MILLER CENTER
of Public Affairs
Presidential Oral History Program

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

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

RONALD REAGAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

FINAL EDITED TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH ARAM BAKSHIAN

Monday, January 14, 2002
Washington, D.C.

Interviewers

University of Virginia
Stephen F. Knott, chair
Russell Riley

Audiotape: Miller Center
Transcription: Martha W. Healy
Transcript copy edited by: Laura Moranchek, Jane Rafal Wilson
Transcript final edit by: Jane Rafal Wilson

RONALD REAGAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

FINAL EDITED TRANSCRIPT

Interview with Aram Bakshian

January 14, 2002

Knott: …future generations to acquire some understanding of the Reagan Presidency and your role in it. We're very grateful that you're with us today. I think the first thing we should do, we usually do a voice ID for our transcriber, so if you could just introduce yourself.

Bakshian: My name is Aram Bakshian. I'm here to be interviewed today as part of the Oral History Project on the Reagan administration.

Riley: I'm Russell Riley, an Assistant Professor at the University of Virginia, Miller Center.

Knott: And I'm Stephen Knott, an Assistant Professor and research fellow at the Miller Center. We usually like to begin by asking you how your career in politics began, if you could just take us back a bit. We notice that you are a lifelong Washingtonian?

Bakshian: Yes. My family always followed current events and we were Republicans. I was in the Young Republicans, at which point I then had my first actual political job, which was in 1966 when I was 22 and congressional staffs were expanded. So I was brought on for speechwriting, news releases, that sort of thing with then-Congressman Bill Brock, who was a Republican from Chattanooga who later was a Senator, later a Special Trade Representative, later Labor Secretary, et cetera.

Riley: How did you get connected with a Tennessean?

Bakshian: It was a matter of the D.C. Young Republicans. The actual urban population of Washington is overwhelmingly Democratic, so the D.C. Young Republicans consisted disproportionately of people who worked on the Hill or who were from elsewhere in the country, but then lived in D.C., often as Capitol Hill staffers. So it was a very Hill-centered thing. Most congressional staffs you'll find over time, while they have a core of people from the constituency, the specialists and the Washington staff especially, as opposed to the district offices, tend to include a fair number of people who either had previous experience on the Hill or political experience or press experience, if that's what they're handling.

Knott: Speechwriting was part of your charge for Representative Brock?

Bakshian: Yes, that was the first political speechwriting I'd ever—well, the first speechwriting per se I'd ever done; I'd already done writing. And then from there, I was asked to do

speechwriting for a few other people. There was in 1966, the midterm elections, a group, Americans for Constitutional Action [ACA], which was a conservative but mainstream organization, which endorsed candidates, and helped them raise money. It doesn't play as large a role now, if it still exists. Also during the course of the campaign they would do what they called the "speech kit," which was issued once every week for—I forget how many weeks, maybe it was ten speeches as the campaign heated up—prefab speeches that could go out to any candidate they endorsed, could be modified and delivered locally. There was a series: one on crime, one on foreign policy, one on budget, one on agriculture, et cetera. I was asked to do that, again by people I knew from being on the Hill and being in the Young Republicans.

Those speeches reached just about every Republican Congressman, every Democratic Congressman who had a high ACA rating, and various candidates, some of whom ended up in office. Then some of them individually contacted me. So I accidentally became a speechwriter, as opposed to just an all-purpose writer, which I do on the outside. That was the entrance. And once you're launched, it's just like theater or being published, being in a decent production or having a good publisher. After you've had a book or two out then things take care of themselves a great deal more than when you're on the outside trying to get in.

Riley: Had your family been involved in politics in Washington?

Bakshian: Not professionally, but they always had been active in the Republican Party and always followed current events quite a bit. The next major, full-time position I had, aside from speechwriting for this person and that, was in '71. After the '70 midterm elections, Bob Dole became chairman of the Republican National Committee [RNC], which meant that he had to have a second staff because if you're a Senator and you're also the chairman of the RNC, your Senate staff handles your Senate business but is not part of the Republican National Committee. So, as the new RNC chairman, Bob Dole needed a speechwriter. The chairman has to do a lot of speaking.

I was brought on as speechwriter for the chairman there on the basis of people who knew my work congressionally. I did that for about a year and some months. Bob Dole is not the easiest person to write for, because while he is a good impromptu speaker he doesn't like using a script and he doesn't like reviewing or editing. You get no insight on the way into writing it and either he takes it or he doesn't take it, but there's no insight about what he would have preferred to say or anything like that. So it was interesting and challenging, but mainly as a stepping stone to other things. Then again, all during this time I was also doing other writing for publication: history, criticism, reviews, et cetera.

The next big development came in '72—this would have been maybe six months after I'd quit the RNC. I happened to do an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* as a conservative being critical of Congressman [John] Ashbrook's run as a maverick against [Richard] Nixon in the New Hampshire Republican primary. He hadn't run in New Hampshire yet, but he had announced his candidacy, at the same time that Congressman [Paul] McCloskey from California, the San Francisco area, was running from the left against Nixon in the primary. My point was that the Ashbrook ploy would be stupid because it would backfire, setting back the conservatives. Ashbrook would do so poorly, probably much worse than McCloskey, that if anything it would

weaken the pressure from the right within the party, not strengthen it, and it was probably just a fundraisers' delight more than anything else.

The squib at the end of my article identified me as having been a speechwriter for the chairman of the Republican National Committee, so people in the White House who read it—as I later reconstructed, I didn't know this at the time—saw that I had a speechwriting background. They also saw it as a supportive piece and liked the way it was written. And it turns out they were just at that point getting ready to beef up the presidential speechwriting staff and were looking for some new writers.

About four or five days after the piece ran I got a phone call asking me to talk to a Mr. Clark, I believe in White House personnel, someone I'd never met or heard of. This was the first "make sure he has two arms and isn't from Mars" interview. So I went and he explained that they were thinking of expanding the speechwriting staff. Then, I forget whether it was a week or two after that, I got a call from the office of Ray Price, who was the actual guy in charge of the speechwriting shop, which meant that the initial interview obviously had been favorable and they'd moved me up the next notch.

Riley: You weren't from Mars. [laughter]

Bakshian: That's right. Or I was, maybe that's what they were looking for. I met Ray Price and his young deputy whom no one had ever heard of at that stage of the game, named David Gergen, who I've known for years since. Then more waiting; they obviously were interviewing other people and so on. I forget what the lead time was between then and when I got the call to start, but I was brought on in late May or early June of '72. So that was the entry at the White House level. Then I was subsequently the only Nixon speechwriter who actually was asked to stay on indefinitely in the [Gerald] Ford administration. Then of course we'll be talking about the Reagan situation later.

Riley: Exactly.

Knott: So you were working with Pat Buchanan and William Safire?

Bakshian: I was actually next door to Pat Buchanan, but not when I first got there. When I got there in June, which I think was when I actually ended up starting, it turned out to be about a week before the Watergate break in. If I'd only known. I was working on the second floor. It was a makeshift arrangement where they just had to find space. They had added three people to the speechwriting staff. But once things settled in and they decided who was worth a damn and who wasn't, I got a promotion and was kept when they thinned the staff out after the election. From then on, I was actually next door to Pat Buchanan.

This was either before he was harboring some of his more drastic current views, or the seeds hadn't started fermenting in his head at that point, because he was just a very pleasant fellow, writing an occasional important speech. By the time I got there in '72, the original head of speechwriting, a gentleman named [James] Keogh, who had been with *Time* magazine for years and had set up the operation, had left, at which point there were four fairly senior speechwriters

besides secondary people. They consisted of Ray Price, Lee Huebner, Pat Buchanan, and Bill Safire.

When Ray Price was elevated to head the speechwriting staff, Huebner, Buchanan and Safire, since they'd all been co-equals before, were sort of given a senior status where they could write as much or as little as they wanted to. They were given one or two other responsibilities as well, but they weren't doing the day-to-day grind. Thus Pat ended up in charge of the little sub-staff that did the daily news summary for the President and would occasionally write a speech, write political memos to the President and so on. Safire, I guess in retrospect, was leaking a lot to the *New York Times* in anticipation of building up a career there, and also wrote the occasional speech. But he, too, was semi-autonomous. Lee Huebner stayed more on the team, and I think also acted informally as sort of a deputy editor for Ray Price.

In any event, Pat happened to be next door to me. Also, we were both local boys; Pat was raised in Chevy Chase very close to where my mother was raised, just with different results.

Riley: He was a sort of young tough, wasn't he?

Bakshian: No, he has that reputation. I think he would like to be remembered that way. As far as I know, he had no military or criminal experience—although he once kicked a policeman in the shin. I think that was the extent of his violent background. So when he talks about locking and loading or holding pitchforks, it has come to him rather late in life.

Knott: The kinds of speeches that you would tend to work on for President Nixon, was there a particular topic that they would send your way?

Bakshian: No. I came on with experience, in a sense, broader experience (a) because I'd also done outside writing on a number of topics, but (b) because I'd actually done speechwriting for people in national office. So that while at first obviously they try you with a few little things, by the time I'd been there a few months I wasn't confined to light remarks. And I wasn't brought on because I knew agriculture in particular or just economics. Some of that is beginning to happen more now than it used to, although you would occasionally get people on detail that were specialists. But you basically had senior writers and not-so-senior writers and in the end somebody might do more foreign policy writing or be called on to do the heavy duty domestic policy stuff, and some might be considered more political. But as you rose in esteem you really were a generalist rather than a specialist, so I'd written just about everything.

Riley: Were there other junior members of the speechwriting staff at the time? You said that there were—?

Bakshian: When I say junior, basically you had the people who were the full-time backbone speechwriters and then you had some sort of emeritus people who were still there and would occasionally write a speech but no longer had to produce a daily product. They would not be, for example, at the morning staff meeting or be part of the assigned work of the day and so on. I remember most of the names; I may have forgotten the exact head count.

When I joined in ’72 when they expanded, I was one of three new hires, consisting of myself, a fellow named Rodney Campbell, who passed away a few years ago who was born in England, but lived in America for quite some time and had worked for Nelson Rockefeller, either as Governor or as part of his public policy staff, because Rockefeller always maintained a presence on national issues. He may have almost been a balance hire to me as a Rockefeller Republican, since I was seen as a *National Review* conservative. Then one of the first women to be brought on ever as a presidential speechwriter, a lady named Vera Hirschberg, who had had some journalistic background. I’m not sure whether she had worked on the Hill at that time or whether it was basically journalistic, but she was a solid professional.

In addition to those three new people, you had a fellow named Jack McDonald, who was a veteran writer, a very tested pro who had previously I think worked for [Caspar] Weinberger at HEW [Health, Education, and Welfare].

Riley: Right.

Bakshian: Either that or he went there afterwards, but he had had some other political or policy experience. Then there was Noel Cook from Pennsylvania. I forget how he got there because he’d been there for several years before my arrival. And, of course, there was the celebrated Father John McLaughlin, who had been hired and was still a practicing priest, which proves that practice doesn’t make perfect.

Riley: Did he wear the collar?

Bakshian: Only on ceremonial occasions where it was the only way he’d get to an event, by saying grace. He had been a political hire, he had been an unsuccessful Republican candidate for Senate in Rhode Island, I believe. I think he was from Rhode Island.

Riley: I didn’t know that.

Bakshian: It was not a big race. Then he had worked, I think, for Postmaster General Blount as a speechwriter before he was brought on at the White House. Didn’t work out as a speechwriter, but it’s—

Riley: [Roy] Blunt?

Bakshian: I think it was Blunt, yes.

Riley: I’m from Alabama, and I have a hard time—

Bakshian: Well, I don’t know how long he was there. He was always working his résumé—

Riley: Sure.

Bakshian: He’s a good talker so he would make a good impression on the way in. He may have had a friend in White House personnel for all I know. But then, after doing one or two speeches,

they decided that he wasn't really one of our main strengths. However, you don't just tell a priest that you're giving him his walking papers. In fact, when Nixon resigned, the new press secretary, who didn't last very long, Jerry terHorst, one of the first things he announced was that John McLaughlin was on his way out. But, before you knew it, Jerry terHorst had resigned and John McLaughlin was still there, hanging on with his teeth. And backed somewhat by [Alexander] Haig, for whatever reason. He did ultimately leave, but I think it was after they cut off the water to his office.

Then there was Lee Huebner, who although a senior writer was still an active and valuable part of the staff, and John Andrews who was a good writer and also happened to come from a Christian Scientist background. He did his job, he was totally qualified to be there, but he was thought to have a sort of inside track with [John] Ehrlichman and [Harry R. (HR)] Haldeman as co-religionists. There was a little bit of a factional thing there. Not factional really, but a Christian Science connection. It would be as if you had several Mormons working somewhere who all networked.

Riley: In the [George W.] Bush administration we've seen that, so—

Bakshian: It is interesting, these little marginal factors—they aren't political, they're cultural or religious. Oh, and there was one other fellow, who was I guess the youngest writer there—I was fairly young myself at 28, but he was I think in his early 20s. His name was Tex Lezar, and he had a strikingly good memory. He was very often pulling together anecdotes and support material. He would occasionally write remarks but not many major policy speeches. So that was the writing staff. Then of course there was also the research support and secretarial and administrative staff.

Riley: How was the dynamic inside? Was there resentment of the emeritus staff?

Bakshian: No, it was fine. After all, for people like myself, we were coming in, we hadn't been part of the old thing so it wasn't like they'd been jumped over our heads or anything. In fact, they hadn't been jumped over anybody's heads. Ray Price had been elevated in the sense that he had been singled out to take over the department, but they had all been compensated.

Riley: Right.

Bakshian: So it seemed to make sense. And it wasn't as if the "seniors" were arbitrarily interfering or were rival power centers. In other words, if they were all supposed to be co-equals or something, that could have been difficult, but that wasn't the case. Lines of authority were clear, so there wasn't any friction. In fact, it was quite a happy department, very hard working. Indeed the Nixon White House was the best run operation I was ever a part of, in terms of day-to-day logistics and all. And until the Watergate business started getting really critical, it was a nice place to work. That is, if you were doing your job and were good at it, you knew your work would be recognized. There was pressure but it was pressure to perform.

Occasionally it was a little unsubtle. On the day after the election, the 1972 landslide, everyone shows up for work and there's a memo saying, "Everyone is being asked to submit a letter of

resignation." You're familiar with this. And everyone did it. Even then, if you were fairly sure of yourself, after the first month or so there you knew where you stood. You could tell by the kind of assignments you were getting, first of all, whether you were considered up to snuff. If you were getting bigger and bigger assignments and then you were asked to go on Air Force One to attend an event or something, that was a pretty sure signal.

So that when I submitted my "resignation" letter, I thought, *I'm going to make the cut*. I know one or two other people that I had my doubts about and indeed they didn't. They were taken care of, they were given a chance to get something else in government, but that was just good management practice. It could have been done a little more subtly than asking for the letter the morning after the great victory celebration, but the choices were not factional. They were based on performance. I'd have to say that Haldeman, on the few occasions early on when I ever met him or talked to him, knew who you were, knew what your work was, and again, if you'd been delivering you had nothing to fear and there was nothing nasty about the way you were treated.

It was a bit impersonal perhaps, but then again I was much more junior there than I was in the Reagan White House, especially at the beginning, when I was getting my first impressions.

Knott: I was just going to ask how much direct contact you had with President Nixon?

Bakshian: Not much. There'd be occasional meetings or signings, for example, and as I was promoted and writing the more important things, I would see mark-ups on major drafts when they were going back and forth, and occasionally even a little congratulatory note or call. Once or twice he may have called somebody whom he didn't know but where he liked their writing. John Coyne, who joined from Vice President Agnew's staff after Agnew resigned, was such a case.

But then again, Ray Price, who was in the equivalent position that I was under Reagan, did see more of Nixon. So for me to compare access as first a junior writer and then a fairly senior writer but not in charge, to my access to Reagan as his Director of Speechwriting, is not valid. But even with Ford, when I was at the same level I had been at the end of the Nixon administration there did tend to be a little more access to the Oval Office. That also had to do with the fact that [Robert] Hartmann, who was initially in charge of the speechwriting department under Ford, was in a rivalry with White House Chiefs of Staff and I think probably tried to maximize access for the one division that he was still in charge of, the speechwriters. So again, there may have been some Byzantine stuff involved. But Ford was also more open and a little more at ease. That was the nature of the individual personality, though.

Riley: You attribute a lot of the smooth running of the Nixon White House though to Haldeman's management style?

Bakshian: Yes, because there were several people, we used to call them the clipboard boys, who were assistants. We mocked them, but they kept the trains running. There was a guy named Larry Higbee and another one whose name I can't think of, but they were the ones that would show up frequently during the day to see how this was going or that was going. They were figures of fun at the same time that they were taken very seriously in terms of their power, but

the bottom line was it was a very well-run operation, very professionally run as far as scheduling, as far as deadlines, coordination of information, and it all started with Haldeman. Not only that, but some of the things that made subsequent Republican administrations run well can be traced back to the structure of the Nixon White House.

If you chase down the political genealogy of people who are in there even now, some of the older ones might have been very young people in the Nixon or Reagan administrations. The Reagan administration had a leavening of people who had experience in the Nixon White House. That was one reason why, even though there had been a four-year interregnum with Democrats, the Reagan administration was able to set up fairly quickly and wasn't swallowed by Washington. It was able to draw on people who had had part of an eight-year experience in power before.

Knott: By any chance, were you at the speech that President Nixon gave to the White House staff when he announced that he was resigning?

Bakshian: I happened to have taken the precaution, as it turned out, of being in Europe at the time. It was in the summer. Months before, I had scheduled three weeks of vacation. Because I had been commissioned, I think that was the year that I was doing a piece that would run two years later or so on the 100th anniversary of the Bayreuth Festival, so I was in Bayreuth, Germany, and then in Vienna, and in England on the way back. When I got back to Washington, I think it was either 24 or 48 hours after Nixon had resigned.

Of course I heard all the tales. Recently there was a TV documentary done on a friend of mine, Ben Stein, who was a new writer in the last months of the Nixon administration. One of the various questions they were asking me about Ben as they put the documentary together, which made it onto the documentary, was my mentioning that Ben's always been very versatile. In fact, if you look at the footage of Nixon's farewell speech to the White House staff, Ben, who is really a very versatile talent, is the only person in the entire room who is crying at the same time that he is chewing gum. He really is. There is this momentary shot of Ben chewing gum while the tears are running down his cheeks.

Riley: I want to go back and ask a question about the transition from writing for members of Congress, moving into a position of writing for the President of the United States. As a crafter of speeches, if you recall anything about your learning curve or about the kinds of lessons that you—

Bakshian: I think I understood on the way in. I mean, I'd been in Washington, I knew a fair amount about presidential rhetoric and I'd observed it, plus I'd written about history, diplomacy, culture, and whatnot. So you know enough to assume a slightly more magisterial tone. But the big adjustment in terms of how your work is affected is that the Hill is fairly loose and easy. There isn't much in the way of a fact check staff. I mean, you look at it, maybe the senior assistant to the individual member looks at it, and the boss gives it or he doesn't give it. Or if it's connected with committee work, maybe someone on the committee staff drafts or reviews it, if it's about detailed legislation.

At the White House, first of all you have your own research staff which is formally set up. This may have been an innovation under Nixon because Keogh, whom I mentioned as the first head of speechwriting who was gone by the time I got there, had worked for *Time* magazine. The research structure which he set up at the White House was based on the way *Time* would cover a story. That is to say, you didn't have the identical number of researchers and writers, but each individual speech, whatever it was, big or small, was assigned to a writer and one of the researchers. She might be working on three or four at a time—in those days it was she, the writers were mainly he's and the researchers were mainly she's. But in any case, there was always a researcher and a writer assigned to each speech or set of remarks.

In addition, as drafts were circulated, the researcher usually followed the paper trail in the initial steps because the same speech might be circulated three times with re-writes and all. More than that sometimes, if it dealt with a very sensitive issue or a new policy. The researcher would keep track of all those mark-ups, and you would get them too. If it was a speech that dealt with a number of issues, domestic and foreign, for example, and legislative, you would have someone from the Congressional Liaison looking at it. Copies would go, if there were defense issues, to Defense, NSC [National Security Council], and probably State. Budgetary considerations to OMB [Office of Management and Budget], the whole speech would go, but that would be why they were supposed to be looking at it. Senior policy counselors would also get a whack at it. If farming, Agriculture, and so on. All that stuff would be fed back. The researcher would keep track of all this.

When they were just fact checks, it would be a matter of just making the corrections. When there were policy differences, very often the speech itself became a tool for negotiating what the final policy would be. So it was a much more elaborate, laborious, but also thoroughly interesting process from the time your first draft came out of the typewriter—forget about word processors then—to the moment of completion than it would have been on the Hill or almost anywhere else. It was actually more like a large multinational corporation, if you were writing policy speeches for the CEO, where there was an enormous bureaucracy that it had to filter through, which is why there are very few good speeches given by CEOs of large multinational corporations. Similarly you could say that very often with a President who doesn't have a rhetorical flair, he's in danger of being swallowed by the bureaucrats as far as the quality of his own utterances is concerned.

Riley: Did you find it difficult to adjust to writing within a bureaucracy? The impression I get is that most writers are—

Bakshian: I didn't find it difficult to adjust. I didn't particularly like it, but I wasn't that surprised by it. It made perfect sense that that is the way it would be done at that level and it just came with the package. The people who are usually most frustrated by that are people who put all of their ego into writing for somebody else. They think of it as *their* speech rather than their client's speech and then it is "how dare anybody touch it." I don't think that's a particularly healthy attitude, or at least it wasn't one that I was interested in embracing.

Knott: You've already given us some indication, but could you talk a little bit about the differences between the atmosphere in the Ford White House as opposed to Nixon?

Bakshian: Well, the Ford Presidency first of all had not had—let me preface this by saying that I think President Ford altogether did a very good job and probably was the best person for that almost impossible time and place. I can't think of someone who would have been better at the helm under the circumstances where he assumed office, which were probably the most negative, adverse, difficult circumstances any incoming President has ever had to cope with.[1]
I probably had less trouble adjusting from Nixon to Ford than some of my colleagues. I didn't know Ford personally, but I knew people who knew him. I knew people that knew his staff. I had met one or two of the aides he brought with him, because the Hill was where a lot of his people came from. There were people I'd known when I was at the Republican National Committee or working for Brock, who were people who were at, say, the Republican Congressional Campaign Committee. For example, the first person who was in charge of speechwriting under Ford was named Paul Theis. He had previously been at the Republican Congressional Campaign Committee, where I had met him. I didn't know him well, but I knew several people who had worked with him. So I was on more familiar ground than most of the other Nixon people.

