EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS M. ROLLINS

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McLean, Virginia

Interviewer

Janet Heininger
Heininger: This is an interview with Tom Rollins on March 10, 2009. Why don’t we start at the beginning, and tell me when you first met [Edward] Kennedy and what your initial impressions were of him.

Rollins: The first time I met him was during a campaign swing through Texas. I don’t remember this in great detail, but he was on a campaign swing through Texas, I believe as an early part of his ’80 effort. Bob Shrum was traveling with him, and Bob invited me to join them on the plane they were taking to Austin. I was there as Bob’s guest and friend, just to see what was going on. So it was a, “Hi, how are ya? Nice to meet ya,” but we didn’t spend any time talking to each other. I had not met Kennedy personally until I had been hired to be his staff director.

Heininger: Did you meet him in the hiring process?

Rollins: No, I was interviewed by staff.

Heininger: You had been hired.

Rollins: Had been hired, had not met him, and I hadn’t shown up for work yet. I was still living in Texas. I hadn’t shut down my law practice yet and moved to Washington, and he came to an event in Houston. It was in the lobby of some big hotel and I was there because I was about to become his staff director. He came up and shook my hand, we did a little hi, how are ya. It lasted all of 45 seconds. Then my job was to show up in Washington and run the committee.

Heininger: He hired you without meeting you?

Rollins: Sight unseen.

Heininger: For probably one of the most important positions that he had to fill.

Rollins: In retrospect, it was bizarre.

Heininger: OK, how did that happen?

Rollins: Obviously he was working through other people to pull that off. When I was in law school, I worked for Larry [Laurence] Tribe, the law professor at Harvard Law School. I was his research assistant all three years that I was there. I never worked for a law firm during any
summers, which, in retrospect, was a terrible mistake. I should have found out that I wasn’t well suited for that before I went and did it. [laughter] I worked for Larry and spent all my summers up in Boston, working for him during the summers. He did lots of work with the Kennedy staff on judiciary issues and so forth.

Bob Shrum has been my closest friend since—I think we both would accept that that designation began when I was a senior in high school. Bob had debated at Georgetown University. I was debating at a Texas high school, and I was thinking about where I wanted to go to college. I was in love and I figured I needed to stay at the University of Texas so I could be there with my beloved. I came to a high school tournament here at Georgetown University and the coach craftily assigned Bob to judge me and my partner for two rounds. It was a really good debate and it was my story, my life. In fact, I’ve got a nice little thing up there on my office wall that Kennedy put in the Congressional Record, congratulating me on being voted the outstanding debater of the decade, of the 1970s. So I was hot property for college debate recruiting.

Shrum had persuaded me to go to Georgetown. He worked real hard at making sure that I was going to go to Georgetown, and when I got to Georgetown we were friends. Shrummy was teaching at the Kennedy School my freshman year in college. He comes back one weekend and says, “I’ve met this girl you need to marry.” I said, “Oh, really?” He said, “Yes. There’s this girl named Vick [Radd] and she’s up at Harvard and she’s wicked smart. You would have incredibly intelligent kids if you guys got married.” And I’m thinking to myself—and I’ve since repeated to others and this is oral history—What the heck, I’m trying to get laid in Washington for God’s sake. Don’t go finding me girlfriends in Boston. Shelved that idea.

He reminds me five years later, when I’m headed off to law school, “By the way, that girl Vicki I told you about is going to be in law school.” The third year we dated for a time and she says then we broke up. All I remember doing is wandering off. We didn’t see each other for 17 years, until Shrum’s wife conspired to get the two of us together for lunch. Neither of us had been married, and three months later we were engaged. And that’s the woman who’s ordinarily down the hall. She is putting on lunch events at the Potomac School right now. Anyway, I go a long way back with the Kennedy organization, in its many forms.

Bob and I have known each other forever. Between Bob and Larry, they knew Carey Parker really well and had recommended me to the Kennedy staff. I don’t remember how it was conveyed to me; I think Larry suggested it. They needed a lawyer on the Armed Services Committee about the time I was graduating from law school, and they asked if I’d be interested. I remember thinking what a ridiculous suggestion, I’m not the least bit entranced by those ideas. What I care about, what I still think about in my spare time, is domestic policy. I love domestic policy. I love education. I love health care. I like figuring out how we can solve these problems. So I said no, I’m going to go do my judicial clerkship. Then it turned out I was going to practice law, so I moved back to Texas and was practicing law.

I got a call from Bob [Mann]. He used to be the press secretary for Kennedy. He called and asked if I’d be interested in moving back to Washington and being the chief counsel and chief of staff for the Democratic side of the Labor and Human Resources Committee, as it was called back then. He said basically it’s all domestic policy. So he made this pitch and I was receptive to it because it was a lot of domestic policy.
**Heininger:** That was the press secretary who called you.

**Rollins:** The press secretary. He and I had met a couple times—oh, and he was a Texan so there was this Texas thing going on. Bill Carrick also called and talked to me—he was Kennedy’s political director back then—and made the case for doing this thing. I’m trying to remember if they flew down to Texas to talk to me or if I flew to Washington to visit with them. I think I came to Washington to visit with them about the nature of the job, whichever of those two things happened.

It was post-’84. Gary Hart had found a very receptive chord in American politics, talking about continuing to pursue Democratic values but to do it in very new and different ways, and the old stuff just wasn’t going to happen. I’m sorry, I still feel that way about single-payer national health insurance, and that makes me a renegade in some circles. There were things that had to get done, but they were not going to be pulled off using the old politics. Well, Gary Hart had struck a very resonant chord in me with that argument. They said, “Look, we want somebody who can come here and bring us lots of new ideas about how to serve traditional values but probably in innovative ways.” That was very appealing to me. I thought about it and I called him back and I said, “No thank you, I can’t do that. I’ve got a law practice here.”

I think it was just a matter of hours after I turned it down, Shrum called me down in Houston. He had since moved on; he was starting up his own political consulting firm. He said, “I heard you turned down that Kennedy job.” I said, “Yes, I did,” and he said, “Why?” I said, “Bob, I have a condo, I have clients, I have trial dates. I can’t just walk away from this thing.” And he said, “I want to make a couple of points to you. (1) You have conspired, every weekend since you started practicing law in Houston, Texas, to have your law practice end late on Friday night in either Washington or New York so you can spend the weekend on the East Coast. So I just want to point out to you, you need to admit to yourself that you’d rather live here, and just move back. (2) You’re 29 years old. You can do this now or you can wait until you’re in your sixties and your kids are in college to come and do something like this.” You know, to make this kind of change in your life and so forth. These were both very powerful arguments. I called him back and I said, “You know what? I think I would like to do that job.”

So I agreed and sold my condo to my parents, which turned out to be a very bad deal; the market collapsed shortly after I sold it to them. I put everything in the back of the Buick and drove to Washington. I stayed with Bob for a couple of months before I found a place to live, and went to work on the Hill. I started, I think, in October of ’85. I’m not precise on the time. I remember it was before I turned 30, and my birthday is in November.

I moved into a very strange circumstance. I just assumed that if somebody makes you a job offer, the job will be waiting for you. They hadn’t actually terminated my predecessor. I’m not sure they’d been clear with her that she had been terminated. Kitty [Kathryn] Higgins was my predecessor as the staff director—I don’t think she was a lawyer, but staff director of the Democratic side of the Labor Committee. We were in the minority. There was nowhere for me to park because Kitty was going to park there, and I didn’t have an office because Kitty had the office.
I was a little flummoxed by all this. I had not dealt with this kind of thing before, but as I gathered, after a longer experience, this is not entirely unusual in politics. Sometimes nobody can bring themselves to speak straight. So it was an ugly transition there for a while. Kitty obviously didn’t want me around, and I think was just trying to will me away. I don’t know; I shouldn’t impute ideas into her head. She was, at the end of the day, a lovely person and I don’t know why they didn’t tell me that they were firing an incumbent to have me come do this job. I think they should have been a lot clearer about that.

I remember every Monday morning, she would come in and she would hold a meeting with the staff. She knew everything that was going to happen on the Hill that week and was startlingly well informed, like what amendments were going to be offered. I said to her, “How do you know all this stuff?” I remember the first time she said, “Well, you work around here long enough, you just kind of pick these things up.” I thought, Wow, I’ll never be able to match that. And I thought, Is there some meeting? I realized that on a Monday morning, you couldn’t reach her early in the morning. Where is she going? There’s some meeting. Someone had said, “There’s a staff directors’ meeting that they have every Monday morning.”

I said, “What is this meeting?” She said, “Oh, it’s just a meeting. People get together, we talk, we have breakfast.” Oh, bullshit. It’s where every committee staff director tells all the other Democratic staff directors what’s happening with their committee, and the leader’s staff tells them everything that will be happening. So whether it’s an armed services bill or whatever, you know what’s coming up. Finally I had to jump up and down. God damn it, I am the staff director, so I will go to the staff directors’ breakfast. I finally got a place to park my car.

So that was a little weird. We were in the minority, which I count, in retrospect, as being in my great favor, because you don’t really get to do anything. I remember—what was it? Not Sam Rayburn, the Texan, talking about the Vice Presidency being about as enjoyable as a warm pitcher of spit. A warm pitcher of spit is great compared to being in the minority in the Senate. I remember going in to object once to the majority staff about something that they wanted to do, and Kevin McGuinness, the guy that flipped sides with me a few months later, said, “Oh, Tom, that’s a great point. Tell you what, let’s have a meeting of the committee and we’ll count how many people are on our side of the committee and how many are on your side of the committee and we’ll settle it that way.” All right, Kevin, the hell with you. They can run roughshod over you.

