WILLIAM J. CLINTON PRESIDENTIAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH ROY M. NEEL

November 14, 2002
Charlottesville, Virginia

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TRANSCRIPT

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Riley: This is the Roy Neel interview for the Clinton Presidential History Project. We discussed outside very briefly, again, the ground rules. Everybody in here is clear on that. What we didn't talk about outside is the allocation of time during the course of the day. I thought, in consultation with Steve and Darby, that what we might do is begin getting more biographical information on [Albert, Jr.] Gore—your experience with him as a member of the House earlier—some sense about your early experiences with Al Gore. Then we'd go through the period of time in the campaign and then the White House. We'd like to reserve some time to talk at the end of the day about the 2000 campaign and your role in the transition there.

We can structure this any way that you would prefer, but usually dealing with things chronologically tends to lead to an easier flow of things. So maybe what I ought to do is throw out a first question, which would be about your earliest experiences with Al Gore. How you came to meet and know Al Gore.

Neel: Before we begin, too, I have had to postpone this interview a couple of times. For some reason they came at difficult times. It was originally scheduled for a little longer period. I'd be happy in the future to come back if you think that would be helpful.

Gosh, let's see. My family goes back with Al Gore's family into probably the late 1930s, early 1940s. When Albert Gore, Sr. was the Secretary of Labor in a gubernatorial administration in the '30s, I think, my uncle was a political reporter for the *Nashville Banner.* They got to know each other, my uncle and Albert Gore, Sr. and Pauline [Gore], and became friends. When my uncle and aunt went off to Washington in World War II, he was Chief of Staff to a Tennessee Senator named Tom Stewart. My aunt was the deputy to the Librarian of Congress, Alan Tate, or the poet laureate, I should say.

They became good friends. Then, through the years, I had met and been around Al off and on, probably when we were both in college. We had a lot of mutual friends in Nashville. When I came back from Vietnam in the spring of 1970 and Al came back a little bit later, we both went to work for respective newspapers in Nashville, I for the afternoon newspaper the *Banner* and Al for the *Tennessean.* I was a sports writer and he was a legitimate journalist, an investigative reporter.

Riley: If you're from Tennessee, I would think sports reporting is the highest form of—

Neel: Well, for a young man at that time it was like stealing money. It was not going to be a way to make your living because you really couldn't make a living at it, but it was fun. I was working my way through school at the time, finishing up at Vanderbilt. Al was at the divinity school and then the law school at Vanderbilt and we became friends through that period. I went on to work for the mayor of Nashville and on a number of projects for myself while he was still at the *Tennessean.* When he decided to run for Congress, suddenly, in 1976, I offered to help and did a little work in the middle Tennessee area. My home was just outside of Nashville, in Smyrna, Tennessee, Rutherford County, which was in the congressional district he was running for at the time. We had a number of mutual friends who were involved directly in his campaign.

After he was elected, which was essentially the primary—back then, when Democrats won primaries, that was tantamount to winning the general election. Things have changed considerably since then. But after that primary, in the summer—August, I think—I went off to Europe and didn't think anything more about it and came back and he had won the general election. He asked me to come to Washington with him shortly after that. I did so, thinking I would go for a couple of years. I was still thinking I might want to be an art historian; art history was one of my majors at Vanderbilt. I thought that would be a really cool thing to go and look at pictures in the National Gallery and the Freer and elsewhere for a couple of years while I was working with him.

Once we got to Washington it just became more and more fun and I never managed to leave after all those years. So I came up with him in part because we had had a lot of mutual friends. I had done a lot of work in Nashville on federal grant programs. One thing that Al wanted to do was to construct a new way of serving his constituents. He succeeded a man named Joe Evins, who had been a champion pork barreler in the Congress, had represented that district for 30 years and had prided himself on bringing home federal spending for projects in Tennessee. Whether dams or courthouses or roads or whatever, he was a champion at it. But by 1977 those kinds of funds were drying up. Also, Al was a freshman House member, he wasn't going to be able to pick up the phone and tell somebody to fund a multimillion dollar courthouse, as Joe Evins had done. So we were going to have to do it differently.

So one of the things Al wanted to do was to create a resource for our constituents to help them make better sense out of the federal government, help the federal government work better for them. We put on, starting very soon, a series of what we called "workshops" all across the congressional district on a wide range of subjects, everything from federal resources for small business, for education, energy conservation, solar energy, healthcare and so on. We did about a dozen of them. They were really unprecedented, usually one- or two-day programs where he would emcee the whole program and was in charge of it. I would put it together and we would invite constituents and they came from all over the state. We brought in federal officials and other experts and did these seminars for people in the congressional district. Hands-on things, we would do exhibits and so on.

We put on a program in probably 1980 or '79 on gasohol, the production of alcohol fuels. It was at a time when energy conservation and finding renewable energy sources was a big deal. We got interested in it and we had exhibits from those who were manufacturing equipment for farmers to turn corn and grains into alcohol fuels. We expected to have about 400 people there; we had

5,000. We had it in the gymnasium at Middle Tennessee State University and they had to pull out the bleachers and expand the whole thing. We got started three hours late because we couldn't accommodate everybody. We found a lot of farmers who were actually moonshiners who wanted to see if they could get more for their moonshine selling it as alcohol fuel than as moonshine.

He was very creative about these things, about his service. All the time he was working on issues in Washington, he was an issue-oriented Congressman, as opposed to one mostly interested in bringing home federal spending or getting into the leadership path. I mean, there are really two ways you make your way in Congress as a beginning member. You choose the leadership route, which is to get involved in organization, in doing favors for people and for the Speaker or the majority or minority leader and so on, and you make your way that way with an ultimate goal to be Speaker of the House.

Or you can get involved in issues. That's for people who are ambitious and want to do things. There are also large folks in the middle who really don't do either. They come to the House and they answer constituent mail, but they are not really motivated beyond just staying there. But the aggressive and assertive members of Congress choose one of those two paths and he chose the issue path. It fit his background as a journalist, as an inquisitive guy, and he made his reputation on that, on doing oversight work in the Congress.

Early on, during those first two or three years, I was busy putting together these projects, these workshops around the state. After a couple of years I took on the role of Legislative Director for the office and managed all of our various projects with our committee work on energy issues, health issues, communications and so on, and with a legislative staff all through the House. Then when we got to the Senate, he ran for President and then I became his Chief of Staff. So I'll stop at that point.

Riley: I want to dial back and ask you a kind of biographical question. That is, I'm intrigued by the idea that this young man is at one point enrolled in divinity school and then goes to law school from there. I've got the sequencing right on that?

Neel: Yes.

Riley: Did you have conversations with him at the time about career paths, whether he was trying to find a path for himself or—?

Neel: Yes, some. He came back from Vietnam like most of us, terribly disillusioned. Divinity school seemed like a good way to work through some issues. I don't think it was ever in his plan to become a pastor, but he was looking for some answers about what was going on in the world. He was working as a reporter at the *National Tennessean,* which put him into contact with the contemporary world around him in Tennessee. Then he became a court reporter and covering local government and got involved in a number of big stories, a couple of exposés that ended up having a number of city councilmen prosecuted for graft and whatnot. He began to realize that to really have a grip on how government worked and didn't work, then he would need a legal

education. So he went to law school, all the time, again, continuing to work at the *National Tennessean*. So all these things sort of fit together for him.

Why he left divinity school for law school, it was really more of a practical issue of looking for a different kind of education. He began to get on track of the sort of things he wanted to do. But he still, at that point, had no interest in politics.

Riley: So it wasn't a foregone conclusion at this point—

Neel: Not at all.

Riley: As outsiders, if you look at the career path of this individual, it almost seems because of his family background that this is somebody that—and you see this probably even in some of the stuff in the briefing book—that this was somebody who was being groomed for the White House from way back.

Neel: His parents may have thought about that. Probably up until the time that his father was defeated for reelection in the Senate in 1970, that might have been the logical path. He might have continued on that path: come back, run for office and so on. But his father's defeat at the hands of Bill Brock, a very mean-spirited, nasty campaign that really turned a lot of people off, I think soured Al on ever running for office. It wasn't until maybe late '75, early '76 that he even gave any thought to it at all. He just assumed he would not do it.

I think a number of us who knew Al in those days before he first ran for office wondered what he was going to do. He was obviously bright and directed and driven. I would have thought that his path would have been more like that of David Halberstam, who had been at the *Tennessean* before, he'd come down from the *New York Times* and ended up being a nationally renowned journalist. That's what I assumed Al would do. He didn't seem interested so much in making money for the sake of making money or for power, but he had this keen analytical mind and that seemed to make sense.

But it wasn't a linear progression. Certainly after his father's defeat, I think that kind of sent him into a different mind set.

Riley: Do you have a sense about what drew him back in that direction by '75 or '76?

Neel: He had been covering government. He had been doing this in a thoughtful way, studying and learning about the process of government, particularly local government, while working for the *Tennessean* as an investigative reporter and a columnist and in law school. So all these things began to bring about a public policy focus that he was not unfamiliar with, having grown up in Washington around the Congress and having gone to Harvard and been mentored by a number of people that were involved in politics and having been a government major.

There was a natural evolution. I think what happened, though, is when he got wind of the retirement plans of his predecessor—who was, by the way, his father's successor for that same House seat 30 years earlier—it became clear to him that it was going to be now or likely never.

This was the time. He would have been probably 26 years old, 27 maybe. He had the energy, he certainly had the support of his family. I'm sure it wasn't an easy decision but it was a natural decision. It was, in many ways, a complete turn around in his life, one that may have made absolute sense to the rest of the world but was arrived at in a little more tortuous fashion than might be apparent.

Knott: Was it an asset or a liability for him to be the son of this very famous Senator? How did he deal with the question of being the son of a powerful Senator and being so young when he first ran for office?