Plus, as it happened, I and one other writer (John Coyne) had been detailed during the period when Ford was Vice President but not yet President and when he was just assembling his own staff, to help with some speeches. This meant that Hartmann, who was his Chief of Staff when he was Vice President, and who had come with him from the Hill, knew me and knew my work. He also knew I wasn't obnoxious and trying to bully them as a presidential aide dealing with vice presidential staff. In other words, when the vice presidential staff was very much in the back seat, I had had a friendly collaboration with them and hadn't been obnoxious and also had written things that they didn't have to gag to swallow.

So that when Ford became President, I was not totally a stranger or just somebody who worked for the Nixon people. That may have been one of the reasons why I was the only Nixon speechwriter who was kept on long-term by the Ford White House, in fact until I unilaterally quit to accept a fellowship at Harvard more than a year later.

The Ford White House was the first Presidency in a long time that had to land running without ever having had a shakedown cruise. No campaign, no executive experience, although Jerry Ford knew Washington very well. And incidentally, of all the recent Presidents, I would say he understood the governmental process, the legislative process better than anybody since [Lyndon] Johnson. You would see this when a speech was being reviewed in the Oval Office, where he was going through it and they actually started talking about the nuts and bolts, not the rhetoric, but what was going to happen to this legislation. He knew where it was, how it would get through or wouldn't get through; he thoroughly understood the process.

That isn't something, unfortunately, that helps a person when they're dealing with the public and communicating public concerns, because people don't understand that or aren't interested in it. But he was probably more competent in that respect than Nixon had been or than Reagan was on a detailed level. Ford also had a wonderful presence when you were in the Oval Office with him that was entirely different from what ended up being filtered through not only the TV cameras,

[1] Start Tape 2

but the people who edit the footage and concentrate on someone stumbling while descending from Air Force One.

He had a firm paternal, benevolent but authoritative way that worked very well when you were actually in the room and also when he was well-served with his speech material. His first speech to the nation couldn't have been better. It was kept simple, but I think it restored confidence and sounded just the right note at a really bad time. We were still in an unpopular war and we'd never had a presidential resignation before. It can't get much worse than that.

Riley: Were you involved in crafting that speech?

Bakshian: No, that was the last thing that was done exclusively, as it were, by his vice presidential staff headed by Bob Hartmann. I mean, he had just become President and then immediately the sorting operation began of whom to keep, whom to replace, and generally taking up the reins. As I say, I was the last "Nixon" tree standing in the speechwriting shop, as it turned out.

Many people that ended up senior in the Ford White House weren't really outside hires or people from the Hill. There were some, but many of them were junior, or second tier anyway, people who had been in the Nixon White House but who replaced the highly visible head of their division or office. Others were people who had Hill experience, like Don Rumsfeld, but who also had administration experience.

In the case of the White House writers, that was Hartmann's surviving fiefdom with the result that it tended to bring more people in from the outside or the Hill. I was still there. John Coyne, another Nixon writer, was there for some months after the other people had left, but then he was replaced. As for the new hires, there were a few people from the Hill or people who had known Hartmann. Although there was one person who was hired because—I think Paul Theis, who was then heading the speechwriting office, thought that this was a very good friend of Hartmann's. Actually Hartmann had I apparently received the résumé in a letter and forwarded it without being particularly concerned. But it was taken as, "Uh-oh, this is somebody we've got to deal with." So there were a few accidents like that. And a number of people who were detailed, tested and didn't last very long.

When it settled in—and speechwriting was more like that than the generality of the White House—it was a pretty good staff. A lot of the same efficiency, since the structural machinery was already set up. It would be like a new officer taking over an army base but the army base is still running the way it had always run on a day-to-day basis. And that got it pretty much through the balance. The style at the top was quite different. Ford was more accessible. From a speechwriting point of view, he had more limited possibilities. Nixon was interested in big ideas, also until the last troubles, he had a big stage to perform on. Ford was an unelected President dealing with crises which were already in existence and he was bailing water, basically. There weren't too many new initiatives that were going to go anywhere. So it was a less imaginative, creative time to be a speechwriter regardless of Jerry Ford's admirable personal qualities.

Incidentally, I would refer you to an appreciation I did of Ford a year or two ago; it was in *American Enterprise* magazine where I described Ford in more detail.

Riley: Okay.

Bakshian: I forget the issue, but it would have an index.

Riley: Sure.

Bakshian: My article appeared right before Henry Kissinger's, just by a fluke, but it must have really cheesed him off. But anyway.

Ford was very personable, but as a speaker, his style was somewhat more limited in terms of delivery. It wasn't an intellectual problem. He was a sort of steady, slow speaker so you had less range. It would be like what sort of dialogue do you write for a certain type of actor. But the internal working, the mechanical working, the structural working of the White House under Ford wasn't that different really from Nixon. It was almost an extension at the logistical and operational level. What changed was the personalities of the men at the helm and the circumstances, because suddenly it was a besieged White House with a Congress in opposition hands that had tasted blood and wasn't going to give any fair chance where they thought they had an unfair advantage.

Riley: Was there discussion at the time of making clear breaks from the past in speechmaking practices or being more conciliatory, less combative?

Bakshian: I don't recall there ever being meetings where people sat around and said anything like that, but you just understood that it was a new ball game. Ford's role, especially initially, was to be a conciliator, heal the wounds and then try to govern. He also was faced with inflation as a major economic problem and of course what turned out to be the tragic end of the Vietnam war. And dealing with it with nowhere near the executive authority that his predecessor had enjoyed until the very end. So I would say the changes were externally driven rather than a matter of sitting around and coming up with a new idea. You were reacting to a different world out there. You had much more limited windows or targets of opportunity. There was only so much you could do. It was defensive, essentially.

Knott: So you stayed with President Ford until late '75?

Bakshian: Yes. Just as when I first came to the White House, I had no agenda. Somebody reacted to something I'd written at a time when I didn't even know they were looking for anyone. Similarly, I had met a few people who had fellowships at Harvard's Institute of Politics. One of them had said, "By the way, you might just—you may not want to do it, but you might want to. I'd like to put your name in." They ask former fellows to recommend other people. If they ask you to go up and talk to them, you go up to talk to them and see what you think and so on.

So I said, "All right, go ahead." They did ask me to come up and I liked the idea. Also, although I was in total sympathy, I had the feeling that as Hartmann's last fiefdom, the speechwriting department was losing connection with the senior level. Some of the people that were coming in might have been called "old hacks." Before, you always felt you were part of, I won't say "the best and the brightest," but there was some unit pride. There was a little less of that. There was very little reason to want to just hang on and stay there for the duration.

Riley: Sure, sure.

Bakshian: I also had a feeling that if the Democrats didn't totally botch it, they had an odds-on chance to recapture the White House in '76, although an event devoutly not to be wished for in my view. But at the realistic level that's where it looked like it was going. Also I looked forward to the idea of just taking a look at Harvard without having to actually go there as an undergraduate and listen to all the idiot professors. At Harvard. This is not a generic attitude towards professors.

Riley: No offense taken. [laughter]

Bakshian: So go to Harvard I did. Then when I came back, again I hadn't planned it, but I became involved in two parallel political things. One was, as I mentioned at the outset, once you get started in this business and if your work is well received, then you hear from people or there are people that you worked with at one place who are now somewhere else and get in touch. Well, when I got back to Washington in early '76, Dave Gergen had been working at Treasury with Bill Simon, who was a very dynamic, active Secretary of Treasury.

Simon also took his speeches very seriously, had a reputation for being difficult to write for, not in the Bob Dole sense of just having no ideas, but of wanting it just so and wanting a writer that he had confidence in. Part of it was winning his confidence. Once he had written somebody off, and he tended to do that about people who were professional Treasury staff, then I always felt—because I would occasionally get a draft that one of them had done, work a little on it—I would make some change, but I would say it was mainly their work. Simon would say, "Who worked on this?" And I would tell him who had prepared the first draft, which I had then edited and revised. Once he was sure I'd gone over it I think he looked at it in a different frame of mind than if it had just come to him directly from somebody who was one of the staff writers.

Anyway, I ended up on a consultant basis doing lots and lots of work for him, although maintaining my freedom by not being an employee of Treasury. It was a contract arrangement.

Riley: Was he being viewed as a presidential possible that early?

Bakshian: At that point, no. There were some rumors about a vice presidential possibility but it was not really solid. No, that came later. That was after Ford was out.

Riley: And this was before he wrote his—

Bakshian: Oh yes, this was all before that, because this is when he was still in office as Secretary of Treasury. He started on the book while he was still in, but I think that wasn't even really in gear until after the election. Because he's still "lame duck" Secretary of Treasury until the January inauguration in '77.

Riley: Sure.

Bakshian: Anyway, so I was doing that. But in addition, during the actual campaign I was asked to come on and write. They had a battery of people at the Washington headquarters; we basically were responsible for writing statements, speeches, and speech inserts for prominent people around the country who were giving speeches. I remember one in 1976—Lyn Nofziger was there and he had worked of course closely with Reagan, and Reagan as you know had challenged Ford at the convention. This is the first time I ever wrote something for Ronald Reagan. It was just a tape that was made that then could be broadcast around. Nofziger was convinced that Reagan wouldn't do it because of some of the shabby things that had happened to him during the Ford–Reagan rivalry. But when Reagan was reached directly, and this gave me an initial indication of the sort of person he was, there was no rancor and he was happy to do it.

That was the first time I ever wrote for him, sight unseen, I had never met the man. He made one or two little changes. I remember it was a phone hook-up, but I heard him deliver it, little knowing that this was the beginning of a long relationship. It was a very pleasant first impression.

So I was doing writing during the campaign, again as a paid consultant, and simultaneously doing unrelated magazine pieces and all that. Not about anything I was doing on the "inside," just my own writing on humor, history, politics, and the arts. So after the election then, I took something at Union Carbide within about a year of that, yes, in '77 or '78. So ended my active engagement in politics until 1980.

Riley: Were there any particular speeches either in the Nixon years or in the Ford years that you look back on that are notable? Any of your experiences that were noticeable, anecdotally?

Bakshian: Well, one or two things that can just give insights into how the process worked. The first big speech I wrote is not of any great historical importance but it sort of launched the post-convention campaign, because it was the first major speech he gave after the nominating convention in Miami. It struck the themes that were instrumental in that election because it was an address to the National Convention of the American Legion in Chicago. [George] McGovern had just spoken the day before and I was the writer assigned to it.

It's not a matter of any particular lines springing to mind, but it coalesced the patriotic theme that allowed Nixon, who was never a particularly well-beloved figure, to actually be re-elected by a landslide and to win a large chunk of the votes of the blue collar Democrats who later would be called Reagan Democrats but in that year voted for Nixon. And who knows, in terms of political alignment, if it hadn't been for Watergate, how much that alignment might have stayed in place rather than having to be reassembled. So there was that.

But just how speeches get written. For Nixon's second inaugural, they wanted to do everything just right. So every writer was assigned, "Do your draft of what it should be like." And unfortunately, everyone did. And Nixon, I don't know whether he saw all of them or whether Ray Price or somebody else reviewed and sent highlights or what—but Ray Price ended up working with Nixon on the final product. Unfortunately Nixon saw some lines here and there that he liked from other speeches. As a result, it was a roller coaster speech with staple marks where you could almost—if you knew where these things had come from—identify things that had been "pasted in" from other drafts. If Nixon liked a penultimate line that sounded very good, he might use it, but in the middle of the speech.

I remember one line that I had put in in connection with the Vietnam war, sort of a "don't give up the ship" business. It sounds very good except historically it's not true: "There is no such thing as a retreat to peace." I mean, that sounds very portentous, but it doesn't mean a goddamn thing. Well, sure enough it cropped up in the middle of the speech with nothing before it that had any connection to what I had written and nothing after it. In fact, I remember thinking, *Did someone drop that in by mistake? Did the cleaning lady forget to sweep up?* And there were others I'm sure. I happened to spot that one because I recognized the line. The first time I ever was reminded of it was when he actually delivered the speech. But there were other instances like that because that was a case of having too many cooks. And that would happen occasionally.

But it must be said, Nixon ordinarily, when he was focused and before the Watergate mess in the end, cared about his speeches. He would take time writing and drafting thoughts himself, sometimes wrote—and spoke on the radio, where people were not distracted by his physical appearance and the nervousness that showed up—with a clarity and an organization that was probably as good as any. He had a little more trouble humanizing, not because he wasn't human, but because he was a very sensitive, private, uptight and bruised person in his own perception who wasn't comfortable with his feelings. It wasn't that he had no feelings. When you're uncomfortable with your feelings you either bottle them up or when you do show them, it's not in ways that make other people comfortable and that they identify with. But in terms of logic, structure and judging a good text, he was quite good. That was reflected in his mark-ups and his changes. It was intelligent editing.

I once was on a talk show—a public affairs one, not an entertainment one—with a fellow speechwriter. The subject was presidential speechwriting. It was a show that Mark Shield had on public television for a few years. This would have been toward the end of the [Jimmy] Carter years. Jerome Doolittle, a former Carter speechwriter, was the other panelist. During a break—he didn't say it on the air—Doolittle said, "You know, in the two years," or whatever it was he was in the Carter White House, "I could never figure out what was worse: when you wrote something really good that Carter didn't keep in the speech, or when you wrote something you thought was really good and he kept it in the speech and then you listened to him deliver it."

I don't think it was that Carter intellectually misunderstood the content, he just had a quirky kind of delivery and the wrong word would be emphasized or the wrong sentence or the voice would soar when it wasn't supposed to or it would trail off when it should have been going to the crescendo. But anyway, that was the big problem that that fellow had with his time there.

Riley: The music didn't sound good on the other—

Bakshian: Yes, the feeling that *I wrote that just to hear this guy murder it on the piano?*

Knott: So you spent the bulk of the Carter years at Union Carbide, is that an accurate—?

Bakshian: No. It was one of those things—my advice to anyone is, if you're offered a position and your first reaction is, "I can't walk away from the money but I think this is going to be really dull," my answer is, unless you've got heavy family medical bills or kids about to go into college or something, don't take the job. Because if your first impression is it's going to be dull, it's probably going to be even duller. You may reach the point where you realize, *God, there isn't even anybody here I would like to have lunch with*. So I was up there for about a year. Then what happened was a book project was revived. This had nothing to do with politics. It was memoirs of an old Austrian composer whom I'd known.

Knott: *The Waltz King*?

Bakshian: Yes. I initially took a leave of absence, but as the nice fellow who was in charge of the division said, "You know, when you took that leave of absence I had a feeling we were never going to see you again." Sure enough, I did contact them and explained, "Sorry, but I won't be back." So the book project.

Then, still in '79, I was contacted to do a book on the upcoming 1980 presidential contenders, totally separate from this other book, and I did that too. Plus freelance writing and occasional speeches. I never set up a bureau or anything, but you get phone calls or someone asking for something. Also I was called on again, by people I'd known in the White House or at the Republican National Committee, to be co-editor of the 1980 Republican Platform. It was myself and Mike Baroody, brother of Bill Baroody, who were co-editors of the platform documents in Detroit at the '80 convention. So that gave me the inside role, whereas my book on the candidates had also meant that I was out there being broadcast and whatnot on the subject.

That meant that even though I hadn't worked on the campaign proper, when the transition began, there were plenty of people that knew me and I got calls and got involved, initially on the arts and humanities side of the transition team.

Knott: The book that you wrote, you predicted a Reagan victory, is that correct?

Bakshian: No, because it was written the year before and it was a matter of predicting who would get the nominations on both sides and speculating. It handicapped each candidate, what their strengths and weaknesses were, but it wasn't actually saying who would win by how much, because it was written way before the conventions. In fact, I had to finish it before the first primaries, to give you an idea. What I did quite correctly predict, even though I was writing it months before the field had narrowed, was that it was going to end up being a Reagan-Bush match for the GOP and on the other side that while [Edward] Kennedy would be the only serious opposition, Carter would almost certainly be renominated.

The difficulty was at that point there were all these other irrelevant people in the field so you had to do chapters on people who didn't deserve a footnote and had dropped by the wayside by the time the book was out. Larry Pressler I think was one of them, for example, and Phil Crane, the long-time Congressman from Illinois—I had actually ghosted a book on the Panama Canal for him several years before that.

There was an example of how ghostwriting is in Washington. I was asked to write the book; it was a quickie, a little under 200 pages—they may have laid it out in a way that went a bit longer—called *Surrender in Panama*. It was against the Panama turnover, the treaty. Well, I wrote it in a few weeks and when it came out I noticed that someone on the staff had added I think two footnotes. But it was almost verbatim the way it had been written. A friend of mine, who knew I did this and worked in Chicago, happened to be at a Republican fundraiser once where Crane was there, and a nice lady was coming up to Crane, a fan, and said, "Oh Mr. Crane, I so much loved your book on Panama and the thing I liked most about it, just reading it, I could tell you wrote every word of that yourself."

Actually the same friend had been on [Spiro] Agnew's staff; he was a speechwriter, and one of the women's magazines of the time—this was way before they got the way they are now—had asked for an article by Agnew talking about how he loved his wife, Judy Agnew. Agnew just assigned it to one of the writers. So this writer, John Coyne, wrote a nice article. And Agnew I think didn't change anything. It was published, and he said what was sad was Mrs. Agnew was so touched by it, and assumed Agnew had written it himself.

Riley: Did you do other ghost projects, book projects?

Bakshian: Simon had asked me to help with his book but after some very initial work and being a house guest of the Simons for what seemed like two weeks, although I think it was more like ten days, I decided*, Hmmm, I think somebody else might be more interested in this than I am*. Total immersion with Bill Simon was more than I'd bargained for, though he was a remarkable guy, and very dynamic. He was disappointed that I didn't want to stay on with that project, but he specifically asked that I still help with his speeches while he remained at Treasury, so we stayed on good terms. Maybe he respected me as one of the few people who walked away rather than just sat there and nodded.

The Memoirs of Robert Stolz, Vienna's last waltz king, published as *Servus Du* in Germany, was written in his first-person voice, so that was a collaboration, although it was sort of along the lines of the Crane book in the sense it was taking tape recordings of his—it had started in '73, and then he passed away in '75. What happened was it was revived for 1980, which was his centenary. His widow was still very active, so, working with her, and taking tapes and the notes where we had left off, I brought the narrative up to the point where I had finished the research with him, in his voice, and then collaborated with the widow to cover the remaining years of their life together.

Riley: Did you write this in English or German?

Bakshian: Where there were German documents or phrases, I would use the German. I could deal with that. But I'm not a fluent writer in German so I was writing the main narrative flow in English. Both [Robert] Stolz and then his widow, Einzi Stolz, had English and she was very fluent.

Riley: I see.

Bakshian: She also worked with the German publishing house as they readjusted the final text. But wherever there was a source or a document that was in German I didn't put it into English and then have them put it back, I would keep it in the original. Even the English I was writing in was idiomatic German. In other words, for an English language edition, almost all the dialogue and a lot of the expressions used would have been different. What I was doing was writing as a German, what would be close to a literal translation from the German idiomatically. Not just the expressions, but the tone, which was a bit different.

Riley: We can talk more about this during the break. I spent some time in Austria.

Bakshian: Charming little museum piece of a place. You know it's going to be very interesting to see what happens as Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and other hungrier economies come on line because Austria is such a fat little welfare state. It's a delightful place but I'm not sure how competitive they're going to be in the out years.

Riley: This is where [Jurg] Heider gets his traction. But we can talk more about this during the breaks. Where did we—

Riley: Tail end of Ford, I guess.

Knott: And up to the '80 platform. Was there a controversy associated with that platform?

Bakshian: Not really.

Knott: Were there unusual tensions between—?

Bakshian: There were some tensions but most of those were on the outside. In other words, there were some delegates on the floor who wanted to do this or that, but it was a fairly controlled convention because Reagan had clearly got the nomination. John Tower, then Senator, was chairman of the Committee on Resolutions, which is the platform committee. We knew what was going to end up being said, so it was mainly a matter of humoring people around the table who were the members of the committee, whether they were nice old Babbitts from somewhere who were delegates, or whether it was Jack Kemp, who was on the committee and who, to put it very mildly, is rather long-winded.

Riley: We've heard.

Bakshian: But it wasn't rancorous. It was more a matter of just having patience and being able to store your urine while the monologues went on.

Riley: But that was a very conservative platform, even in comparison to the ’76 platform four years before, correct?

Bakshian: Yes, although platforms usually tend to be more doctrinaire, whether it is Democratic or Republican, and more controversial than the campaign message of the nominees themselves. This is especially true for the party out of power with no incumbent record to defend and less responsibility for official polity. They’re going to take a stronger line on the Middle East, usually for example on recognizing Jerusalem as the capital, and then whoever gets elected, usually then the State Department talks to them and they back off. In 1968 I remember, the Republicans were for the Ibos in the Nigerian civil war, being more against the official line and taking more humane interest in the rebel victims. Once the GOP was in, nothing changed. Same with Rhodesia. In that case it was a Reagan platform.

Today the 1980 platform probably wouldn’t read as particularly conservative because times have changed and the rhetoric is familiar by now. But on things like right to life and whatnot, in 1980 there were people who were predicting catastrophe and that it was an extremist document. As it turned out, (a) no one reads the platform, and (b) Reagan was not an alarming person and that’s very important.

Riley: Exactly. Whether Phyllis Schlafly had influence there or not.

Bakshian: The idea was that you let them get it all out of their system and some of it got into the platform. But again, you’re not talking martial law, confiscatory taxes or anything. I would say, what it was, there were some trigger words that the media, which was hostile to Reagan and generally hostile to the Republicans, would use to characterize the document as an extreme document. I would suggest that anyone who read it today would find it rather tame.

Riley: Sure.

Bakshian: Not at all controversial. Well, not particularly controversial.

Riley: But the political center of gravity had moved considerably to the right.

Bakshian: Had changed, that’s right. Most of the people that said it was an extreme document were the people that thought Reagan was unelectable, who never would have dreamt he was not only going to win the election in a very strong showing but that he was going to carry the Senate for the Republicans for the first time since the early [Dwight] Eisenhower years. So in a funny way, the platform may have been more in keeping with mainstream, Main Street public opinion than the pundits who were commenting on it as an extreme document.

Riley: Panama was also—or am I misremembering?

Bakshian: No, Panama was an issue that Reagan had used in the primaries to a certain extent. But it was far less of an issue than when he was running against Ford for the nomination in ’76.

Riley: Seventy-six.

Bakshian: Because it was a live issue then. By ’80 it was something that a number of people who had been against the treaty remembered and liked Reagan for again in the primaries, but it was a done deal.

Knott: So then did you go on during the fall to play a role in the campaign?