We had a handful of opportunities to do things that mattered. We were able to defeat some attempted amendments to federal labor legislation. The Republicans always wanted to eliminate the Davis-Bacon Act as it applies to federal construction projects. We were able to beat back amendments of that sort. There was a nominee who wanted to be chief counsel of the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission, who had said some very harsh things about his belief that we didn’t really need equal employment opportunity commissions or federal civil rights law, for that matter, because the market would solve all this if we just left it alone. We were able to do a series of hearings that were hugely toxic for him. This guy had done crazy things, and we were able to beat the nomination. But in general, your power is very limited. You don’t get to set the agenda. You can write bills all you want, and they just won’t call them up.
I spent six months getting ready. Well, at first I worked on the assumption that Kennedy was going to run for President. So the first month I was there, I was pulling together briefing material so that we would be hot and ready to go on any issues concerning domestic policy. Then he announced that he wasn’t going to run, so I didn’t have to worry about creating briefing books all of a sudden.

Heininger: OK, let’s back up. You got hired sight-unseen by Kennedy, on the strength of Bob Shrum and Larry Tribe’s recommendations, who obviously had persuaded Carey. You didn’t meet Larry Horowitz.

Rollins: No.

Heininger: You didn’t meet Ranny Cooper? You didn’t meet Kennedy?

Rollins: No.

Heininger: And you were hired into a situation where there was a minority staff director.

Rollins: Yes.

Heininger: And they hadn’t told her that she was no longer minority staff director.

Rollins: That’s right.

Heininger: And you walked in and nobody acted like you were minority staff director.

Rollins: That’s right.

Heininger: And you’re only 29.

Rollins: It was a strange place.

Heininger: I would also say this is atypical for how Kennedy’s other hires for the most part have taken place, particularly for such a big—

Rollins: I’m pleased to hear it.

Heininger: For such big positions.

Rollins: Right.

Heininger: When did you actually meet—when did he start treating you like you were minority staff director?

Rollins: Well, that’s a good question.

Heininger: How much longer was Kitty there?
Rollins: She did a really slow exit. We were all trying to be fair, and to an extent I was. We were trying to be gentle, accommodating. I finally had to confront her in her office about this. “What the hell are you doing, you know this is my job, this is my office.” God bless her, she burst into tears. She said, “They never told me any of this. They didn’t tell me you were coming, they didn’t tell me I was supposed to be out of here.” I think there had been some conversations and maybe she hadn’t wanted to hear it, but I strongly suspect that people were being really oblique, and that she was not well informed about these things.

So we worked out a deal. I think it was—I don’t know, the record will show what the right dates were, but I didn’t move into my office. I was in a book closet for a long stretch. I remember I was in this room and it was lined with old books, I mean every hearing, every book any lobbyist had ever given him, they stuck in this room. There were thousands of them. I spent one weekend with those giant rollable dumpster carts, just taking books and throwing them away. I was looking for anything that was useful on public policy that they might have in their records. I think I threw away 90 percent of what was in that office, since that was my office.

I remember people coming to meet me because I was going to be the new staff director. I remember Mike Forsceny, who had been Kennedy’s prior labor counsel, coming to meet me. Everyone was very interested in who I would hire as the labor counsel for the committee. People were basically coming to lobby, to make sure that a friend of theirs would be hired so they would still have stroke. I remember people coming to meet me in this closet, and I would sit on my side and they’d sit on theirs.

I remember meeting with a couple of guys about education stuff. They invented a barroom game, a sort of fantasy football kind of thing, and they wanted to adapt it to education. That later became our Star Schools proposal to beam educational content around by satellite. We met in that book room. It was in a set of offices where other staff had window offices. I was in this book area, and Kitty was down the hall in what became a very nice staff director’s office. But it was some period of many weeks, I think it was months, before I moved into an office and Kitty moved out. Then I moved over and took over the spot.

Heininger: And was Larry still staff director?

Rollins: Horowitz, yes.

Heininger: So he’s still the AA [administrative assistant]. How soon after that did Ranny take over?

Rollins: Larry was not there for long while I was there. He was there until after we took the Senate back in ’86, I’m fairly sure. He left shortly thereafter to go off and do his things, and then Ranny became my boss.

Heininger: In this process, this kind of interim period, were you able to figure out what it was that they wanted you to do differently that Kitty wasn’t doing?

Rollins: Well, I got a very strong sense that, in retrospect, the work of the committee, Kennedy’s side of the committee, was almost entirely reactive, that there was no clear agenda about what we wanted to get done. Honestly, the party didn’t have one. Democrats didn’t have an agenda. Part
of the [Walter] Mondale-Hart thing was the old world versus the new world: the old world in its complete senescence and decline, and the new world with only a handful of weird new ideas and things that looked interesting but had not been well fleshed out. There was no governing set of principles that would allow you to say we want to address this problem; we want to do it in this way, which means that when we address this problem, we will do it in this way and that this is a better way than we’ve thought of before, and better than the status quo, too. None of that had been done. Everybody was still trying to figure it out.

Everybody had figured out that the guaranteed annual income probably wasn’t a good idea. The welfare thing had kind of blown up in everybody’s face. It turns out giving people money whether they’d done anything for it or not was probably not a good idea. National health insurance had been beating its head on a wall for decades. It had been around for a long time and wasn’t going anywhere. Guaranteed jobs weren’t going anywhere. We had to figure out better ways to do these things, in part and perhaps even primarily, for political reasons.

They’re not just going to happen. If you actually care about the beneficiary population, the intended beneficiaries of the programs, the ignorant kids, the sick people, then God damn it, let’s figure out something that can actually pass! And if the American people won’t pass the stuff the way the dreams of dying socialism might prefer, then maybe that ought to be a signal to us that we need to think about these things differently and try and craft a different solution, because the poll numbers showed hugely that people wanted improved education, they wanted vastly improved health care, they wanted this, they wanted that.

I wrote a memo to Kennedy on this early on, and I said look at the numbers. There was an LA [Los Angeles] Times poll, and I had liked the way they’d done it: do you want this, do you want that, do you want this? They wanted all that stuff. And then they asked, do you believe that the Federal Government, if it got very involved in these issues, could deliver more of this, more of that? The numbers go from they want it 80 percent, and they believed the feds can do it, about 25 percent, right? So you understand, there’s the Republican/Democratic split. We’re in favor of the things. Half of the Republicans opposed it because they actually didn’t care about whether education got better or not—their constituents were all in the private or other schools or what have you—and the other half didn’t favor it because they didn’t think federal money would actually do anything about these things. And if you could provide a solution that said we will use the money but it’s going to work, then you had a lot more political appeal.

[Ruolllins: When I was hired they said we need new ideas, we need a new approach. My sense was that there was an enormous reactiveness of the committee, and that there was no innovation, there were no new ideas. The new ideas that were coming in were spoon-fed—I know this because I worked there long enough to know what was going on after a while. People were doing two species of legislation. They were doing what I call “in-box legislating.” You get enough pressure from the lobbyists, enough memos from the, I don’t know, the American Gas]
Association, and the Energy Committee will kick up hearings and a bill and so forth. People were just reacting—whatever was pushing was causing them to do things.

And two, you were just responding to what the opposition was doing, and these were the [Ronald] Reagan years. These guys were riding high in the saddle and there was a lot to respond to. But all we were doing was responding, and there was no affirmative agenda coming from our side and there was no sense about what it should be. So my job was both to quit being reactive and—and I probably read my mandate a little broadly in this regard—to come up with a broader sense about how we ought to put things together.

The other thing that became clear to me when I got there is that there were no management techniques worth talking about. This was a political entity and it was being run loosely, like a campaign. I was not then a business guy, but I really love organization and I love to see things laid out so that they work over time. It was just a mess to try and figure out what was supposed to happen next? What’s the program? How do we know that we’re actually moving forward toward our goals on various things? There was nothing like that.

People had the weirdest portfolios of responsibilities. “I handled job training and immunization liability.” What? “Well, somebody had to handle liability for immunizations a few hearings ago and nobody else could do it so I took it on, and now I handle the immunization liability thing.” “What is it you work on?” “Well, anything having to do with poverty, but occasionally I worry about lighthouses and whether or not we can get enough federal money to refurbish the lighthouses.” It was a mess. People weren’t particularly focused on what they should do. It was their job to react to things.

**Heininger:** This in part was a legacy of the ’70s, where in the beginning of the ’70s, he had had to ramp up in one area, and that was in health care, and he brought in a strong, cohesive staff for that early ’70s period with [Richard] Nixon and national health insurance. But in the meantime, he’s evolving out of a staff that had started with Carey Parker coming in, in ’69, and Carey’s whole role, and then adding in as the ’70s go along, staff to plug into holes, which I think is how you get to the ’80 campaign, where you’ve got a bunch of people doing very different things. As his committee responsibilities grow, he’s able to ramp up with Judiciary people and get a cluster of strong Judiciary people, but all the rest of the stuff is left up like this. And the other Labor Committee stuff never had the kind of cohesive hold that the Health Subcommittee did.

**Rollins:** That’s true.

**Heininger:** So then the ’80s come, and the Democrats no longer have control over anything. You’ve got Larry Horowitz as staff director. Then—I’m trying to think through, because you’re coming in at a very unusual time and under unusual circumstances—you get the development of the forums, which were the way of Kennedy maintaining a big, actually high-profile role on any issue that he cared to do something about, but obviously not within any kind of organizational, institutional role. It’s an ad hoc role if anything else.

