So at this point, did you feel that you’d lost control of this issue?

Espy: Yes. Yes, I did, but I didn’t despair.

Morrisroe: What was Clinton’s response to your position?

Espy: He understood. He empathized. He smiled a lot. He said they would fix it. The way they fixed it, they allowed me to choose the executive director, and some of the staff. So I chose a young man, African-American man, who had been head of development at the Tennessee Valley Authority, Wilbur [T. Hawkins]—I forget his last name, but he then became the director, and we hired staff. I mean, who am I to fight seven Governors? In all, it did bring me back into the loop, because if I helped hire staff, then I could help determine policy, so that’s what we did.

I saw him as someone who—I first remember meeting him, and he was very sincere-sounding. I would say very sincere. I’m trying to separate the impressions, the political skills, from the reality. At that point, I think they were the same, but for the purposes of this interview, I’m having to—Sometimes they’re not the same, but this time I think he understood. He understood that when you have new resources flowing into a state, the Governors want to make sure they have control. That’s what happened. He explained it, but he understood the purpose, and allowed me to help choose the staff. They did that.

I began to know him, and he began to invite me to Arkansas to make speeches. In fact, I made two or three of them when he was unable to make some—These were mostly African-American groups. I flew over two or three times to make speeches where he couldn’t make them. I thought that was great, because I’m not from Arkansas. I thought he was trying to identify me as a leader, a regional leader. Then I tried to repay the favor.

He would come to Mississippi, two or three—two times that I know. One was in Greenville, but there were never speeches where I was absent. I was always there. When he came over, I invited him to be keynote speaker, but I would fire the crowd up. I could see him—I could feel him applauding me with his—You just know when somebody’s beaming behind you, and someone is
on board with you, someone who is aligned with your interests, someone who likes you. I could tell that we were on a mutual accord in the public way we presented ourselves. I could tell. I began to like him more and more, because he liked me. He’s a successful Governor, someone who reached out, and a white Governor who felt very comfortable in black crowds. It was very obvious. He felt comfortable in black crowds. I began to like him, paid more attention to him. When he was elected president of the DLC, I voted for him. I applauded it. Then we began to work very closely together through the DLC.

Morrisroe: What do you think he brought to the position, as somebody who is in the same leadership of the DLC? They specifically went out to recruit him for that position. What did they see in him that they thought he would bring to the DLC?

Espy: Yes. He became the embodiment of the DLC. Here’s a new organization that has a very experienced leader, someone who had won multiple elections in Arkansas—attorney general, Governor—someone who had been the longest-serving Governor, someone who had a great record in education. When you try to forge a new path with a new group, what you don’t want to do is to have people misinterpret your intentions. Through Bill Clinton, they had someone who had a record of success on issues that liberals cared about: education, economic development, affirmative action, health, housing—everything that let’s say liberals cared about.

Liberals might be suspicious of a new group like ours, but having Bill Clinton at the helm of it allayed their—rebuffed their suspicions. Here was a guy with a legitimate, solid record of accomplishment in their issues. He really was helpful. At the same time, someone like him, who was as experienced and as serious a politician as he was and is, could then buy credit, moving us to the center of these new initiatives like welfare reform and IDAs and everything that I also cared about.

Yes, there couldn’t have been a better leader at a better time for the DLC. Then his political—His charm is legendary, and his political assets are incredible. I saw in him someone from whom I could learn a lot. I began to spend a lot of time around him, and fly to the DLC speeches with him. I learned and absorbed what I could from him. It was a good time. The DLC was becoming more serious, and we were called Democrats for the leisure class, but to me—

Morrisroe: Did you get push back on that from the CBC? I know there was a lot of criticism that it was just a southern white boys’ group.

Espy: Yes, but by that time, I could identify those who would do it. It was fine. That was my niche by then, everybody knew it, and it didn’t matter. As long as I didn’t go overboard with it, I was secure in my district. I was comfortable in my reelection margins by then. I was getting 90 percent black returns, and white up to 60 percent. It was very successful. I wanted him to be President so I could remain in Congress. By that time, to be known as the President’s best friend in Congress would have elevated me in Congress. I needed another mentor.

In Congress, when you’re a young member, you always need a push or a hand. You need a mentor whom everyone knows and respects for power, or you need your own personal wealth or something to be able to help others in their campaign moves. That’s the way you get up; that’s
the way you get ahead. By that time, Tony was gone; he had resigned. I thought Bill Clinton would be—I had no idea, nor at that time, any desire, to be a member of the Cabinet. We’re speaking now pre-election days. Yes. No, I wanted to help him to become President so I could remain in Congress and be known as President Clinton’s best friend, particularly in the Black Caucus, and then—I was going up.

**Morrisroe:** When did it first occur to you, or did you sense, that Bill Clinton would be a viable, if not successful, candidate for the Presidency?

**Espy:** Almost immediately viable. Viable; successful I didn’t know. Viable for sure. Yes, he was from a small, southern state, but he had a national profile. He was smart as hell. Again, with political skills that I saw that everyone understands now were formidable. He knew everybody; had a memory that—I’ve not seen anyone’s memory like his memory. They ran him enough to know.

Inside the Democratic Party at that point, the DLC had been accepted. They didn’t see the DLC as a rival; they saw the DLC as an asset, because we could do the think tank and the policy development and they would do the technical campaign mission, then we would do more fundraising, and more policy-development missions. It was very complementary. I think Bill Clinton brought them together. I always knew he would be—if he ever ran for President, he would be viable.

John Lewis and I, and Bill Jefferson, met and decided to endorse him. You have three black southern members who endorsed him from almost day one. I was asked to introduce him when he announced for President in Arkansas, and I agreed to do it. I couldn’t do it because there was something going on in the House of Representatives that I was involved in. I couldn’t get away to get down to Little Rock for that speech. I regret that, but I couldn’t. Yes, he was my guy, and they used me a lot, during the campaign, to answer charges. The Sister Souljah thing was one of them. I was a lowly soldier, and I was in there. I believed in him, and knew that he would be a good leader.

**Morrisroe:** Right. You mentioned the Sister Souljah thing. If we could dial back a little bit to a couple of the events that preceded that, and your observations about Bill Clinton’s relationship with Jesse Jackson, and the DLC. Starting off in the New Orleans convention, he had the “delighted to be united” speech, and was involved with the DLC, then the Cleveland convention, where he wasn’t asked to give a speech. Just using those two, and the Sister Souljah incident, as maybe markers, could you walk us through your recollections of Clinton’s relationship with Jackson, those events, and the DLC?

**Espy:** Yes.

**Morrisroe:** And your role in them.

**Espy:** They’re ambitious men. They both have prodigious talents. They both have wide networks. They’re both credible. You know that at some point there’s going to be a clash. You can’t have two talents like that in the same universe, where they would coexist peacefully
always. Particularly in politics, you know you’re going to have some clash of the titans at some point. It was obvious.

On policy, they disagreed a lot, because Jesse—I know Clinton, as a Governor, had to impose the executions and death—he had to carry out court orders. Jesse did not—does not—believe in the death penalty, promotion of the death penalty. Clinton, as a Governor, did and had imposed the sentence on people. That was a big issue. I’m not a Governor and never had to face that serious decision, but I also campaigned on the idea that I believed in the death penalty, and that the process had to be exact; you had to make sure that that person, as best one could, would actually be guilty. This was pre-DNA [deoxyribonucleic acid] period, so I wasn’t for quick imposition, to make sure the system would be such that you could, with a great degree of certitude, know that the person you’re executing is truly guilty, but once you knew that to the best extent you could, you would carry it out.

I didn’t have a problem with that, but Jesse did. There was some mentally retarded young man who—I forget his name, but Clinton at the time—Jesse thought it was a political exercise, that he used this young man’s death to promote his Presidential campaign. That was a big issue. All I can say is that they believe what they believe. Jesse doesn’t believe in it, Bill did. If that’s what you believe, then I don’t have any problem with you.

The other issue that caused angst between the two, from my observation, was validation in the black community. I think Jesse was used to being the emissary for validation for white politicians in the black community. He would be called on to endorse these white candidates who sought and needed votes in the black community, and Bill didn’t need that. He could go himself. He was very comfortable already; even if he didn’t know them, he would soon know them through his demeanor and his conversation. Maybe Jesse resented that a little bit, because he wasn’t needed as much as he had been needed heretofore.

They both have a little showman in them. Both want to be the star, the head guy, but that’s just ambition. That’s just an element of ego that most politicians have, and you forgive that. They were very comfortable around each other for the most part, until you got to those issues that represented the line of demarcation, and nobody would cross. They’re both real fond of people, all kinds of people. As I say, it was the clash of the titans.

But Bill operated in a world that was truly diverse, where he was comfortable, and Jesse operated in a world that was a bit limited. He was the foremost black leader, and Bill wanted to be the foremost leader. That’s where they began to diverge, and it was resented in some ways. I tend to follow Bill Clinton’s style of leadership, where you’re comfortable in all crowds, where you don’t compromise your principles, but you try to explain what you did. That’s how I try to pattern myself.

**Martin:** Could you talk a little bit more about Bill Clinton’s relationship or appeal within the black community that was more broad than Jesse Jackson’s or the Congressional Black Caucus’s? One of the things that strikes me is that while Clinton was getting push back from some of the black elites, say the Congressional Black Caucus, or Jesse Jackson, he also appeared
to be relatively well accepted by average folks. Do you have any stories that might touch on that, or is that an accurate characterization?

**Espy:** A very accurate characterization, very accurate. It’s how he was raised. He was raised among black people. He was raised in the South, in the Deep South. He was raised around black people. If you read his books and his speeches, he’ll say his mother was in nursing school in New Orleans, and his grandfather raised him. His grandfather lived in a mixed community, and there was a store or something. I’m not sure if his grandfather owned it or the black guy owned it. He would go around the store a lot, and the store was frequented by black people. He became accustomed to the rhythms and the cadence in the conversation, and the moods of black people. As he grew up, it was an acculturation exercise, and he became comfortable. He began playing saxophone, began playing jazz, blues. He just became comfortable. In his political mannerisms, his psyche, people just—Black people understood that he knew them, that he felt comfortable around them.

You could see it in public meetings where, say, it was the black national anthem, and he knew all the words. At gospel meetings, “Amazing Grace” is usually sung; he knows all the words, and he claps in rhythm, rhythmic time. You hear some politicians, they don’t—[clapping] Look at Al Gore. [laughter] He doesn’t clap on the downbeat. He knows he doesn’t, then it’s even worse. When he tries to, it doesn’t work. The black people know, they just—You don’t even have to speak of it; you just know who’s been there and who hasn’t. You just know it. He’s been there, and they understood. That’s taken him a long way. That’s more than politics, that’s life. He felt comfortable.

**Martin:** Was he equally comfortable, do you think, in your experience watching him at campaign events or whatnot, in rural black communities, versus urban black communities?

**Espy:** Oh, yes. Yes. When you go into the sweaty churches, and you take off your tie, and you can quote Scripture like he can, and he can. He doesn’t just quote the head notes, he quotes the Scripture. The elites would usually try to impose a justification. Why is he doing that? What’s your desire? Why are you doing this?

My impression is that lower-income—I’ll use the characterization you used now—non-elite blacks don’t try to deign the end game. They enjoy the present, but they know when someone’s genuine and when someone’s not genuine, more than elites do. They can pick it up. If they feel it through the expression out of your genes—they can feel it. They cannot be fooled. Someone like him, he’s so comfortable it’s in his genes. Then he has wide acceptance to say what he’ll say. Others would try to interpret his goal. There might have been one, but I’d say rural blacks would understand immediately that he was credible. Now, what I’m not trying to say is that they all—they are less—they don’t impose a judgment. That there’s no capability of—I’m not trying to say that. I’m just—Maybe those of us who have been around the world, the way we try to judge too much, you know, instead of sitting back and watching, observing, and letting that person come to us. That’s the difference. I don’t know if I explained that the way you wanted me to, but it’s instant credibility if you’ve been there. They know the vicissitudes of life; they know who’s been there.
Martin: It’s an interesting—

Espy: It’s not a political exercise. It’s— [overlapping dialogue]

Martin: Between elites and the others.

Morrisroe: Why don’t we move on to talking a bit more about the campaign? You mentioned this, and we moved past it to something else, but why don’t we go back to your decision to endorse Clinton, and your two colleagues who did as well, and ask what his level of support was in Congress from the colleagues that you knew, and where he found support in Congress.

Espy: I’m trying to remember the other candidates then. You may have to help me, the other candidates for President?

Martin: Paul Tsongas was going to be in the mix. [Richard] Gephardt, I think, was throwing his name around still.

Morrisroe: Was it [Thomas] Harkin, maybe?

Espy: Harkin, yes. It was easy for us. We were southern members of Congress, supported a native son. On that level alone, it was accepted. Most of the members, as I recall—are you asking about CBC or Congress?

Morrisroe: CBC or generally. You’re one of the members of Congress with whom he is closest. What role did you play in being his emissary to Congress, the CBC, or even more broadly?

Espy: In the CBC, I’d say there was a bit of hesitation, because he was from Arkansas. He was known to be liberal to moderate, instead of liberal to liberal. He was known to be a member of the DLC, which we already discussed. They wanted to watch and wait. In politics, you don’t want to be wrong. You wait until someone clearly gets a bullet, meaning they ascend, they get the mantle. All of a sudden, you look around, and everybody’s with you. That’s not surprising. I’m saying most CBC members, that’s probably why they waited.

Also, Gephardt was in the race. Gephardt was the leader of the Democrats, and they probably called him and asked him to wait, and keep the powder dry. You don’t want to offend a Congressional leader. I had never been close to Gephardt. I wasn’t his enemy, but we never—I don’t remember anything he ever did for me.

I had no problem doing it whatsoever. I jumped in with both feet into the deep water, but I had known him [Clinton] and worked with him at DLC. I was quite happy to be a part of his campaign. I offered myself in every way, and they used me in every way.

Through the CBC, I was one of those who tried to convince them that he had genuine interest in low-income programs and affirmative action, and those similar issues that we all cared about. To the Blue Dog Democrats, I wanted to make them know he was one of them; he did believe in the death penalty; he did believe in gun control. That was my thing, against gun control. He believed
in gun control; I believed against gun control, but he was a southern Democrat who was moderate and interested in welfare reform. Some would consider those conservative themes. To the farm community, I was invited to become part of the farm think tank, agriculture think tank. Because I was acquiring status on the Agriculture Committee, they put me out at rural communities, where people had no sewer, no water, where they had to have food stamps. I would explain what he would do.

They sent me to urban centers. They seemed to keep sending me to Denver. I don’t know why, but I was big in Denver. I went to Denver a lot. I went to California quite a bit. I went to Georgia, Louisiana, all throughout the South, Tennessee. But Denver? I never could understand that. Somebody made the decision to send Espy to Denver. I went to Pennsylvania some. The crowd views, the black crowds—In fact, Denver was all black crowds, but they were black legislators. I would explain and give speeches, and got to explain Bill Clinton.

I went to quite a few states quite a few times, always on the plane that whole year. At any given time, they would call me, and I would have to go in the TV studio and defend him, or promote him, or whatever, and try to do the best I could. They had hundreds of people like me. I’m not saying I was the big guy; I wasn’t, but I had a notoriety, and I had the appeal of being the first African-American elected from a very deep southern state. That currency was good in black crowds outside the South, like Denver, I guess. And I knew agriculture. Very few blacks knew agriculture. I could talk agriculture with rural people. This Lower Mississippi Development Act was good, so I went where they sent me.

**Morrisroe:** You mentioned being part of the agricultural aspect of the campaign. What were some of his issues with respect to agriculture? Do you remember who was involved in developing his agriculture policy?

**Espy:** Not really, no. Within the universal concerns in a Presidential campaign, agriculture doesn’t rank very highly, except that most farmers are Republican. I always understood that as kind of perverse, but most of them are, and they would continue to be, but I wanted to get as much of that vote as possible.

What people don’t understand is that in the agriculture budget, as it’s voted on every five years, you authorize the nutrition programs, food stamps, school breakfast and lunch, all those types of programs. I’d be the one to explain it to liberals, who believed in those programs and had no idea who pays for that. What pays for it is the agriculture authorization bills. I’d have to go and explain that, and that he was a guy who believed in those programs and would not allow the levels of children we would feed to be diminished, and that he believed in nutrition, and improving the health content of food, and food safety, things like that. I’d have to go explain it from my perch as Agriculture Committee member.

But no; we did a white paper for him, and we presented the white paper, but I can’t say he was involved in it. I wouldn’t think he would need to be.

