Riley: Before we go officially on the record, I want to make sure that you don’t have any questions about ground rules. Let me briefly explain what’s going to happen. We’re going to audiotape. We’ll take a break after about an hour and a half, in the middle. But the basic ground rule is that the proceedings are completely confidential. Nobody in the room is allowed to repeat what is spoken in here except you. We’ll make a transcript of the audio recording and provide that to you with a light copyediting so that it reads a little clearer from the questions and so forth.

Demarest: Making me a little bit more articulate.

Riley: Maybe. But I’m sure, given your professional expertise, you probably speak in complete sentences and paragraphs.

Demarest: We’ll see.

Riley: In any event, the idea is to give you a crack at looking at your words and seeing if there is anything that we talked about that you want to place any stipulations concerning the release of and hold on to. So the core purpose is to try to encourage you not to edit yourself into the tape recorder by knowledge of getting this back. Then the cleared transcript, whatever you cleared, will be released at the conclusion of the project. And I’m still working with the people in College Station about exactly when that is going to happen. It could be as early as later this year. That’s going to put a little bit of a burden on us to get this done more quickly than we normally would, but we’ll try to expedite things as much as we can. Any questions?

Demarest: Easy.

Riley: Great. Perfect. All right. You ready? This is the David Demarest interview as part of the George H.W. Bush Oral History Project. Thanks for being with us. We’ve just talked about the ground rules. The next thing we need to do is go around the room as an aid to the transcriber. Rajat’s going to record the sequence of interventions, but it will help her or him to associate a voice with a name.

I’m Russell Riley. I head up the Presidential Oral History Program here at the Miller Center and have done a fair number of these Bush interviews.
Demarest: I’m David Demarest and I’m vice president of public affairs at Stanford University. I was the White House Communications Director for most of my time in the White House from ’89 to ’92.

Walcott: I’m Charles Walcott, professor of political science at Virginia Tech.

Martin: I’m Paul Martin. I’m assistant professor at the Miller Center.

Rana: I’m Raj Rana and I’m a law student and a transcriber for today.

Riley: Okay, great. Tell us a little about your background before you got to the White House. There were some gaps in the timeline here and I’d kind of like to know, were you a Republican at birth? Or was that something that you came by later in life?

Demarest: I would say I was a Republican at birth. I came from a Republican family. I grew up in New Jersey and my father was a small businessman. My mother was a musician and actually a concert pianist. She later became head of music education for Baldwin Piano Company and was quite a pioneer in music education.

My father by training was a geologist, but he then went into business, a similar business that his father had been in. He was not in politics but his father was, my grandfather. My grandfather was the mayor of Bloomfield in New Jersey for many years and was quite a community leader in a lot of respects. He founded a Presbyterian church. He organized a camp for underprivileged children and ran a business to boot. But I think he and my father were probably almost the stereotypical small-business, Republican orientation.

I went to a public high school and then headed to college. I was young. I graduated from high school when I was 16, started at the University of Colorado, and within a year I’d been kicked out. I got myself back in after the summer and promptly got kicked out again. It’s hard to get kicked out of the University of Colorado.

Riley: Do you want to elaborate on that for the record or not?

Demarest: I just wasn’t ready for the discipline that it takes to be a college student. And I kind of skated through high school. It was pretty easy. When I got to Colorado it was like, “Woo-hoo.” Freedom. I had a lot of fun in Colorado. But one of the things that I also got involved in was the anti-war movement. I was very active on the college campus at Colorado, and that is when I really started thinking about being politically engaged.

This was 1968, ’69, ’70. Things like Kent State happened in 1970 on May 4, and those were kind of formative for me. Unfortunately, I didn’t see the need to go to class very often, and so by the time 1970 rolled around I was on my way out of Colorado. I had to find a place to land again, which was not easy. My father said, “Maybe we should look at Upsala College,” which was in New Jersey about five miles from my house.

This was the worse-than-death sentence [laughter] that I was actually, maybe, going to come back to New Jersey, maybe live at home. I had to go into an interview with the dean of admissions with my father and grovel about how I had mended my ways and I was going to...
buckle down and all that sort of thing. And the dean, who was so stereotypical—he had patches on his elbow patches. He was all tweeded out and “Look at me now, I got tweed,” and he smoked a pipe. At the end of the interview he said, “Well, every year we usually take a chance on somebody, and I guess this is your lucky day.” [laughter]

So I lived at home. My father drove me to college and I hitchhiked home each day. I worked construction Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, mainly because my father was going bankrupt, and so it caused me to take ownership of my own education and it was a big comedown, but I also ended up doing pretty well.

And then I got involved in student politics and ended up running for student body president of Upsala and I won. I had a very good relationship with the president of the college and the Board of Trustees. I actually had a platform that I’d committed to and actually got some of it done. That was also rather transformative for me. I had kind of moved from being sort of outside the system to being inside the system.

I then went to graduate school at Drew University. They were experimenting with a one-year Master’s program that really was impossible to get done in one year. You know, all your courses plus a thesis. Nobody finished.

Riley: Which field?

Demarest: Political science. I was a history major at Upsala. Late in my second semester I went to my political science professor, the chair of the department. I was president of the grad students, and it was boring. It wasn’t like being president at an undergraduate institution. I was arguing about library carrels and bike racks. I didn’t like it. So I said to my political science professor, “Do you have any ideas of how I might get involved in a real political campaign?” He said, “Well, that’s funny. A neighbor of mine is running for Congress.” And I said, “Really.” He said, “Yes. Her name—” it was a woman running for Congress, which was a little unusual back then. He described her, a former head of consumer affairs for the state, a former state rep, but she was not going to win. She was running against the majority leader of the state house in a primary, but he thought that might be good experience for me.

He said, “Yes. Her name—” and it was sort of a naïve question, I said, “What party is she?” He said, “Oh, she’s a Republican.” I replied, “I can’t do that. I just can’t do that.” Richard Nixon was still President. I had been an anti-war guy. He said, “Well, why don’t you just meet her?” I met her and I liked her. She was 62 years old and her name was Millicent Fenwick, the pipe-smoking grandmother.

Walcott: Lacey Davenport.

Demarest: Lacey Davenport. Exactly, and I was her driver. That was my first job in a real campaign. It was the best job to have as an entry-level job, because I was with the candidate from dawn to dusk. I listened to all the speeches. I gave her feedback as to how she did, things I would hear in the back of the room and so forth. She ended up winning the primary by 81 votes. The guy that she beat was Tom Kean. Tom Kean and I became friends, and full-circle he ended
up becoming president of Drew University—there are a lot of ironies in this world. He co-
chaired the 9/11 Commission, was Governor of the state and so forth, and a great guy.

I was a volunteer in the primary. Then I went on paid staff in the general. I was no longer the guy
who drove her around. They got somebody else to do that. I worked her field operations and did
her targeting. I got a reputation as being pretty good at numbers and voting returns and things
like that. She ended up winning. She went to Washington. I did not go with her. I went back to
help my dad and his business on the theory that I’d finish my Master’s, which I never did.

Then in ’76 I got this call from a guy saying that he knew a guy that was running for Congress
and they were looking for a campaign manager. And so, long story short, I became the campaign
manager of a Congressional race at 24. It was a targeted race by the Republican National
Committee [RNC] so they sent people up to talk to us.

The interview process, not to digress—I got invited to interview for the job, but I didn’t know it
was an interview. It was just supposed to be a meeting. So I went to this meeting. The candidate
is there. I meet him. There are five or six other people. We’re all talking, and there was a guy
from Washington there, a guy named Russ Evans, and he’s a big shot at the Congressional
Committee in Washington. I found out later that after I was hired to be campaign manager, the
candidate had asked Russ after this meeting, “Who do you think I should have as campaign
manager?” Russ said me. I didn’t know it, but there were two other people in there who were
candidates for campaign manager. Bill Schluter, the candidate, said to Russ, “He hardly said
anything. Why are you suggesting him?” And he said, “Well, at least he didn’t say anything
stupid.” [laughter]

How things happen, you know, it’s strange. But that campaign—the people in Washington didn’t
think that candidate was very good, so when we were projected the winner on election night and
then ABC [American Broadcasting Company] had to take it back, it was noted that this
campaign did a lot better than people thought it was going to do. That gave me a rep in
Washington, because they thought it couldn’t have been the candidate, it had to have been the
manager. And that was a total crock, because the candidate busted his tail in that campaign and
he was the one who really deserved the credit for the campaign getting close. But I got some of
that credit. I then got recruited by the RNC to help in something I used to call the Rebuild the
Party Program, which was a division called Local Elections. I got to be the guy who wrote the
pilot program for that, and ended up being sent back to New Jersey to run it, because New Jersey
has its elections in the odd year.

In 1977 after [Jimmy] Carter had taken over the White House and, you know, you’re a student of
politics—in 1977, twelve out of 50 Governorships were Republican, and a lot of people were
writing the epitaph of the party. Bill Brock, who became the chairman of the party, felt that the
way to revitalize the party was to build it from the bottom up. He started this idea of working
with state legislative campaigns. They hired a bunch of former Congressional campaign
managers who were all young and aggressive. We became the nucleus of this little group and we
just started winning races right and left. At the end of the four years at the RNC we had a net
gain of about 620 state legislative seats, and it proved the thesis that with a little bit of added
expertise you could make a dramatic difference in a state legislative race.
Back then there were 99 state legislative chambers. In ’77, sixteen were controlled by Republicans. Most of them were in Colorado, Wyoming, North Dakota, South Dakota, and at the end of our four-year effort we had 32 chambers.

So Brock became one of the golden boys for rebuilding the party. Brock was never a [Ronald] Reagan guy, and a lot of the people that worked for Brock were not perceived as Reagan people. We were more Bush people. Reagan wins the primary and the election. I was also Brock’s special assistant at the convention. So he plucked me out of my division for the three weeks around the convention.

Riley: This is 1980?

Demarest: This is 1980 at Detroit. And so I got more familiar with him, and then when President Reagan appointed him to be the U.S. trade representative he asked me to come be head of public affairs. I used to say the great thing about being a political appointee in the government is that you don’t have to be qualified for the job, and I was that model, because I knew nothing about trade. But it was a great agency. It was small and nimble and Cabinet level, and one of the reasons they gave it to Brock was because there was a plan to fold USTR in under the Commerce Department. It was a very naïve plan, because USTR is really a creature of the Congress. And they did ultimately propose that officially, that we were going to have what Japan had. Japan has MITI [Ministry of International Trade and Industry], we were going to have DITI, Department of Industry and Trade, and so forth. It totally went nowhere, but Brock did a great job as USTR, very well respected. Still people talk about the Brock days at USTR.

We were there for about five years, and then rumors started about Ray Donovan at the Labor Department. They thought an indictment was imminent. Another of New Jersey’s finest, he got indicted. He had to resign. He had been under a cloud for all five years, really. We started getting calls about, “Is Brock likely?” All of us were like, “Oh, my God. No. No. Please don’t let this happen.” [laughter] And sure enough he got the call and he brought his little inner circle in and said, “Okay, we’re all going to the Labor Department.” And like, “Oh, boy.”

We went over there, and it was a moribund place. It was just a department that was totally on its back and it had no leadership. The Donovan team was not only under a cloud all the time but they were hostile to the bureaucracy. Actively. When we came, I was, let’s see, this would have been in ’85, so I was 34 years old and I was a Deputy Undersecretary, but I was being put in charge of all of its public affairs and its political operation. Its political operation meant there were ten regions of the country and there would be a Secretary’s representative in each of the ten. That’s a very senior person who has no line authority but is the face of the Secretary.

Our transition team did an analysis of these ten people and concluded that they were real patronage jobs. Some of them were no-shows and they all had godfathers that caused them to get these plum jobs, but they really didn’t work very hard. I’m put in charge of this group, and as I come into the department all of them are at least 10-15 years older than me. We read the transition report and it’s like, “Oh, this is not looking good.” So I come into the department. They all wanted to meet with me individually before the main meeting and I refused to meet with any of them individually. I walked in cold to the ten of them sitting down and I said, “Listen, you
guys—” they were all men, and all white men—“you guys have been here for several years, most of you. I have to be able to evaluate you quickly, and so—” and I passed out a quiz. [laughter]

Walcott: I bet they loved that.

Demarest: They didn’t. It was ten questions like, “What is the unemployment rate in your state?” We’re not talking brain surgery here. This was just something that I thought would show them who’s boss here. I passed out the ten questions and said, “They’re easy questions. I’ll just sit here while you fill them out.” They’re all kind of looking at each other like, Who is this jerk? They filled them out and I collected them. I put them in my briefcase and I talked about what I thought was going to happen to the department. All of them flunked. Several of them didn’t get more than two answers right, and this was basic stuff. Several of them left and I hired a Hispanic, a woman, an African-American. That and other things that my colleagues were doing in their departments started to send the signal to the bureaucracy that this is a new kind of leadership here.

It turned out that we planned an event to introduce the Secretary to the staff, to the department, and Vice President Bush came over to do it. We had a banner that said, “A New Pride,” and that just started some positive momentum for the department. We actually had a great time there.

It was a tough department. Brock’s relationship with the unions was pretty good. He listened to them. We didn’t have to deal with the carnage of the air-traffic controllers—that had already happened years earlier—and so we were like a fresh breeze to the department. You were going to say something?

Riley: Yes. Did you get any push back from anybody in the White House over this? My guess is that if those people had godfathers, somebody must have complained to the White House.

Demarest: Brock tried to do the best he could to say, “I’ve got to have my own people here.” And by then, you’re now in the sixth year of the administration and there was much less pressure. A lot of the Reaganauts had already been placed. The ones that really had juice, they’d already landed in places. So we didn’t have much push back on the personnel side. Brock even hired a guy, Steve Schlossberg, who was out of the Kennedy-Schlossberg family orbit, to be his head of labor management cooperation. That raised some eyebrows. I mean this was a Democrat through and through. He got through. He didn’t have to be confirmed by the Senate, so that wasn’t a hurdle.

And so there were people—Ed [Edwin] Meese and Brock clashed, generally over affirmative action. The White House and the Justice Department wanted to throttle back on Executive Order 248 or whatever it is that established affirmative action, and Brock thought that would be a political disaster. One, we would never get it through; the Congress would overrule us. And two, it would just make us look like we were anti-minority, anti-woman, and so forth. And he was right. Brock had very good political sensibilities.

We were really on a roll at Labor, and then Brock dropped the bomb on us when he said that Bob Dole had been talking to him about managing his campaign against Bush in the primary. All of us sort of said, “That’s a really bad idea.” [laughter]
He was convinced that because of Iran-Contra and—this was in ’87—that Bush was vulnerable. Brock’s first wife died of cancer about a year and a half earlier. Really devastating. All of us knew her and it was very sad, and then Brock remarried a woman who was friendly with Elizabeth Dole. So some of this started to gel, and as a staff we didn’t know this was kind of in the works.

It was interesting because not long before that I had been approached about becoming Press Secretary to the Vice President. Marlin Fitzwater moved over from the Vice President’s office to become Press Secretary for the President. That left a vacancy in the Vice President’s office. They filled it—I can’t remember who it was that took the job, but he didn’t last very long, and then they came to me. I want to say it was Jim Lake, who was a consultant who had ties to the Reagan administration. We started talking about it, I met with Craig Fuller, I believe, and then they said, “Okay, we’d like you to meet the Vice President.”

I thought about it, and my definition of the worst job in Washington is Press Secretary to the President. I had no desire to be Press Secretary. I loved communications but I didn’t think that doing the day-to-day drudgery of mud wrestling with media—I didn’t want to do that. My then wife was pregnant with our first and so I told them, “I can’t do this. This is the wrong time for me.” I was like the only legitimate excuse that I could have had. [laughter] So they went and hired somebody else and I thought that was my one and only shot at being involved in a Presidential campaign.

I just stayed at Labor, and then Brock tells us that he’s leaving and he says to me—the irony is that I did talk with Brock about what to do about this White House thing—he had said to me, “Listen, your family is the most important thing. You’ve got to do right by your family,” and he really—family, family, family. Well, he announces, “You’re going to be Press Secretary to Bob Dole.” And I went, “Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. What about all this family talk?” Only one of his inner circle went with him. Now this is a guy who had had a kitchen cabinet that was so loyal and so well connected to each other, and it was really a shock that the only one that went with him was his executive assistant.

The rest of us figured we’d just roll the dice, see who would be next at Labor. Part of it was we didn’t want to work for Bob Dole, since we thought that this was probably not going to be a successful campaign. We were right. The Bob Dole campaign really self-destructed. Brock had no business being a campaign manager. He should have been campaign chairman or something. Brock was not a hands-on guy. He had us to do that. And now he didn’t have us, and Bob Dole was not the easiest guy to manage, either, so that campaign went nowhere.

Ann McLaughlin became the Labor Secretary. She and I got along great, and so I figured I’d just stay at Labor through the rest of the administration. Little did I know that the communications director/press secretary of the Bush campaign, Pete Teeley, was knocking heads with Craig Fuller and Lee Atwater. And so in the early part of ’88—

Riley: Now what was the basis of the knocking heads?

Demarest: Well, Teeley had been communications director of the RNC when I was there, and he was a pretty senior guy. He was very opinionated. He didn’t suffer fools easily, so I think you
have a campaign that had some very strong people in it. Atwater, Fuller was the Vice President’s Chief of Staff, and for whatever reason, they just were having friction, and the campaign wasn’t doing well.

They were kind of muddling along in the early part of ’88. As the spring unfolded, somewhere around March, Bob Teeter and Jim Lake came back to me and said, “Is that damn baby born yet?” [laughter] I said yes. And they said, “We know you don’t want to travel because you’ve got a new baby, and we’re thinking that the model that we had before of Teeley, who was both Press Secretary and Communications Director, that that wasn’t working.” They put forth the proposition that they were thinking about splitting that job and having a Communications Director and having a Press Secretary. That was like nirvana to me as long as I wasn’t the Press Secretary. So they hired me in, I want to say late April, something like that. I told them I had to go on a backpacking trip that was kind of a personal thing and I can’t believe I did it now, but I took like a week vacation before I actually—I think I went on my backpacking trip during the Democratic convention.

**Riley:** This was pre-planned?

**Demarest:** Yes. I went backpacking in the Grand Tetons. It was very healthy to do, actually, but anyway, that’s just an aside. When I joined the campaign, the campaign was significantly behind and [Michael] Dukakis was the Democratic nominee. I did not have responsibility for speech writing. I mainly was there to create this job—what did it really mean to be Communications Director? We started thinking about how do you amplify the messages, how do you coordinate the messages, how do you discipline a far-flung network of surrogates and spokespeople and so forth. I started building a staff and we ended up constructing the line of the day. We had a meeting every day with Jim [James Addison III] Baker, who was the campaign chair. Atwater, Fuller, me, Teeter, maybe two or three others—

**Riley:** Who was the Press Secretary?

**Demarest:** Sheila Tate. But she was always with the President or the Vice President, so she rarely was in these meetings because they were always out campaigning somewhere.

**Riley:** She’s on the plane and everybody else is—

**Demarest:** Yes.

**Riley:** Okay. Is she the only one on the plane? Senior?

**Demarest:** Often Atwater would go out. I went out a couple of times. Sheila got some heat, especially towards the end of the campaign, because she traveled on Air Force Two as opposed to the press plane. That didn’t sit well with a lot of people in the campaign because they felt like, “You should be working the press, not working the President.”

I went out on a trip just to see what it was like. And it was really sort of amusing, because Atwater joined me. I don’t know where we went. It was Wisconsin or—we did a couple of stops. The press plane was like *Animal House*. It was just crazy on the press plane. When the plane would take off—you’ve probably heard these stories—we’d be rolling down the runway and one
of the reporters, usually it was a TV guy like a TV producer or something, would stand on a cafeteria tray and when the plane took off they would surf down the aisle. It was just—and I’m kind of wide-eyed—Wow!

The reporters would routinely get on the intercom of the press plane and tell jokes or stories or whatever. I flew on Air Force TWO on one of the legs and then Atwater says to me, “Why don’t we fly on the press plane?” So we fly on the press plane. Sheila decides she’s going to—she didn’t want the Communications Director on the press plane unsupervised, so she gets on the press plane, too. Now Atwater, the campaign manager, is on the plane. One of the media guys announces to everybody, “Ladies and gentlemen, we have a very special guest today, someone who is rarely seen on the press plane. Let’s all give a hand to the Vice President’s Press Secretary, Sheila Tate.” And I was like, Ooh, this is bad to have Atwater hearing this. Sheila just laughed along with the rest of them.

She got in some issues at the very end, literally the last week of the campaign, when everybody was dog-tired and we were trying to decide where we were going to finish the last few days of the campaign. Everybody’s looking at tracking polls state-by-state, and it was a toss-up between Fresno, California, or someplace like Colorado Springs or one other place, New Mexico maybe. And so we decided not to go to Fresno. We thought California was in good shape and we were going to one of the others that would seem to be tighter, and Sheila was asked, “Why didn’t you go to Fresno?” You may recall that there was a commercial back then of the dancing raisins?

Riley: Yes.

Demarest: And every time we were in the central valley of California, these dancing raisins would come out in full regalia to be there at one of our events—

Riley: They were the California Raisins.

Demarest: Yes. Right. Right. And so she jokingly said, “The Vice President is just sick and tired of seeing those damn dancing raisins.” [laughter] And everybody in the campaign went, “Aaargh! This is not the thing to say. They love the dancing raisins. They’re proud of the dancing raisins. No. No. No. She didn’t mean to say that.” Anyway.

