



2201 Old Ivy Road
PO Box 400406
Charlottesville VA 22904-4406

434.982.2974 *voice*
434.982.4528 *fax*
millercenter.virginia.edu

RONALD REAGAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

FINAL EDITED TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH JOANNE DRAKE

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Los Angeles, California

Interviewer

Stephen F. Knott

Audiotape: Miller Center
Transcription: Martha W. Healy
Transcript copyedited by: Claiborne Lange, Jane Rafal Wilson
Final edit by: Jane Rafal Wilson
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Knott: Can you tell me when you had your first contact with Ronald Reagan?

Drake: I was a volunteer in the campaign in 1985 at Reagan/[George H. W.] Bush headquarters in Washington, D.C. I had been working for the Republican side of the Interior Committee on Capitol Hill and we went into recess in the fall with the Presidential campaign, so I volunteered my time there. After that I went over to the Inaugural Committee, the second Inaugural, which is the one that was iced out. They basically had no parade that year because it was freezing.

I was lucky enough—I don't know if that's the right term—to be in the meeting where we recommended to the President that the parade be canceled simply because we were going to lose a lot of people and a lot of kids would have their trombones stuck to their lips. The President was very upset about that, not so much because he wanted to be in a parade, but because all these kids, bands, high school kids, had come from all over the country to perform in this parade and it was a big honor for them. He knew that. He had been in a band, I think, when he was younger, and so he asked if we could put something together.

So we did. We went to the large performing arts center—it's changed names now. It used to be called the MCI Center—out in Washington, D.C. At any rate, it was a vastly reduced group of people, but all of the bands and marching groups that came from all over the country went out there. He went out there and spent hours with them so that they could get to see him and he could participate in some sort of an Inaugural event. That was my first introduction to the President. I actually went back to my job on Capitol Hill when it was all over.

Knott: What were you doing on Capitol Hill?

Drake: I worked for the House Interior Committee, what was then the Interior Committee. I think it is the Natural Resources Committee; the name has changed. I went back to my desk and I got a call later that day wanting to know if I was interested in working at the White House and I took about three seconds to reply, "Yes, indeed, I would be very interested." I reported for duty the next day and started my paperwork and was there for the four years after that. I wasn't privy to the President every single day, but I was in the advance office there and doing trips and travel, even events out in the Rose Garden and South Lawn, quite consistently.

Knott: Could you tell us how the post-Presidential, your role—how did that come about?

Drake: Well, when it was time to start figuring out what he was going to do, he really wanted to come back to Los Angeles. He asked Fred Ryan, who was then the Director of Scheduling and Private Sector Initiatives at the White House, to please put a staff together. Fred was originally from California and said he would serve as the Chief of Staff. He put together a group of people, one from each area, a press secretary, and somebody from scheduling, and somebody from advance.

He asked me if I would like to come home to California. This was originally my home—northern California, not southern California—but I was ready and willing to come back to California and very eager to still work for the President. It was quite an honor to be asked. I would be handling events and trips and that sort of thing for him.

There was a staff of about twelve to fourteen people and we had a pretty large group of volunteers. We had a large group of ladies who, for about six to eight months, answered the mail that would come in by the bin-loads over at the Federal Building in West Los Angeles. We were about four miles away in a different building. Then they would bring that mail, opened up every day, over to our office. Actually, for about the first four months, we were still getting mail forwarded to us by the White House. It was coming in large bins. It was all we could do—we were about six months behind for about a year. It took us that long to get the mail physically opened and then processed.

It was a very busy time for the President. While he was retired and wanted to be retired, he wanted to spend time on his ranch, he wanted to get back out spending some time golfing, going out to dinner with his friends. He also came into the office. He came into the office the first day after he came back to California and rolled up his sleeves and was ready to go to work. He knew that he still had a lot of work to do. He wanted to deal with the line-item veto and different budget issues, and he wanted to help President Bush at that point—whatever he could. He had agreed to do campaigns for Republican candidates across the country.