**Martin:** How did they use you on Capitol Hill, in terms of trying to persuade other members for endorsements, or did you do much of that?
Espy: I remember the Blue Dog Democrats; I would go and speak with them. I remember the CBC; I would speak to them. He would often have coalitions of people that we’d have to go speak to, in from visiting other places in the Capitol. You’d have to go to a room and meet with them. When the farmers would come up, I’d speak to them. When the groups of constituents, or constituents-to-be, would come to Washington, I’d be one of those identified as being popular enough to go and speak with them. Inside the institution itself, I remember the CBC on the liberal side, and the Blue Dogs on the conservative side. I would go and speak to both of them.

Martin: Was it an easy sell for the Blue Dogs?

Espy: Yes, they wanted a southern President. Bill believed in the death penalty, and he believed in a lot of the things they liked, so yes, that was easier than was the Black Caucus. The Black Caucus had to wait. Once he was seen to be the man, then it was easy.

Martin: How did John Lewis’s endorsement play out? I think of him as someone who carries a lot of weight.

Espy: A lot of weight, yes. John is a civil rights hero, revered as such, and deserves everything that he’s gotten. I’m not quite sure why he did it so early, but I think he believed in Bill Clinton’s heart, he believed in his passion, and he was sold. I think once John Lewis was sold, he was sold. He goes on with you; he’s very loyal. For Bill that was a good pickup. He was used mightily. I only remember one conversation among the three of us before we did it, and the timing was discussed, but not so much why he did it. I leave John to his own motivations. I knew why I did it, and I believe I know why he did, and Bill, I believe I know why Bill did it, so that was it. We never talked about it more than once, then I never saw him again much. I was going to Denver; they had John going to his places, also. Our pathways never met during the course of the campaign at all, until we got to the convention.

Morrisroe: You mentioned that members of the CBC and members of Congress were holding on to endorsements until some later point, when it was clear who was rising. Do you recall what the tipping point was? Was it before the convention? Do you recall at what point the consensus emerged that they were going to endorse him?

Espy: I think it was New Hampshire, around New Hampshire. He lost that, didn’t he? He lost it, but came in close.

Martin: He came in second.

Espy: And I think the 60 Minutes piece where the adultery allegations were coming out and Hillary defended him. They did such a good job, I think people began to say, “This guy is a good crisis manager; his wife is extremely bright; she’s on his side. They thought it out, and he survived it. If he survives this, it may get worse, but we’ve seen his political skills, and he could survive that.” I think people began to say, “This guy’s serious,” and they began to trickle on in. I think it was the Gennifer Flowers—You know, he came to Mississippi the next day. Did you know that?
Morrisroe: No, I did not.

Espy: Yes, after the Gennifer Flowers—at the Steve Kroft 60 Minutes interview, that’s all I know. His campaign before that seemed to be sinking. He came to Mississippi the next day. What I’m told is that his senior campaign people discouraged him from coming to Mississippi after that, because he needed to go somewhere else with a much higher media market, somewhere like New York, with a high media exposure. He needed to have somewhere he would be guaranteed to have a boost. In Mississippi, a state that was going to vote Republican, he would not be seen as getting that boost he needed to overcome the quasi-scandal, and the attempt to overcome the scandal. He needed to go somewhere else. Mississippi was about the last place he needed to come, but he told them he was coming anyway.

We worked very hard here. I’m not saying I did, but I did along with the committee. We worked very hard to give him that boost he needed, and enough numbers to where the media would understand that in the most conservative state, the reddest state in the nation, this guy had a humongous turnout, and was treated as a celebrity. That’s what we did. We knew he needed it then, and worked very hard to get people in one room. He came in, and when he saw the crowd, I could tell he was very appreciative. His voice level rose, and his spirit rose, and you could just tell. In fact, I introduced him, right after, and I made mention of what happened the night before. I think he remembered that.

In my campaign, when I said I had the poll, and I wanted to know why these people wouldn’t vote for me, or why they would, the young white male answer was, to me, indicative, dispositive. I think if you asked him today, at one of the lower moments in the earlier part of his campaign, what allowed him to know he could move forward, it would be that. When you have the lowest moment of your campaign, to come to the belly of the beast, Mississippi, the reddest state, the most conservative, Republicans are dominant, to come to this state with these allegations hanging over your head and be accepted like he was, I think it gave him the strength to know that he could overcome it. I think that was it. He would remember that. I think he’d tell you that.

Morrisroe: Did he make many trips to Mississippi during the campaign?

Espy: Three. About three or four. I remember a big one in front of the State Capitol here. I introduced him there, and I remember the one we had after. I know James Carville didn’t want him to come. He also came again, and James Carville told him at the end of the campaign—Carville called me and said, “Mike, I advised him not to come to Mississippi. You know we’re losing this campaign. If we lose this campaign, and we have sacrificed eight or nine hours planning the event in Mississippi, an insignificant state, a state we are not going to win, and you have him coming there again.” He didn’t say, “We’ll blame you,” but he said, “You remember that.” I said, “His schedule is his schedule. I’m not making him come. That’s his schedule. If he wants to back out, fine, but everything’s set.” And we had a huge rally for him here.

From my days running for Congress, I can appreciate when you—you know the areas you go to where you have a celebrity status or your support is unquestioned. You appreciate that, but whether you go there tomorrow, last year, ten years from now, it’s accepted. Then you can go
other places where the demographics are such that you’re not as accepted. You use that as your bellwether. You use that. You keep touching, going back there. If it’s lower, if it’s higher now, you know. You can extrapolate. You know it. Mississippi, to him—He couldn’t go to Arkansas, because he’s the Governor. He knows it, but he’s coming to Mississippi, which is almost like Arkansas. If he does well here, in his political synapse he knows that it’s going to be good. That’s why he kept coming. It was a touchstone for how accepted he would be on the lower end of those states that would accept him. I think his political intelligence knew, that that’s why he would have to come, touching base with Mississippi.

**Martin:** You were part of a group of folks who put together a plan to boost African-American turnout in the ’92 campaign. It was ultimately not used. Can you talk about the development of that plan, and the problems that touched on it?

**Espy:** Yes, yes. I tried to use the model that I have won by in my state, precinct and block captains, but it was so intense, and it cost so much, that I don’t think we could—It was not the right model for the whole country. You went in with media, and you can’t do it with GOTV [Get Out the Vote] execution. That’s mainly why. I guess that’s understood, but. . . . Then we tried to do it on a zone basis, across Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh, and those states where we had a large urban base that we had to win. In the turmoil of the campaign, it just wasn’t practical to do it. We put a lot of time in on it, but. . . .

**Martin:** Who made the decision not to use it? Do you know?

**Espy:** It was lost in the ether. I don’t know if anybody did. There are a lot of things you think about when you have time and comfort and money to think about them, but in the challenge of a campaign that’s ongoing, and that is busy, you lose a lot.

**Martin:** Did you think that that was a good decision at the time, or did it upset you?

**Espy:** No. It did upset me. My nephew’s running; his election’s in three weeks. There are a lot of things we thought we’d be doing last year that we haven’t done yet. In the crush of time and money, you just lose it, and it’s nobody’s fault.

**Martin:** There was a book that came out several years ago, an academic book by an author by the name of Paul Frymer, that made an argument that Bill Clinton in particular, and the Democratic Party in general, has avoided trying to mobilize the black community because of the fear that for every black person they mobilized, they might lose two white folks. Does that ring a bell, or does that resonate in ’92 to you?

**Espy:** No. No. He wanted everybody he could get. You try to be careful, because you don’t want to have a backlash either way. If that was a serious concern, I wasn’t involved in the discussion of that. He wanted everybody that he could get. It was very clear that he would not get those white males, that they wouldn’t vote for him. Whether or not we got two more blacks, you don’t have five more whites leaving. It was clear that it was a matter of turnout and push and push and getting out the black community, and as many whites across the country as you can.
In local campaigns, in my own campaign for Congress—I’ll go back to that—I’ve always been a friend of Jesse Jackson’s. I think I am today; he may say differently. In my primary campaign, where I needed him, he came in. When I ran against the two white gentlemen, and I had to have a campaign based on black turnout, he came in. Then when I won the general, there was a concern. In fact, my Republican white opponent always threatened, “Mike Espy’s going to get Jesse Jackson to come in.” Jesse offered to come in. I called him and said, “Look, I think I have this thing won. If you don’t mind, no disrespect to you, but I want to keep my car in the middle of the road.” I used that language. He said, “I understand, brother man, I understand.”

I didn’t want any backlash from anybody. I had the coalition of whites I needed, and I had the blacks I needed. I had them anyway; they were Mike Espy black people at that point, and they were excited to vote. I didn’t want any backlash. I didn’t want my calculation to be off 3–4 percent of what we had anticipated. I didn’t want any problem with anybody, so I asked him not to come in on the general election, and he didn’t. He was extremely gentlemanly about it. He understood exactly what I was talking about. When I won, I called and thanked him, for coming and for not coming. On the national campaign, there are so many people that I don’t think it applies.

**Morrisroe:** Maybe before we leave the campaign, we’ll ask you if there are any things that we haven’t brought up, or any recollections you have of Clinton as a campaigner, or your involvement in the campaign.

**Espy:** The Sister Souljah thing got a lot of mention. I don’t know why I was called. I think it was on the *Today Show,* and they had me opposite her. I didn’t know who she was.

**Martin:** As did most of the country.

**Espy:** Yes. [laughter] I really didn’t know. People keep pointing to that as a way that he tried to one-up Jesse Jackson. It certainly was not my intent to do it. I certainly hope I wasn’t used to do that, although I think Jesse believes I was. We talked about it later, back when I was fired by Bill Clinton. I went to see Jesse Jackson, seeking solace and comfort, spiritual comfort. He mentioned it. I think he mentioned that. Beyond myself, it was considered to be a big deal. I don’t consider it to be a big deal; it was part of my assignment. I would defend the candidate as best I could.

I think the campaign’s been covered. I was one of the troops, a lowly soldier trying to make sure he was elected. I went to Detroit and Denver a lot, and I did my best. I hardly ever saw my family, but by that point, they knew I traveled a lot anyway.

**Martin:** It sounds like you were pretty unconcerned about your own district at that point.

**Espy:** I was running at the same time, but I was winning so broadly by the end it was no concern at all. In fact, it was “Congressman Espy’s unable to be here because he’s out in support of Bill Clinton.” The black groups understood that. I had a lot of surrogates. I had no trouble at all, none. I don’t even know if I had to campaign that year. I was winning so big by the end that I was going to be a Congressman forever, if I wanted to be, so it didn’t matter.
Morrisroe: Any special recollections of election night? Were you surprised, or at what point were you convinced that Clinton would win?


Morrisroe: Fair enough.

Espy: I know there were some debates where it got a bit tenuous—I remember one where he stood up from the table and began to approach the black woman who had asked a question. I said, “That’s the guy I know.” This guy was taking control. You have President Bush looking at his watch. He is empathizing with the questioner. He’s getting close to her, but respecting her zone of privacy.

Black people’s zone of privacy is very important; you can’t break it. He knows that. So many white politicians I’ve seen think the closer they get the more serious they are, and it’s not true. It’s actually the opposite. It’s respect; it’s a sign of respect when you don’t break the zone of privacy. I don’t think very many white politicians know that. You have to get close enough to be sincere, but far enough away to demonstrate your respect. He understands that. That’s that culture that I talked about that people understand. A lot of them don’t.

I’ve seen other politicians—I saw Senator [John] Kerry here in Mississippi, when he ran for President, speak at a black church. I didn’t know him well. He asked me to sit on the dais, and I didn’t, because I didn’t know him well. I wanted to see him, and I saw him blow it. This church was a Pentecostal church. They were already geared up to help him. They were already enthusiastic. The bishop said that God told him he was going to be President. God told the bishop to tell him that he’d be President. The bishop took his palm and hit his head. The bishop’s like 5’7”; John Kerry’s 6’5”, whatever. He leaned over and hit him in the forehead, and made him President-to-be. Everybody’s screaming and everything.

Kerry just—they had one of these expandable retractable podiums, where you push the button and it goes up and down. It was down for the bishop, but they’d pushed it up for Kerry. Everybody’s screaming and speaking in tongues and running, and the choir had sung two great songs. I’m thinking, Man, take this moment and use it. He got up there and took a whole sheaf of paper, and put it on—it was so thick. He just—I thought, ahh. Then he talked about stuff that—just cliché stuff. I’m thinking, Man, this is Mississippi; you’re not going to win here. It’s that touchstone. I thought, He’s not going to win; he won’t win. He seemed very uncomfortable around black people. He seemed out of his element. He couldn’t clap in time with the gospel choir, he couldn’t. He was awful. I thought, Maybe he’s tired. It was a Sunday.

That’s when I appreciated Bill Clinton more. I thought, Now, if Bill Clinton were here, that paper would have never come out of his pocket, even if there had been one there. He would have used that moment to his greater glory. He would’ve come out with Scripture. He would have taken that moment. It was already inflamed with passion running amok. He would have taken it, and put it in the stratosphere. That’s what he did. I said, I miss that guy. I miss that guy because
he knows how to use a moment. I also watched him in Oxford, and he can—He uses that moment. We miss him. He has great political skills, and I miss him. Excuse me.

[BREAK]

**Martin**: We were finishing off with the campaign. We haven’t come to the question yet of when you decided you wanted to move from being a member of Congress to Secretary of Agriculture. Is that something you could walk us through? That set of thinking. Why walk away from what looks like a very good, promising start of a Congressional career?

**Espy**: It happened over a period of three hours, on a particular day. I remember it like it was yesterday. I was reelected with overwhelming margins, and Bill was elected, very happy. I’m going to be known as the President’s best—one of his best—friends in Congress. That’s what I wanted it to be. I’d forgotten one thing, though. When I became a member in 1986, I beat a Republican, and they wanted to give me a promotion beyond what normal freshman get. They gave me a seat on the Budget Committee. That’s a perch from which you can see the entire workings of the government and the world. You get more resources; you get two staffers. You get more money in your office budget. You can sit down to interview everybody at your request, Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. You can interview the head of the Federal Reserve, and we did. I learned a whole lot.

**Martin**: Do you mean you could interview them personally, or in a committee hearing?

**Espy**: Both, if you wanted to. In a committee hearing, it was easier, because you just asked the chairman to invite them, and they would call them, because the chairman invited them. [William] Gray was the chairman—my friend, my mentor, Bill Gray. If you wanted to interview them yourself, you may have to go to Mr. [Alan] Greenspan’s office, but because you’re a member of the Budget Committee, and you were trying to gain a greater understanding of financial markets, he would see you. I can’t say I went to see Greenspan, but I’m saying I used that opportunity, that perch, it gave me. You find out how government works. I wasn’t in on very many agricultural markups, as we call them, but I was in a lot of budget markups. It got me to the White House, and I used it to learn about how the government works, beyond what a normal member can learn sitting on one committee.

I had agriculture, but I also had budget. The problem was they had a term limit for Budget Committee members, and that’s three terms. I don’t know whether I could have gotten on another committee and waived off of it and grown in seniority, and moved from budget to that committee, but I didn’t. I had agriculture, but it was known as a junior committee. I did not have another senior committee, not having budget. I forgot that for some reason.

Here I was, elected to my fourth term, suddenly remembering I was term limited. We had to go to Washington to reorganize and decide which committees we would get on. I think it was
November 17 or something like that. I’m sitting there, looking at the roster. I have to get off of budget. Where do I go? Obviously you want to go somewhere with more power, as much or more power. There were only three committees with as much or more power: Rules, Appropriations, or Ways and Means. There wasn’t an opening on Ways and Means. Rules is a small committee, and I wasn’t that interested in Rules.

I wanted to be on Appropriations. James Whitten, the chairman, from Mississippi, boom. It had all the promise I wanted. Then I looked on the availability sheet, in the Democratic Caucus, and it was available, because they do it by regions. I was in the southern region, and my region had to have somebody else. Among all those who wanted it, I was one of the senior people. There was nobody black, so I guess I have a CBC base, I have a regional base, and I have Jamie Whitten. I thought, Done, I’m on it. Then I went to see Jamie Whitten, and he was against it. He never said he was against it, but he never said he was for it. I thought it was very curious. I thought, I got trouble. I got real trouble. I tried to go see Dick Gephardt. As I told you, we were friends, but not necessarily—I wasn’t his guy, and he didn’t do anything. I went to see Steny Hoyer, and I began to really try because at five o’clock, I don’t have a committee. I put my name in anyway, as a member for Appropriations. It’s a secret ballot, but I’m told I went to six ballots, meaning that the sixth ballot, they voted me off.