Neel: Well, those are several big questions in one. It was a huge asset. There's no question about it. He was running against, in that first race in the Democratic primary for Congress, an extremely popular state legislator named Stanley Rogers, who I think was the majority leader of the state house from a town 30, 40 miles away. Well thought of, no liabilities, well funded. It was not a sure thing. There wasn't a lot of polling done in those kinds of races at that time. I'm not sure Al did a significant poll during that whole race. But the Gore name was a huge asset for several reasons. One, he had a sense about what it meant to serve. He had a sense about how these various public policy issues fit into being a Congressman from that district in the state of Tennessee. He had a historical perspective that few would have had. And he inherited a network of his father's friends and supporters, both in Tennessee and around the country.

When Albert Gore, Sr., Senator Gore, left office in 1970—January of '71, I suppose—he still had this wide-ranging network of friends who had followed his work and supported his work as a populist liberal from a Southern state who had opposed the war. He had a deep base of support in the Jewish political community and in other places around the country. He had been a prominent member of key committees and had developed a large network around the country. So he had a fundraising base that helped him raise what was then a pretty good bit of money, about $100,000, very quickly, which no one else would have been able to do unless they had been personally wealthy.

He did have some instant name recognition and that district had been served by his father 30 years earlier. Even though his father had lost reelection statewide, he was still well regarded in that congressional district, which had long been a Democratic stronghold and actually still is to this day. So it was a huge asset. How he dealt with it is a question that certainly inspired a lot of speculation when he first ran for office, for Vice President and then when he ran for President in 2000, the role of his father in his own development.

Riley: Go on.

Neel: There's been a lot of pop speculation written about the influence of his parents on him and his work and his personality and so on. I saw it a little bit differently. Certainly, Senator Gore was very helpful in his first race for Congress and Al used his father both as a sounding board, a source of knowledge about the congressional district, and to tap into a network of friends around the country.

Where his father's influence and involvement stopped short was in steering Al toward decisions. Both in the way he campaigned and once he was elected, how he served. He was very close to his father, deeply respectful, but he was not a clone of his father. They have very different personalities, extremely different. Maybe not night and day, but very different. Al is a much more private person, more reserved, less gregarious. His father did politics differently, in part because his father was of a different era. Al knew, clearly, that that era had ended. He couldn't do it the way his father did it. Whatever criticisms there have been of Al Gore's political style, he knows himself and he knows his limitations. He knows what he does well and he knows what he doesn't do well.

He knew he was not going to be a traditional politician at the time and he had to do it his way. And his father respected that. All the days, the whole 16 years that I served him in the House and the Senate and on into the Vice Presidency, I can't remember a single time when his father was heavy handed in trying to influence Al or Al's office. It just didn't happen. He didn't pick up the phone and call his father every time there was a decision that needed to be made. When Al had to buck organized labor on a couple of critical votes in those early years, I sure don't recall there being a confrontation, though his father was very close to organized labor.

His father by that time was very busy with a new career. So he was not a puppet for his father and the influence his father had on him was probably less than most people have speculated.

Riley: I have a question for you about the extent to which his background might have been a difficult selling point in a state like Tennessee. This is somebody who is Harvard educated and spent a lot of time in Washington, D.C. My political background was in Alabama. I think if anybody had run in Alabama with that kind of record it would have been very difficult, a very difficult selling point. Was it just the fact that the family name helped him overcome that or how did he manage to deal with that?

Neel: I think he had the benefit of the doubt on that issue. I'm sure that there were voters in that fourth congressional district who might have thought, *Well, this is not Albert Gore, he grew up in Washington and was Harvard educated.* First of all, his father was not viewed as an elitist. His father and his mother had a very modest upbringing in the state. They were very connected to the people of that congressional district, the Upper Cumberland area. Al lived there in the summers and had a lot of friends there and was not a snotty Harvard kid. I mean, he has written fairly eloquently about the kind of complicated relationship he had with both Washington and Tennessee and how he reconciled the two different lives.

If you talk to people that he grew up with in Tennessee, who he spent a lot of time with in the summer, you don't see a portrait of an elitist. He was given the benefit of the doubt for all those reasons. He probably didn't lose very many votes based on where he went to college. Also, that was at a time where it was not necessarily a liability to have gone to Harvard. You did have Richard Nixon trashing the Ivy League and so on, but Nixon was history by then. He had been discredited. Al's father was targeted by the Nixon White House. They recruited Bill Brock to run against him and they went after him on personal terms as a liberal.

Remember, by 1976 the Vietnam war had been discredited; Richard Nixon had been discredited. There would have probably been among most of the voters in the fourth congressional district a sense of, "Well, good for him, there's nothing wrong with going to Harvard," or, in a more local context, to Vanderbilt, as opposed to going to the University of Tennessee. It's how you behave, not where you went to school, at least then.

So I don't think that that was much of a liability for him. Now the Republicans tried to paint him in that manner once he became Vice President or was running for Vice President and then ran for President. Whether or not they had success in that is subject to conjecture. But at that point in 1976, it didn't seem to be much of a problem.

Riley: Can I dial back and ask you if you had known him when he was struggling over the decision about going to Vietnam?

Neel: No. I had met him when we were both in college and were home and at events in Nashville and I think at my aunt and uncle's house one or two times. No, I didn't have any conversations.

Riley: But you weren't personal—

Neel: No, no. We've talked about it endlessly since we began working together, about Vietnam and those decisions.

Riley: Can you tell us a little bit about those conversations?

Neel: He has said, in public as well as in private, certainly with me, that it was a difficult decision because he clearly opposed the war. But on a personal level, he knew that because he came from a very small draft board in Smith County, Tennessee, there would have been no more than 60 or 80 people, young men, who were of draft age during any one cycle. Their quota would have been such that had Al somehow gotten out of it, in other words, once he finished Harvard had he gone to graduate school and taken a deferment or pulled some other strings, as many have done, to avoid going into the military, some other poor guy in Smith County was going to get drafted and go in his place, with the fair possibility that he would have been wounded or killed.

Al had a hard time with that, because he would have known just about every young man his age in Smith County, Tennessee and they would have known him. While there would have been a personal struggle on the nature of the war in Vietnam, from another standpoint it was not a difficult decision for him. I mean, his mother didn't want him to go because of course his parents were deeply opposed to the war. His mother talked openly about being willing to help him go to Canada. That was never an option for Al. So that's really what it came down to, something as personal as that.

Riley: Did he bring up the question of political viability, which was something that haunted President Clinton?

Neel: No, I don't think that that was ever an issue. When Al volunteered to go into the Army for his two-year stint—he could have either gotten drafted or gotten a deferment—his father was in a

Senate race. There might have been some talk among others what the effect of this would be on his father's Senate race, but I'm not aware of any of those conversations. They have told me, both his parents and Al, that that was never an issue. Arguably it might have benefited his father for him to go into the service to counter a lot of the criticism of him as an anti-war Southern Senator. But that was never a factor whatsoever. Both his parents said we'll support you in whatever you want to do. His mother actively wanted him to go elsewhere, to go to Canada I think, but that was more a mother talking than a political perspective.

Knott: You may have alluded to this earlier but could you just tell us, did he recruit you for the '76 campaign or did you enlist? Or how did that come about?

Neel: There were several people, it was a very small campaign run out of his living room at their farm in Carthage. We had close mutual friends working on the campaign. At the time, I was the director of the Tennessee Committee for the Humanities. I had run my own small publications and multimedia business and then took this job. I had done a number of grants for the National Endowment for the Humanities affiliate in Tennessee—

Riley: This was after your newspaper work.

Neel: Yes. Once I finished school I left the newspaper. I had gotten married and I had to start making a living and I did a number of different things. I developed an aerial photographic technique and did a business around that, did films and decision-making tools for nonprofits and government offices and so on. But I was really drawn to these projects that the humanities endowment was willing to fund, they were fun for me. I mean, it was part of my background in literature and art history.

Anyway, I was acting director of the Tennessee Committee for the Humanities and had just taken that job when he announced that he was going to run. So I did what I could part-time and then during the summer I did a little more in middle Tennessee, particularly in Rutherford County. I didn't work on the campaign on a day-to-day basis. He only had about five people working on it. Everybody was sort of a volunteer.

Knott: How would you describe him back then politically? He just missed that class of '74 by a couple of years, the group that came into the House and really shook things up. Was he somebody who agreed with that kind of a reform agenda?

Neel: Yes, if you look at the Watergate babies, it's really three different classes, '74, '76 and '78, because there was a kind of a wave that was taking effect. It wasn't until after the '78 election that you begin to have a trail off. There were a handful, but after [Jimmy] Carter was elected it began to trail off.

Yes, he would have been in sync with many of them. They were reform-oriented; they were issue-oriented for the most part. They had a sense of what they wanted to accomplish when they got there. It was an extraordinarily talented two or three classes of House members. A large number of them found their way onto the same committee, the Energy and Commerce Committee, which was prior to that the Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee, run by

Harley Staggers from West Virginia, then John Dingell, when it became a very active committee. It had some of the brightest people ever to come through Congress. Bob Eckhardt ran the Oversight Committee, a very aggressive, tough-minded committee looking at corporate malfeasance in government projects.

Dingell was the chairman of the committee and ran the Oversight Committee and he was a very important mentor to Al Gore. Mentor, maybe that's not the right word. Patron. He liked Al and basically instructed his Oversight staff to work with Al and let Al sort of run investigations. That was extremely important. So when he came into Congress he found himself in with guys like Dave Stockman, Tim Wirth, Toby Moffett, Phil Gramm, Barbara Mikulski, Andy Maguire, the list goes on and on. They weren't all Democrats. Stockman in particular was a very intellectually aggressive member of Congress and they sparred regularly, but it was less on partisan grounds than it was on just issues. It was a very exciting committee and very exciting time.

Riley: What kinds of things was Gore working on at the time to establish—you said he was an issue-oriented Congressman. Tell us a little bit about some of the issues that he latched on to make his own issues, to sort of make an imprint on the institution.

Neel: His transition from being an investigative reporter and a journalist to being a Congressman, to being a member of the House Oversight Committee of the Commerce Committee, was a very natural and easy one. The only difference was, suddenly he had a staff, both a personal staff and a committee staff that could go do these things and had the ability to subpoena witnesses, and a pulpit. These are things a journalist doesn't usually have, as you're supposed to be objective and silent or invisible in many ways. But it was a natural progression for him and he used it aggressively.

