GEORGE W. BUSH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

FINAL EDITED TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM McGURN

April 14, 2016
New York, New York

Participant

Rhodes College
Michael Nelson

GEORGE W. BUSH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

FINAL EDITED TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM McGURN

April 14, 2016

Nelson: This is April 14, 2016. We are in the News Corp building in New York City, Mike Nelson interviewing and Bill McGurn being interviewed about his experience with the George W. Bush administration. We've talked about what is going to happen with these recordings, and Mr. McGurn, do you have any questions about any of that?

McGurn: No.

Nelson: Ready to get started? First of all, thank you for your time, and more than your time. We like to hear the story of how somebody got to the point where they would actually be invited to and accept a position in the Bush administration.

McGurn: Right.

Nelson: So tell me where you were born and grew up and something about your family and when you first got interested in politics.

McGurn: I was born in Camp Pendleton, California. My father was in the Marine Corps. Both my parents were from Brooklyn. He was between Korea and Vietnam. When he left the Marines he joined the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation]. In those days they used to shuffle you around, so we moved around a bit, but he came back to basically the New York area because his parents were sick.

By kindergarten I was back in the New York area. I was in Brooklyn. Then in first grade we moved out to New Jersey, so I grew up in New Jersey.

Nelson: In the New York suburbs?

McGurn: Yes, suburban New Jersey, Bergen County.

Nelson: Did your father stay with the FBI?

McGurn: Yes, he did. He retired at 50 and then had other jobs, running security for different companies and so forth.

Nelson: How about your mom?

McGurn: My mom stayed at home; she had six children. She later went back to college and finished her degree and everything. They're still in the house I grew up in.

Nelson: In Northvale?

McGurn: In Northvale, New Jersey.

Nelson: How old were you when your father retired? There is a reason I'm asking.

McGurn: He didn't retire exactly at 50, so it would have been '85. I was more or less just out of college in my 20s when he retired from the FBI. In fact, he kept working for the security firms and he still works today. He does security clearances for the White House, State Department, those things. He didn't do mine, but he does do other people like me.

Nelson: So he wasn't politically active, I guess.

McGurn: No, my parents were not politically active at all. Although sports and politics were a big part of our dinner conversations.

Nelson: So that's where you first learned about politics?

McGurn: I think so. They were charter *National Review* subscribers. My mother was actually more interested in politics than my dad, I think. So I grew up with that. I'll say this about being at the White House. I had been in journalism, especially opinion journalism, for a long time. I spent three years as *National Review*'s Washington correspondent. So I was around politics a long time, and politicians. What I learned at the White House is that's not the same as being in politics. It's very different. It's a very different culture. Not that one is better than the other, but it is just very different. People think differently and so forth.

At the Bush White House most people define themselves as Republicans. They work for the party and that's reasonable. I'm assuming most people in the [Barack] Obama administration define themselves as Democrats. I never thought of myself as that way because I was in the news business. I might have thought of myself as conservative or something, but Republican was not the label I would think primarily of attaching to myself.

Nelson: So when did you start thinking of yourself as conservative?

McGurn: I think I grew up in a relatively conservative family. I grew up in the '70s where the views that I had were certainly the minority views, so it was more interesting in a way in high school and college. There are different strands of conservatism and what people believe. I would say that when I started to work for the [*Wall Street*] *Journal* overseas I became much more interested in the market aspects of it, especially living in Hong Kong and watching China rise and seeing how free markets could really liberate billions of people. I mean that literally—from poverty and so forth.

There are various threads that are at tension with one another. The change the market brings to a society is sometimes at odds with the kind of stability that traditionalists seek. So there are a lot of tensions.

Nelson: I think about your predecessor, Mike Gerson, and the influence of growing up in a religious home. Was that your experience?

McGurn: Mike was more an evangelical. I had a more standard Catholic upbringing than Mike did. It was a different kind. It may not have the same intensity or so forth. It was certainly there; it was an important part of my life. It certainly wasn't tinged with any politics the way evangelical politics has sometimes been tinged with the Republican Party. To the contrary, the experience of most Irish or Italian Catholics growing up is Democratic, and that would be most of the people that we were around. So we were a minority, my family.

Nelson: I'm thinking—you mentioned the '70s. That was a time when in response to *[Jane] Roe v. [Henry B.] Wade*, many Catholics got very energized on that issue.

McGurn: I'm not as familiar with that. It actually took some time before the Catholic Church became energized on it. Life issues are certainly important to my family, and I remember that, but I was in eighth grade when that happened, so only vaguely. But definitely life was an important issue in my family.

Nelson: Where did you go to high school?

McGurn: I went to Northern Valley Regional in Old Tappan, New Jersey.

Nelson: So you went to public school.

McGurn: Yes, I went to public high school.

Nelson: Did you write for the school paper?

McGurn: I did write for the school paper. *The Lance,* I think.

Nelson: Were you a reporter, a columnist?

McGurn: I was more a reporter; I did stories. I think I did a story on the prom. [*laughter*] There was no [Bob] Woodward and [Carl] Bernstein kind of reporting in our paper. I think they were fairly innocuous.

Nelson: Did you decide at that point or have any inclination that—

McGurn: I always sort of thought that I wanted to write. I get a lot of mail from people who see I have a column now, but they do not realize I didn't get it until my late 40s. One of the things that I also learned is that journalism is not writing in the sense that a lot of people think it is. It's either reporting, or even when you're in the business that we are, the opinion business, the *Journal* prides itself on reported editorials and columns and so forth. It's just different from dashing off a nice essay that I think a lot of people in college or something want. I love the news business; it has been good to me.

The *Wall Street Journal* has been my home for most of my life. I've met fantastic people; I've had great mentors. But it's not for everyone.

Nelson: You went to Notre Dame?

McGurn: Yes.

Nelson: What year did you start there?

McGurn: I started in ’76.

Nelson: Again, I’m wondering in what way that was a step along the road to what eventually became your journalistic career and in your speechwriting experience.

McGurn: I’m not sure. I was always interested in writing. I wrote for the school paper, more columns.

Nelson: At Notre Dame?

McGurn: At Notre Dame, *The Observer.* More columns, often lighthearted ones. I didn’t really do any reporting then. I would say only indirectly. One of my beliefs is that some of the greatest influences are indirect rather than direct. Sometimes I get letters from people who say I’d love to do what you do, work at the White House, then have a column for the *Journal.* My advice is always: You can never re-create my path. I didn’t choose, I responded to things that came up. I was a draftee at the White House, I was not a volunteer. I didn’t seek that. I didn’t seek most of the jobs after my first job. An opportunity came up and I took advantage of it.

The conditions are changing, as you know, so rapidly in our field that 10 years from now I might be doing something completely different from what I’m doing now just because the industry is changing so much. So in the sense of how did Notre Dame contribute to my writing I would say the best contribution it made—I was a philosophy major. I’m a big believer in the liberal arts. I had a philosophy professor named Michael Loux who every week made us write a two-page paper—it might have been four, double-sided—two pieces of paper on whatever philosophy. We were studying history of philosophy.

I think what that does—you know, philosophy means the pursuit of wisdom and so forth. It is designed to teach you how to think. No one needs to know what a monad is or some of these other things, they’re very abstract. But it teaches you how to think and organize your thoughts. So to the degree that any of my education had a direct bearing I would say that a lot of it supported writing in different ways, especially logic and function. In parochial schools and grade schools, I diagrammed a lot of sentences. I’m so grateful for that today.

Nelson: So you went K through eighth in parochial school?

McGurn: Yes, for one through eight. For K I was in public school in Brooklyn.

Nelson: Diagramming sentences.

McGurn: Yes, diagramming sentences. So a lot of the inputs were not direct, I would think. I think sometimes they’re the most determinative.

Nelson: It sounds to me like you’re somebody who took, from an early age, unusual pride in his writing and wanted to be—

McGurn: I was interested in it. I also had a friend of mine, a friend of my dad's named Jules Loh, and he was a reporter for the Associated Press. He was as liberal as my father was conservative. But he was a newspaperman. I wouldn't say he was a mentor, but he talked about it with me and so forth. So I had an example before me of someone who was actually in the business.

Nelson: Who did he write for?

McGurn: Associated Press. He worked right down here at Rockefeller Center—the Associated Press distributes their writings in all the papers.

Nelson: OK. So at Notre Dame, what was the atmosphere there like for somebody whose beliefs were forming as yours were?

McGurn: I was very definitely the minority. It was the late '70s. Father [Theodore] Hesburgh was president, the kind of man whose motto is, "No salvation outside the Democratic Party." [*laughter*] In fact, I wrote him a very earnest letter as a freshman about abortion, which I would be embarrassed to look at today, not because it was rude but because it was earnest. He wrote me back a very angry letter. I thought, *My gosh, I've irritated the president.* It didn't matter, but when you're a freshman you don't always know that.

Nelson: What was the occasion for the letter and what was it—

McGurn: I forget what it was. He gave a lot of talks on campus. He was head of the Rockefeller Commission at one point and he was always dogged by accusations that he was kind of soft on abortion. I think he said you won't even find the word mentioned in the report, and of course they found it a dozen times. It was always one of these things that was out there.

Nelson: When did you decide—

McGurn: He was a man of his generation. Most Catholics were Democrats probably until *Roe*. Really 10 years after *Roe*.

Nelson: So when in your college experience did you decide what to do next?

McGurn: I was always deciding what to do next. I went to graduate school. I graduated a semester early to save some money. I went to graduate school at Boston University Journalism School. That was '80 to '81. If you remember, that was the [Ronald] Reagan recession, so I wasn't going to get a job anyway. Then I came out of that and my mother's sister, my aunt, had given me a subscription to a sort of young magazine called the *American Spectator,* which at that point was very sassy. It was sort of the *New York Review of Books* size and more geared, I think, to a younger audience. It had a lot of humor and so forth.

They had an advertisement in the back that said, "Assistant managing editor. No boneheads need apply." So I applied. It was in Bloomington, Indiana, and I found myself back in Indiana.

Nelson: What do you think made them hire you?

McGurn: It may not have been a large pool. [*laughter*]

Nelson: What I wonder is, you had worked on the paper at Notre Dame. Had you been an editor?

McGurn: I'd come out of the journalism school. It was a small, small operation. It was in Bloomington, Indiana, so again, I'm not sure there were any other résumés that went through the transom there. They may have said, "This guy is foolish enough." I think my salary was $8,500. I'm not sure they were beating them away.

Nelson: What did managing editor involve?

McGurn: Assistant managing editor. Obviously editing the articles, but the managing editor did the primary edit. The assistant managing editor was more moving the process through, constantly proofreading and making changes. It sounds like the stone age now, but the actual technical process for making a fix—you didn't just put it in a computer. You had to put it in a computer and you had to retype two lines. So if there was a typo on one line—if you misspelled McGurn, you had to retype McGurn and you had to retype the line above and that line because then you printed it out on this very thick paper and you put it through a waxer and then you cut it and you pasted over the other page so the light comes out. So if people made mistakes in correction it was a very tedious process.

Nelson: Did you feel like this was maybe steering you toward a career in opinion journalism rather than reporting?

McGurn: Probably, although I don't think I made the distinction. Remember, I was happy to have a job. It was exciting, it was fun. Ronald Reagan, a conservative, was President. My boss, Bob [R. Emmett, Jr.] Tyrell, had a column in the *Washington Post.* There were a lot of debates going on, so it was a lot of fun. In fact, I was in Bloomington, Indiana, a university town, and it is a beautiful town with a beautiful campus, but I was an easterner and couldn't wait to get out of there. In retrospect I think I just didn't take full advantage of everything that was there.

Nelson: Like?

McGurn: The music school was a tremendous school. Just to enjoy where I was. It was a great place. Maybe I see it more having a family. Bloomington would be a great place—you know the film *Breaking Away*?

Nelson: Oh, yes.

McGurn: That had come out just as I got there, and Steve Tesich, who did it—I don't know if he worked at *The Spectator*, but he was friends with a lot of the people there. They're in one of the scenes in the beginning. So when I see it now—there is a town square and we were in the town square over the Loaf and Ladle Restaurant and the Betty Jean Card Shop. If you watch *Breaking Away*—first of all, I'm always looking for the stores—Pagliai's Pizza. At the end they break away and they show the Betty Jean Shop and my old office window showing the kids. It's nice because it freezes it in the time that I remember that I was there.

Nelson: Yes.

McGurn: I think it was a kind of nostalgic thing about middle America, and so it is fun. I just watched it recently.

Nelson: It's a wonderful movie.

McGurn: It's a wonderful movie and it captures the place that I knew.

Nelson: But didn't want to stay.

McGurn: I didn't even give it a chance.

Nelson: By the way, while you were there were you doing any writing?

McGurn: I did a few pieces for them, but not a lot. I was new. I had to prove myself. They wanted to fix errors and also keep it on schedule. It was so much more primitive, printing and the whole process. There was no emailing the page to someone. You had to make them physically and then transport them physically and so forth. I think it was printed over two days, one half one day and another half another day.

Nelson: Was there a benefactor keeping this magazine—

McGurn: There were a few; I wasn't involved in that side. I think they raised a lot from different conservative foundations. Again, I was an assistant managing editor. There weren't people under me except for maybe the interns. The title sounds a little more exalted than it was.

Nelson: Then what?

McGurn: Then I had an opportunity to work for something at that time called *This World*. It was in New York. It is now a magazine called *First Things*, which is religion and society. Then it was religion and economics. I don't even know what you would call it—a thirdly? It came out three times a year, not a quarterly. You try answering the phone and say, "Hi, Bill McGurn, *This World.*" That happened for several months. I was up on 86th Street and I liked it because I was back, but there were things going on that I didn't know about. It was eventually sold to Father Richard John Neuhaus. I don't think he was Father Neuhaus then, I think he was still a Lutheran minister then.

After a few months I had an offer. There were two jobs at the *Wall Street Journal.* One was assistant features editor here and one was to go be the features editor in Brussels for the European edition. I applied to both. I didn't get the first one. I was probably the ninth choice for the other one in Brussels and I went. Since then more or less the *Journal* has been my home. I've had two departures, but since then—that was '84.

Nelson: I take it there is nothing tying you down so far in your life.

McGurn: No, I didn't get married until later in life.

Nelson: Did you feel at this time—I can imagine you feeling, *I'm just going from one thing to another. Is this adding up to anything?* Or I can imagine you thinking, *This is a great adventure*

going from one thing to another and I'm free to do it because I don't have responsibilities.

McGurn: Before the *American Spectator* would invest $136 in a round trip air ticket to Indianapolis, I came into New York and interviewed with Adam Meyerson, who was then at the *Wall Street Journal.* Adam had worked for the *American Spectator.* He now runs, I think, Philanthropy Roundtable or something. So I came into the *Journal* offices. It had to be '81 or '82. I thought, *Wow, this would be a great place to work*. Partly it was the spirit of the *Journal*, free markets and free men. I think the optimism that is inherent in that view that life can get better, that was very attractive to me. It still is, in all its dimensions.

So I always felt the *Journal*—I was a philosophy major. Philosophy was a good fit for me. When I saw Adam I thought, *Wow.* He was like a God, to be able to work here. I didn't realize in three years I'd be working there myself, but for the overseas edition.

Nelson: Let's take you to Brussels. Anything about that experience that you took with you?

McGurn: It was great. I was a young guy. Brussels wasn't that great, but I got to travel everywhere. My first boss, the one who hired me, Gordon Crovitz, then was succeeded by Seth Lipsky. Gordon wasn't there that long while I was there, but he became a great friend. Actually, he hired me again when I went to Asia later. So he made the same mistake twice. But Seth was my mentor.

I went to Lebanon, to all sorts of places, different war zones and things. Seth had grown up in the reporting side, so he really instilled in me how to report a story—even an opinion story—how to really make it sing. In that way he just had an incredible influence on my life. He had been foreign editor of the *Journal* and then was in charge of the European *Journal*. Later he became in charge of all the overseas—

Nelson: Was there a distinction between whether you were on the news side or—

McGurn: Yes, there still is. This is a very separate—it is unusual for papers, but yes. The overseas editions in Europe and in Asia, the editorial pages report to Paul Gigot, the editorial page editor here, they don't report to the local editor.

Nelson: And you were on the news side over there?

McGurn: No, I was on the editorial page.

Nelson: Oh, you were.

McGurn: I was hired on the editorial page.

Nelson: So this was reporting-based editorial writing.

McGurn: Right.

Nelson: For all the separation between the two sides of the paper, in terms of your work you're reporting—

McGurn: Right. It definitely had an opinion. I think the *Journal* actually has a good model because it kind of keeps both sides honest and it doesn't corrupt things. But Seth really emphasized that. For me, I was a young guy in Europe with someone paying me to travel to different places. Again, I went to Lebanon at a time when it was really iffy there. I went to Turkish Cyprus. I went to Northern Ireland, visited with the Sein Fein headquarters and stuff. When you're 25, that's a lot of fun.

Nelson: And the years in Brussels were?

McGurn: About three years. I think '84 to '86.

Nelson: I'm wondering—at this stage, how are you looking at American politics? Do you have any interest in it?

McGurn: I was interested, but it wasn't so much the politics. I was a conservative, so I was a Reagan supporter and so forth. But in Europe there was a lot going on related to that. At that point the *Wall Street Journal Europe* was based in Brussels. We were based in a Hilton Hotel, two floors in the Hilton, kind of downtown Brussels, off Avenue Louise, I think.

One time we were watching—I think on Armed Forces TV we had that feed coming in, a debate between Reagan and [Walter] Mondale.

Nelson: In '84.

McGurn: Yes, '84. The reporters are all there. I don't know if you remember—Reagan seemed flustered.

Nelson: The first debate?

McGurn: I don't know if this is actually the first debate. He was definitely flustered in the first debate, but I don't know when this moment came. There was a moment when he seemed to not realize that once you launched a missile, you could not recall the missile. It was kind of a befuddlement and so forth. I just remember all the reporters gathered around kind of teasing Seth Lipsky, my boss, saying, "This guy is an idiot. Look at Mondale. He knows this about the missiles, that they can't do that. He knows how many there are. He knows where they're deployed. He knows how much they cost." Seth was just calmly smoking his cigar and he said, "Well, there is one thing Reagan knows that Mondale doesn't." They say, "What's that?" He says, "Where to point them."

Europe was filled with American politics and so forth and its own politics. Lebanon, the Marines, so it wasn't a separate thing. I was a young guy and I had been given the chance to go to these places and write about them. I had a fantastic editor and fantastic support back here.

The interesting thing is in Europe I first met Paul Gigot. He was coming through Brussels to go back to Hong Kong where he was the editor of the Asian *Wall Street Journal,* the editorial page editor. I think he was asking Gordon Crovitz for the 24-hour tour of Paris. He was going to Paris, I met him there. I remember thinking, *Hong Kong is on the other side of the world. I can deal with Europe, that's fine, it's very Western, but this is as far as I go.* Then of course within two

years I would be on Asia and I spent almost 10 years out there.

Nelson: Were there by this time writers whom you particularly admired, in particular aspired to—

McGurn: I didn't admire columnists and so forth. Our emphasis, as it still is here, Bob Bartley and Paul Gigot were to do reporting, not just to give opinion but to do some reporting, to bring some news or some value-added apart from your own opinion to things. So to the degree I was looking at that I was looking at Bob Bartley and Paul, who eventually went to Washington and so forth. My focus was more on, What does the *Wall Street Journal* want in this? I just considered this would be my life. I had no desire to go anywhere else.

Nelson: So from Brussels to—

McGurn: What happened is Seth was in Brussels and my boss, but he had been one of the people who started the Asian *Wall Street Journal.* Many of the people in Brussels for the *Wall Street Journal Europe,* first they started the Asian *Journal*, then they started the *Journal* in Europe. So in Europe I was working with a lot of people who had spent a couple of years in Asia. They were all telling me, "If you get the chance, go out there." I was very skeptical.

But on the other hand, the opportunity came up and I thought I'd do it for two years or something and see it a little, mostly because of the people. The publisher at the *Journal* in Europe was a fellow named Paul Atkinson who now does fund-raising stuff for Regis High School here. Paul said, "You've got to go if you get the chance." So I was encouraged by all these people.

Nelson: What were they excited about that they thought you would be excited about?

McGurn: Asia is just so different. Europe was great to see, dead things and ruins and so forth. When I was in Europe I got to interview Lech Walesa when he was under house arrest. So there was a lot of ferment—this was before the Berlin Wall came down. But Asia is just so alive and growing and expanding. The ethos is very different.

In fact, I went and I just loved it, especially Hong Kong. I loved it. I didn't think I would. I thought, *This is an interesting part of the world to see. I'll do it for a few years and then I'll come back to New York.* I ended up staying for a much longer time.

Nelson: What in Asia, besides Hong Kong—

McGurn: China, just all of it. In those years remember the Philippines, for example, still had our base at Subic Bay, and that was a contested issue. At one point I took an aircraft carrier from Hong Kong to Subic and so forth. Korea constantly—it wasn't a democracy and became a democracy. I got tear-gassed in Korea. There was just a lot of ferment.

Nelson: Tear-gassed by the government?

McGurn: Yes.

Nelson: Because you were—

McGurn: I was covering something and what happened is the people I was with moved quickly to one side and I didn't move that quickly and the other side came up. It was kind of a game because the police and everything—they wore those Darth Vader masks. But they were the same age as the kids so there were a lot of games. It was nasty. It stuck to my raincoat and so forth. I remember a young Korean girl giving me a tissue. It was nasty to get tear-gassed. It was exciting out there. It was exciting—the economic growth—to see possibilities. Every time you went to Seoul it looked different, more things being built.

When I first went to China—I can't remember. I think I first went in '87. I went with my brother. Everyone is riding bicycles. You have a capital with streets as wide as an airport runway, but everyone is on bicycles. The clothes are really drab and so forth. The kids are wearing plastic shoes. No one wants to talk to you if you're a foreigner. There's nothing. Within a decade they're wearing fashions to rival Hong Kong women and so forth. The first time I remember going to one of the old Catholic churches in Beijing that was originally founded by Matteo Ricci, no one wanted to talk to me after. Actually, I went back with President Bush one time. Everyone comes up and wants to talk to you and just ask about different things.

So to watch China go from just dirt poverty to traffic jams and so forth—You just wouldn't have believed it back then.

Nelson: Did you cover the Tiananmen Square story?

McGurn: No. One of my regrets is I left Asia just before, in May that year. I got an offer from Bill Buckley to run the Washington bureau of *National Review*. So I left in I think May. It was either April or May of '89, so I wasn't there when that happened.

Nelson: Did it take you by surprise when it did happen?

McGurn: It took everyone by surprise. That was what Deng Xiaoping was counting on. For Hong Kong—when I was there, people were sort of agitating for the democracy that had been promised them. Crudely, the deal was China gets Hong Kong and Hong Kong gets democracy. But of course they've been moving the goalposts ever since and they're still haggling over it. But Hong Kong I have to say then was sort of apathetic. The leader of the democracy movement, Martin Lee, is still around, still fighting the good fight. If he got 50 people at a rally, I'd be surprised. But Tiananmen changed that. It raised the consciousness that wasn't there before.

It has continued, and post-1997 Hong Kong, if you had asked a Chinese Hong Kong person when I was there in the '80s—I came back later in the '90s, but when I was there in the '80s—if you had asked them, even in the '90s when I was there, "What are you?" they wouldn't say, "I'm a Hong Kong person." They'd probably say, "I'm Cantonese," meaning the dialect that goes all through China. That is probably how they would define themselves.

Now they definitely know, "I'm a Hong Kong person" because we have a different system than the others. The Hong Kong identity has been sort of forged in opposition.

Nelson: Was this still a time when Americans were looking at Japan and saying that's the model?

McGurn: A little bit. Some of that had—yes, people thought Japan was the future. In fact, Adam Meyerson, whom I mentioned before, never was over there but he was over here and he was one of the people writing that this is not the model for the future at the time when we all have to be like Japan or we're going to die. And we see Japan, the terrible demographics, the taxes that are going up because of this aging population and so forth.

When I was there my second time for the *Far Eastern Economic Review,* which was sort of an *Economist* for Asia—

Nelson: When was that?

McGurn: Let's see—I went over in '92 and I stayed until '98. So I stayed not quite a year after the transition. The *Far Eastern Economic Review* was sort of like the *Economist* for Asia. It was founded in Shanghai in 1946. It was probably 1996—we did a big 50th anniversary. Part of it, which was fun, I went through all the old issues and collected articles historically. There was no competition then in the English-language press. It was a different time and everyone had to read it.

I was really struck that for the first 30 years, all the articles on Japan were about Japan is overpopulated, Japan's crushing population, the population burden of Japan. Then in the '70s it was, "Oh, my God we're an aging, graying society. We don't have enough kids." All the stuff that they said about China they said about Japan. Now China is finding this too, with its horrible demographic mix because of its one-child policy. It's just an interesting time.

Nelson: Anything else about your Hong Kong years?

McGurn: I came back and worked in Washington for *National Review.*

Nelson: Afterward.

McGurn: I spent two and a half years in Europe and then two and a half in Asia.

Nelson: OK.

McGurn: Then in '89, as I said, right before Tiananmen—it might have been April—I came back to America and became Washington bureau chief for *National Review.*

Nelson: Sorry, I got the sequence wrong here. So that was in between.

McGurn: Then I went back to Hong Kong as editorial page editor of the *Far Eastern Economic Review.*

Nelson: So what brought you back to *National Review*?

McGurn: I wanted to go back home. I'd been overseas about five years and so forth. When it came up—I got this note from Bill Buckley saying, "Come see me. I'd like to talk about this." I was initially not even going to come home and interview with him. Seth Lipsky said, "You know, when Bill Buckley asks you to see him, you should at least go see him."

Nelson: How did he know who you were?

McGurn: The new editor of the *National Review* was John O'Sullivan, whom I had known in Europe. John had been at the *Daily Telegraph.* I knew him from various things. He had been at Heritage Foundation. I knew John for a long time. Probably John wanted to hire me and he asked Bill.

So I went back and they made an attractive offer and I thought it was a chance to come home. One of the things that can happen when you're overseas is in the beginning it's great, but after a while you can say, "I might be stuck here forever. I'm never going home." Seth Lipsky said, "You don't want to be one of these guys, you're 65 sitting on a bar stool at the Foreign Correspondents Club boring everyone with your stories about the Vietnam War or something."