We started in, and he did a number of big speeches up front. He did a lot of universities; that was something that he had done during the White House and really enjoyed. He got a great response. It was a really fun time for us.

He went to Europe in June of that year and was awarded a knighthood by the Queen and spoke in Paris at the Academy of Sciences. He spoke to Parliament. He did a number of big things. At the same time, he was working on building his Presidential library. All the papers had come out from Washington. They had been put in a warehouse that originally had been a spaghetti factory or pasta factory. It was kind of a joke. Everybody said, “the pasta factory,” but there are literally hundreds of thousands of boxes of documents and papers and we were trying to build the library at the same time and put it all together. It was a very busy time. He also was traveling around, come that fall, for candidates who were running in off-season elections.

Knott: Now were you Chief of Staff of his post-Presidential—?

Drake: No, that's how Fred Ryan started out. I was the Director of Advance—basically for events and special projects that we were working on. Fred Ryan left after, oh, it was about 1994, when the President wrote his farewell letter. Fred, at that point, passed the torch to me and we continued. The President continued coming to the office for many years after that. I don't have an exact time. There were weeks where he'd come in every day; there were weeks where he'd come in two days. It finally got to a point where it didn't make sense any more.

He wasn't doing speaking events; he wasn't doing public events. Once he stopped coming to the office on a regular basis he still went out in public quite a bit, just to be out for a lunch or to do things with friends, that sort of thing. Then it got to a point where even that wasn't comfortable anymore. We, I think quite honestly, didn't realize the response that we would still have, even at this juncture. We had been advised that at the ten-year mark in a post-Presidency era, that was about the time that things would really wind down. The mail would really let up. The phone calls would stop.

The ten-year mark is when a lot of papers and documents are opened. You sort of have a flood there, initially, and then it would really back off. We haven't really seen it back off yet, to be honest with you. It's a wonderful tribute to him—the amount of mail that we still get, and the phone calls, and the requests. Most people have figured out that he's not able to do that kind of thing anymore, but the requests for Mrs. [Nancy] Reagan to fill in for him have been quite heavy.

There's been a lot of attention on him in the last five years, despite his illness, because of the papers, because of the number of books that had been written about him, and essentially *by* him, at least a couple of books or papers, letters that he wrote himself, radio broadcasts that he wrote in longhand, all of this written in longhand throughout the years. People are finally seeing, believing, what we've been trying to tell them all these years—that he wasn't just an actor reading a script.

Knott: So this didn't come as a surprise to you when these letters were released.

Drake: It came as no surprise to me. I'd seen this during the White House years. But certainly, post-Presidency, this man would come in and roll up his sleeves, and where was his pile of work to do? He would write things in longhand. These are all original thoughts that he'd had for many years. I think people are finally understanding that he's a prolific writer. He was not someone who used the telephone much. He didn't like the telephone, to the point where he finally asked for it to be removed from his desk. He didn't like it ringing. That was not his thing.

Knott: He preferred to think and write.

Drake: Absolutely. He wrote his own speeches at the White House. I think you'll find many speechwriters who will tell you that they would draft something, as all White House speechwriters do, and he would edit it. It would be edited many times by him, personally. The Berlin Wall speech is quite symbolic of that. He wanted it left in and he was advised, even at the Secretary of State level, to please take it out, that that would not be a good piece of diplomacy to leave it in there. He left it in there.

Eventually his diaries will be released. Although there are many who probably think that there are thousands of pages, there aren't. They are short pieces that he would—hopefully he took the time to do that every day, because he knew it was important. At some point those will be published, so that people will be able to share in those, as well.

Knott: We've had testimony from others who have worked for President Reagan that he was a very gentle and un-demanding—if that's the right word—boss. Is that an accurate—?