The issues were wide-ranging. He began to develop a deeper focus in a few issues toward the late '70s and the early '80s, but in those early years we were in the middle of an energy crisis. So just about everything related to problems in energy production, conservation. He went after the oil companies who had formed a secret uranium cartel to control that market, and skewered them, a remarkable hearing where you had the head of Gulf Oil having to admit to managing this cartel. It was quite extraordinary. He may have been a second-term Congressman at the time, but for Gore it was pretty heady stuff. Twenty-eight, 29 years old. And he was getting a lot of positive attention.

Al and a number of others did their work, they studied their material. They were not only aggressive from the dais with witnesses, they knew their stuff. The press noticed it and wrote, I think, a lot of very flattering pieces about a guy who was tireless in going after these problems. On another committee we went after the cable television business for basically monopolizing that medium, jacking up prices, offering poor service. Then a little later on, denying the right of backyard satellite dish owners to buy programming, in particular HBO. Al Gore became the patron saint of backyard satellite dish owners.

Riley: A lot of them in Tennessee—

Neel: There were 50,000 in Tennessee. It was a pretty rag-tag industry and a pretty rag-tag group and there were a lot of funny things going on in the business. Still, he became their champion. Later on we brought Billy Tauzin into the mix, who also helped. We waged war on behalf of the backyard satellite dish owners against HBO in particular and the big cable companies and made a lot of headway. In fact, a number of the laws now that govern program distribution for satellite distributors came from that work. Dish Network and the DirecTV are direct outgrowths of that work.

Riley: My thanks, I'm the proud owner of a satellite dish.

Neel: Well, I must say, I have a dish also. The problem is, I'm paying over $100 a month and now I'm quite aggravated by it all. My kids—my wife and I have six between us—they love it, because they love this device that can digitally record stuff. We'll never be able to take any of this stuff away now. Anyway, backing up.

On the consumer basis, Al would hold these town meetings across Tennessee, across his congressional district. He did, I think, 2,000 of them during his eight years in the House of Representatives. He would fly home on a Friday mid-day and he would get in his car with a staffer, and they would start driving through the congressional district holding open meetings.

Riley: This was his standard procedure. Every Friday he would—

Neel: Three out of four weekends a month and he would do them from Friday afternoon until late Saturday night. He would have probably eight or ten of them every weekend. He would have a map on which he would plot them. If we hadn't been back to this place in six months, we were definitely going to go there. I can remember endless calls, conference calls with our staff in the district to plan these meetings. He would get in his car and drive like a bat out of hell along these country roads and stop at little corner meeting places and there'd be ten or fifteen people and they'd bring their Social Security problems and veteran's benefits and we'd have a case worker there, and he would just do this, sort of a circuit rider, all through the district.

Riley: Was that at his initiative or were you pushing—

Neel: No, absolutely his initiative. He knew that he was going to have to find a way to connect to his constituents, because he needed to have the ability to do this issue-oriented work and perhaps sometimes vote in a way that his more conservative constituents might not appreciate. But if they knew him and they liked his hard work and they knew that he was fighting for them on all kinds of things, they would be supportive of that work.

The point I was going to make is through all these town meetings, occasionally an issue would come out of one of those meetings. Someone would come to a meeting and say, "Let me tell you about a problem I'm having. Did you know that there's only one company that sells contact lens solution and it costs $8 a bottle? And I know it only costs 30 cents to make because my husband is a pharmacist," or whatever, and he would be interested in these things. He was sort of a one-man *60 Minutes* operation if he caught on to one of these things. He would write these things down—the tape can't get this—but he would come back to Washington and sit his staff down,

his legislative, Washington staff. We had about ten people in Washington, ten or twelve in the state. And he would have written about a hundred little notes on little pieces of paper like this across the state.
Riley: For the record these are about a half inch by an inch and a half—

Neel: Some might be a little larger, some might be on the back of business cards, but his desk would be covered with these little pieces of paper and he would pick one up and he would say, "Roy, at our meeting in Dunlop a guy named Calvin Thompson told me that he's got a backyard satellite dish and he wants to be able to buy HBO. HBO has told him not only will they not sell it to him, but they're going to make it a crime to take it down even though it's not scrambled. Would you look into that?" And he would hand me this little piece of paper. This would be my work for the morning.

So I'd follow up on it, we'd find out all this stuff, that in fact HBO and the cable industry had put into the works a proposed law that would make it illegal for anyone to take down an unscrambled signal from a satellite. From that one meeting and that little piece of paper a whole legislative agenda would grow out of that. Same thing with contact lens solution, with Amtrak.

After Carter came into office, the Department of Transportation was facing a horrendous situation with Amtrak. They were leaking money, the trains were old, people weren't riding them. It was a real mess. The Department of Transportation proposed eliminating about half of the Amtrak network. One of those trains ran through middle Tennessee and at one of his meetings somebody stood up and said, "Congressman Gore, did you know that they're about to end the only rail passenger service we have through Murfreesboro, Tennessee? Can you help us with this?" And there was a passionate group of people in Tennessee and all through the country who were passenger rail fans. Al thought, *Well, that's interesting.* He began to look into it and brought that piece of paper back to me and we got into this and he got excited about it.

We found an ally in Wyche Fowler in Georgia, who was a Congressman from Atlanta, and Wyche and Al got together with Wyche's staff and me. We sat down and we thought, *Well, what's the deal here*? We found that the funding for Amtrak was already on the table. It had gone through the committees. It had passed the Appropriations Committee; it was moving on to the House floor within one week. It included in it a proposal to basically gut Amtrak, kill our train in Tennessee and a bunch of others around the country. They said, "We're not going to let this happen. This is premature." We had all this information about the fuel efficiency of rail passenger service as well as service in rural areas, not to mention the fact that there were hundreds of thousands of passionate fans of passenger trains that were upset about this.

So we organized a coalition of people around the country. These are two freshman members of the House. This was in November of 1977, we'd been there maybe seven or eight months. We didn't know what we weren't supposed to do. We weren't supposed to buck these old bulls on the Appropriations Committee that had already gotten all this worked out. They had saved their trains, but you know, everyone else, to hell with them.

We worked very hard and we turned back this plan that the House Appropriations Committee had approved and the Senate approved and the Department of Transportation approved and we

re-committed the entire Appropriations Committee report to the committee, with instructions to restore all these trains until a study could be done and all this stuff. It was a huge victory and we got a great kick out of it and people were flabbergasted that these two freshmen Congressmen could pull this off. This was another thing that came out of these meetings across the state of Tennessee. This was the way he integrated his constituent work with his issue work in Washington, which was to fight on behalf of ordinary people against the big government interest and big business interests. It was sort of populism with an intelligent bent to it.

We did these things constantly. We were all overworked, we didn't have any resources to speak of, but it was great. It was clearly the best time any of us had had in Washington, those first four or six years in the Congress. It also helped him do something else. It helped him both identify with and connect with his constituents on a more personal level and on a political level that he might not have been able to do otherwise.

Riley: How was he being viewed at this early period in the late '70s by the Washington establishment? I'm especially interested in your observations about how the press was reacting to him. If he had any relations with the Carter White House, what those were like, and then the Democratic leadership under Tip O'Neill.

Neel: A member of Congress or a Senator is only going to be able to be as aggressive or successful as his constituents will let him be. He had enormous popular support across the state of Tennessee, not just his congressional district. He had been there maybe six months and was viewed as a "comer" and as the likely successor to Howard Baker, who was the Republican Senator from Tennessee. Jim Sasser had been elected as a Democrat. In fact, Baker ran for reelection in 1978 and Al was pushed hard by a lot of people to run against Baker in '78. We knew better than that. Baker was popular, he was going to win. Whatever Al's popularity or what he had gained was not going to work in '78.

Riley: Were there people in Washington pushing you?

Neel: Oh yes, yes. The Senate Congressional Committee. I don't remember the Carter White House weighing in on that but labor unions, any number of people. He wasn't going to do that, he had a lot more work to do in the House. So he was viewed with a great deal of respect and admiration across the state of Tennessee. He wasn't yet beloved as a politician. He was too young; he was not a personality to have developed that kind of relationship with the voters in Tennessee yet.

In Washington, there were several other levels too. He was viewed with growing respect by the Democratic leadership, Tip O'Neill, people like that. They began to view him less as a showboat but more as someone who was going to be a star in the Democratic Party. And they encouraged that. Tip O'Neill came down and did a fund raiser for Al in his first reelection campaign—

Riley: How did that—

Neel: He came to a little Holiday Inn in Lebanon, Tennessee and did a fund raiser for Al. A lot of these guys, too, had really loved Al's father and they felt that connection. But they also had

begun to develop a real growing respect for Al. He wasn't doing it the way they did it. He wasn't working to be the Speaker of the House.

The press that covered these kinds of issues, meaning the national press that would cover congressional hearings and these kinds of things, caught on to him very quickly as someone to get to know and work with, because basically he created stories for them. In addition to that, he took some of their work and made public policy issues out of it. Occasionally, if a *60 Minutes* story, for instance, was being developed about some abuse in some industry or some healthcare thing, they might have come to the Oversight staff and said, "Are you aware of this? You guys should do something about this." So there was a kind of relationship at work there. Gore's committee would do a hearing that would then be a part of this *60 Minutes* broadcast.

The younger political journalists looked at him with a lot of interest. The old bulls may have seen him in a different way but they were very positive too. I cannot remember a negative column being written by a political journalist in Al's early years from an objective source.

Now within the Congress there were a group of committee chairmen who really didn't like Al Gore. He was upstaging them, he was taking some of their issues. On the Science and Technology Committee on which Al also served in 1980, he became the chairman of the Investigation and Oversight Subcommittee of the House Science and Technology Committee. He won that chairmanship in 1981 for the last four years he was in the House. The committee had kind of a fuzzy jurisdiction. They oversaw NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] and the National Science Foundation, a few other things. But it was a secondary committee for almost all the Congressmen that were on it.