So I was ready to come home. John O'Sullivan had taken over *National Review*, so it was sort of like we're going to have a rebirth. Not change, but we're going to do this. Reagan was leaving office. George H. W. Bush was just elected, so it looked like kind of an exciting time.

Nelson: Washington editor Buckley was famous for hiring people and then putting them into jobs where—

McGurn: Right. The interesting thing about Bill Buckley that people didn't realize—Bill was sort of bored by politics. He never really enjoyed the actual politics—he liked the first principles and arguing about things at this level, the philosophy of politics and the study of it. But the nuts and bolts of it, he wasn't that interested. If you think about it, he didn't spend that much time in Washington, right? That isn't what really engaged him. He was on bigger issues.

In fact, in one of his books he talks about—it was a book about people who backed *National Review* and the kind of nascent conservative movement. We wouldn't know any of the names, it was a relatively obscure group of people, some businessmen—we're talking back in the '50s and then the '60s. Then he met Ronald Reagan and someone said maybe Reagan should be President. I think this was even after he was Governor. Buckley said, "I don't see it." He would admit that that was not what he was primarily interested in. I'd come up every two weeks for the editorial meetings and he was great to me, but what people don't realize—they think of him as a political figure, but look at his books. They're not really about politics.

Nelson: So Washington—George Will had had that job, right?

McGurn: I don't think George Will had had that job; John McLaughlin had had that job, the McLaughlin column. George Will might have. The immediate predecessor I think was John McLaughlin.

Nelson: So what is the Washington Bureau of the *National Review*?

McGurn: We hired a reporter. We just tried to fill it with a little more news kind of things. John O'Sullivan's background had been newspapers, *The Daily Telegraph* and so forth. He tried to liven it up. I don't think he really changed the philosophy. It was just a new team coming in. It just seemed like an exciting time to be there.

Nelson: The year was?

McGurn: I got there in ’89, say, April ’89 when I came over. Then curious things—[L.] Gordon Crovitz—I don’t know if you know him.

Nelson: No.

McGurn: He rose to be a very top executive. I think he was publisher, brilliant guy, Rhodes Scholar, Yale Law. Writes a column on Monday for us.

Nelson: For the *Journal?*

McGurn: For the *Journal*. Gordon’s my age. Gordon had been moved to Hong Kong to take over the *Far Eastern Economic Review.* The *Journal* had owned a minority share; the Dow Jones had owned a minority share for most of its existence. It was a British weekly, English weekly, like the *Economist*, but for Asia. As I said, founded in Shanghai, but it was losing money.

The *Journal* bought the thing outright, the majority shares. They put Gordon in as editor. Gordon had the bad taste to ask me to work there again. I was kind of fed up with Washington. I loved Hong Kong. I was happy to go out there again.

Nelson: Right.

McGurn: In the meantime, when Gordon called me, it was 1992. I had met a young woman in Washington, a redhead. He said, “Here’s a money offer, here is where I’d like you to go.” I said, “I won’t haggle with you on money, but I need a little extension because I’m trying to marry this woman and I’m not sure I’m going to be successful. I just met her in February.” Gordon offered me the job in March or April and I accepted, but I hadn’t told her. I proposed in August. Then I left and I came back and we got married and so forth. We loved it.

I had been in Hong Kong twice, once as a single man just going to war zones. I went to Afghanistan during the first war, spent two weeks in Afghanistan more or less by myself with Afghan units.

Nelson: The Soviet—

McGurn: Right. The first Afghan war. I just went all over, to Sri Lanka, the war zone. I was single. For me, Hong Kong was a base. I could travel. It was fun. The second time I went as a married man. I was single for the first six months and then she came over. I had more fun. It was just a different life. Having a wife meant we made friends who are lifelong friends. Our closest friend there is probably Jimmy Lai. I don’t know if you know him. He is sort of the Rupert Murdoch of Hong Kong. He was a refugee from China, came with nothing on his back and swam through the waters to get there. He didn’t finish high school and is now a billionaire and a very big prodemocracy guy. Our family is very intertwined.

When we first met Jimmy he had founded this clothing chain called Giordano’s. It’s kind of like the Gap. You would take it for granted because it was middle-class clothing, Lands’ End or something, polo shirts, brightly colored. They were all good quality, uniformly priced, brightly

lit stores. That was a revolution for Hong Kong because it had never really marketed to the middle class. What it had was you could go out in the street and you might find a Hermes tie for five dollars. You might find that jacket out there for two dollars, but you couldn't go out looking for that jacket, it would just be whatever came up.

Before Jimmy, you had an economy where some of the people bought Rolex watches. All the hotels had these name-brand stores of Italian and French designers and then the masses just bought in the streets and stuff from factory overruns. Jimmy opened this chain of stores that gave good quality at a good price. Now you see a lot of that, but you didn't see it before. Now there are chain restaurants and stuff there. You just didn't see that before.

I had suggested we do a cover story on that, just on this guy marketing to the middle class. Gordon wrote me a note. He has a very spidery handwriting. He says Jimmy claims to be the only man in Hong Kong to have read all of [Friedrich] Engels. I thought it was an achievement, but it's like when you see in China these things like someone has inscribed *The Iliad* in Chinese on a piece of ivory the size of a fingernail. Yes, it's an achievement, but you wonder what it means. It wasn't Engels. It was [Friedrich] Hayek, the free-market Nobel Prize–winning economist.

Nelson: Big difference.

McGurn: For conservatives like me, Hayek is the gold standard because he really believes in the free society and so forth. Jimmy read all of Hayek. He had been here when he was poor, just pushing the racks of clothes, and he met some Jewish guy in the business who gave him some of the Hayek books. Then Jimmy became friends with Milton Friedman, took him around China. So it was just a lot of fun. We became very close to their family and some of the associates he had.

Nelson: I feel like every time I take you into American politics I'm dragging you there. I do want to ask you this about the *National Review* time, because a Bush was President, right?

McGurn: Right.

Nelson: So what was the *National Review*'s take on this Republican President?

McGurn: It's an interesting question. One of the reasons I left—I loved the people at *National Review*, but Bill was very antiimmigration and John O'Sullivan, the editor, was even more antiimmigration. Of course the *Journal* is pro-immigration and I'm pro-immigration; I have three immigrant daughters, so I should be. That was a difference of philosophy. In the magazine we were always bashing George H. W. Bush for things—he went back on his tax pledge and so forth. In retrospect I feel a little embarrassed. The man was a war hero and stuff. I was young. I think we had a cover of George H. W. Bush as Goofy, the Disney character.

Bill had been to Yale with George H. W. Bush, and he didn't like a lot of that, so there was a little tension.

Nelson: Didn't like a lot of what?

McGurn: The Bush bashing. When Bill had friends, he didn't really want to see them bashed.

So there was a kind of a tension where we had to write in principle because we felt President Bush was surrendering things. Bill was uncomfortable with it. Then John was making immigration—sort of like Donald Trump then—a big issue. I wasn't really on board with that. I wasn't a determinative voice. It was one of the reasons why when I had an offer from Hong Kong, I went.

I mean, I didn't stomp out, I didn't have hard feelings. I'm friends with all of them. I was friends with Bill forever. But I also learned—the *American Spectator* had been a nonprofit, *National Review* had been a nonprofit, *This World* had been. I learned I liked working for a profit-making company. Not because it's richer, but because it's a cleaner situation. You do it or you don't do it. At nonprofits there is always an excuse like, "We don't have the money." At a for-profit it's your priority. If you have the priority, it will happen. I just liked the idea of being in the competitive world, being part of a publication that was actually making it.

I think my new boss, Rupert Murdoch, shares that bias too. You should make money. It forces you to do things. You have to sell your product; you can't just put it out there. You actually have to persuade readers. That's how I see my column. I have to persuade readers. They may be more or less in my ballpark, but a lot of them would be skeptical—one, to read it—they have 9,000 things competing for their attention. My goal isn't to always get them to agree with me and say, "You're right." It is maybe to say, "Oh, I didn't think of it that way before." That's when I think I'm successful.

Nelson: One thing is clear: You didn't catch Potomac fever.

McGurn: No, I didn't. I didn't at the White House either. I never had that.

Nelson: You mentioned your three daughters. When did you adopt them?

McGurn: We adopted two while we were in Hong Kong, one in '96. Then we got the middle one in '98 right before we came back to America. Then we were here for a couple of years and we went back and got our third right before I went to the White House.

Nelson: As babies?

McGurn: Yes, they were all babies. The last one we got at, I think, sixteen months. She was the oldest. The first two we got at five months and seven months.

Nelson: I had another sort of *National Review*–related question. I think this was inspired by your talking about the lack of incentive at a nonprofit to make sure you're doing things that people will place an economic value on, if I'm putting that clearly. My sense is that even as conservatism was rising as a political force and there were more conservative voices in the public discourse, *National Review* was not carrying the same weight.

McGurn: I think that's right, but I don't think that was a weakness of *National Review*. I think it was a function of *National Review's* success. Bill paved the way. When he started, he was the only one doing it, except for these lunatic things like the *American Mercury*, full of anti-Semites. Bill blazed the path. Bill was Jackie Robinson in the conservative sense of a mainstream conservative voice. He unfairly never got the Pulitzer because of the prejudice against him.

It's interesting for me to read how a lot of folks on the left say, "Oh, we miss Bill Buckley, it was so civil then." That's not what they were saying with Bill Buckley. When he wrote *God and Man at Yale*, you should read the responses to that. They were calling him a fascist and all this stuff. It was a very difficult time for him. The *American Spectator*, which I worked for, was not quite his baby, but Bob Tyrrell was inspired by him. Now, with the Web, we have all sorts of things.

In many ways—Matthew Continetti just had a piece the other day about conservatism, and his analogy was when Bill started out it was sort of a Catholic Church model, where Bill was the Pope and he could do this thing because it was a smaller church, but now we have Protestant sects all over the place. So it's just a lot different.

Of course, as I said before, there were a lot of strands in conservatives. The genius of *National Review* was to be called "fusionism," to take the anti-Communist, traditional values and free-market people who don't always coexist nicely and put them all in one bundle. Now, some people have gone off in different ways. I think some of those splits are a little exaggerated. They're very profound among people running a think tank or something, because if you're a think tank on security or your think tank is on the economy—that's what your focus is. The average guy, or voter, that you're trying to reach I don't think makes as many of those distinctions.

Nelson: I'm thinking, though, that circa 1990 if you're a conservative writer you're thinking, *Where will my stuff actually be read?* With *American Spectator* now becoming a bigger deal, the *Weekly Standard* is not far away. The *Journal*'s editorial page?

McGurn: Right. And I think they had different audiences. The *National Review* always kind of regarded itself as the keeper of the tablets and so forth. You know, it still has a pretty hefty readership. I do notice, for example, something in *National Review* appears and later you'll see it trickle out to all these other blogs because they still look at it. It's different.

The *Journal* audience is businessmen. They're somewhat conservative, but they're not *National Review* conservatives by and large. We have a good chunk of them. I can't think of a product to liken it to, but it's sort of like in the early days you had one size fits all, like Coca-Cola. You grew up, there was Coke, then there was Tab. Now you go to the store, there's Cherry Coke, Vanilla Coke. The market is segmented into so many different things.

If your focus is terrorism, you can find conservative think tanks that just focus on that. If your focus is markets or liberty, we have that. So there is a lot more segmentation. I think *National Review* still tries to bring it under one—Paul Gigot worked at *National Review* for a few months. We have our big disputes with *National Review* these days. Not me personally, but the editorial page and so forth.

Nelson: So your second tour in Hong Kong comes to an end how?

McGurn: Hong Kong, went back to China. I had a young family, I had two children now and was looking to go home. I had been there almost six years, I think.

Nelson: Your wife is American?

McGurn: My wife was American and she had been there about five years. She came over. She loved it too. It is such an alive society. One of the things that first impressed me—when I was in Europe I got a box—you know the boxes of business cards that are about this big? If I gave away 10 business cards in my whole time there in Brussels I'd be surprised. In Hong Kong you'd go through a box like that every three months. Maybe because people were more transient, they knew they were just going to be here for a bit, they were more open. It was just that kind of place.

I remember when my wife came. She had come from Washington. I said, "You can do anything you want here; no one is going to know. You fall on your face, we go back home, no one knows. You should try something that you wanted to try, because there is more opportunity." A colleague of mine at the *Journal* who was in the sales department said she ought to try sales because she has a good personality, outgoing, very opposite to me.

I said no, because no one in either of our families was into that. Well, she went into sales for a rival magazine, loved it, and did it. The great thing about sales is it gets you out of your office and out meeting people. So that was again the kind of place Hong Kong was. But we had two kids. We both have strong families. We didn't want to have kids growing up as expats, especially when they're Chinese but they're not really Chinese. We wanted them to be rooted in an American community and have cousins and uncles and aunts and so forth. So that was the other impetus for coming home.

Nelson: So you come home to—

McGurn: I came home to the *Journal.* The *Far Eastern Economic Review* is part of Dow Jones, and Bob Bartley brought me home to be, I think, chief editorial writer here in '98. So I came back in '98.

Nelson: You are, as best I can tell, becoming a speechwriter for a President—

McGurn: The farthest thing from my mind. No desire. I mean, if you've done these other interviews, you know that most often the route to the White House for most people is working on a campaign. In fact, when you want to hire someone—if you wanted to hire a speechwriter, you'd say, "What did they do for us in the campaign?" That's the first question. That's kind of like boot camp for a lot of people. That's where they met over bad coffee late one night in Iowa. They forge a lot of bonds. I didn't have that. I came from an outside place.

Nelson: But you have a real pulpit, the editorial page.

McGurn: Right. I was just writing editorials, unsigned things. I wrote the occasional signed piece; I probably would do three or four a year, but most of my work was unsigned then.

Nelson: This is '98?

McGurn: Yes, '98.

Nelson: Through—

McGurn: I joined the Bush administration. I started two days before the second inaugural.

Nelson: So you were doing this through the first Bush—

McGurn: Right, term. In fact, I know later you want to get to this. In 2001 Mike Gerson tried to hire me to be a speechwriter and I went down and I had breakfast with him the day before the first inaugural. I went back, talked to my wife. We basically concluded we came from Hong Kong. We wanted to have our girls grow up in a community here. I had no desire to work for the government or any of that stuff. It was a joint decision, we passed on it.

In here it says he tried to hire me twice. I think it was only once. I don't know what their conversations were, but I knew some of the people. I had known Matt Scully. He had been at *National Review* when I was there for part of it.

That passed, and then President Bush in 2001 in May gave the commencement address at Notre Dame, my alma mater, and I was invited to go out with them on Air Force One, and I did with a group of other people. I don't know who did that or why.

Nelson: In what capacity were you invited?

McGurn: I think just a friend of the President. I wrote about it for the *Journal.* We wrote an editorial on it, "God, Man, and Notre Dame" or "God, Man, and Bush" or something, so it was a story. I flew out there. That's where I met him, on the plane. I was not looking to work for him. I thought when I said no, that was it. If I had ever wanted a political career, I had closed the door to it.

Nelson: Let me back you up a little bit. As a writer you're writing about the 2000 campaign.

McGurn: Right.

Nelson: You're writing about the first term. Maybe you could just back it up a little bit to when do you first begin taking account of George W. Bush in your capacity as an editorial writer?

McGurn: I'm not sure I wrote a lot about the campaign. Paul Gigot was in Washington then. I think he would have done more of that kind of overtly political stuff. Generally, a lot of the editorial writers here—I would be writing about policies and so forth. So yes, he was President. We paid attention to him.

Nelson: I mean as a candidate. Part of the Bush appeal in 2000 was policy-based, right?

McGurn: Right. Also that he wasn't Bill Clinton. The *Journal* had had a huge campaign—remember, I was just part of the *Journal* and not the boss. The Clinton years were years of huge upheaval and so forth for a lot of people. The *Journal* didn't really think Al Gore was the guy to lead the country. At the *Journal* I don't recall the huge enthusiasm for George W. Bush. That would be more—you'd have to ask—well, Bob Bartley is dead now. I do remember at one point Bob Bartley, Paul Gigot, and Amity Shlaes went to Texas to meet with him, which he did with a lot of people. A lot of people came away wowed. I wasn't in those meetings.

But we had, for example—I remember Condoleezza Rice coming through and talking. It was very impressive to hear her talk about China.

Nelson: During the campaign?

McGurn: Yes, during the campaign. We had a lot of it.

Nelson: What were you writing about that got you on Gerson's radar screen to want to hire you?

McGurn: The answer is I don't know. I think Mike knew that I broadly shared a lot of their values. I think he knew I had written on religion and so forth. Not in that sort of direct evangelical way, but I think he knew I was not a guy who looked down on people of faith and so forth. So he thought I was compatible.

I'm pretty sure Matt Scully was the guy who was pushing me because he had known me at *National Review.* The speechwriting under Bush was a very collaborative effort, so a lot of it is also personality. We didn't have room for prima donnas or anything, so that may have been part of it. You'd have to ask them. Again, I'm not sure I wasn't their ninth choice.

Nelson: Well, so how did Gerson frame his deal, and did you turn it down for reasons other than you just didn't want to move again?

McGurn: That was the main reason.

Nelson: I gather when you came back you were living in New York or New Jersey.

McGurn: Yes, New Jersey. We were living in the town I'm still living in, a different house but same town.

Nelson: Madison?

McGurn: Yes, Madison. We mainly turned it down because we wanted stability and we just decided—well, two things. I had no desire to work in the federal government. I loved the *Wall Street Journal.* I loved being back at the *Wall Street Journal.* This was my milieu.

It's funny. If I go someplace, I'm now defined—people say, "former White House speechwriter." That was for three-something years out of my career of now more than 30 years. That's not how I define myself. I sort of look at that as my service. I define myself as a newspaper man—all I wanted to do from the moment I came and talked to Adam Meyerson was to work for the *Wall Street Journal*, and I did. I wasn't looking for anything.

I still feel that way. This is where I want to be. There is no other perch in journalism I would rather have. I am doing now exactly what I would like to do at the place I'd like to do it, among men and women I'd like to do it with. The default was stay here. I'm very happy here and so forth. I didn't want to work for the government. I had no idea what it really entailed. I had no idea later when I accepted. Plus it would have involved a really disruptive move for my family after we had just moved and closed on a house and so forth.

I think up to then I hadn't lived in the same apartment or house for more than two years. It was like 25 years. I was ready to drop anchor.

Nelson: Had you ever written speeches?

McGurn: No.

Nelson: I would think that's a different—

McGurn: Yes. Later, when you get into—I mean to me the most interesting part, what I see that other people don't have, is just the mechanics of speechwriting in the Bush White House. All White Houses are different, from what other speechwriters have told me. It's not a process people appreciate.

Nelson: Did you know Gerson?

McGurn: I think I knew of him. I didn't know him well.

Nelson: Tell us the guy you knew.

McGurn: We're kind of in the same circles that way. Frankly, I found George Bush's approach to faith attractive. If you go back and you see the editorial, it was something like "God, Man, and Bush at Notre Dame" or something. I thought that was very attractive.

Nelson: When did the meeting with Gerson occur? Was it before the inauguration?

McGurn: Yes, it was the day before, I think.

Nelson: The day before.

McGurn: It was either the day before or two days before. It was right before. He had written the first inaugural and we met near Capitol Hill.

Nelson: The invitation was to come in and join him and Scully?

McGurn: It was John McConnell and Matt Scully.

Nelson: McConnell.

McGurn: Right. I think he had some other people and so forth. So I finally talked to my wife. We had a heart-to-heart over it and we just decided the government is not for us.

Nelson: Did you keep on doing what you'd been doing?

McGurn: Yes, I just stayed at the *Journal.*

Nelson: There are some references in one of the news stories to working briefly as a columnist for the *New York Post*, a speechwriter for Rupert Murdoch.

McGurn: Yes. Again, the timeline is complicated. I continued to work for the *Journal.* Then in 2004, through Peter Robinson, in Reagan's old—the guy who wrote, "Tear down this wall." Peter is a friend. He is at the Hoover Institution. Peter said Rupert Murdoch is looking for a speechwriter. I came up to this building to interview for it.

I remember sitting outside Rupert's office thinking, *Why the heck am I here? I like the* Journal*. I don't have any desire to do this.* But I met Rupert and he was so charming and so persuasive. Dow Jones was kind of struggling through most of the years I was there. It wasn't making money hand over fist. Rupert—it just had a different aura. Plus the main thing was I had a family and I needed more money for schools and stuff for the kids. That was my big worry.

So in September 2004 I came to work for Rupert. Part of the job was writing speeches for him, but that wasn't enough full time, so he had me write columns for the *New York Post.* I did that for only a few months. Then I got the call from Mike Gerson again. It was right after the election. I'd been here for just three or four months and I was in the luxury corporate thing. I kept expecting someone to come to the door and say, "Bill, there's been a dreadful mistake." I was in this beautiful office and so forth. Little did I know it would be Mike Gerson again.

He called that November before Thanksgiving, after the elections. He said he was leaving as chief speechwriter and the President would like me to take his place. I think he had obviously suggested me. So would I come down and see the President.

I had a real conundrum because first of all, I had just accepted this job from Rupert. How do I tell this guy I can't do it? So I asked Peter Robinson. He said, "You're the son of a Marine. You cannot say no when your country is calling you like this." That was the determinative factor. I was a draftee; I did not want to go. But we were now at war. We were not at war when I was first asked. I had come to know two moms of Marines, each of whom had lost a son in Iraq and so forth. I knew other people. I'm trying to raise my children to say don't just look out for numero uno, do something larger than yourself. How could I say that and be asked to make my tiny sacrifice of moving when other people are giving their lives and so forth? So that was the dispositive element in that. I just didn't feel I could say no.

I went to Mr. Murdoch and I told him this. Rupert is just a real patriot. He said you can come back whenever you want. He knew I wasn't leaving him for a better offer, being fickle. He also knew I didn't really want to go. I took a huge pay cut. All that pay that I got was cut and I think it was cut below my *Journal* pay. A lot of people at the White House are either very young, where the money is actually good for them, or they're lawyers, older, and they've built up savings. There weren't as many families in my age group where your family is young, you're still doing it. I was in that place where for me it was a huge financial sacrifice to go down there. But again, compared to these moms who had given their sons—they have a hole in their lives every day for that. So I didn't feel we could whine or anything. My wife felt the same way.

Rupert was a patriot; he realized I wasn't doing this for myself or leaving because someone gave me a better offer but because we were at war. That was the dispositive element.

Nelson: Let's back it up a little bit. You mentioned the trip to Notre Dame. That was in 2001?

McGurn: Yes.

Nelson: Was that the first time you'd been in the same—?

McGurn: Yes, anything with President Bush.

Nelson: First impressions.

McGurn: He is very gregarious. The President sits at the front of Air Force One and there are different compartments. There is a whole compartment for staff. Then we were in this little compartment for guests. It's like a little room. They have comfortable chairs. He came back. I remember I asked him to sign—you have a little card that says Air Force One and it says Mr. McGurn, you are the guest. People keep it as a souvenir. I thought I would never be on Air Force One again; this is it. So I asked him to sign it and then everyone else asked him to sign it. He was very outgoing. It was a good day for me. He loved going there.

I remember he mentioned he was going on to Yale. I flew back separately from Chicago. He was going on to Yale. I remember him telling me that he was going to get a much better reception at Notre Dame than at his own alma mater later on.

Nelson: The speech itself?

McGurn: I think it focused on the homeless. It also was challenging people to support faith-based institutions and their work. I'm not sure who wrote it. I think it may have been Pete Wehner, but I'm not entirely sure.

Nelson: So this was pre-9/11.

McGurn: Oh, yes, definitely. Notre Dame by custom has generally had the President-elect give the commencement speech after—

Nelson: The just-elected President.

McGurn: Yes.

Nelson: I'm thinking, of course, also pre-9/11 is the stem cell decision. Did you have anything to do with that?

McGurn: No, that happened right before 9/11 in August. I did write a long column defending President Bush, but I didn't interview him or talk to him about that. I thought he had a very reasonable compromise. The irony is that he was being attacked by some fellow Catholics. Anyway, I had written a defense of that. That wasn't yet on the radar at this point. He was still newly inaugurated. The first year for a President is kind of fun, the commencement addresses. When you're first elected for either party, people are eager to get you because they haven't seen you that much. They get to see you up close.

Nelson: We ask everybody about their experience of the morning of 9/11 and whatever the relevant aftermath was.

McGurn: The morning of 9/11 I got on the train that I still take, although the train then used to

take me to Hoboken and from Hoboken I would take a ferry over to our offices downtown.

Nelson: Lower Manhattan?

McGurn: Yes, lower Manhattan, in something called the World Financial Center.

Nelson: OK.

McGurn: So I was on the train. I always went up to the first car. I like the window so I was sitting by the window. Someone came out and I guess the first plane had hit. Someone said, "Look at that. There's smoke coming out of one of the towers." A conductor came from the first to talk to someone in front of me. Maybe he was an employee.

Nelson: Did you see the tower?

McGurn: I saw the first tower that got hit. We just saw the smoke. We only saw the smoke coming out of the tower; we didn't know a plane had hit.

Nelson: Right.

McGurn: When I lived in Hong Kong, I lived in a high-rise, and across from me there had been a fire on the 40th floor or whatever and I remember there was a lot of smoke. It looked terrible. No one got hurt. I just thought it was a fire on the top floor. I didn't think anything of it.

I got off of the train and was making my way to the ferry and then they canceled the ferry. I still didn't know planes had hit. I knew there was smoke in one of the towers. I'm not looking up. I'm just a commuter getting on a train. I found a woman from my town who actually worked in the building next to mine. I used to occasionally see her, a friend of mine on our commute, so we were going together. I think I met her after I got to the ferry. I said, "The ferry isn't running." So we were going to take the PATH [Port Authority Trans-Hudson] train, which is like a subway.

Nelson: Under the river.

McGurn: It goes between the states. When we got there that was closed off. There's a big hub at Hoboken. Then I think we looked at buses and we realized nothing was going. We're not looking up. So we went to Starbucks just to have a coffee and figure out what to do. I didn't know we were under attack.

I called my wife and she was freaking out. It was one of the weird things that I was right there and I knew less than people in Tokyo who are watching this on the screen. My wife said, "We've been under terrorist attack. You have to come home." I said, "I might have to put out a paper." I was still trying to get in. The woman next to me—because of the signals, the rods were on top of the World Trade Center, her cell phone service couldn't get through.

We came out of there and I was still thinking I was going to get across and go to work because another building might be attacked; my building would be OK. So we came out and I remember looking up at the first tower and I said, "I can't see the tower." It had come down. But again, if you asked me how a tower would come down, I would think it would go like this. I didn't see it

come down.