**Rollins:** I’m sorry, this was the United States Senate. It’s not about forums. It’s not about lunchtime hearings with six cameras in front of him. Horowitz once teased me, because I knew about Horowitz and his forums on Laetrile and nuclear winter. I remember they were holding
hearings on nuclear winter: “Super! We want to avoid nuclear winter! Good idea.” They’d get a ton of cameras for these things. I remember we had a hearing on some key issue—I don’t know, poverty or something like that—and Horowitz teased me and said, “Well, I see you only had three cameras covering that thing.” And I do mean this as a snotty remark, I said to him, “Listen, I have decided to quit treating him as a God-damn rodeo clown, where you guys just run him out there to get attention for any reason you can. And the measure of your success was whether you could get attention, which is a bankrupt standard. I’m going to work to make him a giant in the Senate, and I’ll let history be the judge of how many cameras we deserve.” It was all about the legislation. You do the work and you don’t need to call the press all the time. Eventually, they will come find you.

I’m trying to remember who the reporter was who told me this early on. He said, “Your crap detector goes off instantly when you get calls from politicians saying, ‘Cover my story, cover my story, cover my story.’ You know there’s something going on there, and you want to find the hole in the story that they’re trying to tell.” When somebody’s got a great story because they’ve actually done something real, the reporters come and the crap detector is not on. The thing that’s on is that they think they may have found treasure, and you get a way better story.

I figured not only could we actually make the world a better place, rather than have somebody run around saying ah, nuclear winter is coming, nuclear winter is coming, we could actually move things on the planet and we would get great coverage later on. People call him—and I don’t even want to lay claim to a significant portion of this legacy—the greatest Senator of the century, maybe the greatest Senator of all time. I think it would be a tough argument to name another guy who has done more or better than he has in his time. That’s what I wanted to work on. That’s where I thought our time belonged.

**Heininger:** But you also came in with no background. You hadn’t worked in a political institution; you hadn’t specialized in these issues.

**Rollins:** Right.

**Heininger:** You were, in that sense, a gadfly or somebody who was interested on the outside, and I’m assuming therefore—

**Rollins:** I would never have hired myself. [*laughs*]

**Heininger:** Well, understandably. But somebody thought that this was worth doing, and I’m assuming that Bob Shrum, from a political standpoint—and did you ever discuss this with him—that he wanted to see you in there because he wanted to see a shift in Kennedy’s approach to something that he felt you had the strength to do? You had Tribe’s recommendation that he’d worked closely with you and you could do it. Did you get the sense that that was—

**Rollins:** I never asked anybody there, why the hell did you guys hire me? I knew what I was told, what was expected. We want to serve traditional values, we want innovation, we want new ideas. It was Gary Hart. I mean, you look back at the ’84 campaign; new ideas, that’s what we need. It was Pat Caddell’s polling. If we could find a President, a Democratic candidate who could serve traditional values but do it in innovative ways, in ways that don’t seem to have the
obvious flaws of a lot of traditional Democratic approaches to these things, it would be a huge refresher for the country and we could own politics again. That was the answer to the Reagan revolution. I took that to be my duty, and then I looked at where I was. I was in a legislature; this is where I wanted to work. I wanted to make laws. There were people there who weren’t interested in making laws; they were trying to make the news.

**Heininger**: Well, who *told* you to come up with an agenda? Did Kennedy ever give you marching orders? I mean, you were brought in for a job and it’s, this is what a minority staff director does and maybe someday we’ll take back the majority, but here’s the job. We’re hiring you to fill this job. But you came in with a vision of what you wanted to see Kennedy do. Did you ever get a confirmation from anybody else? Did you ever get something like that from Carey? Did you get it from Ranny? Did you get it from Kennedy?

**Rollins**: I’d have to say, Carey—I took Carey to be my boss on substance, and he was.

**Heininger**: Right.

**Rollins**: There were conversations. I cannot remember explicitly when they happened or even in what rooms they took place. Carey made it clear that we’re looking for new ideas. The Senator—he was a pretty oblique guy back then, and we’ll get to that. I had a hard time making sense out of him for the longest time after I went to work for him. It wasn’t clear to me the direction was coming from him. He seemed to be going through the motions in the Senate. I think he was still hugely stung. I’m sorry; I shouldn’t make guesses about what was in his head but the lore around the place was he was still hugely stung by the loss in ’80. He was unbelievably stung by the loss in the majority. Being in the minority is just a ridiculous job in the Senate. I remember the Republicans giving orations. Who was that wonderful, goofy, tall guy from Wyoming?

**Heininger**: [Alan] Simpson.

**Rollins**: Simpson, saying, “We used to have the majority, it was strong, bold, red wine.” He’s giving this speech on the floor of the Senate, and he said, “And we want it back.” I said, “I hear you, brother, I’ll kill ya over it.” It doesn’t come anywhere near this job, as I’ve done both and it really stinks on their side. It is a perfunctory responsibility when you’re in the minority. You go in, cast your losing vote, and go back and do whatever you’re doing to raise funds to run for your next shot at office. You want the majority.

So I wasn’t getting strong instruction from the boss. Carey was—and I’m going to say this now—100 percent supportive of all idea generation I was involved in. He wanted to vet and talk through these things. He would say, “Why don’t you go up to Harvard and talk to the guy who wrote the book and make sure we can actually hold a hearing with this guy,” and so forth. He was hugely supportive. I was on my little mission, but I was being encouraged.

**Heininger**: How close is he to Bob Shrum?

**Rollins**: Who, Carey?

**Heininger**: Yes.
Rollins: Oh, very close. I don’t know how close the two are today but they could—I’ll tell you this. If Bob or Carey had a personal crisis, they would both be on the phone with each other quickly. They worked real closely together in the ’80 campaign. Carey Parker is one of the finest examples of a human being I’ve ever encountered in my life, for brilliance and selflessness. I remember once I was getting in a car and Carey was getting in too. I’m over on my side and he’s hopping in and some old buddy comes by. “Carey Parker, how are you doing?” He said, “What are you up to buddy?” He said, “You know, still striving.” [laughter] And it wasn’t until I stopped striving that I realized, wow, that really is something, to be at it at that age and all those years and even now. Carey was hugely supportive.

Larry, technically I guess, hired me. There’s a scene in Black Hawk Down where a commanding lieutenant has been lost in battle and there’s a kid, a sergeant, who has suddenly got to take command of this unit. He’s never had command before, and the colonel or the captain or whatever calls him over and says, “Sergeant, you are in charge of your Chalk now,” whatever a Chalk is. “You are now in charge of your Chalk; treat your men well. You’ll be called on to make decisions and they’re going to count on you to make the right ones. Hooah?” And the kid goes, “Hooah.”

That was like my introductory briefing with Larry. Sort of, “Don’t be a stupid asshole, do good things, good luck to you, son.” I went over to my office and started in. I went and I remember complaining to Larry that this woman is still here, how am I supposed to do this job? No one knows who they’re supposed to take orders from and how they’re supposed to behave. In retrospect, who could blame them? And some people still had strong loyalty to Kitty, she had hired them. In fact, all of them there were technically there under her reign, so who was I and why should they pay attention?

I remember when we first took over the committee, so Larry was still there. The state of Massachusetts had enormous success with its ET [Employment and Training] Choices, antipoverty program. It was a way to get people on welfare to transition to work. There was a guy who worked there, Dave Smith, who was sort of chief economist for Kennedy. I was told David was very bitter that I got the job and he didn’t. I honestly believe he was trying to do me in. He told me to watch out for this ET thing.

Everybody thinks we’re just going to do a bunch of hearings praising the heck out of this thing and that we ought to do this nationally, and that was sort of what people wanted to do on poverty. Let’s just copy Massachusetts. He said the wife of a prominent Harvard faculty member, who I think had been on the faculty herself at Harvard, had done some research on ET, and it turned out it wasn’t all as rosy as it seemed. He said, “I want you to call this woman. Don’t use my name, but investigate this thing because we don’t want to go stepping into this unaware, to save the Senator that embarrassment,” and so forth.

So I called this woman and she was explaining there was this and that problem with ET, and perhaps the data overstated and had been cut the wrong way. In other words, this thing was not a gift from heaven. She said, “Where did you get it?” I said, “Dave Smith suggested this to me.” And oh, my God, it gets back to him that his name has been used. Then it goes to John Sasso, [Michael] Dukakis’ staff director, who has since been a campaign official in many campaigns.
I have huge respect for him, but at the time, he calls Horowitz and says, “Who the hell is this guy who is running your committee? We don’t need some district attorney on Kennedy’s committee coming in and trying to undo the reputation that the Governor’s programs have achieved,” and so forth. So there was this dustup that went on for a day or two about whether I ought to be fired because I was out doing investigative work on ET choices. Then Dave blew up and I said, “Dave Smith told me to call this woman and talk about it.” Oh, well, now he’s furious because it had gotten out that he was the one who had tripped the investigation. Horowitz let it blow over, but the Dukakis people had demanded my head for having called and asked these questions. So that was an early dustup, and I do credit Larry with having had the strength to say, “He’s young, he’s new, we won’t do that again, and frankly, he was sent there by one of your friends, so maybe you ought to forget it.”

Heininger: Did you get along with Larry?