The investigation subcommittee, which was supposed to be just that, an investigation and oversight committee, was essentially a vehicle for junkets for members of the committee and their spouses and other members of Congress that they would invite on board. This was widely done, particularly in the late '70s and '80s. It began to trail off a bit later on as the press got on these things. One of the things they would do is go to the Paris Air Show. When Al became chairman of this subcommittee, we immediately went back and looked at the committee reports. We found that the committee had only convened four times in four years, but most of what they did was take these junkets. They would go to Brazil. They would go to Asia and they'd have stop-offs in Hawaii and Paris. The guy who was running the committee was basically a travel agent for these members of Congress and their friends.

Riley: I think with your art background, probably a trip to the Louvre would be—

Neel: It would be fine for me but Al wasn't going to have anything to do with it. We immediately fired the guy who was running the subcommittee. Now that brought about the ire of the full committee chairman, because he was his guy. Al immediately set out to hire a professional staff person, scrambling for staff, begging for staff. They immediately said, "No, we will name your staff director." We had to fight the chairman all the way.

Finally Al was able to hire a professional staffer and a couple of assistants. We recruited fellows that were free, science fellows from various organizations and universities. We set out an agenda

of perhaps 20 hearings and immediately all the senior people said, "No, you can't do those. We're not going to let you do them." Al said, "Well, yes I will." They refused to give him a budget or anything. So by hook or crook we did these hearings, and they went all across the board. I mean they were all very serious, some quite esoteric. This was where Al Gore got his start on global warming issues, began to develop these things, on a whole variety of other kinds of very technical science issues. It's where he began his work on fiber optic networks and the beginnings of the Internet-related issues. He ran this committee very aggressively. We held something like 80 hearings in four years, which is a very busy agenda.

It raised the hackles of a number of the senior members who thought he was making them look bad, basically. But so what. Al did that work which was really the genesis for much of the work he did later on in the Senate and in the White House as well.

Riley: You said that people knew he wasn't angling to become Speaker of the House, so there was a sense, I would assume, based in part on this kind of bull-in-the-china-shop behavior that this is not somebody that's interested in developing a career that requires—

Neel: Getting along by going along.

Riley: Exactly. So this was developed fairly early on that this was somebody who was there to move on to something beyond just the House of Representatives.

Neel: Well not necessarily to move on, but to do the work in a different way. In a way that was not designed just to make friends. And he was, I'm sure, viewed by some of the older members as cocky, arrogant. Some of those things stuck with him all through his career. But still, he was going to do it in a very serious way and that challenged the status quo.

Knott: During the four years that he's in the House when President Reagan is in the White House, a lot of Southern Democrats crossed the aisle on some very critical votes. Were there any instances where Congressman Gore joined in with the so-called boll weevils and endorsed—?

Neel: Not so much with the boll weevils. He was not a part of that group and generally was on the other side of those issues and on the other side of a lot of Reagan policies. I mean, Reagan was trying to dismantle the TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority], there were constituent interests, there were other things as well. It was much of the economic program. Where Gore disagreed with the liberal position in a most profound way was on a national security issue, in particular, a proposal to build a new generation of nuclear missiles, nuclear warheads.

Riley: This begins when he's in the House.

Neel: This is when he was in the House. This would have been in '82 and on into '83 but primarily around '81, '82. Starting in 1980, '81, Al began a very aggressive study of nuclear arms policy—arms control, weapons and so on—using a guy who was on the House Intelligence Committee at the time, Leon Feurth, who was detailed to Al to do this sort of tutorial. Al had become a member of the Select Committee on Intelligence—

Riley: Is that what prompted this in ’80 or ’81?

Neel: Yes. Well, the story that Al tells is that he began to hear a lot of people, both in Tennessee and elsewhere, his own kids, worrying about the prospects of nuclear war. He just got interested in it. Certainly nothing political stimulated that. Through his study, and with Leon’s support, he determined that the biggest threat to the world, the biggest nuclear threat, was because of the aging nuclear weapon system that we had and the overwhelming threat that presented to the Soviet Union.

So he believed that what was necessary was to modernize this nuclear arsenal, get rid of these old, more dangerous, less controllable missiles—multiple warhead missiles—and replace them with smaller nuclear devices that could be much better managed, controlled and commanded in a way that would prevent accidents, would prevent accidental launches and would be more precise. You wouldn’t be launching one of these on the city of Moscow to take out the city. They could be targeted to military facilities and so on, as a way of building down the nuclear arsenal and do that in the context of a nuclear arms treaty with the Soviets that would have them do the same thing. So you would be backing away from the threshold.

There was a strong contingent in the Democratic Party that was essentially anti-nuclear at all times. They would be damned if they would fund the development of any new nuclear device, nuclear weapon. Al and a few other guys, Norm Dicks and a few other House members, aligned with a few Republicans in the House and a few Republicans in the Senate and the Reagan White House—particularly their arms control people, not their political people, and their Defense Department people—to work toward a compromise which produced something called the Midgetman solution. Gore was a prominent supporter of that. That went against the liberal Democratic orthodoxy. For the first time he got a scathing column written against him by Mary McGrory, of all people. Probably one of the meanest columns ever written until he ran for President, in which she just basically condemned him for retreating from his liberal roots and those of his father. His father would be ashamed of him and all this stuff.

Well, she was wrong. Gore and that group were right. In any event it was something he just believed in. He knew it wasn’t going to create any political benefit for him. I mean, arms control issues don’t give you any political juice whatsoever. So that was one example. I can’t remember any examples where he aligned with the boll weevils as such. These were mostly Southern Congressmen. Some of them later became Republicans. You know, Billy Tauzin, Phil Gramm and some of those people. But no, he was not part of that group.

Riley: How was Reagan doing in his district?

Neel: Well, Reagan did very well. He certainly carried that congressional district in 1984. I don’t think Reagan carried our congressional district in 1980. I think Carter won that district, but Reagan did carry the state in 1980. That was really not much of an issue. Al Gore won his races. After his first race in the 1976 primary, he would get 80-90 percent of the vote, and in his first Senate race he won with something like 70 percent of the vote. He was never challenged. Once he was first elected to the House, he was never challenged seriously.

Riley: The Senate race comes up in ’84. What precipitated that? Howard Baker retiring?

Neel: Yes. Al got wind of this through a friend, a Republican friend, that Baker was about to announce his retirement within a few days. It gave Al a head start of a couple of days to put together a network of supporters, so when Baker did announce that he was going to retire—it got out maybe the day before, the evening before—Al had already lined up support from all of the Democratic political leadership in the state of Tennessee with the exception of the two or three other people who wanted to run. They came out immediately after Baker’s press conference and announced that they were going to support Al Gore, that they thought Al Gore should run. The Speaker of the House, a man named Ned Ray McWherter, who later became Governor, basically sealed the deal.

All the key Democratic constituency groups, communications workers, the teachers, and others, and it became a slam dunk. He had virtually no opposition for the Democratic nomination.

Riley: Were you working with him at the time in terms of putting feelers out?

Neel: Sure.

Riley: And the feedback was all extremely positive?

Neel: Oh, yes. It was hard to imagine how he could lose, despite the fact that it was Reagan’s landslide reelection.

Riley: Exactly.

Neel: I mean, the biggest problem we had was dealing with the challenges around the state, are you for [Walter] Mondale and [Geraldine] Ferraro? Al did not go to the convention in 1984. I mean, he wasn’t a part of any of the convention plans and he did not attend the convention in ’84. He stayed home and campaigned.

Riley: How did he respond when people asked him?

Neel: He said he’ll support the Democratic nominee. He wasn’t going to run away from that. You got a lot of questions about Ferraro, but Al was a Southern Congressman who voted for the ERA [Equal Rights Amendment]. I don’t know that he had been in the minority, but certainly it was not a majority position in the South, even among Democrats. He had never made any secret of his support for that. I never talked to him, at least I don’t remember conversations we had about Mondale’s choice of Ferraro, but he never said anything negative about Geraldine. They had been friends; she was a House member.

Riley: But they didn’t come and campaign in the district.

Neel: No, no. Mondale may have made a stop in the state, but his options were so few, he was focusing on other places.

Riley: I remember Ferraro coming into Montgomery when I was there.

Neel: It was clear they were going to get wiped out from the beginning.

Knott: Does his agenda change much when he moves from the House to the Senate? Does he continue to stick with some of the same issues?

Neel: He did carry over a number of the same issues, but his agenda changed in this respect. Suddenly he was assigned to some different committees. He became a member of the Armed Services Committee, so it furthered his involvement in national security issues, arms control in particular and other national security issues, defense issues. He had two major committees, the Armed Services Committee and the Commerce Committee, which I staffed for him as well. He continued his focus on some energy issues, transportation issues, and communications issues.

We were in the minority. When Al Gore was elected in '84, the Republicans controlled the Senate. For the first time in his career he was in the minority. It wasn't much fun. He was assigned to committees, in one case he was the only Democrat on a committee chaired by Larry Pressler, a Senator from South Dakota—North Dakota or South Dakota? God, I'm blocking it out. Anyway, Pressler was not much respected by his own party and he had this one subcommittee, Travel and Tourism. It was the only thing that Pressler had. So Bob Packwood, who was the chairman of the committee, said, "Al, I'm going to give you some of your committee choices," and he was working at the time with [Ernest] Hollings, who was the ranking Democrat. He said, "You can have this, this, this, and this, but in return you've got to go serve on this committee with Pressler."

So Al was the only other member of this committee. I don't know that it ever met. He continued working energy issues and certainly national security issues, communications issues. A lot of the things he carried over, he felt some pride of involvement and responsibility to continue some of those things. He began working on a number of healthcare issues. In the Senate the committees are not quite as important. If you get involved and you become educated on a topic, you can have an impact, regardless of what your committees are. You get noticed, you're one of a hundred. If you are thoughtful and you study an issue, you can really do some interesting work. Some Senators have so much on their platter they don't focus. They kind of throw up their hands and don't dig much into anything.