About four o’clock, I had the Agriculture Committee, and I liked that, but I didn’t have a senior committee. Here I am; I have less power in my fourth term than I had in my first term. I have the President there, my best friend. That’s something. I have less power in my fourth term than I had when I was a freshman. What do I do? I went back to my office, and had a glass of wine. I had to think it out. I could stay here. I’ll get a committee, Commerce or something. I can get a committee, but it won’t be a committee that will allow me to do anything, or at least as much as I had been doing. When you’re on the Budget Committee, you can put budget authorizations in so many places, even the Lower Mississippi Delta. I had a special little caucus on the Budget Committee promoting my programs, and you could just put it in there. I wouldn’t have that ability anymore, asking somebody else to do it for me when I could do it for myself.

I mentioned to you that there were several forks in the road along the way when I campaigned, but I didn’t mention them. They were spiritual and somewhat mystical, and I didn’t go through them with you, but this was one of them. I said, “OK,” as much as a human being could say it, I said, “The Lord is trying to tell me to move. It’s time to go.” Here’s my chairman of Appropriations, kind of saying no. Who would think that—The dean of the delegation always—but he didn’t. He was an octogenarian, but he understood what I was asking. And President Clinton, who—“I’ve always wanted to be in the Congress, would have been a friend of the President, but maybe it’s not my will, it’s your will. Tell me, what am I supposed to do? Do I leave Congress, after I’ve worked so hard to get here, to stay here like this?”

The answer, I’m not saying to you the Lord spoke to me, but it was pretty clear that I would not have as much power in my fourth term as had in my first term. There was an opportunity to try to get a more powerful position in Washington, to do more for Mississippi, and in areas in which I had become a specialist: agriculture, rural development, rural housing, food, and nutrition. I was on the USDA [United States Department of Agriculture] Administration Committee, familiar with the workings of the agency itself. I had real problems with Farmers Home, and I gave a
speech and called it a racist organization. I’d given those speeches. I said, Here is the chance for me to become the Secretary. It has a $62 billion budget. It has 110,000 employees. I like to travel. We have 80 offices around the world. I became known in the Congress for GATT [General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade] and NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement]. I believe in free trade. We get to sign the agricultural agreements that say—Everything that I’ve been aiming for is in this agency. Maybe I could be Secretary.

I looked around, and I didn’t—I had heard five or six names of people who he had considered. I thought, I’m about as good as those guys, and one woman. Here you go; this is it. Let me try for that. Between two o’clock and six o’clock on one day, I did that. It just so happened that at seven o’clock we were going to be at Union Station.

The DLC had its first big post-election banquet. I knew that, as one of the VIPs, I would be at the head table. I thought, Here you go. Tell me if I’m wrong, but let me try tonight. Let me try to become Secretary of Agriculture. I was very nervous, and I had a little bit more wine. I dressed and went over there. I still wasn’t sure how I would do it, but I thought, If he says yes, or if there’s any positive sense here, I’m going to do this. I still could be a Congressman, but I wouldn’t be as effective. This was a big change now, because I came up that morning just to a meeting, expecting to be in my fourth term, and here I was making the decision to leave. This was a pretty big decision. I went to the meeting. I know you’ve been in Union Station, where they have all the stone statues. That’s where we were. They’d taken all the regular tables out, and there was a sea of tables for the event, with one huge round table at the top, then there was a podium, a riser and a podium. I had to introduce Al Gore. I had to try to get that speech together. Then Bill Clinton was late; he’s always late, so I used this opportunity to make sure I knew what I was doing.

I excused myself, went behind the curtain, and sat on a milk carton. There was only a milk carton, and I sat on it. On the back of the envelope inviting me to the event, I wrote “Ten reasons why you should consider me as Secretary of Agriculture,” just like that. It all made sense. I like to write things down, to convince myself that I’m—Maybe I’ll memorize it, but it’s mostly that if it comes out of my hand, then I know I’m doing it for me. It’s the reason I think that, nobody wrote it for me. I wrote “Ten reasons why you should consider me as Secretary of Agriculture.” They were all related to things he had said on the campaign trail, and how he wanted to include everyone, in a Cabinet that looks like America and all that. It wasn’t so much race related, but was what he had said he would do. I knew his mind; I knew his heart. I could help him do it. There were ten reasons, and I wrote them. Ten reasons. I didn’t even have—There was just an envelope, so I put it in my pocket.

About ten minutes later he came in, and I gave it to Warren Christopher, because at that point I figured, look, if I’m this audacious, where I’d leapfrog over the process, I’m going to have trouble. Warren Christopher was then the head of the transition committee. Warren Christopher and—

**Morrisroe:** Vernon Jordan.
Espy: The lawyer. Yes, they were co-chairmen of the transition. I didn’t see Jordan, but I saw Christopher, whom I didn’t know, but I said, “Warren, would you please get this to the President-elect?” He said OK, and put it in his pocket. Clinton came in late, and began to shake hands around the table. He got to me, and I shook his hand. “Hey, Mike, how are you doing?” I said, “I gave a note to Warren Christopher for you.” I thought he was going to say, “OK, I’ll get it later,” but he said, “Warren, where’s Mike’s note?” Warren gave it to him, and he put it in his pocket. He kept shaking hands, and I thought, That note is lost. [laughter]

About 15 minutes later, I’m about to stand up to begin introducing Al Gore. It was a circular table, but it was a long table, though, and he was reading my note. I thought, Wow, he got it. My heart started beating. [laughter] I’m already about to stand and introduce somebody, and he was reading the note. I saw his eyes going down on the paper, and when he got to the tenth point, he looked up at me; we locked eyes, and he did like this. [motions]

Morrisroe: For the record, that was a thumbs up.

Espy: Thumbs up, it was thumbs up. I found out since that he does thumbs up every day. It’s not unusual, but I took it as a sign of approval for my idea. Certainly he was smiling, and gave me a thumbs up, and did like that, you know, like the comedians. I thought, Wow, is it this easy to get this job? I found out later it wasn’t easy, and I’d have to do a whole lot more to get the job, but I stood up and introduced Gore and everything. We loved the rest of the event.

I decided, OK, I’ll leave Congress if I get this. Two weeks later, it took about three weeks, because we were announced December 24, and that was around November 18, I had to go through the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] investigation, had to go through filling out all the applications, had to go through all the interviews with the transition committee. I had to go through maybe six trips to Little Rock, under the cover of night, where they would meet us at the airport and put us in an FBI vehicle with the tarp. They had the tarp in the backseat, and they told me to get on the floorboard. [laughter] The media was camped out across the street from the Little Rock mansion and they didn’t want any leaking about who he was seeing for these various positions. I had to go get on the tarp and they’d lead me in there. I went through numerous interviews.

There was one time that—I was divorcing at the time and my children—I’d moved to a condominium here in Jackson, out on the reservoir, and I received a call from Warren Christopher. It was raining, and I had my children. I cherished time with them, because I didn’t see them that much. I had them that weekend, and this Saturday morning it was raining cats and dogs. I got a call about 10 A.M. from Warren Christopher, saying the President wanted to see me at two o’clock. I said, How’s it possible? There’s no direct flight from Jackson to Little Rock at all. You have to go to Memphis, and then from Memphis to Little Rock. I said, “If I left here now, I wouldn’t be there until three or four.” He said to me, “Find a way to be here at two o’clock. We know you’re resourceful.” I said, “Resourceful?”

Morrisroe: It’s like a test.

Espy: I had to call my ex-wife, and tell her I had to give her my kids back. That was a real
problem. I had to find a private plane, which was not readily available to me. I raced out to—I took my kids back to their mother, to the home, raced out to the airport, and got a private plane. It’s raining, and the pilot couldn’t set down in Little Rock. He had to set down in a place about 40 minutes away, at a little private airport, because he couldn’t get into the airport. They shut the airport down. I had to have him call a cab to come get me in the rain to take me to Little Rock. I made it right at a quarter of two; I was knocking on the door about a quarter of two. Warren opened the door and said, “We knew you could do it.” So I say, “What?” [laughter]

Clinton was sitting by the fire. It was our third or fourth interview with him personally, with me. We talked about agriculture, what I wanted to do and everything. He said, “I think I’m going to do it with you.” That was it. I thought, Well, it was worth it, going through all that trouble of getting here. Then I was very happy and went back.

From that point, when you get the designation, then there are a lot of things you have to do. You have to go see the Senators, so I had to do that thing, where there were no objections. A lot of that work, then, is in Washington. I had to go through the mock Senate confirmation stuff and all that, but it was easy from that point, because I had the President’s support. It was a very intense month; from December 19 to December 24, I don’t know if I’ve ever been through anything like it, the bar exam, maybe, but very intense with different hands on you, different people supporting or opposing you.

I knew I had trouble. I was pegged as someone too ambitious, because I jumped over transition, and thought my relationship with him was so strong I’d go to him directly. It was, but you don’t want others to know that. I was pegged as too ambitious maybe, and that hurt me later, I found out. I met all of his senior people. I met everybody, and I met the other Cabinet officials he had been considering, talked to all them. You go from here to here [motions] in your level of exposure. The national media—automatically they follow you and question you and look in your background. That was an incredible time, an incredible time. Then I decided that’s it; I have to leave my Congressional office and start a lot of stuff here. Who’s going to be next?

Martin: At the time when you first found out—

Espy: That was a long answer, wow.

Martin: No, no, that’s a great answer. A good story. No, a fantastic story. I was curious, when you first figured out that you didn’t get the Appropriations Committee, or at least that wasn’t going to come through, could you have gone to Clinton for some help?

Espy: Maybe. Maybe, but I wouldn’t have done it. It’s almost like the resignation thing. I didn’t do it. I was a Congressman. Why would I ask the President-elect to help me in my own legislative branch to succeed when I’d been there four terms? If my own peers don’t accept me and want to reward me, why would I ask somebody else to come in like that? It was almost a—I would not have asked him that. I would have asked Gephardt, and did, tried to. You have line authority. I’ll go through the line, but I won’t cross that horizontal thing.

Martin: Were you given an explanation after the fact why you didn’t get the Appropriations
Committee slot?

**Espy:** I’ve written about that. I think it was, rest his soul, James Whitten. He was the chairman, he was from Mississippi, and he didn’t need anybody else. He took care of all of Mississippi; he didn’t need another Mississippian taking care of Mississippi. I’m not saying it was turf for rent, but it was almost as if we don’t need that here. He could have said, “I’m going to help the young man.” He didn’t do that. I think he said, “Let’s find another place for him to help Mississippi. I’m helping Mississippi because I’m the chairman, and we don’t need him. I’m helping the Delta, because it’s in Mississippi. I’m the chairman, and obviously we don’t need him.” That’s the way I think his thought processes went. Some people said it was racist, and some people said that I— I believed he felt that the state didn’t need another member on that committee because he was the chairman. I’ll just leave it at that.

**Martin:** Let me ask a different question. It points into the background materials we’ve read. There’s a comment that you are a list maker, and a diary writer. I was wondering, in this transition period, did you start making lists of what you were going to do as Agriculture Secretary?

**Espy:** I make a list every day; I still do. I make a list every day.

**Martin:** What kinds of things were you putting on your list?

**Espy:** When I said ten reasons I should be Secretary, that was a list. On that list, I said what I wanted to do. Once I knew that I would get the opportunity, I began to make lists of what I would do. Yes, and they’re all in Mississippi State. They took everything I have, and I do it every day. I always have. From the earliest, from college or high school, I remember making lists. It helps me focus. I used to prioritize A1, A3, B6. You get to the end of the day, and you say, “Wow, this day I did nothing.” [laughter] “This day I was really good.” It helps. You get so involved with minutia that you have to try to bring your mind back to focus on what you thought, at least at the beginning of the day, was important. If you don’t do it, that’s all you’re going to do all day. I do it all the time, still do.

**Morrisroe:** What made the cut for your list in terms of your priorities for the Department of Agriculture during that transition?

**Espy:** My Congressional experience informed me. I thought the department was too big for the contemporary missions. It was too weighty with—It wasn’t lean and efficient to fulfill the missions of the day, because it was created—Abraham Lincoln created it, and it’s almost like that’s where it is, lo these many years.

To me, the future of agriculture was foreign markets and specialized, customized crops. It’s almost like you order a dress that’s made for you, where there’s a bar code for you. As soon as it leaves you, there’s another being made, but you don’t have to have an inventory of dresses, because it’s too expensive. That’s how I see agriculture: custom crops instead of the surpluses and the subsidies of taxpayers going for the huge crops that depress prices. The farmers can’t make a profit, so therefore the crops go to storage, which imposes another cost on the taxpayers.
I was thinking that maybe we could go to value-added crops and stuff people really want and like to eat. Countries that grow cotton more efficiently, they bring their cotton in, but then we take their place on stuff that we do. Just to modernize agriculture. We didn’t need that many people.

At that point, Al Gore was in charge of reinventing government. I read the David Osborne book, and I said, “That’s what I want to do. I want to reinvent the USDA; I want to streamline it.” I don’t know if we want to get into these questions, but that’s what I did immediately. I know part of my top ten was reinventing, streamlining USDA, separating the wheat from the chaff, and using the money to make it more efficient, using money to make it safer, and keeping the money, then using the savings to force agriculture to a different mode. That was part of making it less racist.

I’m the guy who eliminated Farmers Home, because I made a speech and said it was racist, and I think it was. I had my own belief system about it. There were no blacks on the ASCS [Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service] county committees, because most of the farmers were white, and they voted the membership of the committees. If you were a black farmer out there, you’d never get voted on the committees, because they voted their peers on the committees. I decided, Let me try to get the Secretary to designate minority representation on these committees, because these committees decide who gets the largesse from the government. These were my ideas. I wrote them down.

Morrisroe: Is this when you met with Clinton those several times? Was this the substance of your conversation? Do you recall what those conversations were, and what his thoughts were in terms of agriculture?

Espy: Global agriculture. I believed in trade, foreign trade; he did also. I believed in making it more efficient; he did also. I believed in food safety; he did also. We talked a lot about that. Again, agriculture was not the dominant theme. I’m not trying to say that, and it shouldn’t be, but somebody has to be Secretary of Agriculture, so it might as well be me. Somebody who thinks like him would—I mean, we’re in charge of food stamps.

When I was in the Congress, they had just begun to experiment with EBT systems, Electronic Benefit Transfer, where you didn’t have to have the coupons. You have to pay to get those coupons printed. Those coupons go from the coupon holder to the grocery store. Once the coupon holder buys the groceries, the coupon goes to the local bank from the grocery store. The local bank sends it to the Federal Reserve. The Federal Reserve bundles the coupons, sends them back to USDA, and they’re burned. Look at all that. Look at the time and expense of that. Al was part of this group favoring EBTs, Electronic Benefits Transfer, an ATM [automatic teller machine] card for welfare recipients. You give them an account, you have the benefits transfer every month, and they have a card. They go to the supermarket, swipe it, and automatically it’s debited, and that’s it. I was a proponent of that; I wanted to make that nationwide. These are the things I wrote. Efficient, efficiency, and he liked it, so I got it, and went through the confirmation.

Morrisroe: Anything notable about your confirmation hearings, or the vote?
Espy: It was intense practice, intense practice. They assigned two or three people to me, and they guided me through the whole thing. I knew a lot about agriculture, but I knew there were a lot of things I didn’t know, so I was trained; I felt very confident that they couldn’t have asked me anything that I didn’t have some knowledge of, but it was a smooth transition through it. There were no great questions.

There were some few things, family related, that I had to have an off-the-record conversation with Senator [Richard] Lugar about. He was chairman of the Agriculture Committee at the time. It was nothing great that would prevent me, but I had to explain some things. I had been through the House banking scandals and I was caught up in that a bit. I’d received an exoneration letter from the Justice Department, long before, but I did have to explain it. It was explainable, and they accepted it. The latter four weeks were a lot easier than the previous three weeks, but it was something I will always remember.

Martin: I don’t want to park on this in any sort of way, but I’m curious. You mentioned having to have an off-the-record conversation with Dick Lugar. What, without going into great detail, what—I’m trying to get a sense of what a Senator would be concerned about, or what kinds of things he would have to be mollified about.

Espy: When you’re going for a Cabinet job, there’s an extensive FBI check. I’d never been through one before. In Congress you run, the people elect you; you don’t have to go through FBI scrutiny.

Martin: They let anybody become a member of Congress.