Bakshian: No, because the book was out. I didn’t think ethically there was a problem for the ten days or so involved in being up at the convention helping edit the document that would be the platform, as opposed to actually being in an advocacy role or out on the road with a candidate. Plus it’s not much fun. It’s interesting once. So I wasn’t involved in the campaign, although from the point of view of White House personnel and all, I had paid dues and participated because I had helped with the platform.

Instead, I was still doing commentary outside through the campaign and then was contacted after the election when they began the transition activities.

Knott: There was a point maybe a couple of times in the briefing book. You attended the victory celebration—?

Bakshian: Oh yes, because I described that in a piece for the—well, initially it was a piece for the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner,* which I then expanded on as the introduction to a book called *The Future Under President Reagan.* It was sort of an anthology, it was a quickie that came out after the election but timed to come in about the time of the inaugural.

Knott: I wasn’t aware there was this spontaneous—

Bakshian: Oh yes, the ’80 election night enthusiasm I wrote about. Once it was clear Reagan had won, all of a sudden there was a flood of traffic into Washington. It was like people who had had it bottled up for a long time. And of course, they were much more likely to live in the suburbs than in D.C.. All of a sudden there was this traffic jam coming up to the Hilton, the same Hilton where Reagan was shot later but which was the campaign night headquarters. The place was mobbed by Middle Americans.

Knott: So how were you contacted?

Bakshian: Again, the overlapping. People talk about networking and all sorts of poor little souls consciously try to do it to no avail. The only real networks are the ones that are like the nervous system, already there for a reason. You’re not going to be able to install it yourself. A fellow who had been the editor at Arlington House Publishers, which was a conservative publishing house, who had called me about doing the book on the candidates, also ended up being involved in the transition. I don’t know how he had happened to, but he was there, including specifically the arts and humanities. He asked if I’d be interested in helping with that too, and I said fine. So I did. This was just going to occasional meetings, it wasn’t like dropping everything and moving into an office full time. There was a core staff that was full time. Also, as you can imagine, the

arts and the humanities were not exactly on the top of the list in a transition when you've got foreign policy and serious domestic concerns.

So I was in the door. Then, I guess that meant that my name was on a list for that subject matter (arts and humanities) when the White House personnel started actually fleshing out the staffing of the White House. Elizabeth Dole was designated head of the Office of Public Liaison. A decision was made at that point to at least temporarily have one of her staffers deal with the arts and humanities in the large sense, education, the arts and all that. But also at this point, you've got lame ducks who are chairmen of the two endowments. Their terms aren't over yet and the search is going to go on for replacements and it's going to take a while, so it made sense to have someone in the White House, at least in the opening months, identified as point man for the arts and humanities. I agreed to do that. It was interesting. It was a painless way to return to the White House without any heavy lifting—I hadn't aspired necessarily to go back to the White House and I hadn't thought about speechwriting particularly.

So that was what I ended up doing initially in the Reagan White House. What led to the speechwriting was that Ken Khachigian, who had been in charge of speechwriting during the campaign and whom I had known in the Nixon White House initially, had told everybody that he had no intention of staying in Washington. He stayed a bit longer because when Reagan was shot he stuck around until the recuperation and the address to the joint session. But he had always told senior staff he was leaving. A lot of them don't want to believe that. They think everybody desperately wants to be in Washington, so I think they didn't really make early provision for replacing Ken.

So when he left, they didn't really have a successor in place. They designated Tony Dolan, who was on the staff, to be acting head of speechwriting and that went on for some months. Apparently not to everyone's satisfaction, because in the autumn of '81 I got a call from White House Communications Director Dave Gergen. Initially, he didn't say, "Will you take over speechwriting?" It was, "We're having real trouble hammering out a speech on the disarmament initiative, the arms reduction initiative. Could you just take some time?" And I was literally put in an office, a separate office from where my own office was, and given two drafts. Well, two-and-a-half really: a Defense Department draft and an NSC draft that had the State Department input as well as the Defense Department input.

Of course they had been horribly messed up and were worded in bureaucratese and there were a number of things that hadn't been reconciled. What they needed was a speech, a deliverable speech, which, even if some policy details still had to be hammered out, was written in a deliverable fashion and was ready for the President to look at rhetorically.

Riley: Sure. You had not written for Reagan since the radio address?

Bakshian: No, I hadn't been writing speeches for anybody. Well, I had written speeches for other people in between, but I hadn't been focusing on political speechwriting at all. But I happened to be in-house at a time when they were having trouble with a speech. Dave Gergen of course had worked with me in the late Nixon White House when Ray Price became sort of director emeritus and stayed on as a senior speechwriter with his own little office to deal with

Nixon. Dave had then taken over the day-to-day running of the speech department. He had worked for Simon too so he knew me, he knew that I'd been able to write for Bill Simon—and actually be respected by Simon—so I think he figured Reagan would be no problem.

Anyway, I was a known factor. I was asked to do that and later asked to take over speechwriting. I forget how long it was before the formal announcement went out, but shortly after that speech I was put in. I told them at the time that I hadn't orchestrated this and I didn't have any long term aims for staying. I stayed longer than I'd planned. Again, I think they thought that once you land, you'll stay. But that was how it happened. At least the first I knew of it was when I got the call to do that speech. Dave may have talked to [Michael] Deaver; they may have already been thinking about something like that. If so, I was both unaware and uninterested.

Plus, I was feeling increasingly that once the two endowment people were in charge, it didn't make much sense to have a slot in the Office of Public Liaison, which is a very cosmetic outfit anyway, dealing with the arts and humanities. I mean, it's mainly hand-holding with outside interests. There are real divisions and there are unreal divisions in any White House or any government agency. The standing joke in most corporations is that the human resources division is where you dump your leftovers. Usually, they're never heard from again.

So when this came up I thought, *Okay, do it for a while*. The speechwriting staff was all in place. I didn't fire anybody, I didn't hire anybody. Some of them were better than others and I just made maximum utilization of the ones that were the best. With the ones that were not quite so good, I tried to find things they could do that they were capable of doing or that we had turn-around time to repair or touch up. And that remained true all the way through. Plus, most improved with experience.

I know from Deaver and the people who were close to the President, that the smoothest the speechwriting shop ever worked was when I was there, or so I'm told. Because there just weren't problems. The prima donnas were kept under control and I was not a prima donna. As Director of Speechwriting, I had access to the President. That stopped at some point after I left because of human interactions between my successors and senior staff. It had nothing to do with the President changing his mind. And Mrs. Reagan was happy with the speechwriting shop on my watch. The way you knew Mrs. Reagan was happy was you never had to deal with her. The way you knew she wasn't happy was if you suddenly did have to deal with her. But she felt he—the President—was well served by us.

Incidentally, she's gotten a raw deal from people who complain about her interference. The only major intervention Mrs. Reagan ever made that I'm aware of happened after I was gone but I heard about it from insiders. The biggest disaster of the Reagan White House staff, not talking about overall administration, was making Don Regan Chief of Staff after the 1984 re-election. Everyone recognized it very quickly. But he was also a very ruthless person and everyone was scared of him, including the Vice President, and most of the senior staff. Mrs. Reagan was the only person who recognized the problem *and* acted on it. Of course, Don Regan then wrote a lot of nasty things about her.

As far as I'm concerned, the only times I know of that she ever injected herself—and it had nothing to do with speech content, because she thought he was being well served there—was if she thought the President was being over-scheduled. This had nothing to do with astrology and what day it was. It was working him too hard, dragging him out and making him catch too many planes and overnight in too many hotels and give too many speeches. In that little instance and in the big instance with Regan, not only was Mrs. Reagan's "interference" justified, it was the right thing and it's to her credit that she did it. Because someone had to do it and no one else had the guts to do it. Of course, she was uniquely positioned, it's fair enough to say. Nobody[2] else was married to the President at the time and Jane Wyman was not going to intervene.
Riley: I find it of some interest that our colleagues in presidential studies actually recognized this. Richard Neustadt, who is sort of the dean of presidential studies, often speaks of the "Nancy function" and he has worked with us in consultation on our projects. We were talking about the current Presidency a couple of months ago and we asked him what does he think of the operations of this White House and so forth. He said, "The one question, the one thing that I would most like to know about this White House is, who is serving the Nancy function?" So I think that it's a role that you highlight, it's not something that the public at large recognizes because she was such a—

Bakshian: Also her husband was someone who didn't like to fire, was a very amiable, nice man, and so she had to provide a little bit of the backbone. Not on policy, not on that, but on putting the foot down about human situations inside the household, as it were. Actually I think Laura Bush is like Mrs. Reagan, although an entirely different personality, just as George Bush is an entirely different personality from Ronald Reagan, yet there are certain parallels.

First of all, of recent Presidents, the Reagans and these Bushes—the old Bushes it was true of to a certain extent—are really close, tight. The husband and wife are a real team and a real marriage. They talk about things, live their lives together. Laura Bush, from what I can just reconstruct by studying the record and the biographical evidence, probably was the single person that had the biggest influence in turning her husband into a serious adult with a public sense of mission. She really turned his life around, because he always had leadership qualities in the sense that he was someone who knew how to bring out the best in other people's performances and had a real gift of dealing with people, but he never really got serious until he gave up some of his extended adolescent habits of conspicuous consumption and whatnot, after she got hold of him. And I've got to think that where needed, she will always be there.

I do think that because of what he saw as Governor of Texas and also what he saw as his father's son when his father was in the White House, where he in some ways did the Nancy function when he would come up on a visit—who is serving the President well, who is not?—he's probably a little more attuned to that than the average President. He probably doesn't need "Nancying" as much as most presidential newcomers. But were the need to arise, Laura would do it. Because everything that has happened so far, her blossoming as First Lady—she's a private person with no lust for power or attentions, such an opposite of her predecessor—but when there is a need, she comes forward. Really, I can't think of anyone who could do it better. She is the perfect contrast. She supplies certain human qualities that were drastically missing in her

[2] Start Tape 3 at 018

predecessor. And also in the very nature of the relationship of the previous President and First Lady, if it can be called that.

And then, there's her quality as conveyed when she is speaking on television. Laura Bush has the ability to be very, very articulate. I mean, on the *Today* show and other interviews, as well as where it's scripted. I think she may surprise people before it's all out. But I think her husband has a tighter grip and an understanding of what is going on in the shop, because although he didn't work at the White House, he was there very often under his father and that's precisely what he was keeping an eye out for then.

Knott: Let's take a short break right now and we'll resume in a few minutes.

[BREAK]

Knott: Talk a little bit more about the Office of Public Liaison. Was there anything in particular during your brief tenure there, in terms of dealing with the arts community, that stands out?

Bakshian: Of course the arts community was in a great tizzy when Reagan came in. They thought the end of the world had arrived. So one did get calls and have meetings with some interesting people. Basically you were allaying fears, and as it turned out the world hadn't really shattered and there was a budget fight and so on but things went on more or less as before.

I remember having a phone call from Isaac Stern. Also, there was an old European conductor, since passed away, Maurice Abravanel, who had been director of the Utah or the Salt Lake City Symphony, someone who had a lot of his recordings and he happened to show up, various other people like that.

Also, the in-fighting in particular for the National Endowment for the Humanities. There was a Texan named Professor Mel Bradford who had been a [George] Wallace supporter in years gone by, then had become a very conservative Republican. He desperately wanted to be Director of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Knott: Is this M. E. Bradford?

Bakshian: Yes. Mel Bradford. And a little bell went off in my head, *This is a non-starter*. It wasn't a matter of my being opposed to him—I won't say I could have cared less, but I didn't have any agenda of my own. But I would be getting calls from him all the time. He would be lobbying conservatives on the outside. He was a very colorful man and probably was a very good actual professor to take a course from, because there were a number of bright younger people who had studied under him who were still very loyal to him. Some of them were now in the administration, even in the White House, and they didn't want to say no to him, although I think in the back of their heads most of them knew this was not destined to be.

Bradford came up to town and he probably did the biggest favor he could have to the opposition. He went over and started personally campaigning on the Hill, going around talking to people. He hadn't been named as the nominee or anything. Of course, the *Washington Post* wrote large

pieces making fun of him, which didn't require a great deal of skill. Anyway, he didn't get it. The person who got it—it was the first in a stepping stone of other appointments—is a very well-known name today, and that's Bill Bennett. He certainly wasn't anyone conservatives could have objected to, although at the time there was grumbling from some of the Bradford partisans.

Riley: Were you at all involved in consultations about this particular appointment?

Bakshian: Yes, but I was just basically acting as honest broker. In other words, I was getting input, I just passed on candidate evaluations but it wasn't as if I lobbied for anybody.

Riley: And were you passing these on to personnel?

Bakshian: Personnel and also senior people like Deaver and all who took an interest. The other thing which I took more pride in and which I kept when I went over to speechwriting, was the clearance process and the nominating process for the Medal of Freedom, which is the highest U.S. civilian honor. It doesn't go for any one particular thing. In fact, while it's usually a group presentation, sometimes, especially if it's an older person who may not be around long, there will be an individual presentation. But about once a year or twice a year, they'll give three to six at the same time. There might be one or two people from the arts, one or two humanitarians, somebody from medical science, a literary man, a great civil servant.

It's an interesting thing because it's the highest civilian honor. I took it very seriously. But at times there are going to be people who have been big contributors or something, who are really pushing for it and it's important that somebody be a gatekeeper for that. In fact, after I left, I realized that—I'm not going to name any names—but one or two people, who had spent a lot of money and been humanitarians but not all that distinguished, but also had spent a lot of money contributing to candidacies, finally got in. These were people I'd managed to fend off while I was there, but then they crept through. Also people who had had some accomplishments but I didn't think were quite up to the Medal of Freedom but who later on got in.

Conversely, people ask me, what do I think my greatest achievement was in my years working at the White House? And I always say, "I finally got Eubie Blake the Medal of Freedom." Eubie Blake, the old ragtime piano player and composer who lived to be 100. I had first suggested him when I had no direct connection with the Medal of Freedom, when I was a speechwriter in the Ford administration. To give you an idea of the mentality at the time, he didn't get the Medal of Freedom, but one of the senior Ford people called me back and asked whether he was still available to play parties. I explained, no, he doesn't need that sort of work anymore.

But I didn't forget about it. I met Eubie, because I then occasionally wrote for *Stereo Review*. They used to have an annual awards ceremony for artists and recordings. I remember walking into the reception and there, both standing up, were Arthur Fiedler and Eubie Blake. Arthur Fiedler was smoking a cigarette and drinking vodka. I think Eubie Blake was drinking bourbon. Several hours later, as the crowd is clearing, who is still there but Arthur Fiedler and Eubie Blake, they're sitting down by this time, but still knocking back the hard stuff! Anyway, I got talking to them, really liked them, so I kept on trying to get the medal for Eubie.

When I came back to the White House in ’81and was in charge of the Medal of Freedom, the first thing I did was put him on the list and sure enough he got it in the first round of presentations. I guess he’s the only person they gave it to who was the son of slaves, and now the only person they’ll ever be able to give it to, because there wouldn’t be anyone like that left now.

Knott: Were you involved in the decision? Wasn’t Whittaker Chambers posthumously awarded—?

Bakshian: That happened later. I wasn’t against that, but that just didn’t come up while I was there.

Knott: Were there any controversial recipients that you were—?

Bakshian: No, there was never one that was a disgrace. We never had anything and I don’t think even subsequent administrations have had anything like the Arlington Cemetery deal, where there was some [William J.] Clinton contributor and appointee who was an ambassador who lied, he claimed he had been in the Coast Guard or Merchant Marines during the war and it turned out to be a bunch of crap. When he died, not only did he get a grave at Arlington, but they waived the ordinary rules. There was this enormous pink marble, vulgar monstrosity which has since been dismantled and sold, probably to a Japanese millionaire or a Saudi millionaire somewhere who thinks it’s in good taste. But no, never anything like that. These are just questions of degree.

Riley: Sure. Were there formal criteria?

Bakshian: No, it’s very loose. They have to be of outstanding distinction, Americans who have contributed richly to the national life in some way. So usually it’s public life, the arts or humanities, humanitarianism, and always a few performing arts or composers because those are the big names. When I was there, among other people, Buckminster Fuller, Dumas Malone, who was the biographer of [Thomas] Jefferson. Sort of took up the mantle of Douglas Southall Freeman, or at least was in that tradition.

Riley: Steve’s got a book coming out next month that will rectify some of the misimpressions that Professor Malone left about Jefferson.

Knott: [Alexander] Hamilton in particular.

Bakshian: I have great admiration for Hamilton. There are two books that I’ve read recently that struck me as pretty insightful. One is a bit of a polemic but good. It came out a few years ago, the book was Conor Cruise O’Brien’s book on Jefferson, the French Revolution, and slavery, which really cuts through some of the hypocrisy. The other one is *American Sphinx* on Jefferson. Jefferson always pretended to be above it all, but was always at the back door, money to [Philip] Freneau, not only that but public money sometimes. Whereas Hamilton’s faults were real and he didn’t try to conceal them, but his vision was the true one of what the potential for this country was. Jefferson was already riding a dead horse. His ideal didn’t even exist then and the illusion was about to be dispersed.

Knott: Well, we're on the same plane.

Riley: Steve is now resident apostate. We bring him in to show exactly how ecumenical we are at the University of Virginia.

Bakshian: I think Jefferson in an ironic way—and not the way Jefferson meant it, you could argue that other than the Louisiana Purchase, his Presidency was deeply flawed. The fact that he wanted written on his grave that he was author of the *Declaration of Independence* and had founded the University of Virginia turns out to be about right. They were his two most solid achievements.

Riley: With that aside. Let's see, we were talking about the Medal of Freedom.

Bakshian: Medal of Freedom.

Riley: Exactly. Can you tell us a little about the process? I mean, was there a formalized process?

Bakshian: I was responsible. I kept a file, the correspondence would always be directed to me. You'd have people writing in, recommending someone, sometimes obviously a ginned up campaign, other times genuine—one of the saddest I remember was the late Irving Berlin, who was already 90-something years old at that point. I received numerous letters from elderly people wanting him to get the Medal of Freedom, and I had to write back and inform them that he had been given the Medal of Freedom 25 or 30 years before by President [Harry] Truman or President Eisenhower.

Knott: President [James K.] Polk. [laughter]

Bakshian: We gave one that people remember. There was a steady—and I don't think orchestrated because she was still alive but semi-veg, but there were people that would write in, usually World War II veterans, about Kate Smith, about her singing "God Bless America." Senator [Jesse] Helms' office was pushing it because she was either from or had ended up in North Carolina. She lived down there in her old age, anyway. Sure enough, the President did go down and give her the Medal of Freedom, she was confined to a wheelchair by then.

Riley: Went to her?

Bakshian: That would occasionally happen. Reagan was on a trip to North Carolina and they arranged to fit in the presentation. I remember he came back that evening, had flown back in, it was a day trip, and he said, "You know, I'm not sure Kate was even that clear on what was going on." I think she had had a few strokes.

So, you could get the Medal of Freedom from something like that. Or you could be distinguished in entirely different ways. I think Dr. Edward Teller got it at some point. It didn't happen to coincide with when I was there, but it reflected the range—anything from serious scientific achievement to the popular culture, to elder statesman, occasionally a jurist of great distinction.

Riley: Did the senior staff ever weigh in on this? I mean did you get [Edwin] Meese and Deaver?

Bakshian: Sometimes. What I did was keep a dossier of all recommendations. You would have the once or twice a year, as I said, maybe five, six person presentation, and then occasionally there would be a case of individual merit, or word would come that somebody might not be around much longer so it was now or never. Also in the case of Kate Smith, we'd had it in mind. We knew she was not in the best of health and I think—oh, it was during the midterm elections and the President was going to be down there in North Carolina anyway. I don't know whether Helms was up that year or not, but his office had always weighed in for her getting the Medal of Freedom, so he deserved some credit in a sense. I think he was present at the presentation.

Another case before I was responsible for it, but of a remote presentation, happened under Nixon—and again, to somebody on their last legs—Sam Goldwyn, the old motion picture producer was semi-out-of-it and in a wheelchair. Nixon gave him the Medal of Freedom on a West Coast swing. Afterwards, Sam Goldwyn's son recounted, not for the media at the time, some remarks that old Mr. Goldwyn made about Nixon, which I will not repeat.

Knott: Now, you reported to Elizabeth Dole, is that correct?

Bakshian: After a manner. I gave her copies, but I kept that file and it went to Deaver as Assistant Chief of Staff, who also was interested in that sort of thing. But it would go to him in the form of my recommendations and then I would draft the citations that the President would use.

Riley: Were there instances where somebody communicated to you, or the President communicated to you directly, that he was proactively interested in having somebody?

Bakshian: No, not initiated, not initiated. Usually what you would do—if I recall, it's been a while now—you would send them a "long list" to choose from months before the next Medal of Freedom presentation. And it was flexible, it wasn't like the fiscal year and you had to do it at a set date. It would probably end up being, say, five or six people. But you would give them, so there was some choice, maybe ten or twelve names with detailed descriptions. It always ended up being people I thought were good choices. One of the few people I personally recommended—I happened to have gotten to know Frank Capra, the director, and felt he deserved it—may have finally got it later, but he didn't get it while I was there. That was partially because in any given presentation, if there was already one Hollywood type you didn't want two. It wasn't necessarily a flat comprehensive rejection.

When I took over speechwriting, I stipulated that I would take the Medal of Freedom with me from Public Liaison. It was only because of the arts and humanities link that I had been given it in the first place. When I left, I think Deaver took responsibility, or he may have assigned one of his aides to keep track of it day-to-day. But instead of somebody else outside of Deaver's core staff taking it to him, he absorbed the function.

Riley: You would prepare a memo for the President making a case for—?

Bakshian: Well the preliminary went to the Chief of Staff or ordinarily Deaver with names and bios. What I don't recall off the top of my head was whether at that point Deaver made the cut and sent just a proposed final list to the President, or whether the larger list went to the President. I think Deaver made the cut and it went to the President. So that if the President had someone in mind could add them, but that didn't happen during that period. Frankly, it's not the sort of thing that is uppermost on presidential minds ordinarily, unless some old friend has called up or called Nancy and said, "Don't you think that so-and-so should get the Medal of Freedom?"

Riley: That was the basis of my question, because I would have thought that—

Bakshian: I think Walter Annenberg may have got it later but not on my watch. And actually, it could have been toward the end of my watch. I forget, because there were names that you saw but you didn't send forward and in retrospect you may be remembering a name that you didn't put on the final list but that you had initially considered. Actually Annenberg had done rather well after a false start as ambassador to London, but more importantly various Annenberg projects in culture and broadcasting, aside from being very generous in the amount of money, were, I think, important. It was a major contribution beyond just making a lot of money or just giving it away at random.