Nelson: Fall to the side.

McGurn: I didn't see the thing.

Nelson: Like a tree.

McGurn: But there's all the smoke. You know how usually when there's smoke you can discern the lines. I said, "I can't see the tower." So it was puzzling to me. It just didn't occur to me that it would fall. It just didn't occur to me. Just a little footnote to this; when I was a child my dad—one of our friends growing up was head of the Port Authority so I remember when the World Trade Center was a hole in the ground. He also brought us on top of the World Trade Center before it was finished. So I had been up there when there was no glass in the walls. I had grown up with the World Trade Center. I couldn't imagine it going.

Anyway, I thought at this point it is just confusion; we should probably get out of here and go back home because we might be swamped with people getting out. So we got on a train to go back to Madison. As it just lurches to go out it is deathly quiet and someone said, "The second tower is down." I remember there is a line in Augustine's *Confessions* where he talks about hearing of the sack of Rome. I just remember it is just so far beyond imagination. I got home. Is the water going to be poisoned? You just didn't know what was going on. Then within an hour—the *Journal* has offices in Princeton. It is actually called South Brunswick, but it's right next to Princeton, a big printing plant. I thought I'd better go down there. We might be putting out the paper there. It's just an hour drive.

So I went down there and I spent the day there and Paul and I and a few others put out the paper. Then I got home. My brother had been in the second tower. He had been in the bombing of the first—was it '92?

Nelson: In '93.

McGurn: The '93 bombing. After the first plane hit—he didn't see the plane hit and he didn't know what happened, but he saw a typewriter keyboard go out his window. He was on the 50th floor or whatever and he said, "We've got to get out of here." No one really believed him. So he went in the stairwell. He wrote a piece about it for the *Journal*, Brian McGurn. He got in the stairwell with a friend of his and a pregnant woman who was a temp and they helped her down. They went down and while they were going down another plane hit their tower and they tumbled down a flight of stairs and everything. It was just chaos in there.

He got out and I think he called my dad just as he got out, but then we hadn't heard from him in hours so we didn't know if the tower fell on him or whatever. They dropped this woman off somewhere where her husband could get her and he walked up to the George Washington Bridge—miles. We didn't hear from him for a while. So I didn't know if he was missing and so forth.

So I'm asking my wife what is going on and she said there are three dads in our parochial school that we haven't heard from. You know in the beginning you think maybe they'll climb out of the

rubble. One of them was British. I remember getting home really late, like midnight. One of the families was not far from our house, just two blocks. I remember seeing the lights on. You know how you see houses— it's lit up when everyone else is in bed and you know it is a troubled house.

Nelson: Yes.

McGurn: To me one of the saddest things was seeing the empty cars in the lot belonging to these dads who never made it home. There were something like 11 kids among these three dads who never came home that day. So yes, it was very personal. In the beginning we just didn't know what was going to happen next.

Nelson: It occurred to me while you were talking that there were cell phones in 2001, but there weren't smart phones. So you couldn't go to the—

McGurn: And here, for our problem a lot of the transmission was on the top of the World Trade Center. But it always struck me, like you were saying, people could be watching this in Tokyo and have more information than me standing right there, because I just thought it was a fire initially. I was just trying to get trains. I didn't know the full story. Other people were announcing what—now when I've looked at the clips, people are showing the clips, especially of the second plane going right in. I didn't see any of that. I didn't frankly see any of the President because I went home and then was trying to figure out what to do. I knew we still had a paper to get out, so I went down to South Brunswick. I think Paul was the only one.

Nelson: You didn't see the speeches he made on 9/11? Is that what you're saying?

McGurn: It's a blur now. I don't remember them. I was busy worrying about my family and then trying to do the paper and making phone calls, so we didn't really know what was going on.

Nelson: I think most people would agree that among the most memorable speeches of his Presidency were the National Cathedral speech and then the speech to Congress on the 20th of September.

McGurn: Right.

Nelson: Did you think, *I was offered a position as a speechwriter there and now I'm listening to—*

McGurn: No.

Nelson: Not regret, but listening to these speeches and thinking anything at all?

McGurn: I never connected. I was inspired by the speech. I think people were more inspired when he came up and had the bullhorn. That was a much more personal level, just being up here.

Nelson: You didn't happen to see that?

McGurn: I did on TV. No, I wasn't down at the rubble.

Nelson: Because the *Journal* offices then were pretty close.

McGurn: Yes, what happened is they were trashed. All the stuff came in and they were completely trashed. We were in South Brunswick for two or three months and then they moved the editorial page near Times Square. There was a building that they had for a dot-com that went bust, so they had all these terminals. It had never been turned on. We were there for about a year after that. But we were in South Brunswick, New Jersey, Princeton, so I was driving down every day. It was about an hour from my home.

Nelson: Anything else to put in this period between Bush becoming President and the offer to become chief speechwriter?

McGurn: I don't think so.

Nelson: You didn't spend more time with him?

McGurn: No, I'm pretty sure—I may have been in a public event where he was speaking, but I had no intimate time, or even in a room where you would say I was with him. I didn't have anything like that.

Nelson: As a citizen, as an editorial page writer, what did you think of his first term?

McGurn: Primarily for me the issue was the war. I think we were supportive at the paper. It really didn't turn sour until after I got there and took the job. That's when things started to go sour. At that time I think most of the country was fairly unified and so forth, so there weren't any of those issues at the time.

Nelson: Did you think of the war in Iraq as a continuation or an extension of the war in Afghanistan?

McGurn: Yes, but remember that didn't happen until much later, after we'd been in Afghanistan for a while.

Nelson: Right.

McGurn: I had been in Afghanistan as a reporter, so I knew that. So yes, I thought it was just an extension of going in. Even when I first joined, things were still pretty optimistic. Two thousand five was a really bad year and 2006 was worse, in a way. Even the first part of 2005. If you remember, they did the purple fingers and everything. It was pretty positive up until then.

Nelson: The first elections.

McGurn: Right. So basically the President's popularity didn't start to plunge until I worked for them. I don't like to connect the two, but the timeline's there.

Nelson: Do you want to take a break?

McGurn: I'm fine.

Nelson: We're getting you into the White House. Tell me about the job that you inherited.

McGurn: As I told you, I got a call from Mike Gerson.

Nelson: Was this before or after his heart attack?

McGurn: I think it was before because I think he didn't have it until Christmas.

Nelson: So he was leaving?

McGurn: Yes, he was leaving. He said he was leaving. He was going to a policy position, which is what he really wanted to do, I think. The difference is that he had a personal relationship with the President. When I want down to the White House, I was ushered into the Oval Office. I'd never been in it before. In fact, I'd seen Pete Wehner a few times down there, I think, because I knew Pete. I always saw him across the street like at a coffee shop because it is just easier than going through the rigmarole of going in. So I hadn't been in there at all.

The President just asked me, "Why do you want the job?" I basically told him the truth. I didn't really want the job. What happened was that I just felt I couldn't say no. All these people had made terrible sacrifices and I was being asked just for a tiny inconvenience in my life. I felt I couldn't look at my children and tell them anything that I believed if I didn't make this little inconvenience.

I have to say it was not easy—especially for my wife, who had to move and do a lot of this on her own. But it was a great opportunity in so many ways. I remember my friend, Jimmy Lai, the guy in Hong Kong, said, "No one will ever say your children aren't really American because they're born in China." In the meantime, we had gotten my youngest. The summer of 2004 we got our youngest child. So seven months before, she had been in this orphanage in China and seven months later she's meeting the President of the United States. That was a very overwhelming feeling.

I remember that I had given an interview. In those days when you did an interview—I knew enough—when you're a speechwriter or something, you don't want too much attention in the press. You don't want to be the story. So you have to give enough color that they get something, but not enough to hang yourself on anything. They did the story—new voice takes over. When the lady was leaving—it was an AP [Associated Press] woman—she saw a picture and she asked about my youngest. I was by that time at the White House and I had a picture on my desk. I said, "Yes, she grew up in this shitty Chinese orphanage and now she's seeing the President." She put "cruddy" or something in her story. She used that quote.

Then the official Chinese news agency, Xinhua, ran a version of that, I think. I asked a friend in Hong Kong how did they translate that, and they wrote something like "excellent public welfare facility." Their headline was funny, like "White House Pen Has Chinese Connection," or something like that. So that was how they did it.

I went down. It was kind of a pro forma meeting with the President. I think he was just looking at it to see if I was someone he could get along with. He was great to me. He was just great to my family. In the interim I had left the *Journal* to go work for Mr. Murdoch and I was writing

speeches, so that was part of the thing. But let me tell you, at the White House the learning curve—writing—I learned how different writing speeches is from writing articles. They're very different skills and almost contradictory.

Nelson: Elaborate.

McGurn: A lot of times people think that the best guys to get for speechwriting are guys or gals from the news business because it makes sense. After all, they're writers. In fact, I learned that was not really true. My situation today—not this actual day—I have a column that is 800 words. It might be 796, it might be 802, but my space is pretty much 800 words.

My goal is to stuff as much information as I can in there, to cut out excess verbiage and to really make it taut and cram the information in there. One reason you can do that is someone reading my story can stop, talk to you, and go back to the story. If they don't understand a paragraph, they can go back and reread it. A speech is a totally different thing. Oral is very different from written. So a lot of things that work very well written do not work orally. One reason is there is no going back. You miss the train. You can't reread the paragraph.

President Bush says, "We've got to make it so Bubba can understand it." I can get into that later, his particular approach to speechwriting, which is really not well understood and probably the most fascinating part of my job. So I learned. Also, say a President has two terms like President Obama or President Bush. He'll have, I don't know, 18 to two dozen speechwriters all together flowing in, maybe a little more. He doesn't want all different speechwriters. He wants everyone to sound like him. It can be very frustrating because he doesn't want to see your pyrotechnics and how you do it, and say you can do it better. He is interested in having everyone adapt his voice and his mannerisms. That's very difficult for people who are used to writing—especially who have their own style, especially who are older.

I found that the better candidates for doing it were younger, had not been writing in papers, so they didn't have their own voice established yet. There was nothing wrong with their voices; it's just it's not the President's voice, and the President had a very definite way of going about it. But when you do something orally you have to sort of tell people what you're going to tell them, outline the story, then you have to give them markers along the way.

Everyone has been to horrible long speeches where you think they're winding up and they say, "Now for my second point." I was at a speech once of a coach in my daughter's school. She used the word "finally" nine times. When you say "finally" it needs to be finally. You're signaling to people where you are. So if you tell people—I'll put it in President Bush's framework. He took a course at Yale called American Oratory. I can't remember the professor's name, probably some of the other people have mentioned him. [Ed. note: Rollin G. Osterweis] He's very famous. John Kerry took the same course, and John Kerry was on the Yale debate team, and Bill Buckley took the course. So this professor was very famous.

I always tried to look up to see if I could find his curricula, but I couldn't. As far as I could see he just had them read different speeches and go through it. But his main point, and certainly the main point President Bush took away, is you have your introduction. You tell people the three points you're going to make. You make the three points. Then you have your peroration and your

conclusion. He insisted on that logic. Sometimes it's very literal, sometimes it's a little hidden. I can see it. It's like seeing a skeleton beneath the surface. You may not see it, but I can see it.

That's why the President says, for example, if you're giving a health care speech, or say you're giving a terrorism speech, "We're going to defeat al-Qaeda and there are three points to our strategy. The first point of our strategy for defeating al-Qaeda is this." Then you go to the second. A lot of writers find that dull, but to the audience there is a map and they know where they are in the road even if they can't follow anything. The President was very big on logic. He had a lot of other foibles and stuff, but logic, more than purple prose. Most writers want to get there and write "the mystic chords of memory," and stuff like that. He was much more interested in the logic, having the logic follow.

I really learned a great deal from seeing that disciplined-for-the-speech approach. But they're very different. Writers frequently have their own styles. It's much harder to adapt. If you look through history, a lot of times it's been young people writing these speeches. They're in their 20s. There's a reason; they can adapt a little more to the President's style. That's what I found.

Nelson: Did he take this away from that oratory course in general, or were there particular speeches that he admired?

McGurn: In general. Then there were a lot of little subsystems. I have to say it took me a while to find that voice. I was in the position of too big to fail since I was the chief speechwriter. He was very patient with me. But there were a lot of things. For example, a paragraph—he wanted it to follow logically from the preceding paragraph, but we couldn't begin them with "but" or "at the same time." They also had to be able to be lifted out and able to stand on their own, and it is very difficult.

The second thing he had was that if you mention something one place you can't mention it later. In other words, if you're giving a speech on what the administration is doing and you talk about education, get it all done there, don't do it later. That is an excellent rule. It can't always be followed. Sometimes something comes up in a different context. But there were a lot of things like that. He was always, again, looking for the logic.

I'm sure you've heard from other people, the staff people come back with their comments and a lot of them are really undisciplined and they don't know the President's style. They just want to insert their little pet thing. President Bush called them "cram-ins," meaning that they didn't follow the logic. He'd ask, "Whose cram-in is that?"

I have to confess when we didn't really like the person or we didn't agree with it, we sort of did exactly what they asked us to do without finessing it so it would stand out the way the President would see it.

Nelson: So if you like them you could fix their language.

McGurn: Here's the thing. The President liked his speechwriters because we're on the same team. Our job is to make him look good and do what he wants. We don't have side agendas. We're not the policy people. We actually do set policy in the sense that the speech—and we can get to that later, like the surge speech—often *is* policy setting. They set it. The President says it,

that's policy.

We generally, however, don't have other agendas. A lot of other people do have other agendas, and it's not necessarily wrong. You hire people and sometimes they think their agenda is the President's. But all Presidents are frustrated by staff that seem often to have their own agendas, Cabinet Secretaries and so on. The speechwriter is one of the few people that he can kind of let his hair down and let them know, "You're on my side because we have the same interest in doing it."

So you go through this whole staffing process where they give you all their input. A lot of people would be afraid when the President got the speech, especially if he didn't like it. We loved it when it came to the President. We loved it, even if he hated the speech, because he would go through it and edit it with us and we didn't have to answer to anyone else. The problem before is conflicting bosses. The Secretary of Defense says this, the Chief of Staff says that, the Secretary of State says this. We try to navigate. We don't outrank them, so we have to take it seriously. By the time it goes to the President, he is the only one we have to listen to. You're all trying to guess—they say this, they say that. How do you put that in a way that fits in with what the President's priorities are?

When it goes to the President, my experience was even when he hated the speech and might have been mad at us—one time he asked my younger speechwriter, I think on the immigration speech—"Do you think this is a good speech?" There is no answer to that. If you say yes, he's going to tell you all the reasons it isn't a good speech. If you say no, he'll say, "Why are you giving me a speech you know is bad?" So there are not a lot of options.

Some of the speeches you ask about there are a lot of little anecdotes about that. But the speechwriters, we generally had an interest. Even if he might have been a little annoyed, he was very professional. He never said, "We can't fix this." Sometimes what he would do is we'd go through it. He'd give us stuff. He'd say, "OK, come back to me." Then he would get what we'd call "compare" on Word.

Nelson: Track changes.

McGurn: Yes, track changes. You'd see it in red so he could see what we did. He'd say, "OK, we're getting there." Then you'd go over it. So it would be several edits before—it didn't have to be perfect the second time. He just needed to see the ball going forward. Then like hammering a piece of steel into shape, he'd keep hammering on it until it got where he wanted it.

Nelson: I wonder, did you give a printed version that showed changes, or is he doing it—

McGurn: No, he gets it printed. He didn't do anything on-screen. He didn't have a computer there. He actually showed a lot of confidence in us. There was a speech, I think at the Army War College, when I was relatively new. There was something in the beginning that he just hated. I can't remember what it was. Someone, I think the Chief of Staff, Andy Card, suggested maybe we cancel it. Not a great vote of confidence for us, right?

Because he had this thing in the beginning he just couldn't move on. This was the night before the speech. It was a nighttime speech. But he basically said, "Fix it. Do this." You had the

confidence—I mean, he could go to sleep. He's not thinking, *This is going to be a disaster*. He's thinking, *They'll do what I say. It will be where I want it.* It was great to work for a man like that.

Nelson: For somebody who had such clear ideas about what he wanted speeches to do and how he wanted that done, how did he have the confidence that you, as not a young junior person and as someone with whom he really had no relationship, would be able to do that the way he wanted it?

McGurn: I don't know. I think it was less in me. I don't take this as a swipe against him or against me, but he knew what he wanted and he believed he could tell people how to get there, which he did. Actually, it took a while for me to get it. As I said, I was too big to fail. He was patient. He had favorites of who could have a style—a young guy, Chris Michel—

Nelson: I wondered about that. How does somebody who is that young—

McGurn: He started as an intern and he just was good.

Nelson: An intern for the speechwriters' office?

McGurn: Yes. He was good, a smart guy, young. He just did more and more. He was in his 20s. He liked sports, went to Yale. He was kind of like the son he didn't have. He was a very good, spirited guy. I love Chris. Chris and I did the surge speech together.

Nelson: The surge speech in '07?

McGurn: Yes. I don't know if you're looking up—I see you have the speeches here and you printed off the rhetoric. Earlier on you were talking about who wrote the speeches. I didn't have anything to do with the second inaugural, that was all done when I got there. The first big one was the State of the Union that I worked with Mike Gerson on. But you list them—they must have looked at the original thing, because at the bottom it says who did it. One change from Mike Gerson when I was there: He always used to list at the bottom in rank who had been involved. When I did it, the first person was the lead speechwriter. Then it was in rank. So partly to make it easier, if you had changes, you would know whom you go to.

Nelson: OK.

McGurn: So you could tell during my years after a while who did what because I put that first and so forth.

Nelson: Gerson, in his book—first of all, he has very nice things to say about you, but it seems like the basis for his decision to stop being head speechwriter was when he said, "I was to hire a new head of speechwriting, releasing me from the daily tyranny of small Presidential events and allowing me to focus on larger projects." Then he goes on to say, "This prayer was answered in the form of Bill McGurn, a brilliant writer and a principled man." You read this and you think, *OK, so Mike Gerson wanted to continue to be the chief speechwriter for the speeches he was interested in and wanted a new chief speechwriter who would do the stuff he wasn't interested in.* I wonder, was this a handoff or was this—

McGurn: I will say it's hard. I don't think Mike approached it that way. I think he really wanted to be in policy. But I think the President was comfortable with Mike and didn't want to lose him. It's like if you have the old family plumber that you've known for years and years and then he says, "I'm retiring and my nephew is taking over the business and he's a really good guy and he is really smart." OK, you might like the nephew, but if the guy is still in the house, you're probably going to call the other guy because you're just used to him.

Mike eventually left, but I don't think he was doing anything sneaky. It was frustrating. He was involved in a lot of the big speeches sometimes, but I think that was what the President wanted.

Nelson: So you didn't feel like you have the position but not the authority that the chief speechwriter should have? Or did you feel that way sometimes?

McGurn: I wouldn't have put it that way because I didn't know what the structure was before. I did sometimes feel frustrated. I tried not to get caught up in this game. Everyone in the White House has frustrations. I remember telling my wife, "Look, we came down here to serve a wartime President. So any frustrations—if we put those forward, then we're saying that's not really why we're here."

I didn't talk to the press about who wrote what speech or anything. We didn't do any of that. So in my time I tried to stay out of that. But he was there for the big speeches because the President wanted him to be.

At the end of the day, you work for the President. A lot of people don't understand that in the White House. A lot of times things that may seem unjust—you're there at the service of the President, and a lot of times things are the way they are because they're the way he wants them to be.

Nelson: Let me ask this now because it has come up at some point. Matthew Scully wrote an article for the *Atlantic* basically saying Mike Gerson was a credit hog.

McGurn: Right. Let me say—I think if you look at my years, you'll see no quotes about that or nothing about me. My business was staying out of that. I don't know what happened before. I'm just not going to get into it. I didn't do it when I was in the White House and I'm not going to do it now.

Nelson: I wanted to—

McGurn: That's fine.

Nelson: I can't not mention it at some point. I can't think of another article written about a speechwriting shop that was of that kind.

McGurn: I'll just say that the article he wrote was not about my speechwriting shop. I'm very proud that we didn't have those disputes. There are always injustices and there are always hurt feelings and so forth. It's the nature of the beast. It doesn't excuse a lot of things, but I'm proud that I didn't have any of those accusations or anything when I was there.

Nelson: Was your office in the West Wing?

McGurn: In the West Wing, yes.

Nelson: Were any other speechwriters in the West Wing?

McGurn: No, but I think in general that was common in the sense that the department head for a lot of groups would be in the West Wing because the West Wing is so small. Then the deputies and so forth would be in the OEOB [Old Executive Office Building] next door. So one of the things was I was in a very tiny office on the second floor near the stairwell when I first started.

Nelson: Is this the "bat cave" referred to in some article?

McGurn: I think that might have been at the OEOB. I was in a small office.

Nelson: "Small, windowless West Wing bat cave" was his description. This is a story by Elisabeth Bumiller in the *Post.*

McGurn: That would have been the first, because the second—I had two offices. This was my first office. Yes, that was a windowless office. Josh Bolten then gave me what would have been Karl's old office, a big—it would have been Mrs. [Hillary Rodham] Clinton's office before, a giant office. Even with that I found that the advantage of not being in the West Wing and across the street—they had much bigger offices and it was a little bit more run down, although it has all been refurbished. My deputy, Marc Thiessen, if you walked up the stairs at the office on the right, a huge office, had a balcony.

Nelson: In the Eisenhower building?

McGurn: In the Eisenhower building. It was the first one to the right as you go up there. It was huge. It had a balcony. On Fridays we'd go out on the balcony and have martinis and cigars. We generally liked editing the speeches in his office because there were no phones ringing from my office. It was just more private, more room. He had a huge—it was just easier to relax. So our working thing—I think Mike did the same thing with John McConnell and Matt Scully.

Nelson: I can see being close, being in the West Wing as being something—

McGurn: Yes, everyone wants to do it and everything is rank. One of the things I didn't realize when I got there was how rank-conscious the White House is. The ranks—Assistant to the President, all that stuff. They're equivalent to military ranks.

I think the top rank that I had, Assistant to the President for Speechwriting, is like a four-star general and Special Assistant is a one-star general. They don't really matter except for pay, and also if there is a big event, protocol, who sits with So-and-So. Generals have always been irritated to sit next to a 25-year-old speechwriter. But it is conscious, because unless you're in those first categories, commissioned officer, you can't eat at the White House mess. You had to eat at the mess in the OEOB. People called it the "people's mess." It was really messy. It didn't always work.

It didn't matter to me except that it matters to everyone else. So when you have a rank, the good thing is that I came in at the highest rank.

Nelson: Did you know to ask for that?

McGurn: No. I knew nothing about it, but Mike had been at that rank. The other people who were there know that, and they know that you need a certain rank to be taken seriously in the rest of the government. I didn't know anything about that, how rank-conscious the White House was.

The other thing to keep in mind—for the President's staff, National Security Advisor, Chief of Staff, and this, we all had that same rank, but most of them were my bosses. It didn't mean that you were equal. It's just pay grades and all the other stuff. Even though you have the same rank it doesn't mean that the other guy—the Chief of Staff is our boss. The National Security Advisor is taken a little more seriously than a speechwriter.

Nelson: Yes. You hear "proximity is power" when people talk about the West Wing. Did you find that? Did you find being there, other than how it made others regard you, had some practical benefit?

McGurn: I think it did. First of all, the President would say, "I want to see you in two minutes." We saw him every week for a regular editorial meeting.

Nelson: "We" meaning?

McGurn: I'm not sure Mike did this. I think Mike might have met with the President alone. He had a prior relationship and a long one, which I did not have. Going back to the writers, I think that is a very important thing. Arguably, I would say Ted Sorensen was the best Presidential speechwriter in terms of rhetoric, [John F.] Kennedy's speechwriter. The reason he was is that he had a long relationship with Kennedy. So when a Defense Secretary would come in and make changes, he had the presence, and Kennedy knew him, as not quite an equal but almost an equal. Most of the time the difference between a good speech and a bad speech is all these people trying to gunk it up with crap. Sorensen was in a position to say no, which not many other people are in. Mike was in a little bit of that position because he knew the President very well, and his style.

So yes, being in the White House helped that. The speechwriting team had a weekly meeting, a regularly meeting, I think on Thursdays. Then when a speech would come up—the President always wanted it two days before the speech because if he didn't like it or he wanted to work on it, he wanted to have a full day to work on it. When we were working on a speech with him, as I said, he might spend 20 minutes or half an hour going through. Then he'd say, "Go back, work it out, and then come back to me." We might do that six times in a day.

Then of course there are times when you do practices. For a State of the Union it is just hours and hours. It varied. But we had regular meetings with him.

Nelson: They would come over from—

McGurn: The two other speechwriters, Marc Thiessen and Chris Michel.

Nelson: Again, I'm wondering. Was it because you readily bump into the National Security Advisor?

McGurn: I think so. You see people. It's small and it's intimate. Yes, I think it may be one of those things that if you're not in there you feel really distant. If Paul Gigot was in the next building I might actually have the access. I might just feel differently having to walk into the next building than to walk down there. I just think—it's definitely a feeling. A lot of people in the OEOB don't go into the Oval Office. We had it slightly different because the President is meeting with our team.

Usually I would take my deputy and assistant deputy, Marc Thiessen and Chris Michel and whoever was the lead writer for the speech, which again was different from Mike. Mike and John and Matt, they had a remarkable way of writing. They would sit down and sentence by sentence the three of them write it. I just constitutionally couldn't do that. Speeches, being oral, you have to read them aloud. So it could work on paper, but—that's why we did do a collaborative effort. But generally what I would do was assign someone: You write the draft and then we will work off the draft and fix it, put applause lines in, this sort of thing. Make sure the logic's going and see how it sounds. So it was a slight difference that way.

It was remarkable how they did it. The first big speech I did—again, I was not there for the second inaugural—was the first State of the Union, and that's how they did it. Mike would just say, "Three-page, OK, we'll pick up here." I've just never done writing like that before in my life, so I was kind of amazed by it.

Nelson: The staff you had inherited and how you modified that staff?

McGurn: A lot of people were leaving. Matt Scully left. John didn't leave, but John had sort of become on the side Vice President [Richard B.] Cheney's lead guy. So he basically was doing that. He would occasionally come in and take over. He did some speeches for us, but he generally was doing that, and my team was doing some of the other ones. But John did a few.