Espy: This one is extreme. They talk to your teachers, your relatives. They talk to everybody. The only black mark on my record, that I knew about, had been this bank thing. A lot of people like me went through it, but they kept me about three weeks, looking at some other stuff related to my campaign. It was almost as if they weren’t related to the bank; they were related to something else they thought they found. It was related to my FEC report, a thing that a member of my family was involved in. I had to go explain it. The FBI record is for Senators’ eyes only. You have to go to a vault and read it. Something was in there that he saw and he wanted me to explain, so I had to go and talk to him about it. He accepted it. It did not involve me; it involved a member of my family. I don’t remember the confirmation process as being particularly that difficult. They liked me. We were involved in a euphoric moment. You had a new President-elect, so it was good.

Morrisroe: To what extent did you have a say in the staffing of the Department of Agriculture with the political appointees?

Espy: Some.

Morrisroe: Could you tell us about that?

Espy: Not as much as I thought. Not as much as I thought.
Morrisroe: Had they already started staffing it before you were in there?

Espy: Oh yes. Sure. Yes. Some people I wanted never made it through. They first will allow you to choose your personal staff. For the Secretary of Agriculture that was about maybe 25, 26, 27 people, so I got that. Beyond that, the Under Secretaries, the chief policy people, they’re all political. There’s a lot of need to satisfy the White House as to who those people are going to be. They screen those people. They send you a list of people they will accept. You shouldn’t even start interviewing until you get that list. These people have policy credibility, but they also have political credibility. These are also people, I remember, who had helped me craft the President’s campaign agriculture documents, so they rolled in, too. For every position, they’d send three or four, or two or three, in some cases five or six names, then you begin your interview process of people. That’s difficult, because they have their own respective connections to the White House. You’ll get a call from somebody saying, “You interviewed him. He’s on the list, but we don’t really like him.”

The Secretary does all that personally, because these are people who will work with him or her, so that was credible. There was someone on the list for general counsel whom I liked; I really liked this person. I had called this person and told him, “You’re on the list. I like you. Let’s go with you.” This person was already making preparations to come to Washington, and I was leaving Mississippi to go back to Washington. I got a call from Al Gore; the Vice President wanted to talk to me. They held a plane for me to talk to the Vice President. He said, “I understand that you’ve hired so and so for general counsel.” I said, “Yes, I have. He was on the list, credible guy, Harvard, Yale,” this and that. He said, “Well, that’s not the person I want. I want you to hire this person.” And I said, “But that person’s not on the list.” He said, “He’s a late entry.” [laughter] He said, “I want him,” I said, “I already called the guy.” He said, “Call him and tell him no.” I called him, told him I had accepted his candidacy. I have to tell you, his candidate was a great guy, a great guy, but he was from Tennessee, and I guess he decided he wanted to be general counsel, and he got it. I had no problem. Knowing what I know now, I think he’s good. That’s how it works.

Morrisroe: Were you happy with the lists you were sent?

Espy: I didn’t know some of the people. I had to know them all, and I had to have them know that I was Secretary. Just because your name’s on the list doesn’t mean that you can override me. We had that discussion with everybody, but we reached an accommodation. There were some people not on the list, who I fought to get on the list, then hired them once they got on the list. It took too long, because that’s really all you do in the first six months. All these little things are happening, and you’re interviewing, and they have their own distress and timetable that you have to try to accommodate. It’s exciting, because they’re excited for you, and they have to prepare for their own confirmation proceedings as well.

I went for my briefing from my predecessor, Ed Madigan, who, like me, had been a member of the Agriculture Committee. He used to sit on the upper tier; I would sit on the lower tier. I consider him a friend. President [George H. W.] Bush had appointed him, and he had been there for two years. I asked him for a briefing, and he said fine, and sent a car for me. I came over; I remember that. There was another long, oak table. He’s sitting at the end of it. I’d been to the
USDA before, but now I’m the Secretary-elect, and I got all this pomp-and-circumstance stuff. I walked up the spiral staircase, and went through what we call the cage, a series of eight rooms with beautiful, beautiful paintings on the walls.

I went in to see Secretary Madigan. He shut the door, showed me around his office, the big office and the anteroom, kitchen, and everything. Then we went back and sat at the oak table. He said, “Let me say something about this job. My first day as Secretary, just like you, I was met at the atrium, and escorted through the “cage.” They brought me up the spiral staircase, and walked me through. I was all in awe, like you probably are. They sat me down on that chair, patted me on the head, and turned around. They left, shut the door, and continued doing just what the hell they wanted to do.” [laughter]

He was telling me that Secretaries come and go, but the bureaucracy remains forever. He said, “Yes, it does; don’t get carried away with this.” Then he handed me a list of names. Two lists of names. One had on it the people he wanted me to keep. These were Republicans who were political who were suffering health-related—They needed to keep health insurance.

Morrisroe: These were political appointees?

Espy: Yes. There were five or six people he asked me to keep. Someone had cancer; someone’s wife had cancer. Someone was looking for a job, but didn’t have one yet. He asked me as a favor to keep them in the system, and allow them to leave voluntarily. I agreed to do it, not fire them just because I’m a Democrat. I agreed to do it. Then he handed me another list of people whom I should trust.

Morrisroe: Of the bureaucracy, or of the political appointees?

Espy: Of the bureaucracy, people, managers in USDA whom I should trust, whom I could trust, who had been there a long time, who were extremely competent regardless of whoever the Secretary was. I should trust them. There were four people on there. I said, “Wow, this list to keep—six, seven; this list—four.” [laughter] I said, “How many people work here, 120,000?” “Yes.” I said, “Wow, OK.” [laughter]

Morrisroe: Did his recommendations about those four people bear out?

Espy: Absolutely. Absolutely. I drew them close, and they were key people. In fact, I elevated some of them, and they remain elevated today. I remember that one. Your mind’s going a thousand miles a minute, and you’re taking in so much.

In the third day, we had the *E. coli* outbreak. Three days—I was—I’ll just let you ask the questions. There’s so much that I could recall at this moment that I’d rather you ask the questions.

Morrisroe: All right. Fair enough.

Martin: Why don’t we talk a little about the reorganization? That was one of the first big things
you did. It seemed like that there was quite a bit of push back, especially the question—I think it was David Boren who raised it—about getting rid of D.C. [District of Columbia] staff before you closed some of the field branches. Maybe you could talk us through some of the decisions you made, why you wanted to do certain things with the reorganization.

**Espy:** First of all, the agency was too large. The missions had changed. It was my job to keep the money—I wanted to streamline it and recapture the savings—and put the savings into training, or retraining. As a Congressman, I was very familiar with farmer constituent calls, when they went to this office to do this and to that office to do that. To get the crop insurance, one office; to get the target price information, another office; to get the loan is another office; to get this is another. I said, “Why they can’t be one office?” I started something called one-stop shopping. Some of the savings we put into building the offices. You’ll see them today, the brick offices; that’s the way they built them.

There’s a lot of loyalty to each little brand, so I wanted to eliminate all the brands, and start with a new brand. Farmers Home became FSA [Farm Service Agency]. We did it down the line, to break that old thinking, and come up with a new thinking. Patti LaBelle had a song, “New Attitude,” so I had that piped into everybody’s office. I found out where the central system was, and we piped that into the hallways. A new attitude. Then when the Secretary met the staff for the first time, Patti LaBelle was blasting, “I’ve got a new attitude.” I meant farmer relations, race relations; we had to create new brands by blowing up the old brands, by putting something in their place that seemed to be more modern.

There were too many people there. I had someone do a study, and found out that some of those offices out in the country only had one or two farmers frequented the office the whole year. I found out which offices were busy, and which ones weren’t. It just made sense to me. In Abraham Lincoln’s day, everyone farmed. The latter half of the century, only 2 percent farmed. It didn’t make sense to have all the offices. That’s why I started with co-location, a brand-new office where all the missions could be combined. We found out we had to have 75,000-some people leave. I gave them 30 days to leave. If they left within 30 days, they got $25,000 cash. We had 27-, almost 30-something thousand people leave. I tried to match the mission with the name of the agency more closely.

There was a lot of push back. Al Gore pushed back because it was part of his reinventing government. *My* plan was ready before anybody’s. I wanted to announce my plan, because you lose—bureaucracy rules. I knew it had to be beyond just Mike Espy doing it; I wanted it to be a Congressional initiative, but the Congress says, “We have too many offices.” So the legislative schedule was moved forward, and I didn’t have a bill yet. I wanted it to be a bill, not just an initiative from the Secretary, because it would never remain. When it was ready, Al Gore’s larger piece wasn’t ready, so we had to wait and wait. When you wait, it atrophies, because people begin to pick it apart. They call their Congressman; someone did a *Washington Post* report about an office we looked at where you only had one person in there all year. I got a call on a Monday from the Senator from West Virginia.

**Martin:** [Robert C.] Byrd?
Espy: Yes, Byrd. He called me, and I went up there. Yes sir, he was chairman of the Appropriations Committee. He had a long table. There were two people at it, a court stenographer and himself. He sat at the end, she sat right there. I thought, A court stenographer? “Senator, what do you want?” He said, “I read in the paper yesterday that you are considering closing these offices.” I said, “Yes, it’s true.” “The example they used was this office in West Virginia.” I said, “Yes, but I didn’t choose that one. That’s the one the Washington Post chose.” “Yes. Well, did you know that that person is my cousin?” [laughter] I said, “No, I didn’t.” He said to me, and this is on the record, he said, “I don’t want that office closed.”

I said, “We’re going to close some in Mississippi, and that’s my state, and I’m the Secretary. I’m going to make an example of it. We’re going to close the cotton classification office in Greenwood, Mississippi, because it’s not being used.” He said, “That’s noble of you, but I don’t want that closed.” [laughter] “If you close it, you’re going to have to see me at another table soon, and there’re going to be a lot of people around there. We’re going to be considering your budget.” I said, “Wow, sir, that’s serious.” So I kept it open. I kept it open. It’s that serious. I didn’t close it, not that one, but we closed a lot of others.

We did have a reduction in force; we did have co-location. I tried to move it through Congress, but at that point, a lot of other things were happening. It finally passed. I made it a condition of my—I’m moving far ahead now, but I want you to know that the day I resigned was the day that the bill passed, same day. It was no coincidence. It took two years, but that’s because we had to wait to put it on the calendar. I wouldn’t have had to, had I not had to wait on the overall effort of reinventing government.

Morrisroe: Faced with that, there’s nothing you can do if Gore is asking you to wait? Are you trying to go through White House staff to get movement?

Espy: You want to be loyal, and be part of the team, and you have to wait. I had to wait. They wanted to take credit for it, and they can. I’m their servant. They took credit for it, but we lost a lot of time. We could have moved on to other things.

Morrisroe: Did the White House Congressional Liaison Office help? Did they make that legislation a priority at all, or did you have most of the Congressional work yourself?

Espy: That was one of the last positions that was fielded. We had to work with the people who were there. I did a lot—

Martin: Is this before Paster, Howard Paster, comes on at the first?

Espy: Howard Paster. I don’t remember Howard Paster that much now. There’s so much happening at the same time. You work with the people you have, and you get so busy, so busy. Every night they give you a thick book like this [motions] to read for the next day. You don’t have any time. There’s a call every morning at 5:30, 6:00 A.M. between your chief of staff and the White House Chief of Staff, or the secretary to the Cabinet. They let you know what the President’s doing. Whatever you thought you were doing might change by the time you get to the office at 7:00, or you’re in some plane.
My job was—Like any Cabinet job, you serve at the will and pleasure of the President, but agriculture’s a little different, especially if you’re black. I was a member of Congress, so I was known for that. That was part of my portfolio, as a member of Congress, going to fundraisers for members whose votes he needed on administration items, or going out to their districts. If they’re rural Congressmen, there’re not going to be but one or two members of the Cabinet to go to those districts whom these constituents know. There are a lot of urban places, very few rural, but they know the Secretary of Agriculture, so I’d go to those. I did a lot of Iowa, a lot of Kansas, a lot of stuff like that, and big groups that I had never worked with; as a Congressman I had not worked with that Cabinet member. Lots of trips on issues, anything important at the moment for the President, that has to be important for you. It was a very fast time. You have to notice stuff, be able to recite it. Go on TV and be articulate.

The reorganization was very important to me. From my days as a member of Congress, I knew that the agency was too stodgy, it was too ossified, and needed to be changed and have more color put in there, more racial administrators, more black and Hispanic, and people who understood diversity. That was my goal, to finally get somebody on the ASCS committees. I never did do that. Congress didn’t pass it. There was a bill put in, and it was rejected. Then I asked my followers, let that person be nonvoting, and they didn’t do that, either. We tried; from that came the black farmers’ lawsuit, in which I was a lawyer. We tried.

Then you have your emergencies. Three days in, we had the *E. coli* incident in the Northwest United States, then we had the floods, a 500-year flood that summer. Stuff was happening all the time.

**Martin:** It seems like nature was giving you plenty to deal with on top of your political schedule.

**Espy:** The big things, we had that—NAFTA and GATT. I liked to negotiate. I liked it. I thought maybe if I hadn’t become Secretary of Agriculture, I could have become the trade negotiator—that would be my fallback position. I liked it, and I thought I understood it. I really liked it, and I don’t mind traveling. I made a deal with the trade negotiator that I would have the primary responsibility for agriculture, not them. We would bring them in when we needed to close a deal, but I would negotiate it. If I could do it personally, I would do it. Mickey Kantor said, “Yes. Go ahead and go for it.” That put me in the air a lot, in Marrakech and Geneva, and places around. It was a very incredible experience doing that.

**Morrisroe:** I’m wondering if you want to talk about some of those individuals. You mentioned Mickey Kantor. Who were some of the other people with whom it became clear early on, in the Cabinet or the administration, you would be working closely?

**Espy:** Mickey Kantor for sure. Christine Varney, Secretary to the Cabinet. Ron Brown, Secretary of Commerce. He became my big brother. Political stuff, he just knew it. I would get his advice a lot. I don’t know if anybody knows that the African-American Cabinet Secretaries would meet: Secretary of Energy, Secretary of Commerce, Secretary of Agriculture, Secretary of Veterans Affairs. We would meet once a month, and talk about what was going on. They were great meetings. Of course, the Chief of Staff, the first one, I forget his name—Clinton’s friend.

Espy: McLarty, yes, Mack McLarty. We’d meet a lot with him. With me, it was the budget director, because I would fight a lot with EPA. The EPA administrator, we would fight a lot on issues. One was the phase-out of methyl bromide as a soil fumigant. She saw it as an ozone depletor. That went straight up to the top. The budget—Everybody was picking on the agriculture budget. I had to go appeal personally to President Clinton on that one.

I thought during the first year of my being there I had high credibility. I thought I worked hard. Inside the Cabinet meetings, it was all kudos, even among the rest, visibly before the rest of them. They were using me for certain examples of having to do something, how to rebuff somebody politely, without costing him politically. *E. coli*, the food safety issues, we jumped on that very quickly. We were on *Larry King Live* a lot with that. People saw an administration that was effective, diplomatic, that could move in with resources and help solve something, identify a problem, not cover it up. Identify it and move to resolve it, quickly, without alienating the industry. People saw that, and he appreciated it, he really did.

That opened my eyes up to the Food Safety and Inspection Service and the power of the food lobby in the United States. I went through several slaughterhouses, and we changed a lot of stuff. My reform efforts broadened immeasurably from that, not just streamlining the USDA, but food safety. I was known for that. With the floods, he chose me as the point of contact for the federal response across all agencies, which was a good sign that I’d done well. Then we started getting grades from newspapers, and I had an A+ from the *Baltimore Sun*.

Then it began to go downhill. You always raise just to lower your—I knew that was a problem. [laughter] I knew that was a problem, but I wanted a legacy there, no matter how long I’d served, no matter how short. I wanted it to be reform, reform, reform. I think it was.

Martin: We’ll pick up on all of that in the second half after lunch.

[BREAK]

Martin: We wanted to see if you would take the discussion about the reorganization of the USDA and follow that all the way through the passage of the bill, and the ramifications after that. I know that’s a lot of stuff to think about, but we wanted to do that to start with, because I don’t want to lose that story. It seems like an important part.

Espy: A central story, because it’s not something that was just a notion. It was based on my knowledge of the department, my sense of its changing mission, my sense of the ossification of the entire agency, and the fact that the farm population had dwindled, and support in the Congress had dwindled because rural populations were lower, and it’s the body politic. Its
Congressional representation was lower. The challenge was going to be greater, because the budget would become more of a concern. If you don’t have the political representation in the body deciding the budget, you’re going to get shafted.