Knott: Can you talk a little bit about Elizabeth Dole? Assessments, observations of her?

Bakshian: Elizabeth Dole came on line at a very fortunate time because there were very few elected women and a corresponding demand for visible female appointees. Therefore, women who had been early visible junior female appointees would be the pool from which someone who hadn't been Cabinet level, but who knew some people and had "networked," might move very high up. And there weren't that many of them. Elizabeth Dole was one. She is very good, good attention to detail. From everything I've read, she'll probably be elected the next Senator from North Carolina and I think that will be great. But she always seemed most concerned with details, not big concepts. People I've known that have dealt with her in her much more substantive appointive jobs, departmental ones and all, always felt that she was more interested in the public image and building credentials. She was building a résumé rather than doing a great deal in the immediate position. That's from people who were working in the department with her and so on. I really couldn't say, myself.

At Public Liaison that was— I think I mentioned that it was more of a good will, PR sort of operation and she was a very good choice for that function.

Riley: A woman had been her predecessor? Was that Ann Wexler's job before?

Knott: I think it was Midge Costanza.

Bakshian: Yes, I always mix those two up, but it was a woman before that. And actually, Elizabeth Dole's first job in the White House in the Nixon administration had been working for Virginia Knauer, who was not Office of Public Liaison, which hadn't been created yet I don't think, but she was the consumer advisor. Because under Johnson they had created a consumer

advisor who I think was Esther Peterson. So then the Nixon people had to—well didn't have to—but it would have been a big deal if they said we are not going to have a consumer advocate.

So they had Virginia Knauer with Elizabeth Dole as a young aide. Well, time passes and the world changes so Elizabeth Dole is put in as head of Public Liaison in '81. Virginia Knauer is a bit older now and less at the center of things so Elizabeth Dole puts her in as a member of her staff dealing with consumer affairs, so the old assistant took on her old boss as *her* assistant when she was boss.

[The following passage is embargoed until 2012.]

[redacted]

Knott: Unless there is anything else as far as the Office of Public Liaison, we can shift gears now and take a look at your role as directing the speechwriting office. You've already touched on how you were selected. Did you make any changes when you came into it?

Bakshian: No. I knew some of the people, others by reputation. The first thing I did was just look very carefully for the first week or so at strengths and weaknesses of their writing. Actually, I'll be happy to go down the list of the people. The staff I inherited: Tony Dolan, who had been the acting head, like me had written for *National Review*. To save face, because he was removed as acting head when I was named as director, he was given the title chief speechwriter to distinguish him from the other speechwriters on the staff. There were no line authorities or anything. Sort of like what happened with Safire and Buchanan in the later Nixon White House, except that he was still online, a full time writer. When I made assignments, it was the same way with him as everybody else.

He was a prima donna but a good writer, although he was one of those people that usually would go around complaining that Reagan was being stifled by staff, "Let Reagan be Reagan." What they really meant was, "Let me be Reagan." They had trouble taking editing. Long after I left, I remember, an ending which I thought was rather hokey that had been rejected several times,

including by the President, in some State of the Union drafts and other items. Well, it finally showed up in a speech. I guess the lesson was, if you wait long enough you can recycle your rejects. Tony must have kept this thing in a refrigerator, in a freezer or something, for years. But anyway, Tony was a very talented writer and a bit of a prima donna.

Ben Elliot succeeded me as director of speechwriting, and I had known him earlier. He had been on the staff of Bill Simon at Treasury.

Riley: And survived.

Bakshian: Yes. At Treasury, Ben was one of the people who was a perfectly competent writer and one of the people I had in mind when I mentioned if you took a draft of theirs you might fool with it a bit, but it was fine to begin with. If someone had just lied to the Secretary and said that I'd already gone over it, it probably would have been accepted as it was. It was just the way that Simon thought. So Ben was one of the heavyweight writers. His background—nobody had *a* specialty in the sense that that's all they wrote about, but he was a supply-sider and very big on economics. So very often I would assign him major economic speeches.

I would have to go over everything that was done before it left my department, but there were only certain things I would write from scratch. The bulk of the speeches, especially the routine ones, I would assign. Ben would get many of the economic ones, but everybody did everything.

Then there was Landon Parvin, another very good writer. In fact, I would say probably the most facile of the people on the staff in terms of being a utility player, Landon could do anything. Landon had been brought on initially because he had a good comic touch and he always did. He would do specific humor stuff for the President besides regular speeches, or if you wanted a few humorous things, he might tack them on to somebody else's speech. But he also did major policy items.

Riley: Did Reagan need much help in that regard?

Bakshian: No, but it would be a matter of checking out venues—if a speech was being given at a certain locale and there was some local humor, checking out whether there was something you could refer to that was topical there, that kind of thing.

Riley: Sure.

Bakshian: Or when the President would be speaking at the Gridiron, for example. Landon always would do the Gridiron remarks. Reagan would put in lots of jokes of his own but you need to start with something. You don't send him in there unarmed.

Landon also developed a very good relationship with Mrs. Reagan, although she had her own speechwriters and her own little staff. It was sort of like Simon, she had to develop real confidence in you. I guess the idea of someone on Ronnie's staff would have a little bit of stature in her mind that might be different from her own. So Landon would occasionally help with

things for her, which was great because that was one of the reasons I think she had a great deal of confidence in our shop. She never interfered with us and was always highly satisfied.

Anyway, Landon was a very good writer. He was the one to use if something came up suddenly, or if there was going to be a lot of something that was going to be difficult and you needed someone who wouldn't get tied up in knots, get upset or get temperamental. He and I were probably the best at that. And not get too upset in terms of, "Oh my God, Jack Kemp might not like the way this looks," or "They're not letting me be Reagan," or whatever.

Another of my writers was Mari Maseng, who was from North Carolina, and has since worked a lot with Elizabeth Dole, incidentally. Mari was younger, less experienced, but very sound. Occasionally she could get a bit frayed and get a little behind, so you just took that into account, but she was, and is, a good writer.

Riley: Some of that is age and experience.

Bakshian: That's right, and confidence and having been there before. The longer you've been around the more no new situation is really that new.

Riley: Exactly.

Bakshian: And then there was Dana Rohrabacher, who has since become a Congressman. He wasn't junior in seniority but he was a generalist, although he had a broad interest in foreign affairs and libertarian concepts. He was the sort of person you might assign the toasts for a state dinner but you wouldn't necessarily give the biggest speech to—actually if it was major foreign policy, usually I would end up doing it. But anyway, Dana was there and he was sort of the—I won't say the "Valley boy" as opposed to Valley girl, but very California. There was an assistant of mine who used to keep track of his spelling lapses. He once merged destiny and Greek cheese when he referred to something being a "feta compli," by which he meant *fait accompli*. And there were other instances. Oh, the Hollywood Bowel, which must have been part of the UCLA medical school, I would assume.

Riley: You would think that with a last name like that, spelling would have been one of his strong suits.

Bakshian: Yes. As far as I know he never misspelled his last name. But don't get me wrong; Dana was very creative, very interested in policy and ideas. In fact, his niche was the House of Representatives. He's where he belongs in every sense of the word and it suits him.

So those were the writers. As you can see from my descriptions, there were different strengths and weaknesses but there wasn't anything that was missing. I'm not bloodthirsty. I also happened to know at the time that I got there that Tony, who had wanted the job I was given, had actually told Dana—I don't know whether he told anybody else—that the only reason he hadn't been given the job was that he wouldn't promise to fire Dana, and that I had been given the job because I had promised to fire Dana. Well Dana was still there when I left over two years later, so that will give you an idea of how true that was, but that's the kind of game some people play.

I had no interest in getting rid of anybody. I didn't dislike any of them. And I was able to make the team work, so why tinker with it? In addition to which there are only so many people out there who are good at speechwriting; it combines a lot of qualities. Sure, people were lining up wanting in, and from time to time people did pass through that somebody had recommended. But you're taking a chance if you bring in someone from the outside that you've never worked with before and who has never worked at that level before. There are one or two people who have written successful books, for example, but aren't good at speeches. I remember thinking, *I've got people on my staff who may never write a book but can write a good speech*. There are people that can do both and there are people who can write books but can't necessarily write speeches. There are people who can write editorials but can't write speeches. There are people who can write newspaper editorials but can't write television commentary, that sort of thing. So anyway, I didn't make any changes. The same writers were all there when I left, and all of them had worked well under my direction.

The only turnover, which was natural, came in research. Generally, your researchers and fact-checkers are younger people who very often want to have worked in research right out of college or shortly after college. But after having put in a bit of time in research at the White House, they can get placed at a better level in one of the departments or agencies. Research is very professional work, but it's somehow considered sort of clerical and very much—well, not managerial or anything. So you would get people there that didn't stay because as soon as they got a chance to take a job in the press office somewhere in the federal bureaucracy, they would prefer that. It was the next step up in their careers. But I never fired anybody; that was just natural attrition.

I had a good rapport with President Reagan and he would call up occasionally out of the blue. One thing that impressed me very early on was his generous attitude to corrections to things he'd written. Lyn Nofziger, who was in charge of the political office, was involved. It had to be before the midterm elections because it had to do with the early initiatives, just getting support for the President's program, tax cuts and everything.

The President had changed something in one of our drafts—this was shortly after I'd come on board—and so I'd put the change in. I guess Nofziger had noticed that what I had originally written was better. He said, "By the way, don't hesitate when you think something should stand corrected." And sure enough, I guess Lyn had said something to the President, because I got a phone call from the President saying, "Aram, I want you to bear this in mind. Whenever you think that something that I changed might not be quite right—don't just automatically go with that. Say what you think." I mean, it was the opposite of saying, "Be a yes man," and that impressed me very much. It showed a security on his part, also an appreciation of work and knowing that no one person is always going to know all the nuances.

Riley: Sure.

Bakshian: But any rate, one of the things that demonstrated his approval was the fact that shortly after I became Director, they set up a weekly meeting which had not existed before, where I would meet with the President in the Oval Office if he was in Washington. Each week I

would take those writers who had an important assignment coming up. You'd try to rotate it so everyone got their chance, and once I even took the whole staff in. That was more of a photo op, to give the researchers and the secretaries a chance to feel they were part of the picture and be able to tell their relatives and friends that they had been with the President.

One of the secretaries said something very interesting when we came out of that meeting. It had been about 25, 30 minutes and the President was talking. Very often it would get anecdotal and he would be talking about things other than politics. One of the girls said to another of the girls, "You know, I know he wasn't doing it, but I felt that he was talking directly to me all through that meeting." And the other secretary said, "That's funny because I had exactly the same feeling." That was a gift he had and it was because he did have a genuine empathy for his audience. He was a very contained man, but he had a way of, as actors sometimes do, of establishing rapport with his audience. That didn't mean that in private life he was close to lots and lots of people, but he had that quality. Not only did he have it in a room, he had it in the country, over television, he could do it on screen.

Bush, in a less polished way, has also connected.

Riley: This Bush. The second.

Bakshian: This Bush, partially because of the tragedy which created the focal point for it, but also because he has a bit of that quality. He's a natural about people. He's comfortable with people and people sense that. They know when you're not. Anyway, getting back.

Access. Besides those meetings, I could always reach President Reagan whenever necessary by phone. It didn't occur very often because we had a smooth operation. The stuff I wrote didn't tend to come back with massive changes or anything. In fact, very few changes usually. I was comfortable with the way he spoke and actually he spoke in many ways. It was like a singing voice with a wide range and also a set of several styles. Ronald Reagan was always himself, but if it was complicated material and literate material that suited the occasion, he could handle it. If it was casual, he could handle it. You didn't need to write "down" for him, you just had to know what was appropriate to the occasion. So it worked out very, very well.

And in these meetings, it would get comfortable. I knew a few old Hollywood people myself, people like Doug Fairbanks, Frank Capra, and Rouben Mamoulian, and so I could relate to some of the non-political things he would talk about. Jim Baker and Dave Gergen would usually also be at the meetings besides whichever of my writers were there. I remember one meeting where I actually—I may be the only person that ever has done this—I realized, *This meeting is going on*, *and Reagan is reminiscing and all*, and rather than enjoy the fact that I was getting more "face time"—everybody fights to get their time on the schedule—I said, just as Reagan got to the end of an anecdote, "This is really great, Mr. President, but I know you have a lot of very important things you've got to do and we're really taking up a little too much of your time."

Actually he was taking up the time, but I'd seen Baker sort of getting nervous, looking around. But even Baker didn't want to say anything. So I did and Reagan laughed and we left. Most of the decent big people actually appreciate it when you level—and they know, they recognize it

when someone is not just kowtowing or just grubbing and they usually appreciate it, in my experience anyway.

Riley: Did you do any kind of conscious study of Reagan's speaking style as you took on—

Bakshian: No, but I've always written with my ear. Whenever I've written for anybody where it's important, and where it's not an official document like a corporate report, I would say the best speechwriter writes with his ear. It's like a playwright writing dialogue for a character. Or, for that matter, someone writing for Jay Leno rather than the same writer writing for somebody else. Even as you're writing it, in your own mind, you're hearing him speak it or her speak it. And you're writing it that way, in the same way as if you were writing for a particular character in a novel, you're writing to fit that character and they're not all supposed to sound alike.

But I do that automatically. When I was brought in to take over presidential speechwriting, I didn't sit down and study Reagan. I'd been seeing the man on television since *Death Valley Days* and *G.E. Theater,* plus old movies. I'd watched him closely. I'd written for him, and in the same way remembered what he had sounded like in his political speeches when I had to do the little thing in the '76 campaign that I mentioned earlier.

There are a lot of lines of creative work where some people go about it very mechanically and methodically, painstakingly struggle through it, and they end up perhaps getting very good results by step-by-step, as opposed to sitting down and just doing it. There are people who compose music that way and there are others who will sit down, play it on the piano or hear it in their head and write out the score as opposed to sitting around brooding about it for a long time beforehand.

Riley: Exactly.

Bakshian: I tended to be more on the spontaneous side.

Riley: And do you feel like the rest of your staff was in pretty much the same position? Were they people who had a kind of intuitive sense about what a Reagan speech ought to look like?

Bakshian: Yes. Remember, they'd been there before I got there, so those that had to learn it by rote had learned it by rote or had got as close as they were ever going to get by the time I had to work with them.

Riley: Okay, okay.

Bakshian: But there were varying degrees of that which would also affect what I would do with their drafts, how much I had to do before I could send them on.
Riley: For[3] those of us who are outsiders, there's something of a mystery about how one goes about gaining a sense of the voice of someone for whom you haven't worked very much.

[3] Start tape 4 at 042

Bakshian: You have seen them and you have heard them. And you will have also noticed, if you've observed them, especially once they're President where they've got to use lots of material that was written for them, you'll notice what seems to work and what doesn't—when they sound their best. You remember them at their best and that's what you strive to make them sound like when you're writing. It needn't be that conscious if you have an aptitude for that.

Riley: Exactly. I guess I contrast that with the fact that we've talked with a lot of people who were in policy positions, or even in Cabinet positions, who were brought into the White House in the Reagan Presidency, who had not had a great deal of interaction with Reagan before. In many instances they felt it necessary to bring themselves up to speed on what a Reagan Treasury Department, just to pull something out of the air, what it ought to look like based on campaign commitments, based on the kind of things that Reagan—

Bakshian: Well, that gets back to what is or isn't going to be implemented—what was campaign rhetoric and what's going to become policy. Particularly at the beginning of a first term, that's true. But as far as getting in the head of the person, the art that everyone who's at a senior level and who is involved in policy and advocacy has to develop is how do you best communicate? Not how do you best get them to communicate your policy, how do you communicate best with them. The art of the right memo.

But there's no one memo fits all. With Reagan, keep it very compact, concise, clear, snappy. With a Clinton or a Carter and to a certain extent a Nixon, they love to wade into it and read all sorts of stuff, agonize over it. Sometimes you needed to customize something like a cover memo, the summary or the executive summary, because in the case of Reagan he wasn't going to spend a lot of time reading a lot of dry crap. I think most Presidents shouldn't. Presidents are more in danger of drowning in that stuff. Well that destroys the adjective "dry," doesn't it—

Riley: I caught you. [laughter]

Bakshian: Well, I would have edited that before it went in, in draft form. But, as I was saying, most Presidents are more in danger of being buried by details than they are of being under informed.

Riley: That works.

Bakshian: What worked well with Reagan and why he was a good person to write speeches for, was that he knew the direction he wanted to move in, and he was a very good judge of writing. When he read it, he knew what it would sound like. I don't think someone like Carter always did or Ford, or Nixon, or even Clinton sometimes. So that Reagan was reading it with his ear as well as his eye and with his gut as well as intellect, with the further result that when he did make changes, it wasn't just that he might make a policy change. He was actually improving the draft in terms of its deliverability and the way it should be phrased so that his edits were welcome when they occurred.

You would have to make fact checks if he injected an anecdote—I think in one of the clips you've got, I mentioned an example to somebody. The problem was not that he had a bad

memory, at that time anyway, but that he had too good a memory. Because a memory is not selective, it hasn't researched and filtered and verified everything it remembers. So that if he remembered an anecdote from *Readers' Digest* in 19-whatever, or in *Human Events*, he might recall it perfectly, but that doesn't necessarily mean that it was accurate to begin with, a figure on welfare mothers or something.

One of the things we had to do when he would send out a radio speech that he had written—since those were only five minutes he would very often draft the whole radio speech—you would just have to make sure that if there was something in there that hadn't come from a briefing paper or whatever, that it was currently still accurate. Or that if it was a historical anecdote, that it was from a reliable source.

I remember once, and I actually had to give him a minor history lesson. He was telling a story about [Marquis de] Lafayette and George Washington, in which Lafayette referred to George Washington as "George" in his presence. I happened to have written and read about the American Revolution a lot. With the possible exception of Martha, nobody called George Washington "George." I mean nobody, so that was just inaccurate. That doesn't mean it wasn't in a magazine article that Reagan had read.

Riley: Sure.

Bakshian: I didn't just change it, I explained that historically, Lafayette, in particular, who considered Washington a real father figure, would never have called him George. So there were little things like that. But he had an incredible memory and he always knew how to relate to his audiences. It goes back to his sports casting days. He said when he first sat down to sportscast on the radio, the first thing he thought of was speak as if he were sitting in a barber shop talking to a few people—if it would have reached them, it would get through to his radio audience and they would feel he was talking directly to them. This gets back to him making people think he's talking to them, not to some vast faceless crowd. He had that gift. I think that W. is developing it, although he'll never be the speaker Reagan was. But he has already connected to the public in a way Clinton never had to.

By the time Clinton really needed to sway people, he was in personal trouble and he had to excuse things. That's not the same as being able to use leadership to move in a positive direction. W. in a sense has been the beneficiary of this tragedy [9/11] not because just anybody sitting in the White House could profit from it, but because he was the right man responding in the right way and people have bonded with him as a result. In the same way people that had never been very keen on FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt], in fact might have hated his guts, rallied after Pearl Harbor. You just don't get a Pearl Harbor every four years.

Riley: Fortunately.

Knott: How big was this research staff that you had to check facts and figures?

Bakshian: It varied, just as the speechwriting staff, for example, under Nixon, expanded gearing up to the '72 campaign. Ordinarily there would be a few interns or volunteers that would come

and go. There'd be a few more or a few less, but there was always at least one head of research or senior researcher, and then four or more other full-fledged, full-time, salaried researchers. And there was a sort of secretary/researcher who would do some routine fact checks but was also helping run the office—the office manager for everybody in research. There were one or two people who were actually there in research slots when I got there who had been there from the beginning, just out of college but who then either were going back to graduate school at the beginning of the academic year or were moving on to get a job that meant something more for their credentials afterwards.

Riley: Were the researchers primarily involved in fact checking or were they proactively searching for things—?

Bakshian: Both. When you scheduled something, you assigned a researcher. I would have a schedule and for big speeches it would be way down the line, for some routine ones it would be fairly tight. It also depended on how far in advance the speech had been scheduled. Some things would just come up. At any rate, each week, I revised the schedule. Besides assigning an individual writer to each speech, I would assign an individual researcher. The more important the speech and the more the lead time, the more the researcher would talk to the writer and the writer would give an idea of some advanced material that they wanted the researcher to compile. But in addition, the researcher would pull what was needed. This could depend on the nature of the speech. If it was a very tightly focused thing on agricultural policy or taxes or whatever, that's simple. If it were more of a semi-political or social speech, or patriotic or inspirational, there was more you could draw on so they might cast the net wider for human interest material.

I would tend not to ask for much on the way in myself, but then I would be pretty focused on what I was going to be doing. Some of the writers wanted researchers to look for quotes or anecdotes. But I'd been doing that for years and it was almost quicker to do it myself. But some of the writers relied on their researcher for this. The researcher actually in a sense participated in creating the first draft as opposed to starting with reviewing the first draft, fact-checking it. But even simple fact-checking took a lot of work, because we're talking about line by line, fact by fact, verifying everything. Sometimes you would even have conflicts. I mean, the budget people might have a different interpretation of what a policy or number would result in than the Treasury people. You'd have turf wars along those lines.

Knott: Were there ever any occasions—you mentioned earlier the President might have written out one of his five minute radio addresses and might have an anecdote in it, you'd have somebody check the facts. We've heard in some of the other testimony that he could be fairly stubborn on certain things. Were there ever any instances where you would say, "This doesn't pan out," and he would—

Bakshian: No, nothing that he ever sent out to me created that problem, where we had to flag it. Where there were things that we corrected, it would be a factual correction rather than saying, "You can't say this, period," in other words pull the story. It was a matter of saying "this is apocryphal," "this is not one that actually happened," "the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act was actually passed five years before that," or two years before that, or something. Or the budget

figure for that or the amount spent on that was such-and-such. But we never had to pull something whole.

I think that's the sort of thing that, for example, people working on debate drill, where he might have come up with something, would say, "You can't use that on this subject." But what he tended to send out to us in speech draft, in my experience, unless I've forgotten something—I know that there was never any big issue where it was a matter of my sending something back and him digging in. That was just because he never sent me out anything where I felt that action was required. On the other hand, when I made corrections I always had an explanation. I suspect that most of the people that had problems like that took a condescending view of him in the first place and maybe went about "enlightening" him in a way that ticked him off and might have led him to dig his heels in.

Not only that, in some cases maybe they were wrong and he was right, especially where you're talking about rhetoric and not actual hard facts.

Knott: Would it be accurate to say that as far as dealing with the White House staff, that Michael Deaver would be the person?

Bakshian: No, the immediate person was David Gergen as Director of Communications. I met with him every morning before going into my office, or at least before sitting down and upgrading the speechwriting schedule. Speechwriting was one of the several divisions of Communications: the press office, speechwriting and Mike Baroody's press operation, which was separate from the press office dealing with the White House press corps. It was an outreach to regional and local media. I think that was pretty much what consisted of Dave's portfolio. So he was the immediate contact.