I remember he was especially great when we were short staffed. I think it was [William] Rehnquist's funeral—John had certain skills. John loved the government; I mean in a good sense. I'm not criticizing as a conservative. He loved the formality and stuff. For an occasion like the State of the Union or a state funeral he was just great.

I always said that if President [Jimmy] Carter had died during the time I would have asked John to write the eulogy because he would be gracious in a way I might not be able to be.

Nelson: [Gerald] Ford did die, didn't he?

McGurn: Ford did die. Ford was a Republican. It was easier.

Nelson: I see what you mean.

McGurn: John just was great at those little—and John and Matt and Mike—obviously in retrospect you see there were certain irritants. With three writers, you're just always going to have that. But they did have a kind of magic. I was in awe of that. It's a great talent. And they

each contributed something to it. John just had this marvelous stuff.

I remember the State of the Union when Mrs. [Nancy] Pelosi took over and he wrote the paragraph—her dad had been mayor of Baltimore. He just wrote a very gracious paragraph. John was big on logic. Matt wasn't as logical, but he was very poetic, and they have since worked together on things. They're kind of a remarkable team.

Nelson: So the people you brought in—

McGurn: John was basically gone and Matt was basically gone. Junior staff are always leaving. So over time—Marc Thiessen had been there.

Nelson: OK.

McGurn: He actually asked me to be the deputy.

Nelson: He asked you if he could be the deputy?

McGurn: Yes. I wasn't thinking of it. I hadn't been in the government. I didn't know any of this stuff and it was all new. He was a great help because he had a real flair for it. I feel he bailed me out in the early—just knowing—again, for a newspaperman, we're writing so tersely. We're trying to be terse and not waste words. That's the opposite of speechwriting. You have to be mellifluous and expanding. I'd have a page and a half, I'm done, and I've said everything. He'd just spread it out. You just can't be terse, dumping stuff on people. You have to ladle it out slowly so they can absorb it.

Nelson: That reminds me of something, the distinction you were drawing earlier between basically writing for the eye and writing for the ear.

McGurn: Right.

Nelson: But when you're writing a Presidential speech, aren't you writing for the eye too? Especially a major speech that you expect people to read and in some cases in foreign capitals?

McGurn: They might. I think that they can still read it. It's not going to be as terse. You're not writing it for the eye, definitely. You're writing it for different audiences.

One of the questions in here later is who are you writing for. The President is always clear. You're writing for the American people. When it's a war speech, you're writing for your allies. You're writing for the troops. One of the things President Bush would say when people always wanted him to say, "We've got this wrong," or "I don't know." He said, "You know, if you're some Marine sergeant in Fallujah and you're standing on a corner, you don't need your Commander in Chief wringing his hands and saying, 'It's so hard. I'm not sure.' It's a disservice to those people."

You're writing for the enemy; you're writing for the world. Everyone. I think candidates learn that. In the beginning they're stumping in Michigan or Iowa and they say something for the local audience, whether it's union workers or soldiers, and they don't realize this when they're first

President, that people in France are looking at this, and Australia and Russia. It's a steep learning curve. They learn that too. Everyone is looking at it.

Nelson: Something else. When you were talking about Bush's overarching structure for the speech, were you all also supposed to be thinking about what is the quip going to be that is going to be on the news? Most people see part of the speech, they're not going to see the whole speech.

McGurn: I think that is a valid question and I would probably be more inclined to think of it that way. I don't think we did, because we're thinking we have to explain A or B or C. We are working at that, but we're working at how do you say it in the clearest way as opposed to the clever way. The danger of looking too much for the clever line—I liken it to if you're an outfielder and you try to make fancy catches, you're going to miss them, right? You make a fancy catch by just going after the ball with all you've got and you give it all you've got. Occasionally that means you dive or you do this and then you make the great catch, but you don't make the great catch aiming to make a great catch. You go to it aiming to make a catch, and so forth.

Nelson: Right.

McGurn: I think that's true of writing. I think when people try to be fancy it's the worst kind of thing. You try to say it clearly and in the course of doing that you'll come up with some good things. Now, that's different from—the President wants applause lines. For example, "Two years ago Saddam Hussein was raining down missiles; today he is sitting in a prison cell and facing justice." Yes, yes, applause. And Presidents all want applause lines. There is a way to get the audience. That's another thing for speechwriting. In editorial writing we don't do that. We don't expect people to sit there and halfway through your editorial stand up and cheer. [*laughter*]

Nelson: I have to say your gifts of analogy were wasted on this administration. The plumber thing and the catch thing he would have—

McGurn: Right.

Nelson: First of all—whenever you want to go to lunch.

McGurn: You tell me. I want to give you what you need.

Nelson: I wonder if we're ready to get into that first big speech you worked on, and that is the first State of the Union of the new term. Did you feel that that was kind of your baptism by fire?

McGurn: No, because in the beginning I would say that Mike really wanted to try to extricate himself from speechwriting, and I think, what is it—Al Pacino said, "I tried to get out and they dragged me back" in *The Godfather*. In the beginning I really didn't know. So it was working with Mike and John on the State of the Union and a couple of other things. In retrospect, I don't really know when it evolved from that.

I contributed lines or something, but I was a student in the beginning. President Bush in the beginning a couple of times would go over things with me. We had some near disasters. Not always because of writing or something, but just the occasions. Once we were doing a faith-

based speech. It was early on. Governor [Tommy] Thompson had, I think, some vouchers for drug treatment. So you could go to a faith-based institution.

One of the President's lines was, "At a faith-based institute run by the Methodist church they can say we're open to all drunks, but we can't say just Methodist drunks. They'd have to be other drunks." He'd say something like that. So anyway, Tommy Thompson had done this thing—instead of going through the state-approved kind of thing, government thing, they would enlist some of these faith-based programs. Kind of an Alcoholics Anonymous, but through a church or something. We were using one as an example. One of the things that was always maddening was examples in the President's speech. You would think there were 9,000 examples. But when you get mentioned by the President, they go through a lot of vetting because people have complicated lives, messy lives.

We found out at like eleven o'clock the night before the speech that this woman we were using had outstanding warrants for her arrest. We were using her as she got there and got treated. We called up the place and they said, "Yes, we know this, because part of our treatment, when someone comes in saying, 'I'm a drug addict,' part of the thing is they have a lot of problems."

Nelson: Right.

McGurn: So you come clean. What are your other problems? "I've got a son struggling in school. I'm taking care of my mother. I've got issues with the law." They try one by one to get your life adjusted. So they're not as upset about this. But when you learn at eleven o'clock at night that the one example you're using still has outstanding arrest warrants—the doctor said she'd been clean for a month. So we used her. I think we didn't use her name.

I remember telling the Staff Secretary, Brett Kavanaugh, who is now Judge Kavanaugh—his wife was pregnant. "I know you're looking for a nanny and I know this woman. Doc says she's been clean for a month." He says, "Very funny." And Jim Towey, he's a good friend of mine, Director of the faith-based thing. I'd always go—because the faith-based people would drive you mad with this. He said, "That's why they're in the faith-based program. They have a lot of problems. If you want someone who is a Boy Scout and doesn't really have a problem, they're not going to be in this."

Even a soldier. You might say this guy is a hero and then you find out he's got a wife-beating charge on him. People just had complicated issues. That could be kind of frustrating.

Nelson: I know in Brad Patterson's chapter on the speechwriting office he talks about fact checkers.

McGurn: Oh, yes.

Nelson: But this sounds like an additional layer of fact checking.

McGurn: Everything was checked. Like the tours White House staff can give of the West Wing and so forth. Everyone who works there, I think even if you work at the Department of Education you can do it. There are rankings. Your time might be one in the morning rather than I'm an assistant, I can do it pretty much when I want. You give your Social Security number to

go in. You find out all sorts of things about people.

I had a friend. I can't say who it was. He was coming over and he said, "I've just got to let you know that when I was a student at 18, it was 1978 or something, I was in Washington one night and I thought it would be really neat to hop over the fence and then hop back. I hopped over the fence. I didn't get a chance to hop back. I spent the night in jail." He was coming. Actually, it's not a problem; they just want to know. So you find out all sorts of things in people's backgrounds. People are complicated.

Nelson: The State of the Union address.

McGurn: Right.

Nelson: The first one. Here is part of what I'm thinking. Since [Lyndon B.] Johnson moved it into prime time, this is probably the biggest audience the President will have for a speech in a given year.

McGurn: Right.

Nelson: But there are these other folks in the room. Sometimes if the other party has Congress they're sitting right behind him, they're in the shot. But in that first speech when President Bush was laying out the possibility of Social Security reform, he says, "Thirteen years from now, in 2018, Social Security will be paying out more than it takes in. By the year 2042 the entire system would be exhausted and bankrupt." As the President said this, a chorus of no arose from the Democratic side of the Chamber. What I wonder is for that speech, no one had—it was a speech, but it is a television show. It is not like a typical studio audience. It has people in the opposition party.

McGurn: Let me say this, having suffered through many State of the Union speeches. I hated the State of the Unions. I think possibly, again, with the exception of John McConnell, most of the rest of us did too. John liked the grandeur of the moment.

I can't remember if it was John or Mike who had a beautiful shot of the President—it is in black and white—speaking at the State of the Union. From the podium you have three branches of government represented there. The occasion is America. It is a great stage. John really rose to that occasion. I didn't like them because no matter what anyone says, every year, Democrat or Republican, the speechwriters get together and they say, "You know what? This year we're not going to do a laundry list." And every year it's a laundry list. The reason is that's how it is made out to be. The only time it is not is I think the State of the Union after 9/11 or Pearl Harbor, when it becomes another war speech.

It's the nature of the beast because the State of the Union is not really the State of the Union, it's laying out the President's agenda. That was Social Security. So we then went on the stump. The State of the Union is the framework for how we're going to discuss Social Security or whatever else is in there. There are usually three aspects to the State of the Union. First is foreign policy, domestic policy, and maybe social policy or something like that.

Then you have to knit them together. Sometimes the President, as I said, wanted that logic.

Sometimes we'd just call it a hard break. There's no way to do it. How do you link—so you say, "As we continue to fight al-Qaeda we will also improve health savings accounts" or something like that. All the speechwriters do this. The trick is you want to be gracious because it is a great moment for the American people.

So there is a kind of little trick. You're trying to get the other side to cheer for what you want in different ways. I can't think of an example now. But you're trying to word it in a way that they have to cheer even though they don't want to. Every President since Jimmy Carter always talks about energy independence—and the cameras, NBC [National Broadcasting Corporation] will focus on the Saudi Ambassador as he booed from home, not in the Chamber. So it's a grand occasion, but it takes over all of January. The speech takes over, that's all you do.

Then what they do is they feed—that's when you see speechwriter profiles because the press really has nothing to write about so they throw the speechwriter out there and you do the little profile and you hope you don't say anything that you'll be embarrassed by seeing in the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times.* So I didn't like it. You practiced the speeches and they're an hour to an hour and 45 minutes long and you keep practicing. Everyone haggles over every line because this is the bureaucracy's chance to get their program mentioned. It's kind of a statement of Presidential priorities.

The frustrating thing is you just don't get that much time to spend on it because you have a lot of freight you have to put on that train. If you think about it, how many State of the Unions are memorable? Where does anyone quote State of the Unions? It's almost never because it's a list. Every year speechwriters say we're not going to have a list, and every year sort of out of necessity it becomes one.

Nelson: Is the contemporary State of the Union address forced to do too many things?

McGurn: I don't know if it is forced to do too many things, but because it's on prime time, it's the President's chance to put his agenda forward, unfiltered. The other side doesn't get to do it—before the American people. So they're always going to take that chance.

I sort of think we were better off when the President would write a little State of the Union and send it up. But it's a fact of life today that you have to master.

Nelson: It's telling the rest of the government here is what is on the President's list for the year. At the same time it's an address to the nation, to people who want to know.

McGurn: And you have to knit it with some kind of philosophy or some overriding theme. In that way they can be a little artificial because you're trying to knit health savings accounts and al-Qaeda and funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities or something like that with some kind of grand theme so people can process it.

Nelson: If you didn't have a State of the Union address, or if you had a State of the Union address that was not televised or was a written message, which was the case for many years, what would take its place in terms of the President's ability to communicate with the country about—

McGurn: Today the President has a million ways to communicate, social media, all sorts. What it means is instead of having one overall framework for here is my whole agenda, he'd be going around and selling different parts. Despite the State of the Union saying here are all the things we want to do, generally there are one or two or three priorities. Like you mentioned, Social Security reform.

The day after, the President was going out to make his pitch for Social Security reform, and he'd go to a whole bunch of places. The same thing on health care reform. So it becomes the template. But usually there's one or two. So I'm not sure how much it would change. It's just an opportunity to communicate at a time when people will watch. People will watch the State of the Union.

But I think most speechwriters are frustrated because you get so little time to spend on the one subject because you have so many things you have to put in there. I think most of them don't feel that satisfied with the treatment. It's kind of like writing an overview of history rather than the chapter that you're really interested in.

Nelson: Did you treat the State of the Union address as embedded in a strategy? In other words, usually before a State of the Union address you'll hear previews of some of the things that will be in there. Afterward, there will be follow-up speeches by the President.

McGurn: That's what I'm saying. The State of the Union to me was the blueprint for what the President is going to spend his time on in the next year. As I said, there's usually one, at least one, sometimes maybe three, grand kinds of schemes, whether it's Social Security reform, whether it is something overseas. So this is the way—

The process is the policy people get together and they say to the President you have three choices on this, A, B, and C, what do you want to do? He'll say C. They put it together. Here's what we're going to do this year. So the State of the Union is really the first chance to explain that to the American people. This year we're going to fix Social Security. No one else has done it before. We're going to do that. You give a few of your principles. Then later you'll draw them out into a more expansive chapter. To me it was a road map, or outline is probably a better thing for what the President's agenda is.

In many cases, as I say, it's the way to explain it. What I mean is the language. Remember for the President, you're at a press conference, you're asked 9,000 things. You are asked what is your policy on NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities]? What is your policy to Pakistan? All these things. So it's very important for a President, in his mind, to have a formula and language that he can repeat. He can't keep coming up with new—so it's very important to get your logic and your facts down so the President can say, "Here we're doing this," and go into it and not contradict, to make it easier. He's responsible for so many things.

So the State of the Union is the first chance you get. OK, we're going to privatize some Social Security. How do I put this to you, and maybe what are the benefits and principles, the bullet points for this? You might flesh them out later on.

Nelson: That's a better answer than the way I phrased the question. My question was essentially when you're writing the State of the Union address, as hard as it is to do that, are you also

thinking, *We'd better be working on the speeches that the President is going to give when he goes out*?

McGurn: Yes, because that language—the State of the Union is whatever, January, February—and you see a speech in August on the subject, it can't deviate. It might give a fuller explanation and start emphasizing other things, but that's what gives—because you can't start from scratch. Everything in the government builds on what you've done.

The difference between my experience and Mike's is Mike was in the first term. They set a lot of the policy, right? The decisions were already made in a lot of things. Some things they weren't. In some ways it was more fun the first term. You're just saying this is what we're going to do, a little more philosophical. The second term you have to defend that. When you're doing, say, Social Security, you have to see what the President has said in the previous four years and not contradict it. So it has to be in harmony with that, even if you're going in a new direction.

Nelson: I was thinking about that. That is what I was going to ask you next. You're coming in halfway through. I'm guessing you hadn't read every speech or press conference remark.

McGurn: And when you read them, you find out what are the things that are common. You also see how he thinks. That's why I did bring more of my speechwriters in to meet the President, because if I went and told someone this is what you were like in an interview I might be very accurate, but if they're sitting here they just get a better idea. A lot of times it won't be the thing directly, it might be a joke you say or it might be something like I remember we were doing something on energy and the President talked about when he was a student and living through the energy crisis in the '70s. It shows more people how you think.

I also thought if I miss something that the President says and others will say, "No, I remember he did this." A lot of it is he really gave marching orders, but it's how he thinks, what he got passionate about, what he hated if he didn't like it. I believed the more people who had heard it and seen it for themselves, the more accurate I would be. I mean, how many guys wrote the Gospel and they have different accounts? They all knew Jesus, and sometimes had very different accounts.

Nelson: How about if we take a break now?

[BREAK]

Nelson: I know there is no such thing as an average day, but was there sort of a common routine in times when you're not really focused on State of the Union or—

McGurn: The President generally is always speaking. Any public appearance is a speech—Brownie of the Year, meeting with college football's national champions, whatever it is. So there are almost always three public appearances a day that go through the speechwriting department. It goes through the same process whether it is the State of the Union or a meeting with the world

champion Yankees in the back. It's a constant churn. The only day that was somewhat a respite was the end of Friday because the President seldom had Saturday speeches. Sunday sometimes you're working on Monday. I always liked Fridays the best. And when the President traveled, because I wasn't traveling, I got a little bit of a break.

Nelson: By the way, he did Saturday radio addresses, didn't he?

McGurn: The radio addresses were very short. Also the radio addresses, unlike other things, he didn't read before. He came down, he wanted to sit and read it through. So the logic had better be good and clean and so forth because if he stops, there is a big problem. So they would record it, I think, very early on a Friday.

Nelson: Oh, on Friday?

McGurn: Yes. We had very little time. Though we did sometimes make news in the radio addresses, mostly they were a summary of something you did before, and the brevity meant they had to be simple and clear.

Nelson: I know Reagan started that and I guess every President since then has continued it, but what did you see as distinctive about that genre? What was the purpose?

McGurn: It was kind of speaking directly to the public. It's a way to make your message clear by simplifying it and getting it in language people can understand and a logic. I am a less-is-more person, so I think shorter speeches are more effective than longer speeches. I think Reagan said the longest speech should be 20 minutes. I'm a real believer in that.

The State of the Union goes longer because of the occasion, but the Gettysburg Address was 271 words, right? Moses put the Ten Commandments—or God put them on two tablets. Those seem to me to be good arguments for brevity.

Nelson: I'll tell you this as somebody who was at the receiving end of the radio address. I used to do a brief political Q&A [question and answer] on the local news on Saturdays. The news editor would always say, "Let's see what the President said today in the radio address." My guess is that that is happening at local stations around the country.

McGurn: I think so.

Nelson: You're so understaffed on Saturdays and they're looking for—

McGurn: Right, it's a great way—it's sort of the equivalent of these local papers that people pay attention to in their communities. Not the *New York Times,* not even the middle-sized papers. Car manufacturers have figured out a way to put their ads in those papers because that's where a lot of people are. They're more inclined to read about their local high-school softball team than the *Times* foreign affairs section. So you can reach a lot of people that way. It's a great vehicle.

Nelson: Did you ever have an occasion with Saturday speeches, while we're on that, when something happened between Friday morning and Saturday noon and you had to go in and rewrite or substitute the whole thing?

McGurn: Yes, it happened a lot, because we didn't usually decide on the topic until late Wednesday. Then there would be Thursday writing it and getting it into shape. It was often fluid because it was a last-minute thing. By nature of you're trying to figure out what you want to say. In some sense because it is shorter it was easier to do that.

The most notable time—I think the President used his Saturday address to defend the terrorist surveillance program. I can't remember the details now, but it had been attacked in the *Times.* I could be wrong about that. It had been attacked somewhere. He used it. He went out there and gave a very vigorous address on it, very short but pointed. He did that live on Saturday, but it wasn't that often.

Nelson: Was this something that one member of your staff specialized in, or—

McGurn: We did that, but that's more just a division of labor. Radio addresses were short in time but intense. You had less time to do it. Other speeches you had a week or two, but for this you had a day to do it. So there are plusses and minuses to both.

Nelson: Back to a day in the life. Did you have a regular time you came in in the morning, a regular time you left at night unless there was a crisis or something?

McGurn: Yes. Not always a regular time at night. It was a long day. I generally got there at quarter to seven because it was 7:30 for senior staff meeting. But the President's schedule—I think he had a formal briefing—I can't remember if it was a 7:00 or 7:30. If he was going to read a speech, frequently that would be the time he has questions about a speech, 6:45, because he's reading it. He's going in to his intelligence briefing and so forth. So I had to be there in case he called.

Then we would have the senior staff meeting. Then there might be other meetings occasionally. There was a meeting every week to discuss the upcoming speeches and so forth. We were always working on something. When you have three appearances a day there's always something—look at President Obama. I'm sure he has the same schedule. It doesn't mean they were all grand speeches on policy, but they're all events where he has to speak. You don't always prepare a full speech. Sometimes you just prepare a note card or something for him.

Nelson: In something I read you rejected the term "Rose Garden rubbish" to refer to those minor sort of ceremonial things. You didn't like that term.

McGurn: No. The Rose Garden is for very important things. He had a speech with the President of the Palestinian Authority. Another time we announced that we had killed [Abu Musab al-] Zarqawi, the top guy in al-Qaeda in Iraq. So the Rose Garden thing—look, all speeches are the President communicating with the American people. They're all important.

Nelson: I didn't mean to focus on the Rose Garden. That term has been used to describe the little bitty speeches.

McGurn: You know the little bitty speeches—

Nelson: "Rubbish" is the operative word there for people who use that term. That's what I

wanted you to react to. Should a President have to make three speeches today, two of which will only mean something to—

McGurn: That's part of the job in a democracy. One of the things that any White House staffer has to guard against is not getting jaded and taking it for granted. Andy Card, who was Chief of Staff for a while, really came from nothing and he was very good at reminding us how lucky we were and that this was the people's house and the people's government. This might be the turkey pardoning for you, but for the kids who are coming there or the mom or the teacher, this might be the biggest event in her life and we should treat it that way. I always appreciated that he did that.

Nelson: So senior staff meeting. Was that with the assistants to the President's people, that rank?

McGurn: Yes.

Nelson: What function did that meeting serve? How was that of value to you? How were you of value to it?

McGurn: I think it was of value to everyone in similar ways. You basically find out what the President is doing that day, what everyone is doing. So you kind of know what everyone else is doing. The White House is very compartmentalized. You're working in your own department and you don't know what the other people are doing. The right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing. At least the department heads know that. There will be some questions sometimes. The Chief of Staff will have some questions, but it's basically to give a daily overview of what is coming up that day or soon. People bring up questions to each other, to let them know where they need help or what is expected.

Nelson: Now, it wouldn't be a surprise for others—you say the President will want to see a speech two days in advance. So it's not as if you're going to walk into the senior staff meeting and they're going to say, "Oh, the President needs to give a speech today" on such-and-such, right? You're basically there to—

McGurn: They might be saying the President is traveling to Omaha today to give his speech on such-and-such. So that's part of letting the people know what the President is doing and he is going to emphasize Social Security reform or defeating al-Qaeda or whatever it is. Again, people are all pursuing their own little agendas. I shouldn't say own little agendas. They're pursuing the President's agenda in their department, often a very narrow focus. This allows people to get a broader picture of the President that day and what is coming up.

Nelson: Would assignments come out of this meeting? How would assignments come to you for big speeches, for the little speeches?

McGurn: We had a meeting, I think it was every Monday night, usually in the Chief of Staff's office. They would outline the events that were coming up.

Nelson: Who would?

McGurn: Senior staff. Usually the communications chief, Chief of Staff, and Karl Rove would

be there. They would outline what is coming up. Then one function of that meeting would be—well, we need a speech here. That's where I would first know about a speech.

Nelson: So it was sort of like just-in-time ordering, right?

McGurn: Well, you'd be plotting for months. Sometimes you'd know, OK, he's going to Tokyo on this day and he's going to give a speech. You'll know that months in advance. Some things we'd only know—next week the Cattlemen's Association is meeting. He's going to speak there.

Nelson: We were talking earlier about the '05 State of the Union and the introduction of Social Security reform as a top agenda item. What I remember is that for the next two or three months—I was at one of these events in Memphis. The President was touring the country, but the events were not speeches, they were kind of like discussions.

McGurn: Oh, yes, there were a whole bunch of different vehicles. There were town halls where he would sit there. Sometimes he would just have a card with bullet points to refresh his memory.

Nelson: And you would prepare, your office would prepare—

McGurn: We prepared for any public appearance. It would be in different format. A lot of times if it's a formal thing, you're preparing so the President would know the names of whoever is there that he has to thank.

Nelson: Yes, because the other people who are on the stage would be people who are there to basically help him make a point by telling their own stories.

McGurn: Or just the host. You're speaking at the Cattlemen's Association. Who is the President of the Cattlemen's Association? If his wife is up there, what's her name? All sorts of people.

Nelson: You were responsible for—

McGurn: The difference between journalism and the government is in journalism we have to collect our information ourselves. One thing I learned from Mike that was kind of interesting—when I write I try to find out the fact first and then I write the sentence with it. Sometimes if it's an obvious fact like the GDP [Gross Domestic Product] of Venezuela, I can get the number later, but most of the time you're looking for a fact and that will tell you whether you can write a sentence. I learned the government is so big, we have people—you could just leave it blank. You could ask insane questions like how many bananas the Marines in Fallujah ate in April. There is someone in the government who knows that. They'll come back to you and what they'll say is, "Do you include cooked bananas? Do you include green bananas? Sliced bananas?" There will be five different answers depending on what you want. Someone knows almost everything.

You mentioned the fact-checking thing. That was put in before I was there. Those people worked like dogs, young people. Kind of an umpire's job, thankless. No one notices you unless you mess up. They had to footnote every assertion. They couldn't go to Wikipedia or anything like that; it had to be back to the original. So when we did a speech, it might be two pages but it might have four pages of footnotes to back it up. They're doing it at the last minute, they're working at three

or four in the morning. They were young people.

Before I went to the White House, I thought when you did a speech someone gave you a glossy brochure produced by 40 PhDs, and then you just kind of took the facts from that. It is a lot more bailing wire and duct tape. You're scrounging it in. We had fact checkers and researchers in the same department. The researchers are the people you ask sometimes to go find this information. The fact checkers have to confirm it. The Staff Secretary would review the fact checkers. So if you have a State of the Union, you might have 80 pages of footnotes.

Nelson: You're overseeing all this?

McGurn: Right.

Nelson: How big is your staff that you're responsible for?

McGurn: I had, I don't know, it's a little while now. I think I had five or six speechwriters. I know in here they act like Mark Busse worked for NSC [National Security Council], but on the speeches he kind of technically worked for me. When he did a speech, it would go through our process. John McConnell, same thing. He really worked for the Vice President but he occasionally did speeches going through me. So we had five or six.