My main responsibility was to try to craft a structure that would take from what I heard in the senior staff meeting—where we were going, what we were talking about, what the Dukakis campaign was doing—and create a line of the day that was like a one-pager that then we would get out to all of our surrogates that day so everybody would be on the same page, literally.

It seems rather pre-historic today, but the mechanics for making it happen were not easy back then. There was no e-mail, there was no Internet, so what I did was to—I had some folks that would do the writing and then we would gather as a group and we’d massage this. We’d finish it by 3 o’clock in the afternoon. We’d get it approved by Baker and then I had a team of people that we had organized—basically a pyramid—and we had ten or eight fax machines, and we would fax to people who had faxes. We got this out every day for the balance of the campaign with what we wanted all of our surrogates to be saying the following day.

Walcott: Was this modeled on how the Reagan White House manipulated the media?
Demarest: Well, I think the Reagan White House was better at that from a network standpoint. I mean David Gergen—you’ve read some of the stuff that I’ve said. Gergen spent a lot of time trying to spin the networks and trying to hone down—there is one thing that we want to get out today. And I think in that respect, there was one key message that we wanted to distill everything down to on a day-to-day basis. But we weren’t telling this to the press.

My aim wasn’t to have me tell the press this. My aim was to have this echo chamber out there all singing in unison about what was happening in the context of the Presidential campaign. So it was, I think, more indirect, but I think also not as much of a sledgehammer as trying to argue with a reporter, “This is the most important story of the day and you have to cover this,” and so forth, which is basically what Gergen did.

There were a lot of people in the early days of the White House, and Gergen wasn’t there all that long. A lot of people who felt, and this is sort of hallway gab, that the reporters got more out of it than the White House got out of it. That in order to push your agenda you also have to give something up. And so there were people who felt that Gergen was a source for the reporters as much as he was pushing an agenda.

Walcott: He was, in effect, buying them off with information?

Demarest: Yes. Only he knows whether that’s true, and the reporters on the other side, but if you’ve got the three networks sitting in your office virtually every day, you’re going to have a conversation with them. They’re not going to let you just tell them what you want them to hear. They’re going to push back. They’re going to ask for more information. They’re going to ask for kind of nuanced, “So what happened in the meeting when you guys discussed this?” And, “Who said what?”

I always felt the White House press corps is very unlike the press corps at most of the agencies. That the press corps at the agencies are 75 percent about policy and 25 percent about what’s the buzz in the agency. Whereas the White House press corps is 25 percent policy and 75 percent about all the machinations that take place in the White House. And so, you’ve seen some of my interviews where I liked having agency people talk about issues, because I thought they had the highest level of competence on those issues. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

So this line of the day was, I think, quite effective and was regarded as such, as helping us control the agenda of the Presidential campaign. It caused us to be very disciplined, whereas the Dukakis operation seemed to be much looser. Then we headed into the fall and we had the debates. I was the guy in charge of the post-debate spin.

Riley: Can I stop you before we get there and maybe ask a couple of preliminary questions?

Demarest: Sure.

Riley: When you came into the position in the spring of ’88, and then into the summer the Democrats got a big convention boost that year. Did you get any sense of panic at that time when you came in that, Boy, this is an insurmountable problem for us?
Demarest: No. And I think part of it was, if you think back to ’88, the horse-race aspect of things I don’t think was nearly as in-your-face back then as it has subsequently become. We—the Vice President—never seemed unglued about where things stood.

I sort of thought, This is all the preliminaries, and when the campaign—whether I was right or wrong, I sort of bought into all of this churning around in the spring and in the summertime is really just a prelude to the main event. If we get our act together and we have a well oiled, disciplined, focused, we’re on the front foot, put them on the back foot kind of operation, we’ll be competitive.

I also was the beneficiary of all the opposition research on Dukakis, and for better or for worse, I also bought into we have some really strong arguments with this guy and he’s got a background that we can amplify where we think he’s out of touch with mainstream America.

Riley: Okay.

Demarest: And they ran a lousy campaign. The Dukakis—

Riley: But you didn’t know that at the time.

Demarest: That’s right.

Riley: They were—

Demarest: But they were riding high. I watched his convention speech about competence. It didn’t quite resonate with me that that was what I would hang my hat on if I were running for President.

Riley: Not against George H.W. Bush in particular.

Demarest: Right.

Riley: Somebody who’s got a résumé.

Demarest: Yes. About the best you could find.

Riley: Exactly.

Demarest: And we knew that there would be this kind of, the silver foot in his mouth, and portray him as an elitist and so forth. I can’t remember exactly when the Dan Rather interview was. I just rewatched that the other day and it’s really something to watch. I’m sure you’re familiar with it. I don’t know if you are or not.

Riley: Which one is it?

Demarest: We agreed to be interviewed by Dan Rather.

Riley: Yes, sure. It was at the convention, wasn’t it?
Demarest: I think it—boy.

Walcott: I think it was a little later.

Riley: Was it? Okay. That’s checkable. Don’t worry about—

Demarest: And the ground rule was this was a profile. That was what Rather had agreed to. This was going to be a profile interview.

Walcott: This was after that—was it a *Newsweek* cover or *Time*—

Demarest: The wimp factor.

Walcott: The wimp factor. Yes.

Demarest: We understood from a variety of sources. Not me, but [Roger] Ailes, I think, understood that this really wasn’t going to be a profile. They were going to come after him on Iran-Contra. And so, after about the fourth or fifth question, all of the questions being on Iran-Contra, the Vice President said, “You know, I thought this was going to be a profile.” And it was a live interview.

Rather was just boring in on him. It was starting to look like an attack, and finally Bush said, “Dan, how would you like your career to be judged on when you walked off the set?” And that was like a pie in the face. It was one of those defining-moment kinds of things. And you know, he walked out of that interview almost fist-pumping. He, we all felt that we had really come out on top of that.

I think in the summertime, we were gearing up for our convention. I really looked at the convention as the opportunity. I did not know who the Vice President was going to be. None of us did. We were in the dark. Even at senior levels we were in the dark about that until literally when Dan [J. Danforth] Quayle is coming up in the boat and so forth. I might have gotten an hour’s notice or something. We all watched the hugging; the Dan Quayle hugs of the President on the boat. A lot of us were, “Eh, okay.”

I was one who didn’t feel particularly uncomfortable with Quayle, because Quayle was on our oversight committee when I was at Labor. I knew that he did have some pretty good ideas and background and talent about the Job Training Partnership Act, and I also knew that he had done a fair amount of work on nuclear issues, defense issues. So I didn’t walk into it thinking, *Oh, my God, why did he pick Dan Quayle?* I sort of thought, *Okay, young, attractive Senator. I only know this much of him.*

But when we saw the boat pull up and the President announcing that this is my guy and Quayle was just hyperactive and he was hugging the President and it just didn’t look very Presidential. And then we had been in New Orleans for at least ten days before that happened, and my job was to think about how to help organize the four days of the convention. To have the first day as kind of looking backward, the second day is to go on the offense. The third day is to do the profile of George Bush, and then the fourth day is to have the President command the stage. I might have
gotten the second and third mixed up, but basically my brilliance at the convention was on how
to do the attack day.

One of the things that we did was we analyzed the Democratic platform, and the platform
statement of the Democrats that year was quite lengthy. Our opposition research team had gone
through it and tried to analyze it through a number of different lenses. And one lens was what
words aren’t in it. Words of principle were not in it. God wasn’t in it. They did this little
analysis. All sorts of interesting powerful words weren’t in it. Then they looked at it and it really
was an all things to all people kind of platform. That you could see anything you wanted in it or
nothing. And so we started to come up with an idea that it really was like a blank sheet of paper.
So we went out and we got buttons—we went to a button place, like campaign buttons, and I
said, “Don’t put anything on them. Just make it a white button. People will say ‘What’s that?’
And you’ll say, ‘It’s the Democratic platform.’” [laughter] Because it doesn’t say anything.

It was pretty smart. Then we had placards, just white placards. I was thinking, This is going to be
great.

And then the Quayle implosion hit, and that was so much the story of either the second and third
day or the third day, I can’t remember which, but it was everybody, the National Guard issue and
how he handled himself in the press conference. It was just—that was panicky.

Riley: Did you get a sense about who had been consulted in this?

Demarest: This is one of those, “Success has a thousand fathers, and failure is an orphan.”

Riley: Right, but you’re close enough so that—can you identify the father for us?

Demarest: I think most people felt that it was Baker, that Baker saw Quayle as bridging the
generational gap so that he could appeal to younger voters. And Indiana was going to go
Republican no matter what, so it wasn’t so much that as he’s a midwestern—

Walcott: A middle-America guy.

Demarest: Now Bob Kimmitt was the guy who did the vetting. And the thing that I always
found remarkable—because Kimmitt is a Vietnam vet, I believe, as soon as—now this is part
because of my own background as an anti-war guy, in my view back then, anybody who went
into the National Guard was doing it to get out of going to Vietnam. And as soon as I heard that
he had been in the National Guard during the Vietnam period, that set off all sorts of bells and
whistles to me of, “Hmm, this isn’t the same as war hero George Bush.” [laughter] And it isn’t
that I look down on anybody who did that because I was against the war, but it did tell me that
this was a potential vulnerability. What I didn’t know was that there were going to be
accusations of: “How did he get into the National Guard?” and “How was he going to handle
those?” and that firestorm that kind of blew up around that. That was very frenetic, and you just
kind of batten down the hatches.

Walcott: Was there any planning preceding the presentation of Quayle as the running mate?
Demarest: No. As soon as we knew who he was we scrambled to put together the “This is why he’s the greatest choice of every possible choice out there,” but that was all after the fact.

We were highlighting his JTPA (Job Training Partnership Act) work. We were highlighting his work on disarmament. Those were the two pillars that we built up around Senator Quayle. But all of that just kind of went out the window. Right off the—you had a hurricane and you couldn’t hear yourself talk because there was this cacophony of the Quayle issue. It really took George Bush to do a great speech. It’s almost like he carried the campaign on his back through that speech, and then it was more of, “Okay, how are we going to manage the Quayle problem?”

The way we were going to manage it was he is going to small markets. And there was that scene immediately following the convention where Quayle went out and there was a rope line and the reporters were screaming at him. There was one reporter—I can’t remember her name but she was from the Wall Street Journal. She had this look of apoplexy and the cameras zoomed in at her screeching at Quayle, angrily, and it looked like she was a madwoman but she was the press, and so it sort of turned the axis a little bit to it looking like this is a little overkill. These press people are going after Quayle, they’re just not being reporters, they’re going after him.

There were a lot of rumors about how we turned up the sound system so that the crowd, a very favorable crowd, that had come to see the Vice President that we had turned out, they were hearing all this press screaming. The crowd turned on the press, and the press started feeling very uncomfortable with that. I never found out if that was true or not, but that’s what the press alleged, that we had sort of constructed this situation that was going to make them vulnerable to—

Walcott: Was there, in this campaign, any conscious effort to demonize the press? To allege media bias and portray the press as out to get the Republican candidate?

Demarest: I think all of us felt that the press was not going to be an ally, and that if there was a judgment call, that’s going to be made by the press in general. I’ve never felt that the press was the enemy in any of the jobs that I’ve held. I think that there is a certain approach that they take towards people who are in power that is on the one hand legitimate, they have to do that, but on the other hand it creates an impression that all they do is look for the negative. I think that often they operate like a pack, and so if a theme starts to take hold, they all kind of reflect the theme. I was talking to my brother once and he referred to it as a “witless conspiracy.”

It’s not an organized effort. It’s not like they all sit in a room and say, “Okay, this is what we’re going to do.” But you look at how stories—the New York Times writes a story and then, well, what a surprise, all the networks are covering the same lead. And there is a risk aversion that nobody wants to be the outlier and come up with their own take if they feel like the consensus of their peers is one way. I don’t think that’s a liberal/conservative issue. I just think it’s sort of the nature of how they operate. Now, in today’s world it’s a little different because of the fragmentation of media and so forth, but back then it was more pronounced.

Bill Brock always had pretty good relations with the press, but we’d get stories that would just drive us nuts. But we never chalked it up to “the press is out to get us.” In the Presidential
campaign I don’t remember a theme of “these damn reporters, they’re just out to screw us.” I think Dukakis could argue that they maligned him.

Walcott: At least in one case, yes.

Demarest: Yes. And so that’s a long-winded answer to your question.

Martin: How was your relationship to the television campaign, creating commercials—

Demarest: Zero.

Martin: None.

Demarest: The whole advertising end of things—I mean that’s what’s sort of odd. There were chunks of the campaign that were already in place that were doing what they were going to do, and so to call me communications director of the campaign was almost a misnomer. I wasn’t in charge of all the communications of the campaign because I wasn’t working with the ad agencies. I wasn’t in charge of speechwriting, but I was in charge of these pieces of the campaign that were communication pieces that were, I think, important and necessary. We’ll get to my White House time in a bit, but there are some parallels there. I had control of certain levers, but I didn’t have—in the White House I would not say I was the communications architect for the Bush Presidency, because I don’t think there was, necessarily, an architect. It was a collection of people who had different pieces of that pie, and it certainly wasn’t—there was never a Mike Deaver in the Bush White House, ever.

Deaver really was someone who not only was close to President Reagan, but also he came out of that business of message management and he was given the horsepower in the White House to make it happen. It was basically Deaver, Meese, and Baker, the triumvirate. And once you’re in a White House you know who are the key players. I think in the Reagan White House Deaver was one of them, and in the Bush White House it was more diffused among people like me, but most of the power resided in [John] Sununu and [Richard] Darman.

Walcott: During the campaign, advertising became an issue or a series of issues, Boston Harbor, Willie Horton, like that. Did you not have to at least react to those sorts of things?

Demarest: Sure. And we did that through the line of the day, actually the mechanism that brought everybody together behind certain approaches and certain reactions. We did a lot of lines of the day about the furlough program. We did a lot on Boston Harbor so that we were both incorporating what the advertising was doing. I would be in these senior staff meetings when we would talk about how we were going to be going up to Boston Harbor—or we’re going up to Boston, we’re going to get the cops from Boston standing behind us and all of that sort of stuff. So I was part of those conversations but I wasn’t on the creative side of the ads, and I still get queried about Willie Horton as if we created Willie Horton. It’s funny; even in my business school class, one of the students said, “Well, what about those ads about Willie Horton? Did you write those ads?”

No. And I go back through—you know, the Lawrence Eagle-Tribune actually did 167 stories about the furlough program and won the Pulitzer Prize for it, and Al Gore was the first one to
raise it against Dukakis in the primary. It wasn’t us, but did we use it? You bet we used it, because we felt that it said a lot about who Dukakis was and how he thought. And it sort of lined up with the card-carrying member of the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] and the Pledge of Allegiance. A lot of people talk about the Bush campaign having trivialized the campaign because we used issues like that, and I don’t subscribe to that. I think that those were—if Michael Dukakis one day of his life mentioned that he didn’t think that teachers should have to say the Pledge of Allegiance, okay. I would not make that the central issue of the campaign. But he very aggressively engaged on that issue and I think it told something about him. And the same thing with the furlough program.

He had a legislature that tried to end the furlough program and he vetoed it. That’s something I thought was significant. And then people would say, “Well, there is a Federal furlough program.” Well, actually not for people who are in for life without parole and who have nothing to lose by jumping furlough. So there were a lot of pieces of that that I got pretty well versed in, but I wasn’t the one doing the creative—

**Martin:** How much notice would your campaign have gotten from the folks who created the Willie Horton ad that this was coming?

**Demarest:** Well, we never had a Willie Horton ad. We had a furlough program ad with a revolving door.

**Martin:** No, I mean with the folks who created the Willie Horton ad?

**Demarest:** You mean the independent committee?

**Martin:** Yes, the independent committee.

**Demarest:** I didn’t have any knowledge of that.

**Martin:** So when it gets announced, you have to react to it?

**Demarest:** Correct. And so we sued them to take it off the air. It was becoming a problem for us because people were saying, “Oh, that’s the Bush campaign.” And we were saying, “That’s not us. That’s some independent committee. By law we’re not allowed to have any connection with this independent committee.” You’re not allowed to play that game. And so the independent committee ignored us and we sued them to get them to stop running the ad. I don’t actually know whatever became of that. I don’t think they stopped running it.

**Martin:** It didn’t run that much. I think it ran on the nightly news.

**Riley:** Yes. They got the free media to repeat it.

**Demarest:** But our commercial was a revolving prison thing. There was a person or two in that who were of color, and so it’s funny that whole issue had lasting damage on the President, because when we met with Civil Rights leaders it really stuck in their craw, and no matter how many times you talked with them about, “This was not about race,” they had a very hard time
feeling comfortable with that. It was always something that was put on the table when Bush would meet with African-American leaders.

Riley: You used what I thought was a very helpful metaphor, that you weren’t the architect of the message, and I’m sure that must have been true in your White House, that must have been true in the campaign as well. You came in and the architecture of the message must have already been in existence, but I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that. This is a period of transitions in a number of ways, in foreign policy, maybe not so much transition from Reagan, but I’m just curious about what your sense was of the meta-messages that you thought were central for your campaign in ’88. Is it continuity? Is it change? Is it competence? What?

Demarest: Well, I think we were looking to try to take the best assets of the previous eight years, hang on to them, and demonstrate that this isn’t going to be Reagan III, that Bush is going to have a particular identity that is going to be different from Reagan, but not cast aside a lot of the good that had occurred with Reagan.

We had an economy that was going well, so we clearly wanted to take advantage of the continuity aspect of that. However, there was a hard edge to the Reagan administration that we didn’t feel—when I say we, we tried to be reflective of the President. I think we felt the President didn’t want to be the enemy of the environmental movement or perceived as such. He didn’t want to be the enemy of the education establishment. He didn’t want to be relegated to 4 percent of the black vote. And that part of the reason for those circumstances that existed with Reagan, Reagan putting James Watt in charge of the Interior department, Anne Gorsuch in charge of EPA [Environmental Protection Agency]. This sort of very overt, in your face, dismissal of not just the far extreme environmentalists, but it was all of them.

I think that for all of the popularity of the Reagan administration, at least through a lot of Reagan’s time, you had big chunks of the electorate that felt alienated, and I think our view was that this is just not good for George Bush and his Presidential race, but if you’re going to have a Republican Party that is going to be a majority party, you can’t whack off big chunks of an electorate that is concerned about certain kinds of issues.

I don’t think it became that much of an issue in the campaign, but I think the comparison to Reagan in the White House was real, especially in the first year. And that was a real challenge, threading the needle of not appearing to be somehow critical of the President—former President—and at the same time as trying to establish your own identity. I think how that got manifested in the campaign was this kind of kinder, gentler language that came out in the convention speech.

Riley: We’ll pick the theme up again once we get you into the White House. Let me ask on the campaign, in your earlier narrative you sort of dropped off, because you were going to say some things about the debates, and I encourage that, but one other question, and that is, I wonder if you could give us your character sketches of the three or four important people to the campaign. What was it that they brought to the campaign, their relationship with the President? I’m thinking of people like Jim Baker and I guess Bob Teeter, certainly Lee Atwater.
Demarest: Yes, it was really a very interesting mix of people. Lee Atwater and I were the same age, and he and I sat down one time, it was after some campaign day, and it was pretty early. He was one tough cookie and very incisive, and there was an aw, shucks part to him, but there was a laser-like focus on how he thought about wedge issues and things that could really either diminish your opponent or amplify your candidate. And he was a very sharp guy and a sharp-elbowed guy.

He and I are talking, and we really didn’t know each other that well, because I didn’t really know him before the campaign. It was kind of funny because I didn’t know most of these people when I came into the campaign. I was sort of this odd character because I was kind of godparentless. Atwater and I are sitting in his office and he said, “You know, you and me we’re the same age and we’re really very much alike.” And he goes on this line of thinking, and I didn’t really respond to that. I remember walking out of his office going, We’re not at all. [laughter] But in a campaign there were few people that I would say were as focused and disciplined as he. With a very good sense of how to work with the President, how to push the President into taking a firmer, more clear—creating that bright red line of how he thinks about something and how his opponent thinks about something. I think he was very good at that.

I would say on the Democrats’ side, he was [James] Carville-esque. He was smarter, and he wasn’t quite as bombastic as Carville was and is, and he wasn’t somebody who wanted the limelight like Jim appears to like the limelight, but I think there are real similarities in terms of how they were able to cut through a lot of the ambiguities of politics to find that kernel of this is going to work, this is really going to cause voters to have second thoughts about Dukakis, or this is really going to have the effect of raising your credibility on the positive side to the President.

I think that jumping forward, one of the problems that we had as a White House was that we didn’t have Atwater at the party. Atwater I thought would have caused the President not to do some things that he ultimately did, like pitch the tax pledge, particularly the way that he pitched it. And who knows how that all would have shaken out, but I think that was a tremendous loss. Would Atwater have been a good Chief of Staff at the White House? No. He would have been a disaster. But as a campaign manager I think he was very good.

Riley: Was he more instinctive or empirical? In other words, was he the kind of guy who liked looking at the crosstabs and coming up with things?

Demarest: Well, I think he had a lot of confidence in Teeter. I had known Teeter when I was back at the RNC, and he was the only guy I really knew. Bob was always incredibly thoughtful, an analyzer of data, and I think Lee had a lot of confidence that Bob was asking the right questions, was getting the right kind of information. To the extent that Lee wanted to dive into the numbers I think he could be analytical, too, but I think his strength was much more instinctive and that it really came from his gut.