My idea was to make it more efficient, more necessary, and more relevant to the lives of consumers, rather than just the lives of farmers. That was important. We weren’t going to get any new money, so we had to save current money, and use it to a greater purpose. My idea was to make it smaller. That meant to close offices, which was a political dilemma because nobody wants an office closed. We always want the status quo, and people like Senator Byrd are always going to be concerned, and will make you feel it if they don’t like what you’re doing. We had too many offices. We had to close some. We had too many people, just like Secretary Madigan said, who’d pat you on the head, and continue doing just what it was they wanted to do. You had to make the importance of it so evident that it was beyond you.

This meant that it had to be a Congressional initiative, because the Congress has the purse strings. If they owned the initiative, it would more likely pass than doing something the administration wanted done. I had to make the people want to leave, which meant there had to be an economic incentive to leave. You had to create a temporary program with a Holy Grail at the end, so that it would advance them financially to leave. That’s why we did the $25,000 cash bonus to leave in 30 days. You had to leave in 30 days; if not, you didn’t get it.

**Martin:** Was the Agriculture Committee supportive of this bill, or was it a struggle?

**Espy:** They kept kicking it back. I tried to involve them in it from the very beginning, and we went around and around on it. They finally agreed to it, and began to own it. It took so long because, as I said, I couldn’t push it until the Vice President had signed off on it. It took so long for him to do it because the rest of the pieces of the puzzle were not in place yet. One was to close offices, one was to reduce the work force, and change the work force. Another was to change the culture of the department. In doing that, we tried to put more blacks in these FSA committee positions. I tried to deal with the senior executive service, because I found that before Christmas they were getting bonuses of $20,000 to each home. That didn’t work, because the bonuses were supposed to be for meritorious service, new inventions and things, but they always went to the same people.

**Morrisroe:** The bonus system was their invention. [*laughter*]

**Espy:** The bonus system was their invention, that’s right.

**Martin:** You were always pretty inventive.

**Espy:** The morale was very low among the employee population at large, and there was no fresh thinking because they would not be rewarded.

**Martin:** When you were circulating these ideas of the various things that you wanted to do, did Clinton or the White House interject ideas here, or were you on your own?
Espy: Process, process. If it’s something I thought the administration would benefit from, then it was my responsibility to bring it up. For something like this, I’d bring it up to Mack McLarty, to have him think about it, and maybe put it into the President’s agenda. If it wasn’t that important, I would mention it to my chief of staff, who on his morning calls would mention it to Christine Varney. They would know; you can’t ever have them not knowing.

That was the greatest sin, to do anything that they don’t know about, especially if it’s good. No, especially if it’s bad. [laughter] They have to know about it. One was the senior executive service bonus system, which I changed. I formed a committee to do three things: reduce the size of the bonus, spread it across the greater employee base, and thirdly to award the cash prize more contemporaneously to the new idea that you were rewarding. Do away with bonuses at Christmas; do it—On these monthly employee programs, do it at $500–$1,000, and do it across a greater spectrum of people. We did all three. The President agreed to that. Then other Cabinet agencies began to use it to break up their senior executive service hegemony.

We did all three, and began to change the mission of the agency: less farmer to more consumer; letting consumers know we were relevant; making sure that consumers had every confidence in our Food Safety Inspection Service, particularly after the E. coli outbreak incident; and letting consumers know we had the primary responsibility for food and nutrition, emphasis on nutrition.

Obesity was a problem. We began to talk about wholesome meals in our schools’ food purchase programs. Fewer fats and less oil—fewer fats and less sugar. That was a big problem, because the food industry is very powerful. We began to talk about it, but then also to let the people know, particularly the black caucus groups that are concerned about food stamps, that we wanted to modernize the system, but still be available for people. I thought we did really well on that one. Then we had to handle crises through a mechanism that was already in place, like the floods and fires, that kind of thing. That was it.

I wanted to become known as the reform secretary. I learned later that reform secretaries don’t last very long. Someone told me—I won’t mention his name, but he was a Secretary—the way to succeed at USDA, and that generally the way to succeed in government, is to do very little, very slowly. That’s the way he said it. He said the way to succeed is to do very little, very slowly. Here’s a guy in office telling me that. I said, “That’s not me.” You flame, and you burn out. That’s what happened to me, I think. You have to decide which initiative has to be accepted and promoted by the President, through the executive branch; which of these initiatives must be adopted by the bureaucracy, or moved through the legislative branch; and which ones you have to be a maverick on, and they just allow you to be an irritant.

Martin: Is this sort of a gut reaction for you, in terms of which is going to be which?

Espy: Yes. Because I’d served in the legislative branch, I knew how far to go with them, and how long it would take. I knew that already from the Budget Committee. That’s where it helped me, because I knew who to go to, who to talk to, who to talk to on background, who to talk to—We would also use media to embarrass some of these offices we wanted to close; the legislators maybe wouldn’t be as powerful as some Senators, so we closed them.
The last reform was to bring running water to every home in America without running water. That was a big one. I didn’t know there were so many. We did a survey of all homes in America without running water, and created a program—I remember the sum of $2 billion that we tried to find in the USDA budget for this exercise. We got the Congress in on it, and Wall Street, through a bond program. We would have these communities form a water association, then we would subsidize the water association, as long as the new homeowners would have to do some of it themselves. It’s almost like Habitat for Humanity. They’d have to do—it wasn’t a welfare program, giving them water; they had to earn it, but we would help them earn it, so we did that too. Water was a big deal in the reform program, as surely was streamlining government. That was number one, but it was also reforming the missions to make them more relevant to people and to times. And making sure we had running water in every home. Yes, that was it.

Your political sense must give you an estimation of how far you can go with the President, how far you can go with the media, how far you can go with the Congress, and go up to that line and stop. You have to know what to do through the legislature, and what to do through the administration.

There were some times, I’ll confess to you, I’ve never said this before, where I would be unavailable to some of them. One time Mack McLarty called me. I’d done something that was right to do, but it may not have been necessarily politically correct at that moment. He called me three times that day, and I was unavailable. That’s almost a sin. I knew they would see the wisdom in it, but it wasn’t necessarily the right thing to do at that moment, and I was unavailable. Maybe twice. This one I can say: One time, I gave 140,000 employees the day off with pay. Something had happened. I don’t know what had happened. I can’t remember, but we’d been through such turmoil that I gave everybody a day off. My phone lit up from the White House, because none of the other Secretaries did it, and Mack wanted to chastise me for it. I didn’t take the call. I wanted to bring morale back into my department. Maybe it was the reinventing government thing that had passed. I don’t know what it was.

There was another one where—You have to be very flexible. We are responsible for putting out crop reports. It’s almost like—you know the comedian Eddie Murphy in Trading Places? Yes, it’s just like that. They give you a security card, and they escort you to the vault in the attic of the South Building, almost a 20-minute walk to get up there. They have to sign you in, and everybody knows who the Secretary is, but you have to sign in. You have to put your security system enhanced passport through the slot. This big steel vault opens, then you go in there. It’s like a little city, where you have economists, and they’ve been working all night. They were working all night to bring the Secretary the crop report. How many oranges are grown, what pork bellies are on sale for, what they’re doing in Russia, and what the wheat crop is estimated to be. It has a great relationship to market prices and agriculture. If it’s stolen or known, someone could make quite a bit of money in one day.

The practice was that they would come and get me at one o’clock. I’d walk over and be there by two o’clock. It would depend on the agenda—I would have to listen to it, ask questions, and sign off on it, the crop report. Usually the crop report would not come out until about four o’clock. The thing is, the commodities markets in Chicago close at four. It depended on the length of the report; it would either come out at four or five o’clock. Once it came out and the Secretary
signed off on it, the commodities reporters would race to the phone and call their shops about this and that.

Here’s a great example of how the mission, how the global information age, had changed, allowing profit centers to grow or diminish. At four o’clock, the commodities markets in Chicago were closed, in New York closed, but in Tokyo, they were opening. The traders in Tokyo—I remember they were very concerned about Tokyo, but all over the world—were just coming up at dawn. The USDA crop report would have become public, and they could trade all night—all night. When our markets opened in Chicago the next day, we’d be behind the curve: lost the opportunity, lost the hits, lost the money, lost everything.

The commodities people came to see me, and asked me if I could get that changed. I thought it made a lot of sense. They asked me if I could release it in the morning, but it takes a long time to get it together. They would have to work all night, for the Secretary to get it in the morning, by the time he opened up, ten o’clock, Central Standard Time. They would have had to work all night. They didn’t want to. The Economic Research Service really didn’t want to.

I told them, “This is a change that benefits American markets. We have to change that. If you have to work all night, you have to work all night. You have to; you don’t have any choice. I’ll make myself available at nine o’clock. I hope to do it in an hour, to read your report or to listen to you, ask questions. By ten o’clock, we have to release it. I understand that you have to receive information, collate it, do your economic job, and put it in a report for me, but those of you who are responsible for doing this, for every night you work, I’ll give you two days off. Go home, kiss your wife or husband, tell them you have to go back to the vault and work all night, but you’ll be able to be home two more days. Also they got preferred parking as an incentive to work all night. That’s the trade-off.”

So I did it. Today, the report is still being issued at ten o’clock. That’s something the bureaucracy didn’t want to accept. We had to find a way to be flexible. The goal was to make the information available to the American markets for the benefit of American traders, by the time they open the markets. Then the competition would be behind. They were competing off of our information. I gave them two days off, and they still do it. These are the kinds of things—When I say “reform secretary,” these are the things I did. They made sense to me. Yet the bureaucracy didn’t want to work all night. You had to make it, shape it, and make it work all night, and see that it’s in their benefit, because the bureaucracy got two more days off. That’s what we did. I did it. That was the formula for almost everything I did: What is the goal? Obtainable? Is it necessary? Let’s find a way to do it, and let’s give people some good, some benefit, they can see.

**Martin:** When you were trying to do some of these reforms, it seems like there were two timelines tracking. One of which was you’re trying to get these reforms accomplished. The legislation was going through, but was stopped at several points. You had to deal with the Presidency and the press. It strikes me that, unfortunately, your own political capital was waning. How does that train wreck happen in terms of those two things, those two timelines hitting?

**Espy:** Yes, when your halo begins to diminish, you don’t rise as high, and people know it. Everyone knows in Washington when you are—when there’s this dark cloud over you. They all
know, and you feel it. Your phone calls aren’t returned as quickly; your questions aren’t answered as rapidly. The whisper campaigns start, and people disassociate themselves from you. You know what you feel, that you don’t like it, but it’s unmistakable. It’s almost a smell of death.

**Martin:** Did it happen quickly, or was it sort of a dragged-out process?

**Espy:** Mine dragged out. Mine dragged out so long. It was so slow that I didn’t see it until it was too late. We’ll track that. 1992, I’m the golden boy, I’m A+ in the *Baltimore Sun*, I’m ahead in the Cabinet. I say this because it’s the signature of NAFTA, the signature of GATT. I negotiated personally the rice into Japan, personally the wheat into China—personally, one on one, everybody’s out of the room. They were considered very big deals then. Then the floods, and the fires, beginning in ’93. Everything was working well, I was happy and in control, and the legislation started moving. Then we began to be sued by the meat industry for some of our reform initiatives. They said I was too—I did not cross all the T’s and dot all the I’s. I probably did, because when I first got there, when I first began to pay attention to the system for inspecting meat, I began to—

When people know you have power, and you’re concerned, you start getting a lot of things coming to you. There was a whistleblower who called my office and told me, “Mr. Secretary, these things are happening, and I want to tell you in person, but I don’t want you to know who I am.” So I made arrangements to go visit the guy. We met each other in a building in Washington, out of the government complex. When I got there, he was behind a sheet, with a white light on his hands, so I knew somebody was there, and his voice was disguised. I’m sitting there, and he told me that he was a meat inspector at this plant, and here’s what happens. I listened to him for two hours; I was fascinated by what he told me about how the meat’s eviscerated, where the *E. coli* comes from. I learned stuff. He could have been lying, but he went to lengths to disguise himself, and he wouldn’t lie. I went to that plant in Nebraska, and made a surprise inspection of that plant, personally. He had told me God’s honest truth. We tried to do something about it, and they fought back.

When I first got there, there was a Food Safety Inspection Service regulation that if a feces chip—When a cow is eviscerated and skinned, the skin is torn off of a cow or whatever animal’s coming down—and it’s on the hook—it has these hooks. It takes the hoof and it hooks it, then the head is down, the blood is dripping. The worker turns the carcass around and takes this big rotary saw. Sometimes they nick the intestines, and all the ingesta comes out. It sprays on everything, because those things are moving down. The regulation said if the inspector notices a feces chip that is above a certain diameter, the inspector is supposed to wash it off or take a knife and chip it off, like nick it. I said, “Come again, what?” They said, “If it’s above a certain size.” I said, “That means that if you can see it, you have to judge how big it is before you decide you have to take action? Most of these bacteria are invisible to the human eye. If you can see it, it shouldn’t be there.”

I told them take a chemical wash. If you can see it, it doesn’t matter what size it is. If it’s available to the human eye, naked, you wash it off. We got that one. I said take a chemical wash and wash it off. They were saying that sometimes the high-pressure hoses embed the feces chip
more into the carcass lining. That’s probably true. Then we said wash it off or carve it off. They threw every kind of stuff in our way. It was a wash it off, carve it off kind of thing. We won that, but it took a long time to do it, because maybe it didn’t go through all the—You have to have comment periods and everything. I was a quick-action guy; I didn’t have tolerance for all of that.

But you have to. That’s the system; you have to follow it. They sued us in the same court they sued Oprah Winfrey in, and they beat us, the [National] Cattlemen’s [Beef] Association. We had to go back and redo it. In the meantime, all these kids could be dying, because what happened at Jack in the Box is the feces chip remained on the outside of the carcass, was ground into hamburger meat, and proliferated. It ended up in a lot of hamburger patties. Whoever was cooking it didn’t cook it long enough, and the kids ate it and died. They died from hemolytic uremic syndrome poisoning. I don’t believe I attended the funerals, but I did visit the families in the Northwest, and asked Clinton for an airplane. That’s the first time—I have to tell you about that one.

My thing is that this is a reform agenda. Then I started saying, If that cow has the prevalence of E. coli in its ingesta, why doesn’t every other cow who ate the same stuff have it? I decided to try to force a reform regulation that said the cows are to be randomly inspected, once they are eviscerated. All you have to do is take a sponge, right where the blood and ingesta is sprayed, swab it on the outside, where the ingesta is likely to be, have an in-house laboratory, down the hallway, with a microscope. Put the sponge under the microscope, and if it looks like E. coli, then you stop. Failed, that failed. We were sued, and it hasn’t happened today.

**Martin:** So the first couple of stops were in the court system. Not political problems, but—

**Espy:** Court. No, Bill Clinton was firmly, firmly on our side on this one. It’s amazing to me that that was the allegation that was used against me, that I tried to get favors from the beef/chicken industry. That was so ironic, because even today I still get a little emotional about it. That was my thing; those kids died. I changed that thing—I tried to—and that’s what was used against me, allegedly giving favors to those guys. It never happened. That’s what the jury saw—saw it my way. Anyway, that’s my answer.

**Martin:** At some point, we’re going to have to ask a question about the federal prosecutor.

**Espy:** Please. I could take you through the office and show you. I’m proud of it.

**Martin:** Part of what we were trying to get on the prior question was how you were able to do your job still, with the political problems happening.

**Espy:** I tried to explain that. I don’t know how much more I can. It’s troublesome; when your star begins to fade, you can’t do as much, because you can’t do anything by yourself. You need people to help you, support you. Washington likes you to be powerful. When your star’s rising, you get friends; you get those who want to associate with you. Once your star fades, the reverse is true. It’s human nature. It’s just the way it is. The same people I would invite in the Congress, who had always come to my little dog and pony show on reform, on reorganization, had stopped coming. My agenda started to slow considerably. In Cabinet meetings, where they made a great
display out of—Two or three times I was put up as the example of how to do something without political repercussions that were negative. They stopped doing that.

Al Gore one time, even at the advent of my troubles, stood up and—Once the Washington Post started writing about something—he stood up and put both hands on my shoulders in a full Cabinet meeting and said, “We’re going to stand behind you. We know you didn’t do anything wrong. We know this is an assault on all of us,” and this and that. I was really proud, but then that stopped. It’s hard. Once something stops like that, it’s hard to—I had trouble coming to the Cabinet meetings. I had trouble walking through the Rose Garden. You see some media person; you can see they’re motioning to the cameraman to focus on you, so you have to pick your head up, and act like you’re not concerned, because you know that’s going to be in the evening news. You know it. It’s hard. Every day you’re worried about what’s in the paper.