We had four or five fact checkers, two researchers I think. I had an assistant. My assistant, though she did do my schedule, and that was pretty easy, she also prepared the physical speech for the President, which is very difficult. People think you have a correction and it's just like a Word document; you correct it and you print it out. It doesn't work that way.

Nelson: No?

McGurn: The President has these cards that he marks. It's heavy-stock paper, different paper for daylight or indoors.

Nelson: Is this 8-1/2 x 11?

McGurn: I think it is 8-1/2—

Nelson: It's not like index cards.

McGurn: No, but it's a heavier stock. He would go through and he would mark things and make little notes to himself in his own sort of hieroglyphics, either "slow down" or "emphasize this point" or a difficult name. So he'd go through and mark up his speech, giving himself all his signals how to do it. Then you make a correction—and he has to re-mark the card up. So what you have to do is take out that card. Say it's page 2. Then you put 2A in there. Then if you make another correction on 2A it is 2A sub 1 or something.

The President hated people making all these corrections because he's already gone through his cards. Now he has to go through and mark up the new things. People would just send in 10 last-minute things, thinking, *Oh, this is going to be small,* but it just doesn't work that way. He didn't want it to go that way. All the Presidents do it differently. Of course for some of them they're on

the teleprompter. But last-minute changes—it's just the physical process was a lot more complicated than people realized.

Nelson: I had no idea. You also said earlier—

McGurn: Sorry, one other thing with that. The President had an assistant when I was there for most of the time, a guy named Jared Weinstein, a young guy, personal assistant. They are always young, because it's kind of a tough job. They have to be there when the President gets into the Oval Office and they're there when he goes home at night, a long day. He does everything. He gives him the speeches. He's next to him. He's next to him in meetings with Prime Ministers and so forth. If the President wants hand sanitizer, he does it. If the President meets you and he says send me your address and I'll send you this—this guy gets your card and the stuff like that. It's kind of a hard job, and he would carry the speeches.

They would put the President's speech in a binder in plastic, things in order for the President to go—the speech would be in here in a binder and these plastic pages that he turned. Even if it was on a teleprompter, if the teleprompter goes dead, you want to have that thing.

Nelson: Yes.

McGurn: One time I remember we had a last-minute change. I forget where the President was going. It made it into everyone's copy except for the President's. Again, his copy is marked up. So it's not like you print out a whole new set of cards. You have to fix it. If you make 10 changes like that, it's 10 new pages that have to be marked up. It gets very complicated and so forth and a lot can go wrong.

Nelson: I know this is a ridiculous question, but didn't anybody say if you would just learn how to use Word, you could do it all electronically?

McGurn: No, I don't think that's right. What he's doing is writing notes that mean either "slow down here" or "here's a name," aids to himself on the speech. I do that when I do my own speeches. I don't mark it as much as he did. He would underline different things. You can't do that in Word. That's what he does by hand. Little notes here. Maybe go slow here. Maybe something means this name is difficult. All sorts of marginal notes that he's looking at.

Do you remember when Joe Biden got in trouble for basically reading Neil Kinnock's speech about his father coming up from the mines? People say, "How can you do that?" I think it's very easy to do. Most people—I don't think President Bush was one of them, but at times—most people *read* speeches, they do not *give* speeches. They're not looking at the meaning, they're just trying to read the sentence without stumbling. So I can see how Biden did that, because he's reading a speech, he's not thinking of the words. It's one of the advantages of memorizing, like reading it over and over. You've absorbed it. But in many of the routine speeches people are giving, they're not doing it.

Nelson: Right.

McGurn: So it's very easy to just read the sentence. They're not thinking, *Wait a minute. My dad wasn't a coal miner,* they're reading the sentence. In fairness to Vice President Biden I can

see how that happens, because most people read speeches.

Nelson: You said for his first State of the Union, as often as he would rehearse it, he probably did know it pretty much by heart.

McGurn: I think when you give speeches like this, you may not know it by heart, but you kind of know where you are. You know if there's a name coming up that's hard to pronounce. Sometimes you just find—I can't give an example now, but there are sometimes things that are written that are fine but if you try to say them aloud it's a tongue twister, like some bad alliteration.

Nelson: Yes.

McGurn: I believe everyone can give a decent enough speech. I always say the two keys are write short sentences, because when you're speaking the pauses between sentences can sound like commas. People are not going to get the punctuation. Write short because if you write a long sentence you'll find that you get into the wrong cadence. It might be a question, and you don't have that, or you get lost in it. So write short sentences. You think it's short and choppy; it won't sound short and choppy. It will give you plenty of time to pause.

Then I say read aloud as many times as you can. Not whisper, read aloud. Then you won't stumble. You'll know this word is coming up and you just won't stumble on it.

Nelson: So back to the day. You come out of the senior staff meeting and go where and do what?

McGurn: Generally try to find out for the speeches tomorrow or the ones we're going to deliver what stage they're at. A lot of the day is reading aloud speeches, editing by reading aloud with the other two guys, going over the speeches. As I say, I always tell people to read aloud. That's what I did. We read them aloud. You can't edit a speech by just sitting there editing it in [Microsoft] Word. I read it out loud with Marc Thiessen and Chris Michel, and if there was another writer involved, that writer was included too, because among the three of you you'll probably be able to come up with—if you get stuck, someone else will go in. You get a pretty good sense of what works, what doesn't work, when there is a group of you reading together. Sometimes people get stuck, but another person will have an easy answer for you.

Nelson: I know you're not doing Will Farrell, you're not doing Bush imitations, but are you trying to replicate what it would be like if he were reading it?

McGurn: Definitely. But he didn't have an affected style. The writing is more about how it is simple words. It's hard to explain. You know the kinds of metaphors that he'll go for. Again, he is looking mostly for logic and simplicity. He is not into the purple prose.

Nelson: You said earlier you would prepare the President's remarks for any public appearance. Would that include press conferences?

McGurn: Yes. We didn't give him the answers. Someone else would give him, "If they ask you X, here are some notes on that." But generally he would do a two-page statement before and then say, "Now I'm taking questions." The same thing for Cabinet meetings. You'd frequently see

he'd have his Cabinet meeting and then he'd give a three-paragraph something or other. "We just talked about Katrina and what we're going to do. Now I'll be happy to take two or three questions." So that's what I said for any of those appearances. You had to do those.

Nelson: So you're with your staff. You're going through the speeches. What about speeches that are not at that stage of development, assigning speeches that came out of the—

McGurn: That's out of the meeting. They used to call it "Andy's Anonymous" because it was Andy Card's office. You'd start assigning them going up. Generally with Marc we'd say who should do this, who should do that. You'd try to space it out so people get a day off after they've done the speech so they're fresh for the next one.

Nelson: Other than foreign policy, is it Mark Busse?

McGurn: Yes.

Nelson: Did your speechwriters tend to have areas of specialization?

McGurn: Informally. Marc Thiessen did the speech, for example, on enhanced interrogation, the big one, our policies and everything. For that speech the three of us looked at it. We had to be read into the program, which means it's a clearance level higher. They read you into the program, then when it's done, you're out. You can't really talk about it. This was so high—I had top-secret clearance, but this was even higher, this specific program. It was all classified material. He had to write it in what they call a SCIF [Secure Compartmentalized Information Facility]. The windows would be covered and stuff to prevent anyone from bugging it. We wouldn't be allowed to take our Blackberry in or anything. You had to write it on an NSC computer. We had to go in and see it there. We couldn't take anything in or take anything out.

Then right before the President gave it, he declassified the materials. We couldn't put it on our computers until he had done that.

Nelson: Wow.

McGurn: That was rare. So Marc generally did those kinds of speeches. He did a lot of the war speeches, military, because he had been with [Donald] Rumsfeld at the Pentagon.

Nelson: Who told you had to do it that way?

McGurn: It was just the security procedure.

Nelson: Had this been done before, or was this something—

McGurn: It's just how the NSC handles it when you're working with classified material. That's why a lot of us are very skeptical about Mrs. Clinton's claims, because if I left a folder that said "classified" on my desk and went to the men's room, I could be cited. That's run of the mill for people handling classified material. I had a safe in my office. If I wasn't physically with it, it had to be in my safe locked up.

Nelson: Is it lunchtime yet in a typical day?

McGurn: Generally I had lunch at the White House mess.

Nelson: That's what I was going to ask you about. Is it the same cast as at the senior staff meeting?

McGurn: More or less. People are bringing in guests there, so it's a big thing. When I was there was one table. Really it's not fancy. It's a glorified pub. If you didn't know it was the White House mess I'm not sure you would know by any—it's just a room. But it's relaxing and the Navy stewards run it. They also have a takeout window there. They'd be open for breakfast and lunch, not dinner though. At dinner the window would be open for a few hours.

That was very relaxing. There was one table that was like a loose table, so if you were commissioned officers you could sit there. There would be other people. That was where I could talk with people from other departments, the counsel's office or something, at that table.

Nelson: So the senior staff meeting is a meeting—

McGurn: It's a long table in what they call the Roosevelt Room.

Nelson: Interacting with all the other—

McGurn: Two dozen people.

Nelson: Here you could have a conversation with somebody.

McGurn: Right, and that was interesting. You got to have friends and you'd meet down there. Usually among staffers just by serendipity you go down there and someone is sitting there having lunch and you would have lunch. So that was great fun for me. Also it was easier for me than some people. If I had guests, I'd bring them in. You don't get an expense account, so if I took someone there it was all on me, even for work. To have someone take you out is really complicated because you can accept only up to this amount.

I was fortunate. In my job I didn't have to meet with anyone, really. So I just decided that this is a time in my life where I'm not going to go out to lunch. I didn't go out to all these lunches, I stayed there. I was usually so busy that it didn't matter. It was a little easier for me. Some people can't avoid it. Karl Rove had to meet with people all the time and have lunch.

The government rules are so crazy. They pay up to $25 or something. So if you're with someone, someone can't just get the check. If it's $35 you have to say, "Here's $25 for my share." I was glad not to have to do any of that.

Nelson: When did you write?

McGurn: It's a good question. During the day I didn't have any time to write. I was managing. A lot of the writing was editing. You assign it to other people. The speech really comes together when you read it out aloud and you go through. I wrote on weekends or at night at home. That's

when I would write my speeches because I would have time, where it would be hard in the White House. Occasionally in the White House I wrote, but most of my day was geared to getting the next day's speeches ready. I just didn't have the time there, so I'd either do it at home late at night, or actually I ended up doing a lot more really early in the morning, like getting up at four. Just getting older, and it was easier to fire-blast a few coffees in and get going than to stay up to one o'clock. I'm like this.

Nelson: Had you developed habits as—

McGurn: I have a lot of bad habits. [*laughter*]

Nelson: Morally neutral habits as a writer. I mean, when you were writing for the *Journal* did you like to write in the morning?

McGurn: Here I had been doing editorials. It was more in the afternoon because you're hitting the deadline. So I wrote on deadline. With my column what I tried to do is have a draft the day before, since my column is on Tuesday, and then I could spend Monday fine-tuning it, getting it a little smoother. I can't always do that, news changes and so forth. But there, really the weekend or something. I was fortunate, the house I was living in was huge and I had a nice home office so I had plenty of privacy and so forth. My kids were little, so it wasn't that demanding.

Nelson: So you're at the White House at 6:45 in the morning. When do you usually leave?

McGurn: That's the problem. I would leave at 8:30 or 9:00.

Nelson: And then you're writing when you get home?

McGurn: Once in a while. That was the problem. President Bush was a morning person. I was not a morning person, but I had to be a morning person when I was there. One of the problems was he got up early. To make sure that the speech was ready for him when he got up often meant me staying late, but he wants to see me in the morning. He sort of enjoyed waking me up.

One time he called. I think it was a Saturday. It was nine o'clock and I had been up until about one or something on his speech. You can get up like he does at five if you go to bed at nine, right? I had fewer hours' sleep. I'll put it that way. So he called and he said, "Did I wake you up, Bill?" I said, "No, sir." I was on my back and spoke in a gravelly, unpersuasive voice. When I was going away, I said, "You know, Mr. President, when you called that time and you asked if you woke me up? I wasn't always truthful." [*laughter*]

Nelson: Some comic said, "Yes, I had to get up to answer the phone."

McGurn: Right. I know Andy Card got there in the morning. I think he got there at five o'clock, literally, every morning. And I don't think he left until eleven. That's just how dedicated he was. He was Chief of Staff. I know that was tough for Josh Bolten because I don't think he was quite the morning person.

Nelson: I want to ask you—when you come there Andy Card is still Chief of Staff.

McGurn: Right.

Nelson: So your acclimation to the White House and how the White House works is how Andy Card runs it. Then in not too long a while Josh Bolten comes in. I just wonder what you observed about those two Chiefs of Staff, their operating styles. Of course, Josh was his deputy.

McGurn: They didn't really affect me directly because speechwriting had a rhythm of its own. The Chief of Staff only knew about speechwriting if there was a problem. I can't remember having any. He would sit in on the big speeches at the end, but only the editing and making suggestions. But in terms of running it and what we had to do, he didn't do too much. As I say, what I loved about Andy is he knew what a privilege it was to be there and impressed on us all the time not to take it for granted and not to ruin it for someone. It was a big day in their life. They're from Nebraska. They're there. To have a little humility. I loved him for that.

Josh came in and Josh gave me a bigger office so I kind of liked him. [*laughter*] I think Andy had known Mike. Josh was just really great to me. I don't know why. I just enjoyed talking with him. He ran meetings very well. We also had a less regular meeting called "strategery" after that *Saturday Night Live* thing.

Basically, we were looking at trends. Everything is on the table, more philosophical, not what's due tomorrow. You know, in those meetings people can go off on tangents. They can really be deadly. Josh—I was really impressed with how he ran meetings. He was very businesslike with that. I just was treated very well by a lot of different people. There were tensions. I always bragged about the speechwriters, that unlike other departments, not just in the Bush White House, in all White Houses, I said, "often intemperate, never indicted." [*laughter*]

We have never had a speechwriter indicted, I think, in the history of professional speechwriters. Not every department can say that. But we were also often intemperate. We're into ideas and stuff. We're debating a lot of those things. Writers are not always egomaniacs, but we fight over who gets credit for what word. It can be a little—

Nelson: Fight over the words too.

McGurn: —small-minded and so forth. I look back with fondness on almost everyone. Some people—Karl Rove made my life miserable because he would want a change in the radio address at 3:00 A.M., but he was a great guy. I'm good friends with him. It was just a wonderful experience that way.

You know, it's a pressure cooker. I wouldn't be a kiss-and-tell person because I think people need the freedom to say what they want even in bad ways and behave under the pressure. I have the advantage that I can write, so I can get even with everyone. I just think you owe people a certain confidence.

Nelson: Let me ask you this. It's a different kind of question. Of the books that have been written by people who were in the Bush administration, or about the Bush administration, are there any that strike you as especially good or especially bad?

McGurn: You know what? To be honest, I don't read a lot of them, and when I do I read it for a

specific thing. I'm looking for a specific thing. The only one that I truly remember is Elliott Abrams's book, he was a friend of mine before the White House. He wrote one on foreign policy and so forth that I read and found very interesting just because when you know something—do you know the poem "The blind man and the elephant?"

Nelson: I know the story.

McGurn: They all touch a different part of the elephant.

Nelson: Yes.

McGurn: That's like most institutions. So that was interesting to hear from his perspective what were the internal battles going on there. The speechwriters are not really policy makers. So sometimes speechwriters have an inflated view of themselves. The policy is basically set by others. Sometimes when we get to the President we effectively make the policy, and people don't like that. We're not the policy people. That's why Mike wanted to move to policy.

Nelson: Talking about different kinds of speeches, President Bush was very active in the midterm elections. I guess that would have been the 2006 election.

McGurn: Right.

Nelson: I know he was very active in 2002. I assume he did a lot of campaigning in 2006.

McGurn: He did.

Nelson: What was that like?

McGurn: Usually you're appearing at a fundraiser for a Congressman or something, so you prepare the notes. It's generally—I don't know that we did full-fledged speeches. It's probably usually an introduction and then some notes, and maybe you try to have a funny line or something. The other thing is I think you asked about travel.

Nelson: Yes.

McGurn: I seldom did domestic travel. The reason was I was working on the next day's speeches, so if I'm on the plane I can't do it. I did a lot of international travel. But I seldom did the domestic travel. Also, part of the job is rewarding the other speechwriters, letting them travel. I tried to get as many as I could on at least on one Air Force One trip while they were writing speeches. So I didn't travel during the day. Also, most of the time he's coming back that night. For me it would just take me out of a whole day's operation for the next thing.

Nelson: Right.

McGurn: International travel is different. You go for two weeks. He needs a speechwriter to be on hand if he changes speeches and so forth. When I got here, for example, I flew to Australia. Mr. Murdoch was giving a speech there that I had prepared, a couple of speeches. I flew in his plane. There was almost no one on it. It was his secretary and me, the flight attendant, and the

pilot. The plane was empty. Like a lot of private jets, his had a little room and its two chairs unfold into a bed. So I got to sleep. I photographed the picture and I sent it to my friends back at the White House. We called that Rupert One. I said, "This is the way to treat speechwriters."

On Air Force One what would happen is they have comfortable seats, but it's not luxurious. It's like sitting in a nice easy chair rather than an airline seat. That's nice, and there's a table in front of you, but there's no place to sleep, or you're on this long thing. A lot of times I'd be on the floor sleeping with my face where someone spilled a diet Coke and someone kicks you in the face and says, "The Mexican trade minister is going to be greeting the President. We need a speech on that. We need you to write something on that." Then you go in the back and try to do something.

So on the foreign speeches there's a lot more work and adjustments. What we try to do is give the President—there would be 20—there would be dinners where he has to give a toast. As I say, any public thing. So you try to do most of them. The big speech we probably would have worked out long before, but there are always little things along the way. So there are lots of speeches. You always want someone on the ground with him who can handle some of that stuff.

Nelson: Did you make most international trips?

McGurn: No. I did a lot of them. That was a luxury. I went on the ones I wanted to go on, like when we met the Pope and China and so forth, which I'm interested in. Partly it's a reward to some of the other people. The other thing was I was a family man working crazy hours. When he was away it was almost a little vacation. It was just a lot less hectic. You could write something coming up and everything. If you're going, you're working full time. If you're there, everyone is gone. It's nice.

Nelson: Sounds like full time, little sleep, or at least little productive sleep. No audibles called.

McGurn: Again, I looked at it as kind of like the Army. The unhappiest people are people who don't say, "I'm in a totally different world and I've got to adjust." I just figure—I change everything. I don't go out to lunch. I didn't come back to New York. I only came twice in all the years I was there because I couldn't get the time. I just gave up a lot. It's a short period in your life and it will make the rest of it easier if you just admit you're in a different place and you have to do this for a while. You're not going to do it for your whole life.

Nelson: Every time you pick up the *New York Times* on Tuesday it seems like there is another article on how performance suffers when people don't get enough sleep.

McGurn: Right.

Nelson: Did you notice that?

McGurn: I probably exaggerated. I wouldn't say it was daily. First of all, I was living five to ten minutes away. Because I was driving at odd times I had no traffic. I came in in the morning. I was there. If I left at 8:00 I'd be home at 8:10 so I could eat, go to sleep at 10:00. It wasn't so much the lack of sleep. It wasn't as if I was living on five hours sleep each night. I left at 8:00-ish, which is usually what I did. I'd definitely be home by 8:30 or 9:00. I'd have some dinner, be

up until 10:30 and sleep until 6:00. You're still getting a pretty decent amount of sleep. Plus you had the weekends. It wasn't impossible like that. It's just that there wasn't room for other things, social life and so forth.

Nelson: I'm going down this taxonomy of speeches that Brad Patterson put together. He mentions a kind of speech that basically was outsourced, and that is funny speeches.

McGurn: Yes.

Nelson: Really? Isn't there a risk when you have a President telling jokes?

McGurn: Yes. That predated me. Who was that? Landon Parvin?

Nelson: Yes, Parvin.

McGurn: I never met him. That was for the White House dinner. He did that. Someone else did it. I had no say in it. I didn't see it beforehand. They had done that before and they just continued to do it. I think that's a practice in both parties. They treat those as—and they really are comedic speeches.

Nelson: I know, but jokes can misfire. I just wonder if anybody is thinking, *This may seem funny, but—*

McGurn: I'm sure in that process people like Karl Rove were looking over it, but I was not part of that process at all.

Nelson: Kind of a subgenre for the State of the Union are the guests in the box. I was thinking earlier when you were talking about the President, speeches that were sort of relentlessly logical, but these were occasions to kind of get flowery and even inspirational, sentimental, and all those things.

McGurn: Yes. They went through the vetting process too. That was a very fraught process. Before I got there I think Mrs. [Laura] Bush had a faith-based person there—a former gangbanger. He didn't do this, but his gun was used, it came out later in the *Times*, to murder someone. There's always something. As a speechwriter, it started with Reagan and pointing to the guy who jumped in the water and saved people.

Nelson: [Lenny] Skutnick.

McGurn: Skutnick, right. I know it's kind of hackneyed and overdone. One of the worst apart from the State of the Union is St. Patrick's Day. There are three speeches on St. Patrick's Day. First, the Irish Ambassador brings a bowl of shamrocks to the President. Then the President has a reception for, I think, Irish-Americans in the White House. Then there is a lunch on Capitol Hill or something with the politicians. So you kind of have to do three.

By the time I got there, all the St. Patrick's stories—you're scraping the bottom of the barrel for that. It gets pretty hard to find a new one. The snakes that St. Patrick threw out, that has been told. I think we told a joke about armadillos or something. That was always a grim time, St.

Patrick's Day, trying to find something new.

Nelson: I wonder if this might be a good time to go through some of the speeches.

McGurn: Sure, whatever you want.

Nelson: Earlier you said you had some anecdotes about particular speeches. I would rather take my cue from you here. Which of the speeches?

McGurn: Just to make sure, the second inaugural was written before I got there. I didn't really—

Nelson: Did you play any role in that?

McGurn: No. I read it before—there might have been minor edits, but I did not participate in that at all. The State of the Union, the early ones—even when I'm not writing speeches, when you're the chief speechwriter you're editing everyone else's things.

Nelson: Sure.

McGurn: The Katrina speech—a friend of mine from New Orleans, Raymond Arroyo of EWTN [Eternal Word Television Network/Global Catholic Television Network], gave me the last line. I think it's about the second line—"There is a custom for the funerals of jazz musicians, the funeral procession parade moves slowly followed by a band playing a mournful dirge. Once the casket has been laid in place, the band breaks into a joyful second line symbolizing the triumph of the spirit over death. Tonight the Gulf Coast is still coming through the dirge, yet we will live to see the second line."

A friend of mine from New Orleans gave me that line. Then Mike was drafted. I'm assuming John McConnell—

Nelson: That was the speech from Jackson Square in New Orleans, right?

McGurn: Yes.

Nelson: Let's hit the pause button. At that stage in terms of the public perception of the handling of hurricane Katrina, this was a salvage operation.

McGurn: Right.

Nelson: This speech—I just wonder, when you're trying to reverse or stop a downward spiral, which he was experiencing then, what does that do to the writing of a speech?

McGurn: I don't think it affects the writing. The politics of that were, as far as I remember—remember, they had the hurricane, and the levees helped the first day.

Nelson: Yes.

McGurn: Then they broke the second day. He flew over. If he had stopped, it just wouldn't have

been an issue. Look, the history of New Orleans—I hate to say it, but if your Governor is a nitwit and your mayor is an idiot and they're leaving buses and stuff there, there is not much the federal government can do to overcome that. But the politics said otherwise. The President got blamed for it. This speech was just the first. He was always down in New Orleans.

I can't remember—LBJ [Lyndon Baines Johnson] visited some site. If President Bush had just visited—basically, people want to see the American President say I care. It was misinterpreted as I don't care. I'm up there. I think that was more politics than anything else, but he went down. It was the bane of my existence. We were writing a Katrina speech every week to go down and announce some new program. So this was just the beginning of a whole—basically, what the politics required was that he had to go down there a lot, whereas if he had landed or gone—he probably wouldn't have had to do that.

Nelson: What I'm wondering is, was there a heightened atmosphere in the White House and conveyed to the speechwriters' office that this one really has to be good?

McGurn: To tell you the truth, there kind of always is on any big speech. Every game is like a World Series game, a big speech. This was big.

Nelson: This is you're down three games.

McGurn: This was big, but what was hard about this was marshaling all the things that we were going to do. Remember, the government is just starting, so what are you going to do? You had to have a coherent agenda. This is filled with it. So there's a lot of stuff that isn't rhetorical uplift, worker recovery. This is nuts and bolts. You're sitting there. You lost your house. Half your family is in Texas, the other half may be in Alabama. What's the future? Your neighborhood is under water. So it's more practical to say, "We're on the case. We're looking at things we're going to do." So that was the intent.

There are a lot of those things. It's early on. People have to think them through and say what is going to happen. Later you go in and talk about other things. There's always frustration that things didn't work out and things that were promised didn't materialize. The other thing is that if you're President people come in and promise you stuff all the time and then they don't deliver. That happened. Generally they want to tell a President what he wants to hear. So President Bush would always be saying, "I thought I was told there were going to be 10,000 mobile homes," or something like that. He might not remember who told him, but he was told. Then you find the reality is 1,000 have been delivered and the next 9,000 won't come for eight months.

Nelson: You think these people believe it when they're saying it, or that they are—

McGurn: I don't know. I'm just saying it's frustrating. A major city is under water. What do you do, and in what order? A lot of times the honest answer, just put it on the local—if my house went down, my instinct is I want my house back. Build it back. But three months from then the insurance guy might say, "This is what I'll give you," and you might say, "Gee, I might be better off moving to Baton Rouge and building there." So what your instinct is and what people want to hear, and then what's actually best for you—that's what's hard, imaging the whole rebuilding so quickly or what you're going to do. This part, I think a lot of it was instant relief. My house is under water. The clinic where I used to get my diabetes medication isn't there. What do I do?

Nelson: Yes.

McGurn: A whole host of problems like that.

Nelson: This reminds me, I guess, of a broader question. My memory is he gave this speech prime time on national television.

McGurn: Right.

Nelson: In Jackson Square, wearing informal clothes.

McGurn: Right.

Nelson: So every speech that is going to be televised there is a picture, a visual context, but this one was very unusual. Was that part of speechwriting?

McGurn: The speechwriters don't really design that. The President has a whole host of people—I mean, sometimes we chime in with an opinion, but our job is the words.