Riley: Paul, you have anything? Okay. The President and Atwater seem to be a kind of odd coupling. You’re consenting to that. How did the dynamic of that relationship work?

Demarest: I can’t say that I was a witness to much of it, but I think a lot of people in positions of real power have a mix of people that they surround themselves with, and some of them do kind
of make it look like an odd couple. Because if you look at the difference between Lee Atwater and Craig Fuller, you can’t get two people that are more different. Craig Fuller is like the consummate polished insider. He, I think, was always someone who you saw 75 percent of him, but 25 percent was always ready to move in a different direction. And I think that navigating—he was head of Cabinet affairs at the White House for Reagan, and I think that’s one of those jobs that requires a whole lot of pushing the President’s agenda with the Cabinet, but also pushing the Cabinet’s agenda with the President, and so you are always in this kind of yin and yang moment of trying to find that right balance. I think that Craig was great at that.

Now as a Chief of Staff for the President, that’s such a different job than Chief of Staff for the Vice President, so I think Craig’s skills were very well suited to Cabinet affairs, to Chief of Staff of the Vice President. I don’t think that that would have been the best role for him when Bush became President. And we can talk later about whether I think Sununu was the best for that role, too. But I think that’s where—Bush is an incredibly smart guy, and I think that he’s very able to see how he may not be psychically in synch with somebody but he can certainly see whether they are a valuable asset in an organization or a team. I never really watched the dynamic between him and Lee, but it always seemed like it worked for them.


Walcott: How much time did you spend with Bush during the campaign?

Demarest: Very little. One, I was pretty much always in Washington. I only got out on the road for the debates and I was not part of the debate prep. Others were doing that. My job at the debate was to take what happened at the debate and do the best I could to make it look like we won. That was my job and I took it almost like a military campaign, actually, and we’ll talk about that in a minute, but I went out on the campaign, I think twice, and then the three debates, and that was it. But this is where—I had met the Vice President once, when I was hired. The other guys interviewed me. I go in to be blessed by the—it was all cooked. So I spent 15 minutes with the Vice President and I was on board. I saw him at a distance the times I went out on the campaign, and that was it.

One time in Denver we were having breakfast in the hotel dining area and the Vice President told one of his aides to have me come over. I was scared out of my wits. I thought I’d done something wrong. I came over and he said, “Pull up a chair.” I pulled up a chair and now everybody is looking at me like, “Who is this guy?” and he said, “So how do you think the event went?” He and I had about a ten-minute conversation about how I thought things were going and so forth and I said, “I think this part went well. With all due respect, sir, I think you should emphasize more of this or that.” I don’t remember exactly what I said, but it was ten minutes of face time.

I don’t know if it was before or after that, but I flew on Air Force Two for the first time that I’d ever been on that sort of plane, and Atwater was the one who made that happen. Atwater brought me into the little conference room to tell the President what I thought, how things were going, and Atwater said, “This guy’s doing a great job.” It was wonderful. I was like on cloud nine at 30,000 feet, yes.
That was about the only time that I’d really had any time with the Vice President. And then at the debates he was off doing his debate prep and I was organizing this post-debate, actually it was both pre and post. This was something that the Dukakis campaign didn’t know how to do, I don’t know why, but they didn’t.

Riley: We’re there at that point. I promised everybody I would break after an hour and a half. Let’s take five minutes and we’ll reconvene and get the story on—

[BREAK]

Riley: We’re talking about travel, and so Air Force One.

Demarest: The old Air Force One was still in use when I started at the White House. That was, I believe, Lyndon Johnson’s plane as Vice President, so it was the old 707 and you felt like you were in the stone age because it was low ceiling, the seats were first-class seats for that era, but the old 707 was just a tube and there was a tiny little conference room and then a little tiny room for the President to sleep in. There was a FAX machine and no computers. Phones maybe every fifth row or something like that. It was not an easy work environment at all. No tables. No conference room to work in or anything like that.

So when the new Air Force One came on we were like, “Whoa, this is heaven.” So roomy and a huge conference room and couches and everybody had their own kind of section and a lot of room to move around. Much, much better.

But the mechanics of travel were really extraordinary because you would walk into the White House in the morning, you’d drop your bag off wherever the bag room was, and the next time you saw it was in your hotel room. And for me, because I was senior staff, I would get to my hotel room. I never had to check in at the hotel. I would just get on the elevator, go up to the floor—we usually had two floors of a hotel that were reserved for us. The President was on the top floor. The elevator would only go to the next-to-top floor, and then those of us who were senior staff were usually on the President’s floor, so you’d go the stairwell and you’d go up the stairwell and there would usually be some guys with M-16s in the stairwell in SWAT [Special Weapons Tactics Team] uniforms. When you walk in your room, there are your bags and the second phone, and so you pick up the phone and it’s the White House operator. It was great. That second phone was there whether you were in a hotel in Prague or in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. These things just miraculously happened.

Riley: I guess they miraculously stop happening when you leave.

Demarest: Yes. Prague was the only place where I almost missed the flight. We had been at a state dinner, we had flown all night. The President didn’t like to waste time, so when we flew internationally, if we were going to Europe, we would put in a full day at the office and then we would go climb on Air Force One and fly across the Atlantic. We’d have dinner and then he’d
look at his speeches. He’d call me up to the front, we’d go over his speeches, and then I got to work all night as we flew.

And so he went to bed. I worked, and if I had any time left, my sleep spot was on the floor behind this row of seats. Those people who didn’t have to work got the couches because they were always getting to bed before me. So in this one particular trip, we landed in Prague, we went straight to the Parliament. It’s like 9 o’clock in the morning and he has an address at 10 o’clock. I’d been up all night and he does his address to the Czech Parliament. Then we did the—you’ll find that I always say, “We did a speech,” as if I was standing up there mouthing the words as well. But the next event was to do a speech at Wenceslas Square, which had hundreds of thousands of people. It was the biggest crowd we ever had in the Presidency.

We did that speech, then, after that, he had some meetings, then we did a state dinner—I think Shirley Temple Black was the Ambassador then. Then, like everybody else, I went back to the hotel. What you do is pack and you just leave your clothes in the room for the next day and you take your bag and you put it out in the hall. Because it’s secured, you don’t have to worry about anybody stealing it, but once again, miraculously, your bag disappears from the hall and ends up at the next hotel.

The next morning I wake up, and you know how it feels when you wake up and you realize something’s just a bit amiss. Like This feels like it’s later than it should be. I got out of bed and I just knew something was wrong. And of course I didn’t wear a watch back then, but it just felt like this is later than it should be. I open my door and I look out in the hall. None of the bags are there, they’re all gone. All of the phones from all of the rooms are out in the hallway with wires. I’m like, Oh crap. Jesus, what time is it? I realize that I should be long gone. I get out my little book of what the schedule is and it says he’s going to do an Embassy stop-by to thank the employees of the Embassy, and then he’s going to go to Air Force One.

I’m not showered. I just throw on my clothes. I race downstairs. Of course none of the Presidential party is there, but there were some guys that looked like they were Czech motorcade drivers or something. I was able to communicate to one of them, “I need to get to the Embassy right now.” He took me to the Embassy, and the President was walking out and I’m walking in. [laughter] That was the closest I ever came to being—because if you are left, oh, my goodness, you’re in for the hassle of your life, because you have no passport. There is a person from the State Department who collects all the passports on the plane. That person keeps all the passports for the whole trip, and you get it back at the end of the trip. You could imagine what a mess it would be to get left somewhere.

We did leave some camera guys in Alaska once. We were flying to Tokyo for the Emperor’s funeral, Hirohito’s funeral, which was actually a very interesting thing for Bush to do, having been shot down in World War II. But we stopped at Elmendorf Air Force Base, and it’s February. It is cold, and blizzard-like conditions. But we went into the hangar—we had to refuel. The President did some address and then we had a little down time, maybe 45 minutes of downtime, and this camera crew just sort of didn’t get it that they needed to be back to the plane like sooner. And literally, the plane took off and these two guys are, “Wait, wait.” I believe there were some on the plane who said, “Isn’t that the CNN [cable news network] crew?” And the
hassle they had. I mean, it’s bad enough being left in a city that has a commercial airport, but they’re left on an air force base. In Alaska. In winter. Anyway.

Riley: Okay. Back to debates. You said you had a little bit of pre-debate work.

Demarest: Yes. The whole point was to, one, get everybody on the same page, as we had been doing before, but also figure out a way to tee up the right issues that we thought were our strengths, pre-debate—and when I say pre-debate, meaning day before and day of, but before the debate actually occurs. One of the things that we came up with was to create local feeds through satellite broadcasts.

I had done some work at Labor with some companies that would film you. You’d do a standup interview and they would have a satellite truck and you would connect then to whichever media market wanted you. on debate day, we would offer up John Tower as an expert on defense and we would pick several cities that we thought the defense issue would resonate with and offer up John Tower on-site, at the President’s debate, outside the hall, doing a standup with six anchors from around the country for five minutes apiece. And so you got the benefit of really leapfrogging over the network guys right into a key market with a key spokesman on a key issue. And the anchors loved it because it kind of brought them into the process as if they were live at the debate.

We trotted out that plan at Wake Forest at the first debate and we had like a gauntlet of all of these standups and all of my surrogates talking to all of these local news stations pre-debate and then we did exactly the same thing post-debate. So we bracketed the debate, which we felt was the best way to ensure that we could position the President’s performance, the Vice President’s performance, in the best possible light. That was one part of the strategy.

The other part of the strategy was—and this is where it gets a little bit like the military— when I got to the debate I went into the press room, I looked at how it was all set up, and I looked at my list of surrogates, and I started to prioritize which surrogates did I think would have the most attraction. Almost like if you threw fish food into an aquarium and the fish food was the surrogates. What would happen? Where would the press go?

I divided my surrogates into tiers of—because I assumed that what was going to happen was, after the debate was over—the President is not going to go anywhere. He’s not going to go into the pressroom. But the spin doctors are all going to go into the pressroom. But you don’t want to throw them all in there at the same time. You want to throw them in there in waves. My assumption was that the Dukakis campaign’s surrogates, their campaign manager, their expert on defense, whatever, were all just going to walk in there. So the first part of the conversation in there was going to be like a big fish-food fight, and everybody was going to be scrambling randomly like guppies after the food.

I felt that we didn’t want to send our top-tier surrogates in right off, that we’d send in sort of mid-level surrogates. As the press got their first questions, they would then go to another surrogate and at the right moment I would send in my more big-name surrogates that would be like sucking the air out of the room. And sure enough it was like guppies.
If I sent Jim Baker into the room, everybody glommed on to Jim Baker, but if I sent John Tower, some people would talk to him. And in my humble opinion, at Wake Forest I think Bush was the slight loser of the first debate. I think if you were a debate analyst, you would say he was a slight loser. I think by virtue of how we managed the debate spin, it came across like a tie. These are all totally subjective, but I think we outdid them in the mechanics of how to characterize the President’s performance in the absolute best possible light as well as technically, more of our surrogates were out there in more effective ways.

Then came the Quayle debate, and the Quayle debate was terrible. The debate was over after the [John F.] Kennedy comment. We just went through the motions. “No, he gave a credible performance.” You knew you were really swimming upstream on that one. And because it was in the Midwest, all of our spin work was done by, I don’t know, 6 o’clock at night or 7 o’clock at night, we were done. We retired to a suite, and it was me and Charlie Black, who was a Republican operative, and John Tower and probably 10 or 15 other people. I have told this story; you’ll see why it’s kind of an interesting story for the times.

Towards the end of the evening, a lot of people had a lot to drink, and I can’t say I ever saw John Tower have a drink, but some of us were in this little kitchenette next to the main room of this suite and when we came out John Tower was sitting in what looked like a Queen Anne’s chair, kind of a very formal chair. And for whatever reason he had rolled up his pant legs to his knees and he had a glass of clear liquid in a stem glass and he was sitting there like this but with the glass balanced on his head. [laughter] Several of us walked out and we’re not sure if this is like a trick that he does, or a joke. What’s this all about, what’s with the pants rolled up to his knees? John Tower is about 5’1”, he is a tiny guy, so his feet didn’t hit the floor. It just had this whole picture that was striking and somewhat absurd.

Now, fast-forward. John Tower has been nominated for Defense Secretary, and a special assistant for me who happened to be in that suite that night, her name was Mary Kate Cary—you may have seen her quoted from time to time, but she ended up being a speechwriter for me in the succeeding years. When the Tower nomination was in the midst of big problems and there was all this talk about his womanizing or his drinking, Mary Kate came over to see me in the West Wing. She said, “I just wanted to ask you something. Do you remember the, do you remember, do you—” and she’s kind of fumbling. She said, “Do you remember that suite that we were in after the Omaha debate?” I said yes. “Do you remember what Senator Tower did?” “Yes.”

“Should I not say anything about that?” [laughter] I replied, “Yes. You didn’t see that.”

So the third debate. We were getting pretty good at this, this whole spin business afterwards. Basically I would meet with all the surrogates and I would describe how this was all going to work and that we’re going to send you in one wave after another and so forth.

Well, the third debate was sort of the mirror image of the second debate, with the opening question to Dukakis (the rape question about Kitty [Dukakis]), which shocked all of us. I never watched the debates in the room. I always watched them on TV. There was a group of us watching it on TV because I wanted to see it as the public sees it. When Bernie Shaw asked that opening question, I don’t know if you are familiar with the question.
Riley: Yes.

Demarest: Okay. All of us went, “Huuuh. Oh, my God, what an opener.” Then, when Dukakis gave the answer, which was dreadful, like a robot, unfeeling, no emotions, cerebral, it fit the entire narrative that we were trying to portray him in. Several of us said, “We just won.” Not just the debate. We won. This is over. And the rest of the debate we watched with interest, but our sense was that first question so depositioned him that how could he recover from that?

When we walked into the pressroom afterwards, I, leading my phalanx of surrogates, the reporters said, “Don’t bother,” [laughter] “you won. Do we have to go through this?” And I was like, “Yes, we do,” but it was essentially over at that moment of the debate’s first question.

The one other thing that I would mention about the campaign that I think had a direct impact into how I ended up in the White House was that I think the operation that I had was well regarded—the line of the day work that we did, the debate stuff that we did. There wasn’t anybody out there who seemed to be the likely choice for Communications Director at the White House. I really wasn’t thinking that much about that because I didn’t know exactly how the White House was structured. But there was very little press speculation as to who would be in the Bush White House should he win.

One of the things that was an interesting tidbit is that a number of times I would have my line-of-the-day meetings (and my line-of-the-day meetings were really pretty funny because I had a very young team and a lot of them were wanting to do much more aggressive attacks then.) I felt like Grandpa, saying, “No, children. No, we can’t call him a pervert. No, that’s not going to work.” It was things like that. We would have these funny conversations in the line of the day and we’d get it to where it was a manageable couple of paragraphs.

But one person liked to drop in on my line-of-the-day meetings and just hang out with us, and he would just kind of—I had an office that was half the size of this. We’d all crowd in there and he’d sit on the radiator. And it was Governor Sununu. So I got—

Riley: This was how early?

Demarest: This was like in September and October. If he was in town he would—he was interested in it, and he was a lame-duck Governor. I got to know him a little bit because he’d come to my line-of-the-day meetings from time to time. He wasn’t imperious. He’d offer his thoughts here or there but nobody was like, “Oooh, Governor Sununu.” They weren’t bowing and scraping and he was just another guy. That’s how I sort of got to know Sununu.

None of us had any idea that he was going to be in a key role in the White House at that point. And so the President, we’re now through the debates. He has taken a commanding lead and it’s feeling really good. We end up absolutely—it was a landslide.

I was in Houston that night, and it was great fun and a wonderful moment and so forth, and I think I flew back the next day and then I ended up driving somewhere with Bob Teeter and I simply said, “I don’t know what happens now, but whatever it is I’d like to be part of it.” And that was it. A couple of days later I went back to the campaign headquarters and I’m getting my
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stuff together and a couple days later he called me. He and Fuller, I think, had been made co-
chairs of the transition, and they asked me to be head of public affairs for the transition.

So that meant I had a job, because all of us were off payroll basically that week of the campaign.
So then we had the transition, and that was a very different kind of environment. Late in the
transition—you guys know the date, I’m sure, of when Sununu got named, but I think most of
the betting public was on Fuller to be Chief of Staff, and when Sununu got named, it was like,
“What?”

When I heard that, I was like, “Oh, okay, at least I know this guy. This is good.” I knew Fuller,
too, and I thought I was in good shape with either of them, but I still had no idea where I would
be going. Shortly after Sununu got named, he had somebody tell me that he wanted to see me,
and so I went into his little office in the transition building, which was up on Connecticut
Avenue somewhere up near the Hilton, and he said, “You want to be Communications Director
of the White House?” “Yes.” And he said, “Well, we’re not sure about a couple of things. We’re
not sure if it should be a Deputy Assistant to the President or an Assistant to the President.” And
I said, “It should be an Assistant to the President.” “Okay. And we’re not sure if it should be just
speechwriting or speechwriting and public liaison.”

I said, “Public liaison is what links up to all the interest groups, right?” He said, “Right.”

I said, “It should be both.” And he said, “Okay.” That was it. That was my interview. There was
no, “What would you do? Have you ever written a speech before?” None of it.

I was kind of flabbergasted that I was actually going to have this job. Then it started to sink in to
me and I was terrified because it was a big job. When I worked for Brock I think I wrote two
speeches for him because he basically was so good that he just kind of winged it. So I had no real
speechwriting background. I was a good writer and I had a good command of the English
language, but I wasn’t a speechwriter.

I started thinking, Okay, what are my strengths in terms of what would I do here? And the
transition did help, because it helped me formulate a little bit more of what this kinder, gentler
thing meant. My strengths were always that I could put together a good team and that I was a
good manager, so I had built a good transition team in the public outreach end of things. Once
again, I wasn’t in charge of speechwriting in the transition, and partly because he wasn’t doing
speeches except for the inaugural address, which I saw the night before he gave it. I knew that
Peggy Noonan was drafting it and that she had done the convention speech for us. She was in the
campaign doing a lot of the speeches, but this was just an area that I hadn’t been connected to.

When I started realizing, Oh, speechwriting, this is not going to be easy, I started thinking about
who I should start looking to to build a team for going into the White House. I was way ahead of
the game on the public liaison side because that’s a lot of what we did in the transition, but I was
behind the curve on the speechwriting side.

Walcott: How did you find your speechwriters?

Demarest: The first thing I did was hire my deputy at Labor, my deputy at the campaign, and
my deputy at the transition was Chriss Winston, and I had tremendous amount of confidence in
Chriss. We just started looking at, during the transition, “All right, we’re going to have to build a speechwriting team. We need to start interviewing people and start putting the word out.”

One of the first people that came to me was Clark Judge, who had been a speechwriter for the Vice President. He’s a very fine writer. This has to be into December, because it was shortly after I got named. He came in and told me what he had been doing, and I was very interested. He said, “I’d be really interested in joining your team.” I said, “I’m happy to talk to you about it.” And he said, “But you should know I would only do it if I was chief speechwriter.” I said, “Well, this is going to be a very short interview, because there’s not going to be one.” I had already decided that.

I had opinions about the Reagan speechwriting operation, which weren’t particularly flattering. It wasn’t that they couldn’t write speeches; it was that they saw themselves in a very different way than I was going to have our writers see themselves. And this became an issue because of all this—it was a different model. I was very familiar with the stories that came out of the Reagan Administration that there would be dueling speech drafts, that there were different ideologies among the writers. Somebody is more hard line. Somebody is more soft line. And they’d fight it out. Sometimes by leaking speech drafts to the press. I thought it just looked tacky and that’s not serving the President very well.

I thought part of it was that people’s egos got way out of control, and at least for my entry into the White House I was not going to perpetuate that, and for me to designate somebody as chief speechwriter—how would I know that they would be the right chief speechwriter, and what did that even mean? Does that mean they tell the other speechwriters what to do? Or they’ve got the inside track to how the President really thinks?

And so I made Chriss my Director of Speechwriting. Chriss is a very fine editor and we just started working on how we were going to design the speechwriting group. We got a lot of static in the first few months—like one speechwriter had worked for Sam Pierce and for some reason that meant that because Sam Pierce was known as Silent Sam that meant that he had a terrible speechwriter. The arguments that got thrown up at these speechwriters were so juvenile—it’s funny, I was rereading some of that in this briefing book. I think there was a New York Times thing by Bernie Weintraub, who talked about how I was downgrading all the speechwriters.

And it was so clueless as to how you manage people. I’ve got a blank slate. I can hire whomever I want. I can give them a high title or not. Why on Earth would I do that? (give them a high title)—when the Reagan writers, none of them started as Special Assistant to the President, but over time, because you can’t reward them with money, you keep inflating their titles. Eventually some of them got a Special Assistant to the President title. What does that mean? You get White House mess privileges because you are a commissioned officer. On the one hand I had a budget I had to work within and it didn’t make any sense to me that I should start taking options off the table for me in terms of how to promote people and so forth. It was just a no-brainer that I would handle it this way.

Riley: Don’t lose this train of thought, but it’s fascinating from the outside, because this is occasioned by the fact that there is a friendly, in-party takeover of the White House, right? If there is, it’s possible that the same battle would be fought if Democrats were coming in, but it’s
unlikely because at least you’ve got a four-year window of time, and that’s one of the fascinating things about this entire transition: How do you manage going from the Reagan era to the Bush era? What are the fights? How do you distinguish yourself?