Rollins: Reasonably well. He and Shrum were really good friends, so I had entrée to Larry through Bob. I sensed pretty early on that he was on his way out the door; he was thinking about other things to do. The Senator announced he wasn’t going to run for President, and I think Larry had probably stayed on, thinking that he was going to be part of that and that wasn’t the game any more. Larry had been there a long time. He was, in some way or another, a doctor. [laughter] Always good for medical advice. I’m not sure I’d let him come after me with a scalpel. I think he wanted to go make some serious money, which you aren’t going to have on a Senate salary.

So he went off and was doing investment banking or something of the sort, pretty quickly after he left. Then Ranny took over the job and boy, their two styles were worlds apart. In retrospect, the mishigas that I went through with the transition with Kitty, I think, was a big part of Larry’s style. He was not clear with people. I think he liked and maybe even profited from staff conflict. You’d let the survivors rise—I don’t know. An enemy might say you needed him more if there were lots of conflicts to resolve.

Ranny’s style was utterly different. I’m sorry, I’ve characterized it as a feminine style or a female style, and I loved it. I’ve since advocated it to friends of mine who are women, moving up. I said the best boss I ever had was this woman, and here’s how she did it. We didn’t talk endlessly, which is the critique that’s sometimes made of the “community decision” style, and you didn’t need absolute consensus on things, but everybody knew what the reasons were and we all knew what the decision was, and you’d march.

I’d have my staff directors’ breakfast Monday morning. I think it began at 8:00, and that would go on for an hour or two, and everybody knew everything about what was happening in the Senate. Then I would come back over to the Senate office and our Kennedy staff meeting was roughly 10:00 that morning. The first order of business was for me to tell everybody what was going to happen in the Senate that week. Then you’d have judiciary and labor and foreign policy; everybody was represented at the meeting and we’d brief each other on what was going on that week. And then you might have a fight about whether we’re going to do this or whether that policy is moving, and so forth. Policy debates were usually handled by memo to the Senator, and if it wasn’t fixed that way then you’d have a meeting to decide what we’re going to do on this or that piece of legislation. But what was going to happen, who was in charge, whose responsibility was what, Ranny handled it in that meeting or she’d call people into her own office later on.
She never minded if I flirted with her. In fact, she used to tease me that Tony Podesta and I were shameless in our willingness to flirt with our own boss. I said, “So shoot me. I think you’re cute.” She was OK with that, but I remember I fell in love with one of my staff members, and I went to Ranny and said, “I can no longer be in charge of [her]. I can’t do her promotions or her salary any more. I’m trying to have an affair with her.” She thanked me for that and she took over that stuff. That was the transition on how we handled those love-in-the-workplace issues back then. Nowadays you just don’t do that and it solves the problem right like that.

**Heininger:** But Ranny was also organizationally inclined, as well as having a management style that was very different from Larry’s.

**Rollins:** I guess that’s right. Yes, I think that’s certainly fair. Let me say this. I never felt like we dealt with disorganization coming from the main office when Ranny was in charge. Always knew, always had a pipeline to a quick decision if I needed one, but I rarely needed one. Her style was such that we all knew what we were doing. I deeply believe that if an organization is in clear agreement about its objectives and we all agree this is what we as an organization want to do, we are all pulling in this direction, and you cut up responsibility for getting there, based on people’s various competencies and interests, and hold people responsible for accomplishing their part of the goal, things tend to run real smoothly. It’s when you don’t have clarity about roles or goals that organizations start to behave the way that I think the Kennedy organization did when I first showed up. It was really dysfunctional, my own story being perhaps evidence of that. Well, you would know better because of the interviews you’ve done, but I don’t think my case was unique.

I think the Judiciary people were pretty well organized. They’re a bunch of lawyers who tend to understand yes, we’ve got to get this filed by then, and we’ve got to get this done by there. They seemed to have their show together, and the rest of the place did not seem to have its show together particularly. There were a bunch of people who were trying to get out the door because Kennedy had decided he wasn’t going to run for President. I can’t speak for Bill Carrick’s own mind, but I think Bill wanted to be Kennedy’s political director when he was running for President, and when he wasn’t going to do that, then Bill was looking for the next thing he was going to do.

**Heininger:** But Judiciary had also gone through a period in which Kennedy had been chair.

**Rollins:** Yes.

**Heininger:** So it had gone through a process where there was a need to set a direction, a need to have some kind of a formal organization. The Labor Committee had never really gone through that in the same way.

**Rollins:** And that’s a point I meant to pick up from an earlier comment you made. He had never chaired Labor. If you don’t chair a committee, your job is kind of reactive. You may chair a subcommittee and then you have to organize that little domain or that domain. It’s like Howard Metzenbaum had a well-organized subcommittee presence on the Labor Committee, but I don’t believe Kennedy chaired any subcommittee officially. He was just the head of the—

**Heininger:** He did the Health Subcommittee from the ’70s.
Rollins: Well, there was no Health Subcommittee when I got there.

Heininger: No, by the ’80s there wasn’t, but the early ’70s there was one.

Rollins: Right. I understand.

Heininger: And by the ’80s—no, you’re right, there was not a Health Subcommittee.

Rollins: And it’s a legislative place. He answered to this scattered responsibility across everything the Labor Committee did, and no overarching program or even set of clear ideals or programs that he wanted to pursue, so it was a mess.

Heininger: So you had a sense when you came in, that there was both—there had been this relatively long period of five years or four years or so, of being in the minority, of Kennedy going through this process of coming off the failed ’80 campaign, making a decision not to run in ’84, and subsequently again making the decision later not to run in ’88. So there was a sense of lack of direction on that. At the same time, a very reactive process had set in, in part out of necessity, because with the Reagan era and the vehemence that things were being pushed, it did become a very reactive era. You come in with your own vision of an institutional approach, use legislation to accomplish defined ends, come at it from a different perspective, not having had the background not to, to a certain extent.

Rollins: Yes.

Heininger: With backing from Shrum, who is feeding in on a political end. You obviously get along quite well with Carey Parker, who likes this new approach, not sensing a whole lot of direction.

Rollins: I think Carey also, if I could say, was really happy to have somebody else with a brain laboring at the wheel. Carey was doing all the heavy lifting on speeches, on policy. He was doing everything. The speeches were still done extremely well, and press releases all cranked out real nicely, and so forth. But Carey was getting memos from here, memos from there on how to do this, how to do that, and he was just trying to field all this stuff. I don’t think he was getting a lot of good work product passed up to him. Honestly, I’m certain he did not have the time to go out and think, What should we be doing on immigration policy now, what should we be doing here? The best he could do was think, Well, ten years ago we did this, and that seemed to work really well. Why don’t we try that again? And he would send me clips of articles; look, they’re doing something interesting in New Mexico or Uzbekistan, why don’t you check that out? Or they’re doing this thing in Massachusetts, why don’t we see about copying that? He was really, really spread thin when I was there.

Heininger: So he needed somebody else to come in, given that this was Kennedy’s chief area, and I would assume he saw you as an ally and somebody else who could do heavy lifting. He probably recognized your organizational capabilities fairly quickly, once the whole thing with Kitty was settled.

Rollins: Maybe, by virtue of my recommendations from Bob and Larry, whatever the truth may be, I think he assumed that I had the intellectual capacity to work the issues. I’d never done any
serious organizational work in my life. I worked at a law firm. I had an ideal about how work ought to be structured, from the time I worked on a magazine in law school, which to this day is still the organizational pattern I try to reproduce in organizations, a beautiful way to live. But I’d never run anything, I’d never been the boss. I’d been captain of the debate team, but that’s a very different thing. So I was making that up as I went. It turns out I’m really good at it, but that’s certainly not something they should have had reason to expect from me coming in the door.

**Heininger:** They probably thought you had the capability of doing it.

**Rollins:** Perhaps so. I showed up, things seemed to be in mayhem. I was in a book closet; it was a big book closet—I had a desk in there. I went hunting for things we ought to do if we could take the majority. Within a month it was clear he wasn’t going to run for President, so that agenda is over. Are we going to take the Senate back, and what happens if we can get the Senate back, what should we do? I spent, I think it was six months, before that November election, putting together an agenda of what I thought we ought to do if we took the Senate back, down to bills and who ought to staff them and what the budget should be and so forth. I was researching madly. I debated—as though you know what that means. I am accustomed—

**Heininger:** That means you know how to do research and you know how to organize it.

**Rollins:** I know how to do mountains of research. I can go through mountains of literature in a big hurry, and I go through it like a soldier looting a town. I’m looking for the stuff we can use. What can we use to produce the results we want and to develop a sense, a clear set of policies that guide the way we think about policy? People were all over the map on this stuff. We do it this way because that program did it that way, or we do it this way because the groups want us to keep doing it the way that it’s always been done because it’s their job to protect the programs that already exist and make them bigger. Whatever. No one had a sense about where we were coming from and how we would produce effective solutions to real problems that we as Democrats cared about.

So part of the research was just to find things that work, and part of the research was to figure out how things that work come together; which of them will we say we want to support because they are part of an understanding of public policy that gives us—and I’m sorry, I think of this as a debater—a defensible position we can always hold to. That meant politics too.

I was reading lots of polling data and focus group transcripts and so on. Some people were very helpful. Folks I got to know were sending me stuff. Look, you’re reading this stuff. Here are the private focus groups my group paid for on this stuff. Bill Harris, who is still a close friend of mine to this day—his dad, Irving Harris, invented Toni Home Permanents. You and I both remember those.