Deaver was at the Chief of Staff and Assistant Chief of Staff division level, the top level. Speeches and "image" were more his venue than budget policy and that sort of thing. Deaver was also the keeper of the body, had been for years. The speaking function and scheduling were very close to his area of expertise and he was also very trusted by Mrs. Reagan. So he was the appropriate person at the top. Baker and I had good relations but we didn't have to deal with each other much on a day-to-day basis.

Knott: What about Ed Meese?

Bakshian: Ed is a very nice man, but my sense from the very beginning was whenever a President comes in and there are some people who are old friends from the old days, there are those who adjust to Washington ways and the power dynamic. And there are those who will always have the affection and support of their patron but who—I won't say get derailed—but tend to be sidetracked a bit. Ed was most comfortable in the realm of ideas, with the result that he was in effect running a think tank at the White House rather than a power base.

As the administration moved on, and as it got more from the theoretical to the actual, he was never totally marginalized but he was more and more an advisor, an almost passive advisor, and less a shaper of policy. I never had any run-ins because I knew him and I knew people in his

shop and we got on well. They tended to be ideologues or theoreticians, some of whose policies became reality, some of whose didn't. But they were almost a faculty department as opposed to part of the corporate structure of the operation.

Where there was something important and Ed weighed in, Reagan would always listen to him. But day-to-day he was less of a factor than the Chief of Staff, Deputy Chief of Staff and, for that matter, things like OMB and the NSC. OMB specifically weighs in on everything that involves money; NSC weighs in on every foreign policy or defense issue, and also alarms that may go off at any time, kidnappings, strategic alerts, that sort of thing. So by the time Ed went over to the Justice Department, I think he was probably glad to become Attorney General and felt his most important time at the White House had been the opening of the first term, to make sure that the ideas that had been campaigned on—at least as large a part as possible of them—became actual executed policy. After that it was diminishing returns.

I say it out of all respect because I think he was one of the most decent people in there and a very good thinker.

Riley: You've mentioned that you'd known David Gergen for a long time.

Bakshian: Well, from the Nixon White House.

Riley: And Gergen is so prevalent in the print media, and has written himself, that I suspect as our colleagues in the future are looking back at this administration, that there will be a lot of people who will look at his work for signs about what was going on. Can you tell us a little bit about Gergen and his style, how he fit into everything?

Bakshian: Very, very much a backstairs person. I mean, Dave cared very much about position and access. He took very good care of you if you worked well, and were a valuable member of his team. I consider him a personal friend. At various times over the years, I've been contacted by important people in the public and private sectors because he had recommended me. They were looking for someone and asked him and he recommended me. These are things that you don't have to do for people afterwards. I mean, he doesn't need me, I don't need him, but we respect each other and are on good terms. Dave also was willing to put up with a lot of crap, to suffer fools gladly when he had to.

Back in the Nixon White House, he probably started as a Democrat, and got in as an assistant, really almost as an administrative assistant to Ray Price. But Dave would work as long as it took, and was always ready to take on more chores and responsibilities. He was recognized for competence by putting in all hours, delivering on difficult deadlines, et cetera. So I would say Dave was the ultimate mixture of technocrat and administrative type. Not somebody with much ideology of his own. But he was a recognizer of creative talent—as any good administrator or manager has to be. And at the White House, there are very few executives. Even though it's at the top of the power pyramid, it's a relatively small staff so you're really talking about senior managers, people who are actually giving orders to a much smaller number of people than most executives do, and yet it's very important. But it's managerial skills, the same things that run an effective office as opposed to running a vast government department or agency. And Dave was

masterful at that and at keeping everybody happy—delivering it, getting it done, and volunteering for more, taking on additional tasks and thereby acquiring additional authority. He was a master of that.

Those days are probably gone after his brief political sex-change operation with the Clinton administration, because it probably means that it would be hard—if he so wished, and I don't think he does. I think he's very happy—for him to join a Republican administration.

Riley: You mention that there were some people who felt uncomfortable with him politically because they weren't sure that he was a—I think in your words—

Bakshian: This would be initially, now.

Riley: Before Clinton, even in the Reagan period.

Bakshian: In the Reagan period, after a while there were a number of people who got positively paranoid and were convinced that Jim Baker—oh, one other person who should be mentioned because he falls into the Gergen category a bit here. Once I had dealt with Gergen, who was my immediate superior within communications, and I interfaced with the staff and we had a draft—mechanically, the next person who got the draft to then circulate it around was Dick Darman. The people that would have their problems or their issues with Dave Gergen would also feel that way about Darman.

Riley: Darman's position was—?

Bakshian: I forget what his title was.

Riley: Was it Staff Secretary?

Bakshian: I think it was Staff Secretary, because he controlled the paper flow. Which was why, once you had internally finished with your first draft, in fact toward the end of the day in the afternoon, everything that was going to go to the President, other than a hot, last minute thing that had to be going back and forth, the package went to Darman, who reviewed it and then that's what went to the President that afternoon or evening. He and I always got along. We were both professionals.

I think there is an exaggeration on the part of frustrated people who didn't end up being as important as they thought they were going to be, or who really thought that Ronald Reagan was a complete ideologue and policy wonk, and who think people like Darman, Gergen and Baker "hi-jacked" Ronald Reagan. Ronald Reagan had several big priorities and he achieved most of them. He was a man of strong principles, but he was not a man of fanatic temperament and he certainly wasn't rabid, he wasn't a doctrinaire personality or character. Many of the disgruntled people were very doctrinaire. They also assumed, because of Reagan's rather pleasing personality, that when they went in and talked to him and he heard them out in a friendly way, that they had carried him and that they had said what he believed. I mean, they got a little bit intoxicated with

their own verbiage and then were disappointed when it didn't always come out the way they expected.

Sometimes the squabbling even spilled over into the press. In 1982, for example, there were two alternative drafts of the State of the Union address. I never bothered to correct it, but Bill Safire got this one wrong in the pages of the *New York Times*.

There had been an earlier draft that Tony Dolan had been working on before I'd even taken over the speechwriting office. It had one of those endings that turned up again in a speech years later. Well, I replaced it. I was sitting there thinking about the State of the Union when the Air Florida crash hit and I saw that thing happen live on TV. At that point, as soon as the name was available and we made sure he didn't have a drug record or anything, or was an illegal alien or something, I wrote Lenny Skutnik into the finale. I wrote the passage and that created the hero in the gallery ploy, which unfortunately has been milked to death since and overdone. I almost regret it.

I'd been asked to take over and scale down and improve a draft that had been banging around, which was partly committee work, partly Tony Dolan's. Tony kept lobbying and demanded they send in two drafts, his draft and mine.

Riley: This is the State of the Union.

Bakshian: Yes. Well, I couldn't have cared less. They both went to the President and the President wrote, "I've got to go with this one," and it was the one I had done winding up with Lenny Skutnik. To this day I'm sure Tony thinks that Darman or somebody queered the process or sabotaged it or something, but I saw both drafts come back and I saw the President's handwriting and I saw him give the speech.

Well, the time comes for delivery and I get a call that morning or the day before from Jim Baker saying, "Aram, we would like to have you sitting in the gallery since you were responsible for this one." I said, "Jim, frankly, I've read that speech so many times, I'd rather watch it somewhere where there are ordinary people reacting to it. I'm really not that interested. I've been to the Hill many times, so thanks but no thanks." Tony scrambled and got a seat and sure enough in the column by William Safire a day or so later, it was, "And sitting in the gallery was the man who created the Lenny Skutnik image." And, as far as I know, Tony never bothered to tell Safire that he'd got it wrong.

I never called Safire on it because as far as I'm concerned, if the White House senior staff wants to identify you, that's their business. But it's not up to you to be out there taking credit for lines which aren't even supposed to be coming from somebody else anyway. Years later I explained that to Bill Safire, but that's after Reagan was no longer President.

Riley: How often is it that you actually get to see the President deliver a speech that you've written for him?

Bakshian: Actually, if you wanted to, you could do it constantly. The other thing is, even then, and now it is probably even more so, you've got electronic hook-up. White House

communications, that's the actual electronic arrangement, which I think the Army handles, is very good, so that you're in the position of being able to watch any presidential appearance from your office. But the rewards that the people who want to be visible fish for—and I never fished for them, but did receive them—would be to be a state dinner guest, so you're there when he gives the toast you wrote.

And the other thing is you've got to travel with the President sometimes. If it's a long trip you need to have at least one writer on it, not if it's just a day trip, but if it's a foreign trip.

Riley: Somebody who can handle—

Bakshian: That's right, because something may have to be changed, or if it's a European thing with many stops, even though you've got the package of ten items, you still need to be there in case there's a change due to breaking news. I was on the European trip. I let Ben—because I was already thinking of leaving—there was a big Latin American trip where I let Ben do that one because it would give him a chance to exercise the editorial function if something came up. But ordinarily it would be the director and maybe one other writer on a big trip with a lot of stops.

Riley: I guess the reason I posed the question is I keep coming back to this notion about how do you know that you're doing a good job. How do you know that you're being successful? How do you know what works and what doesn't?

Bakshian: Oh, you're also present very often if it's a major speech. The President is going to do at least one or two TelePrompTer rehearsals after you've gone through the whole script and you're there watching him do that.

Riley: I see, okay.

Bakshian: Plus you've seen what he changed or hasn't changed, you know how comfortable he was or wasn't with the speech. The more important the speech, the more it's gone back and forth. The other thing would be whenever, if he wasn't up at Camp David, the President was giving his Saturday radio speech from the Oval Office, I would always walk over there and be present for those. I got much more done on those Saturdays because it meant you had to get up in the morning and head down there and then at noon you were downtown, there were plenty of interesting things to do you might not have bothered to do if you hadn't had to be in the office.

God, there was one period during the last Nixon days where I remember clocking it, I think it was a month, it was at least a month, where it was a seven-day week for four weeks in a row, including a lot of late nights.

My point was, you could see as much as you wanted. Plus the technology was there so that you could study at great length and in great detail how the material was going—live or play it back anytime. Besides, even more than most Presidents, Ronald Reagan had an established voice. This wasn't someone who was finding his way. He had a clear, versatile style and was easy to write for.

I would think if you had been starting, for example, at the beginning of the current Bush administration, and if you hadn't worked with him on the campaign and were a new writer brought on, you might have experimented in your early drafts to try to see what Bush could be comfortable with and get his measure. But Reagan could handle almost anything, or at least I had enough of a sense of Reagan that anything I was going to write for him would be something he could handle and it would sound right coming from him. And 99 percent of the time he felt so too, so it wasn't a matter of back to the drawing board, I've got to relearn my job.

Riley: He was such an accomplished speech maker then that you—

Bakshian: If you understood him, you didn't have to agonize over it. He wasn't limited in range, it wasn't like writing for someone limited by a handicap—he didn't need the rhetorical equivalent of ramps or a special elevator, so you had the full range of terrain you could have him take on.

Riley: Were there any instances, notable instances where something didn't work? It fell flat, he—?

Bakshian: Nothing that I immediately remember. Well, there'd be occasional lapses. I remember that he—I forget whether—oh, it was a long-since liquidated dictator of Liberia, Sergeant [Samuel] Doe, and the President either had notes or he had put the notes aside, I forget, but he greeted him as, not Chairman Doe but as Chairman Moe, presumably the last of the Three Stooges. It was just a spoonerism, in the same way that Jerry Ford once discovered a new Transcaucasian disease called "sickle cell Armenia."

Riley: Very close to your heart.

Bakshian: I thought maybe if I hadn't been there it wouldn't have happened.

Knott: How much lead time would you have in terms of, for instance you mentioned let's say there was a European trip coming up and they would put—

Bakshian: With those things there'd be a lot of lead time, although the venue might change at the last minute or something might be added on, but those usually were very, very orchestrated. In part because usually those trips, while there is negotiation, the work has been done in advance. You're going because you know the fix is in. There is a reason for it, which is to show the flag, or you know that there will be some signatures and there will be ceremonies, so you have a scenario that is pretty solid. You are really fleshing out and articulating a settled matter, so there is plenty of time for those.

Similarly, the State of the Union, while it may change till the very last minute, in the Reagan White House at least, had an effective early steering committee effort to keep it on message. That's because there is always a gang bang attempt by everybody to get into the State of the Union, every little crappy agency wants their stuff, their agenda, included. You have to resist this pressure you have to focus it, concentrate on certain things, give it a theme, keep it on target. So that starts early, although there is a lot of revision. The difficult speeches are those suddenly

triggered by crises and that's where being experienced and calm helps, although usually, fortunately, when there is a crisis or a short notice thing, a terrorist hit or something, usually what you're doing—or as Peggy Noonan did in a very famous one, long after I was gone—when the space shuttle blew up, you're dealing not with a lot of facts but with a lot of emotion. It just requires writing skills and articulating strong feelings which are going to be there anyway if an American has been kidnapped or if you've had a shared national tragedy.

So usually the unexpected ones don't tend to be complicated on a policy level and the more it is going to be a policy item, the more it has been orchestrated in advance. The other things are just last minute schedulings or adding on to the schedule, which can mean a last minute rush, but they're not usually the ones that involve major new policy shifts.

One example that you had in the folder is the Evil Empire speech. I can wait on that, you may want to get to that separately later. But it was an example of something becoming of great importance because a statement included in a routine, low-profile speech takes on major foreign policy significance. That's very rare. But that was the case of a minor speech that was scheduled for a different purpose and was considered a throw-away speech where then some phrasing got into it that made it important. And that only happened because it wasn't intended as a major foreign policy address, therefore senior foreign policy people weren't paying that much attention and so something got said that might not have been said otherwise. Usually, however, there's a structure, and the more complicated or important the speech, the more lead time there is.

Then you have the radio speeches where usually you'll choose a policy theme well in advance. But sometimes it's Memorial Day, July 4th, or Thanksgiving weekend. And very often, one out of five or so, the President would just send something out that he decided he wanted to speak about.

Knott: Were there ever any instances where your phone rang at four in the morning and somebody is on the other end saying there's been this disaster here, could you—?

Bakshian: Occasionally, but usually they just needed to reach me to make sure about something already in process. I remember once—and I don't know how they tracked me—I had taken off two days, I had just gone up to New York and I was having lunch with Michael Arlen, Jr. at an Armenian restaurant and the phone rang. Well, someone came up to me and said, "There's a phone call for you from the White House." I must have told somebody in the office that there was this Armenian restaurant I liked in New York. Well, the White House operators are uncanny, maybe they've got ESP—

Riley: Or there's something in your fillings.

Bakshian: Right, maybe there's an implant [laughter]. That might have been the second time I'd been up to New York and I might have mentioned that I always eat at the such-and-such. Sure enough they tracked me down. It was a fairly routine thing, something that involved an intelligence issue, but nothing really important. I remember getting sort of ticked off and saying something about, "Well, you can tell the CIA to stuff it," and then looking around and realizing that people were suddenly staring at me.

Fortunately those people didn't know what my job was, because years later I went to the same restaurant and in the meantime someone had done a book on Armenian-Americans in all walks of life, well-known ones. He was a photographer, he did little profiles but it was basically portraits with brief bios. That book had come out, say, three months before this time. I was coming in after an absence of a year to this Armenian restaurant. The Armenian owner walks up and says, "Oh Sir, I always knew you were *somebody* but now I know *who* you are."

Knott: I think this is actually a good point to break for lunch.

[LUNCH]

Knott: Perhaps we could talk about some specific speeches, some of the more notable speeches that were produced during your tenure. You've already referred to one or two of them, but the one that caught my attention was the address to the members of the British Parliament. Also, I think there was an article in the briefing book that mentioned a lot of the language that ended up in the so-called Evil Empire speech was originally in the address to Parliament.

Bakshian: The writer who was assigned to do both the Parliament speech and the "Evil Empire" speech later delivered to the religious broadcasters group in Florida and was primarily responsible, although the drafts had to go through me, was Tony Dolan. I don't think "Evil Empire" had ever been edited out before. I don't specifically recall that happening, but it would make sense that if it had been in a major foreign policy related speech the NSC and State would be more highly focused on it, and chances are it would have been spotted.

But when we get to the religious broadcasters speech, I do distinctly remember that one because I recall reading the speech draft before I sent it on and getting to the "Evil Empire" reference and thinking, *Now, if I flag this in any way, it's going to get pulled*. But first of all, it *is* an evil empire, what the hell, and if someone up there disagrees or is nervous about it, it's up to them to notice it. I'm not going to raise the question because I happen to agree with it. So I didn't call it to any one's attention and sent it through. Similarly, I think in the article they mention Sven Kraemer in the NSC doing the same. Later people professed to be involved in the process who may not even have been involved in it at all or were trying to cover their tracks. At the time, when there was a flap, a number of people tried to point out how they had attempted to stop it because they were being more responsible than us ideologues.

Of course, it has played rather well over time and now they're all explaining how they were part of getting it in instead of out, so I don't know whom to believe along the way. Dave Gergen weighs in both ways in that article that was only written recently. I remember talking to the reporter on the phone about a year or so ago but basically at the time it was a matter of: Here's a speech. This gives an insight into the speechwriting process and how sometimes things like this happen.

Here was a very much on the B-list speech to religious broadcasters, in, I believe, Hollywood, Florida. It was Florida, anyway, where they were meeting for their annual convention. It's not a major address, it's not going to be a policy address in the strict sense of something to be

announced. It is considered political fluff by the higher-ups. I assign it to Tony Dolan. He writes the speech. A lot of the speech was touching bases on pieties with religious speakers—

Riley: Is that why you assigned it to him?

Bakshian: Well, he would be comfortable writing the speech. I didn't assign it to him knowing necessarily that there would be a reference to the "Evil Empire." There was no conspiracy. But it was a political and conservative speech. Other than myself he was the only—I guess Dana Rohrabacher was considered a conservative too—but again, Tony was senior to Dana and would be the first person that came to mind for a conservative message type speech if I wasn't going to do it myself. So I assigned the drafting to him.
Whereas[4] if it had been a major foreign policy address, before it went to the President it would have been very seriously circulated and read by people at a higher level, in this case I don't think it was read by many people at a higher level until it had already gone in to the President. By that time it is of course much harder to dislodge. The President, amongst others, decided to keep it. This gets back to when he's asked to take something out. That might be an example of him resisting the "expert's" suggestions, instinctively and correctly, because there was nothing wrong with what he said.

The phrase "Evil Empire" is pale by comparison, certainly, to characterizations that had been used at various times by various Soviet leaders to refer to the United States. So it wasn't as if we were ratcheting up the rhetoric—in fact it was part of their daily dialectic to imply that ours was an evil society. I've also since been happy to learn, especially during a private trip in '89 when I was in various Eastern European capitals, that whatever was said about the speech over here, it certainly resonated with the people who were unfortunate enough to live in the evil empire at the time. Boy, did they ever agree, except for a few of the tenured people we were talking about, the nomenklatura.

So anyway, the President got to see it without it being excised. Once he saw it and signed off on it, it proved impossible to back up on. The media wasn't looking for anything though, because as far as they were concerned, "Oh, this is one of these dumb right-wing things and who cares about preachers," and so on. So it was only after the speech was delivered, or as soon as the text was released, that it became a story. I forget what day of the week it was, but it was basically in the papers the next morning.

Then there was the initial quote, "damage containment," when of course there had been no damage as it turns out. In fact it was a plus. But if all of the policy machinery had been really fully at work and focused, it probably never would have got to the President's desk. That is, it would have been expunged, or at least there would have been much more of a fight. But because it was an unimportant event and not a speech which from the early drafts NSC and State and senior counselors were interested in, it was given and it made history.

I suspect that some of the people who were quoted in the article and elsewhere didn't even catch it or didn't even bother to read that speech through until after the fact.

[4] Start tape 5 at 013

Knott: You said there was a damage control effort. Did that come from the State Department or—?

Bakshian: That I don't know about because it never got to the point where I was being told to pull it from the draft. I think to the extent it happened—and I forget whether the article that you all have got into that or not—it never got back to me. In other words, it never got to the point where once I had sent it through, it came back saying, "This is going to be pulled." So I think to the extent that anyone was talking about it, they were talking to the Chief of Staff or discussing whether the Chief of Staff should talk to the President, or it may be that some people are now explaining how they expressed their reservations but were a little more quiet at the time. That we may never know.

Riley: For the benefit of the reader of the transcript who might not have the briefing book at hand, although the briefing book will be deposited with the transcript, the article that we're referring to is one by Frank Warner entitled, "A New Word Order," and I'm looking to see where the original—

Bakshian: It was either Pennsylvania or New Jersey, I seem to remember.

Riley: *Insight on the News* is the name of the publication. In any event, there's a copy here.

Bakshian: Actually that was the name of the feature. If I recall correctly because he called me up twice on it, it was in either a New Jersey or Pennsylvania newspaper.

Riley: Okay. The *Morning Call* newspaper company is what it shows up in.

Bakshian: That's right. I think *Insight on the News* was the name of the feature page or something and that's where he was writing it.

Riley: I was just referring to whatever the indexed piece was, so we've erred—we probably need to get that clarified. In this particular instance, because of the media flap that resulted from this speech and because of the subsequent gravity of the speech, it has attracted a lot of attention. I wonder if there are a lot of instances that you can recall where you exercised your discretion in terms of flagging something or not flagging something that had some measure of consequence on a smaller scale?

Bakshian: I don't recall any specific cases. But when that would have happened, it would have happened at the very outset so it never would have become an issue. In other words, one of the things I would always be looking at when a writer brought me his or her draft before it got outside of my department would be to look out for sensitivities like that. And I made many edits, many, many times. I don't recall any particularly glaring ones. Or if there were glaring ones, I routinely struck them and it never got to a fight, so I don't really have any other instances to give of that scope or that significance.

Knott: Were the State of the Union addresses the most burdensome?

Bakshian: Yes, because first of all you work on them the longest and they were the speeches that many, many, many outside players wanted to get into. The writing wasn't the problem, it was deciding what was going to be written about.

Riley: Could you start from the beginning?

Bakshian: From the beginning. Well before the first year, early on—they developed the idea that we'd have a steering committee for the State of the Union. That helped.

Riley: They being?

Bakshian: The Chief of Staff, with the Assistant Chief, Mike Deaver, attending the meetings, a number of senior policy people, Meese people, budget people, etc. There were at least five or six people on it and of course myself as the head of speechwriting. When I came on, the first State of the Union I was responsible for had already been being worked on for some time. It was probably November before I was brought on to take over. So I think that was the speech where Tony Dolan would have been working on the early draft. But as the new head, I was brought in to be in on the steering committee sessions, even though Tony already had a draft in process. It had been assigned before I was there. Yes, because that would have been the year that the two drafts went in that had been discussed earlier.