**Demarest:** I felt like I had found myself in this uncomfortable crosshair of Reagan being the Great Communicator, ergo, he had the best speechwriters in the world, ergo, the people that I hired could not possibly measure up to them. Anything that would validate that argument then became truth. And so what I did with the speechwriting organization became the proof that we didn’t care about communications. Or oratory.

**Walcott:** Along that same line, one indication that speechwriting was perhaps downgraded is that your staff was a lot smaller than Reagan’s. Who made that decision?

**Demarest:** I was surprised at that, because I saw the article here that said he had nine writers, and I don’t remember him having nine writers. I don’t remember any discussion about my staff being smaller on the speechwriting side than Reagan’s. So that was sort of news to me when I read this in this briefing book, because I had a director of speechwriting, an executive assistant that worked on the speechwriting side. We started with five writers, five researchers. We did more speeches than Reagan did. That’s true. But I just don’t remember any of the debate about the numbers of people I had being different than Reagan.

All the debate seemed to be about they don’t have mess privileges, they don’t have special assistant titles, and there was some sort of amorphous—and we think they’re paid less. Yes. They’re just starting here. That was a real frustration. And we didn’t help matters because we wrote some pretty mediocre stuff in the early going and it took us a while to get our sea legs. That was one of the real dangers of being at the beginning of an administration, when you’ve got a whole new group of people who have never worked together. I didn’t meet the Head of Legislative Affairs until I walked in the White House. I didn’t meet the staff secretary until I walked in the White House. So you’re just trying to figure out the relationships and who’s going to do what and who’s aggressive and who’s not aggressive and who’s easy to work with and who’s not easy to work with and so forth, at the same time as you’re trying to pump out product in a way that suits the President. But you’ve never worked for the President before. You only worked for the Vice President. And the public liaison staff was significantly less in numbers than the Reagan team. We got static for that as well, but that came later.

**Walcott:** Why was that decided?

**Demarest:** Well, they had to make room for some other—there was a finite—there was a pie, and if there was going to be a “points of light” program, you had to figure out where those slots were going to come from. So when Andy Card was doing most of the transition work of trying to set up the White House staff, he and Sununu were kind of looking at all the boxes with all the—here’s where all the staff are. Now here are the new things that we’ve got to do, that we’ve committed to in the campaign, so those have to be staffed. Where are we going to draw from? So they looked at shaving, and public liaison I think was a pretty easy target, because the way the Reagan Administration used public liaison was very aggressive and you could argue that there were cases where they were in some gray area about the anti-lobbying act. They really believed that they would get all the horsepower they could get behind their legislative initiatives through
public liaison and the interest groups. They created sort of an expectation among the interest groups about how involved they were going to be.

And when we got briefed about what are the constraints that we are operating under? You know, it is illegal for the White House to lobby? I can’t say to business leader X, “Call Congressman Y.” I did tell my staff early on, when we were just discussing the rules of the game and how we have to behave and so forth, and I said, “Now, my rule is I don’t go to jail for anyone [laughter] nor should you. Okay, let’s get that straight.”

I think that our approach was maybe more nuanced, but we didn’t have the horses, and we were less aggressive, and I think some of our interest group people on the outside who felt that we weren’t bringing them in as much as they would like, and we weren’t making them as central to everything as they would like reflected that and would complain to whoever would listen, and then I would get an earful. Certain things do run downhill. But on the speechwriting side it was rocky because we were just trying to figure a lot of things out at the same time.

**Riley:** Was Peggy Noonan approached at all about staying on or coming in?

**Demarest:** Not by me.

**Riley:** Was there a reason for that?

**Demarest:** I had heard that she was not interested and that would have been difficult for me anyway, just because I—she by reputation had become so identifiable that I thought that would be problematic. Peggy’s a perfectly nice person, but I was not disappointed that that was not going to be an issue for me. And, frankly, as I think was probably in one of these articles, I had for years railed about her book, *What I Saw at the Revolution*, as the beginning of the end for speechwriters occupying the place that they should occupy, which is to not be the focus of attention. You’ve seen in a lot of this stuff that I told my writers they are to be heard and not seen.

**Riley:** Passion for anonymity. Paul?

**Martin:** I was going to ask you about just the broader Reagan team and whether they were playing no role, negative role, positive role in this transition period? Are they spinning quietly stories to the press to pick up on things, or are they a non-entity?

**Demarest:** I don’t remember, during the transition, much quacking from unnamed sources that are a little bit tweaked because Bush is doing this or Bush is doing that, is not following the Reagan mantle properly. I think that at that point in the Reagan Administration, they’re now in their eighth year, were very competent, very wonderful people who were serving in the eighth year, but I don’t think anybody would argue that that was the A-team. The A-team was the group that came in with him and over time an administration kind of loses its ability to attract and retain, and a lot of the folks see their opportunity to move into some other role on the outside in year two or three of the first term or two or three of the second term. At the very end I think they were on their fourth or fifth Communications Director, and so I think those jobs get less and less plum people. So they’re also not quite the people who are going to hold so fast to the Reagan legacy, if you will. I don’t remember a lot of concern about that.

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**Walcott:** What about trying to hold on to their jobs if you had people who wanted to continue into the Bush Administration?

**Demarest:** You know we always characterized it as a friendly takeover. And there were going to be people who served Reagan who were going to continue to serve Bush. But I think Bush gave a lot of latitude to his Cabinet, and if somebody—there were a number of Reagan people who were good friends with Bush, too. Those people sort of split the difference and they were able to stick around, but I don’t think just because somebody was in the Reagan Administration they were like, “Unless you leave on your own, we’re going to keep you.” I think that churn did happen. And I think some of them weren’t happy about that, but I didn’t feel like it was across the board. I don’t think people felt this was like a clean sweep, that we kicked everybody out. I think there were some comments like that, but I don’t think they resonated very much.

When I think about it, most of the people I hired were largely from the campaign on the public liaison side. Then there were some on the speechwriting side. I thought that we did a pretty hard look around the agencies. And if you think about it, I mean, Curt Smith came from HHS [Health and Human Services], where he worked for [Richard] Schweiker and then somebody else. Dan McGroarty worked for [Frank] Carlucci, so I was hiring people who worked in the Reagan Administration. I didn’t get that complaint about the speechwriting group. The complaint was, “Oh, well, Frank Carlucci was not known as an orator.” So let’s blame the speechwriter.

Mark Lange was speechwriter for Ann McLaughlin [Korologos], and Mark Davis was speechwriter for the party chairman, so I felt like I had a pretty experienced team by the time I got it all set up. But boy, those first couple of months. I first, if not one of the first, speeches that he did was to a group of CEOs [chief executive officers] that we invited to a luncheon in the State dining room. I think Mark McIntyre was a holdover, and I had assigned the speech to him, or Chriss did. The speech was supposed to be on how these business leaders could do more in their community and so forth, to help with social problems. Mark wrote a speech and it went into circulation and it got to the President and, and everything was so loosey-goosey in these first couple of weeks that it didn’t get a lot of scrutiny, because it was an inside-the-White-House kind of thing.

The President calls me and I’m told I’m to come to the Oval Office. I’m going to go to the Oval Office and this is my first time in the Oval Office. I had been there once before for a photo-op with Reagan because I ran the combined Federal campaign, which is the charity campaign. That was my experience of being in the White House and the Oval Office. So I get this call and I’ve got to go to the Oval Office and I’m like, *Oooh, oh boy, what’s this all about?* And, of course, nobody tells you what it’s about.

**Riley:** Now where is your office?

**Demarest:** My office was in the West Wing, second floor, facing Pennsylvania Avenue.

**Riley:** All right, so you’re in whatever the previous Communications Director’s office was?

**Demarest:** No. Mari Maseng had the windowless office, which was on the first floor.

**Riley:** And she was the Communications Director who preceded you. Okay, I had forgotten that.
Demarest: And Pat Buchanan had had that office, too.


Demarest: I’ll tell you a little bit about my conversation with him, but the windowless office was called that because it had no windows. When Pat Buchanan was there, he had a window painted. It was right down the hall from the Oval Office. Andy Card, when he was doing the map, said to me, “You’ve got your choice. You can have the Mari Maseng office,” also known as the windowless office, “or you can have the second floor office.” I said, “Does the second floor office have windows?” “Actually, it’s a corner office.” And I said, “I’m in.”

So I had that and that stayed as the communications office I think through [George W.] Bush II. When I went back in there several times, that’s where Dan Bartlett’s office was until—

Riley: Forgive me; I interrupted your story. You’re getting called to the Oval Office.

Demarest: So I go into the Oval Office and the President is there. I sit down in a little chair in front of the desk and he says, “I’m not totally comfortable with this speech.” I said, “Yes, sir.” Meanwhile, all that’s happening is this sensory overload of, “I’m in the Oval Office.” I’m trying to listen to him tell me what he doesn’t like about the speech. I’m concentrating as hard as I possibly can. And he’s not the best communicator. He’s saying things like, “You know, I don’t want to talk down to these guys. I actually know a lot of them,” and he’s telling me stuff like that. After about two minutes he goes, “Okay.”

I said, “Yes, sir,” and I walk out of the room and I’m like, I have no idea what is wrong with this speech. I quickly decided I couldn’t tell Mark McIntyre to redraft the speech, because what would I tell him?

Riley: He’s the original drafter?

Demarest: Yes. So I just decided I’d rewrite it myself. I did the best I could and sent it down to him. It didn’t go through clearance again and the next morning, which is when the speech was going to take place—or it was a luncheon speech, I swung by the Oval Office to check in with Patty [Patricia Presock], the secretary, and she said, “Dave, I’m sorry about your speech.” And I said, “What do you mean?” She said, “The President—well, he hated it,” and I said, “I know. That was yesterday.” “No. He hates it now.” [laughter] And I’m thinking, Oh, my God, what do I do now? I said, “Patty, this speech is going to happen at noon. What can I do?”

Riley: Sorry.

Demarest: And she said, “He said he’s off to swear in Bob Mosbacher over at the Commerce Department. He’ll try and fix it in the car. You can’t do anything.”

And I’m thinking, This is a huge disaster. I don’t know what to do. I had thought that I would walk over to the event with him. I quickly decided I was not going to do that. Frankly, I didn’t want him to see me at the event, but I was a table host at the event. All of the senior staff were table hosts. It was probably one of my three or four worst days in four years, because I was totally without any way of fixing what was wrong. Plus, I didn’t know exactly what was wrong.
So I go over to the event. I sit down at my table and there are these CEOs at the table and, of course, one of them says, “So, what do you do?” I said, “I’m the Communications Director.” “Oh,” and he says to the guy across the table, “He’s the Communications Director. So you’re responsible for the speech we’re going to hear?” I said, “Actually, I’ve got a lot of writers who do that sort of thing.”

The President comes in and I knew exactly what was wrong with the speech the minute I walked in, but I’ll save that for in a bit. He comes in and he starts to talk and he says, “Before I begin, I want to introduce my staff to you.” So he goes table by table and now I know he’s going to see me, the architect of this terrible speech that he’s about to give. I’m thinking, Maybe he’ll just fire me. Like right now. And it was a very kind of out-of-body—I just remember thinking, This is how he’s going to salvage this speech. It was weird—I couldn’t eat. It was terrible.

Anyway, he gets through, he doesn’t fire me, and he then starts on the speech, and it’s terrible. He took a terrible 15-minute speech and he made it into a terrible half-an-hour speech. [laughter] Because he kept—he tried to fix it. Right. Glasses start clinking towards the end and I am just sinking, sinking, sinking. And he ends his speech with, “Before I end, I’ve got a surprise for you.” And of course I think, Here it comes.

And he motions to the double doors like this, and the doors open and in walks Barbara Bush. Everybody claps for Barbara Bush. She comes to the lectern and says, “I only have two words for you: ‘Use me. Invite me to where you are and I’ll be there and I will help you with your community action,’” whatever it is, “Use me. Thank you very much.” Everybody claps. Everybody stands up. The President goes, “Thank you very much.” The guy sitting next to me turns to me and goes, “Great speech.”

What I found out, what I realized was wrong, was that I’d never been in the State dining room before. I didn’t realize how intimate a setting it is. The President didn’t have his big lectern with a big seal on it. He had a little toast lectern. He was as close to the first participant as I am to you, and what he needed was some light remarks, not a speech. He couldn’t articulate that to me, but when he said, “I don’t want to talk down to these guys, I know most of these guys,” he was signaling me that he wanted it to be much more conversational, that he didn’t want a formal kind of speech, and what I gave him was formal, stiff, something that you would give in a hotel ballroom or somewhere.

It was a wonderful lesson for me, because I realized that setting and context—I really needed to work on that. Understanding what the venues were going to be like and really having a crisper understanding. He was so gentle in the early days of knowing that we’re all doing our best, we’re trying to provide him a good product, and this wasn’t like some disaster to him. It was a much bigger disaster to me, and I was thinking it was going to be a career-defining moment. But it was actually great that that happened so early because it was so instructive to me.

Walcott: I was going to ask, speechwriters who write about speechwriting tend to have a common complaint, and that’s that they didn’t know the President well enough and didn’t know how to express that President’s style and thinking. Was this the kind of thing that enabled you to communicate with President Bush so that you were able to catch on to what he wanted?
Demarest: I think so. And I think that the more I was around him, the more I felt intuitive about him and what he’s comfortable with and what he’s not comfortable with. I also recognized that he himself was a very good writer and if he would take the time or had the time to focus on a speech and do some edits, invariably they improved the speech. The challenge was he rarely did that. And so I tried to become sort of an alter ego for him, especially on major speeches, because we were accepting so many speaking events that I couldn’t pay attention to all of them. I think my writers started to connect with him, and one of these articles talked about a meeting that he had with my writers. He tried to communicate to them what he liked and what he didn’t like. But even so—he just didn’t have a style that was self-reflective enough to really be crisp about, “This is what I want,” other than saying, “I don’t like a lot of flowery prose. I’m not Ronald Reagan. I’m not an orator; don’t try to make me into one.”

I had a conversation with him once—actually there are a number of conversations I had that had this sort of theme—when we would do humor, like the White House correspondents dinner. He hated those things. Hated them. And he would say to me, “I’m not God-damn Johnny Carson.” I would say to him, “Mr. President, you’re actually a pretty funny guy. You really are. We’ll work with you to try to let that come out, but you are funny.” And he is. He loves being mischievous and he loves sort of borderline practical jokes. He’s got a great sense of humor but he hated being cast in a role that he didn’t think he could measure up to. It was the same thing with regular speeches. He was convinced that he was ineloquent. I remember one time in a meeting with education leaders, it was in the Roosevelt Room and he said, “Children just need somebody to hold them and to love them and to hug them. Somebody who knows their name.”

I’m not sure if that’s exactly the quote, but it was a beautiful little turn of a phrase, and this whole kids have to—they’ve got to feel that somebody knows their name—I thought was really lovely, so I used it. I made sure that was in a speech somewhere because those were his words. His writing was actually quite eloquent. This is reflected in some of this stuff, too.

On domestic issues we had to work really hard to find where the connection was for him. Foreign policy issues were much easier, and a lot of it was he felt much more grounded in those. He was less grounded on the domestic side and he was more passionate about foreign policy issues. Defense issues or talking with troops, holy mackerel, really touch him.

Early in the administration the turret on the Iowa battleship blew up and killed like 30 guys. It may have been Clark Judge who wrote the speech, because he was still on staff and he wrote a very nice speech. I didn’t go on that trip. We hadn’t worked out who travels yet, and so I listened to the speech on the squawk box and as I’m reading the speech and there’s like two paragraphs to go, he just stops. He can’t go anymore. He can’t do it. He left off the last two paragraphs and just said, “Thank you very much,” because he was starting to lose it. That was another kind of signal to me that when he’s talking about loss of life of military guys, this is something that is incredibly personal to him, dating back to when he got shot down and losing the two guys who were in his plane.

Over time I think I got to know the way he talked and how he talked in clipped sentences and things like that so I could write like he talked. And my challenge was how do you write like he talked and still make it sound eloquent? It’s tricky. But over time I felt like I could do it.
Riley: Well, it’s not just you, though, as you had five or six people working for you, so the question is an extension of that. How did they learn? And how quickly do they learn? Is it only through you, or are they also getting exposure to the President himself? Do they travel to the speeches that they write?

Demarest: Rarely. There was a tremendous amount of pressure coming from Sununu to keep the traveling party small. He was sort of an old school—he had a cynicism about him that the only reason somebody wants to travel is to ride on Air Force One.

Riley: Which is not a bad reason.

Demarest: Sure. But it was like that was their only legitimacy, and so if I said to Andy Card that Dan McGroarty ought to be on this trip, I’d get push back of, “Listen, the speech is already going to be mostly done, you’re on the plane, why do we need Dan on the plane?”

This was an ongoing problem. If we were doing a long trip—South America, five countries in six days, 23 speeches over the course of that, I would be able to argue that, “On this trip I think Chriss should come,” my director. Or when we went to the Gulf, [Ed] McNally and Chriss came—I think we went to Czechoslovakia; then Speyer, Germany; then Saudi Arabia—we did the speeches up in the Gulf.

But invariably what happens is that when things have to change at the last minute, I’m the one who gets tasked with it. So on that Saudi Arabia trip, we had all four speeches in the can. I wrote one of them from scratch. He did an Air Force event, then an Army event, then we went out to a ship, then we went out to a forward Marine base. So those were the four speeches, and I wrote the ship speech because it was largely a prayer. I wrote that on the road because it got laid on late, and I wrote that in Czechoslovakia. We were all dog-tired and we arrived in Jetta, Saudi Arabia, at like 11 o’clock at night and there was a State dinner at midnight, or we arrived at 10:00 and the State dinner was at 11:00.

They eat late. And we were like, “You’re kidding me. We have to do a dinner now?” So we do the dinner and we get to our hotel and wheels up for heading to the Air Force base is at 5:30 in the morning. And then when we go from Jetta to Dhahran and then we—the traveling party gets squeezed, because now you are no longer on Air Force One. Now it’s just choppers, so now it’s just me.

But on the flight up from—it was about a two-and-a-half hour flight from Jetta to Dhahran, and the President—I was sitting and I had shown the speeches to [Norman] Schwarzkopf, and he got choked up reading them. Because we had letters from home and we had parents saying things like, “Mr. President, my son is serving in Desert Storm in Saudi Arabia and I know it’s a dangerous thing, but I believe in you and our country.” So a lot of the speeches had those sorts of things in them. A half an hour into the flight, the steward comes and says, “Mr. Demarest, the President wants to see you,” and that’s always a little bit of a trepidation, because there’s usually a problem. It’s not to say, “Hey, this was a great speech, thanks.”

So I go up there and he is stony. Just not happy, but he looks sort of different. It’s not like he’s angry. He just looks agitated and he says to me, “What are you trying to do to me?” “Sir?”
“What are you trying to do to me? Has Schwarzkopf seen these speeches?” I said, “Yes, sir, he got kind of choked up.” He looks at me and I said, “A little over the top? A little too much?”

“Yes. Yes. A little too much.” And then he got this soft look. And he said, “Dave, I’m just trying to get through today.” “Got it.”

So I went back and I rewrote all four speeches. And when I say rewrote it was like cut, cut, cut, cut, cut. I chopped them all down and took a lot of that stuff out, and he still cut stuff out. In the first speech he probably only used half of it. No, the first speech was the Air Force, and that one he kept relatively intact. The Army base, which was out in the field, so we’re out in the desert, he cut that one way back.

He kept the ship speech intact in its entirety. I was pleased about that, but it was a much shorter speech, and then we got up to the Marines and that was going to be the event of the day. That was timed so that it was going to be the right time back home and so forth and it was another kind of learning moment for me. Because it was so emotional—we were at the Kuwaiti border and these guys were—we landed in choppers, they put us on flatbed trucks and drove us up a little winding road that was maybe a quarter-of-a-mile long to get to the base itself. These guys were swarming all over us and him. The sun is starting to go down and I’m watching these Marines and as he’s walking through them, a lot of them are just trying to touch him, and I thought back to what I had read about Roman emperors and how an emperor walking through the legions, if they touch the emperor they will survive the battle.

It was very kind of, Wow, this is really something to see. He got up to where he was going to speak and I realized that he doesn’t have to say anything. Just him being here is amazing, and that’s the story. He doesn’t have to try to be eloquent at this moment. He used maybe 10 percent of that speech that was left, but it was a remarkable moment.

These guys were telling us—I said, “Where exactly are we?” The guide brings me over to this spot and says, “See that little thing over there? That’s a berm, and that’s where they’ll be coming from,” and it was like half a mile away. And these guys were just rip-ready, gung-ho, and it was moving for all of us.

On the way out, we’re literally on these flatbed trucks hanging on to the top of the cab, we’re standing up, and as we wind our way back to the helicopters, these guys are all yelling to us. This was Thanksgiving Day, right, and they’re all yelling to us, “Thanks for coming.” And I’m thinking, You’re thanking me? Holy mackerel. I’m going to get on a helicopter and I’m going to Cairo or I’m going to Dhahran, where I’m going to get on Air Force One and Howie the steward is going to come and say, “Mr. Demarest, would you like some libation?” I’m going to be throwing down a scotch and you’re going to be still up here at the Kuwaiti border waiting for the Iraqis to come across. What’s wrong with this picture? And you’re thanking me. It was just such an amazing moment.

**Martin:** Can you talk a little bit about President Bush’s view of the bully pulpit in general as the power of the President?