Nelson: The words. What would they say to you? Now, this is what people are going to be seeing, so write a speech—

McGurn: We know the setting. You want to refer to it or something. With any speech you really want to know all the setting and the history behind it so you can allude to it or at least convey to the people you know who they are and what the place is. So yes, but a lot of those are more the advance team, and the political crew would say this.

When we got a speech we would always know where it is, the audience, and so forth.

Nelson: As I remember he is talking to the camera here. I don't know if there was a live audience.

McGurn: I wasn't down there, so I don't know. I'm assuming there were some people there, but he was right in front of the cathedral, very dramatic. It was a dramatic day. An American city had been swallowed up.

Nelson: Then when a President gives a big speech, "big" meaning it is designed to have a big audience and be consequential, would there be an aftermath where basically you're assessing or others are assessing how well did this work? Did this have the effect—

McGurn: That wasn't, again, us so much. I would say that came up more often—this is almost more like a State of the Union for Katrina. How are they going to get the city back off the ground? I don't remember all the details, but I'm sure the President said, "I want every Cabinet department to tell me what your role is." It is unbelievable. They all have something. We got the inputs and we put this together.

Then he went for specific purposes—a clinic built here, the charter school built here, that sort of thing. The other example that consumed more of our time was war speeches. We were

constantly—almost every war speech was a big speech, and yet the war is still going on, but different things pop up as issues, so you're emphasizing different things at different points. There was a major war speech at least once a month and I would say maybe twice a month. You have to explain to the American people what you're trying to do.

Nelson: You said in 2005 you joined—

McGurn: I'd have to go back through—2005 was still pretty good, because one of the speeches I remember was a snowy Sunday and Mike and John and I were working in what was then John's office. Marc Thiessen took the office later. Just kind of by ourselves and so forth. Then we saw some of the results, the purple fingers in the air. So it was still pretty positive for a while.

Nelson: Yes.

McGurn: It got tougher in 2005, but I think the big thing—remember the mosque that got blown up?

Nelson: Yes.

McGurn: Then 2006 it all went to hell, which is why we had the surge announced in 2007.

Nelson: What I wonder is, this isn't a Katrina event, this is a year when the news is steadily getting worse, it seems.

McGurn: I would say in 2005, I could be wrong on this, but I don't think it was steadily getting worse.

Nelson: No, I'm talking about 2006 now. I agree with you on that.

McGurn: In 2005 I think the difference was it wasn't good in the sense we're fighting over there and it just seems like we're not winning or making progress. We did have progress to the elections, but then it didn't seem to be followed up with a decisive victory. So in 2005 we're fighting and guys are dying, but people are wondering are we really winning over there. Nobody is really thinking that we're losing. I think in 2006 people are thinking, *My God, we're losing*.

Nelson: That's really my question. In 2006 it's not just one thing that has gone wrong; it seems like every month the news is getting worse. And how do you write in the face of a cascade, a tide, of bad news?

McGurn: I don't remember who it was, but one of the answers was we were always doing a series of speeches on the war. Generally the public approval went up after the series, but speeches can take you only so far. Substance at the end of the day dictates it.

Nelson: Yes.

McGurn: I remember having an argument with someone, I can't remember who it was. They were kind of implying, "Well, things are bad because the speeches weren't good enough." I said, "You give me a better war, I'll give you better speeches." It sounds flip, but it's true. What the

American people wanted to know is, Are we winning? In 2006 it looked like we were losing, plus we had a very dishonest antiwar effort in the U.S. In other words, all they wanted to do was to get President Bush to admit the mistake and to say that there was a civil war.

I give the President credit for this. There kind of was a civil war, but that wasn't the issue. The issue was that al-Qaeda was the accelerant. So what they would do is they would drop bombs in a Sunni playground and kill Sunnis, right? Then the Sunni neighborhoods would go out and kill Shi'a guys. The same way they would cut off the heads of 10 Shi'a guys in a market and leave them there and then the Shi'a would retaliate again. So they were kind of fomenting the Hatfields and McCoys. The basic thing was what the surge did. [David] Petraeus squeezed al-Qaeda out. It doesn't mean the two sides loved each other, but it stopped the killing, which was the biggest thing. It really stopped the killing.

The surge was the largest thing that I worked on—the speech. Not that long, but I think the most important. I think it holds up pretty well and it was delivered in exceptionally difficult circumstances.

Nelson: Then let's talk about that speech. This is January 2007.

McGurn: Right.

Nelson: The midterm election has just been disastrous. The Iraq Study Commission is working along toward a recommendation, basically announcing—

McGurn: A withdrawal.

Nelson: A withdrawal. The President in the face of these two powerful adversaries, if you will, is saying, "No, we're going to double down."

McGurn: Right. That's a good intro. It's even worse than that.

[BREAK]

McGurn: So I'll just go right into the surge. You've given a background. So 2006 was a terrible year. Everyone knew at midterms people wanted us out of Iraq. Even people who previously had supported the war wanted us out of Iraq. I think the President realized that, certainly by the fall. Then you had the Anbar Awakening in Iraq. It started that autumn and we supported that with the surge later.

By the fall, way before the midterms, President Bush was planning to change his strategy. He decided to wait. He didn't want to look opportunistic and do things like replace Secretary Rumsfeld before the election, which a lot of Republicans criticized him for. He didn't want to look like he was just throwing the guy over to win an election. He wanted to win a war.

The place was blowing up, just going to hell. We knew we were going to do a big speech, and it was originally planned for before Christmas. I can't remember the exact day, but it was like the 20th. It kept getting postponed because they kept changing the strategy. Remember, the surge was not about just sending more troops to Iraq. The surge was also about completely changing the strategy. Most people still don't get that. People in the Bush administration still didn't get that. Most people think of the surge—we added more troops, put in Petraeus. But it was a completely different strategy and the speech was fraught with its own problems. It kept getting postponed.

Nelson: And the new strategy was?

McGurn: I'll get to that. Counterinsurgency in the shorthand. It was supposed to be done before Christmas and then over Christmas vacation I was working on it. It just got so messy. The other speechwriting problem is after Christmas, between Christmas and the State of the Union, that's when you start working on the State of the Union. So we thought the normal thing would be that we would be done with the surge thing before Christmas and we'd work on the State of the Union. Well, it became clear that wasn't happening.

Chris Michel and I cobbled off to do the surge speech and we left the State of the Union to Marc Thiessen, John McConnell, and Matt Scully who came back to help on that. Otherwise it just wouldn't have gotten done. I think they were a week apart. So on the surge speech, every time we got told this is going to be our strategy, it got torn up. It was very frustrating to get answers from everyone. They're recreating an entire military strategy. It is almost like Pearl Harbor. The other strategy didn't work, it blew up. We have to do something completely different.

In those weeks this young guy, Chris Michel, and I got in before 6:00 and we stayed until 11:00 every night and we frequently the next morning had to tear up everything we did and rewrite something. This was about a two-and-a-half- to three-week period.

Nelson: Tear it up because—

McGurn: People would say, "That's not the strategy. We're not going to do that. We're going to do this." Everyone is giving input. I had a big office—this was the one that used to be Karl's and had been Hillary's, next to the counsel's. Next to that office, off from the secretary's office, there was a tiny room. It wasn't even half the size of this room. We worked in there rather than in my big office. More privacy, just this young Yalie and I. Just long hours and it was confusing. Everyone wanted to have their say. They're coming and bugging us to do it.

This is a speech where the speech is policy. We're not explaining the policy, we're making the policy in this speech. It's very difficult. Here is the fundamental difficulty we had. The President's new strategy was a counterinsurgency strategy. The old strategy was you go and you have a base and you support operations. This was to go after the insurgents, to get them in their lairs. Petraeus had thought out a new approach. It's a counterinsurgency strategy. Not just more troops, a different strategy.

The problem we had was we were not allowed to use the word "counterinsurgency." Now, why would you say we couldn't use it? The answer was in classic counterinsurgency teaching, I think. You're supposed to have 10 troops for every one of the enemy's to be successful. We didn't have

that, we had eight troops or something. Now, General Petraeus argued that the Iraqi Army and police supplied the difference. What we didn't want is people saying, "Oh, it's a counterinsurgency strategy. It's doomed to failure because our troops don't have the numbers you need for counterinsurgency."

So here's the problem from the speechwriter's point of view. You're wearing a red tie today. How do I describe that tie if I can't use the word "red"? The most we could say was General Petraeus had been the author of the U.S. Army's counterinsurgency manual. So the result is after two weeks we put this thing together. It goes through the staffing. Then on a Saturday morning at like 6:30 we're meeting in the Oval Office. The President has seen the speech for the first time.

The mechanics of speeches, by the way, are that the speechwriters don't give the President the speech. The speechwriters turn in the stuff to the Staff Secretary and he's the guy who keeps track of all the President's paperwork. So the President has nothing on his desk. The Staff Secretary gives it, takes it away. He doesn't keep files. There's nothing like a file folder on his desk. That way he can keep track of what the President has seen. You don't have people giving him stuff on the side, it all goes through him and all the drafts.

So when I walk in and we're discussing a speech it is the Staff Secretary who hands out the speech. It imposes some order on what he can do. It's now 6:30 in the morning. This young guy and I, we're just exhausted. We've been eating—they have this form of chicken nuggets at the mess. I can't eat chicken nuggets ever since then. They were dry—when I think of them, it's a very bad memory of this tiny room.

Everyone and their brother is coming up to us, giving us advice. This is how the President—he's sitting in the Oval, the National Security Advisor is there, Secretary of Defense is there. They're all there. The President reads through. He's on like the third page. He goes, "OK, page one is awful, but it's not the disaster that page two is." You can imagine what we're thinking here: *This is not going to go well.* [*laughter*] The major speech of our term.

Again, to set it up. As you said, there was trouble. There was electoral trouble. Even people who had supported the war didn't want it to go on. No one wanted to hear more troops or we're going to do what the President wanted to. The Iraq Study Commission basically was a whole document designed to get us to move out. There was like a paragraph in there. Of course enhanced military operations, something like that, might be successful. We took that and said, "We embrace the Iraq Study Group and its recommendations."

I give the President so much credit for this. So many times—I sat literally right next to his desk on the side when we went through these speeches. The other guys sat on sofas or something. He used to say to me, "Billy, we are not going to abandon the people of Iraq the way we abandoned the people of Vietnam, from the rooftop of an Embassy." I loved him for that. I really do. I love the man for that.

We went through the speech. He didn't like it. After this meeting—when he doesn't like it, you have to go fix it. He was saying things. As you can imagine after the speech, now that the President has expressed his—there were not as many people enthusiastic to be around Chris and me to have their inputs anymore. We were kind of left alone. I said, "Look, if we're going to get

in trouble for the speech, let's at least do it the way we think he wants it and at least get in trouble for giving what our judgment is." A lot of people know him, but they don't know how he does speeches, what he's looking for. I know what he was hung up on.

In most of our speeches we have a paragraph explaining what we're doing, the logic of the speech. "This is a counterinsurgency strategy and this will do—" and because we couldn't use the words, we were futzing about it, describing it. He could see it was not a clear and convincing description because we can't use the word counterinsurgency, so I said, "You know what? Let's just cut that out." That was on page two, that whole transition into it. He may not be articulating it, but he's thinking, *This is fuzzy. This is bad.*

I said, "There's no way to fix that under the parameters we've been given. Let's just cut it out. He's going to stumble on it." We did it and we did it the way we thought he wanted it. The next day, we met Sunday, same thing, 6:00 or 6:30 in the morning. When the Staff Secretary, Raul Yanes, was handing him the speech I said to him, "Mr. President—" I was standing in front of the President. He's sitting at the desk and I'm standing right in front of him. "Mr. President, sir, yesterday you did not like page two. Chris and I basically took out page two, so when you think of page two now, if you think of it as page three it will go down a lot better."

He looked at me. He did one of these things with his glasses over his nose like this to see if I was pulling his leg. But I wasn't. I was telling the truth. I'm not a bluffer. I can't bluff. My bluff is I tell the truth. He went through it and there were a few bumps, but he was basically happy with that.

Everything went wrong the night of the speech. This is my proudest speech and everything went wrong. No one wanted to hear it. It had been canceled so many times before. Iraq is going to hell. So few people believed it. So few people endorsed it. Even the conservatives trashed it after that. When he delivered it, I don't know if you remember, he delivered it from a room downstairs. I think it's the library. I remember we had to change the angle because one of the lights in the background looked like a cross and we didn't want it to look like a crusader's thing, the way the light was shining on the thing.

Fox did it, and if you remember they missed the feed or something in the beginning. He looked very awkward. It was just awkward and tense. So everything went wrong with this speech except the substance. I said before, "Better war, better speech." It holds up very well. The surge worked. Not because the words were so great. He took the blame for everything. There is a line that says, "The troops have done everything I've asked of them." I think it holds up well.

People always ask, "What is a great speech?" I don't think it's always the eloquence. I think part of it is. First of all, a speech has to be consonant with the man. A Reagan speech is not a Bush speech is not a [Winston] Churchill speech is not a Clinton speech or a JFK [John Fitzgerald Kennedy] speech. They all give different speeches. It has to sound like the man.

Two, I think it has to have some guts. It can't be just on a subject where everyone agrees. Then three, it has to be borne out by events. Within a few months—No one thought—You look at what Barack Obama was saying about the surge then or Hillary Clinton or so forth. Later they wanted to take credit for it. It worked. Nobody at the time thought it would work except

President Bush and it worked very well.

I remember the President rehearsing that speech. It was awkward. He would sometimes do it two or three times right before a televised address. He had a bad rehearsal on one thing. Instead of rehearsing it he went out on the South Lawn with Barney. I looked at him and I thought, *Boy, that's a lonely man*. It's one thing to write the speech, it's another thing to have the lives of a lot of men and women hinging on this thing. He went out and I love him for it. It was a real moment of courage.

I'm not saying it was harder, but when we went to war on 9/11 people were pretty unified and supportive for the most part of the effort. Very few people—in fact, in the campaign Bernie Sanders is saying he was one of the few who opposed Iraq. But even on Iraq there wasn't that much opposition to going in. At this point in the war in Iraq, there was opposition to everything. Everyone wanted to hear we're coming home, and he didn't—I give him a lot of credit for that.

Changing a strategy in the middle of a war—also, let's be honest—the Pentagon didn't want it. They just didn't want it. At the very end there was a change. They sent back their changes and they wanted to say up to—was it 20,000 or 25,000 troops? I remember the National Security Advisor crossing that out. Everyone was hedging their bets.

Nelson: Cross out the "up to?"

McGurn: Yes. Everyone was hedging their bets on this except for the President. He went in. I think he was really vindicated. It was a tough, tough judgment. Again, in a speech at the beginning of war you're doing a different job. You're rallying people. This is to a war-weary public. Then you're asking the poor guys out in Fallujah and these places, "I know you've given everything and you've seen your buddies die, but we're asking a little more of you." It's a hard thing to ask and it is a hard thing to do. I was proud to be with the President at his lowest moments. Lots of people are there when a President is riding high. I saw a man for all his flaws who was just magnificent in that moment.

Nelson: I want to take you back to that process where you and Chris are working 6:00 A.M. to 11:00 P.M.

McGurn: And eating bad chicken nuggets.

Nelson: And losing your taste for chicken nuggets. I want to take you back to that. You said everybody had something to say.

McGurn: Right.

Nelson: What I'd like is for you to—who is in that "everybody" category, and what were they saying?

McGurn: They come up and they have—maybe we can include this.

Nelson: Who?

McGurn: I would say most of the people in the West Wing. Anyone—National Security Council, people we knew. A lot of national security staff assistants at the assistant level.

Nelson: What are they reacting to? Are they reacting to drafts you've circulated?

McGurn: I don't know. If you were down on your back and you said your house is burned down and I'm going to build it and I'm going to think of how to do, it people would all come with suggestions. Let's help, we can do this, we can do that. They were helpful suggestions. I don't think they were malicious. But here's the difficulty: You can't just have points. You have to have coherence.

This is where the President's strength really bore him out. You have to have a strategy and a logical coherence. So anytime people say, "Let's add—" Where does it fit in? What do you mean, "Let's add"? What is it part of? It has to be something you can explain. It's not just throwing a lot of good ideas or parts out in the air. The President is saying we are going to completely change our strategy, we're going after these bastards. We had a different strategy before. It did not work. No fault of our military, it did not work. So we have a new general with a new plan.

Part of his plan to do this, to go after these guys in their lairs—because a lot of these al-Qaeda things were in the outskirts of Baghdad and then they would send the people in to bomb. He just methodically went. I remember, I think it was in April, the speech was in January, we saw the first results in Ramadi. We saw time-lapse pictures of the al-Qaeda—the shaded areas where they controlled and how it was shrinking. It looked like pictures of radiation shrinking a tumor. It was remarkable. Chris Michel wrote a speech on that. I think it was for Detroit on foreign affairs. It was in April.

The focus was on Ramadi. I remember trying to get the slides declassified. It was very difficult. So people had all sorts of comments, "Well, we need—" I can't remember the suggestions. Some of it was language. Make a reference to this, make a reference to the Prime Minister, or this is how you do that. But the problem is again, if you're rebuilding a house and people say, "Oh, it would be nice if it had a bay window," well, it depends what kind of house it is. If it's a Frank Lloyd Wright house it's not going to have your colonial kind of window—it has to fit into the theme. For us, the hard theme of the speech—this is policy—was to lay out a new strategy.

I don't have it in front of me, but he probably said, "Tonight I'm laying out a new strategy for victory." No one wanted to hear a new strategy. They wanted to hear we were bugging out. It worked and it worked so quickly too. The tragedy is it probably came too late to vindicate his reputation. President Obama has squandered most of it now.

Nelson: The major players in executing the strategy were going to be Pentagon, civilian and military. State to some degree, Steve, and—

McGurn: Right.

Nelson: I wonder. I assume their opinions are going to have to be brought into account, but are they part of those who before they've seen a draft are—

McGurn: Well, Steve Hadley is the National Security Advisor, so he definitely had input and we take it seriously. I believe Steve Hadley deserves the Medal of Honor, or what is the other medal that they give civilians?

Nelson: The Medal of Freedom.

McGurn: The Medal of Freedom for his actions. He singlehandedly preserved the option for the surge, looking at that. He pushed the Pentagon. He knew what the President wanted, and in a very behind-the-scenes way he did very brave things.

The kind of people that go up to speechwriters—it's more the secondary level, assistants who come up to you with different ideas. Look, they're smart people. They've come up with a thought, but when you're writing something it's hard to incorporate every good idea. It's the same thing with edits. I would always say everyone has things they want to add, no one has things they want to subtract, so it just gets bigger and bigger.

Nelson: In this instance you described a preparation process by the President for the delivery itself that wasn't what you would have expected. But did you find that in general he had a harder time communicating effectively when he was talking to the camera?

McGurn: No, I actually think the more formal the better, because he was very disciplined.

Nelson: I mean whether there is an audience present or not or just talking to the camera.

McGurn: No, he did all these Oval Office addresses. I think he was pretty effective on that. He was a very disciplined man, incredibly disciplined. That helped him stay fit and not go crazy during these difficult times. Some people say he was better with one-on-one. A lot of politicians are. They're engaging, and he was very charming. But because he was very formal his style was very different.

I knew slightly Bill Clinton's chief speechwriter, a nice guy, Mike Waldman, completely different styles. Clinton is very informal. Clinton notably—in the State of the Union they put the wrong State of the Union in the teleprompter and he adlibbed until they got it right. Very few people could do that.

Did you ever see—there is a *Saturday Night Live* of Clinton—it's Phil Hartman and he's explaining his foreign policy in a McDonald's after he jogs and he's doing it as he's eating everything. It's brilliant. Clinton just had that natural ability. On the other hand, I'm not sure there's much memorable that Clinton said. You go away and he dazzled crowds, but I'm not sure there's much memorable left. The most famous lines from Bill Clinton are like, "It depends on the word 'is,'" or "I did not have sex with that woman." But he had a gift for speaking.

Nelson: Looking through my notes here, when you were talking about the surge speech I thought of something Peter Robinson said, and you said it, too, sometimes in the writing of a speech, maybe not by choice but by necessity, because you have to decide what to put in, that in effect you're making policy, or that at least you're—

McGurn: Definitely. That's why I say sometimes you're explaining policy, but there are always

gray areas, which option or how we're going to do it. A speech solidifies that. In this case it is even more than that. No one knew the policy until President Bush announced the policy. Even the Pentagon didn't—now, General Petraeus had a draft and I think he made some edits when we did it. The Pentagon saw it. So there were a lot of people who had inputs on it.

Nelson: Well, General Petraeus and the Pentagon, more broadly defined, didn't necessarily have the best relationship.

McGurn: Right. He saw it separately from the Pentagon. Also, I'm not an expert on this, but they have different responsibilities. General Petraeus was to win a war. He's out in the theater operating, that's his job. The Pentagon's job is really not to win wars but to preserve the institutions—the Army, Navy, Air Force. That's what they're looking at. It's to keep these things healthy and so forth. Slightly different. So they have different priorities. It's not that someone is just bullheaded or something; it's a different kind of priority.

Nelson: That's a good point. So the concern in the Pentagon then is where are these 20,000 going to come from? They're already doing too many rotations and that sort of thing.

McGurn: Look, some of them failed. General [George] Casey failed, right? He was supposed to have subdued Baghdad twice and he didn't. He failed. If anything, in some ways we were too deferential to the Pentagon, because they failed. I mean Lincoln had—until [Ulysses S.] Grant—what did he say to [George] McClellan? "If you're not using the Army, I'd like to borrow it." In the meantime guys are dying there.

As I say, one of the things that I did—my dad was a Marine, so coming from a family like that and hearing President Bush say, "They want me to just say how hard it is and wring my hands. Some sergeant in Fallujah doesn't need to see his Commander in Chief looking like that." He was very concerned with how his words—he's their Commander in Chief—are going to be taken by some guy in uniform who was about to go down a dark alley in Fallujah. Those guys can't think of whether this is going to work or not going to work. Are they not all in? President Bush was thinking of our troops on the line all the time.

I'll give you just another illustration.

Nelson: Yes, please.

McGurn: When I left, when a senior staffer leaves, one of your privileges is you have an hour-long meeting with the President. You bring in your family. So I brought in my parents, my kids, and both sets of grandparents. We had a delightful meeting in the Oval Office.

Well, we were a little late. When I was a staffer, I went through the Oval Office through the secretary's office. If you're looking at the President it's on the left and you go in and out. So we were in the hall and we were going to enter through the right where people go out. The President was late. He was never late. He just was never late. What then came out of the door—he had stayed late with the group of about two dozen handicapped veterans. I'm talking about veterans who were really handicapped, who had lost both legs, half a face or head shot off, severely wounded. They're meeting the Commander in Chief, who sent them into battle. That's an emotional thing.

The President saw them, which I give him great credit for doing. But moments after that, he is seeing me and my then five-year-old whom he has to be cheerful and stuff for. It is tough. I was saying to my girls, "This is the reality of a wartime President, to see these people who served you and paid a high price for it."

It turned out later that he had written personal notes to all these families. I saw that. I saw it up close several times.

Nelson: What do you wish that was better understood about George W. Bush?

McGurn: I think his thoughtfulness. The Texas cowboy stuff he fomented a little. He didn't really want people to know he was born in Connecticut. Just very thoughtful, and he really took his responsibilities seriously. He used to say, "If it's just me and Barney left, we're going to fight this thing and win. The world pays a terrible price when people doubt American resolve. That's the way I look at it."

Nelson: We haven't talked about Vice President Cheney at all except for you to say that John McConnell was detailed as his speechwriter.

McGurn: Right.

Nelson: But did you feel his influence when you were writing speeches for the President, or did John feel your influence when he is writing speeches for the Vice President?

McGurn: I don't think it worked that way. I loved Vice President Cheney. At that lunch table a lot of my closest friends were Cheney's staffers.

Nelson: Like?

McGurn: Shannen Coffin was a lawyer up in Boston, and John. I'm not saying it mattered, but I was on the Vice President's side on a lot of things. I think he was a man of principle, didn't mince words, was willing to be the bad guy for the country, the guy that everyone makes fun of, and I admired him for it. I think he has been vindicated on a lot of things. Personally, I didn't feel any of that.

I knew a lot of the people on his staff. There were people who distrusted other people on each staff. I heard from both sides, "The other guys are winning." Both sides would say that. There was the other fellow, David—

Nelson: Addington.

McGurn: Addington. Lunch partner. I personally didn't have any of those kinds of interactions or feelings, no conflict. Frequently we asked the Vice President to do tough speeches that the President couldn't do for some reason on the scheduling.

I think he was a great Vice President. I think by and large I agreed with his take on a lot of things. Not that my take mattered. One of the things is that the egos of people who work at the White House and so forth are always mind-numbing to me. I was very conscious this was not a

McGurn administration, this was a Bush administration, OK? There may have been things I would have done differently, but that's not my job. My job is to do the best for him. If I couldn't professionally deliver what he wanted, then I shouldn't be there.

People say, "Oh, what do you do when you disagree?" Well, I had small disagreements. If I had big disagreements I would resign and just say I can't do this in good conscience. I wouldn't denounce him; I'd just say we have a difference of opinion and I can't do that. But on the whole I agreed with things, and on the things I didn't, I owed him the best job I could do.

Nelson: Was there ever an occasion where you thought*, If he decides this this way, I'm going to have to reexamine my place here*?

McGurn: No. The reason is because I think in the priorities of—look, I'm old-fashioned. When we put our men and women on the front lines, I think we should win. I agree with [Douglas] MacArthur that there is no substitute for victory in that sense. So I want to win. President Bush wanted to win.

I'll tell you about one time. People always used to chide him for talking about victory and so forth. One time we went out on the South Lawn. There was a picnic for families of the troops. In this picnic some of the families would be of troops just deployed, some of the troops that have come back, some gold star families that had lost soldiers—kids without daddies, one without a mommy. I went down a row and there were all these gold star moms there. So people are really suffering.

The President came out, gave an impromptu speech. I saw the face of this one woman from New Jersey. I got to know their family. They're not far from my parents' family. Their son was killed in Iraq. They don't want to hear some flimsy thing; they want to hear that their son's sacrifice meant something. That's not easy to say, but he said it. I respect him for it. I saw her face light up. There is this woman who had this terrible loss—not *had* this terrible loss, *has to this day* this terrible loss.

I didn't have that. Look, the primary reason I went was for the war. The President was free market. Let me tell you an inside joke. I had a bust in my office. There is no way in hell you're going to be able to identify this guy. Frankly, even if I told you his name you're not going to. He's John Cowperthwaite, who was the Financial Secretary of Hong Kong from 1946 through 1960 something.