**Heininger:** Oh, yes.

**Rollins:** They made a bunch of money on Toni Home Permanents, and then they started supporting programs for really poor kids. Bill would ship me the focus group research that they were paying for and what people are looking for in domestic policy and what they’re not. I went through this stuff, and then I started boiling it down into memoranda about what we ought to do.
**Heininger:** Now, are you using the staff to do any of this, or was this really a solo effort?

**Rollins:** I used the staff to tell me what’s the state of play right now; what are we doing and why are we doing it? What is the legislative agenda? If you’ll forgive me, you may have noticed me glancing that way. I actually have the binder from back then [moves about, fetching a book]. You’re the only person other than me who has ever seen this.

**Heininger:** “Must Do,” I like the title.

**Rollins:** Oh yes, that was the Must Do folder. I’m sorry; I had used this thing as a utility binder, so that’s Teaching Company stuff in the front. A couple of committee reports and these are—OK, so this is where the Kennedy stuff begins. This is an 11/21/86 staffing update. My math skills have improved dramatically since then. An overview of what to do in the committee, how I wanted to reorganize people, and do task groups rather than areas of legislative concern. In fact, I think I wrote in there—by the way, that’s something I wrote when I was 30 years old, so it’s almost a little embarrassing—that we had to get rid of in-box legislating, that we were going to pursue specific objectives and goals. You organize people, and their job is to pass specific bills, not to cover an area but to pass specific bills.

I broke the committee into six key areas, and the idea was that each of the areas would focus on things. Then there was a support group of investigative personnel and the other things that go into making their jobs possible. I even hired John Massey and Lenny Gail, two guys who had been former national debate champions, just to prepare briefing materials for floor debate, because I could tell, having watched a bunch of floor debates, if you’ve got all the arguments down, you know what the other side is going to say. These Senators are standing there and people will hand them a five-page memo answering an argument. Nobody can use a five-page memo to answer an argument in the course of a Senate argument. (2) And there are counter examples in Alabama and Nevada. And three, four, five.

I’d always go to the floor with a book like that for Kennedy, so we knew the arguments that were coming. We’d hear one, I’d click open my little binder or reach into my little folder, and I would hand it to him and he would have his responses, good to go. We were wired for floor debate. We were wired for floor debate. I’m a debater. The Senate was heaven to me. What I loved about the Senate is that the debate was totally unpredictable too, because all amendments are germane in the Senate. The House is practically scripted; the Senate is mayhem—it’s chaos by comparison. Guys could attach amendments to your bill having to do with anything. You had to beat them, otherwise you’d have some ridiculous thing about cutting off hydration for people who had been brain-dead for a year stuck onto your bill about—

**Heininger:** Remember the turtle excluder devices?
Rollins: Yes, on nets.

Heininger: Every time. It was like no matter what you were dealing with, there would be turtle excluder devices.

Rollins: TEDs [turtle excluder devices].

Heininger: TEDs. We’re on a defense bill, no turtle excluder devices; that’s the amendment.

Rollins: You’re exactly right.

Heininger: That’s the Senate.

Rollins: It can happen all the time. I actually liked that because it put a premium on being really quick. I remember one time—this is my favorite story on unpredictable amendments. We were doing a bill to ban the polygraph for employment screening, because you’ve got all these false-positives. They’ve got grandmothers who are flunking because when you ask them about their lesbian past, their blood pressure goes up. Ah, she’s lying, and so on. So we’re banning the polygraph in the workplace examinations.

Phil Gramm has this thing. We had left an exemption in there for certain DOD [Department of Defense] personnel, because frankly we don’t care that there are some false-positives. You need to be absolutely certain that people handling national security stuff are trustworthy, and that’s OK. So he says, “Ah ha, they admit the Department of Defense process for polygraph screening is OK, so we will simply apply the DOD process to all the employment-based applications.” It was cute, and tried to leverage off our own admission about DOD. I had this pile of the DOD polygraph regulations in a file the chief labor counsel handed me. Well, here are the DOD regs.

Gramm’s speech is going to go for five minutes, so we have five minutes to come up with a five-minute response to this thing. And we didn’t know what the amendment was until he started talking. I get this pile of paper, and I’m leafing through it as fast as I can, and I found the critical thing. It turns out that for a DOD employee to be polygraphed, you have to have the personal authorization, by signature, of the Secretary of Defense. [laughter] There were two and a half million polygraph exams being given in the U.S. at this point, so it meant that the Department of Defense would basically become a polygraph screening device for the rest of the country, so that Safeway checkout clerks would never go through without a polygraph exam. Oh, it was such fun beating that amendment. Most of the time we knew what the amendments were, so you’d brief them out, you’d block them out beforehand and be ready for the floor debate.

Anyway, I put together this book. In fact, what’s the date on those memos?

Heininger: 11/21/86.

Rollins: So we had won the election. This was a book that I put together, the final draft.

Heininger: And this was the first time anybody saw it?
Rollins: It was the first time anybody had seen the final version. I’d been through drafts of some of these things.

Heininger: I would assume they had gone through Carey.

Rollins: I don’t think Carey saw them until after we got this.

Heininger: Oh, really?

Rollins: Well, here’s what was happening, and I’ll go back a bit later and fill in the story on how he decided to head the Labor Committee. We won the election, and he decided he was going to head the Labor Committee instead of Judiciary. Then I got word we were to have a meeting up in Hyannis Port and we’re going to spend some time going over the legislative agenda for the committee, what we are going to do. You can imagine my delight, since all I’d been working on was what I wanted the Labor Committee to do. I cranked out this book and I shipped it up with the Senator; he had it for a week or two, or something like that. Carey had a copy, Ranny had a copy. We all flew up to Massachusetts to go over this thing and decide what of this was going to be our agenda and how we might change it and how to rework it. Then I’d get my marching orders and go.

So that was the draft of what the committee was going to be about. Those were the areas in which we would do our work. Those were the goals we set out to achieve. They are, as I realized from having read some business literature about this later, what you call BHAGs—Big Hairy Audacious Goals—that were to an important extent unachievable. If you have lesser ones, I guarantee that you’ll never achieve them either. You never fully achieve almost any strong objective you set, but you can get about 90 percent of the way there. And if you set your objective at 50 percent because you think it’s hittable, you’ll only get 90 percent of the way to the 50 percent, so go strong. It may take you a couple of decades.

One of the bills in there is to raise the minimum wage, which was not part of a Labor program; that was part of an antipoverty program. My approach to poverty was, let’s solve the problem of the working poor, because it threaded the needle politically. There was huge support for doing things for people who worked full-time all year. If you work full-time all year, the majority of the American people think you ought to have health insurance at work, they think your family ought to be covered, they think you ought be paid a living wage, and so forth. You say, “Hey, how about everybody make enough money and have health insurance, whether you work or not?” The numbers plunge, right? So the working poor were the way to solve this problem.

I remember going over the minimum wage thing with Kennedy. He looked me and said, “If we do this thing it’s going to take us five years.” It took five years. We’ll talk about that later too. He had such a wonderful sense about what the place could tolerate, what it would take to pull off this and that. I was young, I was hungry, and I said, “We’re going to get it in six months,” and it took five years. I was gone by the time they actually got the thing through, but we’d done the two years of spade work early on. Now they go out and pass minimum wage increases like there was no political blood involved. It was gruesome trying to get that first one through.

Heininger: But then it was an untouchable issue.
Rollins: The AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations] wouldn’t back us on increasing the minimum wage. As somebody pointed out to me, it was the AFL that actually opposed the minimum wage when FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] first introduced it because they don’t want people getting wage increases from the government. They want them to have to join a union. I understand all that, but there were a lot of people who were never going to get organized by the union and who were going to starve for another couple of decades unless we raised their wages.

By the time we got around to the minimum wage legislation, in the vast majority of states, you were far better off on AFDC [Aid to Families with Dependent Children] than you were working full-time on the minimum wage. It didn’t pay as well as being poor did, to which Republicans would say to cut the AFDC payments. AFDC payments weren’t even enough to get you out of poverty. The poverty line itself is based on an estimate of how much food you are able to buy. If you are below the poverty line, almost by definition you are malnourished, because you can’t afford to buy enough food to meet U.S. RDAs [recommended daily allowances]. Frankly, if they would adjust that number for what food actually costs or what housing actually costs, as a percentage of your income now, it would turn out that you actually need to raise it quite a bit in order to avoid malnutrition.

So no, you can’t cut the AFDC, food stamp, and Medicaid benefits in order to force people into the labor force. They’re all starving already. All you’re doing is ensuring that people will be working and starving, rather than on AFDC and starving. We need to move the wage up to where people can beat poverty by working full-time all year. But I remember him giving me the tempering on that.

What was the other one where he reminded me. . . . I think it was on profit sharing. I was arguing for a bill to increase the fraction of American wages that came from profit shares, because it would reduce unemployment because when times get tough, profits go down. You can keep people at the lesser base salary and you don’t need to unemploy so many people. This was working really well in Japan. He said, “The problem with a piece of legislation like this is like the things I did on deregulation.” I said, “What do you mean?” This had been 15 or 20 years before my time. He said, “We deregulated trucking, and a lot more people are working in the trucking industry now than were working in it then. All the guys who got hurt by that bill know I did it. None of the guys who got helped by that bill think I did it. Right?” So it’s one of those things where you get all the blame and none of the credit.