**Demarest:** I think he was conflicted about it. He certainly intellectually knew that part of the President’s power is, in fact, the bully pulpit. He also had an inferiority complex about how good
he was at it. So when people would talk to him about using the bully pulpit, it always made him retreat into sort of, “I’ll be judged by my actions.”

And he kept referring to, “Don’t overplay this oratorical power of the Presidency. They’re going to judge us on whether or not we’re doing right for the country,” and so forth. And I think that that was in part because he just felt he was always going to be in the shadow of Reagan when it came to oratory. And that he would never have a Challenger speech. He would never have a Pointe du Hoc speech. That just wasn’t going to be him. So he looked for other ways to engage with the public, and as you know, he was very comfortable with press conferences, but not the East Room press conference.

He was very comfortable with this kind of walk into the briefing room, and he could parry and work with the White House press far better than Reagan ever could. Reagan could do the little one-liner quip, but how many times Reagan would not get his facts right or there were always issues after the press conference of corrections and so forth. We never had to do that. I think I told the story in here in brief of the summoning—when we did our first East Room press conference I think Marlin and I said, “We should really brief the President. This is a big moment.” We had avoided doing these press conferences for quite some time because it’s such a big moment. We needed to get this right. In the room were the Vice President, Darman, Sununu, me, Marlin, Roger Porter, Brent Scowcroft—all of us there to help the President through this difficult moment.

Marlin brought with him a list of questions and he starts asking him each question. After each question, the President answers, and he’s putting up with us, right, he answers the question. He does it kind of in character, and each question we all say, “Yes, sounds good.” After about the sixth, “Yes, I think that’s good,” after about the 20th question, I’m embarrassed. I think this has been ridiculous, it just told me that this is not worth the President’s time. He knows these issues better than we do, and is better at it than we are, and we never did it again. And I think that Marlin often would prep him on, “One of the things you might get questioned on today is X.” But we felt pretty comfortable that he was on top of pretty much all of the regular policy stuff that he was going to face.

Walcott: Why did he dislike that format if he was that good at it?

Demarest: I think all of us felt that the East Room press conference was artificial, that it created the celebrity journalist moment where the journalists would posture and position themselves, and we really did want to have a more working-like relationship with the press. To me the most fun article of all of these is the David Ignatius piece. I’ve used that many times. Press to Bush: Manipulate us. And the conflicted nature of the press, that they didn’t like it when Reagan “manipulated” them, but when we had a much more working-like relationship with them, we got castigated because we didn’t have a line of the day. The collision of those two things I always thought was very amusing.

We did try to use the bully pulpit. I think part of the reason that he did so many speeches was that we thought that was an avenue for getting messages out there. I don’t think that we did it in nearly as disciplined a way as the Reagan Administration did it, and I think that was probably something that was to his detriment in terms of message management.
But I think back on some of the criticisms of the first six months. A lot of the speeches were so-so. We did turn the corner at Mainz with the Mainz speech and that was like one of the best days of the year for me. When I walked out of that hall and I walked among the reporters, they said, “Okay, he can do a good speech and you guys did a great job.” Little did they know that we had such a disaster the night before with the speech, where the speech and all of its changes were erased by accident. This was after Sununu—I’ll be quick about this.

We all knew this was going to be a big speech. So Sununu, who never took any interest in speeches, decided he and Brent Scowcroft would come help us. And so Mark Davis, Chriss Winston, and I sat with Sununu and Scowcroft, going through the speech line by line with them editing and changing. It was torture for two hours. Mercifully, they leave. Right then, Mark gets back on the computer to wrap it up and he kicks the power cord, and back then there wasn’t an automatic backup and we lost everything that they had suggested. We call a tech guy, the tech guy comes in, and he confirms there is no way to resurrect any of this stuff. So then Chriss, Mark, and I say, “Okay, what do we do now?” Of course the two of them look to me and say, “Are we going to call them back in?” I said, “No, we’re not going to do that. We’re going to try to remember all the changes, and this is just going to be among the three of us.”

So we reconstructed it and nobody was the wiser, because a lot of them were trivial editorial changes. The speech went great and people got off my case about the writers, and that really was a turning point. One of the people who was on our case was William Safire, who met with me early on, maybe two months into it, and he was, rest his soul, as arrogant as arrogant could be. He said, “I know you guys are new, so I’m going to lay off you for awhile.” Well, thanks. Thanks very much. But yes, the first six months were kind of rocky on that front. Then second year we started hitting our stride, and I think we got really quite good in the latter half of the second year into the first part of ’91.

That was, of course, the Gulf War. Funny to say it like this—I had the most fun from the moment Desert Shield started until the end of the war, because I had the most authority, I had the most juice, I had a clear mission. I knew exactly what to do and how to do it. Let’s see, in September we were in the budget negotiations and we were also in the off-year elections, and it was a classic mixed-message environment, because the President was insisting that he help candidates. At the same time he was insisting that he hold this quite fragile political coalition together, and so at the end of his speeches he would be basically banging the Democrats, talking about how he needs more Republicans in Congress, and then at the end of the speech he would say, “But politics stops at the water’s edge, and I want to thank the Democratic leadership of the House and the Senate for standing firm with us on Desert Storm.”

The budget deal happened and our numbers are going down. The messages about the Gulf are all fuzzy, and right after the election he calls in Sununu and says, “I’m not going to get my—if we go to Congress for a vote I’ll lose, and we need to do something about it.”

Sununu tells Scowcroft this. Scowcroft tells Bob Gates to get on it. Bob Gates, the Deputy National Security Adviser. Bob Gates calls me and says, “I don’t know why they talked to me. You’re the guy they ought to be talking to.” I said, “You’re right.”
I met with Bob and Sununu and they said, “What do you need?” And I said, “I need you to send a memo to the Cabinet saying we’re going to have a coordinated communications approach to the Gulf issues and I’m running it. And it should be signed by Scowcroft and Sununu,” They said okay. They did it.

I then pulled together a group called the Gulf Communications Working Group, and it was great. Everything worked like it’s supposed to work. That existed then for the next four, five months, and you know, communications is not rocket science. It has to do with clarity of message so you know what you’re trying to say. You’re saying it to the right people. You’re creating moments that people outside the room can tap into, and so the first thing we did was to harmonize what are our objectives in the Gulf. And repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat. We settled on what those were. We then started putting together event after event after event to enable the President and/or surrogates to say those same things over and over and over again. And you could just see the needle move to people understanding why we were in the Gulf and what the stakes were and so forth.

**Walcott:** The key to it, though, sounds like it was the clarity of the message in the first place.

**Demarest:** Yes. If you remember, there was a flurry of press coverage over a Baker statement about oil, and that got everybody saying, “Oh, this is all about oil.” That was still during Desert Storm and the mixed message aspect with the Democrats. It was a prescription for us not getting the vote we wanted in January. People forget that we won the House vote substantially but the Senate vote was very close, and I think that the way we were able to be clear about what the stakes were in the Gulf and the methodology that we used and the execution that we used, for November and December particularly, really made the difference.

**Riley:** We need to break for lunch.

**Demarest:** Okay.

**Riley:** We’ll come back and pick up here. Paul, you’re not going to be able to be with us this afternoon. Was there a question that you wanted to—?

**Martin:** No.

**Riley:** Fine. Very good. Then we’re downstairs.

**Demarest:** Okay. Great.

**[BREAK]**

**Riley:** Coming back after lunch. I’ve got a couple of notes here, bits and pieces of things that I wanted to get back to quickly. You said there was a Pat Buchanan story in here at one point.
Demarest: I went to all the previous Republican Communications Directors that I knew of during the transition and after I’d been named as the incoming Communications Director. I met with Mari Maseng, Tom Griscom, David Gergen, and Pat Buchanan. I think those were the four who held those roles at some point during Reagan. I don’t remember much about the meeting I had with Mari because she was mostly oriented towards public liaison as opposed to communications. I had known Gergen when I was at USTR [United States Trade Representative], so I had met him a few times. He basically said you’ve got to do it like Reagan did it. I said, “But I don’t have Reagan.” He said, “Doesn’t matter, that’s what you ought to do.” It was totally, “Do it the way I did it and everything will be fine.”

Tom Griscom was there with Howard Baker. He was the one I found most helpful. He was a very thoughtful guy and really spoke my language, plus, when I told people I was Communications Director of the White House they’d go, “Really, that’s really interesting. Were you on TV?” No, there was the Gergen model and then there was the Tom Griscom model. They said, “Tom Griscom, who’s he?” Right. The Griscom model was totally behind the scenes. Don’t make yourself into a media star. That fit with my personality and it fit with what I thought was the right way to manage this particular function.

Buchanan and I met. He was over at CNN by then, I think on the [John] McLaughlin Group or one of those shows. It was a short meeting, but he said to me, “What do you think the mood of the country is? What do you think people want?”

I said, “I’d like to think I’m a student of history, and I think if you go back for the last 30 years it has been a rather tumultuous time in this country starting with the assassination of John Kennedy, going through the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War era, the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King. That then preceded Nixon and Watergate. That followed by a brief [Gerald] Ford Presidency, the Carter arrival to Washington with high hopes, and the bottom falls out of the economy and our prestige internationally is down. Then there’s the Reagan Revolution and anti-government kind of feeling.” I said, “In brief, I think the country is tired of all of this collision after collision and maybe it’s the time for a little bit of consensus-building and looking for common ground with various parts of what makes up this great country,” or something like that.

He looked at me and he said, “You may be right. I think Americans just like a good fight.” [laughter] That said it all. I said, “Thanks very much.” That’s how he was as Communications Director, that’s how he was as a speechwriter with Nixon, and that’s how he was on Crossfire.

Riley: And as a Presidential candidate.

Demarest: Yes. You asked about Message: I care?

Walcott: Yes.

Demarest: I don’t remember exactly when that was. It may have been in early ’92 up in New Hampshire. We had a particularly disastrous trip for our first foray into New Hampshire after the New Year. Pat Buchanan was nipping at our heels. The President was scheduled into I think five or six events in New Hampshire. We worked with the campaign on the speeches; he hated them all. This is now, there is a campaign, yet we’re the writers. This was the beginning of tension
between the campaign and my office. From my perspective the campaign had no sense of where it was trying to go. We as writers on the speechwriting team, we’re supposed to create that. So there was a lot of difficulty in those early days as to what are we trying to say here.

Not surprisingly, the campaign gives us all this stuff to say. We put it in the speeches. The President doesn’t like it. The night before, we’re rewriting speeches. We get up to New Hampshire and the first event is a semi Ask George Bush event, which was always his strong suit. In that event he pretty much looked at his speech and didn’t even use it and just went right to Q and A. In the context of the Q and A he said the economy is in free fall. He meant the New Hampshire economy, but all the reporters were like, “Oh, this is a great sound bite.” They all ran with “Bush is now saying that the economy is in free fall.” Well, that sort of destroyed the day, because it was the first event. We all knew that this had now become a bad day.

Each event after that that day he got more and more disjointed in his talks; you should read this in his papers. There is a speech to an insurance company employee group that is at the end of the day that I use in my speechwriting class as not just what not to do, but how bad things can get, because it is almost like he is in stream-of-consciousness and he is jumping from one subject to another and saying things that don’t make any sense in ways that are just weird.

He’s pulling quotes—since the climax of the speech was a point where he’s trying to say that yes, things are tough, yes, it is—being President is not the easiest job in the world, but he’s not about to wear a hair shirt and he’s not worried about the burdens of the office and he likens the situation to [Abraham] Lincoln when Lincoln was confronting serious problems. So that’s what he wanted to do. Instead, it comes out as remember Lincoln on his knees? Don’t tell me about the burdens of the office, “Don’t Cry for Me, Argentina.” We’re in the back of the room, and oh, my God, I went to [Samuel] Skinner and I said, “You have got to do something. He is spinning out of control here.”

The whole speech is like that. In fact it almost ends with “Don’t Cry for Me, Argentina.” It’s something that I don’t think has ever been uttered by a President. Anyway, that Message: I care very well could have been in one of those talks that day because I think he was trying so hard to tell the people of New Hampshire that he gets it. It came out inartfully with this Message: I care.

Riley: One of the places that scholars always examine is the relationship between the communications operation and the press operation. I’m wondering if you could talk a little bit about your relationship with Marlin. Were there ever any turf wars between the two of you?

Demarest: There really weren’t. Part of that is I have no interest in what Marlin did in terms of wanting to do that myself: I didn’t really like, I didn’t want, the whole engagement with the press as a spokesperson role.

Riley: Right.

Demarest: Second, this may sound a little Pollyannaish, but I felt it did the President a disservice to have a whole bunch of people chattering with reporters, almost always on background, who may or may not be helpful to what Marlin is trying to do in the press office. Marlin and I got along fine. We sort of looked at it as Marlin is the day-to-day guy; he’s the guy who is going to wrestle with the press every day, and that’s not my business. My business is to
manage a speechwriting operation, an interest group operation that harmonized messaging, that would manifest themselves mostly through speeches and meetings and events. Marlin, he had had White House press corps and God bless him. So we had very little in the way of turf issues.

The one time that it got a little dicey was that Sununu started—as the President’s numbers were going down, there got to be this conversation about a czar of communications. They talked to Jim Lake. Lake had too many conflicts; he worked for too many clients. That wasn’t going to work. All the while I’m there going, “What am I? Chopped liver?” But in all candor I only saw myself as having one piece of the action. The way Sununu had organized the White House, he made it very clear that communication strategy did not reside with me, it resided with him. He said the same thing to Fred McClure about legislative strategy. He forbade Fred to have a legislative strategy group. I took my cue from that, because that meant I couldn’t have a communication strategy group either. So I then created a communications events group to get around that and allow myself to have a coordinating role. But I was under no illusions that I was driving communications in a big-picture sense at the White House.

Walcott: Was anybody?

Demarest: Well, you’ve probably heard plenty about there were two people who basically ran the White House, and it was Dick Darman and John Sununu, neither of whom had the expertise to do communications. Both of whom thought they were smarter than everyone. I don’t think there’s any doubt among any of the staff that what they projected was that if there was only enough time, we could do all your jobs, but we don’t have enough time, so we’ve got to have you guys. We all felt that way.

You had two personalities that were very different individuals. Sununu was an outsider who now was on the inside who did some things very well, other things very poorly. Darman, brilliant. Did some things very well, some things very poorly. With Sununu he was willing to take flak for the President. He really believed that part of being Chief of Staff was if there is an arrow coming for the President you get in between that arrow and the President. I give him high marks for that. On the other hand, he had an arrogance about it that he really believed that he was so much smarter than everyone, and that got him into trouble. In the budget deal it got him into trouble because he thought he could handle the right wing, the conservatives that we were going to infuriate by breaking the tax pledge.

Darman, on the other hand, knew policy process better than anybody, and he also had an incredibly forceful personality that was very intimidating. Here you had a guy who was the staff secretary with Reagan, who was like this with Jim Baker. He was formidable and he did not suffer fools easily. He thought nothing of ridiculing people in a senior staff meeting. He and I got along, but it was not easy. I worked on him a lot to be a decent person. It came to a head when he was annoyed that Chriss Winston had called him at home on a Sunday because there was stuff that we just couldn’t get the facts straight. The next morning at the senior staff meeting he says to Sununu and me, before the meeting starts, about this. He didn’t use a kind word to describe her, how dare she do that.

I said, “One: Dick, don’t call her things like that, that’s beneath you, and two: she was doing her job.” To me, when you push back on bullies they back off. I went to Sununu on another occasion
when Darman had been particularly nasty to another person on the staff in the senior staff meeting and almost reduced her to tears. I went to Sununu after that and I said something to the effect of, “Governor, you’ve got to step in here, Dick is just—you can’t let him behave that way at a staff meeting. If he does it to me I’ll hit him.”

It was the sort of thing where that conversation with Sununu also said to Sununu—because he was a screamer with everybody. He never screamed at me. We had this okay relationship, but it didn’t mean that he didn’t push all the time to assert his will in the White House. He just did it differently with me than he did with other people.

**Riley:** Did the two of them have good insights into communications? Did they overestimate their intelligence when it comes to—

**Demarest:** Yes. Here’s an example, and this is one I’m not proud of. The Exxon *Valdez*, early in the Bush administration the tanker crashes. Huge story. I say at a senior staff meeting something to the effect of, “Should we consider having the President go up to Alaska?” Dick Darman wheeled on me and said, “Oh, that would just be great. Let’s put the President in the same picture with some dead oily bird. Brilliant, brilliant.” I mean he really just came right back at me. All my instincts said this was the right thing to do. My answer should have been, “Yes, Dick, because this is a President who’s trying to show that he cares about the environment, and you can’t do that from 4,000 miles away in a situation like this.” This is the answer I should have done. I totally wilted.

It was in the first few months. I didn’t have my footing. I figured this is a guy who has been around. He knows better than I do. I didn’t serve the President well because I didn’t push back on that. Of course the President didn’t go to Alaska. The Exxon *Valdez* became a huge environmental catastrophe and it looked like Bush was sort of MIA [missing in action]. We ended up sending Skinner up there.

**Riley:** Who develops the reputation as the “Master of Disaster” based on this, right?

**Demarest:** Right. It was a huge missed opportunity. But Darman was forceful. Over time, the longer those of us in certain roles survived, the more we got our footing and we could push back. Once that first year was under our belts, I was more comfortable pushing back when I had to. But in the early going, not so much.

**Riley:** This is another question about matches that are not obvious. Bush himself didn’t detect any of this or felt that he needed to have someone in these positions who could throw elbows in a way that this genteel man from New England could not?

**Demarest:** I think that if I’ve learned anything about CEOs, CEOs don’t like doing the ugly stuff. They don’t like firing people. They’re terrible at it. It doesn’t matter if they’re in politics or they’re in corporate or they’re at a university. They want somebody else to handle this stuff. I think Sununu did make it clear that he was willing to do the tough stuff and keep Bush above the fray.

Bush also had, as Sununu’s deputy, Andy Card. Andy Card was as much a confidant of Bush as there could possibly be. So he always knew that he had Andy there, who was probably going to
act as a tempering influence on Sununu, and that’s exactly what Andy did. I had known Andy since my time at the RNC when Andy was a state legislator. So Andy and I were good friends. Often people would plead their case to Andy, who would then intercede with Sununu.

Riley: Andy was Deputy Chief of Staff at the time?

Demarest: Yes.

Wolcott: Before he went to Transportation.

Demarest: He only went to Transportation when Skinner arrived and brought [William] Henson Moore to be Deputy Chief of Staff.

Riley: And is it pretty much the same story with Darman? Did the President himself feel that he was getting what he wanted to have in that position?

Demarest: Yes, I think so. I think the budget deal soured him a little bit because that was kept so close by Sununu and Darman that everybody was cut out of that conversation. They were the ones who had convinced him that this was going to turn out okay—wrong, big time wrong. The way it was rolled out was dreadful and everybody knew it was dreadful. [Barbara] Bobbie Kilberg, who worked for me, I don’t know if you interviewed her.

Riley: Yes, recently.

Demarest: I don’t know if she told you the story, but when this all happened and it gets posted on the press door, just terrible. Marlin is cut out of it, he doesn’t know what—but he’s told he can use two lines and put it up in the pressroom. So the whole thing blows up and I’m outside the Roosevelt Room and it’s like you feel the wheels are coming off the car. Just everything has blown up. Bobbie comes in, is for whatever reason on the floor as well. Even though her office was in the Old EOB [Executive Office Building].

I’m standing there and Bobbie is coming one way and Sununu is coming the other way, and I know this is going to be a hell of a collision because Bobbie was somebody—I don’t know if it was because he was Lebanese and she was Jewish, but they had in a way a friendly relationship that was also turbulent. She says, “Governor, the business groups are going crazy. What should I tell the business groups?”

The only way I can characterize it, he snarled, “Don’t tell them anything,” and that was our communications policy. It was appalling. As the whole thing unraveled with the conservatives on the Hill taking a walk, us having to kind of re-jigger it, it just looked terrible. The long-term implications were so serious. But your question was about Darman and the President.

I seem to remember we used to say there was the good Darman and the evil Darman. The good Darman was not just smart and really insightful and incisive, he was charming. The bad Darman could be an SOB [son of a bitch]. You hope that you were going to run into the good Darman, and God rest his soul too. But I think that he had a lot of credibility with Bush. He knew his stuff. To really know the budget inside out, that’s a project nobody likes. But if you have somebody who is really good at it, he’s valuable. So I think that Darman, between his history, his
experience, his knowledge, he was a real asset as long as he could keep his ego in check. It was when that got out of control that there would be problems.

Walcott: So in terms of media, communications planning, what you’re saying is the net effect is that Sununu, particularly, was by arrogating to himself actually keep it from happening, so you had to work around him.

Riley: You mean with the budget deal in particular or—

Walcott: More generally, with the events planning group and so on.

Demarest: I found myself—first of all, I ended up collecting departments. Over time I had media relations, I had public affairs. I had the speechwriting and research group, public liaison. Then Andy didn’t want to run intergovernmental affairs anymore, so he gave it to me. I found a lot of my job was just trying to manage the activities of these groups.

At the same time, I had become good with the President so that I traveled wherever he went, pretty much. So that aspect was largely on the speechwriting side. That’s why I was there.

Riley: As a writer and editor, or primarily as an editor?

Demarest: Primarily as an editor. Occasionally I would have to write one from scratch, but that was rare. If it was a trip that was more than one day, often there were serious rewrites that are going to have to take place. So I would do that.