I don't know whether he was a member of it or he just spoke to us, but pollsters like Dick Wirthlin would be giving input about what are the public concerns right now and what side of the issue, what's the cutting edge, what are you vulnerable on, what are your strengths to lead with. And then policy priorities, what is it we really care about getting across right now. Honed it down. That essentially gave you a structure for the speech, not a rhetorical structure but just a subject matter and order of priorities and what was going to be most important at the end. Were you going to deal with foreign policy at all, refer to it briefly but then get into domestic, or leave it for a separate speech and say that's what you were going to do at the beginning of the speech?

Once you've got basic things in place, the committee still meets to decide the various branches of government that are going to be involved: if you're going to have something about agriculture, if you're going to have something about the economy, if you're going to have something about taxes, if you're going to have something about defense budget, welfare, et cetera. Drafts are coming in. Usually, rather than the departments directly sending them to speechwriting, the economic stuff would be going through the economic advisors, legislative stuff would maybe be generated in various places but would be vetted by Congressional Liaison, so you're getting all these pieces of raw ingredients. You couldn't really say that they're even bricks because in their current shape you couldn't use them. But they're the raw materials, maybe they're the straw and the clay, coming in from all sorts of directions.

At some point then you need to put together a draft, which may bear little resemblance to the final draft, but it has got to be the starting point for the general circulation. So that instead of just the specialists all pushing their agendas, now the big boys weigh in. Some things get eliminated, some things shrink, some things are increased but the first choices are made.

Riley: Is the person working on the State of the Union address also handling other responsibilities?

Bakshian: Yes, that's right. In at least one instance I was doing the first draft all the way through and at the same time was running the whole department. And at the same time that Tony had been working on that draft he would be doing other things.

Riley: So you don't have the luxury just to drop everything anymore.

Bakshian: And also remember, this is over a long stretch of time. There would be days or a week perhaps where you would deliberately not give it much thought or where I might have asked Ben Elliot to edit routine stuff that was coming through for a few days while I concentrated on the State of the Union. But no, part of the professionalism is that you are capable of juggling more than one ball at a time.

There are periods when you are crashing and very, very busy. I always equated it with working in a firehouse. There are moments of great hazard and of great excitement and great action, but there is also a lot of time when other than routine stuff like polishing the brass—which would be the equivalent of the Rose Garden rubbish and the short remarks and the perfunctory things, the radio addresses—you're there because you need to be there just in case something happens. You're working long hours, but much of that time is not necessarily that draining.

So anyway, back to the draft for the State of the Union. After that first draft goes, you're getting closer. It still hasn't gone to the President. He may have given you an idea and signed off on what the steering committee has decided the priorities are. But you want to get as much of the infighting amongst the specialists out of the way before it goes to the President so that he doesn't sign off on something that isn't settled policy yet. So you go through that screening process. At some point, I don't chronologically remember precisely when, it would get to the President—probably after Christmas. Maybe he would see an early draft or an outline or something earlier, just so he gets a sense of where it's going, and to let us know if it meets with his approval or if there is something he thinks should be in that isn't, or something that's in that should be out.

So he is already thinking about the State of the Union, whether or not he's looked at a draft yet. And you, when you're writing something else, are also thinking about the State of the Union and maybe getting ideas for it, in the same way that seeing the Air Florida crash coverage live on TV gave me the idea for what the ending to the speech would be. Just as well they had the Air Florida crash, because ordinarily at that hour the Muppets reruns would have been on and I don't know what sort of ending that would have suggested. The President as Kermit the Frog, as long as he didn't go on with Miss Piggy.

Riley: And sitting up in the balcony—

Bakshian: Oh yes, the two old crabs.

Riley: Exactly.

Knott: Bert and Ernie?

Riley: No, no, no.

Bakshian: The two old goats.

Riley: That would have added an interesting dimension to the State of the Union.

Bakshian: Speaking earlier about Austria, someone told me there's a famous fellow named Marcel Prawy who used to talk about the Vienna Opera for years. He's also done a few things about Stolz, and very often he would be televised from the balcony, talking about the opera, and he was getting older and older. When the Muppets were finally produced and dubbed in German, everyone said, "Oh, one of those guys reminds me of Marcel Prawy."

Riley: You have to be careful in translating those programs.

Bakshian: But anyway, then the State of the Union draft would get to the President. Actually, it's smoother once it is with the President, when he is a man who knows his own mind, like Reagan did. I know it has been different in other cases. One of Clinton's State of the Unions, he was still trying to make up his mind on the wording on his way to the Capitol to deliver it. One of the things Dave Gergen told me when I bumped into him after he had been a month or two at the Clinton White House, and I asked, "What are the main differences?" He said, "The vertical authority. There don't seem to be flow charts. There is no real accountability or pattern for how things are done." So that for example one Clinton State of the Union, I forget which one, the speechwriting staff per se had been doing the official draft and that was going in there. Meanwhile Clinton and Mrs. Clinton had been asking other people to write this and that. It wasn't going through the regular process and the right arm didn't know what the left one was doing. Which was one of the reasons that the speech was still being rewritten and screwed around with while he was on the way to the Capitol. I think it was the year also that the TelePrompTer copy was missing or there was a problem for a while.

Riley: [George] Stephanopoulos—

Bakshian: All because of this slipshod last-minute work.

Now, more typically a speech is more tightly focused than the State of the Union. A good working example was the speech the President made for the Caribbean Basin Initiative. This will give you an idea of having a lot of rival players because it involved strategic issues and the whole business of communism in this hemisphere. But it also involved a trade initiative, which also involved both domestic economic considerations and tariff issues and political issues on the Hill, textiles, labor, et cetera. So that by the time there was a draft ready to circulate, before it even went to the President, you would be sitting around the table at some point, or getting feedback from—and I'll probably forget some—the budget people, Congressional Relations, NSC, Department of Defense, Department of State, Department of Commerce, Department of Labor, trade representative, and those are just off the top of my head. There were probably others as well.

As you can imagine, these guys are all not marching to the same drummer. And you are the mediator, so if you're in fairly decent standing, which I was, and aren't cowed by these people, you can occasionally just make them bump heads and resolve differences. If someone is demanding a change after the President had signed off on a draft, for example, and if they're trying to pull rank or say, "The Secretary demands this," I would say, "Well, if you want, you can give me a paragraph the way you would like it and I will send an explanatory memo to the President saying that you object to the way he approved his speech and this is the way that you want him to give it. Do you want me to do that?" And of course they would invariably fold.

There was another one like that, it was when the so-called Star Wars initiative was being announced. The whole speech wasn't about it; it was a foreign policy address. I forget what the main thrust was, but there was just one paragraph announcing the initiative. It was very funny because they were being very hush-hush about it. The speech was going to be given in the evening. And midday that afternoon, we have to be in the situation room at NSC and papers must not leave the area. Of course, the *New York Times* that morning has already written about Star Wars and the leaks have already occurred but they're still paying this game. I came in, and [Robert] Bud McFarlane was still in charge at that time, or the judge was still there and Bud was really the working manager of the NSC.

At any rate, I come in and they hand me an insert and Bud says, "Aram, this is the wording. Defense has signed off on it, we've signed off on it, nothing can be changed. This is locked-in policy." I looked at this piece of paper, it was one sentence and it was about 250 or 300—no, maybe 180 or 150 words long. It was one sentence. I asked, "Nothing can be changed in this? It has to go as it is, exactly like this?" He said, "Yes, Yes." I said, "Nothing?" He said, "Nothing can be changed."

"Well," I said, "I think you should bear in mind that if this has to be delivered as written, you may be responsible for the first President of the United States asphyxiating on live television, because there is no way he can breathe and read one sentence that is one hundred and—"

"Oh, oh," Bud said. Then we all sat down and divided the sentences up. But I mean, it can get really idiotic. And if I hadn't stood up, the President would have been given this moronic, bureaucratic-ese—a memo, not a speech draft. These people have tin ears. All they knew was that bureaucratically, around the table, they had got to a formulation which had eliminated whatever Defense didn't trust State about, or whatever the Army didn't like the Navy about.

Riley: There are some fairly frequent mentions throughout the briefing materials about the idea that a speech deadline often forces the issue with competing actors.

Bakshian: Or comes up with a new initiative that might not have—well, there aren't old initiatives are there? You notice I keep editing. One example was a speech that was going to be, I believe it was going to be a commencement address to a little school, I think it was Seton, it was a Catholic junior college or a small community college and I believe in New Jersey. It was a commencement that was going to be given by President Reagan and I was writing it. It wasn't

connected to any political or policy strategy—it wasn't part of any offensive on this or that policy.

So I just did some general thoughts on education and what needed to be done. I don't even remember what the specific points were because it was not a point by point education agenda, but it was about values and so on. It was really a common sense sermon rather than a policy speech, and it played very well. The President liked it and he gave it and it went over very well, and that led to a whole initiative on education and Bill Bennett becoming the point man and talking about it. By then I think he had fairly recently replaced Terrel Bell as Secretary of Education, coming over from the Endowment for the Humanities. That was really Bill Bennett's making, because he then became a major administration voice, since he wasn't an educational bureaucrat like Bell had been. But it happened quite by accident because that speech resonated.

The other equivalent is the getting down to the deadline and forcing decisions on the State of the Union for example, or a budget message where there have been differences within the administration. Are you going to veto or not veto, things like that. There's a schedule and that schedule will drive a decision on something that may have been unresolved for months or even years. You'll end up sometimes refereeing not only the big policy call, but how it is going to be framed. Because it isn't just a matter of what decision is finally made but how it is articulated, to diplomatically get it in without looking like all of a sudden everything has been turned upside down. And the speechwriter plays a key role there.

Although the single biggest thing in speeches like that is to make it the President's again—to fight it back into good spoken English The more specialists get involved, the less it is going to be decent English. And they don't know the difference, it's not like they're trying to sabotage it, they just don't realize.

Knott: This may sound like an off-the-wall question, I hope not, but was there ever an instance when, let's say the ceremony, there was a tremendous amount of emotion, maybe a Medal of Honor award or—?

Bakshian: I'll give you one that moved me, it wasn't even a public ceremony. In fact, I probably wouldn't have shown emotion if it had been. It was one of the Saturdays where the President was giving his radio speech in town, in the Oval Office, and so I was there. The only people present were the radio pool, I think it was NBC radio that particular week. They would rotate which net would cover it. So you had a sound man, an engineer and the producer in there. Mike Deaver was also there and one or two other staffers. The speech was on or near a patriotic holiday, maybe it was near the Fourth of July or Veterans' Day or something, because the speech had a patriotic motif. But in it was a letter to the President that the correspondence office found for us.

This letter had come in not too long before—research had called the correspondence office where there is a staff that reads all the mail, or used to then, and they pulled this one, and it was from a Navy warrant officer, not a commissioned officer, who was on a major American ship in the China seas. Some boat people had drifted toward them, nearly dead, and they were crying out, "America" or "freedom ship" or something like that, and had been rescued and this sailor

described what it felt like to bring these people in and save them and what America had symbolized to the boat people on that sinking hulk.

So it went into the speech. I thought it was very moving when I wrote the speech and included it, but it didn't really hit me until I was standing there in the Oval Room and the President read it, because he was so good. I actually found—which was very unusual for me—that my eyes were beginning to water. In fact, I got embarrassed and I actually turned my face to the wall so nobody could see my face, because I was ticked off that I was actually crying. It's one thing to feel it, but then I realized, *Oh crap, it's actually showing*. So I had my face to the wall. But Deaver had noticed it, because afterwards he said to me, after the speech, he didn't even directly refer to it, he said, "You know, he has that effect on a lot of people."

What I realized then was first of all the sentiment behind what had been written but also the gift that Ronald Reagan had for invoking feeling and response. Because I was not—I mean, I already had read this so it wasn't like being hit by it unprepared, and yet it evoked a deep emotional response in me. So that really gave me a very personalized appreciation for what he was capable of doing.

Knott: Was there ever an occasion where you may have written something that he had difficulty getting through or might have even said, "I'm not sure I can get through this?"

Bakshian: No, because one of the things I think I was very good at is editing—getting rid of that, if it was coming from other sources, whether it was the policy papers coming from elsewhere or even one of my writers. So he never, I don't recall him—oh, you mean about choking up.

Knott: Emotionally.

Bakshian: No, not anything that I wrote. But there was one case where we had to cut a speech. It was one year at the White House Correspondents' dinner where the President always speaks and it's ordinarily on a Saturday evening with lots of jokes. The week before that, however, was the week that the U.S. Marines took the big hit in Lebanon, where we had several hundred fatalities.

Well, Landon Parvin had already come up with good humorous material for the usual presidential speech and the President had gone over it, added some things and so on. Probably it was that Friday when we were having our regular speech meeting, and Reagan just said to us, "I don't think it's appropriate for me to make jokes," even though there were going to be other people doing that at the dinner. "I'm just going to speak briefly and explain why I'm not going to do that. No one needs to write anything. I'll just make a short statement while I'm there."

I was initially disappointed because I was thinking, *The show must go on*, and the Marines would be the last people in the world to think that they had derailed something. And also I wasn't quite sure how it would play. Other people would have been making jokes before he came on. But Reagan's warmth and the genuine quality were such that when he got up to speak he simply said, "The events of this week are such…and I, as Commander in Chief…." I don't even remember exactly what he said because as very often happens, when it is particularly moving, the impact is

strong enough that you miss the word for word. You can't reconstruct it afterwards; you just remember how you felt. That was the way that was. There was a silent, almost reverential silence. Not only was he sincere, but the White House press corps, one of the most cynical audiences in the world and not one that was very friendly to him, was clearly moved and it turned out to be very appropriate.

I never saw him tear up. I saw him get very sentimental, but he was such a consummate pro that when he was speaking, in the same way that if he had been doing a scene in front of a camera, he would only cry if it was going to be appropriate.

Riley: Exactly. I guess the two instances where you might have expected something like that would have been the Challenger speech or the—

Bakshian: I wasn't there for that, that happened after I—

Riley: Or the Pointe du Hoc would have occurred.

Bakshian: But he was able to pull himself together—what it was, I think, was that he sensed that it's one thing to get sentimental when it's a private moment, but when you're the person who is supposed to be handling the grief and holding the country together, then you don't want to let yourself go because you're trying to set an example.

Riley: It's like a eulogizer.

Bakshian: Don't cry in front of the children, they're upset enough already.

Knott: Right, right. I do remember one instance where he—it was the dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown for the Vietnam conflict and he almost—

Bakshian: There, because that would be a reverential moment where there could be a catch in the voice. This is not people where the bodies are still warm and there are mourning people in shock. There I can understand it, or a funeral tribute to somebody who died in old age. There his voice could catch and all that. But he would be less likely than most to ever show anger without meaning to, or less likely to lose control. The only time I ever—it was before I was working for him—he didn't really lose his temper, he showed some sort of righteous indignation, it was the, "I paid for this mike" line in….

Riley: The New Hampshire debates.

Bakshian: The New Hampshire debates. And that was also the clever thing to do, I mean it was the appropriate thing, very effective. And even when he would deal with hecklers, and I'm thinking now of nothing in particular while we were in there, but when he was Governor of California, he generally was very good at having a humorous response. Don't get madder than they are. It's like judo, use the weight of their overstated rude or hateful behavior to flip it back on them by coming out good naturedly and making them look shabby.

Knott: I don't recall when the Vietnam memorial was dedicated. I know he did not—

Bakshian: I think it was after I was there. Unless it was almost a cornerstone thing or something, because I seem to remember that I was out writing about that subject, the debate was still going on about the design. I think he went to the actual dedication after I had left. The other reason is, I'm sure that I would remember that speech if I'd been involved in the process and I don't have any recollection of that.

Knott: One of the speeches that we highlighted in the briefing book was the so-called Star Wars speech, the SDI [Strategic Defense Initiative] speech. Is there anything in particular that jumps out as far as that process?

Bakshian: No, because Reagan had such a sense of vision on that one and it was so clear what he believed, and you could only get so technical. So it actually wasn't hard to write. The hard thing was getting the decision made, although he was probably the easier sell, it was getting the agreement of various advisors on the way in. But what he was going to say about it afterwards almost wrote itself, it seems to me. I don't remember that being as contentious, most of the heat on that was the public debate about it and commentary about the concept going on outside the White House.

Knott: Was it a source of concern that it had been labeled the Star Wars?

Bakshian: It was a source of concern with some people, but then some people are going to find a source of concern all the time. I remember thinking, and I think this turned out to be correct, that while the people that coined it meant it in a derogatory way, they made a big mistake because they chose an image that summoned up something very vivid and futuristic and impressive in the public imagination, and it was a popular cultural image that even not very well informed people could grasp. In a funny way, calling it Star Wars probably made it seem more credible to a lot of ordinary people. "Oh my God, they can really do something like that?" So it backfired. It probably drove nuts some of the scientists and some of the marketing people early on who were saying, "Good grief, it's been rendered ridiculous." Well, quite the opposite. It would be like worrying about the Minute Man missile being called the Minute Man missile because it involved archaic images like the musket or something.

Knott: The Zero Option speech, anything from that?

Bakshian: That was the first one that I worked on. There the hard part was, I was thrown into a room—I've talked about this one so often that I forgot whether we got into it in the first session—but basically thrown into a room with the last Defense Department draft and a draft that had been put together by NSC that tried to merge the State Department and the Defense Department drafts, and possibly a State Department draft and just told to make a speech out of it.

What happened was that they were still fighting about certain bits of policy but what I was able to do was make a cohesive, coherent speech. It became a speech that could be read and even though this option or that option might change, it now had a theme and it was a piece of rhetoric rather than just a memo on policy. In addition to which, the President pulled out, after he got my

first draft, a personal letter that he had written to Leonid Brezhnev, I guess while he was still convalescing. No, I don't mean Brezhnev, Brezhnev spent almost the entire Reagan administration convalescing until he died, but while Reagan was convalescing from the assassination attempt.

He had written a long, moving letter to Brezhnev. So he opened his speech with a fairly long quote from that letter, which again put into human and personal terms a commitment to peace. It also showed him reaching out to a foreign leader, and flew in the face of all the attempts to characterize Reagan as the crazy cowboy and the war monger. That was Reagan's idea, it wasn't mine, although I had looked for that kind of tone in the speech itself. But this was a case of him not only not screwing up a speech but giving you value added by his input to the speech.

The hardest part about that speech, as I say, was getting to the point where it was ready for the President. That had nothing to do with the challenge of writing it and it had everything to do with the fact that the policy people were still fighting. They all had to get together finally and agree because the speech was being given on a set deadline.

Knott: That may be another instance of a speech which initially some people may have distanced themselves—

Bakshian: Oh yes, and then it played better and all of a sudden they were all part of the visionary group. The funniest story that way, Doris Kearns Goodwin's husband, Dick Goodwin—this has nothing to do with the Reagan administration, but a lot to do with speechwriting—he had been a junior speechwriter under Johnson. Well briefly, in the periphery under [John F.] Kennedy and then under Johnson, but he dined out on it forever afterwards. He wanted to remain a mover with Democratic party affairs so the year that [Edmund] Muskie was going to run for the nomination and before he wept—in fact it was the year before, it was leading up to the campaign year of 1972—Muskie gave a speech that really bombed. They called it the "Lincoln speech" because he gave it in a log cabin and he was sitting, trying to look very folksy in a backwoodsy way. Anyway it turned out very corn pone and it didn't work.

Well Dick Goodwin had made the mistake of leaking beforehand, taking credit for having written the speech, thinking that this was going to be the speech that everyone remembered that launched Muskie. Maybe he had something to do with the speech and maybe he didn't, but he had leaked that he had. So then after the speech bombed, he was stuck with it, because ordinarily ten other people would have said, "Dick Goodwin didn't really have anything to do with that speech. I was the one who wrote it." Well, in this case, all of a sudden there was this vast wasteland out there but just Dick Goodwin standing.

Riley: And that's why his wife is more famous than he is.

Bakshian: That's why he now is a dancing partner or whatever.

Riley: One of the things that the Reagan campaign team has been noted for is the effective use of visuals and staging events. Was the speechwriting department involved at all in those questions about staging, or were you consulting with people like Mike Deaver, who were supposed to be—

Bakshian: Mike worked closely with us because he felt the speeches were important and he was involved with that. Very often he would talk to me in advance, not just on particular events, but on where we ought to take the President out into the country to address a particular issue. And then he'd get into what sort of a setting you would use, what region, whether the audience would be a young audience, a student audience, or specialized in any way, a minority audience. So that was always very important. By the time the speech was being drafted, that had usually been settled, so that you knew whether it was going to be a commencement or whether it was going to be some big special effects thing, the balloons and all that.

Riley: Right.

Bakshian: We didn't ordinarily help write that scenario because that very often was also shaped at the scheduling level before we were in on it. The President is going to be in California, he's going to be at UCLA, or he's going to be addressing 5,000 veterans. That may be the reason that event was accepted and put on the schedule. Once that's on the schedule, then we get it and we're tailoring the speech to what that event's going to be.

Riley: You're setting the stage—

Bakshian: Most of the staging. The exception would be if someone like Deaver got an idea close to deadline about a better way of doing it or some value added that could be tacked on. Or even something where current events in the meantime had produced something appropriate to weave in, a theme—the survivor, the Olympic winner who came from the home town down the way. But ordinarily, our job wasn't to come up with venues. Our job was to do the script once the venue had been arrived at.

Knott: You've mentioned a couple of times you consider it very important for speechwriters to maintain their anonymity. Did you ever have to discipline anybody in that regard?

Bakshian: No, because the one person who changed the rules on it or at least avoided the rules in her own case, was Peggy Noonan. She wasn't on my staff; she came on later. While I was there, however, there was at least one instance where I noticed something was misattributed to a person who hadn't written it, but took the credit. But generally discretion was observed.

Usually if you were mentioned, it was by higher ups. For example, when I did that first Zero Option speech and after it turned out to be well received, I was mentioned in *U. S. News and World Report* where there used to be a "Washington whispers" column which was just short items. The first I knew about it was when *U. S. News and World Report* came out. It said that "credited with the successful speech was Aram Bakshian, Jr., who was brought in to do such-and-such," or something like that. Well, that came from Gergen or the press office or something, and that's fine, if the decision is made at that level to do it. But I never leaked attributions myself.