Drake: Absolutely. It's an accurate description. You know, he didn't have to be demanding. He had a genteel way about him. He was a kind, very warm, compassionate person and you wanted to do whatever he asked. One of the things that was said to me at the beginning that I will never forget was, "When you work here, especially in this office, when we're out representing him across the country, and around the world, really, when you work on events and you go out and advance them, if you come to a point where you need to make a decision about how to do something, think about how the President would want it. Then it will be easy." He would want you to do the right thing, to include the kids. There were many times when we would go to military things. This comes up, I guess, because President Bush just went to Iraq on a secret mission.

Our President would have loved that. One of the things he always said to us when he would go to a military base was, "That's fine, I'll meet whoever you need me to meet, any officer. But I want to meet the kids that are down low. I want to meet the kids who are doing the work, the soldiers. I want to be where they've been and see what they see. I want to eat with them, sit down at a table with them if we're going to have lunch." I think there are a number of photographs of him at the DMZ [Demilitarized Zone] and he's eating lunch with the soldiers. Those are the kids—he feels like—he came from the Midwest, as American and apple pie as you're going to get—an American President. He knows what it's like to be down on the front lines.

Knott: Sure.

Drake: He's just a very kind person. We used to get into a lot of give-and-take just moving from place to place, because he always would defer to me and the other women in the group to go first into an elevator or through a doorway. But that became very difficult, especially if he was moving out into a public view at that point, because you don't step in front of him to do something. We used to get into that a lot, "No, you go first." "No, *you* go first." He was just a very kind person, someone that—he didn't have to ask twice. If he asked you to do something, you wanted to do it very quickly.

Knott: Do you have a favorite anecdote? I realize it's probably a tough question. Is there maybe a moment that really stands out for you?

Drake: That's tough.

Knott: I know that's tough. If you can't answer that, that's fine.

Drake: That's very tough.

Knott: Were there certain kinds of events that he seemed to enjoy the most?

Drake: He always enjoyed the ones with the military. He has said it a number of times, but his hardest days were the days when he ordered them into some battle of some kind, ordered them to the front lines to do anything. I think he really felt close to them—how difficult their mission was, wherever it was. He always enjoyed talking to young people and at the same time he enjoyed sitting down with [Thomas] Tip O’Neill—two Irish guys enjoying usually a little spar on whatever the issue was, but realizing that life goes on once the politics of the day are over.

A number of people would always wonder what they could do for him for St. Patrick’s Day, and we’d always try to come up with something. We had an Irish guy who worked in our office, Rick Ahearn, who would always try and do something, to come up with something different every year. We had bagpipers at the White House, and one year we actually took him out to a restaurant in Old Town, Alexandria—that Irish restaurant that’s out there—for lunch, not that the Irish are well-known for their food, but they’re well-known for their enjoyment of a good time. He always enjoyed being able to tell the story of the pub that’s named after him in Ireland. People have post offices, and roads, and bridges named after them; not too many people have a pub named after them.

He enjoyed just being with people. He always makes you feel comfortable. So many people would come to our office. This happened in the White House, too, and I know Jim Kuhn could tell you many stories about this. People would be so nervous to get to shake his hand or get to see him. People would come to his office post-Presidency and would just be shaking. There were so many people who were in tears because they couldn’t believe they were going to finally get to meet him.

That was something that he really wanted to do post-Presidency, that is, to see and say hello to as many people as possible, knowing that so many of those people would never have a chance to meet a U.S. President and that it just wasn’t going to be possible for them to come to the White House. We crammed as many appointments in as we could in a day. Those people would come in and he would make them feel like he was their best friend. “How are you? How is everything going? Where are you from?” He always seemed to find something in common with them that they could then talk about. If it didn’t come up immediately, he’d come up with a joke for them. One of his pastimes was telling Soviet jokes that he shared with President [Mikhail] Gorbachev.

Even post-Presidency, they got together, and he finally got to take the Gorbachevs to his beloved ranch in Santa Barbara to show him what he had been talking about for so long. I think the Gorbachevs were, frankly, quite shocked that this ranch, which I’m sure they expected to be the Ponderosa, was this little ranch house essentially on a lot of acres, but a lot of acres that basically were covered with trees. I think he was expecting something different.