Knott: So the kind of style that he had adopted in the House, the sort of individual or entrepreneurial approach, in some ways now that he's in the Senate he has even more leeway to pursue his own agenda.

Neel: Exactly. That's right. You've got a little bit bigger bullhorn, you get noticed a little bit more. After his election in '84 he started getting the little sprinkling of newspaper articles, "This guy will be a presidential contender some day." He was young and he had a lot of energy and he had very strong electoral support in his own state, well thought of in many circles. Every time a guy gets elected to the Senate, somebody starts talking about him being a presidential contender or a vice presidential contender, whatever. They all think they ought to be President. All one hundred of them. So it is not an unusual thing, but you do start getting this attention and you do

have more tools. You have a larger staff; you have other resources that allow you to do these things.

Knott: Though on Armed Services he worked under two very powerful chairmen, right? John Tower and Sam Nunn, if I remember correctly. How did that work?

Neel: He only had to be in the minority for two years. Then when the Democrats took the Senate back in the ’86 election and Nunn took over, he and Nunn became good friends and they worked closely. I say good friends, as good a friend as you can in the Senate among men who look at each other as potential rivals. I mean, there aren’t many close friendships developed in the Senate except with those people who are no longer a threat. That’s why everybody loves Teddy Kennedy now. Teddy Kennedy is everybody’s friend because he is a threat to no one. And same with David Pryor, people like that. If someone is viewed to be a potential presidential candidate, they don’t have many close friends. The Senate doesn’t work that way, unless you brought those friendships into the Senate with you. But he and Nunn were as close as they were going to get and Nunn was very supportive of Al’s work and Al’s involvement. In fact, Nunn was one of the first people to endorse Al Gore in his first presidential campaign in ’87, ’88.

Riley: Why don’t we take a four or five minute break and we’ll come back and talk a little more about the Senate and the transition.

[BREAK]

Riley: Anything particularly memorable about that time that you want to get on the record, before we start talking about his consideration of presidential politics?

Neel: It wasn’t long after he came to the Senate in January of ’85 that people began touting him as a potential presidential candidate. That pushed our political activity into a whole different realm. Before that, it just sort of took care of itself. He participated in events, he did things with the party, with different groups, but we didn’t have a political operation at all. The fact that he didn’t have to worry about reelection to office or even election to the Senate for that matter, it gave us the luxury of not having to think about campaign politics hardly ever.

Now, that has a down side, too. But in any event, for the first time we had to start looking and thinking about national politics because we weren’t going to be left alone. It was right after the Mondale wipe-out in ’84, so everyone who thought they were anyone in the Democratic Party was looking for solutions, looking for people, factions were developing to begin to get behind certain candidates. It’s not unlike what the Democratic Party is looking at today. People were beginning to choose sides and promote certain people.

A group of moderate Democrats, not all Southerners, but moderate Democrats—that’s the way they would think of themselves—mostly from the finance side, there were fundraisers, they were in the business world, and so they took a real liking to Al. We had known a number of them. He spoke to some of their events and probably as early as ’85, ’86, some of these people began

talking up Gore. Others were being talked up as well for sure. There were other people on different paths, Dick Gephardt in particular, that thrust our operation into a different area.

Having said that, there was a pretty substantial wall between our legislative operation in the Senate and politics. Only one person on our staff, Peter Knight, did any serious fundraising, was involved in fundraising. Other than scheduling and just general kibitzing, we didn't have a politically-oriented staff. My background wasn't campaigns and pure politics. For that matter, no one in our office had that background.

Riley: Did he use an external consultant when he ran for the Senate in '84?

Neel: Yes, two media consultants, Bob Squire and Carter Eskew. It was our first work with Bob and Carter. We didn't have political consultants, we had media consultants who did advertising basically, and then we had a direct mail consultant. But we didn't have anything like the types or number of people that candidates have these days, even for the Senate. We didn't need it. I don't remember how much money we raised, but we spent maybe half of it. Maybe spent the last of it in kind of a goodwill tour and some ads, thank you ads, but it was a campaign that assumed he was going to win and it was not very stressful.

Anyway, we came to the Senate, suddenly and not unexpectedly he started to be talked about and we had to start thinking in different terms. It put him under a spotlight. We had to be that much better at what we did, because if you give a speech it's going to get noticed. If you go to a hearing and ask a really bad, misguided question or if you take a position on an issue that reveals a kind of untoward relationship, it's going to be noticed, whereas in the House maybe no one would notice. In the Senate, and particularly given that it was Al Gore, it was going to be noticed. So we had to ratchet up our professional resources within the Senate operation. We had to improve both the quality of our staff in terms of experience and skills as well as broaden it and find other ways to supplement the staff with limited funds, too.

Knott: You mentioned earlier his interest in defense issues, especially the nuclear issues. Did Senator Gore have any involvement in intelligence matters? I'm thinking in particular the Iran-Contra scandal explodes during Reagan's second term, sort of dominates that entire period of time. Was there any involvement there? Anything that stands out in that regard?

Neel: Well, my recollection was that at first he was not on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. But as a member of the Armed Services Committee he was privy to a lot of that information. There were hearings on various aspects of that and the Democrats controlled the Senate at that time. Nunn was not an antagonist to Reagan's Defense Department and we didn't have that kind of relationship with the administration. Al was not active in any investigations related to Iran-Iraq, in part because it became a legal issue pretty quickly and the special counsel was appointed. That sort of took it out of Congress to a certain extent. He was not one to give endless speeches about the evils of the administration on the Iran-Iraq thing.

Riley: Were you at all involved or was anybody on the Gore staff involved in the development of the Super Tuesday primaries? Was that looked at as something that ultimately you could take

advantage of, or was it something that you were actually helping to drive during that period of time?

Neel: Well, the party decisions about Super Tuesday developed shortly after Al came to the Senate, after the Mondale wipe-out—There was a thinking that the Southern primaries were watered down in the process and that a Super Tuesday would give more focus and therefore might produce a more moderate candidate, and therefore would more likely elect a Democratic President. We were not involved in that. I don't recall Al being personally involved in any of that. I can't recall who was party chairman at the time, maybe it was Paul Kirk. Yes, Paul Kirk was chairman. We were not involved in that, but it clearly wasn't lost on the people who were pushing Gore and Gephardt, for that matter, at the time, that this could be a benefit for someone coming out of the center to run in the Democratic primaries.

Riley: What kind of discussions do you recall about whether to decide to run for President in 1988?

Neel: Not many. He kept it very close to the chest. He did talk to a lot of people but he wasn't convening groups of people to hash this out. I'm sure he talked a good bit to Squire and some others. There was this group of moderate Democrats who were active, they raised money all around the country. They came to him and urged him to think about it.

It was a fairly narrow window of time to consider it. It was the spring of '87 and by that time there were already six people in the race, and they had basically recruited all the staffs and set up organizations. Of the six, they were all fairly at the same level. [Michael] Dukakis had more of the established players, I think, but Gephardt was actively running, as were a number of other people. The window in which he had his deliberations was fairly short and I don't recall a lot of freewheeling conversations about whether he should run or not. That's generally not been the way he has done his deliberations about politics or anything else.

Knott: What were your feelings at the time about this? You must have thought about this to some extent. Did you think he was jumping too fast?

Neel: It sort of snuck up on me. We had a staff retreat in March—

Riley: Eighty-seven?

Neel: Eighty-seven. I think it was March, maybe it was February, I can't remember, in which this subject came up. Somebody on the staff said, "Are you going to run for President next time?" And my recollection was he said, "I don't think I will. There are people that would like me to, but I just don't think the time is right." And that was pretty much the last of it. I mean, there had been internal speculation within.

I remember, in my own situation, I went into the hospital for some minor surgery, I guess it would have been April, maybe on a Friday morning. And on Saturday morning, Peter Knight called me at the hospital and said, "You've got to get out of the hospital, we might be making this race." I was totally shocked, completely taken aback. It was some time the next week when

it broke. There was a lot of talk about it and the press was speculating about it, not in a major way because there were six guys already running and not that many people were thinking seriously about Al Gore running for President. But he came into the office the next morning at 8 o'clock and said, "I've made up my mind, I'm going to do this." We had to scurry and put together an announcement event in the Mansfield Room in the Capitol within just a few hours.

Riley: You were his Chief of Staff at the time?

Neel: No, at the time I was his Legislative Director. Peter Knight was Chief of Staff.

Riley: Just to help us out, who would he likely have these kinds of conversations with if he's mulling over? I mean Peter Knight would have been somebody that he would have talked with about it.

Neel: He would have talked to Peter. Al has always, at least in my experience, seemed to compartmentalize advice. That's why you wouldn't get, a la Clinton, these freewheeling, all-night brainstorming sessions about what you should do about a subject and you'd have in the room every imaginable person. If you're talking about foreign policy, Clinton would have everyone from James Carville to Susan Thomases to whomever in the room, which made no sense. He just listened to everybody. Gore never operated that way. If you had credibility or something to contribute on a particular subject, you were in the room and he talked to you. He would seek your counsel. But if that wasn't your area and you really had nothing to contribute, you were probably not going to be involved in that discussion and you knew you weren't going to insert yourself in it.

So he would have talked about this with people whose opinion he thought would have made a real difference. Who would have really known what they were talking about, what the prospects were, who's doing what with whom.

Riley: That's [unclear] in the realm of electoral politics, then?

Neel: Exactly. I would not have been involved in a debate about what we were going to do about arms control issues.

Riley: Right.

Neel: I wouldn't have sought that meeting. And this is the single thing, by the way, having nothing to do with the subject, that is most unrealistic about *The West Wing*, in which Leo McGarry, the Chief of Staff, is in the situation room running these things and is knowledgeable about coups in Venezuela. That's ridiculous, that would never happen. It doesn't happen in this [George W.] Bush White House, it didn't happen in the Clinton White House.