My objection is to a speechwriter who rushes outside and starts taking credit on their own initiative. Or, as I think I mentioned in one of the clips in there, a case—it was after my time—

where Peggy Noonan, while she was still working at the White House, posed for a picture that was on the cover of *Esquire.* She had to know that *Esquire* wasn't doing this story about her to make Reagan look good. If anything they wanted to make him look like a marionette, doing an article about the woman who puts words in the President's mouth. I just think that's inappropriate in the same way—well, it's just unprofessional it seems to me. A speechwriter, it's almost like a medical or legal relationship. Afterwards, after the President is no longer in office, or if the White House has credited you with writing the speech and someone wants to ask questions about that speech, how did it come about, within the realms of propriety, that's fine. But to go out and say, "Oh look what I did." That's tacky.

That used to happen occasionally on the plane with Spiro Agnew, when Buchanan and Safire were on the plane in 1970, the midterm elections.

Riley: It's surprising that there is a plane alive that would handle that much ego.

Bakshian: Well it was easy to get up, it was hard to land. But they'd come down and show the press their "nattering nabob" stuff and everything, showing it off, before poor Agnew had even delivered it. That's unfair to Agnew for one thing. Anyway, I just thought it was inappropriate. It's no big deal but I just didn't think it's right. Bill Safire is a writer in his own right many times over now. And Pat, well, he's written a number of books. But usually it's people whose own ego is tied up in speechwriting—the biggest thing in their life seems to have been what they're writing for other people. I guess they crave some recognition for that because they haven't written much else.

Riley: How often is it that you would consult with people outside the White House in the development of speeches? I think you were occasionally called on to comment on something. Did you have colleagues? I'm not talking about policy consultation in the departments and so forth, but I'm thinking more in terms of literary figures or academics or something like that.

Bakshian: I never did anything organized in that way. Socially, many of my friends are writers anyway. So very often we would have conversations in the same way that while we were at lunch today we talked about some academic things, some historical things that were of mutual interest. We didn't specifically get together at lunch to talk about Thomas Jefferson, but we did end up doing so. So I would get input that way. Plus, once you're appointed, people know that you're director so you hear from people you knew. You also hear from people you didn't know, but who are just sending ideas, ninety percent of which are not any good, but every once in a while there might be a nice idea. But I never did it actively, in a formal way.
The[5] only person that was ever brought in—oh, we did occasionally have meetings with Dick Wirthlin, the pollster. That was important because we knew that policy people were also getting those poll briefings, so to me it was of interest to see what they found, but it was also of interest to make sure I knew what was going into the ears of some other people in the White House. So I was ready, I was armed, could speak the same language if I thought that we shouldn't react too much to that poll result or there was another way of looking at it, or could refute it if necessary. That was the only thing in-house.

[5] Start tape 6 at 041

There was one time when Ben Elliot, who was very keen on economics, invited Rep. Newt Gingrich, who was then not that well known, to come speak with the speechwriting staff. We also had Arthur Laffer there once. I always thought that he should have spelled his name Laugher.

Riley: Did he draw on a napkin for you?

Bakshian: That happened to me, actually I got that from Jude Wanniski earlier. A mutual friend who knew Jude got us together at the National Press Club, and he drew "the curve" on a cocktail napkin. I didn't keep it, plus he's probably done it so many times that the country is probably strewn with napkins on which he—

Riley: Framed napkins now.

Bakshian: But Laffer actually spoke to my staff. Those were both initiatives that a staff member had taken. The main thing I remember about Newt Gingrich was the incredible dandruff the man had. He was wearing a blue jacket or maybe it was a pinstripe suit, but it was dark blue. He's an interesting speaker but he's not quite as interesting as he thinks and he does tend to go on, so after a while you're sort of—you don't want to look at the ceiling or anything, but you're trying to think of something to occupy your mind—and my eye fixed on all this dandruff. Then once I noticed it I couldn't stop looking at it, because it really, we're talking about the major snowfall of the year.

I knew someone, actually one of the Nixon writers who had a story about the first time he was taken into the Oval Office to meet Nixon. Nixon had a very bulbous nose and apparently there was a temporary large blackhead that had lodged itself there. And the speechwriter, about 60 seconds into being there he noticed this enormous blackhead on Nixon's nose. He told me, "This insane craving came over me—I knew that I couldn't do it or some alarms would go off—to rush over and squeeze his nose and see it pop and head ceilingward."

Riley: Well, that's a Nixon story I haven't heard before.

Knott: No, it's a good one.

Riley: I want to ask you another question about the polling. Your use of the polling information, you said, was to get a sense about what the other consumers were buying.

Bakshian: Well, that was an additional one that they didn't realize I was bringing to the table. The reason we were being given it was just, "Here's what they found."

Riley: Exactly. One of the things that has evidently become a staple of White House polling—that may be an overstatement—somebody like Frank Luntz, for example, has made a career out of testing word valances. Were you guys doing anything like that or is that something that you think is a kind of prevalent feature—?

Bakshian: I think it has become more dominant because like everything else, speechwriting has become more of a formally recognized separate form. I suspect that in 20 years there will be speechwriting schools almost the way there are journalism schools. I mean, departments somewhere.

Riley: Or software programs.

Bakshian: Yes. Actually there are a lot of speeches that one hears these days that sound like they came directly off of a not very good software program. Maybe a software program where it was Chinese editing or something, like the instructions that used to come with Japanese appliances.

But it hadn't been refined as much back in the early '80s. There would be, how do certain phrases play? Or if you're referring to such an issue, how do you refer to it, what's your angle of entry? Luntz is one of a whole new generation of pollsters and that's constantly being refined. Also, I forget whether they had yet the electronic gadget, the deal where you can actually not just question people afterward but see how their pulse rate and everything is responding while the speech is being given, so that you can actually track their motor reactions. I don't recall ever seeing that technology being done in those days.

Riley: I don't believe that technology came until sometime in the mid-'90s.

Bakshian: But there's going to be more and more of that. At the end of the day though, the people who have something to say will be helped by that because they won't be intimidated by it. It will be a useful tool if you don't let it dominate you. The people who pay too much attention to it, Clinton tended to do this, wind up saying nothing or avoiding too many things. Or ending up with an inconsistent message if they are constantly dodging along with the polls, because confidence and opinions change. In fact, the only reason to be a leader is that by the time you're finished you will have led people to a position they may not have been at when you began. Whereas doing it by polls or too heavy reliance on polls means just being able to position yourself as close to the mob as possible and never getting a dangerous distance out front. But that's not leadership; that's survival perhaps. And it isn't even survival in the long run because people notice it after a while.

Knott: You spent a considerable amount of time, all of your life in Washington. You worked for three different administrations. Was Ronald Reagan the best speech maker that you've seen?

Bakshian: Oh yes.

Knott: And why? You've said some of this already.

Bakshian: He was good in all of the aspects. Yes, he could read a script well, but the reason he could read a script well was because he understood how to bring out the best in the script. He also was the best to write for. I'm not talking now about the delivery, but if he changed anything, he improved the flow and cadence or added an element of feeling or something that was appropriate because he understood the speaking process.

When he was young in Hollywood he had the reputation, when there were arguments on the set, of being the guy who could just sit down and fix a scene. Maybe if so-and-so had a problem with this line, or two of the actors couldn't agree or the star didn't like what the director did, Reagan would say, "Look here, why don't we just do this," and he could very quickly rearrange things. He had a gift for that.

He also was the most pleasant to work for. The others (Nixon and Ford) weren't unpleasant, but with Reagan you came away really liking the man. He treated people with consideration and grace. Of course, I worked more closely with him because I was in charge of the speechwriters, I wasn't just one of them. So I was in the position with Reagan that my boss, Ray Price or Dave Gergen, would have been in the case of Ford and Nixon, so I was seeing more. But aside from that, I could see the same thing in the feeling that my staff had for him as compared to what things had been like in the Ford and Nixon White Houses. He was just a very unusual man. We'll probably never see anybody quite like him again.

One reason that he was unusual, aside from his personal gifts, was that he embodied so much of the modern history of this country. He could resonate with everyone from the young to the very old and he understood, in an almost evolutionary way, what America was. His roots went back far enough so that what was just a Norman Rockwell picture, but a pleasant sentimental one to many people, he had actually lived. Also lived the tough side of the Depression and everything.

The best thing about Ronald Reagan was he was a grown up way before he became President, because his life hadn't been defined by becoming President. He didn't get there because he had to prove something to himself. He was a completely mature person before he got there. He was there because he felt that he had a contribution to make. By the middle of his life he had already had two full, successful careers. I won't get into it, but the Screen Actors Guild role he played, that's a whole other section that most people overlook, which is incredible, different from just being an actor. It's before he is running for Governor and yet it is dealing with everything from foreign policy to down and dirty politics in the most vicious way. He was getting death threats as president of the Screen Actors Guild.

Riley: Is this something he made reference to in your dealings with him?

Bakshian: He would occasionally, but I also have a friend who has just been working on a book about this subject where I've really seen a lot of source material. But he would make remarks occasionally about, "You don't need to tell me about that, I saw all that when the communists were fighting me in SAG." In fact, I think he said to somebody—whether it was Mike Deaver, this was after I was gone—oh, when he was meeting with [Mikhail] Gorbachev, someone warned him, "You've got to be careful." He said, "You don't need to worry. I've dealt with communists before. I'm going to be covering my back at all times."

But getting back. Richard Nixon's whole life had been spent wanting to be President. He was a great man in many ways but he was flawed in others. Jerry Ford was sort of an accidental President. He hadn't spent his whole life wanting to be President, but he became President under very negative circumstances. Wouldn't have run for President of his own volition, and while I have nothing but fondness and personal respect for him, the experience of working with him

wasn't the same as working with someone who really was almost born for the role. Who was a real prince of a guy.

With Ford it was a caretaker regime and you knew it. With Reagan you felt like you were breaking ground, that every word you wrote you couldn't have thought of anyone you'd rather have using it than Ronald Reagan. I think that would be true no matter what—to the extent that I am called to write for anybody else, I can't think of anybody who could equal him, or certainly not surpass him, if I live to be 100. And I just like the guy. He seemed to like me, too. Mike Deaver once saw me doing some doodles during a boring meeting. He said, "Oh, the President does doodles. I want to show the President these."

I got back a nice note from the President sending some of his doodles and saying, "Actually yours are a little more complicated and show some more character," or personality development or something. But I mean it was just nice. Unfortunately, we had a moron secretary at the time who took literally the fact that the paper flowed back and forth, which meant the speeches, had to all go immediately to the archives, so she sent the doodles too. I don't have a copy of them to this day.

Riley: Well, it's in the archives. You can get it.

Bakshian: Well, I say archives, wherever they were storing it.

Riley: You've mentioned that you did spend a fair amount of time with the President working over these speeches and it's probably not a fair question to ask what one of those meetings typically went like, but can you sort of march us through? Who would be in the room, what—?

Bakshian: The meetings ordinarily, the formal meeting would be the weekly meeting, where you weren't there to go over any one speech, but to schedule ahead. Maybe there was one big speech on the horizon you're talking about. You go in there. The President would have a copy of the latest schedule. You would have it. The point of departure would be mentioning that and saying, "By the way, is there anything in particular on any of these events coming up that you'd like us to stress." Usually there wasn't much that way. If he had something he would write it in. I mean, it would come out to you or he would add it when he got the draft.

Then it would be conversation about stuff that might already have been written, or if he was going to speak at a fundraiser the next day or something, wondering how that audience is going to be. Then we would get into small talk and reminiscences. Or a subject that might have come up because of a speech would lead to a discursive sort of thing on Social Security or World War II or whatever. So the meetings were helpful. They helped keep you feeling you were in contact with him and on the same wave length and you were reading him clearly. Most of his actual input in terms of the actual framing of the speeches would tend to be what he wrote or what he re-wrote and what he changed. Or at the very last phases, going through a TelePrompTer practice. That would be where you might get a change, just for smoothness or something at the last minute.

Riley: Tell us about that.

Bakshian: Usually, it would just be a matter of the President telling the TelePrompTer technician, "Make that two sentences," or, "Cut that one," or, "I want to use that instead." But there was very little of that because with someone like him—I'd like to think he didn't make too many changes because I was good at getting it to him in the right form—but he would usually make that kind of edit the first time he read a draft. A less experienced speaker might not, when they read it, spot the problem and might only realize it when they were speaking it for the first time.

Riley: Exactly.

Bakshian: A Ford might be, "Well, wait a minute, let's not do it that way," or, "I feel a little awkward with that." But with Reagan, it was already taken care of.

Riley: So if he was doing a TelePrompTer practice, how many people would be in the room?

Bakshian: Usually, let's see, the late Mark Good, who was the media guy and who would deal with the cameramen and everything. Dave Gergen would probably be there. Deaver would be there. Baker might or might not, depending on what time it was and what was coming up next.

But that would be the core. Usually the secretary who had prepared the TelePrompTer copy, Nancy, who was the senior secretary in my office, and who was a lightning typist, would be there to make any last minute changes. She actually would type into her word processor what would come out as a disk or whatever. That would then go into the machine that punched it in as TelePrompTer copy. She would also go over it because the line space is different on TelePrompTer. She would revise that so that it wasn't just a print out, because then you would have awkward line endings. She would make allowances for what the last word per line would be and so on. She would be there because then if there were any changes, she would know exactly how to handle that. But there wouldn't be that many ordinarily for that sort of a run through.

Riley: And he would do a complete read through of the speech?

Bakshian: Not always. If it was a televised address, especially where we had a tight time constraint and where he was going to be on the air. He would do that at least one full rehearsal beforehand, shortly before, the day before or the morning before the evening. With the stump speeches you didn't do that ordinarily unless it was a stump speech that was also going to be televised at the convention or something where on-air timing had to be exact.

Riley: Were there any major Oval Office addresses to the nation that you handled?

Bakshian: Yes, several. Most memorably, the one on the economy was very important before the 1982 midterm elections, where he basically managed to hold the losses even though we were in a recession, because his "stay the course" message resonated.

Riley: This is the one with the charts and the visuals, right?

Bakshian: I can tell you about the technical sides of these things, what can go wrong. The late Mark Good, who died in a car crash a few years ago, was responsible for the props and everything. We had done a rehearsal for that speech. It was an evening speech, televised from the Oval Office. A magic marker that was going to be used by the President had been left out open, with the result that it had gone dry. When the President was actually live giving the speech, the President being the President, he was quite able to wing it for a bit when he realized he was out of ink.

Mark, he almost got grabbed by the Secret Service because he realized what was wrong, grabbed a magic marker, took the cap off, went down on all fours and crawled around the desk and handed it up, onto the little ledge of the easel. But the Secret Service almost went for him before he got there because they saw him lurch towards the President. But Reagan saw it happening, never missed the pace, picked up the marker and never looked back.

If there was a hitch with the TelePrompTer he could handle it, because he had an excellent memory, despite what has happened since. If he read something once or twice, he had it down pat. He had that reputation when he was a college kid, he had an almost photographic memory—he was familiar enough with his speeches so that even if there was a glitch, or if he made a momentary slip or misread something, he was familiar enough with what would follow to improvise a transition so that it all got back on track. He always had a firm grasp of the material in that respect as opposed to a firm grasp of the legislative details of the initiative or what committee or subcommittee it was in or something like that.

But that magic marker episode was really nifty. That was Mark's favorite memory too, because he said he was probably the only person who ever crawled toward the President during a live broadcast in the Oval Office and lived to tell the tale.

Riley: In that particular instance, the idea of using visuals is something that occurs to the speechwriting staff? Or are you getting input from others?

Bakshian: I think we also had some animateds, because there were some visuals besides what he pointed to. In fact, that may have happened with an earlier speech. I think for that speech, what we had were some charts where you actually showed the lines moving because you were talking about phases and what has to happen in order to get the end result. So you were showing the lines making progress, converging and then whether it was inflation or joblessness and economic growth or whatever. As you spoke, people were visually getting the imagery re-enforced of a gradually building progress ending in the right way.

I think that was the first time that animated graphics had ever been used during a Presidential speech. Obviously we had to gear the speech to it and it had to be geared to the speech.

Riley: Did Reagan get stage fright?

Bakshian: No, or if he did he never showed it, which some of the best don't. I'm told I usually look at home when I'm in front of a large live audience or a camera and I usually am pretty

much, but on one occasion or two where I felt a bit nervous or just wasn't feeling well or something, I found out afterwards that it didn't show. So who knows what he was feeling. But he basically was a self-assured man who knew who he was.

One thing he did, one thing I learned from him that I'd never heard before, and it makes perfect sense, most people drink ice water. What he would do very often before he was going to give a long televised speech, would be drink some fairly warm water, which sort of loosens your throat up. Because the problem when you're going to speak is a tightening—and cold water doesn't actually loosen. It may seem soothing, but it is tightening. He would drink, especially if he had been speaking earlier in the day, he would take a bit of warm water to loosen up.

There was another tip he mentioned once, again at one of the meetings. He loved his ranch of course. I forget how we got around to it but he was talking about being on the ranch one day and discovering these snakes. It was a nice story. Some snakes are live bearers. The snakes are born live, they aren't eggs that are hatched later. So there were all these little baby snakes that they just found in a hole in a gully or something. They wanted to get rid of them but he didn't want to kill them, so he and a ranch hand were just picking up all these little snakes and moving them outside the ranch. Here's the President of the United States, and this is supposed to be the bloodthirsty killer who is going to plunge us all into Hades, rescuing these baby snakes.

He got bitten by them—they weren't venomous, but he got bitten by one. He said, "You know, you can take vitamin E oil and put it on a cut and it's amazing what it will do." I'd never heard that before but it's the one practical thing I learned from all those years in the White House. Nowadays, I always keep a bottle of vitamin E tablets because actually, if you nick yourself, if you're messing around in the kitchen which I do on occasion or if you're shaving or something, it actually goes into the skin and it accelerates the mending process. So nobody can ever tell me Ronald Reagan didn't teach me anything.

Knott: This is vitamin E?

Bakshian: Vitamin E. It comes in these gel tablets and inside the tablet it's an oil, a concentrate.

Riley: You can actually get it in an oil form too.

Knott: Let's take a brief break here. We're almost at the half-way point of this session.

[BREAK]

Bakshian: … Unless something comes up that you hadn't thought would come up and you might want to do follow-ups, it would be possible to just wind it up. I'm available tomorrow, but if we're finished so much the better.

Riley: If you know something about Reagan's secret trip to the Kremlin?

Bakshian: With the Bavarian Illuminata? [laughing]

Riley: That would be worth an extra few hours.

Bakshian: And the Rosicrucians, and the gnomes of Zurich and the Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion—

Knott: Again, somewhere in the briefing book I believe there was a reference—I think it was a quote of yours, where you said that the organization of the Reagan White House was not quite up to what you saw in the Nixon White House.

Bakshian: The Nixon White House, it was the German general staff. It probably ran more smoothly than most anything else, than any place else I would ever be likely to work. But maybe it was a bit over-regimented, and the day-to-day trains running on time may have also led to perhaps a little bit of suppression of creativity sometimes.

The Reagan White House was not chronically disorganized, quite the opposite. In fact there was a large cadre of people in the Reagan White House who had been in the Nixon White House, I happen to have been one of them. I was in my 20s in the Nixon White House, and in the Reagan White House, in my 30s. There were people who had been in their 30s and then were in their 40s. I'm sure that now the White House has people that were my age when they started with Reagan who are now back in the Bush White House.

So in many ways it was an extension of the Nixon White House. For example, the speechwriting operation before I had taken it over, when it was being set up in the White House, when Reagan became President: One of the first things they did was to reconstruct the research system the way it was done in the Nixon White House, which was based, as I said earlier, on *Time* magazine. So they brought Theresa Rhodes Rosenberger, who had been one of the researchers for several years in the Nixon White House. She came in. She was married by then, had children and was not going to stay, but she came in, she set up the system, broke in the talent, stayed there for a few months and got it all in place.

She left, but it was essentially the Nixon system at work. And the tradition continues. One of the researchers in the Reagan White House was a young lady named Julie Cave. She is married with children now,[6] but when it came to setting up the speechwriting operation for the 2000 convention in Philadelphia—where I was asked to help with just a few of the principal speeches: Colin Powell, Bob Dole, General [Norman] Schwarzkopf and Condoleezza Rice—they found Julie, they got a hold of Julie. So she set up the scheduling, researching and all of the stuff as professionally as it would have been done in the Reagan White House.

So there's an example of a model that started in the Nixon White House in the 1970s and still goes on today. Someone who was a young entry-level person, trained under that system in the Reagan White House, then, almost 20 years later, is implementing that model yet again. There is a time line here that doesn't ever really break.

Knott: Would you say it's accurate that communications were higher priority in the Reagan administration than in the Nixon White House?

[6] Married name is Altman, Julie Cave Altman.

Bakshian: No, but they were—Reagan as a speaker, it was recognized that the President had a great asset in his ability to communicate, so more attention was paid to that. But if anything, the Nixon White House was even more conscious about media relations, was more obsessed with press coverage, especially unfavorable press coverage, so in a way they actually paid more attention to it, and Nixon personally did. Reagan wasn't hurt, he wasn't egotistically vulnerable to criticism. I mean, if something inaccurate or very unfair or a cheap shot was made, he'd find that annoying, but he wouldn't go all morbid or brooding, so in a way he was less obsessed that way.

We recognized that this was one of the best things we had going for us in that administration. So it was good to be a speechwriter then, since the speechwriting department was in good standing as an integral, important part of the operation. Toward the end they had several turnovers and there was once again a situation where some speeches were being farmed out. Well, I wasn't there, I just heard about fragments of it from people who were still around. But that was a function of personalities and also Don Regan as Chief of Staff and other things that were going on then. But as long as it was a cohesive department and respected, it was the best time to be a presidential speechwriter.

Knott: We've seen comparisons drawn between Bill Clinton and Ronald Reagan in terms of communication, both good at it, very different style. What's your take, what is your assessment of President Clinton as a communicator?

Bakshian: Clinton was a very gifted speaker, but he lacked authenticity—he was constantly telling people he felt their pain but—first of all, maybe he was telling them that too much. With Ronald Reagan, any little idiosyncrasies he had seemed to be perfectly natural, but he never struck a pose, even though he was an actor. Bill Clinton had certain bits—he would jut out his lower jaw and project the lower lip—and you always knew immediately that he was striking a pose. He always tried to sound sincere, and he did a very good job of it, but that's what it was—a job. You got the sense of a guy doing a very good job at trying to sound sincere, somebody who had been a good salesman.

The other question would have to be, what did he use his Presidency for? Ronald Reagan had very important ideas, very important goals and he was there at a crucial time when the world was changing. He made some of that change and made some of that change go in the right direction. Bill Clinton was in a time of great prosperity, but think back. Memorable speeches are memorable not just because they were well written speeches but because they were attached to something that mattered. They moved people, not just at the moment by bringing tears or inspiration, but they moved people, they moved mountains. They had to do with real change and leadership.