Riley: You’re talking about having—

Demarest: So I had this collection of people, and I found myself spending more and more time not thinking about big-picture issues, more time making the trains run on time. Because if you think about the public liaison function, most of the events that are done at the White House or events that are with particular interest groups outside the White House, those are public liaison events. So my name was on the schedule as the action officer, or Bobbie’s was, but Bobbie worked for me, or one of the other members of the staff. But it would always be Demarest/somebody or a speech would be me.

I found myself spending a lot of time staying one step ahead of the sheriff, making sure I was on top of all these events as well as on top of speeches. I wasn’t lobbying my peers about this is the direction that we’ve got to take the White House, nor did I have the horsepower to do that. I think a lot of us in that White House, for the first three years, kind of settled into those more managerial roles as opposed to driving—I don’t think Fred [McClure] would say he drove a legislative process. He was a guy who was confronted with a problem, China MFN [most favored nation] or whatever, and he would organize all the pieces to do what we needed to have done, or the Clarence Thomas nomination.

But were we apprised of whether Clarence Thomas should be picked or not? No. In my world now, the public relations/communications portfolio and the things that I do and my peers do in companies, a lot of the beef for the last 30 years is this whole notion of having a seat at the table.
Interestingly this role has morphed much more to be a seat at the table than it ever has been before, particularly on the corporate side.

It’s nice to be at the table, but the next step is how do you not just offer advice as to how something may or may not play before the decision is made, but how do you incorporate your insights about those sorts of things into the actual decision itself? But back then, I think a lot of—what everybody is sort of paying lip service to, you need to be proactive and so forth, but a lot of it was real.

Walcott: There’s a quote somewhere in here, I think it’s Curt Smith, that in effect there was a separation between policy and politics, that the communications side and the policy-making side weren’t integrated the way White Houses are supposed to be. Would that be fair?

Demarest: Yes. The budget deal is a classic. I wasn’t a part of those negotiations. I wasn’t kept very well apprised of how those negotiations were going. Nobody said to me, “What do you think the implications would be if we put revenues on the table?” I would have said, “That would be a disaster. Now, if we have to do that, here’s how I think we ought to think through being dragged kicking and screaming to that point,” which is what Reagan basically did.

Riley: Sound of the concrete cracking around his feet, right? That was the way he described it.

Demarest: But we were given no opportunity to do that. So the day before, three days before, a week before, we’d get signals. Dick Darman started telling us fairly early, “Don’t use that no new taxes thing in speeches.”

Riley: Early, like within months after you’d come into office?

Demarest: Yes. And we didn’t know if he was on the reservation or off the reservation, because others were saying, “Yes, use it, that’s the best line in the campaign. Absolutely. We’re not going to raise taxes.” Sununu would tell us that. So we were thinking, What’s going on here? We started thinking that maybe Darman is the guy who is just trying to undercut. It just wasn’t clear. I think that there were plenty of other—we weren’t involved in the ADA [Americans with Disability Act] talks or the Clean Air Act amendments. We were basically the sales force.

If I were dropped out of the sky today into that environment, I think I would have behaved a lot differently knowing what I know now, but I didn’t know what I know now.

Riley: It’s interesting. You were talking about the development of the profession over the last 30 years. I think that has caught up with subsequent White Houses.

Demarest: Yes.

Riley: Listening, we’ve had lots of conversations with people in the Clinton administration. I don’t think this was a problem for them. I think the message people were always—in fact, the policy people were sometimes uncomfortable with the extent to which the message people were having an influence over those things.
Walcott: That’s interesting, because also the Clinton White House was kind of tumultuous and the Bush White House was not. The Bush White House was collegial.

Demarest: Pretty orderly.

Walcott: Orderly, friendly. Was that part of the problem? Not enough arguing in the hallway?

Demarest: No, I don’t think so. I think that the way the roles were either subtly or overtly designed sort of told people, “This is your purview.” In ’91 we had lots of conversations about, “We’re losing traction, how do we get traction?” Sununu was saying it was the quotas, Kuwait, and something. It was like three Ks.

Riley: KKK.

Demarest: Well, we joked that this is not a good thing because it is kind of like KKK, you get it, Ku Klux Klan, let’s not go there.

Riley: I stepped on your punch line, my apologies.

Demarest: But I can’t remember what the other K was. Anyway, my fear was the same as several people, that we had hit these meteoric approval ratings in 1991 and as soon as we moved back off them, context is everything, and it’s not going to be, “Wow, isn’t it great that George Bush is at 75 percent?” It’s going to be, “George Bush dropped 16 points in the approval ratings, so he’s really on a slide,” even though we were still at historic highs.

As the numbers started to come down and the economy started to get iffy, it got very tense. Then Sununu got into his problems. I was looking for a job at that time. That’s a whole other story, but the point is that I felt—I shouldn’t say I was looking for a job—I was open to a job on the outside and I had a couple of interviews and was offered a job that got—the offer was withdrawn after Skinner arrived and started talking about getting rid of the Communications Director. It was a horrible set of events. Anyway, I felt that the time to leave that was appropriate was in the third year. So in the fall of the third year I started having a couple of conversations.

When that blew up right after the first of the year, I didn’t feel I could leave, because I didn’t want the rats leaving a sinking ship thing, but Skinner was making my life so miserable that I didn’t know what was going to happen. It was an odd set of things that ultimately occurred, many of which I didn’t really understand, mainly when Skinner arrived I could see that this was not going to be fun. He was asked a question, “Are the President’s poll numbers bad because of policy or communications?” His answer, as I’m thinking, I know what the answer is and it’s neither of those things, it’s the economy—his answer was, “We’re not getting our message out.”

At that point I knew that I was going to get fired, I just didn’t know how it was going to happen. I was fully prepared to be fired. All Skinner had to do was to call me into his office and say, “You’re fired. We’ll make it graceful, and you’ve served the President well, and we’ll find you a spot somewhere, but we’ve got to change direction.” But he didn’t do that. And his team started the kind of drip, drip, drip of stories in the paper about there may be a shakeup at the White House and one of the people—you saw it in the book.
So we went to Japan on the worst—I call it “the heart of darkness trip.” It started in Australia, went to Singapore, then to Korea, then to Japan, and each stop it got more tense, more difficult. When we got to Japan we were going to have all of these auto executives with us and other business leaders, which was an idea cooked up by Skinner and Teeter, to have them give us a ringing endorsement of our work with the Japanese.

I had been at the U.S. Trade Representative’s office. I knew that we weren’t going to get concessions from the Japanese on a trip like this, at least not to the extent that any business leader is going to put us on the back. So we get to Japan and not only did we not get those kinds of concessions, and not only did the business leaders sort of trash us, you know, thank you very much, but at the State dinner the President throws up on the Prime Minister’s lap, literally. So all of the metaphors of the President supplicant to the Japanese—it was just a nightmare.

Little did people realize that below the fold in the *Washington Post*, the top picture being the President, below the fold was the story about me about to get fired. I knew about it the night before. Marlin told me it was coming. I told Marlin I had accepted a job in Singapore. The search firm called me to say they wanted me to take the job and I said yes. I said, “I’m happy just to say fine, I’m out of here.” I’d been looking for some time, I’d been in negotiations for some time, and Marlin said, “I wouldn’t. I’d wait until I got back and you get this all squared away with the company. You’re just going to have to sit and take it.”

Okay, so Mrs. Bush came back on the plane and asked me how I was doing. I said, “I’ve had better days.” But the good news was I was able to call my then wife and tell her it was coming so it wasn’t a surprise to her. She knew it was coming. I got back and I couldn’t wait to get in the government car and call the company. I called the company from the car, from Andrews Air Force Base, and I talked to the head of HR [human resources] and he says, “We were kind of re-thinking this.” At that point I knew I was like a dead duck and I was going to have to walk back in the White House and everybody would be looking at me like I was the walking dead. So all you can do is kind of suck it up and do the best you can.

For the next three days I didn’t hear anything; nobody talked to me. Finally Skinner called me down to his office and he said, “You’re doing a great job.” Yeah. But he said, “We’re going into a campaign year. You’ve got too much on your plate. You’ve got to decide whether you want to do public liaison and intergovernmental affairs or speechwriting.” I said, “Okay, and I have 24 hours?” He said sure.

I walked back in and I was certain that speechwriting was going to be the worst place in the world to be, so I said, “I’ll do public liaison and intergovernmental affairs.” He said, “Sorry, I just gave that job to Sherrie Rollins. You’re doing speechwriting.” Okay. Sherrie came onboard. She took the public liaison part. She had the office next to mine. She and I got along fine. I’d known her before. Two months later Ross Perot announces. I’m at a party at Sherrie’s house and Sherrie said, “Dave, can you stay for a little bit?” I said sure. She said, “Ed’s [Rollins] really thinking about taking the Perot job. You’ve got to convince him not to.” I said, “What am I going to say to Ed?” She said, “He likes you.”

So I sit down with the two of them and I talk to Ed and Sherrie and I’m like, “Ed, what are you thinking? The guy is crazy; he’s a nut.” He said, “Well, you know the Bush people, they haven’t
treated me well.” So I gave as big a pitch as I could not to do what he was about to do, and the next day or two days later he announces he’s going to manage Perot. Sherrie came in to me and said, “What do you think I should do?” I said, “Sherrie, you’ve got to do whatever you think you want to do.” She said, “Do you think I have to resign?” I said, “Think of what a senior staff meeting would be like. Your husband is managing a campaign that is seriously wounding the President. Just think about it.” So she resigned.

Skinner then had to come back to me and ask me to take it all back. I agreed to take it all back on the provision that he find somebody for speechwriting. My suggestion to him was that the person that he gets for speechwriting has the confidence of the President and has worked on a national campaign before. So he agreed.

I reconnected with my old staff. Everybody was happy. I didn’t tell them of my deal. So for the next couple of months all I had to do—I had a number of fights with the campaign that culminated in a June meeting with the speechwriters. I was getting so much static through Skinner from Teeter. Teeter, my old advocate. Now Teeter is the campaign manager of the ’92 campaign and he’s complaining that the speechwriters aren’t producing ringing speeches. Skinner is now reflecting that to me. It’s like every speech that we do, he didn’t get enough applause, he didn’t get enough adulation. There wasn’t a standing ovation or whatever. I was getting really tired of it.

We did a speech to the Southern Republican leadership group. I wrote it myself because I was tired of them hitting my speechwriters. The speech got, I don’t know, 27 applause lines and I got this, “Yes, it was okay.” What do you guys want? So we agreed that Teeter would meet with my speechwriters. In June we finally got this on the schedule, June of ’92. Teeter comes in. He starts talking to us about this message architecture and he passes out—which I still have, actually—he passes out a sheet of paper that has a pyramid of boxes with domestic policy, foreign policy, and so forth, and it all rolls up to a box called “theme.”

He is explaining all the different boxes, and we’re navigating this thing as it gets up to theme, and when it gets to theme he says, “That’s where we need your help.” All of us just about dropped our jaws. He then got called out to a meeting and left us there and never came back. We were so angry, because the campaign has no theme and all the while we had been castigated for not articulating the theme.

The next day at the senior staff meeting, Teeter is across the table from me. I always sat next to the Chief of Staff. So I’m sitting there, Skinner is here, Teeter is there, and [C.] Gregg Petersmeyer, who you’ve probably met, he’s the “points of light” guy, he’s sitting either next to me or across the way. The meeting ends and Teeter says, not to anyone, “Boy, that meeting yesterday, there were a lot of dim bulbs in that meeting.”

I’m not even paying attention, but I kind of hear this. He’s saying it towards Skinner, and I said, “You’re not talking about the meeting with my speechwriters, are you?” He said, “Well, you know, I thought we could get something out of them, but—” I’d had it by then. I said, “Listen. You distributed a document that had everything but a theme, and you guys have been on us for no theme, and you’re now telling us that we have to come up with the theme. Isn’t that the campaign’s job?” Skinner says, “I think he’s right, Bob.”
I’m so frosted by this whole conversation and I go back to my office and Gregg Petersmeyer, who is the nicest, most low-key, most even-measured, just a great guy, comes into my office. I’m on the phone. He’s standing in front of my desk kind of doing this. [running in place] He’s beside himself. I get of the phone, I said, “Hi, Gregg.” Now this is the most understated man in the world and he said, “I’m wild, I’m just wild.” I said, “About?”

He said, “What I just saw. All this time I’ve been thinking we just haven’t been able to get it out. We just haven’t been able to tell the world what our theme is. I just saw the campaign manager and the Communications Director of the White House and the Chief of Staff all saying we have no theme. I can’t believe it!” Anyway, a little digression.

Riley: No, it’s not at all. Continue your narrative there.

Demarest: The White House for those five months starting in January really is unraveling. There’s a lot of gallows humor.

Riley: Let me interject one question here. Can you address the question of why things were so late in developing to begin with in creating a campaign? One of the things that we often hear about ’92 is that there was no architecture in place, or the personnel—it was a campaign late developing.

Demarest: The President bears the ultimate responsibility, in that he created a triumvirate of Malek, Teeter, and Mosbacher, and I think no one felt that they had the authority to run the campaign, no one person. Bob Teeter, for all of his strengths as a pollster, has few strengths as a manager, or had few strengths. He has passed away. Bob Mosbacher was a fundraiser par excellence, but he’s not a manager either. Malek, who had been a CEO of a company, was in competition in a sense with the other two, and he wasn’t interested in doing the day-to-day stuff that has to happen in a campaign. So you have this triumvirate that didn’t really work as a team, and they weren’t able to convey a kind of logic and a structure and a thematic approach. I used to say, and this is a pejorative, obviously, I used to say that there are people who haven’t met a decision that they can’t avoid. I felt that Skinner was like that and that Teeter was like that. Malek I think was a decisive sort, but he didn’t have the authority to be decisive. Teeter had more of the authority, but it wasn’t in his nature. Mosbacher, really, it wasn’t what he was interested in.

So to me, the lynchpin that might have pulled it together was the Chief of Staff at the White House who was more Jim Baker-like, who commanded prestige, respect, authority, thick as thieves with the President, and so forth. I’ll tell you that after the Japan trip the President knew that his team—I don’t believe the President had the kind of confidence in his team that he should have had if he was going to rely on that team.

On more than one occasion I would come in to him in the Oval and I would say, “There are some changes to your speech on such and such and here’s what they are.” I was really pretty good about not walking in saying, “You won’t believe what the campaign wants you to say now.” But I would say, “There are some suggestions that have been made,” almost in that kind of third party—without biasing it. I was really a Boy Scout in a lot of ways on some of this stuff. He’d look at it and he’d sort of get that look of furrowing his brow like, This doesn’t sound like
something I’d want to say. He’d say, “By any chance are these changes coming from the same rocket scientists that sent me to Japan?” [laughter]

While it was sort of amusing, I’d say, “Uh-huh.” And he’d say, “Don’t worry about them,” and he’d dismiss those changes. While it was amusing to me, even at the time it told me, “You need to change this. If you don’t have confidence in these folks, you’re the only one that can change it.” But I think he felt that if he’d just changed his Chief of Staff, he couldn’t change his Chief of Staff two months after. I think he lost faith with Skinner within the first two months.

Riley: There were a lot of people who didn’t have faith in Skinner to begin with.

Demarest: Right.

Riley: A hand has just been raised. What was it? Why do you think the President, of all the people that he could have selected, going into a campaign year, why—?

Demarest: Skinner had a good rep as Transportation Secretary. He knew the family and he had helped Doro [Bush]. Doro I think was going through a divorce, and he had been helpful to her in sort of a personal counselor way, he and his wife Honey [Skinner]. So I think as the President looked around, here was a guy that had been a U.S. Attorney, who had served the last three years as Transportation Secretary, had gotten pretty high marks. I don’t know who came to him with that suggestion or not, but when he was named I didn’t feel like, Oh, what a disaster. I thought, Okay, that’s the new guy. I hadn’t heard terrible things about Sam.

When he hired Eugene Croisant from, if you can believe it, the Sara Lee Company—

Riley: I did not know that.

Walcott: It had to happen.

Demarest: Yes, Gene Croisant from Sara Lee.

Riley: This was early.

Demarest: Yes, he was going to evaluate all of us. It was so silly, because all of us were there with different histories and connections and godparents and all of that, so to bring in a management consultant who is going to try and figure all this out in December of a campaign going into the Presidential campaign. It was absurd and it was laughable and it became laughable very quickly.

Then you had the Japan trip. Skinner wasn’t on the Japan trip. He didn’t seem to know how to deal with me. He was looking like he couldn’t make decisions. You’re dead meat if people think that of you.

Riley: Sure.

Demarest: Each month we used to say, “Well, can’t get any worse than this,” and each month it certainly did get worse. Then we had the Perot thing with Sherrie, and then I get my portfolio
back. Then in June I had the meeting with Teeter, and it’s clear that the campaign hasn’t made any progress whatsoever in terms of becoming a real effective campaign. Now we’re going into the summer, and I hear from Henson Moore that we found a new Communications Director. I say, “Great, who is he?” He said, “I can’t tell you that.”

So I talked to Marlin and Marlin says, “Maybe we ought to get this word out before you get savaged again.” [laughter] We fed it to Frank Murray at the Washington Times and he wrote a very nice article about me, that I was well respected and so forth, and going into the campaign they were going to bring this new guy on, but he didn’t know who the new guy was. We asked Ann Devroy if she wanted a story about me. She said—I’ll tell you what she really said and you can edit it. Marlin said, “Do you want to run this?” She said, “No, I’ll wait until I find out who the new guy is going to be, because I just think I’ve fucked over Dave enough.”

Riley: I wouldn’t touch that.

Walcott: That’s how people talk, that’s right.

Demarest: So that article came out and the President and I got on a plane and went to Poland after going to—it was fourth of July weekend. We went to—I think Faith, North Carolina, of all places. We went to a NASCAR [National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing] race or something down there and then we flew to Poland. When we landed in Poland the Washington Post story with the new guy ran and it was brutal, I mean brutal.

As you know, the new guy was head of PR [public relations] for Kentucky Fried Chicken. His name was Steve Provo, perfectly nice guy. But Provo had never worked in a national campaign before, never met Bush, and looked about 22 years old. When they dug up a picture of him, I don’t know if you’re aware of this—the article is “New Communications Chief,” or something like that. The picture was him, his white shirt rolled up with his elbow on a cardboard mockup of Colonel Sanders. The commentary in the story is all sorts of people railing against Skinner that this is the end of Skinner, this is it, this is an idiotic move—poor Steve Provo. Here he has been given this wonderful opportunity and he’s trashed immediately. He’s 30 years old but he looks so young. It just on the surface looked like a disastrous decision. That was some kind of a final nail in Skinner’s coffin.

There are two postscripts. One is that Skinner is fired. He had a going away party; they’re awful at the White House when you’ve been fired. It was in the White House mess. Now this is the man who made my life miserable for seven months. The only other person he made almost as miserable was Kathy Super, who was the scheduler. He stands up there in the White House mess, and the President is there. The President looked like if he could be anywhere else in the world that’s where he’d want to be. The President said two quick things and he was out the door. What do you say? The guy has been here six months. It had a very awkward feel to it.

Skinner begins to talk and he says, “You know, when I was at the Department of Transportation, I thought the finest people in government were at DOT. I believed that until I came here. I think the finest people in government work right here in the White House. Take David Demarest, for example,” and he talks about me. Then he talks about Kathy Super. Most of the people in that
room, at least a good chunk of them, knew this is just weird, this is just strange. It had a surreal element to it. So I like to say Skinner wanted to fire me, but I went to his going away party.

The last postscript I will tell on that story is that when I was at Bank of America, almost two years after my time in Washington was over, a friend of mine called me up to say that I was in *Vanity Fair* magazine. I said, “What?” So I got it and there was a profile of Barbara Bush. In the profile of Barbara Bush, all about her history and so forth, it said something to the effect of unlike Nancy Reagan, Barbara Bush did not get involved in staff issues at the White House except—and it tells my story. It says that she took Skinner aside when Skinner was trying to push me out by leaking stuff to the press. “Unnamed sources saying that Demarest may be the first to go,” or something like that. It says she stood up for me. I heard that after the trip to Japan she took Skinner aside and said, “We Bushes don’t treat people that way.”

It was after that that Skinner called me in and said, “You’re doing a great job.”

Riley: Was Barbara Bush at his going away party?

Demarest: No, but Marlin said in his book, it was sort of a backhanded compliment—“Everybody wasn’t Dave’s friend, but he did have two, and they happened to be the President and Mrs. Bush.” Something like that.

Riley: Was it just widely understood that Jim Baker was untouchable at State, not untouchable in the sense of criticism, but unmoving, that he had gone over there—the predicate for the question is if you look objectively at what President Bush was confronting in 1992 in terms of trying to get reelected, he’s deprived of some of his long-time associates who had been in those roles. Lee Atwater we already talked about, and Jim Baker is another person. So I’m soliciting comments.

Demarest: I think the Jim Baker issue was incredibly serious. Many of us pined for Jim Baker to come back. I think the conventional wisdom among us was that Baker really didn’t want to, and Bush didn’t want to have to ask. There was both a deep friendship between the two of them, but also some competition between the two of them, which precluded somebody making the first move. Jim saying, “Mr. President, I think that this election is in trouble and I want to help in any way I can, and if that means I come back and help you on site, I’ll do it.” I don’t know that conversation ever happened until much later, and the sad part—Skinner is removed, but Baker doesn’t start until after the convention.