But in any event, I would not have been one in direct conversation with him about how we raise the money, where would the campaign team come from, what would we do about this or that. He would have talked to Bob Squire. He would have talked to his father. He would have talked to maybe a couple of journalist friends. And then he would have just sucked it up and made a

decision. Gore's way of gathering and processing information is, unlike Clinton, not a vacuum cleaner. It's much more microscopic.
Riley: We'll get to that aspect, because this is something we want to hear very much about. But in trying to get a sense about Gore's decision-making, it's helpful to know who would be in the relevant orbits that we might talk with eventually to get a sense of that.

Neel: Unfortunately, Squire is dead. There are probably few people who had a closer working relationship with him on pure politics through the years. Squire did not do that campaign in '88. He was working on other Senate campaigns and gubernatorial campaigns and he didn't do the media work for the '88 presidential campaign. But Squire was a career-long advisor to Gore.

It's a good question, though. You know, I've never been asked that and I don't know who would really even know the answer. I mean, you should talk to Peter at some point if you're interested in it. Maybe Tipper [Gore]; I don't know that Tipper is going to feel comfortable doing these kinds of things at this point. But I don't know the answer to that. I don't think that he ever did this by gathering a number of people in a room and then canvassing them all and then having an open discussion. He did that on some issues, but I don't think in '87 his decision to run for President was done in that way.

Knott: So you remained in the Senate office while this campaign in '88 took place?

Neel: In the beginning I did. Peter went off fairly soon to manage the fundraising process in that campaign and I took over at that point as Acting Chief of Staff. Then Peter never came back; after the campaign he left to go into business and do other things. Toward the end of the campaign I took a leave of absence and went on the road with Gore. Between the New Year and Super Tuesday, I was on the plane with him for the duration of the campaign, through Super Tuesday, because we just needed a traveling Chief of Staff.

I was both conduit and liaison to the campaign out of the Senate office but we still had regular work to do. That campaign lasted about a year for us, through the New York primary when he got out. So we had about a year. He was not willing to miss that many votes or to completely give up on a number of issues that he had been involved in, so he did come back a great deal. He was there for all the important votes, but also for some committee work and so on. It was just too long a time to check out. So my work was still in running the Senate office.

We may have sent two people to the campaign from our Senate operation. As I say, we didn't really have a political operation, it was a legislative policy operation in the Senate.

Riley: The picture that you painted of Congressman Gore is that this is somebody that was extremely attentive to how things were playing back in his district. Did you get the sense that he was worried about how a presidential campaign would look to the folks back in Tennessee?

Neel: Well, that has been a legendary problem faced by a lot of people who have run for President. That ended up costing George McGovern his seat and being the sort of downward slide for a lot of people. It wasn't a big concern for Al. His support was so broad and so deep,

and there were no rising Republican stars in the state. No one ever was able to make an issue out of that. His electoral base of support was so deep that it was never really much of a concern.

Riley: I guess he had four years to recuperate. Have I got my math right?

Knott: Two years.

Neel: Two years until his reelection. We can get to that later if you want to, after his ’87, ’88 presidential campaign, or I can just fast forward through that.

First of all, just as a kind of a footnote. Super Tuesday, which was supposed to be the launching pad for first Gephardt and then Gore—Gore basically knocked Gephardt out of the water. It was a fairly bitter campaign between the two of them and it took years to repair afterwards, but was repaired. The real surprise in that campaign was that the big winner of Super Tuesday was Jesse Jackson. We won five states on Super Tuesday, but Jesse Jackson won a few, mostly in the Deep South. And that ended it. Right there, that was it.

Riley: You had a crowded field, right? So the white candidates—

Neel: Gore’s only hope, and Gephardt’s too, is that you come out of Super Tuesday and be the only alternative to Mike Dukakis. It didn’t work that way. Jackson was still alive and kicking and had won a bunch of primaries. Gore was hanging on by his fingernails at that point. He didn’t get enough votes in Illinois to continue to get matching funds.

Knott: What were the differences between Senator Gore and Representative Gephardt?

Neel: They were nominal except for national security issues. They were more different on style. Al much more aggressive. He had taken a very hard position on these national security issues, particularly on nuclear arms issues. There was a seminal debate held in Iowa by the nuclear peace caucus. In the ’87, ’88 campaign, we were debating all the time. We did something like 28 debates in the Democratic primary. This was one of the early ones.

All the candidates were asked to sign a pledge to oppose any new funding for any new nuclear weapons deployment. The anti-nuclear groups were very rigid about this. I remember at this point—we knew this was going to happen and we talked about it before the debate—but they went down through each of the candidates, and I think they were all there, “Will you sign this pledge?” And everyone, “Yes, absolutely.” They were playing to the Iowa caucus. I mean, that was the whole idea, to win the Iowa caucus. Al said, “No, I won’t. Whatever the politics are here in Iowa or anywhere else, it’s bad policy. I am the only one at this table who will not sign that pledge because it is wrongheaded,” and basically, that did it. He drew the line—he was strong on national defense and they were all weak.

Well that really didn’t sit well with Gephardt especially. That was the main distinction, Gephardt had bought into the orthodoxy with the others and he was thrown off-guard. In the subsequent debates it was obvious that this was really a campaign between Gore and Gephardt, at the tier below Dukakis. Jackson was just out there doing his thing and getting support as well. But Gore

and Gephardt just ripped at each other and Gore got very tough on Gephardt. It was more of a style issue than substance.

Riley: You were on the plane with him for two and a half months.

Neel: About two months.

Riley: What did you learn about him during that period of time that you hadn't recognized before?

Neel: I'm not sure I learned anything new. It sort of reaffirmed my knowledge that he was like the Eveready rabbit. He was tireless and he had enormous discipline. We'd always known that, but it's really tested in a presidential campaign, to conserve your energy. He was rigidly disciplined about his daily routine to help him get through it.

Riley: Staying on time, not over-scheduling—?

Neel: Not so much that, you get plenty of exercise and enough sleep and prepare yourself. He has always been a man of enormous self-confidence about his ability to accomplish a task. Sometimes that self-confidence got in the way of reason, in terms of allowing enough time. For instance, he's always had great self-confidence in his writing abilities, thinking that he could finish off a speech the night before and give a great speech the next day. Well, he learned through that campaign that it wasn't that simple. When he was tired he was going to perform very poorly and he performed poorly a number of times for that very reason and didn't manage to allocate enough time and rest to do these things right.

Always wanting to do more than is reasonable, to shove more into a schedule than is reasonable. But he's not alone, it's an illness that they all suffer. Reagan is probably the only one who seemed to be serene in the face of staff that wanted to over-schedule him.

Riley: He had Nancy to—

Neel: Perhaps. I learned that Al could take a punch, but also that he was human. He was pained and aggravated by criticism that he thought was unfair, just like everyone else. His skin was no thicker than anyone else's, but the campaign definitely thickened his skin. And that he could reflect and he could have a sense of humor. One thing I did learn about him, now that you mention it, is that this discipline also went into his personal mental health as well as getting the work done. When it was over, it was over. There was not a lot of looking back and assessing blame. There were obviously reflections about how things could have been done differently or whatever, but there was not a lot of hand wringing.

The things I learned are probably the same things he learned, that in some areas he wasn't quite as smart as he thought he was. He wasn't his own best campaign manager, for instance, and there are limits to involving certain people. I also saw in him an ability to push back at people that I thought might have been harder to push back at, that maybe some people wouldn't have. Maybe

his parents or Tipper or somebody. In any event, he developed a toughness and that was impressive to me.

Knott: Did you attempt—for instance, when he would be working on one of these speeches that you said often times he would, when the next day it wouldn't go all that well necessarily because he'd been pushing too hard or cutting it too close or whatever—did you attempt to address these issues with him? If so, would he listen to you or was that something that would be—?

Neel: Oh sure, of course. The pattern in this is fairly typical with most people running in a stressful campaign. You're told you have to build in time. You push back, "Well, let me do this one last event, shake this one last hand, do this one last thing," or in Clinton's case, play cards or watch a movie or something like that. But then all of a sudden it becomes clear to you you've got to do this thing and it's 11 o'clock at night and you blow up at everybody. But then you suck it up and do it.

You gradually learn, after going through this predictable motion repeatedly, you gradually learn and hopefully you have people around you who will enforce some of these things. But some candidates, their time is not so easily managed. They're going to do it their own way, Clinton being the most famous of that. Gore is better about that. But yes, you learn from those things. You'd either talk about them or you wouldn't have to, when there are mistakes.

Riley: Does he have a temper?

Neel: Oh, yes. Not as famous a temper as Clinton's, but of course he does. He doesn't like to have mistakes in his name or his campaign. When we get to the '92 campaign, I can give you a particular painful example of that. His temper is more of a controlled temper, which in some respects is more threatening. You'd much rather have somebody blow up at you and then let it wash over and it's forgotten, gone. His temper would be of a more pointed one. If you knew him well, you knew to be worried when he was in that state. Some people who never really got to know him well never knew that they were dead meat, because it wouldn't be an explosion. There would be other more subtle ways that people would become marginalized as a result of mistakes.

Riley: But it's human.

Neel: Yes.

Riley: How was his reception during the time you were campaigning with him? I guess you must have gone up with him into New Hampshire and Iowa. Were you surprised at the reception he was getting there?

Neel: It wasn't very good in Iowa.

Riley: Not just because of the nuclear issue.

Neel: We didn't know what to expect. None of us had ever done a presidential campaign. We had barely done Senate campaigns because we didn't have really much opposition. We didn't

have a political operation. I, in addition to running the Senate office and ultimately then going on the plane early in the year, I was involved with debate preparation all through those early debates. You know, these were all issue-oriented debates and I would put the teams of people together to do the briefing books and attended most of the debates and the pre-debate preparations. So we were in Iowa a lot for that reason.

Later on he made a public display of getting out of the Iowa caucus; "That's it, I'm not running. I'm not coming back to Iowa." Well, we were at about 4 percent in the polls and it was not a tough thing to do. The idea was try to make chicken salad out of chicken dung. We were in trouble there and the idea was to at least get something out of getting out. I don't know how seriously it was taken. The reception in Iowa was not good, in part because Gephardt had the farm and labor communities, which are extremely influential in Iowa. Dukakis had the liberals, the anti-nuclear groups and others. Actually Jackson had a number of people in labor and so on. We didn't have any constituency there. We didn't have any reason for being there in the end. We didn't have any niche. So the reception in Iowa—it wasn't hostile, those are nice people—but it was politically not great.