Anyway, I think it was three days we spent at his place in Hyannis Port going over this. I remember I was so frustrated when I put this together. I spent days on this thing. He was close to incomprehensible—and here comes candor. I couldn’t make sense out of what he was saying half the time. I was fairly certain he didn’t know what was in memos that he had written notes on and so forth. I thought he was dumb. I didn’t know what he was. He never seemed to me to have anything to drink at work. He just seemed kind of disconnected and dissolute. I thought, What a fool’s errand it’s going to be, to spend days talking with this guy about this.

We sat down in a room about this size, and we’re all scattered around looking at our briefing books, and this guy starts talking as we’re going through this. I distinctly remember thinking to myself, Who gave this son of a bitch the bushel of smart pills? He was all over these memos. He
had examples going back 15 years on subparagraphs I had written. He could tell me who the key bastard was going to be on this and that provision, and who owned him back home; who was going to cause the problem on this or that issue. This went on for two days. I realized that after he won the Senate—I believe this is it—I don’t think he had a drop to drink. I think he decided, I’m back. He was as wild about doing this agenda as I was. They were two glorious days working on this. I realized, Oh, my God, I’ve got this guy; he wants to do all of this, he’s ready to go. We cut off some dumb ideas and we put in a few more smart ones, but basically the agenda was good to go, particularly on staffing. He had some suggestions for me that were obvious, in retrospect, and so we did them.

Heininger: But you also had to have been a breath of fresh air for him, because what you were doing was saying to Kennedy, “You can stop being reactive.” He understood the political implications of taking back the Senate, but he probably also understood, when he saw this, that he had somebody who had already thought this stuff out and was saying, “Take it and run with it.” That had to have been—from all the other stuff that we’ve done—I think that’s a novel situation.

Rollins: Well, so we were good to go. And I’ll put a quick closure on this piece of the story. We held hearings and marked up legislation nonstop for—you know the Senates are broken into two-year periods, Congress is in two-year periods. I guess it was the 100th Congress. For the first year, all we did was hearings and markups. Then we had this tsunami of legislation coming through. I cannot find the exact statistics, but Carey Parker had quoted this to me and I’ve tried to repeat it or track it back since then. This is roughly correct or roughly what Carey told me. The Senate, in the second half of the 100th Congress, was in business 92 days. We were on the floor moving labor legislation 86 of them. We owned the place.

Bob Byrd loved us because we always had stuff ready to go. There’s the majority leader: “Can someone bring up a bill other than campaign finance reform?” which had been filibustered seven times to death in the first part of that Congress? “Who’s got stuff to go?” We’ve got tons to go. We were just moving stuff. We were ready for big floor fights. We were ready to beat filibusters. I had worked out some really good parliamentary strategies on some stuff. I remember Byrd coming over one day and he said, “Now what is this thing you’re getting ready to do?” And I said, “Well, sir—” I had the parliamentarian’s manual. He said, “Show me.” Of course he knew all this stuff cold. He was just seeing if I knew my ass from my elbow.

Heininger: If you did.

Rollins: And I said, “See, we do this, report back to the committee and report back forthwith with—” I was stripping the amendments. “—and then we do this and then we add this amendment to it.” And he said to Kennedy, “You’re in good shape, good luck.” He walked away and let us do it. He was thrilled that Kennedy was there and was ready to fight on all this stuff. We had good alliances. We had our vote counts done before we went to the floor, and we could tell the leader we’re going to win this bill. We’re going to win this bill big. We’re going to get bloodied on this amendment, you know so and so is going to want you to pull the bill; they don’t have the votes. We think the bill is good despite the amendment, let’s go. We knew what we were doing.
We were very good politically, having the vote counts. Every time we’d start even thinking we were heading to the floor, you’d put together the map, all the Democrats, all the Republicans. It was always so easy. There are 40 guys who are against you no matter what, there are 40 guys who are with you no matter what, and then it’s a fight over the 20 in the middle. Of those, you can always take the northeastern and Oregonian Republicans, throw them into your kettle. You’re going to lose the two Alabama Democrats. And it’s a fight over about 10 to 12 people. Then we would target all of our press resources just at those 10 to 12 people.

When I showed up—they give you this little tour and tell you about how you can use the Senate video studio to send things back to your home state about what your Senator has done. So you have a hearing, they’ll come and videotape it for you. I said, “How does this work? What will you tape?” They said, “Anything you want. You hold a hearing, you get a markup, we’ll come tape it. You have a speech, we’ll come tape it.” I said, “How do you get it back to Massachusetts?” They said, “We put it up on satellite, then you tell your TV stations and they can pull it down.” I said, “What’s the satellite hit? Who else can see the satellite?” They said, “The lower 48 states and Puerto Rico.” I said, “So technically, anything you guys beam up, I can tell a guy in Nevada to pull it down and he can get it, right?” They said, “Yes, that’s true.”

I remember we were doing coal mine safety hearings. So we got a map of the United States and figured out where all the coal seams were. There’s going to be interest in mining anywhere that there is coal. I would use our summer interns as a press notification office. They would call all the TV stations along the coal seams and say there’s going to be a broadcast at 6:10 P.M., with this and that bird and so on. There will be a signal, and there are witnesses from your state in the hearing. That was always the hook. If you had something local they would run it. Plant closings legislation: we’re trying to get through this bill to alert workers 60 days in advance before a plant gets shut down or there’s a mass layoff. We had four guys who just had to move.

I remember Dale Bumpers from Arkansas was being a dick about this thing. I don’t know who he was working for, but he kept saying, “You can have my vote if you’ll cut it back to this, and cut this back to this.” He was plainly bargaining on somebody’s behalf. So we did one of these hearings, and I had witnesses from Arkansas. We did this hearing and I beamed the thing up and I made sure that every TV station in Arkansas carried this thing. They had the crying testimony and this and that. I’m sitting in the little staff catchment area that’s off on the side of the Senate and behind Kennedy’s desk, because he was right there by the little staff catchment area.

Bumpers came up to him, and I’m fussing with something. I overheard him saying, “Ted, every TV station in my state last night is talking about this plant closings legislation that you’re doing, and I got calls lighting up my office.” Now I never told Kennedy I was doing any of this, because I thought it would get him in trouble. I mean, you beam it into a guy’s backyard without asking him. I remember Kennedy looking over at me like this [pauses as he makes some sort of face to interviewer]. Back he goes to Bumpers. Good job; don’t tell me about it. [laughter] I don’t need to know. Keep doing whatever you’re doing and don’t get caught. We eventually got Bumpers.

Heininger: Did anybody else figure this out, this little technique, and start using it too?
**Rollins:** Not that I know of. I’m sure by now they just stick everything on the Internet and everybody can see it. As best I know—in fact, I remember we didn’t even tell the guys who would put it up on the satellite what we were doing. I told them I just needed the times and whatever it was. There were some weird vectors you had to give to people so they knew where to point their dish. But especially in the summers, I’d have like 20 interns doing nothing but making calls to—I forget. There was this name of the specific kind of person you had to find at a TV station—it was the production planner or something—and all these kids would find the production planners and make sure that they had the right coordinates to pull down the signal off the bird. We would use it to move legislation. It was not a PR [public relations] operation, it was just to move bills. We would do it by putting pressure—it always came down to these guys sitting in the middle, and I said guys. Some women finally showed up, the longer I was there. But yes, you used all those tools to try to get votes and move votes and pressure them.

**Heininger:** Now, what’s interesting in here is that you start off this memo that became the subject of two days of discussing what the Labor Committee could do. Even given what you had said before about your approach to press versus Larry Horowitz’ approach to press, you’re obviously very press savvy because one of the first things you say is staffing is designed to achieve three aims: (1) maximum effectiveness in executing your agenda, (2) maximum press attention to and credit for achieving your agenda, and (3) minimum needless hassle for EMK [Edward Moore Kennedy].

**Rollins:** But study the wording of point two.

**Heininger:** Oh, I did. Maximum press attention to and credit for achieving your agenda.

**Rollins:** For achieving your agenda.

**Heininger:** So what you did was turn around what had always been a very press-heavy operation, and said let’s use it and use it to get legislation enacted.

**Rollins:** Press is a means, it’s not the end.

**Heininger:** Right.

**Rollins:** You use it to move legislation. You don’t do legislation to get press attention.

**Heininger:** Who were you dealing with as press secretary at this time?

**Rollins:** At that point—well, this was a point of some contention. There wasn’t one. The main press secretary had left Kennedy’s main office. I had the right to hire a press secretary for the Labor Committee. We’re going to go back a little ways. Among the many women I have proposed to was a woman named Nancy, who was my college sweetheart. In fact, our wedding intentions were announced in the Georgetown Alumni Journal. I decided maybe we shouldn’t do this. I had the ring returned to me at about 60 miles an hour, you get the idea. So Nancy and I were not on talking terms.

Fast forward a few years. I’m desperately trying to hire a press secretary. We’ve taken the majority, we’re running hearings. I’m up until 2:00 in the morning writing press releases. You
write legislation by daylight, you write press releases at night. I’m doing all this stuff. Finally, Ranny calls me and says, “Come on over, I’ve got some news you need to hear.” I make it to her office. I’d been awake for days. She said, “I have some good news, and I have some bad news.” I said, “Give me some good news first because I’m not sure I can handle bad news straight up.” She said, “The good news is you are now free to hire your own press secretary because we’ve hired one for the main office.” I said, “What could possibly be bad news in that context?” She said, “We’ve hired Nancy’s husband.” [laughter]

So it was Jeff Smith. But he was a beautiful guy. Jeff Smith and I actually got along beautifully. He became Kennedy’s press secretary, and I hired Paul Donovan, who later went on to much greater glories with Kennedy, but he was my press secretary first off. We interviewed a bunch of people, but Paul was the outstanding candidate.