Nelson: British?

McGurn: British. He is responsible for the Hong Kong miracle. Completely free market. He was so free market he would not let the government in Hong Kong collect statistics on GDP. I asked him about this once. He died a few years ago. When I asked him about the lack of stats, he said, "If I let them collect it, they can only misuse it." Milton Friedman met him after the war and he started talking. To Friedman, Cowperthwaite was putting in place everything he believed, so a very free-market guy. He was brilliant. In a colony you don't have democracy. Because he was so brilliant and had the position, he could force his will. He refused subsidies of any kind. Hong Kong with no natural resources just boomed under his time in office, and now has a higher per capita GDP than Britain, mother England. So he was a free-market kind of hero. That's why my

godson Jimmy Lai has made these busts and given them out.

Nelson: I was going to ask you where do you buy a bust of Sir John.

McGurn: Jimmy Lai did it. We have another one here. A couple of people at the *Wall Street Journal* have it. I brought it to Washington. It was in my office at the White House. When we had to talk about subsidies for ethanol and cellulose I would turn his head toward the wall so he wouldn't have to see me typing this. [*laughter*] So that was my only kind of—little things of disagreement.

Nelson: Were there other speeches?

McGurn: The surge was such the big one. A lot of them, the commissions, I think that was Marc Thiessen, mostly, or Chris Michel. I can't remember.

Nelson: Which speech was that?

McGurn: The military commissions, the one on Guantanamo. The other ones I liked to do. I love to do the Medal of Honor speeches. I did the first one for Paul Ray Smith, an Army sergeant. I did the one for the Marine who ate a grenade for everyone else. Those are very gut wrenching to do. Most recipients President Obama has given it to died in the action that earned them the medal. This Corporal [Jason] Dunham was an incredible story.

There is a famous picture of the President crying at Corporal Dunham's ceremony. His family was from upstate New York and had nothing. You could see them at the White House in their Sunday best. They were modest, good, hardworking people; it was just gut wrenching. But they were gratifying. We did the speech for his Medal of Honor, but the President also opened the Marine Corps Museum in Virginia. It turned out that Corporal Dunham's birthday is the Marine Corps birthday. We already knew he was getting the Medal of Honor. It hadn't been announced. I said, "You've got to announce it there. There are going to be 10,000 Marines. This guy was born on the birthday." We did it there. That was very satisfying. Little things like that were very satisfying.

Nelson: While you were a speechwriter did President Bush make any of these surprise visits to Iraq or to Afghanistan?

McGurn: Yes. I didn't go on those for different reasons. Usually someone had to do something; Chris Michel went on one of them, I think. They had to do some corkscrew landing there.

Nelson: Yes.

McGurn: I think the Thanksgiving, the famous—was before I got there.

Nelson: It was.

McGurn: I would love to have gone, but there was some logistical reason why I couldn't go. I can't remember what it was. We sent someone. I'm pretty sure Chris Michel went on that one. That's one I would have liked to have gone on.

Nelson: I'm going to go through what might seem disjointed things, but things I wanted to ask about, unless there are any other speeches.

McGurn: No, they're all—some of them, except for the surge, kind of fade in my mind. As I say, as chief speechwriter and even Marc Thiessen and Chris Michel, same thing, though we wrote speeches, we also went through and edited them. The initial writing is like 40 percent of the speech; the 60 percent is the editing. So we were kind of involved in all of them. There were not really any sole authors that way.

Nelson: I saw a reference in part of the background materials that reminded me of the Judson Welliver Society.

McGurn: Oh, yes.

Nelson: I wonder, did you have interaction with people who had done your job before? For George W. Bush.

McGurn: Yes. I went to some of those dinners. As I say, part of my motto is, "often intemperate, never indicted." [*laughter*] The Welliverians are very proud of that.

I had had some friends—apart from Peter and Clark Judge, who had been speechwriters for Reagan—I got to know through this job. There was a fellow named Gary Ginsberg, who worked for Rupert, and his friend, Michael Waldman, who had been chief speechwriter for Clinton. I learned some tales with him. What I've learned is that all Presidents have a different approach to speeches. Some, like Reagan and W, took their speeches very seriously. Part of how you take it seriously is how you treat the speechwriters. We were commissioned officers for W. That wasn't true for his father and some of the others. I think Carter and [Richard] Nixon didn't quite give them as much.

Nelson: They weren't the level of Assistant to the President.

McGurn: Right. Then Clinton was—from what this guy said—just a crazy world. President Bush got up the same time every day, very disciplined schedule. Partly because and probably going back to when he kicked drinking. He just stopped and led a disciplined life. Clinton, of course, led a completely undisciplined life. He is up until 4:00 A.M. calling people and so forth. He is notorious for showing up late for his schedule. The poor Brownie of the Year is pushed back from one o'clock to seven P.M. and falling asleep because it's past her bedtime.

Clinton again, because he was such a natural at public communication—but from what I heard he had dueling speeches, like different drafts of speeches circulating. Dick Morris would have one and stuff. Michael told me the story—I think it was the convention in Chicago, his second. Ninety-six was Chicago, right? They took a train out there.

Again, Bush was good for giving us time—we had regular time each week and then on speeches we had a lot of time. My understanding is that President Clinton wasn't quite as reliable on that. So the Clinton speechwriters thought, *He's going to be on a train; nowhere he can go. He's going to have to see us*. It's like a three-day ride. So he said the first sign they should have known something was wrong was when the speechwriters were in the car that was a converted

men's room or something. That was the first sign of trouble.

The first day was fine; the second day getting a little antsy. The third day—

Nelson: They're working on his acceptance speech.

McGurn: Yes, they're there to do the speech. I think they had a draft, but they hadn't gotten any feedback. So the first day they're not expecting anything, but they see this—The second day, getting a little antsy. The third day they're all turning on each other, fighting with each other. He says an hour or two before they pull into Chicago he is called up to the President's car. The President has some changes. This is probably an hour and a half before he's giving the speech or two and a half hours.

He starts giving it to him. He says he's on his laptop. Remember, laptops weren't as skinny and friendly as they are now. He's on his laptop, Clinton is dictating all the changes. Then they go into the Presidential motorcade and he's still dictating changes. Michael is with it on his knees sitting across from him, writing it in. Someone from the sky, like Peter Jennings, one of the newscasters, saw this, the glow, recognized him and he said, "Boys and girls, let this be a lesson to you. Don't be like President Clinton's speechwriters and let your work go to the last moment."

I didn't know all of them very well, but got to know different ones from different administrations.

Nelson: Somewhere I saw you took issue with a statement by Sorensen, who said essentially speechwriters used to be advisors and now they're just sort of hired wordsmiths.

McGurn: I don't remember taking issue with it. I could have. He definitely was an advisor. That's what I was saying. His advantage was that he was definitely an advisor.

Nelson: It's those two quotes there, one of which is his and one is yours.

McGurn: I don't really contradict. I said speechwriters work closely with the President and the policy people on the text. Typically we go through two or three editing sessions before we go to oral. It comes down to this: President Bush spends a great deal of time on his speeches. It elevates both the speeches and the speechwriters in the policy world.

I'm not sure I really disagree with him, because first of all, the speechwriter's office has grown in formality since they first hired—I forget whether it was Welliver who is considered the first formal speechwriter that Lincoln had. I forget the guy who did a lot of his letters and stuff.

Nelson: John Hay.

McGurn: So I think those guys were guys the President knew and they were advisors. Sorensen, I think, had a great advantage because he knew Kennedy through the Senate. He had the clout to say no to a Cabinet member. I didn't have that clout to say no. I could bring it up to the President and say Secretary Rumsfeld wants to say this or Condi wants to say that or someone else wants to say this. I could do that, but Sorensen could just freeze them out. He was sufficiently high up. He could do that. I agree with that. The problem is the way speechwriters make policy is not

sitting down there and saying, "Oh, what should the policy be," or "We're going to craft a speech that puts this policy—" That's not the way it works.

The way it works is, it's kind of like the President's wife. You're actually with him when he's laying out the speech and the policy people aren't there, generally. So you get the chance to shape it and how it's said and so forth. So I'm not sure that speechwriters actually choose the policy, but they decide where to put the emphasis and how to explain it. Again, if you're a policy person, you might resent—I'm not in the room when that goes on. I think that's the distinction I would make. And it's a lot of power because you are in the room when the President is thinking, *How do I explain this?* He's getting it in his own mind. *What is my policy?* But I don't think it's quite a formal thing. I'm not sure they were ever formal policy advisors. So they might have sat there like the Cabinet.

Nelson: I guess what I wondered is, when you're sitting in these gatherings of speechwriters from over the years and you hear their stories, does it appear to you that the job of the speechwriter is idiosyncratic to each President?

McGurn: Yes.

Nelson: Not that there has been some trend?

McGurn: No.

Nelson: An evolution of the office?

McGurn: No. I think a lot depends on how seriously the President takes his speeches. He can do anything he wants. Like a lot of structure at the White House, you can do whatever you want, really. The speechwriters will always have a powerful role in policy just because they're in the room with the President who makes the policy. It's not policy until the President says it. When he says it, it becomes—and it overrides what everyone else says.

That's why I say no matter how irritated the President was, we loved working with one man, figuring out how to do it, rather than 20 to 30 other competing people. Then do it in a way to please the President. It was just a lot easier. To be honest, he wasn't that hard to please if you were listening to what he said.

Nelson: It sounds like what he wanted was pretty straightforward.

McGurn: He was a straightforward—

Nelson: It wasn't that he was saying give me some, "Ask not what your country can do for you" phrase. He wanted clarity.

McGurn: You can do a little of that in the peroration part. That would be where he would think it was, but not too much.

Nelson: He didn't blame you for failing to come up with Bartlett's quotations.

McGurn: No, and he also didn't mind us doing the clear roadmaps, "The second part of my Iraq strategy is this," rather than coming up with some more inflated way to do it.

Nelson: Literary transition.

McGurn: Later we did do some of those where if you go back and you read it, if you lay it out logically and then you read it, sometimes you can get rid of those sentences and it will still flow. I think the surge speech is—I'm not sure we say it in the first part or the second part, but he didn't mind that.

Nelson: If you knew the skeleton was there and doing its job—

McGurn: You could see it. And if I told you, "Now, look for the three parts," you could kind of see it. You could find it.

Nelson: This is scattershot here, but did it make a difference in your work when Mike Gerson left the White House in June of 2006? It sounds like as long as he was there he was an informal part—

McGurn: And sometimes formal. I guess it made it a little easier, a little clearer. You know, Mike was good at it. He knew what the President wanted. So again, it might not have been comfortable, but if your goal is to give the President what he wants, that helped. I think that was more about what Mike wanted to do at that point than anything I wanted or cared about.

Nelson: Was Karen Hughes involved at all?

McGurn: Not with me. She had left. She came back. Wasn't she State Department something at some point? I saw her a few times on trips and would come to the UN [United Nations] speeches. In Mike's world she was a big presence, in mine she was not.

Nelson: On our timeline in the briefing book there is a reference in May 2007 to a speech that the President gave commemorating the 400th anniversary of Jamestown, Virginia.

McGurn: Yes.

Nelson: What I wonder is—

McGurn: Did the Queen go or something?

Nelson: I don't know. Here's a question that little note inspired in me. That is, it used to be a straightforward thing to know how to deal with history, to celebrate it.

McGurn: Yes.

Nelson: Dealing with history has gotten more complicated, so when you talk about the 400th anniversary of Jamestown there are going to be people saying, "Look how awful this aspect of it was." It wasn't like when I was a kid in school, when it was, "Wow. That's when we began." I just wonder, with race, with historical issues, especially those that involve treatment of

minorities and so on, did you find dealing with history was more complicated?

McGurn: No. First of all, that's far more difficult for people who are far more politically correct because they walk around on eggshells. By not offending one group they offend another group. Whatever President Bush was called, he was never called politically correct.

As I recall, the Jamestown speech—I could be wrong—it was written by a young Yale speechwriter named Jonathan Horn, a great guy, who ended up writing a history book. I think the Queen was visiting.

I remember when I visited Jamestown I found it very moving. There is a plaque. This spot marks where they adopted some rules, where English law came onto the continent, which is a great force. That was much more a celebration. I'm not sure that was considered a terrible thing for the Native Americans. I don't think there were a lot of clashes and so forth as in other places. It's not like going to the spot of the Battle of Little Big Horn or something and applauding [George] Custer.

Nelson: But President Bush—I don't know when or where he was speaking to an African audience and essentially apologized for slavery.

McGurn: Yes. He went to Coretta Scott King's funeral. The President was proud of his civil rights positions and so forth. I don't think he felt embarrassed by it. There were some awful things in American history and I don't think he felt bound by them and would apologize for them as necessary.

Nelson: He famously read a lot of—

McGurn: A lot of history, right. He and Karl, biographies and histories, and they had races. He and Karl used to have this competition on books. Then they started getting into word counts and page numbers and dimensions. It was sort of like the [Ted] Cruz-Trump thing on delegates. Look at rule 51 and carve out your advantage. But he was a voracious reader.

Nelson: Did he ever read things and say, "McGurn—"

McGurn: He would talk about them. One of the nice things was, as I said way at the beginning about influences, they were more indirect. He was just interested in history and so forth. I remember once we went to Camp David. Toward the end the President invited us—when he knew I was leaving—just a reward. It was a great weekend. My wife and I went. The digression is that I hadn't been there before. They have a lot of activities—biking, hiking and so forth.

The deal is you meet at all the meals with the President in this one group house and then you go do your different—the President bicycles and whatever. So among the things he said we could do is go shooting—shotgun. My wife said, "Ooh, I want to do that." The President said, "Have you ever gone shooting before?" We're east coast people, we're not Texans. She said no. He says, "Here's 20 bucks says you don't hit anything."

What the President did not know is that I had never been shooting before. Although my dad was an FBI agent, a Marine, guns were not a big part of our life. We're not antigun. We're neutral. So

we went to the shooting range. We had a whole team of Marines. There were two of us. Then Josh Bolten came. I told the Marine, "Look, I only have to do three things here. I have to hit something, it can't be the President, and I have to do better than my wife." [*laughter*] So they were pulling—I don't know what you call it, the clay pigeon.

Nelson: Skeet shooting?

McGurn: It goes up there and you hit it. So in the beginning I hit nothing. My wife went on this thing and she just got ahead of me by a lot. I hadn't hit anything. Then the Marines were helping me. I went way ahead and I even had a double one where I hit it this way and that way. So I was relaxed. All I had to do was—we were like the equivalent of baseball batters batting .126, .137, and .119. No one was good, but I was the best. I was the .137 hitter of this group. So once I got ahead, because I know I stink at it, the Marine kept saying, "You can do this, sir. You can do this."

I'm kind of done here. I'm just doing this so the President doesn't tease me forever. Then the President drives by and he shouts out, "Hold your fire." Anyway, when we were there, the long and short of it, he asked people about their books, what they were reading. He was always asking people about their books. My wife mentioned a novel; it's about New Orleans. It's kind of a *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.* I'm trying to think of what the novel is.

Nelson: Oh, by [John Kennedy] O'Toole, *A Confederacy of Dunces.*

McGurn: Yes, *A Confederacy of Dunces*. So we got home and the next night he called the house. The girls were excited. The President is on the phone. He asked her the name and he sent the assistant out to get the book. I don't think he liked it that much. He was more into the serious things and everything. But the point is he did act. If people said something—he asked about books all the time. In fact, a year after, when he left office in 2009, that summer my wife and I said we're going to drive down to Texas. We don't have a lot of money for vacation and can't afford to fly. We'll drive the kids, a cross-country trip. We went to the Alamo. I wanted them to actually remember the Alamo.

We went to see President Bush. We took a picture, they're all in cowboy hats. I thanked him for wearing the native garb of New Jersey for the photo. Then he asked my oldest, who was then in sixth or seventh grade, "Do you like to read?" She said, "Not really." My wife was mortified. That's the prelude to a conversation. My middle one who reads voraciously was dying to have the question asked to her. My point is he asked everyone. He's just interested in reading a lot.

Lately he has taken up painting and so forth. But he never said read this or read that. He came close. He was taken with Natan Sharansky's book on democracy. I read it because if he is referring to it and it's something—it gives you an insight into where he is getting this stuff. But he never assigned things. He just went through them.

The other thing is he didn't really watch TV as far as I could see. He'd watch a sporting event, but I don't even think he watched a game all the way through. He might watch a few minutes of it. He went to bed early. If you cut out TV, you have a lot of time to read. You'd be surprised.

Nelson: Different subject: United Nations speeches. Is that a genre of its own?

McGurn: Yes. UNGA [United Nations General Assembly], we all hate them. It's even worse than the State of the Union. United Nations General Assembly. We dreaded them. We hated the UNGA ones too. It's the same thing. The UN Charter has these human rights, and the UN has to go back to respecting them and the high hopes. Of course you're looking at these ghastly countries and everything.

The one year we had fun I suggested—we were having trouble with Iran and stuff. I said, "Why don't we, instead of addressing UNGA—you see the guy in front of you, the Iranian representative—address the people directly? Say to the people of Iran, 'We are not your enemy. We do not like your government,'" and so forth. I forget what year that was, but what was fun about that was the President told us later, because he doesn't get applause at UNGA or anything, it's just a horrible thing for all Presidents to have to do. You're looking at all these rotten, corrupt regimes and everything there.

He said he liked this because after the first two when he addressed the people of these oppressed countries, he saw them squirming in their seats wondering who is going to be next when the President says he's going to talk to your people about you and everything. So that was kind of fun. Small pleasures.

Nelson: Was there any payoff to doing these speeches, or was it just something you had to do?

McGurn: I think the President has to do every one, when it appears. You come up for not quite a week because the President also has bilateral meetings with each of these guys. They used to stay in the Waldorf before the Chinese bought it and I think they suspect bugged it. I don't think President Obama stays there.

Nelson: So that aspect of the trip was useful?

McGurn: Yes.

Nelson: But the speech, the bilateral meetings?

McGurn: For the President, yes. Look, it's another chance to at least communicate your message. You're not communicating to a sympathetic audience. Most of the audience is going to just act bored and not respond at all. They're not going to boo you. They're not even going to be like a State of the Union where the Democrats might boo if you're a Republican or are just going to sit there. So I don't think it's very satisfying for a President.

Nelson: Are there other speeches that he used to dread giving but felt like he had to? Or that you dreaded writing because he felt that he had to?

McGurn: Only those kinds that are formal and there's not much latitude to do something new. Generally I think if you really don't want to do them you shouldn't be in the speechwriting business. Being a professional is doing your job in all the aspects, including the ones that aren't glamorous or rewarding. That's why you're there. I mean, if you only want to do the pardoning of the turkey at Thanksgiving, you probably should be in another line of work.

Nelson: You tell me, are there things I haven't asked you about that you would like to talk

about?

McGurn: I have a little about the mechanics of the speech. As I said, for us the writing was only the first 40 percent and it went through this whole—you couldn't just put a fix in. Also, if someone said, "Here, put this clause in: Last year we spent $30 million on it," that had to go through the fact checkers first. So people were under the mistaken impression you could just insert—there was a huge process for everything and it was very time consuming and wearying and bureaucratic.

The amazing thing is that anything good comes out of it because it's such a committee. One of Peggy's books—

Nelson: Peggy Noonan?

McGurn: Yes. She talks about what the Gettysburg Address would look like if it went through staffing. You know, the comments, "Fourscore and seven years ago—" Archaic, right? Then another, "The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here," and in the margin, "Then why are we giving this speech?" It's very good. It's closer to truth than not truth.

Nelson: I know she tells the story about the post-*Challenger* speech. She wanted to quote that poem about touching the—

McGurn: Yes, "reach out and touch the face—" Right. A lot of people discover their inner speechwriter.

Nelson: When and why did you decide to leave?

McGurn: Partly I was running out of cash. I had an unrented house in New Jersey. I'd been there three years. The joke answer I give is that the McGurn surge had triumphed in Iraq, I'd done my job, time to go. Part of it is I think you get a little burned out. I thought I had a good team in place to take over. It was just time.

The other thing was the rule that if you wanted to leave in the last year, you had to leave at the end of 2007. What they don't want is in the last months everyone is leaving and they can't fill it. They asked me to stay for the State of the Union, so I was a little later, but it was because they asked. That was the basic reason. I don't remember now—the kids wanted to get back to New Jersey. We'd been there a little more than three years. I don't know. It just seemed natural. I don't remember agonizing or anything. Because there was a good team, it didn't seem like there was going to be a giant hole there.

Nelson: So this wasn't the case, as it was with your hiring, of them going outside and finding somebody else. Were you going outside and finding somebody?

McGurn: No, in fact the successor they picked was inside. It was Marc Thiessen. He deserved the chance.

Nelson: Did you tell the President or did you tell Josh?

McGurn: I told the President. That's one of the things. As senior staffer you have several privileges. The only ones I ever used—you have the right to propose a meeting for the President. I did that only three times. Two were women whose sons—I told you, the Marines who had lost their lives in Iraq. They had one-on-ones with the President in the White House, one Catholic, one Jewish. It was very moving for me to sit in on them.

Another was a story—Cardinal [Joseph] Zen in Hong Kong, Catholic Cardinal, kind of a popular hero, prodemocracy, stands up to China when everyone else is afraid to stand up to China. He came and the President saw him in a one-on-one, which no one wanted to happen, including the Chinese.

When you're a senior staffer, when you leave you're kind of expected to tell the President privately. After one of the speechwriting meetings I just asked if I could have five minutes. It was a little teary. The President said, "We've got to stop this now because we cannot have the President and the chief speechwriter coming out in tears from the Oval Office." You can find it; I have my resignation letter on file.

It was one of the greatest honors of my life. He was tremendous to my wife and children. All my girls had their first dances in the East Room of the White House. We were very blessed.

Nelson: That's it?

McGurn: Yes. I wouldn't change a word today.

Nelson: So he didn't say, "Bill, one more year?"

McGurn: I think at this point—first of all, I wasn't unique. They were asking if people were going to go. He didn't do that. Maybe he was happy to see me go. He didn't ask me.

I had gone through all our savings. Our house was unrented. It was just becoming untenable for me to stay there and keep our house in New Jersey. If I had not still owned the house—we ended up moving from that house shortly after we got back. If I had sold the house, I might have had more leeway, but I had no savings at that point.

Nelson: Did he have a nickname for you?

McGurn: He just called me Billy most of the time.

Nelson: Did you go by Billy?

McGurn: It's funny, only my brothers and sisters and my parents. My dad was Bill and his dad was Bill. So when he grew up he was Billy. Childhood friends, not necessarily my friends, but families who were around. So my wife can always tell if someone knows me from childhood because they'll ask for Billy or something. But he's the only one who did it there. He may have had more derogatory ones that I didn't hear, but that was the one he used most of the time.

Nelson: My father-in-law's given name was Billy.

McGurn: Really?

Nelson: The Army changed it. They would not accept that name.

McGurn: I remember talking to my grandfather. I had a toy gun that didn't work and I said, "Can you fix it?" He kept saying, "Get Billy to do it." I felt like saying, "Old man, I *am* Billy." He was referring to his son, my dad. If he had said, "Ask Daddy," or something to do it, but I'm like, "Hello, I'm right here."

Nelson: When you're leaving the White House are there any restrictions on your ability to talk about your next job with a possible employer?

McGurn: You know what? I didn't have a formal thing. I think I talked to Mr. Murdoch. I didn't even look for other jobs. I wanted to be here. In the interim he had bought the *Wall Street Journal*, so I was happy to come back here. Maybe if I were smarter, greedier, I would have looked for jobs at the Pork Belly Association or something, but I was happy to get back.

Nelson: You knew there was a place for you.

McGurn: Yes.

Nelson: So for a period of months the President is still the President and you are now on the outside.

McGurn: Yes.

Nelson: I just wonder—You had a perspective on him as President before you entered the White House.

McGurn: Right.

Nelson: As you're watching the events that unfold in 2008, early 2009, are there insights you had as an outsider?

McGurn: I'll put it this way. I think I'm a little bit more free market than the President, some of the programs. I came to understand a little more the pressures on the President, how things actually work, and so why my views might be harder to effect and everything.

Nelson: The financial crisis?

McGurn: No, I'm just thinking in general, like the ethanol subsidies and so forth. I may have had a little more sympathy. Again, to me the biggest thing was the war. It was the biggest chit in terms of American prestige, and if we lose it I just think there are huge consequences, terrible consequences for a lot of people, including not just Americans. So that was my main concern. Of course I had a column in short order and I started writing my column.

I didn't deal with the President after that. I didn't bother him in the White House. I did have communications with a lot of my friends there the way any normal person would have

communications. I don't recall that I got special insight. I recall when the financial crisis happened being grateful I wasn't there having to deal with that.

I felt that I had the war going to hell and then Katrina. I'd kind of done my share. I don't know—to go right into that financial mess—because when it's happening, you don't know what's going to happen. Remember, the stock market is going up. You just don't know what is going to come. We read it, we look at it now—from the rearview mirror it is a little different, but during the time it's such a seesaw. That's like the war. My suspicion is you get a lot of contradictory advice because people, in fairness, they don't know. So I was glad I was done doing that at that time.

Nelson: Surely by September of '08 President Bush felt like he was on a glide path back to civilian life, not expecting to have to deal with a crisis of that amplitude. I just wonder. Where do you think he got the resilience? I'm not sure what it is to feel, *OK, I'm tired. I can see the exit door, but I've got to have the same intensity.*

McGurn: First of all, he's that kind of person. I think different personalities handle it in different ways. I think Clinton almost feeds on those things. I remember the story about Clinton. I lived in Asia 10 years. When I went to Manila I would love to stay in the Manila Hotel where MacArthur stayed. It's a beautiful hotel on the water.

President Clinton stayed there, for the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II. I was told they got in there at like two in the morning. It has a huge lobby. It's a big square, but it's huge. It's 150 feet high and all Philippine mahogany, just beautiful. It's a social center. People gather there. When you arrive on these trips with the President, all you want to do is go to bed. You're groggy and you're just—so people get their key and go. It's a long day.

I heard President Clinton came alive. He was the last one up to bed, he was just talking to the maids. I'm sure he was exhausted too. So different people can react in different ways. President Bush's resilience was more disciplined. He's in good shape. The bicycling took a lot of stress out of him.