In retrospect, most of the people in our campaign thought we made a big mistake in not focusing a lot of energy on New Hampshire. In other words, not even try to campaign in Iowa. I mean, Gephardt was next door, it made no sense. We had more opportunity in New Hampshire, we should have spent more money there. In the end we spent money late, ineffectively.

Riley: But Dukakis was in Massachusetts.

Neel: Dukakis was next door. But what we found was a reservoir of anti-Dukakis feeling in New Hampshire. New Hampshire is not that fond of Massachusetts. I don't know a lot about New Hampshire, but they don't look to Boston for leadership.

Riley: Steve's from Massachusetts.

Neel: Well, you know that deal then.

Knott: Absolutely.

Neel: So Dukakis wasn't beloved in New Hampshire. Anyway, we didn't know what to expect anywhere. We knew we would get a mildly positive reception in some Southern states and around and about, but we didn't know what to expect. We were real neophytes. We had virtually no one in our presidential campaign operation that had ever worked in a presidential campaign operation. Our campaign manager was Fred Martin, who had been a speechwriter for Mario Cuomo and then ultimately worked for Mondale. But nobody knew anything about anything. How we put that together and ran that, I don't know. It's just phenomenal.

The guy was 39 years old, we had no staff, very little money and no experience, and somehow survived it. So the reception, we didn't know what to expect.

Riley: So a candidate who has run before has a definite leg up on somebody who doesn't have that experience?

Neel: Well, there's no question about that. When you run for President, it's not like anything. Even if you've run a difficult Senate campaign. Even if you've run in New York or California. Until you do it nationwide and you do it dealing with a skeptical, hostile, cynical national political press, until you step in a whole bunch of potholes, you're not going to know how to navigate these things instinctively. If you've done it before you know you're still going to hit the potholes, but they don't derail you and they don't disorient you like they do with first-timers. Which makes a Carter win or a Clinton win all the more impressive, frankly. But yes, it makes a world of difference, there's no question about it.

Riley: Coming out of that experience did you expect that he would make another run in four years?

Neel: Oh yes, we all just assumed, if not four years, at sometime, there was no question. Nobody thought that his career was over. He was 40 years old, he had a lot of energy.

Oh, one other thing. After his campaign was over, he immediately, with Peter, worked to retire his debt. We had about a $2 million campaign debt and that has killed a lot of people. It prevented John Glenn from ever running again. He was adamant that he was going to wipe out that debt immediately and he did. Within six or eight weeks at the most, that debt was gone. That made a world of difference and people noticed.

Then after Dukakis got the nomination, after he chose [Lloyd] Bentsen, Al pledged and raised a million dollars for him throughout his network. Most people assumed he would have another shot.

Riley: Was he ever seriously in contention for vice presidential nomination that year?

Neel: I don't know how seriously, you have to talk to Dukakis people. Dukakis did ask him to allow himself to be considered. I don't know how much of it was a courtesy or how much of it was real. Dukakis and Gore hadn't sparred badly, but if you remember, it was our campaign that raised the Willie Horton issue. Not with ads—I mean, we certainly didn't do it in a way to bring racial overtones into it. It was Lee Atwater who picked up on that and had his team out there and they got pictures of Willie Horton and they basically made it a lot more personal.

I don't think any of us ever thought there was much chance Dukakis would pick Gore. There were people who thought it would be smart for Dukakis, but it seemed like a long shot. It would have been good for Al but I don't know how much more it would have done for Dukakis. I mean, Bentsen turned out to be a pretty darn good running mate and eviscerated Dan Quayle in the campaign. I don't know that it would make much difference one way or the other, but it would have been a further learning experience, that's for sure.

Knott: I'll go back to the years in the Senate, unless you have more questions about the '88 campaign.

Riley: No, see if there's anything there.

Knott: I'm particularly interested in the coming of the Gulf War and Senator Gore's vote on that. I mean there was a tremendous amount of media attention on him at that time, if I remember correctly. I believe he held out for quite some time before he stated his position. Any recollections from that particular—?

Neel: Yes, it's a vivid memory. It was the single highest profile vote he had cast up to that point in his career. He agonized over it; he studied a lot. Leon was working around the clock on that issue with him. And he didn't make up his mind until the end. I don't think he was conflicted so much as he wanted to really understand it and be completely comfortable with it. One reason he held out, he listened to virtually every minute of debate in the Armed Services Committee and on the Senate floor. He was adamant about being on the Senate floor for the entire debate. He knew his vote was being watched with some interest.

I don't remember a single conversation about the political implications other than a passing reference to, "It's not going to be popular in Tennessee if you vote against it." Or, "It will do you some political good if you vote for it," or whatever. But those were passing things and they were not the focus of much attention.

Knott: Could I just ask you to comment on this accusation that was made by I think Senator [Alan] Simpson, that he, Senator Gore, bargained away his vote for prominent television time in the course of the debate?

Neel: Well, Alan Simpson just lied about that. I confronted Simpson about this once and I confronted Pete Wilson during the Democratic convention in 2000 about this very thing, because he repeated that and I interrupted him. [Robert] Dole had tried to make some use of this in '96 and [Jack] Kemp was honorable enough to not repeat it. It was just a blatant lie. It was a rumor that started within the Republican caucus, almost certainly based on some resentment of some of the old bulls to Gore getting attention for this thing, and somehow applying some cynical interpretation of his vote. It is blatantly wrong.

The thing that gave some boost to that, I mean the reason the Republicans probably started to whisper about this, is that we were told to call and find out when he would speak, when he would have to give his speech, his statement before the vote. We called the opposing side—I don't know who was managing the opposition to the vote, perhaps the Democratic leadership—and called those who were managing the vote. We simply needed to know when he had to give his remarks. Simple as that.

So the Republicans had word that he had called to find out when he could speak. Then they told our office, "Well, it depends on how he's going to vote." And we said, "When would he speak if he was going to vote for it?" They took that and it began to kind of rattle around the Republican caucus and that came out of that. Simpson told that story, and it is total, unadulterated bullshit. It was mean spirited and calculated and cynical on his part. Dole retold the story, but he tempered

it a little bit. Dole at least said, "It was rumored that he did this." Simpson told it as if it were fact and he didn't know what he was talking about. Is that a clear enough answer?

Knott: I think it's pretty clear.

Riley: Anything, Steve? I'm wondering if there are other elements—because we didn't do a lot in the briefing work about the Senate career, that's not the primary focus of the interview. Is there anything else that comes to mind to you immediately about his time in the Senate that would be illuminating or illustrative?

Neel: There's one little anecdote. Early in our '87, '88 campaign, we went to see Bill Clinton to ask for his support. Clinton demurred and we didn't know it at the time but he had gotten close to Dukakis and he had already talked to Dukakis. He wasn't going to endorse Dukakis either, but we had a very pleasant meeting. Al and Clinton had virtually no relationship. They knew each other from a distance, they were kind of would-be rivals or potential rivals at some point, but they had a kind of healthy respect for each other. They were not friendly and didn't have much of a relationship. They worked on different things. But I remember that.

We had a lot of friends in Arkansas, friends who were also close to Clinton who basically helped run our campaign in Arkansas. We did quite well in Arkansas in '88. So that was our first brush with Clinton.

Riley: Clinton came out of that campaign not looking too good, right? He gave a four-hour speech at the—?

Neel: What you have to remember about that is that he turned that around. He got some ridicule but he quickly turned it around. It was a brilliant reversal of fortune. Had people thinking of him as the guy that played the sax on the *Tonight Show* as opposed to the guy that gave the long-winded speech.

The Senate years, after the '87, '88 campaign, of course, we had the Persian Gulf vote, but Gore was doing a lot of things during that period of time. He was chairing a Senate subcommittee. He put together a trip to fly around the world to all the environmental disaster sites. Some got wind of this trip, hearing that they were going to go to the South Pacific, India, somewhere in Europe, somewhere in Australia, and whatever, and they thought it was a junket and they started calling the office, "Can we go?" When they found the itinerary, the agenda, they were going on an Air Force jet with bunks that were like hammocks. If they were going to take a spouse, they were going to sleep in a hammock.

They would sleep on the plane, get to the site, tour the site, meet with local leaders and whatnot and get back on the plane and fly to the next one. This was a trip only an Al Gore would put together. Carol Browner was our Legislative Director at the time and we sat in this office, he had this map of the world and he was pinpointing places where we could go. Where are the most dramatic environmental disasters? One in Mali, coral bleaching in the South Pacific, and all these horrendous things all over the world. He had buttons on this map. What's the flying time? And if

somebody didn't know, he'd pick up the phone and call somebody at the Air Force and say, "How long does it take to fly from Honolulu to the Maldives," or wherever.

Riley: It's the right direction.

Neel: Anyway, so he'd get the flight time. "Well, if we leave there at this time, when would we get in there the next morning?" I mean, this is the kind of stuff he did. He was just irrepressible. These kinds of ventures that no other politician would consider doing because they do nothing for you politically, they take a lot of time and energy, and they're just unlikely things to do if you're thinking that you may want to run for higher office.

Now, two other things happened during that period, if you want to stop before the '92 presidential campaign. The first was his son's accident. It was the single most important thing that happened after the '88 presidential campaign and before the '92 presidential campaign. His son was injured in an automobile accident—

Riley: In Baltimore?

Neel: —In Baltimore after an Orioles game and he was near death and was in the hospital for months. Al and I drove back and forth between his office or his home in Washington and Johns Hopkins every day. He would visit with Albert [Gore, III] and he would take a break and then we would work and I'd be on the phone with people.

Riley: How old was his boy?

Neel: Albert would have been 12, I guess. So we set up a makeshift Senate office in the hospital at Johns Hopkins. We drove back and forth every day for several weeks. Not long after that he then began his book on the environment, *Earth in the Balance,* and wrote it himself. He hired a researcher/writer, but it didn't work out. He basically did it himself. He worked in his father's apartment near his Senate office and then worked at home, worked on a laptop, basically wrote this book himself.