The answer is it’s very difficult. All you can do is ask for support, and try to get support from the person who hired you. You serve at his will and pleasure, but you want his pleasure, not his displeasure. You try your best to explain yourself and make sure they come around to your point of view. That’s what I tried to do. Mine played out over months and months. You think you’re up one day; you think you’re down one day; you just don’t know, because it’s happening so slowly.

What would happen to me, and I still can’t figure it out, is every Friday—From the third quarter of 1992 on through when I resigned, every Friday there would be a rumor that I was going to resign that day. Every Friday. It would be in newspapers, it’d be—Every morning I’d get in for my morning briefing, and somebody would hand me a stack of articles. It’s all put together for Secretaries, personal reading. Every one would have something about an impending resignation. Every Friday. I’d say, “Why not do it Monday? Friday? Do it Monday, let me live with it all week.” I think what they were doing was putting it in for the Sunday talk shows, because everybody watches Meet the Press, and Face the Nation; they’re all watching. They’re wanting me to get worried about it over the weekend. It was every Friday, and I could not—I got up every morning and wondered, Why is it just on Fridays that I’m getting this? But there was a group of USDA employees who had been doing that.

**Martin:** Circulating the rumor?

**Espy:** Yes. I pretty much know now who, what, why. I’ve been through all of that. You’re looking at someone who was investigated for four years, and who now has the benefit of knowing the fruits of the investigations. The FBI did 2,000 interviews, and I read every one of them. I know who did what now, and so forth. It’s a liberating thing when you know what somebody said. A great many interviews were very positive. A great many, but some of them weren’t. I know; I’ve seen them today, and they come on like—I don’t know.

**Martin:** You had mentioned earlier that the timing of the bill’s passing was purposeful.

**Espy:** It was a condition.

**Martin:** Want to take us through that story?
Espy: OK. We have to fast-forward then. The months are passing by. My situation’s becoming more and more tenuous. I had been supported by the administration, then I lost it. I didn’t know why I lost it, because the stories were the same. They were becoming more numerous, but not different. They were always about accepting gratuities. The stories were all in the neighborhood of accepting tickets. They were nothing huge. Nothing. I didn’t understand it. I didn’t understand it, but it was like death by a thousand cuts. Every Friday, a story; every week an article; it was all the same thing. I think what had begun to happen was that the President had begun to have problems. Whitewater was growing, and my thing was a microcosm of that. I think he decided to cut the losses. I began to see less and less time with him, and more and more rumors. I was so distraught, because it wasn’t true. I wanted the ability to defend myself. I’d always had his attention before. Whenever there was a problem with EPA, I went to him. Whenever there was a problem with the budget, I went to him. I defended it, and I couldn’t get to him anymore. That hurt me, because I’d been with him the whole time. You have Whitewater, and there was a prosecutor, I think that was [Kenneth] Starr—not Starr, the first prosecutor.

Morrisroe: [Robert] Fiske.

Espy: Yes, Fiske had already been appointed, and I didn’t have one yet, but there was a rumor that I would get one. Fast-forward to the time when my situation was do or die, I thought. I had to hire a lawyer. Ron Brown called me, and I don’t mind saying that he called me, and said, “Look, you’d better hire a lawyer. You’re innocent, but this is Washington; they’re going to try to kill you. They don’t care if you’re innocent or guilty. It’s not about you; it’s about Bill Clinton.” Ron Brown called me and recommended Reid Weingarten to me, my lawyer. I had to pay it. I had to say here I am; this has to come out of my pocket. I had to make arrangements for all that. It’s a very expensive thing, defending oneself in Washington from the independent prosecutor. There was rumor of a prosecutor. I hired Reid because Reid had worked in the white-collar criminal division. I thought he’d be a good person to try to stop it before it got started.

What really got me was that the Attorney General would not respond to a phone call from me. I asked her—I said, “Let me come in to speak to you, or speak to someone you designate without any counsel. I’ll tell you exactly what’s happening, and you investigate it.” They would not. I haven’t, to this day, gone in there to see them. I thought, That’s really different. I didn’t even get a chance to give my side. Then the FBI came in, and I purposefully didn’t have counsel, which was a big, big mistake. You have to have counsel, or at least someone there recording what you said, because that was an issue in my trial. We beat them because there were two FBI agents there. They chose to put one on the stand, and the other one they didn’t call, because they had different versions of what I said. The one who was more positive to me was never called. We told the jury; the jury believed it; and it’s true. All right, I’m trying to answer your question.

Once you go for the lawyer—Janet Reno didn’t respond. What really got me was one morning Leon Panetta was on Meet the Press. They asked him something about my situation, and he said, “Mike Espy has been a great Secretary of Agriculture.” I was lying in bed, drinking coffee, and I heard him say “has been.” I thought, uh-oh. That means that’s it. Because you can say “is,” you can only say “has been.” “Mike Espy’s been a great Secretary.” But the inflection was on “has.” I said, “Oh gosh, that’s it.” I called Vernon Jordan to talk to him. I never asked if I could see the
President. I would tell you, throughout the entire thing, Vernon Jordan was a friend. He returned my calls; he was very accessible to me.

I got a call from Leon Panetta that night to come see him the next day. I thought, That’s it. I said, “What would you do, Mike? You’re a lawyer.” What you do is write a brief, so I wrote a brief and I memorized it. It said—I’m answering your question now—I’m not guilty because everything has been the media. Here’s the explanation. You shouldn’t let me go because I don’t have an independent counsel. When one is selected, I’ll certainly go. If I’m indicted, I will voluntarily resign. You have a counsel; you haven’t resigned; why should I resign? Why should you throw me off the ship when I’m a part of the ship’s crew? I know I’m popular, because even under this ethical cloud—The White House does polls weekly on the standing of people, and mine’s still very high. I’m liked by farmers. I’m liked by rural people. I’m liked by black people. I’m liked by people who like Bill Clinton. I know I am. Nobody in the Congress has called for my resignation, not even Republicans, who now control it. This was 1994, and Newt Gingrich was starting to come up now. He said something about Mike Espy and Tyson, and I thought, Boy, this is really political. My memo was I’m not guilty; I’ll leave if I’m indicted; why should I leave beforehand; I’m popular; and I’m part of your team.

It took me two hours to get through all that. Leon looked at me and said, “Everything you said is true. I have to tell you, Mike, you still have to go. At any other time, in any other administration, under any other President, you would probably get a reprimand, but these are different times, and you have to go.” I said, “What you’re telling me is it doesn’t matter if I’m innocent; it doesn’t matter if I’ve done a good job. It only matters that it’s 1994, and Republicans are about to take over Congress, that I have to go.” He said, “Yes.” I said, “OK. I’m a big guy. I serve at his will and pleasure. Obviously I don’t have his pleasure, so I’ll go.”

But then he made me mad and said, “I want you to go this afternoon.” I said, “Wait now.” That’s—I mean, this is September. I said no. I thought, No way I’m going today. I said, “Why am I going today?” “You just have to go today.” What happened was he had just gotten the Chief of Staff’s job. He wanted to show me as an example of how powerful he was managing the Clinton staff; he wanted to use me. I said, “I can’t do that.” “Well, you have to go.” I thought, Well, Leon, Leon Panetta who was chairman of the Budget Committee when I was a member; Leon Panetta who went to the law school that I went to, Santa Clara, in California; Leon Panetta who was my friend is trying to use me. I said no.

I said, “Tell you what, Leon. I will have a news conference today. If you make me go today, I’ll go. I can’t—You’re the Chief of Staff, but I’m going to have a news conference today, and I’ll say I’m going, but I’m going to tell them everything you said. ‘At any other time, at any other—’ I’m going to repeat your words precisely, and you are going to have to deny what you said. I want to go at the end of December like everybody else. I’m going to say I’m going to go home and be with my family.” [laughter] “I’m going to say the same thing everybody else says.

“But I have to be here for September, because I have this agenda that’s not finished, the reform agenda for reform in government. I have to see it through.” It was about to be passed, it was going to be made a part of the agriculture appropriations bill, I think. I said, “That thing has to pass. That’s not only my legacy, but that is something I’ve been working for. I have to see it
through. I have to see it through. I’m not leaving. Even if I have to leave, I’m going to be at the door every day, talking about this conversation. You’re not going to be rid of me.”

I called a news conference for one o’clock. I was going to resign, and I was going to say it. I got a call 30 minutes later from the White House counsel, Abner Mikva. He said, “When do you want to go?” I said, “I want to go the end of December 1994, like everybody else.” He said, “OK. Don’t have that conference.” I said, “I’m going to have a conference.” He said, “You resign, but you make it effective at year’s end.” I said, “I’ll do that. You all know that nobody’s going to listen to me for four months now.”

They made me sign an agreement that I would have no involvement with meat inspection. That hurt me, because that was what I really cared about, but I signed it, and they announced I’d signed it, like that was a concession they got from me. That was it. I waited until then. I know it was on the fast track to pass. I knew it would pass, and it passed shortly thereafter. I think the day I resigned, they announced that it was included in something, which meant it was going to pass. That was it.

**Morrisroe:** Did you ever have a conversation with President Clinton about all this, or was it all just Leon Panetta?

**Espy:** No. It was Panetta. I didn’t because I do believe that he would have asked for me. I believe you serve at the will and pleasure of the President. It was clear I didn’t have the pleasure. Thirdly, I didn’t want to embarrass him. I didn’t want to be embarrassed, and I didn’t want to embarrass him by making him think about reversing himself, because obviously he had agreed with it, because I was there. Fourthly, there had been a White House press secretary—I forget her name.

**Morrisroe:** Dee Dee Myers?

**Espy:** Dee Dee Myers, yes—who was in the doghouse for some reason. When Leon Panetta came in, he wanted to fire her, and she went to Bill Clinton and he reversed Leon. I didn’t think that was going to happen twice. I wasn’t involved with him like Dee Dee had been in the campaign. You don’t get things twice like that, so I decided not to even try. It was enough for me to hang on until December.

**Martin:** Can we, as a contrast, dial back a bit, to the time where you were dealing with the floods? Those were very different political times for you. You were riding high when you were dealing with the floods, not to—

**Espy:** It’s OK. [*laughter*]

**Martin:** How did you get tapped for that particular job of coordinating the response to the flood?

**Espy:** Because I did a good job. The floods broke in July 1993. Again, this is a kids thing. My kids were visiting me from Mississippi then. They were visiting me, and had only been there two days when that—they would come visit me for July 4. The floods hit July 3, or July 2. I had to
go, and I didn’t know when I was coming back. They went with me to Air Force One; I gave them a tour of Air Force One, and the Secretary’s compartments and everything. They were very happy, then I kissed them and told them they had to go back to Mississippi, because I didn’t know when I could come back.

I brought my senior staff and we threw ourselves into it. It was a 500-year flood, as I recall. You had 8 million acres affected, and 800,000 acres under water. A lot of people needed help. We were there, I think, for almost a week in July. Then I went back there 17 times from then until September sometime.

The President—I remember that we were—Clinton liked to do a lot of town meetings. I was on the dais with him; they would like all the Cabinet Secretaries on the dais with him. He’s sitting here, Mack McLarty’s sitting here, and I’m sitting here. I’m whispering in Mack McLarty’s ear what to tell Clinton about some agriculture something, then he whispers to Clinton, and Clinton starts—He hits the table; he says that was very good, he really liked that. A whole lot of cameras are—we were discussing global politics. Then he announced it. I didn’t know it. He announced at the end of that that Mike Espy would be taking a leadership role for the government’s response. Nobody had asked me. He just announced it. I was trying to mask my surprise, but I was very surprised. I said, after it was over, “Where’d that come from?” He said he just decided to do it. That brought with it a lot more resources and a lot more trouble. I’d be responsible for the whole thing.

**Martin:** Was that run out of the White House?

**Espy:** Run out of the USDA. I had a special task force, and I had a room, a wing of the building, outfitted for the communications center. I put one of my staff persons in charge. She was to coordinate with the relevant agencies and the other—we just did it. I remember an anecdote about that. I was on one of my trips to the Midwest, one of my many trips to the Midwest, and that day I’d been standing on the back of pickup trucks, talking to farmers. Two things happened. I was in South Dakota. Tom—what’s the Senator’s—Tom—

**Morrisroe:** Tom Daschle?

**Espy:** Tom Daschle, yes. I’m there, standing with him. We were in mud, and waist-high waders. I got on the back of his pickup truck, and I was speaking. All of a sudden, there was this deafening roar overhead. I looked up and a helicopter hovered about one foot over this flooded field, and a door opened like it was Vietnam somewhere. I thought we’d get shotguns. What happened was the door opened and these two farmer-looking guys had these burlap bags. They were pouring whatever substance was in the bags into the water. Then it took off. I asked someone, “What is that?” They said, “They’re planting seeds.” “Why? Nothing grows, it’s flooded.” “Because tomorrow is the deadline for the crop insurance.” “Why?” “To get crop insurance, you have to show that there’s been a planting.”

Right, to show there’s a loss, you have to show there’s been a planting. The deadline for planting is tomorrow, so they have these burlap bags filled with seeds, and have to hurriedly make a good-faith effort to plant, so they can claim a loss. They go to the expense of buying the seed to
have it drown in water. No way they’ll get a yield, so they can claim a loss. I thought, *That’s something*. I went back and had the crop insurance bill changed to show a virtual loss. If they had planted, then it wouldn’t have come up. You use the five-year history of the growth to show what you would have lost, so you don’t have to do that. It passed.

**Martin:** Clinton joined you on several trips out to survey damage. Could you talk a little bit about his trips with you?

**Espy:** I will. Let me just mention the second anecdote. We saw that and we changed the crop insurance program. Nobody had to do that anymore. They said, “If it floods by the time the deadline to plant comes, then you show what you would have planted, without having to do so.

The second thing is that we were in Illinois. There was this big cash award day, with all the mayors who had lost—These were not farmers, these were urban mayors. That was part of my job now, to give the emergency awards out. I’d been all day in rowboats, going in flooded fields. I got in the car and we drove like the devil to this very nice urban amphitheater where everybody was gathering. My security detail had gone ahead to make sure that—I was late—to make sure my place was there. They had already started the program. My place was there, and they’d already started the program.

I wasn’t smelling too good; I’d already been under the sun. I didn’t look good. I knew it, but I couldn’t change. I went in, and had all this money in my pocket. I had millions of dollars in my pocket, with everybody’s name typed out, every mayor of so and so. I had them all in there. I was walking in, and was stopped by this big white security guard. He said, “Where do you think you’re going?” I said, “I’m going inside.” He said, “No you’re not. There are really important people in there, and they don’t want to see the likes of you.” I said, “The likes of me?” He said, Yes.” I said, “OK, I’m just going to wait here.” I’m going to see how long this will take for the likes of you to find out who the likes of me is. [laughter] It took about six minutes, then my security guys came running with guns. [laughter] It was in the newspapers the next day. This big old white—this is why I was reminded that racism exists—this big old white security guard stopped me, “Where do you think you’re going?” “I’m going inside.” “No, you’re not.” I said, “Well, OK,” and I had all this money. They got a kick out of that in the paper.

Bill Clinton would join us from time to time. Whenever he wanted to join us, I’d go with him. There’s a picture on my wall back there with him—I’m briefing him aboard Air Force One, and we’re going to the—We would go wherever we wanted to go. We would go do *ABC News* with [Peter] Jennings; we would do NBC, a few more *Larry King Lives*. It all worked. That was the most glorious time, because it was what I wanted to do; I could do it, I was capable of doing it; I liked it; I was available and accessible, and didn’t have any great family obligations to be worried about. I had children, but I was divorced at that point, so I was hitting it.

**Martin:** What was your relationship with FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency]? Did they coordinate with you?

**Espy:** James Lee Witt and I were friends. He was an incredible help during that period, but everybody knew USDA was running this one, because most of it was agricultural stuff. We were
not competing. I valued his expertise. I rely on my instincts a lot, but I like to hire people, smart people, who can help, and I had a great, great staff, very good staff. Most of them were good; some of them weren’t, but most of them were. I don’t remember anything about Bill Clinton going other than he went a lot, and he empathized. We went together. There’s another picture on the wall with us in Iowa, on hay bales. He’s speaking. He’s so smart. He knows—All you have to do is tell him. He’s already probably read more books about agriculture than I’ve ever read, and he remembers. His memory is the best I’ve ever seen. His ability to respond to human crises, to let everybody believe that you’re the most precious person in his eyesight; he’s so good at that. It’s so natural that you don’t have to tell him much. When he goes, you go with him, but he’s the guy.

Morrisroe: When you would meet with him on budget or policy, things of that nature, what type of information did he like to get from his advisors and his Cabinet? Was he seeking political advice? Did he like to debate things with you? I’m trying to get a sense of those meetings that you did have on substance, what he sought out of his Cabinet officials.