To me, one of the worst moments that I had, not personally, but one I felt the worst for the President, was that I believe they had Ray Price working on the speech for his convention. Ray Price had been a Nixon speechwriter. I had heard that. Now, I’m no longer in the speechwriting business; I’m out of that. I’m now just doing my public liaison thing and they were struggling with the speech, clearly. At the point when Ray delivered the speech or the speech came into the process late the week before the convention it was not deemed to be acceptable. It wasn’t going to move the dial. People didn’t like it. I didn’t see it.

The President arrived in Houston—was the convention in Houston in ’92? I think it was—without a speech. I remember walking by a conference room Tuesday or Wednesday of the convention week and there were about nine people around a table cobbling together his convention speech. I had a number of reactions to that. I thought to myself, *Isn’t this interesting?*
I know that there are people in the campaign that I have been at odds with, Teeter and others, but I have managed 1,100 speeches for the man, perhaps I could have been a resource here. The second thing was how can any group of nine or ten people expect that the product is going to make any sense?

Sig [Sigmund] Rogich and I watched the speech from the sky box and looked at each other afterwards, meaning we watched it on TV, and we said to each other, “Boy, the way this convention has gone with all the kinds of sops to the conservative side, with the Marilyn Quayle speech and the Pat Buchanan speech—” We thought we were in big trouble. The convention had a tone of being highly conservative, when I thought that the threat was not from losing the conservative vote, it was from the center, and we hadn’t adequately parried Perot. [William J.] Clinton, although he had his problems, had a campaign that was disciplined and focused and so forth and he was trying to crowd out our center. We just felt that this was really unfortunate. To me that was the President being ill-served at its worst.

**Riley:** Let me ask you a question about that. I’m sure I’ve said this even before. You’ll hear political scientists say that Presidents get the staffs that they deserve. Did President Bush get the staff he deserved or not?

**Demarest:** I think that’s kind of a funny way of posing it. I think that President Bush had a comfort level that he liked to ensure was there with his key staff. If you were in that comfort zone you had a big advantage. I think he valued loyalty more than anything. I know a number of us joked, even Marlin joked, that he should have just fired us all. Fine, bring in a new team. But there could have been people in the White House who thought I was second rate, and I had opinions about other people who were second rate, but I was loyal to the President and I think that counted for a tremendous amount with him. So if I’m totally objective I would say he over emphasized the loyalty issue at the expense of competence. Not competence—I think all of us were competent. At the expense perhaps of people who were extraordinary, who could have made more of a difference in his campaign.

**Walcott:** Did he have people close to him who could say no to him, could go into the Oval Office and disagree?

**Demarest:** It depends on what issue. My standing rule was that I would disagree with him twice in a particular context. So I would go in—it was usually over a speech of some sort. He’d say, “I don’t like how this is coming across.” I’d say, “Mr. President, I think that it does what you’re trying to—” And he’d say again, or he’d parry with some other argument, and I would argue back. If he asserted himself a third time, that third time was usually over the half glasses and it might come with a, “Which one of the people in this room was elected to be President?” He was fun like that, but there was a seriousness to it as well.

**Riley:** Of course.

**Demarest:** I think some people were less inclined to disagree with him than others. I had a relationship with him where most of the things I was disagreeing with him were over small stuff. They weren’t over who—like if he picked Teeter for campaign manager, he never consulted me. I’m not going to disagree with it after the fact.
I was in the Oval Office once with Brent Scowcroft, and Brent and I—our staffs had had a running argument over a passage in a speech that we wanted in and Brent wanted out, according to his staff. Finally his staff said, “Brent will go to the mat on this.” You know, the old “go to the mat.” I was like, *This is silly.* So I talked to Brent and I said, “How about we let the President decide this one? You can make your case, I’ll make my case, we’ll see.” It was about open skies over the Soviet Union.

So we happened to be in the Oval Office together on some other issue and I took the occasion to say, “Brent,” and he had said earlier, “over my dead body is this going to get in the speech.” I said, “Brent, the speech issue that we’ve got, can we raise it now?” He said, “Yes, sure.” So I show the President. I said, “There’s a disagreement, Mr. President. There’s a passage in your speech that some people think shouldn’t be in the speech, other people think it should be. The speech is now written with it in, so take a look.” He looks at it and he says, “Sounds okay to me, what do you think, Brent?” “Fine by me, Mr. President.” [*laughter*]

*What? Why?* I don’t know if Brent has eleven things on his list that he’s going to have issues with the President about, did he care that much about this one? But it was instructive to me that even Brent, who all he had to say was “No, Mr. President, I don’t think that’s good in the speech,” the President would have said, “Fine, take it out,” because I’m not his foreign policy guy. But in the presence of the President, maybe it was that Brent didn’t want to disagree with me standing there. I don’t know, but it was instructive.

I think Andy Card was somebody the President knew he would get the real scoop from. The State of the Union address in ’92 in which they brought Peggy Noonan in over my objections. Teeter and Darman were working with Tony Snow—isn’t this interesting, they’re all dead now…sad. Tony Snow was the director of speechwriting at that time. Tony Snow had been forced on me—he was a must-hire from Sununu. Sununu wanted Chriss Winston out. For no good reason, in my view. But Andy communicated to me that that was impossible to undo. So Sununu and I had a conversation where Sununu said that he has heard about this guy Tony Snow and he thinks that he would be a good head of speechwriting.

I said, “Has he already been offered the job?” The answer is yes. I said, “Okay, Governor, I’m sure he’ll be great.” Almost sarcastically, I said, “I’m sure he’ll be just terrific. Let me ask you something. Has he ever written a speech?” He was an editorial writer at the *Washington Times.* Sununu said, “Um, I didn’t ask him.” Great. I liked Tony and he was a good guy, but he wasn’t a good speechwriter. That wasn’t Tony’s strength. Tony was an editorial writer.

So Tony wasn’t writing speeches, he was the director of speechwriting. When the State of the Union came around for ’92, Tony assigned it to himself to write. He was then tasked to work with Darman and Teeter to get it right. They theoretically worked with him and it just wasn’t coming together. Finally Tony kept coming to me and saying, “They’re not giving me anything. I have nothing to work with, nothing.” He was really frustrated. I said, “I don’t know what to say.” I mean, these are the policy guys. Darman has been puffing up the speech like it was going to be a big speech, which was driving me crazy, because the expectations were getting higher and higher and everybody is saying, “Wait until January when the State of the Union comes along.” So Skinner calls me in the week before the speech and says, “The President thinks maybe he
needs to bring in Peggy Noonan.” I said, “Ugh, that won’t be good. Then it will become Peggy Noonan’s speech as opposed to the President’s speech.” She’s got such a public persona.

Riley: Sure.

Demarest: I was then instructed to send the draft to her of the current speech, and 20-40 hours later I get back a draft that was actually pretty good. I called in Tony. It was like a Saturday. I said, “Tony, I don’t know what’s going on here, but we’re going to have to go with Peggy.” It was devastating to Tony. I wasn’t too happy about it either.

I had more than a suspicion that there had been work going on with Peggy prior to that, because I found a draft that had a line in the speech that was an early draft that hadn’t been sent to her that was in the draft that she turned around back to me. I don’t know, maybe somebody sent her another draft too—I don’t know what happened, but I felt like this had been badly handled and if they didn’t want Tony working the speech, why doesn’t he just say, “It’s not working, we’ve got to get somebody else and it’s going to be Peggy.” So I was really angry about the whole thing. The State of the Union occurs—

Riley: In ’92.

Demarest: Yes, ’92. I’m watching it on TV. I refused to go. It was my statement of protest. I did not go to the Congress to watch it in person. I watched it in my office, just fuming about the whole thing. I saw the coverage afterwards. Tom Brokaw says, “Okay, we’re going to go to Andrea Mitchell for her take on the speech. Andrea, what’s the word on Capitol Hill?” Andrea says, “Well, Tom, Peggy Noonan has done it again.” [laughter] It was like, I rest my case. The speech had no staying power, it wasn’t that great a speech. It had some light moments in it and she had a couple of clever turns of phrase—but there was no there there. No shelf life.

Walcott: As I recall it was touted as the answer to what’s the theme of the campaign, what’s the Bush domestic policy, and it didn’t have that.

Demarest: Totally fell flat. So the President did hear about me being upset. Following that I’m over in the East Wing seeing somebody in somebody’s office. My secretary tracks me down and says, “The President is looking for you.” I said okay. She just patches him right through to me in this other person’s office. “Yes, Sir?” “Dave, I understand there are some hurt feelings about this speech.” I said, “Yes, there are.” “Can you elaborate?” I said, “Mr. President, I don’t want to get into a lot of the detail, but I will do whatever it takes to provide you with the best possible speech I can do.” He said, “I know, you’ve been doing that for me for three years.” I said, “That’s right. But there are people who are close to you who have behaved dishonorably and have lied to me. I don’t have to take that.”

That was the most personal conversation I had with him and he was great. He was very concerned about that. The machinations of the White House often are so detached from the guy in the Oval Office. There were a lot of spectacular things that happened in that White House, but there are some ugly things that happened too. He knew that for me to say that to him that was not in character for me, and it really touched him that I had been hurt and that Tony had been hurt and so forth.
Tony after that was moved out of the speechwriting role later in the year. Then you were asking about friction earlier between Marlin and me? Well, Marlin was made kind of the communication czar, so he would chair these communications meetings in his office. I was part of that. The LA [Los Angeles] riots took place. I got called into the Oval Office I think on the second or third day of the riots, and when I came in that morning Skinner told me the President wanted to see me because he wanted to go on TV that night.

You asked about whether I actually wrote or just edited. The President said he wanted to go on TV that night. I listened to him and I heard what he wanted to say, and I decided I’d write this because it was going to be delivered that very night. I knew it was going to be controversial and I felt that to assign it to a writer was just going to be more complicated. It was going to add another person to the mix, and the writer is not going to be able to push back on Jack Kemp or the Attorney General or whomever. So I wrote it. I wrote what the President wanted me to write, a pretty tough speech.

I sent it into circulation and Tony Snow had come to me and said, “I wrote a draft because I think this is what the President ought to say,” and he shared his draft with me—I’m like crashing on this speech. “Thanks, Tony. If I find time I’ll take a look at it.” What Tony didn’t tell me was that he also shared that draft with some other people. So in Marlin’s communications meeting they discussed it. Now I’m not in the meeting because I’m working on the speech. Marlin called me about 3 o’clock in the afternoon and said, “Dave, we’re not going to use your speech.” I said, “What? What are you talking about?” “We like Tony’s speech.” I said, “Well, who’s ‘we’?” “The communications group down here.” I said, “Does ‘we’ include the President?” I’m really steamed. He said no.

I made a beeline for Skinner’s office and said, “This is outrageous and a mistake. This is not what the President wants to do.” So Darman got involved, Quayle got involved through Bill Kristol, his Chief of Staff. We had dueling speech drafts for one of the only times in the Bush White House. Skinner said, “Can you tone yours down just a little bit?” Criminy. “Yes, I can do that.”

I run up to my office and I transpose a couple of paragraphs to soften it up a little bit, but I was the one who met with the President. I knew what he wanted to say. I run back downstairs, I get my draft to Skinner, and Skinner walks in with two drafts to the President. I’m like, No, no, no, that can’t be happening. Your job is to take care of it, don’t lay this on the President. The President’s aide told me that Skinner came in and the President was like, “What are you doing? I’ve already talked to Dave. I’m sure he’s got what I need to say.” That was the end of it.

But we lost a lot of time and hadn’t even circulated it to the Cabinet yet. I circulated it about 4:30, 5 o’clock to the Cabinet. Now I’m on the phone with these Cabinet members with Jack Kemp saying—another one who has passed away, so you have no contemporaneous witnesses to this to challenge anything I say. But Jack Kemp felt like the President had to say “land of Lincoln” in every speech that the President had that had to do with race relations. He gave me a lecture about—and I said, “Mr. Secretary, I can’t put that, it’s just not going in.” The Attorney General wanted some stuff in, so this is this running battle.
Meanwhile the President is kind of twiddling his thumbs waiting for his speech, and at 6 o’clock I go down finally with what I think is the final draft. The President is in his study and he has typed four pages on his own. He says, “I’ve been giving some thought to this too,” and he hands me four pages of text. It was a very odd, funny moment, because I was so exasperated from this whole awful day that I really didn’t feel like I had to be patient with him, and I said, “Give me those. You wrote all this?” He said, “I didn’t have a lot to do.” I said, “Okay, we don’t have a lot of time. I’m going to go up to my office and I’ll take what I can of yours.” Can you believe it? Saying that to the President?

I ran up to my office and I looked through his stuff and some of it tracked what I already had in there, but I made sure that some of his actual words were in there. I came back down and I gave him the final draft. Now we’re up to 7 o’clock and it’s time to rehearse. We do a rehearsal in the Oval Office. I’m thinking, *Okay, I think we’re home free on this.* The speech is going to be at 8 o’clock on prime time, from the Oval. About 7:20 he gets a call. His aide comes in and says Mayor [Thomas] Bradley of LA and Governor [Pete] Wilson are on the phone for you.”

*Oh crap, this is not going to be helpful.* Now I’m totally just focused on *I want this speech done. I do not want any more stuff.* So he starts talking and I’m drumming fingers, because we’ve got to get through this rehearsal. And he says, “Uh-huh, uh-huh.” He puts his hand over the phone and he goes, “Dave, some place called Koreatown got hit real bad. Put something in about Koreatown.”

I have no idea what Koreatown is, but it’s the Korean section of LA. So I step out and kind of compose myself. Okay, I write, “And our hearts go out to the people of an area of Los Angeles called Koreatown, which had many shop owners—” I create some two sentences. By then he’s off the phone. He finishes the rehearsal. We go into the Cabinet room. There are four of us in there. It’s me and Scowcroft and Skinner and the President, five of us, counting the makeup lady. She’s got a smock on the President and he’s getting powdered and stuff. It’s about twenty to eight, a quarter to eight. His eyes are closed and he says, “Dave, the Governor asked me if I would federalize the National Guard and I told him I would. Does that need to be in the speech?”

*laughter*

I almost laugh—the whole speech is hortatory except for one news item, which is, “I’m federalizing the National Guard.” So I said, “Mr. President, I think that’s kind of the news of the speech.” He turns to Brent and he says, “Brent, I’m not sure how the mechanics of this works. How do I federalize the National Guard?” Brent says, “I’m not sure I know either, Mr. President. I probably need to call Colin [Powell].” I can’t believe this. So he gets Colin Powell on the phone and he’s going “Uh-huh, uh-huh, okay.” Colin says, “All you’ve got to do is say it.”

Skinner then says, “Okay, okay,” and all of a sudden Skinner is going to be the speech writer and he starts talking about, “All right, here, do it this way. Tonight—” This goes on for about 30 seconds, and I said, “Wait a minute. It’s seven minutes to eight. How about I just go into the hall? I’ll write a sentence, I’ll bring it back in. You guys can all clear it and then I’ll load it onto the teleprompter. Will that work for everybody?”

*Okay.*

I go out in the hall. I write the one sentence, bring it back in, clear it, run into the Oval Office, load it onto the teleprompter. We had to scroll back to the beginning on the teleprompter without
going through it again, which is always nerve-wracking, but it came out okay. The President just waltzed in like nothing had happened. I mean, I’d had the worst stressed day of my tenure in the White House and the speech went fine. It was the only time that after the speech there was a long Wall Street Journal story about what happened with this speech and how ironic it was that Tony Snow, the conservative, was arguing for a race relations speech and Mr. Milquetoast (me) was Mr. Law and Order on this particular speech, because I was known as a moderate in the White House. So that’s just a little window into how well oiled a machine speechwriting can be in the White House.

Riley: You’re still answering the question I posed about Presidents getting the staffs they deserve. In some respect what you’re suggesting is not so much; this is a President who was ill-served by his staff.

Demarest: I think there were times when he was wonderfully served. But I think that the way the President organizes the White House staff is messy.

Riley: Always, or only in this case?

Demarest: That’s a great question. If I look back I think it was more the rule than the exception.

Riley: Okay, messy rather than not, you’ve got a Chief of Staff—

Demarest: A strong Chief of Staff I think harmonizes how everybody works. We were a much more, I think, disciplined staff under Sununu than we were under Skinner, because the authority figure wasn’t there nearly as much. People were waiting for the shoe to drop on Skinner; it was just a matter of time. It was not any different than the latter days of Sununu when you get consumed in what is going to happen.

On the trip when Sununu got fired, all of us were on pins and needles, because we knew it was imminent, we just didn’t know when. When there is blood in the water everybody scoots to their own safe place. You try to get down lower in your foxhole because artillery shells are going to be landing everywhere, you know there’s going to be carnage, and who knows how it’s going to turn out? I think that for some people, once they get to the White House there is a certain, whether you want to call it entitlement or—they think it will never end. Even though all I had known was either politics or government, I never thought of myself as having a career in government. I was pretty certain that my time was going to end and I was going to go happily and do something else. But it was interesting to see how some people, even when they were being demoted and pushed around, it felt like they were clinging—thinking they just really need to stay in their White House office no matter how much it starts to look like a broom closet. It’s a funny place like that.

Riley: So messiness is the rule rather than the exception.

Demarest: I think so.

Walcott: Can I go back to speechwriting for just a minute? Two things. First, the—
Demarest: The worst process in the world.

Riley: We’ve got about half an hour, you okay to continue?

Demarest: Yes.

Walcott: The story you just told, but some of the other materials and some of the other things you said as well, make it sound as though even compared to other Presidents, President Bush was relatively passive when it came to the speech process. You hear of others who will do some of their own writing, who will aggressively edit the text.

Demarest: I think that’s accurate.

Walcott: Bush pretty much took what came to him. That came out of a process that seems to, over the last few administrations, have taken on a life of its own, the staffing process in which a dozen or more people are contributing in one way or another, sometimes more than once to each draft before it becomes finalized. Is that process fatal to big ideas? Is that process one out of which the kind of thing that President Bush thought he needed could not emerge?

Demarest: I think it’s a great question and I think it is one of the dilemmas that face every White House and every speechwriting operation. On the one hand you want power and gravitas and news and you want a speech to convey a crisp, clear set of messages and actions. Every communication should provide information, preferably new information. It should make an argument and it should motivate. So they ought to have all those ingredients. The better the writing, the more clear you are about the ideas and the speech, and the more clear those ideas are, the more compelling the speech will be. What does the process do?

The process dummies it down. The process forces compromises that are political compromises by virtue of rarely did we figure out what we wanted to say, have it in the can, and then look for a place to say it. Often we found the place to say something and then that started this process of putting together what he’s going to say when he gets there. All the battles take place throughout that process. The only thing for sure is he’s going to say something at some point. You can’t alter that. So you start bumping up against these deadlines and you don’t have enough time in the day to negotiate a solution that is still going to maintain the oomph of the speech. Instead it becomes a compromise, which then moves the speech down in terms of impact, because you’re trying to say kind of all things to all people.

So the process was a never-ending battle that almost all speeches started with a better edge and ended with something considerably less. I think that all Presidents are a victim of that. Now the flip side is that that also disciplines the system so that you don’t have dumb ideas that somehow get articulated by the President, because whatever the President says is policy. I think in one of those it talks about Sununu dropping in the line about credit card legislation. The market tanked that day. That was a big, bad no-no. There was another example of me inserting something in a speech and not fact-checking it and Sununu giving me holy hell for it but knowing that I didn’t do it on purpose. The process does keep mistakes from happening.

It’s such a competition between not making mistakes and having a forceful presentation. Did you ever see the op-ed I wrote in the *Washington Post* after the last week of the White House?
Riley: I don’t know if that was in the book or not.

Demarest: There was an op-ed. I wrote it. We were totally two weeks from leaving. It was either in late December of ’92, early January of ’93, and a Washington Post reporter had written a piece in the style section. That’s probably one of the reasons you wouldn’t have found it; it was in the style section. It was titled the “Last Days of the Lame Ducks.” Part of it was kind of tongue-in-cheek, but then part of it was a real slam on the people who worked in the White House en masse. It had a line about how now that they’re lame ducks they have no more power. So the line was, “Now that they have no more power, they’re less interesting than the stone or the wood or the glass.”

I thought, These people who have worked here have bled for this President and this country—so I wrote an op-ed that basically said you totally missed the boat. It’s not about power, it’s about perspective. So the op-ed was to talk a little bit about what it was like to work in the White House. Surprise to me, they published it. They retitled it saying there wasn’t time for arrogance, which was a kind of a stupid title, but be that as it may. One of the things I said in there, in addition to the many wonderful turns of phrases in that op-ed, was that too often success was measured by the absence of failure, that by not failing you succeeded. Too many people in the White House operated in ways that ensured that they didn’t fail, but they didn’t operate in ways to ensure success.

Riley: You indicated that it’s easier to write a safe speech. So you get safe speeches rather then cutting-edge speeches. I was reflecting back on it. You don’t like comparisons with Reagan, but in this case it may be useful. Two instances where there were—the hard edge or the cutting edge with Reagan was still there. One was the evil empire and the other was the “Mr. [Mikhail] Gorbachev, tear down this wall.” On public testimony we’ve heard that there was a lot of push back. The bureaucracy did exactly as you suggested.

Demarest: Right.

Riley: Ultimately the President himself prevails in sustaining the language or reviving the language at a crucial moment. Do you recall any instances in President Bush’s Presidency where there was a significant Presidential intervention that maybe did help maintain the punch, or where he reserved the right to say, “By golly, this is my speech, I’m going to say it this way because these were my words”?