So there was no real press person. So many of the Kennedy staff were incredibly press savvy; it’s not as if I had to look too far to find advice and guidance in that regard. But my key point was, you do the work, the glories follow. The rodeo clown stuff, in retrospect—and I wouldn’t have thought at the time, but I would certainly think so today—that it was a cheap way of diluting the coin, of diluting the brand. Ah, Senator Kennedy is paying attention to this, so cameras would follow. Substance is a lot harder. Getting somebody just to pay attention is not so hard, but it doesn’t do anything at the end of the day.

I felt strongly about this metaphor. I thought he was being used like a rodeo clown: have him run out there and run in front of the bulls, and they’ll chase him around and everybody will laugh and then he’ll jump into a barrel. I thought, What are you people doing? Here’s a guy who’s in a position to move the planet. Enough already. I remember a number of these hearings that I thought were risible. They weren’t really connected to any kind of agenda. The agenda they were connected to was getting press coverage, and people counted that as success.

I counted laws on the books that people had to obey or programs that had to be funded, and they were all going to work, as success. I think that’s the way he wanted to approach it too. He did not disagree with the way I’d put this together. He never complained to me about not getting enough. Actually there was one time he said to me, “Horowitz might have gotten more cameras in there.” I did not use the rodeo clown metaphor to him. I said—actually, this comes back to me. We were standing in an anteroom outside the hearing room of the Labor Committee, which I assume is still in the same place. I said, “Boss, I am not trying to turn you into some kind of aging matinee idol. I’m trying to make sure that everybody understands that you’re the greatest Senator.” He said OK. And off he went. I never heard about cameras again. The matinee idol was kind of a gentle way of saying it.

**Heininger:** It helps.

**Rollins:** Yes.

**Heininger:** So he liked your approach. He was energized by your approach. And it turned out you were pretty damn effective too.
Rollins: Yes. As luck would have it, yes. In retrospect, it was a crazy decision to have me do this job.

Heininger: Yes, it was.

Rollins: I swear to God, I’d fire someone who hired me. I’d say, “What the hell are you doing?” I was 29. If you knew me real well you might say wow, something big may happen here. But you’d have to know me extremely well. On the résumé it said great, so I graduated with high honors from Harvard Law School, was editor of the Harvard Law Review. They turn out what, 40 or 50 of those a year? They’re not that hard to come by. Oh, and would you like a job telling the rest of the world what to do? Now you can get five times as many to sign up for the job and from every law school in America. It was a lucky confluence. I had the great good luck to work for a great man, and I think the great man had the great good luck to have me in place at that time.

Heininger: All right, so let’s talk substantively. Actually, before we get to substance, one of the things that you decided needed to be done was to organize the staff in certain ways, which is obviously connected with the substance. Who had been there when you came in? Clearly, when you take back the Senate, there’s a huge opportunity to ramp up.

Rollins: You get to double your staff.

Heininger: Yes, you get to double your staff.

Rollins: Your staff budget doubles.

Heininger: So at that point, how had things been organized, how did you shift things, and how did you deal with bringing people in? How did you choose people, where’d they come from, et cetera?

Rollins: We took the committee, proposed a staffing plan, and then we went in search of people to fill certain duties. I will say, there is this bias in political jobs, and these were political jobs, never to fire anyone if you can keep them. So we kept pretty much everyone. There was no, “You’re out of here.” Everybody was getting fired on the Republican side. In fact, my joke was, “Isn’t it wonderful that the Republicans actually get to meet some unemployed people for a change? That might change their attitude on some of this stuff.” Basically everybody stayed on.

Heininger: Did you reorganize those—

Rollins: Oh yes. Oh, everybody got—

Heininger: You said you had all these people doing this and that.

Rollins: Everybody got reorganized. It was the end of the in-box and it was the end of just churning over the same crap we’d been doing year after year. Actually, can I see that binder? There was a memo that I remember was so symptomatic. Yes, here we go. To the Senator from Tom, David [Nexon], Mona [Sarfaty], and Debbie. So that’s me. It is one of my first bits of stuff here, January 1986. What are we working on in all this stuff? Health, unfinished business. We’ve
got lots of reauthorizations that we need to do, there’s legislation in progress. [Orrin] Hatch has agreed to do a markup of the pediatric home care bill, which I’m sure was an important thing to do. But this is at the top of the memo on health. Ethics commission. Kennedy initiatives. Following the 1986 Kennedy health initiatives should be an expanding health care insurance and. . . . Basically they’re talking about we need to get national health insurance.

**Heininger:** National health insurance.

**Rollins:** And so NHI [national health insurance] all over again. Prevention, mental health, all these are follow-ups on existing legislation. None of this was even—

**Heininger:** And you’re looking at that going, NHI isn’t going to go anywhere, so—

**Rollins:** Nothing’s happening here. Nothing is going to happen done this way. There was time to think about this stuff anew, and part of what turned up in that case was to abandon NHI and go to—

[BREAK]

**Heininger:** This is a resumption of the interview with Tom Rollins on March 10.

**Rollins:** The point I was going to make is about national health insurance. I was looking at this. This bill had gone nowhere, didn’t appear to be going anywhere. As part of the work on the minimum wage, I was looking at these data where people were wildly in favor of doing things for people who worked full-time all year. It turns out that two-thirds of those uninsured are members of families where the head of household works full-time all year, but he’s uninsured or she’s uninsured. So we’ve got a coverage problem. In the meantime, I’m looking at the minimum wage, which hadn’t been raised in, I think, 11 years at that point. It was $3.10 an hour. So we’re looking at about $1 an hour increase just to make up for losses caused by inflation, and to get to where a full-time head of household can work full-time all year and not be in poverty. I realized about 50 cents an hour gets you a thousand bucks. That can buy you decent, Volkswagen-quality health coverage. I worked up this proposal to basically provide minimum health care that was going to be part of the wage statute.

I remember presenting the case to Kennedy about why we ought to do it this way. I had poll data. Paul Begala was working for Senator [Frank] Lautenberg from New Jersey way back when. Paul and I had discussed things, so I told him about this idea. I said we need to do this as a matter of coverage in the workplace rather than as a national right. He had it polled on for Lautenberg. So these numbers come back. Question: how many strongly agree, on a five-to-one scale, that all Americans who work full-time all year ought to be insured at their place of work? It was like 65 percent would give that a five.

Then he asked, separately, how many believe that all Americans should receive health care as a matter of right? It was 35 percent strongly agree. By the way, there was a big chunk that strongly
disagreed with that statement. You had majorities of employers agreeing with the proposition that people ought to get it at work. Twenty-five percent of the people who didn’t—and these numbers are, of course, from back then—get health insurance coverage at work, who worked full-time all year, worked at firms with 1,000 or more employees. Now we’re not talking tiny firms with bad capitalization or any of that. And of those small firms—God bless me, I then became the head of one where I insured everybody—you get screwed on your premiums. We used to pay about 50 percent—and back then the data showed that a small firm paid about 50 percent more for the same coverage that a GM [General Motors] worker got because they were not part of the big pool. So part of our legislation was to waive the antitrust laws in this instance so that small firms could pool together and buy as a big group. Get the rates down, and you’re required to insure everybody.

**Heininger:** Putting them into their own risk pool.

**Rollins:** Exactly, and make it a big one so you can dilute that. So I’m making the case to him, and he said we’re going to get killed on abandoning national health insurance. I said, “Boss, you introduced national health insurance the year before I got here. Do you know how many cosponsors you had on that bill? How many votes did you have for that bill?” He said, “I don’t know.” I said, “You had nine cosponsors.”

**Heininger:** I would have said about ten. But nine, that’s about right.

**Rollins:** I said, “It ain’t going to happen. This is never going to happen.” Meantime, today, there are people who aren’t getting health care because we haven’t skinned this cat. He always used to use that, “There’s got to be another way to skin that cat.” Because we haven’t skinned this cat, we can go out and get two-thirds of these people with this. Then we figure out how to go back and get the rest. His other proposal was always let’s go get the kids. Then CHIP [Children’s Health Insurance Program], frankly, was beautiful.

**Heininger:** SCHIP [State Children’s Health Insurance Program] comes along, yes.

**Rollins:** Beautiful. A beautiful piece of work, and it has covered a lot of kids. But my argument was, don’t make the best the enemy of the good, you know we’ve got to get things done in the real world. If you want things to run perfectly, go rent your own asteroid and it will work. We’re on earth. We’re not going to have national health insurance in this country, single-payer, federally provided, and so forth. We can get everybody insured at work if we get serious about it.

**Heininger:** Did you get pushback from the Health Subcommittee, which in fact had long been wedded to believing that that was Kennedy’s approach, and that was the way it should be and that was the best, et cetera?

**Rollins:** Not so much.

**Heininger:** Did you get pushback?

**Rollins:** Not once Kennedy was on board, no. They were all good and dutiful staffers and started pulling hard at that oar to see if we could get it passed. The heat came from the groups. I remember being in a meeting in Boston, where a bunch of longtime supporters of NHI came in to
give him hell about backing off of NHI. He repeated the arguments that we had made in our briefing. He said, “How many cosponsors do you think I had on that thing? Nine, I got nine.” All the work you do out there in the grassroots, nine. He blew up at them. He said we’re never going to get this thing done this way. We’ve got a shot at getting millions of people insured.