Espy: He would lean back a lot. He would put on those little half reading glasses, and put them down on his nose. He would read your briefing paper while you were sitting there, but he was listening and reading. I like people who can do that, because they tell you they’re listening, because they ask you a question, then you know they’re reading because they’re already reading ahead of you, and he can do it. He was patient. Well, he had a temper, a white-hot temper, but as quickly as it would get hot, it would cool as quickly. I didn’t see that temper a lot, but I did see it a little bit. In these briefings, in these meetings, though, he would be patient. He would listen. He’d lean back, he’d let everyone have their say, then he’d start asking questions. You just had to answer them.

I do remember when they were formulating the budget, the first Clinton budget, in 1993. The USDA had a pass back, meaning it would be passed back from OMB [Office of Management and Budget], then you would have to review it and respond. We had a pass back, and I disagreed with what they cut. I asked for an audience with the President as a referee between Panetta and me, and he saw it my way. I explained that they were trying to take my savings for my reform program before it was passed, taking it and putting it somewhere else, and I wouldn’t let them. He agreed with that. I remember saying he was penalizing me for being the most reform-oriented in a reinventing government program, before it even took place. He was penalizing me for doing what he had said he would do. I was being penalized, taking the money and putting it somewhere else. He agreed with that sentiment. Like anyone else you would expect, he listened, he read, he was patient, then he started asking insightful questions.

Morrisroe: You found him to be very well informed on agriculture?

Espy: Yes, I mean—

Morrisroe: As much as you would expect.

Espy: Yes. Agriculture, again, in the life of a President, is not that important, honestly, but he took it seriously. He wanted to make sure that the political and the financial and the mission-
oriented goals were all the same. He was as up on it as anybody would be. I did not seek to glorify it beyond its natural place in the Presidential agenda. I always tried to highlight the people programs, the food stamps and the EBT transition. Even the initiatives he talked about last week were all—I think he remembers that from his days.

Morrisroe: Did you find those issues resonated more with him?

Espy: Yes. Anything that could be called a Democratic base issue, feeding hungry children, welfare reform, we had a little piece of that. Yes, anything like that I’d make sure was highlighted, so he would know.

Martin: Did he consult with you, especially in these Cabinet meetings, on things outside of agriculture? For example, frequently Henry Cisneros would be consulted on how is this going to play with the Latino community. Were you brought in as a liaison to the black community?

Espy: Yes, somewhat, but he had Ron Brown. At the same time, in my opinion, Ron Brown was an absolute master on that. They didn’t need Mike Espy to talk about the black community, but yes, he would ask, “Mike, how is this going to play where you come from?” I can’t say I was a valued political advisor, but they always tended to send me to those places. I was like a junior Ron Brown. I would think Ron would get the first call, and I would probably get the second call. I tended to get more calls on rural stuff than I did on black stuff, as I remember.

Morrisroe: There was some criticism in the administration, especially in the first two years, that while the Cabinet reflected diversity, the White House staff did not, either on ethnic or gender grounds.

Espy: Right.

Morrisroe: Did you view that as being the case? Did that make an impression on you in any way? Do you agree with the criticism?

Espy: I never heard that criticism much. I was too busy. They had a bunch of black and Hispanic high-level members of the administration—We were given orders. I didn’t much care what the staff of the White House looked like, not really. We were there; there wasn’t a person among us without real authority. There wasn’t a person among us who I thought was incapable, or put there just for color. I think Ron Brown, me, Hazel O’Leary all could, within our respective areas of influence—We were there. I read a story last night about President [Ronald] Reagan and his HUD Secretary; he didn’t know who he was, called him, “Hello, Mr. Mayor,” one time. It wasn’t like that. We would go to retreats. The first time we ever got together was on the retreat at Camp David. I’d never been to Camp David. It was the weekend after everybody had been sworn in, and we all went to Camp David together to bond.

Morrisroe: Is this Cabinet, or Cabinet and senior staff?

Espy: Cabinet and senior staff, yes. Even some of the Under Secretaries came. They decided who would come. We were all at Camp David. Everybody had a cabin; I shared a cabin with the
Secretary of Labor. They would have these exercises—Tell us the three things you regret the most about your life. Tell us the most humiliating incidents in your life. It was all that kind of touchy-feely stuff—

**Morrisroe:** Therapy for Cabinet members.

**Espy:** It was. It was.

**Martin:** Did you guys play along, or did they—

**Espy:** Everybody did. Everybody, how could you not? [laughter]

**Morrisroe:** You don’t need an FBI background report, you just need a—

**Espy:** The President led it. He talked about how he was fat as a child, and how he felt about it when he was fat, and how he wasn’t chosen for football, or he was the last one chosen for sports events, and among his peers. I remember that. Then Hillary spoke, and somebody should have recorded that. You even had Warren Christopher, the straight-laced guy, talking about his childhood. Oh, my goodness, it was hilarious. That’s when I met Robert Rubin and all those guys. Everybody was there for three days together. We ate and drank together, and bowled and played pool. All these things were led by somebody. I don’t know what you’d call them, a group therapy person? I don’t know.

**Martin:** Was Tony Robbins involved?

**Espy:** We didn’t see Tony Robbins. Yes, it was hilarious. It was more fun than anything else, but that was the weekend of the *E. coli* outbreak. I had an agenda thing going on; I couldn’t just be at peace. This was the first time—We went on Friday. That Thursday, we heard a report of it, then I called in my FSIS [Food Safety Inspection Service] staff. That’s when I first knew I had a problem, because the head of FSIS was traveling.

I asked the deputy where he was. She said he was traveling. I said, “I assume he’s traveling in the affected area?” She said, “No, he’s going to make a speech at some event.” I said, “We just had three deaths.” And she told me they were “only three deaths.” I thought, *Come again?* I said, “What do you mean, only three deaths?” She said that was well within the range of acceptability. I thought, *Oh my God, I have a real problem.* I’m not going to call her name, but she’s no longer there. She was a big problem to me. I thought maybe I didn’t know enough about it, so I decided not to say much about what she said. Then I said, “Did he know that the new Secretary had called a meeting?” She said yes, and I said, “So he sent you?” The new Secretary of Agriculture calls an emergency meeting of his Food Safety Inspection Service staff, and he’s not here? OK.

I went to the Cabinet the next day, the retreat, and told President Clinton that this was a serious thing. We didn’t know how widespread this was, that three children were about to die or had died, and that I wanted to personally go out and judge the situation. Agriculture Secretaries didn’t have jets, and it was too far. I said I wanted to ask that this be a Presidential mission, which meant I qualified for an Air Force Lear jet. He said, “Of course.” Just lightly said, “Of
course.” He said, “I’d like a full report when you come back.” I thought, Cool, he understands.

At the tarmac the next day, I met my FSIS director, that Monday. First time ever. We were sitting in this little aft cabin, and there were three of us: him, my chief of staff, and me. I’m sitting here, he’s sitting here facing me; there was a captain’s chair here, a captain’s chair here, and a couch here. I’m sitting in the captain’s chair facing forward. My chief of staff is seated in the captain’s chair facing me with a table. Then there’s a couch, and my FSIS director, whom I had never met, and with whom I was a little angry. I was trying to get my briefing.

He turned to my chief of staff and said, “Tell the Secretary” so and so, such and such and looked at him, so he told me. “Give the Secretary this paperwork,” and he handed it to me. “Make sure the Secretary knows” this and that. I said, “Wait. I’m right here, I see you. Tell me what you want to tell me.” He turned red. He said, “We have never been allowed to address a Secretary directly before.” I said, “Man, I’m so different from what you’re used to. Look, we’re saving time by you telling me directly.” [laughter] “I’m standing right here, just tell me.” I think he appreciated that. He wrote something that said he appreciated that. He remembers that I was a real person. [laughter]

But it’s true. Previous Secretaries—When I was a member of Congress and had an issue, and asked to see the Secretary, and went to the cage, I wasn’t treated with the kind of familiarity you would think a member of Congress would be. No, it was regal in there. They didn’t offer coffee or anything. I won’t say who they were, but no, it was—I don’t know. That’s why I knew it had to change. It had to change.

Martin: Can we go back to a point you had made earlier about the beginning of the Cabinet? You’re at Camp David together; you’re having a bonding weekend, it sounds like. We’ve heard mixed reports about how much the Cabinet was used in the early period. I was wondering what your sense was. Did it act as a Cabinet traditionally would be thought of as acting?

Espy: I would say no. I don’t think we were widely used. I don’t want to say this—I’m going to use this word, but I do not want to say it was negative—We were props. Remember now, we were political props. The American people believe that the White House executes its authority through the Cabinet. They believe that. It’s not true, but that’s what they believe, so whenever you want to make a point about something, you assemble your Cabinet, where the American public can gain the appreciation that the President considers this a serious issue, whatever the issue is. They would come in, we would all sit at the Cabinet table, and there would be a photo op. Then all the media would come in and ask questions, and he would ask questions. We would always meet about something, but it wasn’t you do this, you do that. That’s not the way it works. No one will ever tell you that it worked otherwise, because it did not. The way we worked was through the morning phone calls, because he would definitely execute his orders through his Chief of Staff or through Christine Varney, then I would find out about it, and my day would change.

Then they decided to move into Cabinet working groups, and we did work, where I was in the natural resources working group, with the Secretary of Energy, the Secretary of the Interior, EPA, and me. All four of us would meet regularly and talk about an agenda, a rebirth of old-
growth forests or something, but the agricultural agenda was so different. That’s when I had to be conservative against a liberal—you know, Interior, Bruce Babbitt, protecting owls and EPA, protecting the ozone layer. It was completely 180° from the Congress, when I was the most conservative guy against—Well, I guess it was the same. Let me rethink that.

Here I am, promoting the use of fertilizers and making sure that we have enough paper products. It was more conservative than I was as a person. The agenda of agriculture was very conservative, more than I was comfortable promoting, but I was the Secretary. This was my constituency, and I had to promote it. Whereas in the Congress, I was comfortable promoting what was a more conservative-to-moderate agenda. Agriculture had to be very conservative, and still I wasn’t conservative enough. The best way of saying it is I was always torn. When I would get in the Cabinet meetings or with the working group, I had to be more conservative than I really was. When it came to applying the hammer with reforms, I probably had to be more liberal than I was. You have to be more extreme than you really are so you can keep the thing going. I always felt torn there, but you can never be moderate.

**Martin:** One of the things that you’ve touched on at certain points—You commented on the food lobby being very powerful.

**Espy:** Extremely.

**Martin:** This probably touches on your ability to be either liberal on something or conservative on something else, and your reforms—I’m assuming they pushed back quite a bit on various things that you tried to do. Can you talk a little bit about them as an interest group, and how you interacted?

**Espy:** With the food lobby?

**Martin:** Yes, how you interacted with them.

**Espy:** They invited me to speak at these things. I would always use them as an opportunity to push reforms, like food safety inspection reforms: feces off of meat if you can see it reform; sponge test reform.

**Martin:** But would they come to you and ask—You mentioned the story earlier about the Cattlemen’s Association taking you to court, or taking the USDA to court. Would they try to pressure you more directly first before taking that route to court, or would they always go to the court?

**Espy:** Both. Yes. They would call the Chief of Staff, Mack McLarty; he would call me. He would tell me who was upset with me, and tell me if the President was concerned that they were upset or not, but out here—They’d always tell me who he’d heard from, of course, who had given donations, large donations, and what they wanted. It was up to me to understand that I should heed it or not heed it. Yes. I heard from Ron Brown, who had been former chairman of the Democratic Party; he would give me a history lesson on political donors, who they were, and when they came to see me, whether I should see them or not see them. He would call and I just
listened. You work for them. You see them, but you don’t have to do anything.

The President never called me about seeing anybody, not one time. I want to make that clear. Or seeing or not seeing someone, not one time, not from him. If he did it through someone else, I didn’t know it. I took all this to be heads up from people who were trying to tell me what the situation was. Nobody asked me to change a regulation, or not change a regulation, even with Tyson. Not one time. Tyson’s from Arkansas, and not one time did they ever ask me to do anything or not do something for Tyson. Not one time. But I knew they were powerful; I knew they were friends; I knew they were donors; and I knew they had taken me to court. Yes, I fought them all the time.

**Martin:** Did they come up through Congress as well? Did you hear push back from Senators or members of Congress?

**Espy:** All the time. Most of the time I heard from Congress because Congress is not insulated. The Secretaries are insulated. Congress is not; they see these people every day. They run every two years; they run every six years. They will tell you quite clearly that if you don’t do something for so and so, “I’m going to cut your budget,” like they told me. If you don’t do something for this, don’t even come talk to me. Yes, all the time, but that’s what they’re supposed to do.

**Martin:** Did they come at you also with the idea that you’re a former member of Congress. You have to understand this is—

**Espy:** All the time, yes. “Why would you cut my office?” “Why would you delete the USDA office in my area, when you know I need that office to stay in power?” I would say, “Just let me tell you.” I would bring the study and show that office hadn’t seen a farmer in two years. That’s my reason for closing it, right? [laughter]

**Martin:** Exactly.

**Espy:** I would say it as an example. “I was a Congressman from the poorest district in the country, and I’m cutting this office.” I’d show them. And the cotton classification office—I gave a speech here in Jackson one time. I was Secretary, and these reforms had just started. Someone, quite cleverly, during the question-and-answer period had a black woman to stand—There had to be 500 people in the audience, and she stood up—She said she worked at the cotton classification office in Greenwood, Mississippi, and was it true that I was going to close that office? She had been my constituent, and they got her to stand for everybody. There weren’t five black people in that whole audience.

[William J.] Bennett, the former Secretary of Education, was a guest speaker. I had to give a speech, but he was the keynote speaker. He came after me. When that woman stood up, I explained to her what we were trying to do, why we were trying to do it, the cost savings that we were trying to achieve, that I was sorry she was going to lose her job, and that I’d do all I could do as the Secretary to make sure she got another one. That’s the best I could do.
When William Bennett got up, he said that is the example of a great public servant, who is courageous enough to tell the truth in public, even when it is against his own interests. That was in an article in the *Clarion-Ledger*. He said that is the example of a true public servant, to give bad news in public, courageously, even when it is against his own personal interest. That’s the way he said it. I thought, OK, why didn’t they say that two years later? [laughter] But we closed the office. The cotton office is closed, because it wasn’t seeing anybody. That’s when cotton was classified, and now everything is computers.

**Morrisroe:** One other important area, during your service, was trade negotiations, ranging from China to Japan to the EU and Russia. Maybe pick a few of those that you think are most important for us to understand your role in, and the role of the administration in, taking on those issues.

**Espy:** It’s important even today, because agriculture is the issue holding up the Doha round, even today. When I was there, it was called the Uruguay round. It is the most contentious issue of any of the trade issues because everyone eats. Most every country produces some agricultural commodity. Everybody has some involvement in it, and the involvement is at the lowest-common-denominator level. In Europe, all the farms are very small. Because the land mass is not huge, there are a whole lot of real small farmers, but because there are so many of them, they have an inordinate power in the parliament. They demand their subsidies.

In Japan and in Korea, the farms tend to be larger, but they only grow one crop: rice. Since World War II, all these countries have considered rice to be a part of their national defense, because when we bombed Hiroshima, when we bombed Nagasaki, we weren’t sending any food in. They believe that they have to remain self-sufficient in rice, and that everybody should understand that, that rice is sacrosanct. Rice is what their people eat every day. Their country cannot depend on another country sending in rice. They just can’t, so they want to take it off the table, that issue. But if you believe in free trade, you believe trade should really be free. There could be no crops that were exempt. Even if we grow rice cheaply, more cheaply, then our cheap rice should come into that market, and their cheap cotton should come into our market. By the way, we are hypocrites also. We have great subsidies and support.

My President was a free-trader; my President believed in NAFTA and GATT, as did I in the Congress. It was an easy leap for me, and I liked it. I liked to travel; I liked to see new things, talk to interesting people. I liked the role of the Secretary, and knowing enough to do it personally. That’s why I got Mickey Kantor to allow me to negotiate, at least the first round, personally, so I did. I was going all the time, Marrakech, Toronto, Geneva, Brussels, London, Korea, all the time.