Demarest: Well, you know that the only speech that he drafted from start to finish was the announcement of the Gulf hostilities. I think he did that not to put a hard edge on the speech, I think he did that because he felt putting those guys in harm’s way he needed to really own that.

Riley: Interesting. Can you tell us anything about the process of that?

Demarest: Yes, I hated it, I was mad at him. [laughter] Because we all knew the time was going to come when we were going to have a war. We didn’t know when, and he decided that he was going to write the speech. He didn’t tell me; I think Andy told me. I sort of said okay. I mean, what am I going to say? I get it. But then he asked Dan McGroarty. I don’t know how he ended up asking him, but somehow Dan McGroarty was told, “Come to the Oval, because the President wants you to help on his speech.”
Actually what Dan was asked to do was sit outside the Oval Office. Periodically during the day the President would have him fact check something. So the President was still writing the speech, but Dan was the guy, and I was thinking, I ought to be sitting there; what’s Dan doing there? I was just sort of pissed. Then I told the story—I think it might have even been in one of these documents that at the end of the day he called me down. He was in his study and he said, “What do you think of this?” He showed me a section of it.

I said, “Well, I think I’d rewrite that like that—” It was trivial. I was thinking, This is trivial, what’s he calling me in here for? Right then David Valdez, the photographer, came in, took a picture of me with the President. I thought, Aren’t you just a sneaky son of a bitch? Isn’t it just like you to say, I’ve been working with you these last two years, and this is how you just made me part of the day. So I thought, All right, good, okay, it’s all right that you wrote it yourself.

But when you talk about things like Reagan’s Gorbachev line—that so didn’t fit him.

Riley: Of course.

Demarest: The rhetoric that we used with Saddam Hussein was pretty hard, but it just comported with everything. It wasn’t that there was a bureaucracy saying no, don’t do that. I think he looked at it more as going back to my actions speak to this. When he went to Hirohito’s funeral, that was somewhat of an eyebrow-raiser to a lot of veterans. Although it was so early in the Presidency and it was a whirlwind trip—we also went to Korea and China—it was the only time he was able to go to China before Tiananmen Square happened. But later we did the fiftieth anniversary at Pearl Harbor, and we actually talked more about why the President was able to look to the future with Japan, because he knew if anybody was going to bury the hatchet, he had the credibility to do it.

That so very much came from him, that whole notion. I don’t know that there was anybody pushing back who said that wasn’t a good thing. I can’t recall an equivalency to the Gorbachev line or the evil empire line. When you think about Reagan’s most notable speeches that people remember, at least two of them don’t have a hard edge. I mean the Challenger speech is just a beautiful speech. The Pointe du Hoc speech is a lovely piece of oratory. But they don’t have any edge to them.

Walcott: There wouldn’t be any bureaucrats pushing back.

Demarest: Right.

Riley: You had indicated in some of your previous presentations that it was a mistake equating speechwriting with communications in the Bush Presidency, and I ought to get you to reflect just a moment on that, that there are other ways to communicate Presidential messages rather than just speeches.

Demarest: And I think that has been borne out a hundred times in Presidencies. When Bill Clinton said, “I did not have sex with that woman,” that wasn’t part of his speech. [Barack] Obama, when he talked about the cop at Harvard, that was an extemporaneous—he violated every rule of public relations by saying, “I don’t really know all the facts of this, but let me give you an opinion.”
**Walcott:** Just like real people do.

**Demarest:** Yes, exactly. So I think the way the public and the electorate assess a President is more like a mosaic that combines lots of different inputs, some of which in any Presidency are the way the President comports himself through a formal speech, some of which is through the interaction with reporters, some of which is how the White House behaves.

When Bush digressed into talking about broccoli, that just caught us all by surprise, and it was a very funny moment in the Bush Presidency, but it showed a very different dimension to him than we were able to show through normal speeches—George W. Bush had I think in eight years eight state dinners; we had 32 in four years. Those things send all sorts of signals to all sorts of constituencies—there might not be a news story on that, but the fact that George Herbert Walker Bush was traveling internationally as much as he did, often was hosting a state dinner, displayed an internationalist perspective, competence, comfort level that his son was never able to approximate. So in a sense, none of that was necessarily through a speech; it was through how he spent his time.

**Walcott:** Spending time with reporters, which I noted was described in the briefing book at some point as a throwback to the old days when Presidents schmoozed with the press. Did you have any way, or even looking back now, to assess the effectiveness of that? I know there was at least the comment that he thought that there would be reciprocity, that if he was kind to them they would be kind to him, and it didn’t turn out that way. In retrospect was that a successful strategy?

**Demarest:** I think that my own view of press relations is that in the context of the White House the more you are the source, the less someone else tells your story. Now, when the White House reporters get access, they at least have heard your story, and if you’re using the President to tell it, that’s a pretty compelling and definitive source. It doesn’t mean they’re going to be nice to you; it just means that you’ve given it your best shot.

When I look at the statement that I made in that manipulate-us article which David Ignatius kind of paraphrased that said what a quaint notion that if you’re fair to them they’ll be fair to you. Yes, sure. I think he called it a dubious proposition. That doesn’t mean it’s a bad strategy, it just says that you have to recognize that reporters aren’t bound by—

**Riley:** Convention?

**Demarest:** Well, there’s nothing to say that they’ve got to agree with you. I get in arguments right up until now about where the President, whether it’s of a university or CEO, if they have an interview with a reporter and the reporter writes something that is contrary to what they said, they think they’re the only one who has talked to the reporter. How dare—what do you mean? I mean, you’re like one of 20 people that they talked to and they’re going to not buy your line just like they’re not going to buy this guy’s line. So that’s grown-up public relations.

When you’re in the eye of the hurricane, you tend to think that if I’m nice to them, they should be nice to me. All I wanted was what’s the best strategy for assuring that we optimize what I think are the President’s strengths. He’s on top of his game, he knows the policies, he’s able to go toe-to-toe with reporters and not have a bunch of minions telling the reporters this is what the President meant to say. I thought that was a strength of his and we ought to use it. I think when
the reporters talk about Bush even today they pretty much all liked him, but there was in fact a sentiment for change that infected all of them.

Riley: One of the things that we haven’t talked about, and we can’t get too far down this road, is that there were some changes in the media environment that you had to accommodate as you’re coming on. The Internet is not coming up by that time, but I guess talk radio is beginning to be a phenomenon.

Demarest: I think the biggest change—talk radio was starting towards the end of his administration. CNN was 12 years old and so you were dealing with four networks instead of three; but you were dealing with a 24/7 network, which nobody had really dealt with. Yes, it was during Reagan, but when CNN covered the Gulf War, that sort of brought live TV into people’s homes in a different context than they had experienced before.

I think one of the things that did change, though, was the willingness of the Presidency to engage in nontraditional news media broadcasts. I mean Clinton going on Arsenio [Hall], those late-night talk shows that Bush thought were beneath the dignity of the office. Now that’s just exploded. The President will do just about any show in the world, because there’s no longer the dominance of the major networks.

I talk to my students and none of them, zero, watch TV news. Almost none of them read a physical newspaper. Everything is online now. So I think the way media started to change started with CNN and then into—you don’t even have to get into the business model of the media, which is totally broken, the old media, that a lot of those things started but hadn’t really become issues for us except the sort of nontraditional talk shows that we otherwise wouldn’t have participated in, but now since Clinton was doing it we were thinking about doing it. Ultimately we did very little of it.

Walcott: Did you have surrogates doing it? I understand Bush didn’t want to do it.

Demarest: On some of those major programs, I don’t think they would have wanted the surrogates. So I don’t recall—and certainly Quayle wasn’t going to go on them. That was not going to be part of the deal. As an aside, when I first got to the White House the Vice President’s office sent over a Vice President’s speech for me to clear. I looked at it and I thought for a minute and I said, “Oh, no, no.” I sent it back and said, “It is your job to comport with what the President says. It is not my job to look through every one of your speeches. So you just follow what the President does and you’ll be fine.”

I could see the Vice President going out and speaking, me being on some trip. They would have sent the speech to my office. The Vice President would have gotten into trouble for something that he said and it would have been, “Oh, the communications office had the speech.” It was one of the smarter decisions I made.

Walcott: Was there ever any thought given to using Quayle as some kind of [Spiro] Agnew?

Demarest: I think he was used that way.

Walcott: Were you involved in those kinds of things?
Demarest: No, I wasn’t involved in the ’92 campaign at all.

Walcott: I mean during the course of the four years was Quayle sent out to say things that Bush wasn’t willing to say but that needed to be said?

Riley: He got in trouble with the Murphy Brown—

Demarest: —the Murphy Brown speech, but that was one that none of us knew was coming. A lot of people look back at that and say actually it was a pretty good speech, it was a terrible messenger. That was the problem with that. But no, I didn’t have any conversation that I could remember about let’s have Quayle do this. In part because we saw Quayle as somebody who might help with the base, but you didn’t want to draw more attention to him than necessary. He had been so depositioned by the press.

Remember the story I told you about the first White House press conference and we had all the people in the room with the President? It was kind of embarrassing. Quayle was one of those people. Subsequently, maybe six months later, I was talking to a group of high schoolers, like 500 kids at some event. I was the White House person who came over to say hello to them. So I told them the story about this press conference preparation. I said, “Now let me tell you who was in the room. Governor Sununu, who is the Chief of Staff, Brent Scowcroft, the National Security Adviser, Vice President Quayle—” They all laughed. As soon as I said his name they all laughed.

Right then I thought, *Ah man, this guy is in terrible straits*, because that’s a product of dinner table conversations. It’s not necessarily their own opinion, this is what they’ve heard. It is not necessarily what they’ve come to their own conclusions about. It was really telling. In Cabinet meetings he was perfectly credible; he was perfectly articulate. He just really got creamed and was never able to crawl out from under that.

Riley: Just a couple more questions. The President was diagnosed with Graves’ disease during the course of his Presidency and there were some people who suggested that maybe that had an effect on his performance in office. Did you notice anything?

Demarest: No. Part of my barometer was are we slowing down traveling? That never seemed to happen. I’ve gone jogging with him. I never felt like he was slowing down. There was also the argument of “Does he really want it?”

Riley: Yes.

Demarest: I never felt that he was just going through the motions on that; he didn’t really want to be running again. I think he very much wanted to be President again. That’s where I think he was ill served, and he bears some of the responsibility for that. He did not put together the right kind of team, either at the White House or in the campaign, and they weren’t able to construct the right kind of campaign structure or message or whatever.

So it may have looked to the outside world—I mean looking at the watch during the debate. That was characterized as he wanted to be anywhere but there, like he had a train to catch or something. I think he was just looking to see what time it was and how much time there was left
in the debate. Not an unreasonable thing to do. But once again you go back to the narrative, once the narrative starts, and you do something that might fit with the narrative. Boy, there you go.

In my debate class we talked about that particular moment. We talked about when Clinton was asked about the national debt by an African American woman. She said, “How has the national debt affected you personally?” What she meant to say was, “How bad is the economy?” Bush struggled with trying to figure out—and he was so much of a literalist, he kept trying to figure out what it was she was getting at, and then he didn’t give a very good answer. Then Clinton walks right up to her and he talks about all the people that he knows personally in Arkansas who lost their jobs and their factories and he’s talking to her like she’s the only person in the universe. It was just such a contrast. It was great. He was incredibly compelling.

Clinton also had gone to that site before, and he had talked to his media people. He knew where the camera shoots were and he knew when they’d be doing an over-the-shoulder cut. He was into that sort of stuff. Bush hated that. He no more would have done that than fly to the moon. I think we were sort of worn out by the end of it. When Baker finally got there, in August, we got hit with hurricane Andrew, then September came around and we did start to gain a little bit of traction. You had Margaret [Tutwiler] doing the press stuff and [Robert] Zoellick doing the policy stuff, and you had Baker in there every day.

Baker called me, because I didn’t know what he was going to do with me. His team was invisible for the first week. Everybody in the White House was incredibly nervous because Margaret and Zoellick and Dennis Ross, they were huddled in Baker’s office the whole time. They didn’t see anybody. I knew all of them, but I didn’t know what was going to happen. Everyone thought they might lose their job.

My secretary came in and she said [whispering], “Mr. Baker is on the phone for you.” She was nervous. So I picked up the phone and I said, “Mr. Secretary, how are you?” He said, “David, I’ve got to tell you, of everybody in this White House, you’ve probably been treated more like shit than anybody else.”

**Riley:** That’s a good opening.

**Demarest:** So I said, “I guess, thank you, sir.” He said, “So here’s the deal. I’ve always thought you are a broad-gauge guy. I’ve got to find a place for Henson Moore, and you have both intergovernmental affairs and public liaison. What do you say we give Henson Moore intergovernmental affairs and you continue doing public liaison?” I said, “That sounds fine with me.” He said, “We got a deal, okay.”

That was it. That meant I was going to stick around for the rest of the time, but it didn’t mean that I had anything to do with the campaign. Pretty much everything was migrating to the campaign. I did a little bit of talk radio in the last weekend, that’s when they dropped the—what was the special prosecutor, [E. Lawrence] Walsh came out with “new information,” which was bogus. I was scheduled to do talk radio over the weekend. We had started to feel some momentum. The shows I was supposed to do were all about the economy, so I was totally prepped for all that. Every show, it was all about Iran Contra.
I remember getting off the phone and saying to my wife, “We lost, it’s over.” Whatever momentum we had, if this is any example of what is happening everywhere else, the story of the last weekend is Iran Contra and yes, we lost.

**Riley:** Did you do transition out? Did you help with the transition?

**Demarest:** Yes. I met with Tom Donilon, who went over to State, I think, and I met with Jeff [Eller], their media guy. [George] Stephanopoulos met with Marlin. I can’t remember—Jeff Eller came in to see me. It was an interesting meeting. These were guys—they knew everything. They really didn’t need anybody’s help. The conversation I had with Jeff Eller was amusing. He asked how the place was structured. I said, “Well, it has changed over the years, I used to do this and now I do this.” It was perfectly pleasant.

He finally said, “Let me ask you something. Sometimes Bill—” I said, “Who?” He said, “Bill.” I said, “You mean the President-elect?” “Yes, the President-elect.” I was just tweaking him. He said, “Sometimes he just likes to come by your office and he’ll just put his feet up and just kind of shoot the shit. Do you think that will continue?” I said, “I hope not, because if this President came into my office, put his feet up, and just wanted to shoot the shit I think after about 30 seconds I’d say, ‘Don’t you have something more important to do?’” It was kind of a funny exchange. I said, “You know how many times the President has been in this office? Once, and that was on the first day of the administration. He came around to see where everybody was and we went to him from then on. That’s most likely how it is going to be with you.” I think it probably was.

**Walcott:** After a while.

**Demarest:** Yes.

**Riley:** One final question.

**Demarest:** I always told the President not to take the last question.

**Riley:** I’m sorry—?

**Demarest:** I always told the President never to take the last question.

**Riley:** Why is that?

**Demarest:** Because it’s always the zinger.

**Riley:** No, this is actually a softball, I hope, but one that I hope will be useful. If you could pick out three or four speeches from the President’s time that students of history ought to examine—

**Demarest:** Good question.

**Riley:** What are those speeches and why would you select the ones that you choose?
Demarest: We did a speech on the south lawn on June 12, it happened to be his birthday. This was a speech that was a collaboration of me and Gregg Petersmeyer and a couple of other people who basically said we need something—we’re not going to tell the President this, but this is like a vision speech. So we constructed the speech about what are the things that are the key forces at work—

Riley: What year was this?

Demarest: I’m trying to think. It was ’91 or ’92.

Riley: Okay, we can check it. It’s that late—

Demarest: It’s ’91, because Andy Card was still there.

Riley: Okay.

Demarest: But it was at a time when I and some others were saying we have to have more of a domestic policy. What you have in here is the memo that I sent to him about one hand clapping.

Riley: In the briefing book.

Demarest: Yes. We constructed an audience that was from every walk of life. We wanted the audience to be kind of a reflection of America and we wanted the speech to talk about what really drove America to be the kind of place that it is. We looked at it as sort of a framework speech. If we were able to establish that, then we could follow the trains of thought on the different threads after that. There wasn’t news from the speech per se, and we were very reluctant to say this is the President’s vision speech. So it sort of fell flat. That’s why I wrote the note to him about the—it was sort of a funny note.

It was funny, Fred McClure sent a note to the President following the speech and he said he had some reaction from the Hill, and in particular Newt [Newton] Gingrich said that it was the best speech that he ever heard Bush give. He said it was the only speech that was strategic. For whatever you want to say about Newt, Newt understood strategy. So that was one that I thought was an attempt to try to galvanize what had become an administration that was only about foreign policy in the eyes of the public.

There were three speeches at the 50th anniversary of Pearl Harbor. One was at the cemetery, one was at the Arizona, and one was at the Navy pier. They really should be taken as a trilogy because they kind of look back. Then the Arizona is very kind of emotional. That was one where my speechwriter had really done a wonderful job of language and it was the researcher who did it. On the plane there I asked Brent Scowcroft to read it and back me up with the President that the President is going to want to take this good stuff out. I don’t know if you remember the Bobby Kennedy speech when he heard of Martin Luther King’s death in Indianapolis?

Riley: Sure.

Demarest: That was totally extemporaneous, which is what makes it so amazing. I use it in my speechwriting class. He uses speechwriting devices, but he used them in an extemporaneous
speech, meaning he didn’t have some speechwriter preparing him for it, and how amazing is that? One of the things he used, which I only realized much, much later, was this quote from Aeschylus about drop by drop tears fall upon the heart. I don’t know if my speechwriter knew that it was in Bobby Kennedy’s speech, but she quoted the same thing and used it at the Arizona because of the drop of oil that comes to the surface every sixty seconds. So it had a wonderful metaphorical quality to it and I was afraid that the President wasn’t going to be able to get through it.

I told Brent, “Listen, I know he’s going to balk at this, but this is really good.” So the President is reading the speeches on Air Force One and I said, “Now, Mr. President, I know there’s some language in here that may be a little much for you, but I think it’s really good and I hope that you retain it.” I looked at Brent. Brent said, “Yes, I’ve read it too and it’s really good.” So the President kept it in. Then the third speech was looking forward. I think that’s kind of a nice set.

I think Mainz was a defining moment for him, because that started the whole conversation of a Europe whole and free. We used that formulation in the June 12 speech domestically that communities need to be whole and free, so there was some parallelism there, that we had this foreign policy, a set of achievements. Based on these principles, we need to make sure our communities in this country have that same feel to them, completeness.

**Riley:** That gives us a good rounding off to our discussion.

**Demarest:** That comment I made about the last question, I used to tell him, “Don’t take the last question in a press conference,” and it was sort of a silly thing to say because how do you know when it’s the last question? But invariably the last question was always some weird question that came from some weird reporter. [laughter] So I would tell him that before we’d have an event. He’d say, “Now you know, I’ve got to be out by such and such.” I’d say, “Okay, I will tell you when questions are done. There will still be hands up, but you’ve got to—” Invariably I’d say, “Mr. President, I think you’re about out of time,” so I don’t say time for one more question. You’re out of time. Invariably he’d go, “Oh no, I can take one or two more.” So he’s always the good guy; I’m the bad guy. Invariably he’d get some terrible weird question. You asked for it.

**Riley:** Well, I hope—

**Demarest:** This was fun.

**Riley:** You wondered at the beginning how you’d manage to get through it.

**Demarest:** It does kind of fly by, doesn’t it?

**Riley:** There are, I’m sure, things that we didn’t get to, but when these are going as well as they have today they’re a lot of fun for us, but they’re also enormously educational. You’ve done us a great favor by doing this.

**Demarest:** Happy to do it. Fun to get here.

**Riley:** The important thing is not, though, that Chuck and I are here to hear it, but that we’ve got an extremely useful document for others to come to know the Presidency as you experienced it
and don’t have the privilege of sitting in on your classes and getting it over the course of a semester. So we appreciate the distillation, and again thanks very much.

Demarest: It was the experience of a lifetime. I’m often asked if I miss it and I don’t. I don’t think I’d ever do it again, but I think one of the remarkable things about public service, particularly back then, but I think also today, is that it afforded people at a relatively young age to be involved in unbelievable stuff. That’s scary, because I think I could do a much better job now, having experienced much more out in the world, but in a way politics often is kind of a young person’s game.

Walcott: Certainly working in the White House is.

Demarest: Yes, it’s exhausting, and it has that kind of unbridled idealism and enthusiasm and determination, commitment, all the rest. One of the things that I have yet to deal with is in Christmas 1990 I bought myself a video camera, a little handy-cam. I took it on most of the trips. So I have all this video footage of behind the scenes stuff. I decided that this is the year that I’m going to digitize it and figure out what is there. Some of it is boring as boring can be, motorcade after motorcade after motorcade, but other stuff is kind of funny, other stuff is interesting.

Walking around inside the Kremlin filming with the KGB [Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti] guys going, “What are we supposed to do with this guy?” was sort of fun.

Riley: If you ever decide to have a public viewing let us know, we’d love to come see it. I hope you’ll let Roman [Popadiuk] and the folks at the library know that you’ve got this.

Walcott: Put it up on the Miller Center website maybe.

Rana: I was going to make that offer.

Demarest: So yes, this is just one of those things that has been in the back of my mind for a long time. I probably have 20 hours, something like that.

Riley: We could handle that, couldn’t we?

Rana: Sure.

Riley: If you need help let us know. Thank you so much.