And the Clinton years, when we look back, will be a time that we'll recognize as a time of prosperity that had already begun in the last years of Bush Senior and was already beginning to peter out towards the end of the Clinton term, but a great boom period. The [Warren G.] Harding years or something. Harding was like Clinton. I've always said that Harding and Clinton are sort of parallel. They were both, if not eloquent, very talkative. Both liked to be good old boys, both

were a bit messy about their private lives, both presided over a period of great prosperity, after great major events. And both left a legacy of almost nothing.

Character matters and Ronald Reagan had character behind his eloquence. Most actors don't make good politicians. What made Reagan—I would say this occasionally when someone would say, "But he's an actor," I'd say, "Have you seen his movies? He's a much better President than he ever was an actor," or better speaker. He was not a bad actor, he had a few really good roles, but he didn't have that distinguished a Hollywood career, if you think of memorable roles as opposed to memorable speeches. His qualities were ones that came out when he was at the Screen Actors Guild, when he was working for G.E., not just doing G.E. Theater but touring the country, going to speak to workers on the factory floor, meeting real Americans and communicating with them.

That was something you didn't learn on a sound stage in Hollywood. That was something that he brought to Hollywood with him and that's what made him good when he was playing an all-American role, but it wasn't some technique he picked up out there. Otherwise Barbra Streisand would be Secretary of State and—

Riley: There's an idea.

Bakshian: Well, any number of actors who dabbled with the idea and didn't run or were just total failures.

Riley: George Murphy, I guess was a—

Bakshian: George Murphy was another guy who was a song and dance man, not a great actor, but who had been involved in public issues and had the right sort of personality and could communicate well. He also had ethnic roots, he had a sort of Irish gift of the gab, and in the old days that sort of people went into local politics. But it wasn't because he was one of the great actors in Hollywood. The one guy who was a major actor, who might have been able to do something if he had run, was Charlton Heston, but I think he would have come across a bit too pompous.

Riley: I was going to ask you, because you had an opportunity to—

Bakshian: Yes, I've met him. He's a very nice man and he's not at all pompous when you're dealing with him. But I'm just thinking, his style of acting, which is appropriate to playing Moses, but when you see him giving a speech for the NRA [National Rifle Association], you almost feel like he's back on the sound stage. He hasn't learned the difference between playing Moses to a movie camera and speaking to a live audience. Certainly that's true of the politically engaged actors on the left and actresses who tend first of all to be very shrill, and that's the first thing people don't want in a leader.

Knott: As somebody who appreciates the art of speechmaking, who else have you seen in your lifetime who has impressed you?

Bakshian: Tell you who is a natural—he doesn't have the same range, but who I got to know because I helped him with the first major political speech he ever gave, at the 1996 Republican convention—that is Colin Powell. I wasn't able to go out to the convention that time, I had some other schedule deadlines. But I worked with Powell on his speech in the Washington area, and just by fax and phone for the last few days. He lived in northern Virginia at the time and I got to know him. He's a very interesting man and a very genuine, credible speaker.

What I realized first of all was that he had a first draft that he had generated himself. He may have had some help, but before it was really down to what we're going to run with, it was very together and very good. Like Reagan, he completely understood the drafting process. Turned out he had been called on to write some speeches when he was an officer, just as Eisenhower had written some speeches for [Douglas] MacArthur when he was a young officer. He was a pleasure to work with.

What you realize, some people just understand audiences and can bond with people. Either you've got it or you don't, and he has it. He's a more polished speaker than he was then, but there was just something in him which he was also able to project. Projecting is very important, but you've also got to have it. There are people that have wonderful qualities that they aren't capable of projecting; there are people that have wonderful gifts to project—Bill Clinton I think was one—but who are missing some of the essentials to really be completely formidable, respected, trusted.

Riley: Another parallel that you mentioned earlier about Reagan is that Powell is somebody who had a separate career.

Bakshian: That's right. And he has been brought back into public life because of the respect he earned and the ability he showed. He is not somebody who since he got his graduate degree in public policy or whatever has been calculating every move so that someday he could be Secretary of State, or someday he could be a Senator, or whatever. The best ones tend to be like that. Eisenhower was another. Washington. One of the few anal retentive types who was a great President was probably Abraham Lincoln. He really did want to be President from probably early on. Actually it may not have occurred to him he could be President until his public career, but that was what he aimed for.

Generally, the ones that have been best at it, the ones that I have the greatest respect for—Teddy Roosevelt was another who, he did always want to be President, but he had done so much else before he was President that he had proven himself and achieved things. He had written any number of books, been a war hero, been a crusading police commissioner and so on, brought a lot to the table. Ike, George Washington, most important of all. You look to people like that, especially when it's a trying time and when real leadership is called for and there is just something in them. As I say, they were fully formed before they got there.

Woodrow Wilson once said that Presidents either grow in office or swell in office. I think he was righter than he knew and he, to a certain extent, he tended to swell. But it really is true. The ones that can grow in office are the ones that have already grown up and so they are taking the already formed character and they're applying it to a new job, but they're not being tested for the first

time. One of the exceptions in a way was Harry Truman. He was not a great President but he was so much better than we had any right to expect him to be. And he was an accidental President who had not—his life hadn't been spent in pursuit of the Presidency. He hadn't even particularly wanted to be Vice President, he got tapped just because of geography and political considerations and then one day FDR died and he became President. But he loved American history and that's reflected in the best things about his Presidency. He was shaped in part by a real love of American history even though he had no higher education. He was probably better read on American history than a lot of people nowadays, given the way history is neglected, who get through not only high school but undergraduate studies without knowing as much as he did about the Presidency and the Constitution.

Then you'll get someone like a Bob Dole, who is perfect as a Senator and working with 99 other individuals, but is a disaster as a national candidate and can't delegate authority. I mean, I voted for him when he ran for President but I remember thinking, *My God, I know what a Dole White House would be like because I know what the Republican National Committee was like and what his campaign was like.* The lack of communications and delegation of authority which, while it can be comic at certain levels, can be dangerous when it gets to a higher level.

Knott: Where would you put John F. Kennedy on your list?

Bakshian: John F. Kennedy—

Knott: He certainly wanted the office badly.

Bakshian: Wanted it badly? Well, no, his father wanted it for him very badly. I think one of his saving graces was that he didn't change himself or twist himself out of character or into an uncomfortable posture to become President. He just managed to cover his tail sufficiently so that certain things didn't get out that might have been embarrassing, but I think he pretty much was what he seemed to be. He was interested in ideas. The other thing that we'll never know is whether he would have been a great President if he'd served out his time. There's no knowing, but so much of what came home to roost under Johnson was, if not initiated by John Kennedy, was carried forward by Kennedy appointees at the Pentagon, at State and everywhere else, that Johnson inherited and kept for too long. I don't know whether John Kennedy might not have ended up in the same quagmire. He's remembered for charm and eloquence, but not much in the way of achievements.

Even the things that people think of as major Johnson achievements, such as the Civil Rights Act, were facilitated if not made possible by the death of Kennedy and the national trauma, guilt actually, almost a purging of the nation which led to things that might not have happened otherwise. John Kennedy certainly had been very hesitant about civil rights as President, and understandably, the political climate was very different then. He also tended to be, except for a sense of adventurism on foreign affairs, a pretty pragmatic middle-of-the-roader who didn't want to rock the boat on domestic policy.
I[7] think it's arguable that John Kennedy, if it hadn't been for the accident of religion, geography, and his mother's family's political connections to corrupt old Democratic politics in Boston, and

[7] Start tape 7 at 017

if his father had been any millionaire other than one of the first Irish Catholics to go to Harvard and remembered all the SOBs who had treated him a certain way at the time, he probably wouldn't even have been a Democrat. He would have been a Republican, not a Democrat. He wasn't a typical Democrat. So what a real Kennedy Presidency would have ended up being, I think it would have been more modest in its domestic undertakings than Johnson. Also the opportunities would have been more modest, because it was the death of Kennedy that made possible what Johnson did. But I think the adventurism and the Vietnam stuff might have gone very much as they did anyway.

But he was excellent at communicating. He also had an opportunity. He was playing on an uneven field—the media rules were the White House rules more than they were the media's in those days. A hard question wasn't really a hard question. It was calling on Sarah McClendon, knowing that she was going to ask a "hard question" that you could then get everyone else to laugh at. The etiquette was such—it wasn't until way into Nixon that you had the shouting and all that, and people like Dan Rather making speeches in the form of questions. So it was a different time. John Kennedy certainly did have presidential charisma, but the old song line that was used to rally sentiment on his behalf, "Johnny, we hardly knew you," was more true than his fans might wish to think. We really didn't know him as a man and we didn't know him as a President, because he didn't last long enough to prove how much he could really do.

He blundered horribly in the Bay of Pigs. The Cuban missile crisis, to this day, it is debatable about whether that was a brilliant show down or whether essentially [Nikita] Khrushchev got what he wanted, which was a guaranteed tenure for [Fidel] Castro—and Castro is still there. The Bay of Pigs was done to get rid of Castro. The missile crisis, which we supposedly won, ended up in us agreeing to let Castro stay. Who won that? You know Khrushchev had reasons for thinking he won it. Well, it doesn't matter because it's a question that will never be answered, you can poke at it forever.

Knott: Back to Reagan. Did you read Edmund Morris's book, *Dutch*?

Bakshian: I couldn't bring myself to. I read some of the excerpts and all. But I thought that the literary device of the fictitious characters was so dubious. To me, as a writer, it seemed that he came up with that when he was way behind schedule. He had taken an incredible amount of money, I forget the advance. I think he was swamped in his own notes and he just got desperate for a gimmick and I think he came up with that. Because you notice that now his Teddy Roosevelt biography doesn't have any of that BS in it. It's just a straightforward narrative.

So that indicates to me that either he has since decided it wasn't a very good idea, or if he hadn't been way behind and maybe having a case of writer's block, he wouldn't have come up with it. It was a desperation tactic rather than a brilliant inspiration. To me it so invalidates it as history and biography, I was annoyed by it so I haven't read it. When it's marked down to $5.98 maybe I'll pick it up and just do some selective samplings.

Knott: Is there an account of Reagan that you like?

Bakshian: I'll tell you, I think one that is—it's not brilliant or anything, but Lou Cannon's *The Role of a Lifetime,* because Lou Cannon covered him from California onwards, it's probably the most sensible look at Reagan by somebody who as a journalist knew him from way back. I take pride in the fact that something that I wrote for the inauguration supplement of the *L.A. Herald-Examiner* turned out to be a good description of how he worked out as President. It was just 2,000 words or so, it was talking about what his qualities were.

Knott: It's in [the briefing book] somewhere.

Bakshian: I emphasized the way he resonates with the American public. I wrote that before—in fact, I never showed it to him until after I'd been in the White House about a year. Then I sent him a copy, just to get his autograph on it. I said, "I never sent it to you before because I didn't want you to think I was trying to butter you up, but it seems to have held up and I would appreciate the memento of having your signature on it."

Riley: Is that it?

Bakshian: No, that is an adaptation of part of it. Originally—that was in the book that ran right after the 1980 election called *The Future Under President Reagan*.

Riley: I thought much of this was prescient.

Knott: Yes.

Bakshian: I mean, that was written before he was sworn into office.

Riley: That's why it's so remarkable.

Bakshian: But that gets back to the character of the person. It's not just character, but the individual qualities that they bring to the job are important because I couldn't know what events were going to throw at us in the years of his Presidency, but I did think that I had taken his measure as a potential leader. That was what I was talking about, and to that extent I think I was pretty much on target. If you can write plausibly about people that have been dead for 300 years who you never had the opportunity to meet or see speak, I guess you should be able to do a little bit with somebody who is alive at the time.

Riley: Although it may be simpler to do it in reverse. That may be what we're finding in Edmund Morris's case, that nobody has a living memory now of Theodore Roosevelt, therefore he is starting from a blank slate.

Bakshian: That's true. Also, there are no questions there. Theodore Roosevelt is not going to contradict anything that's written. Plus just about everything—all the evidence that is in is available to anyone who is writing about it now. Interpretation may change, but there are no new secrets.

Riley: There was an article in the *New York Times* about two or three weeks ago, an interview had been done with Edmund Morris about this book. In the first paragraph or two, he basically says, "I don't find politics particularly interesting."

Bakshian: He doesn't make it particularly interesting either, I can tell you that.

Riley: Many of the other Reagan people that we talk with, that's the kind of message that we've gotten back from them, that there is a remarkable political story. Not just a human story, but a political story with Reagan, and he just missed the boat.

Bakshian: This acquaintance of mine who's working right now on the book on Reagan in the Hollywood years—not the acting, but the Screen Actors Guild—said that Morris had all the resources, the information was all there. But it never occurred to him to look into this. Incidentally, I would recommend, he's done a few articles, but the book will probably be coming out within a year or so—I'm not sure what the production schedule is and I don't know what the final title will be, but the author's name is John Meroney. He actually met, he is a very young writer, but he met Reagan a few times before the Alzheimer's set in. Plus he's done real archival work and there are still a few people alive, although they're all getting up there, who worked with Reagan in SAG and he's been able to get to them just in time. It's a good thing he got this idea, because in another five years there'd be no human links left to deal with.

Knott: Have you ever considered writing a memoir of your own experience?

Bakshian: No. I didn't keep detailed diaries, and there are too many other things I would rather write about first in book length. I don't mind writing an essay or reviewing or participating in something. But the time it takes to do it right and given the number of other people, the pieces are all out there now and what I would add might be some insights, but I don't have any burning desire to do it and I wouldn't find it that much fun, frankly. Most people who were in a war don't write war memoirs. Being in the White House is interesting up to a point, but there are other things I'd rather delve into and write about than just going back and going over that.

In addition to which, there are a number of people I like, but if I were getting into things and if I gave honest opinions, probably it would hurt some feelings without achieving anything. And yet, if I was going to write about it, I wouldn't write about it unless I was going to give an honest opinion, so I'd just as soon not.

Knott: Were there any weaknesses, of either President Reagan or the administration that we haven't touched on today? You did mention somewhat the organizational problems, but was there anything else?

Bakshian: Right. Everyone has weaknesses that are complementary to, or at least that are the result of, their strengths. If President Reagan had not been compulsively hands-on, but a little more hands-on, or a little more willing to express dissatisfaction with staff work and so on, maybe certain good things would have happened sooner and certain embarrassments would never have occurred.

On the other hand, if he had been a different sort of person, which he would have had to have been in order to do that, he probably wouldn't have had the strengths that were much more important. There were other people, including his wife, who could take care of being the hit man or keeping an eye on the shop. Nobody else could do for him what he did do. So his weaknesses were details of policy and management. Except when it was very important, he didn't find the legislative process that interesting. I don't either, to tell you the truth. I've worked on the Hill and I've had to follow it. So his interest in government was the exact opposite of someone like Jerry Ford, whose whole career had been spent in the Congress. When you talked to him about a speech, or when he was working on it, he'd be talking about what chance some bill had of getting out of this subcommittee and where it stood right now. He would have known exactly where the budget was, but he might not have had a real big picture. Plus, in fairness to him he was also on the defensive. It was a matter of just keeping the government going and not being totally rolled by the Congress that was in the hands of a ruthless opposition in both houses.

So what people talk about as Reagan deficiencies were almost the necessary complement to what his great strengths were. I can't imagine bolstering him on that side without weakening him on the side that was much more important. He could have used a little more of a mean streak. And yet again, that was what was one of his great strengths. He wasn't weak. Gorbachev thought he was going to just wrap him around his finger and of course it ended up going entirely the other way. I thought that public TV documentary of a few years ago on Reagan, it was part of the presidential biography series, got the summit part down very, very well. Not only did him justice but just did historical justice to it.

And with the staff it was the same way. I wish that someone like Ed Meese, who had a wonderful intellectual grasp of policy, had been a better organized guy. But if he had been a better organized guy, he probably wouldn't have had the grasp or the breadth of interest and understanding of policy. I wish that Mike Deaver had had a bit more substantive depth, but then that wasn't what he was there for, and what was most important about his function was what he was best at and what he did. Jim Baker was not a visionary, but he was very good at keeping the trains going and I think was falsely accused of trying to derail a conservative agenda. Jim Baker and people like that were more responsible for the successes of the first term than the ideologues who knew what they wanted but probably didn't have a clue about how to get it done.

So, I'm trying to think if there is anyone in there that I actually really detested because this is beginning to sound very Pollyannaish, but they were basically a good bunch. You always get the little climbers and twerps coming in, especially the ones who have never been to Washington before. The more you've been in the White House before and you've seen it before, the more you can spot them coming because you've seen exactly the same types, in the same way that someone who has been teaching the same course for a number of years can very early on size up the new class, without having to think about it as much as you might have the first few semesters.

Knott: When you published your—I think it was in the *National Review*—your book review on *Two Cheers for Rape,* did you hear from any of the White House folks after that?

Bakshian: No, I was still there. That is, I had submitted my resignation, but I said, "I can stay here as long as you need within reason." I told them I was going to be leaving and I said, "If you're ready I can leave tomorrow," but I was there for two months or two and a half months or something after that. They kept dragging their feet about finding a replacement. So I wrote the review after I had settled on leaving but I was still there. What happened, the review, the headline—as you know, the editors do the headlines and with *National Review* you don't get galleys or anything. In other words, you write a review, it goes there, and then the next time you see it is when it has been published.

What the review was about, and what the rape in question was about was strictly literary. The book had been written by a woman who was the sister-in-law of someone I knew. As a favor, it was a university imprint or a minor publishing house, to just get her a review, I said, "Okay, I'll review it." The rape in question was the Harlequin romance fiction form. It was talking about women being attracted to what happens in those books, and how even some intelligent women read this crap. It's just unbelievable. You'll occasionally see an attractive, intelligent woman reading this junk. You think maybe you better have a brain scan run on them afterwards but they seem perfectly normal otherwise.

Those romance novels are the only literary form I'm aware of that is 99.99 percent female readership, if not 100 percent. It does not appeal to anyone else. So why is that? The book was about that, what is the literary appeal and so on. That's what I was writing about.

Well a friend of mine—and the fact that he is still a friend says something about my forbearance—who then worked for the *Detroit News*, happened to have picked up a copy, a free copy, because at the press building they used to have a pile of them down there. And he shoved it under the nose of then-Congresswoman from Colorado—

Riley: Schroeder.

Bakshian: Pat Schroeder. And she went on the floor and made this denunciation. I'm convinced she didn't read the article because if she had read it, everything she said had nothing to do with it. Too bad someone didn't give her a pop quiz afterwards about have you read the article. Anyway, it didn't bother me except I got some screwy phone calls. Of course, all she was interested in was trying to create an embarrassment for the administration. It didn't, it was a drop in the bucket. I think it was a cheap shot for her to do what she did, but I could care less and it was of no significance politically.

Indeed, when Reagan was re-elected in 1984, the talk about the gender gap proved to be the opposite, which was that the Democrats did better among women than they did among men, but the Democrats lost an election overwhelmingly because the majority of women, and an even vaster majority of men, voted for Reagan. He didn't do as well with women as he did with men, but he carried both.

Riley: Sure.

Bakshian: And they're still reading those lousy novels.

Riley: Is there anything, do you have any concluding observations about your time in the White House, about Reagan's place in history, or are there other observations that you have that you keep to yourself about Reagan? You've got an opportunity now to put some of these kinds of things on the record.

Bakshian: Not really, except most of what happened in there confirmed things that I had intuited or felt. You mentioned, for example, what I wrote about his potential as a President. That was what I believed about him beforehand and that was what he seemed to be to me when I saw him. But he re-enforced my belief—and this gets back to some of what we discussed about presidential character—you don't take out of the office anything you didn't bring in. You learn things and you may have to face challenges you never faced before, but if you weren't properly put together when you got there, if you didn't bring enough strength, enough compassion, enough judgment, enough balance, then you're not going to grow in office. In fact you're going to be knocked over. Or whatever extremes or imperfections are in your character, if anything, they'll be magnified by the strains of the office, and the ones that get through and are respected are the ones that had what it took when they got there.

Consider FDR. Many of the negative things people said about Reagan were things you could have said about FDR on the way in. Sort of an amateur politician who is just Prince Charming not much substance and so on, but he had what was required. Truman in an entirely different way. Truman actually was a very good communicator in his own funny little way, because he knew how to pithily present what he said and felt. When his judgment had been right about the position he was taking, he articulated it in a way that worked. Sometimes he was on the wrong side of the issue and people reacted accordingly.

My one problem about John Kennedy, a little bit of that trying too hard to be something he wasn't—to be Mr. Superman. Lyndon Johnson, trying to be the great emancipator all over again. A man with a corrupt political background and using corrupt means to try to do noble things. You can't keep them separate. Poor Nixon, in a different way, he wasn't a personally venal man, but he had an insecurity that breeds ruthlessness that breeds problems.

No, Reagan to me was just a trump—he confirmed most of the good things you want to believe, and he proved that sometimes they are actually true. What is it they say about character, the decency of people, and about what someone can achieve in America who didn't start out on the fast track but who just had certain gifts? There is some luck of timing—I've known people who are lucky, but if they're dumb enough they can still end up losing a fortune at cards even if every hand that is dealt to them is all the right cards. You still have to know how to play them. Reagan had some luck, but more than that he played his cards well. Did it with conviction and what he was shined through. His inner comfort also transferred to a comfort with him on the part of the electorate that was often being told that they should be afraid of him, that they shouldn't trust him. He never frightened them and they almost always trusted him.

The only other thing is you have to almost constantly struggle to keep your balance, your perspective in the White House cocoon. If the President is sound, the biggest danger is the staff, getting too many of the wrong people on staff or just not keeping staff under control. Because

there are going to be so many egos, so many over-eager people, and most of them are really unproven. If you think some Presidents don't get there ready for the job, well, what about the staffer getting to Washington for the first time? Maintaining proper staff management and neither being too afraid of or too cavalier about the power of the media—that was something Reagan understood. He didn't go into a Nixon passive hostile reaction even though he expressed his opinion many a time about what the liberally biased coverage was like. He might occasionally talk about "those liberal SOBs" but he didn't get much dirtier than that.

The point was, he was not by nature an angry man and he certainly wasn't an insecure man, so he was more than their match. No other real specific great thoughts. If any of them come to me in the night, I'll fax them to you.

Riley: Oh, just wait until you get the transcript.

Bakshian: I'll probably think of it, even now, what we've talked about today, when the transcript comes back, plus subconsciously the file cards will start shuffling because I hadn't thought about a lot of this except when I read the briefing book and then when we were actually talking.

Knott: Well, thank you so much.

Bakshian: My pleasure.

Knott: This was very rewarding. We really appreciate the time you spent with us.

Riley: Very interesting and illuminating at the same time.