Knott: Yes.

Drake: He enjoyed that. There were a lot of groups at the White House. The athletes would come. After one of the Olympics they came and there was a big debate where they wouldn’t be

able to go outside for a picture because it was raining. It was a big joke, but it didn't rain on Ronald Reagan in many places. It would look like it was going to rain, or just about would rain, and then it would stop and he would step outside. We always figured he had a direct connection with the man upstairs because those raindrops would stop. It's true. It happened so many times it sort of became a legend among the staff.

There was one instance in particular that I remember. I was working on an event with the Olympic team. It must have been '86—

Knott: Eighty-four?

Drake: No, it wasn't '84.

Knott: The Winter Olympics?

Drake: At any rate, they were to come, and it was raining the day before and we were supposed to move to a different location and they didn't want to do that, because then we couldn't take the group photograph with him. No, it had to be the Summer Olympics because it was wrestlers. It stopped raining in time. They set up the risers on the south side of the White House, and we had Olympic athletes, I mean, practically hanging off of the terrace and everywhere they could find, and in their red, white, and blue. The President came out and he stepped into the middle of them, about four rows up, making the Secret Service nervous, and we snapped photographs, of course.

A lot of the kids in the picture, you can't see their faces because they're all turned towards him trying to get a glimpse of him. They've never seen a U.S. President before. Some of these kids are, like, twelve years old—these little gymnasts. Well, there was one kid who was about five rows above him who kept trying to tell him something and he couldn't hear. Everybody was shouting at him and it was very loud out there.

He kept trying to hand him the medal. He took it off his neck and kept trying to hand it to him, and at one point the Secret Service said, "Okay, we're done." He was getting kind of jostled. People were trying to shake his hand—that sort of thing. Well, he left and went back to the Oval Office and the kids had already had their tour so they filed out the gate and went to get on their buses. Somebody came running at me and said, "The President wants to see you in the Oval Office and you're to bring the young man who was trying to hand him something." I had seen what was going on. I said, "Okay, when?" And he said, "Right now. The President wants to see you right now with the kid."

I thought, *Well, this doesn't sound good. I've never been directed to go to the Oval Office before. Whatever it is, we're doing it.* So I went out through the East Gate, outside. I don't think they load buses out there anymore, for security reasons. About the third bus down I found this kid and he, of course, was shivering in his shoes at that point when he realized I was asking him to come to the Oval Office with me. He said, "No, that's okay." I said, "I'm not leaving here without you, and I'm not going by myself, so you're coming with me to the Oval Office." I said to the driver, "Can you wait?" He said, "Of course we'll wait." I said, "What is it you were trying to do?" He

said, "I was just trying to give him my medal." This was a big kid but I don't think he was very old.

I said, "Why?" And he said, "I just think he's great and I just wanted him to have a gold medal." I said, "Okay, you need to tell him that." He goes, "Can't you just tell him? Can't you go back over there and just tell him?" I said, "Oh, no, you're coming with me."

So we got there, and we got ushered into the Oval Office immediately. The President said to him, "Son, I couldn't hear you. I know you were trying to talk to me, and I'm so sorry. I know people were getting shoved left and right and I hope my security guys didn't shove you. There were just a whole lot of things going on there." The kid, of course, was shaking in his boots, and he said, "Oh no, Mr. President, nobody shoved me. Security didn't shove me."

He said, "Well, what were you trying to do?" He said, "I just wanted you to have my gold medal." He said, "No, sir. Son, you earned that medal. You keep it; it's yours." He said, "Sir, I've never been to the White House before. I've never met a President, and I just thought you'd like to have my gold medal. That would mean a lot to me." The President said, "It does, but I'm not taking that gold medal." He said, "Would you put it on so we could have a picture?" The President said, "Yes. I'd put it on to have a picture, but you're walking out of here with it."

I was quite touched by the whole scene. The kid probably has the story of his lifetime.

Knott: Absolutely. Yes, that's great.