The ongoing personal bitterness that I have about this is that I really believe that when—I shouldn’t say Democrats—when politicians get obsessed with doing things the only way, the pure way, they fail to deliver solutions to people who desperately need them. There are 45 million uninsured, and there have been 45 million uninsured since I was 30 years old. We haven’t covered them for a long time. I think the number was like 35 back then. Mothers without prenatal care, families going bankrupt at the rate of one every four minutes, all that stuff is still going on.

So Kennedy does this proposal. The Dukakis people really liked it. They’re flying down; they want to find out about this. They’re starting to try it in Massachusetts. The Southern Governors Association really liked it, and this young guy who was Governor of Arkansas really took up this idea that we could do employer-based health insurance, cover most of the people. It’s for the working people and we’re going to get them all covered and their families. And so [William] Clinton is running on this. It was his campaign health care proposal in ’92. He gets elected and they set up whatever; those histories are written elsewhere. But at the end of the day, when we introduced this bill, it was six pages long. Six pages is what it takes to put minimum care in. And the other thing I put in was a super majority requirement on any mandates, such as, oh, plastic surgery. No. If you want that, you’ve got to have a super majority vote for it, because otherwise people realize that this becomes a way to spend lots of people’s money whether they want to or not, on behalf of health care groups.

It was six pages. By the time the Clinton bill hit the floor, I’m told it was three feet high and included all kinds of stuff, much of which I favor, like banning workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation, but I don’t know what that’s doing in a health bill. I said to Carey, “What are you guys doing? What’s workplace gay rights doing in here? You’re making it harder for the bill to pass.” He said, “Well, we thought it was going to go through, so everybody was putting everything on it.” Again, I’m sorry; everybody who was part of that effort, I lay at their feet the problems that the poor millions of folks who never get to show up and say I’ll take health care coverage at work, for God’s sake. They’ve had those problems now for 15 years, and what’s it been, 17 years since the collapse of the Clinton proposal?

Heininger: And nothing’s changed.

Rollins: And nothing’s changed. And now we’re taking another run at it.

Heininger: Now, let’s do the counterpoint to that. The counterpoint to that is OK, so the first thing, using this find-another-way-to-skin-the-cat approach, is catastrophic health care.

Rollins: Yes.

Heininger: And look at what happened to that.

Rollins: Well, what? In just trying to cover catastrophic?
Heininger: In just trying to cover catastrophic, which ought to be the easiest thing.

Rollins: How are you going to pay for it and who gets it?

Heininger: Yes, but theoretically, it ought to be the easiest thing to get through.

Rollins: No, it’s not easy. Politically it’s not easy. What policy folk, and I count myself among them, often forget is that if you haven’t solved the political problem, you haven’t done a damn thing. That’s nice. We can all sit in our lobbies and our boardrooms and talk about how the world ought to be structured. We live on earth. You need a policy program that is politically salable. If you haven’t got one, you haven’t done any of your work yet. Don’t even bother typing the memo until you tell me how this gets majority support. Catastrophic—you tie it to people who work all day long and you’ll get catastrophic, right like that. You just say catastrophic solves a big problem and people will say, “Who’s getting the catastrophic coverage?” Well, anybody. “Well, do they work for it, do they pay for it?” I don’t know.

And then people start getting upset because they realize you’re just giving stuff away. The huge suspicion that costs us majorities on these proposals is that we’re giving stuff away. This is starting to go on with the mortgages now.

Heininger: It’s already going on.

Rollins: Yes. Why should I pay for a guy who bought too much house? I’m being asked to bail him out. Those sorts of sentiments are reasonable and real. I remember a particular bill we were doing, a welfare reform bill. There was an amendment that someone had proposed to this bill, that if you and your family are on welfare full-tilt, nobody’s working, that both parents should be required to take part-time education or training, just part-time. This amendment came up and I told Kennedy, we’re for this. How can we be against it? How can we say to Joe Six Pack and his wife, who are holding down probably three jobs between the two of them, trying to make ends meet, that this couple can’t find it in their otherwise unoccupied day to show up half-time for training? And he got this call from Dukakis saying don’t do that; that’s too big an administrative burden on the states, whatever it was, and he ended up voting against it.

I said this is just a raw political mistake. You can’t tell people that they need to give up some of their earnings for other people who are doing less than they do. You just can’t make that argument. That is not fair, it’s unethical, it’s bad politics. To this day, I think that if you fashion the program so that people understand we’re taking care of people who work full-time all year—I think we all have a sense that people who work full-time all year, particularly those toward the bottom of the labor force, are probably getting a little screwed, and that some federal legislation just might even things up for them. And that seeing that the people who work full-time all year are treated well—and by the way, that might encourage more people to work full-time all year—it is a great solution to problems. I’m sorry; this is my hobbyhorse.

Heininger: Did you foresee the problems with catastrophic?

Rollins: No, I didn’t work it. It was not proposed as a serious way to deal with these issues back then. People have long said, “Hey, we can solve the whole bankruptcy problem if we just give everybody coverage up at the top.” It’s a political problem. You’ll see here, when we talk about
catastrophic, but that’s part of what you covered as part of the minimum care proposal. I think prenatal is almost as important as catastrophic. The evidence on the payback from decent prenatal care for any and all women is just extraordinary. We ought to cover everybody.

The evidence is for having decent coverage for kids, because their moms, frankly, are making a bad decision in going to work if it means their kids don’t get Medicaid now. You’re thrown back into the ERs [emergency rooms] and whatever other care you may get. A mother is making an irrational decision, in many cases, to go to work and not have health coverage. Now that kid gets a cough and you’re thinking, great, we’re going to go to the ER in the middle of the day and deal with this one. Provide the coverage at work, make sure that she’s covered and that the kids are covered.

I think there is fairness in providing coverage to everybody who works full-time. The American people are willing to help anybody who is working hard or who plainly can’t work. You say, “It’s only for those who are unable to work, and the rest of the thing is designed for people who are working full-time. Are you opposed to that? Are you saying the American people aren’t good for that?” No, and people will back off.

Heininger: I’m assuming you articulated this approach to Kennedy, probably repeatedly.

Rollins: It’s a work-based—

Heininger: It’s a work-based approach. Is this something that you feel was new to his approach to social issues?

Rollins: I think what may have been new about it is that the issues were usually thought of as labor issues and not as poverty issues, not as opportunity issues. These were things that unions would come in and talk to you about, and so you picked them up or you didn’t, based on that. My primary—I told you I love domestic policy, I love thinking about it, I love worrying about it, because I think that the country could be a vastly better place if we could figure out how to deal with poverty more effectively and lost opportunity more effectively. So for me, when the overarching idea of the committee and its jurisdiction was how do we make work succeed for people? How do we make it succeed for a lot more people? Let’s move people off dependency and into productive opportunities. You could use the labor statutes to accomplish this. Let’s quit worrying about doing this through AFDC and Social Security and the rest. Let’s have people go out and earn it, but make it possible for them to do so in a way that makes their lives really work for them.

So you look at the minimum wage, minimum health care, the Family Medical Leave Act. These were all parts of making work succeed for people. I thought of them as a poverty and opportunity agenda, and not as what the unions were looking for. The unions are often opposed to doing good things for people because they want them to extract these things through collective bargaining agreements. I mentioned this pediatric health care bill. We got a letter, and this is back when we were in the minority, from some union, opposing what was a provision that Hatch had proposed, to provide home health care for extremely disabled kids. We’re talking about iron lungs, basically, for children who otherwise are going to have to go to some facility. We’re going to provide this kind of care for them in their homes.
Heininger: Home-based.

Rollins: We get this letter from the unions opposing the bill on the grounds that this grants a benefit to workers that they otherwise ought to have to seek through collective bargaining. I called the jackass who sent this letter and said, “You bring into my office tomorrow morning every God-damn collective bargaining agreement you ever have negotiated that provided iron lungs to severely disabled kids in their homes. Bring in every one, because I don’t think you’ve ever gotten this benefit for a single kid, and here you are saying that hundreds of them ought to be denied this benefit because you might get around to it some day. Bring them in! Bring in the signed copy of every collective bargaining agreement that’s covered that.” Obviously they said, “Oh, perhaps we could reconsider our position.” “Yes, you reconsider your position. Don’t even send paper like that up here. Don’t even think about it.” So labor was rarely trying to do things through what earned them the nasty nickname, mandated benefits.

I think part of the reason that it became a new way to think about things is that we were in a period of severe spending constraint. The Gramm-Rudman legislation was the real deal back then. They gave you spending limits by committee and you just couldn’t break them. Well, there’s an obvious way around that, to make somebody in the Federal Government pay for this stuff. So we started mandating things for business and we thought about things that perhaps we ought to require the states to do. And the states, of course, had a lot more stroke with this politically so it was harder to do that. But on creating a workplace that was fair and decent, I thought we had a tremendous opening. It addressed a budgetary problem. It addressed a clear political limitation in the way that Democrats had thought about trying to accomplish things for people who needed more income or more opportunity. I just thought it was a terrific way to skin the cat.

Heininger: And Kennedy liked this.

Rollins: And Kennedy liked this. And you know what? At the end of the day, the boss always cared 20 times more about the beneficiary population than he did about the intervening service provider. Yes, he cares a lot about teachers, and he cares a hell of a lot more about kids. So this spoke to him too, or I think it did.

Heininger: You’ve got a plane to catch.

Rollins: Yes, I’ve got to go catch a plane.

Heininger: We will resume this.