We flew on coach, because Bill Clinton wouldn’t allow Secretaries to fly first class. I will say that everybody bitched about it. [laughter] Oh, my goodness. He wanted to show how we were for the common man, but you fly 8, 9, 12, 16 hours, and you get up and have to go to somebody’s smoky hotel room to negotiate pork bellies, and you’re hung over and tired—“hung over” meaning jet lagged. If I could change one thing, I’d say understand how tired we were in those trips. Everybody said it. If you couldn’t get a military jet, you were out of luck, so you had to go coach. You may have the whole seat to yourself, but with the money the government spent
on three coach tickets, you could easily have had a business-class or first-class ticket. Anyway, I digress. Everybody was tired of it, though, but nobody wanted to say it. We were all—

**Martin:** Let me pause there. You said they would purchase multiple coach seats?

**Espy:** I’d have nobody sitting beside me. [*laughter]*

**Martin:** Just so you wouldn’t look like you were flying in business class or first class?

**Espy:** So I could stretch out.

**Martin:** I don’t know if I had heard that part specifically before.

**Espy:** Yes, I could stretch out. Usually, your entourage would buy an extra seat or two, then my security would sit behind me. I would sit by the window or by the aisle, and I’d have two places beside me, because I paid for them. Not every time, but on long trips, yes, I would stretch out.

You were asking me for examples. I’d say the first example would be Korea, when I had a Minister of Agriculture cry, one on one. He cried. He asked that the staff leave the room, and he started crying. We had just negotiated a rice entry agreement with Japan, meaning that U.S. rice would be allowed to enter their markets for the first time ever. I was very proud of that, because I negotiated it personally. I have a vase I’ll show you that calls me the Rice Secretary. It was a decent agreement. You always like assent on when it’s going to come in, how much is going to come in, and at what time.

The next was Korea. When I got to Korea, the Minister asked that his staff leave the room, and if I could ask my staff to leave the room. I did, and he told me that he would be fired by the President if the deal we struck were not more favorable than the deal that I had with Japan, that I should understand that his country is more rural than Japan, they depended on rice more than Japan, and that he would be fired. His grandchildren were this old, and he had no other thing to go to. He started blubbering. We struck a deal, and I thought it was favorable. They still fired him the next day; they fired him. About five years later, I went to see him. He’s president of a supermarket. He said, “There is no good outcome, because you’re going to make me open my market.” That’s one of them that I remember well—There were so many.

**Morrisroe:** What about China? You were the highest-ranking official to be the first—a Cabinet member—to go to China during the Clinton administration. Do you recall the circumstances surrounding the decision to send you there?

**Espy:** The wheat growers asked the President to send me because China did not allow any U.S. wheat. We had an issue called TCK smut [*Tilletia controversa Kuhn*], which was some type of fungus that would infect their wheat, they thought. My job was to allow this wheat to enter mainland China. The deal we struck was that it would enter mainland China through some sort of island—Hainan Island is what I recall. On Hainan Island, our wheat growers would agree to fund a wheat mill, a flourmill, that would exclusively receive our wheat, even with TCK smut. We would grind our wheat on the island, and bake it into bread, then that bread would go into
mainland China. That’s what we had, and they were happy we did it. We did apples for the first time. Apples, U.S. apples for the first time into Japan, U.S. rice into the Pacific Rim—Japan. U.S. wheat for the first time went to China. They were my trademark deals that I did personally.

We always had a problem with Canada, but I enjoyed it. I liked it. I didn’t do as much in Africa as I wanted to. We started with South Africa, but we didn’t have time.

**Martin:** You had a somewhat public fight with Canada.

**Espy:** All the time.

**Martin:** Could you talk a little bit about—

**Morrisroe:** Our Ambassador.

**Martin:** The Ambassador, yes, you had—

**Espy:** Yes. I thought he was not supportive of U.S. agriculture policy. I thought he had gotten in and become more aligned with Toronto than he was with Washington. I think I said that, and he got mad. We had tremendous problems with them, and still do when it comes to dairy and chicken. They’re a very small country with a high agriculture output. The way they do it is through marketing boards, where all their farmers have to sell their yields to the government. They have to. The government gives them 70 percent of their cost of production, and therefore undercut the world market on price. Whatever they get at the end of the marketing year, they will rebate to the farmers.

They always are able to out-trade us, because they are doing it through an oligopoly-type system, and we don’t. I even traveled to Brazil, and had a pact with Brazilians to stop buying their wheat, and they got mad. I was picking fights just to try to stabilize it, to reduce their customers, and they would get mad.

As I look back on the whole thing, I could have been more diplomatic. I could have been more judicious. If I were Secretary now, I would do things a little differently, but then I believed that I was kind of messianic. I believed that I was doing the right thing. It didn’t matter who I had to step—I want to say step on, I don’t mean it that way—I mean, step through. I wasn’t dominant, but I was certainly headstrong. I would now be more careful, especially when it comes to picking enemies, I’d be very careful. But I thought I had the support of the administration, and I did until I didn’t. That could be like a light switch.

**Martin:** Can you talk a little bit—this is shifting directions a little bit—about your relationship with Clinton after your resignation. Is there much of a relationship?

**Espy:** It is now. We have now, but I knew that he was for it, so I did not, as I said before—I didn’t beg and plead. He invited me to the White House the day I was leaving, and he was tearful. I questioned it. He’s a master at empathy. I didn’t know if it was feigned or sincere, but it didn’t matter, because I had to go. He handed me a gift, an Air Force One jacket, but it was too
small. I thought, *Well, somebody did good research*, and I gave it to my son, because it didn’t fit me. Somebody in this government—I thought we knew everything about everybody—somebody thought I wore a medium, instead of a large. I knew it was time to go, because they didn’t care even about getting my size. I didn’t hear from him anymore.

We had a four-year—I went four years and never heard from him. I went through four years of it, the investigation and turmoil and moving. I returned to Mississippi, and started with a law firm here. They were able to allow me to defend myself, so I went back to Washington. I was drawing a salary here, and was able to defend myself.

I had two great lawyers, and we fought them, tooth and nail. They offered me three plea deals, and I turned them all down, because I wasn’t guilty. During the indictment, they decided that I hadn’t given any favors to anybody. Tyson, Quaker Oats, nobody got favors. I hold that up as a great thing, because nobody pays attention. All the articles had been written, but nobody ever wrote, “They didn’t charge him with giving favors, because they couldn’t find any evidence of him ever giving any.” I didn’t see that article, but I didn’t get charged with it.

So they went on the grounds of accepting gratuities, and we fought that. We went to a jury trial. It was a seven-week trial, and we beat them. In fact, all the Tyson issues of accepting gratuities were dismissed by the judge, because they didn’t happen. They didn’t happen like that. He didn’t even allow the Tyson issues to reach the jury. He allowed the jury to find on the others, and they found me not guilty on everything, as you know. That was a Wednesday, a Thursday, I don’t know.

Then I got calls from all the talk shows, the main one being Ted Koppel and *Nightline*. I’m getting ready to answer the questions, and did *Good Morning*. I did the *Today Show*. We again did *Larry King*. For some of them I brought my lawyers, because I decided that the value of the glory would be translated to me not owing a certain fee anymore. I had to make sure they understood that, so at certain times I brought them with me, and certain times I didn’t. We did a lot of shows—we did CNN live.

Right after the acquittal, we did CNN. Everybody’s very happy, very—a glorious day. Even the jury was clapping and laughing. They invited me back to the jury room, and said you were—They said three things—You were as not guilty as anyone we’ve ever seen in our life. It took us six hours total over one night to find you not guilty, but we didn’t even take any votes on your innocence or guilt. It was so apparent we took votes on who would get to be foreperson, because each one of us wanted to be able to stand to pronounce you not guilty. That still didn’t take six hours, but we took a lot of smoke breaks, they said. [*laughter*] That’s true.

So Clinton—I started getting all these calls about doing shows.

[BREAK]
Espy: Anyway, I did lots of shows after the acquittal. I was very happy, and Ted Koppel asked to see me personally. The format of the show is that very seldom will a guest be in the studio with Ted Koppel. Usually, you’re in some remote location or something on the screen, but he asked to see me, and he would see me the whole 30 minutes. I said great.

I went over, and the lead-in to it was he was acquitted yesterday, and he’s very angry. Mike Espy, who was acquitted of wrongdoing, told the White House he wasn’t guilty four years ago, and now he’s very angry. I was sitting in the green room waiting. When I got on camera, I told them I wasn’t angry, that I served at the President’s will and pleasure, and it didn’t matter what I had done or not done. If he saw some reason that I could not remain on with them, then it was my responsibility to resign. I handled the whole interview like that. I explained what happened during the trial.

The next day, I got a call from Bill Clinton. “Mike, I saw you last night. I saw the whole 30 minutes. I appreciate what you didn’t say. I appreciate how you handled it. I know you didn’t have to do it that way. I appreciate it, and I thank you.” I said OK.

I then asked him—I had a portrait that had been ready for four years, right after I resigned. Every Secretary gets a portrait, and mine was ready in about March or April of 2004 or 2005. They were going to hang it, and I asked that they not hang it. They put it aside until I could tell them when the proper time would be to hang it, because I didn’t want to—I had to have an end game for this thing. This led to four years, three and a half more years.

The next day I called the White House. I called Dan Glickman, my successor, and said, “Let’s hang the portrait.” He said, “When?” I said, “Tomorrow.” “Who do you want to emcee?” I said, “Bill Clinton.” I talked to his new Chief of Staff and said, “I want Bill Clinton to be the emcee at the portrait hanging.” “Oh Mike, tomorrow?” I said, “Yes.” “It’s the President you’re talking about.” I said, “He doesn’t have to do it, but I’m asking that he do it.” And he did.

He called me back and said he’d be glad to do it. Then someone else called me back and asked me what I was going to say about him. I said, “I’m not going to say anything about him.” I understood that I served with him, and I was prepared to be kind and generous, so they should expect from me the same thing. I’ve always done that. They wanted to make sure that what I was going to say would not be embarrassing to him, and it wasn’t. We had a glorious day. He did emcee, and it turned out to be good. We took it out of the closet, and hung it up, and I took my little five-year-old to see it last week.

I heard from him more frequently after that. He invited my fiancée and me to a state dinner, with the President of Ghana the next month. I got back in the White House, and it was like old times, a receiving line, then I was invited two or three more times after that. He started coming to Mississippi, came once or twice as Tougaloo College commencement speaker, and I was always recognized.

Today, I’m as clued in as anybody, mostly. Well, not anybody, but I receive—He makes a point of communicating with “his people,” meaning any—if he makes five or six speeches they’ll be
bound, and he’ll send them to all of us. He’ll send gifts. He’ll call every now and then, see how you’re doing, and he’ll be—He will answer phone calls directly from us, if we don’t call too much.

I wish I could have stayed on two more years. If I had stayed on two more years, I could have changed more things, but that wasn’t the case. I wish that Leon Panetta had allowed me to just—The thing where I had to say I wasn’t responsible anymore for meat inspection, that hurt me, because, as I said, that just wasn’t true, that didn’t need to happen. During my trial, he was a witness against me.

I’ll put it this way—they had 70 witnesses, and we never put on any witnesses. We won the argument, won the case, during cross-examination. My lawyers’ strategy was to demonstrate I was so not guilty that I wouldn’t even put on a defense, so I didn’t testify, although I wanted to. I agreed with that strategy, and we won. They put on 70 witnesses against me. Leon Panetta was one. He tried to get out of it, because he told them he did not want to be the person who fired Mike Espy, because by that time it was four years later; everybody knew I wasn’t guilty, but—So if you detect a tone of resentment against him, I would say that’s probably true. He went out of his way to do some things to prove that he was the man in charge, and it didn’t have to be like that. I had trauma visited upon me beyond what was necessary. Asked to leave that day, that was not necessary.

I’d say out of everybody and everything, I’ve come to terms with all of it, even that, because I’ve grown and learned a lot, and gotten wiser as an individual. Everybody’s going to have some trouble in life, no matter what. Mine was just very public. But I’ve grown stronger and wiser. I now know who friends are. I’ve read 2,000 FBI reports. I know who said what, I know it. No matter what they say to me today, I know what they said then, and it’s OK. I’m happy today and doing fine. This is my law firm, and this is me by myself, and I can do what I want to do. It’s financially rewarding.

I’ve done polls to see if that hurt me at all. When I came back, I did a poll. I had money left in my old FEC campaign, so I did a poll. It’s very high. I was considering running for Lieutenant Governor, back in 1998. It was December 2, 1998, and I was going to run for Lieutenant Governor in 1999, so I did a poll to try to see if it hurt me. It didn’t, because a lot of the white guys liked me, because Bill Clinton fired me. [laughter] They don’t like Bill Clinton, so if Bill Clinton fired me—What is it? “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” That’s how they think. I’m the prodigal son who was lured to Washington through Bill Clinton’s siren song, and he fired me, so now they accept me. It’s funny, that’s true. That’s what they say. The black people are happy I defeated the federal government. I fought and I stood, and I didn’t back down. I fought and I won. It’s the best of all worlds.

I put my name in my nephew’s poll two weeks ago, and it’s really high. I did a poll in Washington, because I’m a lobbyist there, and asked if that was going to hurt me. It didn’t hurt me, so it’s all over. But I would say, if it ever happened again, I would not be anybody’s appointee, never, because your fortunes rise and fall according to that person’s fortunes. I don’t think I’d ever do that again. If I would ever get into politics, it would have to be as an elected person, very temporary, in a high position or something.
Martin: Can I ask one last question about this? Especially with the trial and the resignation, I was wondering what your take was on this. At the time when you were acquitted, several of the press accounts, I think the *Washington Post* was one of them, made a big deal about the fact that the jury was all black.

Espy: It wasn’t all black.

Martin: Oh, it wasn’t? I’m sorry. There was at least some—

Espy: It was majority black.

Martin: There was some racial comment with respect to that that made me wonder whether—when you see both the coverage and this entire event, is there a racial overtone to it that—

Espy: Yes, it would have to be. Yes, it was Washington, D.C., and the jury was majority black, not all black. There were nine black members out of 12. What do you want me to say? I think if it had been Alaska, I’d have been found innocent.

Martin: Not with respect to how the jury decided, but how the coverage—the fact that the coverage would point out the race of the jurors. The entire investigation, was there a racial component to it?

Espy: I understand. I would tell you, reading from day to day what they said, they had to learn my innocence. They went into it with a predisposition against me, because they had been writing negative stories for four years. You have to justify your prior scripts. It was all negative. I took this, I took that, I did this, I did that. I was a Cabinet officer; it was a high-profile trial. I had two great lawyers, but the government spent $26 million. The *Washington Post*, in particular, had someone there every day. They were there, and they saw—They heard the evidence, and they saw how flimsy it was. They saw my lawyers eviscerate particularly the FBI on the witness stand. They just did.

I was in the situation, fighting for my freedom, but it was funny. One of the OIG [Office of the Inspector General] officers who had been accusing me of doing something with Tyson, when he came in, he would not say hello to the judge. The judge was black. The judge said hello. The judge made a point of every day saying hello to each witness. This guy didn’t say hello. The jury saw it, that the man, this white guy, didn’t say hello, and therefore had a racist attitude, and probably had one against me, because I was his boss. The judge asked for the jury to be dismissed, and he just flayed the guy. He told him that was his courtroom, and when he says hello, he’d better damn get an answer.

They saw the prosecutor one day gesticulate wildly—We were in the most modern courtroom, where everything was operated from a podium, all the electronic gizmos from a podium. He had a glass of water at the top of the podium. He flailed, he gesticulated, he knocked the water over onto the circuitry of the podium, and short-circuited the courtroom. They saw it. They started laughing, like, Who is this guy?
Espy: They saw it. The Washington Post saw it, and I saw their reporting change, where it was very negative at first, then it was objective, then it was supportive. I think they were apologizing, because they saw it—when you have two FBI agents interviewing at the same time, and you invite one to be a witness and you don’t invite the other. What the other person said, we retrieved it and put it on, and asked that FBI agent to authenticate it. He said yes, they wrote it. It was 180° from what you said. They saw it, and I was going hallelujah every time. It was a seven-week trial. After the fifth week, I said, I’m going to win this. It’s very clear, very clear. Unless something happens, I’m going to win this thing.

I think Bill Clinton had been getting reports, because people started showing up. Former Cabinet members started coming in, sitting in the audience; they hadn’t been there before. People I knew and had worked with had begun showing up, and had never been there before. I think the word was out that it was a bogus charge, so I had friends again. People wanted to show me support. Sitting there as a primary defendant, you turn around, and there’s so and so. Then at the portrait hanging, everybody came. They had everybody come. It’s OK—that’s Washington. You have to be adult about it, and understand that that’s what happens.

Martin: We should probably let you get on to the rest of your day. It’s been a great pleasure.

Espy: Thank you.

Martin: We appreciate your time.

Espy: Let me give you a tour of this office. I have a lot of memorabilia here.