Drake: It still makes me shiver just to think about standing in the Oval Office. It's very simple what was going on.

Knott: Could I ask you just a bit—Edmund Morris made a big deal about President Reagan being somewhat distant—there was this wall. Could you comment on that?

Drake: I worked with Edmund for a number of years. He traveled with us overseas. That was an unprecedented opportunity for any biographer to do that. I have to say I'm disturbed, at best, that he couldn't put his finger on what controlled the President. I don't find the President complicated, and I certainly don't find him to be distant. I find him to be a very simple guy who grew up in the Midwest, who came from a background that was not unlike many people who live in this country. His dad had trouble; he drank too much. His mom was a devout Christian and raised her son to be good people.

The President learned that you work hard in your life and you can get places. I don't think he set out to be President of the United States. I think he set out to get a job in an era where there weren't a whole lot of jobs, in the Depression. He's a self-made man. He believes everything that he said. That was really the key to Ronald Reagan. He wanted to make the best he could out of what he had and he wanted that for everyone else. He knew America offers anything that you want to anybody in the world. If you come here and you work hard and you're willing to sacrifice at times, then you can get that.

I don't know if Edmund didn't get that because he wasn't born here, and he doesn't understand the red, white, and blue, apple-pie thing, the flag-waving feeling that many Americans felt again after Ronald Reagan became President. There was a real pride in our country. Maybe you don't agree with all of his politics—I've found very few people who do—but he brought a real traditional feeling of patriotism back to this country. To call him "distant" is a real disgrace, because he was not a distant man at all. He was a very thoughtful man. I think his letters prove that.

I find it hard to believe, first of all, that people accuse him of sleeping too often, because he's not a man who used to take a nap, frankly. He was a man who went to bed, you know, "Early to bed, early to rise." He was a man of the land. He'd go to his ranch when he had that opportunity and he worked very hard outside, physically very hard. He knew the value of breaking a sweat, the enjoyment of riding a horse, and being outside in the open air. He was not that hard to understand. He may be complex. There were a lot of things that went on in his life. He was a man of many careers, for one thing. He's the longest living President that we've had and he could—I'm not sure anyone's going to break that, because he's still going strong.

Knott: One last question. Could you just share your reflections and your assessment of Nancy Reagan?

Drake: I think Mrs. Reagan is also misunderstood. I think she is a woman who feels very strongly about her husband, and always has. Their love story is unprecedented, at least in modern times, and certainly in the modern Presidency. She is very protective, as all husbands and wives are of their spouse. I don't find it that unusual that she had her antennae up, sometimes when he didn't. He was a very trusting man. He trusted everyone. Her natural instincts were probably better than his in that regard. She could tell if somebody wasn't being quite honest with him, if they weren't being up front about something that was going on. That's what husbands and wives are there for—you protect each other. You take the good and bad of each other.

Certainly, in the last six months, or the last three months, people have begun to believe even more that she was a screamer and a shrew. She's not. She's a woman who was very determined, a very bright person, who knew Ronald Reagan and knows Ronald Reagan, and knows what's good for him and what's not so good for him. She is a determined woman. If she got something on her mind she wanted to see it followed through until it was off, until it had come to completion.

She's a woman who has had some challenges, certainly. She's seen her husband shot and almost killed. There were a couple of bouts with cancer—both her own, and the President's. She is a very blessed woman, there's no question, to be blessed with a marriage that has lasted that long. But I'd say there have been many days that have been challenging, and she gets a bad rap in many ways.

I did not know her as well at the White House, because I worked on the President's staff and only saw her when she was with him during trips and that sort of thing. I find it interesting, as I go through my years, that so many people were afraid of her and still are. She's not a woman to be afraid of. She's a woman who is very honest. If you have bad news for her, you just say that

up front. "This is bad news." She takes it like anybody else would. She doesn't scream and cry, but yes, she can be very emotional. She's a person, she's a human being.

Knott: Well, thank you very much. Thank you for giving us this time on short notice.