People criticize President Obama for playing golf. Maybe it's not a good image PR [public relations]-wise to have him playing after some crisis—but Presidents especially need an outlet. You want your President to be in pretty good shape and able to take that. President Bush was a fierce competitor in the bicycling. Several Secret Service agents know that because they careened off some crazy hill and broke their arms or something. That was good for him. He was disciplined so he could take everything I think that way. It didn't throw him out of order.

In some ways also it's easier being in charge. You're the speechwriter. Your mandate is to write this speech on this. You don't have all the information. Unhappily, there is a massive contradiction or something no one wants to face up to that you have to address. Often there is no good way to do something, you've just got to do it. That can be more frustrating, I think. But I think he was just very disciplined.

Nelson: There are a few questions here at the end that we ask of everybody under the heading of retrospect.

McGurn: Sure.

Nelson: I think you've addressed your biggest sense of accomplishment, which was with the surge speech?

McGurn: I think so.

Nelson: I'll just ask you these. Which were the most challenging speeches you were asked to write? Which kind did you enjoy writing the most?

McGurn: Clearly, the surge was the most challenging, because there was nothing that can compare in intensity. If you think of President Bush's years as defined by the war, especially the Iraq War, that was the moment it was all falling apart and he admitted it wasn't working. So that's the hardest kind of thing.

Again, it's not like 9/11, rallying a nation that wants to go in and take it; this is a war-weary nation. So there's a lot of—like Katrina, there are a lot of important speeches and a lot of other war speeches, but nothing with that intensity. Also, that speech is not just a speech about something, that speech is making a bet. That was a bet. We're doubling down and we're going to do this and we're going to win. No one believed it except for Petraeus and maybe Barney. No one really believed it was going to come out as well as it did.

Nelson: Something you mentioned earlier, and we haven't talked about it at all, was your attitude toward immigration, which I gather was on the same page as the President's.

McGurn: Yes.

Nelson: That effort at immigration reform happened while you were there.

McGurn: Yes. It was very frustrating. One of the things the press fixes on—you asked about incorrect things or misimpressions. I was always asked how many drafts the speech was. It was so misleading, because when you have a speech it goes through staffing, which means people come back with their corrections. You're Secretary Rumsfeld or you're the Commerce Secretary and you have one change. "You say last year we spent $160 million on this. It was $130 million. Can you make that one change?" You have to make an entire new draft to keep track of it. So the drafts don't really mean it was rewritten from top to bottom.

That said, the immigration one was like 50 drafts. We got conflicting things. The President's basic approach was to say we can find a way to honor our laws and live up to our highest ideals and so forth. What the conservative critics of the immigration debate don't realize is the status quo is not conservative. The status quo is illegality.

I lived overseas. I know a lot of Hong Kong people and friends over there that love America, would be great American citizens, who want to come. They should have an equal shot. You shouldn't get a better shot just because you live 30 miles from the southern border. Many people wait patiently. Our system doesn't reward law-abiding people. To fix it we have to make a legal channel to take the pressure off, right? Otherwise we're just going to have more illegality.

The perfect is the enemy of the good. Anyway, that had a lot of components. Democrats came together, Teddy [Edward M.] Kennedy famously. It's one of the sneakier roles that Barack

Obama played, because he played a role in killing that. There was a group of eight that made the compromises. Then he put in a couple of poison-pill amendments to kill it. I really hold that against—

If President Obama wanted immigration reform, he had the opportunity to do it. But he didn't do anything about it. Look, he hasn't really done anything this whole time. I think he prefers it as a political issue. But if you go back to the record you'll see—I've written about this—even Democrats were chiding him because he was trying to scuttle the deal, not advance it. Then when it came out, just all hell broke out. Everyone rejected it. The right rejected it and so forth. It just went nowhere.

Nelson: This is a pretty good question; I didn't come up with it. With your background in journalism, were you surprised how the speeches you wrote and the President delivered got reported, interpreted?

McGurn: It's a good question. I was often frustrated, but some of that was our own fault. If the President had a fault, I think he let us, the speechwriters, go on too long sometimes. The danger when you do a longer speech, instead of cutting it down—what amazed me about reporters is how they would report something as new when he said it two weeks ago or a month ago. Same for President Obama. All the White House speeches are up on the White House Web page. Anyone can look at any one from any date. They're listed by month and so forth.

You would think they would just go through and search before they say President Bush had a brand-new thing, he said this, or President Obama. They don't. If it happened a month ago it's like it happened in another atmosphere, in another age. People just don't know about it. The more you give people, the longer your speech, the more likely they're going to pick apart what isn't necessarily the part you want to emphasize. Maybe that day this part strikes them. So sometimes that was our fault.

There is also a tendency of all Presidents—as I said, they appear like three times a day. At the end, people get kind of tired of seeing them. People are tired of seeing Barack Obama now. People were tired of seeing George W. Bush. But it's hard to resist the opportunity to state your message. Again, I'm kind of a less-is-more person. The older I get, I think, if I want a message to my kids, "Come home at eleven," I don't give them an hour of how I love you. I just say, "Eleven o'clock I want you home." The more you give them, the more likely they can miss what your message is.

Now again, it's the job of the press secretary and so forth to say today the President was trying to make the case that X—also one of the tendencies is if you're the White House press corps and say you're following President Bush on the war, or President Obama on anything, you're hearing him say the same thing all the time. Maybe not 90, but 80 percent of the language you're hearing, "Wah, wah, wah." You're tuning out. So if you want to focus on this one new thing, make sure, as someone said, you "put the hay out there where the horses can eat it."

Nelson: Could President Bush or any President give fewer speeches, given that groups have come to expect that if the President doesn't speak—every other President did.

McGurn: I don't know. The people on the other side would say we don't have a choice. People

are clamoring for it, you have to do it, you can't just hide in the White House. But the more you do, because every day the White House, all White Houses, have the message for the day, health care or whatever it is. If you meet with something else and you give a speech on something else to another group, energy, right away your message is confused. Maybe there isn't a way to fix that. The easy way is to be focused and tight.

Nelson: President Bush would often say, "My place in history will be written by the historians 50 years from now," or whatever. So 50 years from now what do you hope historians will say about the Bush administration? What do you think would be a fair assessment, an accurate assessment?

McGurn: I would agree that we can't know. There are so many events that we don't know. If you had gone from 2008 to today—remember, we have a President who dismissed what he now says is the gravest threat that he's dealing with, dismissed it as a junior varsity team only two years ago. Events really change.

Nelson: Yes.

McGurn: Iraq and the wars have a lot to do with American prestige. I think President Obama has squandered a lot, and President Bush sort of laid out what is at stake. I'm hoping that ultimately what will prevail is a free Iraq where Arab people can see what it is like to be free and break the debilitation that they have, with the U.S. credibility enhanced. But that depends on a lot of other things.

I used to say a lot of our speeches depend on whether we win or not. If we don't win, who reads the war speeches of LBJ in Vietnam? He made a lot of good points in them, but no one reads them. So we don't know. President Bush would probably say, "Look at [Harry] Truman. He left office a failure." In retrospect, people think he did a lot for the architecture of the Cold War and setting things up. That's what I hope. I don't know. But events are so fluid. We don't know. It sure would be a shame to me that all the blood and treasure we've expended in Afghanistan and Iraq would mean nothing, basically. Even President Obama realizes that, which is why he is putting troops back there. He is at least trying to keep the lid on until he goes. I'm hoping it's not *après moi, le déluge*. That's my hope.

Nelson: You said you saw him about six months after he left office.

McGurn: Right.

Nelson: Have you seen him since then?

McGurn: I have—I'm trying to remember where. I saw him once. He's come here a few times.

Nelson: To the—

McGurn: He has seen Mr. Murdoch. I think there was an alumni event, White House alumni. I've seen him at a few things. He sends me a note on my birthday or something. I try not to bug him. I'm sure he has a lot of people bugging him. I'm very grateful to him. My family loves him. He gave me a great honor to serve the nation in his administration, but I don't want to be

bombarding him and bothering him with things. But when we see him it's great. My girls adore him.

They had the unveiling of the portrait two or three years ago in the White House. It's not done by the time the President leaves. They sent a note inviting us. I responded by saying, "I can't go, but my wife can go. Can she go and take one of our children?" So she took our youngest. Our youngest has grown up in New Jersey, born in China. She has honorary Texan citizenship. She thinks she's a Texan. She loves President Bush. You don't want to say anything bad about him in front of her.

They went to the White House and there was a receiving line. First it was Mrs. Bush, then President Bush, and President Bush saw her and said, "Come here, girlfriend." He gave her a big hug. Then she met Mrs. [Michelle] Obama and then President Obama. Then George H. W. Bush Sr. was there and got in a picture with her. So in one day this little girl met three Presidents. Those are the little things. President Bush was great. She loved President Bush. All my girls, he was so good to them and everything.

Nelson: You focus on his actions and his legacy and the war. I wonder politically, not just the failure of his brother's candidacy for President, but also the nature of the Republican Party eight years out from his leaving office. Does he have a political legacy?

McGurn: He may, but I think it's too early to say. It really depends—eight years from now, will he be welcome at a Republican convention or not? We'll see. One of the tragedies is that compassionate conservatism has been lost. What he meant to say is conservative is compassionate. I have many issues with the alleged compassion of the Democratic Party.

I'm pro-life. I don't believe compassion is taking the life of an unborn, defenseless child. I don't believe compassion is keeping a black child in a failing school like in New York City and not giving him a charter because you're in bed with the teachers' union. So on a whole host of issues, President Bush was trying to make the case that compassion isn't about sending you to a federal bureaucracy if you have a problem. Unfortunately, in some ways it became all about money, which is the worst measure, because he was trying to say compassion isn't measured by money.

He used to say you can't always solve things with a $100 million federal program. It can't take the place of a caring arm around the shoulder. That's a message I hope we recover. Not that conservatives need to find a way to be compassionate, but to bring out what is compassionate, of opportunity for people and caring. Right now the well is too poisoned. If you even write about that, people are just so polarized they don't want to listen to it.

Nelson: Is anybody doing that effectively today?

McGurn: Not really. There is a whole group of people that are trying to equate compassion with special subsidies or special spending. That's not the American way to go, to subsidize the middle class. In my view, again, this is where the market side of me comes in. My view is nothing was more compassionate than old Hong Kong in the 1950s—free-market, dog-eat-dog Hong Kong. Let all those refugees come in, twice as many as the people that were there, almost sunk Hong Kong. People were writing stories: "Too many Asians," "Hong Kong has no future." Those

people built Hong Kong. It was a market; human talent came down.

At the heart of the vision of this enterprise, the *Wall Street Journal,* my vision is the human mind is the greatest asset. For people who don't have anything, what they really need is not a subsidy, not a grant. They need a clear shot, like Jackie Robinson. We're all celebrating. This Friday is the anniversary of when he broke the color barrier. He didn't say, "Give me a special thing. Put me on first base." He said, "Give me a shot. I can beat those guys. I not only can compete with the white players; I can beat the white players." The compassion for him was giving him the shot he was denied. Unfortunately, those things have got a little lost.

Nelson: Well, I've run out of questions. This has been great.

McGurn: Glad I could help.

Nelson: This is the one time this will happen with you, so if there is something you came thinking we would talk about and I just didn't—

McGurn: I'm not sure there is a better process today. In the old days when you're Ted Sorensen, it's probably I write the draft, I give it to the President, he's fine with it. OK, just go check these numbers or something. That just doesn't work today.

Nelson: Maybe just to clarify this, because I think you said the President would like to see it two days in advance. Prior to that, I don't know if we covered adequately or not the vetting process that you have to undergo with affected departments and agencies and offices in the White House. I know we're done, but could you go back?

McGurn: Let me give you the larger structure of a speech, any speech. It could be the pardoning of a turkey to the State of the Union.

Nelson: OK.

McGurn: It begins, you say we're speaking to the National Hispanic Association or the Texas Cattlemen's Society, whatever it is. Frequently you're speaking to them, but it may be about your issue, energy. You may be speaking to cattlemen about energy. So probably substantively you'll make a few nods like, "I know you need lower taxes," or whatever it is, or, "You need to be able to export your beef to Japan," but then you get into your thing.

So I would assign a writer to do it. The policy people, for the most part they have the policy. "This is our policy, this is what we want to do," and they come to you and explain it and give you all the numbers and all the stuff. If you have questions you can ask them more. Frequently, policy goes across different departments. That's why OMB [Office of Management and Budget] is a big player, because they do a lot of the numbers and they fill in these things.

Nelson: When you say policy people, just in the White House, or White House and departments?

McGurn: And departments. Let's say it's health savings accounts, not a big thing like Obamacare, but just a small thing, health savings accounts. You're giving a speech on that. So you say we're giving it at a Wendy's in Cleveland because they have health savings accounts for

their employees.

So HHS [Health and Human Services] will tell you, OMB will tell you about the money. They will come to you with here's the policy, here are the numbers, here's the thing. They'll try to help you find an example: Sheila is 32, a single mom, she has an HSA [health savings account], and here is how it helps her. So you have that. The writer puts that together, puts it in a speech. As I said, most people probably think that's 90 percent of the speech. It's not 90 percent. I said 40, but it's probably 30 percent or even 25 percent.

They put it together in a speech and then they would come to me and say, "I have a draft." I would take Chris Michel, Marc Thiessen, and we'd go over, the four of us would read it in this office, read it aloud. If we had questions about it we'd edit it, but we'd also edit it putting in applause lines and all this.

Then it goes out. When we have it the way we think it should be it goes out for something called "staffing." Peggy Noonan explains it. Staffing means that the Staff Secretary sends out a draft, a hard copy like this, stapled. It has a cover sheet with the names on it of who gets it. If your department is involved at all, like if the Air Force were somehow providing HSAs or flying something, their person gets it. The National Security Council, it will be like 20 people on any speech. They get it and they go through.

They're supposed to really just change minor points, "You got that number wrong" or something, but they'll frequently have a different idea of how the speech should be. So they can give big changes or little changes. Move this here or take this out. That goes out at a minimum to 20-some people. On a big speech like the surge speech it can go out to 50 people.

It comes back, and you get a pile of these things. You've written your thing, it's four pages or five pages and you get 20 that have all edits. You go through. You have to decide whether you should make the edit, whether it's right, whether it's not right. It depends on the rank of the person how much you can dismiss it. In 20 edits I guarantee you they're all going to have, "I think this piece should be emphasized." "No, this piece should be taken out." So there are a lot of judgments in that. There are fixes, too. "I want this inserted there." Everyone adds, no one takes stuff out.

So you go through this process, staffing. Sometimes if it were simple, the people would do it by themselves. Some senior staff would just make one or two changes, and some would make none. But some go through the whole thing, find their inner editor.

Nelson: Do you give them a deadline?

McGurn: Yes, they have a deadline. The Staff Secretary says by six o'clock. They don't always follow that. Steve Hadley was notorious for not getting it in on time, which is hard.

Nelson: What would be a typical deadline? A day? A week?

McGurn: A day. So you go through. You make all those changes and you hope—you try to do it in a coherent way and see what they say. Some can be the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense. Then you have a new version. We would read it through again just to make sure it's not

clunked up or anything.

Only after those changes would we go to the President with the draft. He would get his draft. Then he either liked it or disliked it. He'd call us in and make some changes or not make some changes. But it went through this whole process and you're waiting for these 20 people to get back to you. One might get back to you at nine o'clock in the morning, the other might not get back to you until three. Steve Hadley frequently wouldn't get back to you until—that's really hard. He's a busy man, National Security Advisor. But it's hard for us to give a speech to the President that's not ready.

After all that staffing it then goes to the President. He could hate it. He could spend the whole day just re-editing it. Only then does he deliver it. Up until the last moment people are always sending in new suggestions for stuff. Of course the closer you get to the end, the higher the bar for making a change. It's a difficult, cumbersome process. We liked the part from the President on. One man, just what he wants. I don't have to worry about what someone else wants.

I remember there was one speech, an Iraq speech. I was in my first office, tiny office, next to Chris Michel. I think he had drafted the main thing. He had put in a line, I can't remember what it was, Secretary Rumsfeld and National Security Advisor Rice had a lot of conflicts on Iraq and so forth. Dan Bartlett was communications director, and he's heading out and he says it's great. He says, "Of course, Rumsfeld is going to hate it." No sooner had he got out the door the phone rings for the young guy next to me and I hear, "Don Rumsfeld here." I'm thinking, *OK, we're going to have some awkward*—but when they come to that stage, then some things the President decides. That's fine with us. We just get it decided.

The hard thing is when these 20 conflicting—the more chefs you have, the worse the dish is. It's no different. It's amazing. Mike Gerson once said the amazing thing is that anything coherent comes out at the end.

Nelson: Did you ever get suggestions—maybe not from anybody in a particular way, but where you thought, *Wow, this is a really good idea. This is a real improvement. There could be a talent pool emerging.* Did that ever happen?

McGurn: We got them from other people. As I told you, the New Orleans speech, a friend of mine, Raymond Arroyo, he is a TV newscaster with this Catholic station EWTN, he gave me the part about the second line, which was a good ending.

I don't know. We're looking for different things. We're either looking for applause lines or something. The problem we generally had is too many advisors. This helped as journalists. One of the things people who aren't writers don't realize is by choosing A you have to say I'm not choosing B.

Nelson: Yes.

McGurn: The worst is to try to do A and B. Worse than that is A and B and C and D and E, which is frequently—also it is frequently what bureaucrats—I don't use it pejoratively, but people, staffers, that's the political thing. You get yours. Well, that's not what makes a good speech. Ted Sorensen would be screaming if you ever tried to do that to him. Tony Dolan also

had a similar relationship with Reagan. He did some brilliant speeches. It just gets harder, the bureaucratic process, and it never ends.

That's the thing for the speechwriter. People are trying to make changes up to the last minute. So until the President is up on the podium speaking, it doesn't end. And you have three more the next day. It's just a wearying, wearying process where the actual writing, and even the editing, is actually a small part of the stew. It's the politics, adjusting all these things and trying not to let this become a stew with no taste, taking out everything from it. So it's an art.

Nelson: What is the relationship between the speechwriter's office and the communications?

McGurn: Dan Bartlett was our boss. I like Dan. I think he's spokesman for Walmart now. I'm sure he has done this with you.

Nelson: Yes, I interviewed him.

McGurn: He was great. I liked him personally too. They're theoretically in charge, but what it comes down to is they would make edits too, but frequently at the end. It would just be like here's what they want. Sometimes they would help us in the sense they would say, "No, you don't have to do that," about things from the other guys. He's trying to control the message.

So if you say Secretary Rumsfeld wants us to say this and we can't say this—for whatever reason. I'm only using his name because I'm blanking on all the other Cabinet Secretaries now. He would say, "No, we don't do that," or "We're going to do this." It's his job to control the message. So he would go through and make his own edits. They counted. They were very high in terms of what we listened to.

Also, Dan Bartlett had had the advantage—he did know the President for many years in Texas. So he had a pretty good ear for what the President wanted or would let fly.

The usual one is the Staff Secretary's office, which we didn't mention. They staffed the thing out. Then they go through it themselves. He hands the thing to the President. One of the oddest things about the job is that the Staff Secretary's job is the most thankless job. He prepares all the papers for the President. So the night—the briefings—he is responsible for all this. If there's no briefing from the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], he gets reamed. But he doesn't have the authority. He has all responsibility and no authority.

He would frequently make severe edits with these Sharpies. It's rare that the Staff Secretary and the speechwriters get along because he checks all the footnoted stuff, all the fact checkers. That's his job. But we got along pretty well. We had the same predators is how we regarded it.

Nelson: Why would the Staff Secretary make changes in a draft?

McGurn: He doesn't make changes. He would be part of the people—as I told you, you send it around to 20. He would be one of them.

Nelson: But why?

McGurn: Because he deals with the President a lot and he is responsible for every piece of paper the President gets. So they check everything. If he says, "This is wrong, you can't say it," he's on the line for it. In fact, the irony is, sometimes the President would be reading a speech that I wrote. If there's something he doesn't like he'd chew out the Staff Secretary instead of me for it. I feel that I cost a high price for the Staff Secretary several times. They are responsible for every bit of paper. It is the most thankless, unappreciated job in the White House.

Nelson: So if the Staff Secretary made a change it would be because he didn't think a fact had been substantiated or something?

McGurn: Or the logic is off or this doesn't work. The Staff Secretary dealing with the President every day on his writings probably has a better sense, and he sat in on all our speechwriting meetings. So he is an insider in the process because they handle the speeches. He's there when the President is telling us—because the speech, of all the President's papers, is the most important thing. But he did it for other publications and the briefing books. If the President wants something, he calls his Staff Secretary. If he's waiting for some paper from Rumsfeld he doesn't call Rumsfeld, he calls the Staff Secretary. That's how it works.

I told you I never handed the papers to the President. It's part of a control so the Staff Secretary—this is the last draft everyone saw to make sure that 10 people didn't have different draft threes.

Nelson: Who was the Staff Secretary?

McGurn: There were two. Brett Kavanaugh was the first—he is now on the U.S. Court of Appeals in the District of Columbia, high-powered stepping-stone to the Supreme Court, and Raul Yanes, who is a lawyer for Davis Polk. I think he did this. He's in your interviews at the Miller Center. He was a great guy. In fact, he was in President Obama's law class.

He used to joke about how Chris Michel was a young Yale graduate and Chris wanted to go to law school. He ended up going to Yale Law School. I think he's clerking for Anthony Kennedy now. He's clerking for a Supreme Court Justice. Because he knows all these guys, he is on this track to do all this stuff. But Raul Yanes, who was Staff Secretary, said if he goes through all this process like we did, Yale, an Ivy League law school—Raul went to Harvard—at the end of the day he could be Staff Secretary and then correcting the footnotes for some other 25-year-old speechwriter 10 years from now. That's sort of how it works. So it's not always that rewarding. [*laughter*]

Nelson: That's marvelous. I'd like to end there, but I have one more question, and that is about Dan Bartlett and the communications office. The example you gave was him reviewing something after it had been written to see is this consistent with the overall message. What I'm wondering is at the front end did he say, "Now here's—"

McGurn: Yes, it was more informal for him. At a certain point in time, especially, remember, most of our stuff was war speeches. I said the State of the Union; at a certain point in time everyone already knows those questions. What he might say is, "We're meeting on this. There is this woman we want to highlight." But Dan was also more an intercessor for us. He could stick up for us or something. His great value was he really knew the President and the President really

trusted him. In some ways I think he was underutilized in the sense that if I had been President Bush with Dan Bartlett, I would have almost had him have no line responsibilities, just sit there in all the meetings.

He was kind of a shrewd observer of human beings. He could say, "Well, Bill McGurn is telling you this now, but I know he's not—" He would be good to be just an informed confidant. But he had a lot of these other responsibilities and it was a hassle. He knew the President—sometimes they bickered like a married couple. They kind of loved each other. They knew each other. They're both Texans. Dan's just a stand-up guy. He really, really is. I really liked him.

Nelson: Bill McGurn, this has been so helpful. I promise you that when the day comes that the world has access to this, people who study the Bush Presidency, especially the second term and the speechwriting office, the Iraq War, this is going to be a resource.

McGurn: It's still the blind man and the elephant. I only know the snout or something. I know a lot, but you were asking before about reading some books. I don't read a lot. I don't read the sensational ones and everything. But some of them are illuminating. Like Elliott Abrams's book, because I was interested in the war and he had definite—I more or less am on Elliott's side with a lot of things. I've known him a long time. His son worked for me up at the *New York Post.* That was illuminating to learn a little bit about what I didn't know. People generally are not modest in these kinds of jobs, the jobs I had. They think they know everything, but you don't always know what the other meeting was after you. It's interesting.

Presidents, all Presidents, know a lot more than you think. They have people coming to them every day. Some people just lying, some people are saying this. You can't be an idiot and be President. To just survive the process. They get a lot of insights to human character because people come to them. They see people at good times, bad times. They meet everyone in the world. But we often don't know what we don't know.

Nelson: The unknown unknowns.

McGurn: Rumsfeld said, "the unknown unknowns" and so forth. There's a lot to that. We know our conversation, but we don't know the other conversations that have gone on or what other people have done.

Nelson: Some of those books came out—I'm thinking of the Bob Woodward books. They're coming out while the President is still in office and people are treating them as shaping a current position. Then books by administration alumni.

McGurn: And you see actually just from the Woodward books how radically he changed—first it was all great, gung-ho, then disaster and then rescue. It was a lot with the zeitgeist, what the flavor of the month was.

Nelson: The book that I think most people whose judgment I respect think is the best so far is Peter Baker's book, *Days of Fire*.

McGurn: I didn't read that.

Nelson: I would recommend it. Now, you would have your own evaluation of it, but it's very evenhanded. Bush people tell me that it's a respectable book.

McGurn: I think the problem is I'm in the press. When people say evenhanded, my antennae go up. [*laughter*] They never say that about a book by, say, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter. So again, it's just what people know and what they concentrate on. You can write true stories; it just depends on what you concentrate on. I'm sure like all Presidents, President Bush had conversations with—I mean, Dan would be the one that I would—he's a Texan, he's a guy, he trusts him. So he might just say things that he wouldn't say to other people.

I will say, I did notice, I was naïve coming to the White House, didn't know anything about rank. When I came to the White House I didn't even know that the Oval Office was in the West Wing. I might have thought it was in the oval part of the south face. I knew so little. I hadn't been in there. I hadn't visited the White House ever. So I was very naïve knowing that. But I find when people who had served a President before go back, I'm not sure their skills always serve the next President. When you have prior experience, you learn what you can do, what you can ignore. Most people have to take a lot of indignities at some point or another. But when you go back you say, "I don't have to do this. I know what I can do."

I'm not sure that that experience always benefits the President they're serving. It might benefit themselves.

Nelson: Anybody in mind?

McGurn: No, not in particular. I'm dubious of people serving more than one President for that reason. I also think that when you've done it, you feel like a veteran. I believe the President deserves someone who has completely new enthusiasm for this and that. I don't know. It's kind of like a second marriage or something. You don't have the enthusiasm and total commitment of the first.

Nelson: The flip side is people criticized some Presidents for not drawing on the experience of predecessors.

McGurn: I agree with that too. There's something to that. There are a lot of attitudes of people coming in: We don't need you, we won without you.

Here's a guy like Ed Gillespie—I don't think he had been in a White House before, but he was a great communications director after Dan. I'd known Ed a long time before. We definitely benefited from his experience. I'm just not saying it's necessary to have White House experience. It's just a very different kettle of fish.

Nelson: What can I say but thank you?

McGurn: OK, you're welcome.