The combination of Albert's accident—or at least Albert's recovery and the aftermath of that and the effect on their family—and his undertaking this massive book project. I don't know if you've seen it, but it's pretty dense and a lot of technical stuff that he personally researched and wrote. It took away almost every ounce of his attention and focus other than critical Senate work. There was virtually no room for any political activity whatsoever. We did none.

Then, of course, the summer of '91 he opted out of the race. He decided that he wasn't going to run. A number of us had gathered together with him at a restaurant in Washington, on the second floor of La Brasserie. I can remember it because I can remember who was there, talking about whether he should run in '92. He attended the meeting, which is a sort of unusual thing.

Riley: This was in early '91?

Neel: It would have been in early-mid ’91, maybe the spring of ’91. It was certainly after the Persian Gulf War was mostly over. [George H. W.] Bush’s approval ratings were through the roof. I think he was just humoring us. I don’t think this was a serious brainstorming that was going to lead to a decision on his part. He probably knew that there was this pent-up need to advise and so maybe a dozen of us, or fewer than that, gathered and we talked. I was strongly opposed to the idea. Like everyone else, I figured Bush could not be beat. How could he drop from 90 percent? We ended the session, Al saying, “I think he can be beaten. I think the right candidate with the right message will beat him. He’s ignoring the economy.” He said all those things and we said, “Right, sure.” That was it.

He was finishing his book and it wasn’t until well into the primaries that we began paying much attention to it again. I don’t know if you want to get into the campaign, but those two things, his son’s accident and writing the book that he was passionately involved in, more so than anything I’d ever seen up to that point. It pretty much sapped him of any time to do real politics.

Riley: Did you get the sense that he was contemplating getting out of public service at that time?

Neel: No, not at all. Never, never. His son did recover and the family was strong. He and Tipper have about as good a marriage as any two people can dream about. His kids were great, they were all doing well and it was a very close-knit family. He had all the support. It was a family rooted in politics; that was never an issue.

Riley: The other part of the equation was he evidently enjoyed writing this book. In academia we often hear people say, “Well, I think I’ve got one good book in me.” Do you think in Gore’s case he felt he had this one good book in him that he wanted to get out and he didn’t look at this as maybe an avenue into a different kind of career for him?

Neel: No, not at all. I think he wrote the book to try to make a difference and influence public policy. It wasn’t an academic exercise. Although there’s nothing wrong with that. [laughter]

Riley: Believe me, we hear a lot worse than that all the time.

Neel: He meant to influence. He thought he had a voice, he had some credibility, he had some things that he felt he wanted to say and that was the best way to be able to do it. That’s what that was all about. I don’t know for sure, but I don’t think that he ever considered leaving public life.

Knott: I believe it’s somewhere in this time frame, although I may have it wrong, where Mrs. Gore gets involved in her campaign to have ratings applied to rock music or whatever. Any comments on that? What was his attitude towards that?

Neel: He was supportive. He helped Tipper and Susan Baker in thinking through how they were going to make their case. He was very supportive of this but he tried to not be visibly active in it, for two reasons. One, it wasn’t his project; it was Tipper’s project. Secondly, it was the kind of thing where it would have been probably misunderstood if it had been Al who was leading the fight on this.

They had that notorious hearing in the Senate Commerce Committee on which he sat and I was involved in, where they came together on this thing. That came up in, I think it was,'89, '90. She felt very strongly about it and he was very supportive of it. I think that in the end they felt vindicated to a certain extent. To a certain extent both in politics and elsewhere you're defined by your enemies. The nature of the vitriol and some of the bile from some of their enemies—I mean, Twisted Sister is not exactly going to upset you too much if he criticizes you.

Riley: She took a lot of shots. How did he react to her taking shots?

Neel: Oh, he was defensive, for sure. But he had been around the block. He had been in a presidential campaign, he had run for office, he had been criticized himself. He had a thicker skin. Tipper is pretty good, though. She was hurt by some of the criticism, most of all by some of the sandbagging, where people promised her confidentiality or a kind of off-the-record session to talk about this and one of the people snuck in a tape recorder and then played it to everybody to basically embarrass her. That's the sort of thing she was hurt by.

He was her biggest defender and advocate. He felt strongly about those things, but he knew better than to pick up her cudgel and take it into the Senate to fight that fight. It wasn't that kind of fight. Perhaps the Senate hearing was a mistake, frankly, because it was widely ridiculed by a lot of people. In any event, her deal was something else. It was public pressure, it wasn't legislation.

Knott: Giving a platform to Dee Snyder to testify.

Neel: That was as bizarre a hearing as you'll ever see.

Riley: Frank Zappa was there?

Neel: I'll just tell you one anecdote. I remember I met with Susan Baker and Tipper the day before this hearing and they came to my office. They wanted a place to meet because they were there doing something else. So we were sitting in there and they were pouring over, I think their prepared statements. I remember Susan Baker, this most patrician woman, reading this document and then they were getting excited about some other material they'd just received about some lyrics that were in a song. Susan Baker looking at her papers and looking at me, she said, "Do you think it would be a bad idea if I used the word 'mother-fucker' in my testimony?" And I was just shocked, just totally, totally . . . and I don't think I ever answered.

Knott: She's still waiting for an answer?

Neel: I think they were kind of shaking their heads. They weren't laughing about it, it was something in one of the lyrics, I don't know. It was a bizarre thing and the hearing itself was bizarre. That was an event of note during that period of time.

Riley: Well on that note, why don't we take a lunch break and we'll come back and talk about '92?

Neel: If you get Carville in here, you'll get a lot worse than that.

Riley: Actually we've had Jim Baker in here and gotten something very close to that.

[BREAK]

Riley: On to the '92, with the experience there. Did Al Gore endorse anybody in the '92 race?

Neel: No, he did not. He did not endorse anybody.

Riley: Okay.

Neel: Until he was put on the ticket, of course.

Riley: Take us back to what you were doing in '92 and what your experiences were when he was approached about the Vice Presidency.

Neel: In '92 I was his Chief of Staff in the Senate office. We were simply watching the campaign from a distance. Early in '92, even up through the New Hampshire primary, it was not clear that Clinton was going to get the nomination and it was generally believed that he had no chance of winning the general election. He was in trouble in New Hampshire, as we all remember. There were still rumblings that Mario Cuomo would come into the race and basically save the Democratic Party.

I remember during Clinton's worst moments prior to the New Hampshire primary, I was sitting in Al's office. We had just watched either a press conference Clinton had given or something else. He bet me that Clinton would not be the nominee. We bet lunch, because I couldn't figure out who among these other guys could be the nominee, if not Clinton. So I took the bet and won it, of course, later on. I lost it on the night that Clinton made his decision about who would be his running mate because Gore bet me—we had another bet, double or nothing—and he bet that he would be chosen and I bet that he wouldn't. So I lost it coming back.

Anyway, I was working in the Senate. Very early that year, through New Hampshire, through Iowa and New Hampshire and the early primaries, once it became likely that Clinton would be the nominee, very few of us thought that Gore would even be considered for all the talked about reasons. They were too close in age and political orientation. They were neighbors in the South. It just didn't make any sense, conventional wisdom. But sometime in May, could have been early June, but sometime in that time frame, once Clinton had sewed up the nomination after the California primary, in which he may have finished second behind "none of the above" or something like that—he didn't win a big number—Warren Christopher called Al and related to him that Clinton wanted Al to allow himself to be considered. Now what that means is, rather than say, "Would you consider running," it is allowing yourself to be considered. Because coming with that is a very intrusive process of vetting and review.

So Gore agreed that he would do so and it is considered unseemly to not do that, actually, unless there is some compelling reason. That jump-started a process all through the late spring and early summer in which the Clinton campaign had a team of vetters poring over all of Gore's background, his financial records, interviewing people he had known, looking for skeletons in closets or anything that would be a problem with having Gore on the ticket. My responsibility was to be the liaison to that team. It was headed up by Harry McPherson, a Washington attorney who went all the way back to the [Lyndon] Johnson years, I believe. The overall process was run by Dick Moe and Warren Christopher.

So Harry had a team of young lawyers who were in our office about every day and asking for records. It was my job to find those records, talk to Gore and others and get all the information they needed, and then go over it with them to make sure it was what they needed.

Riley: What kind of records are you talking about?

Neel: This is everything from a high school transcript to bank records, all of your financial records, tax returns for as long as you're in public life. Just about every imaginable thing that was on record about you. At the same time they were looking at public records, news clips and that sort of thing.

Riley: And interviewing people—

Neel: And interviewing people, to ask them what they know about Gore, would there be any reason for him not to be on the ticket. Very extensive. Ten times more ambitious than a typical FBI background check. They were following up every conceivable rumor. I mean, suffice it to say that there was probably no one with a more blemish-free record, both public and private record, than Al Gore. He was certainly Dudley Do-Right, in fact to the point where some of their investigators just didn't believe it. It wasn't possible. But it held up.

There were some minor issues that had been referred to in public, they would relate to things like, "Did his father have an illegal dump on his farm," something like that. Or there were some zinc royalties coming out of Al's farm in Carthage and there was the idea that out of zinc comes a derivative called germanium that is used to manufacture fiber optic networks, and therefore was Al Gore's advocacy of the Internet somehow self-enriching. That would be about the extent of it.

Riley: There was a reference in some of the readings to an Armand Hammer connection?

Neel: Well, his father worked for Armand Hammer. Armand Hammer was a serious patron of a number of political leaders, elected officials, including Senator Gore, the elder Senator Gore. Then once Senator Gore was defeated in 1970, he went to work for one of Armand Hammer's subsidiary companies, Island Creek Coal Company. I wouldn't be at all surprised if Armand Hammer attempted to use that connection to try to influence Al. But I also know, without question, that he would have been pushed back pretty aggressively. Nor do I believe that Al's father ever attempted to use that connection to advance either Island Creek or Occidental

Petroleum. Armand Hammer was quite a figure. He would not have been above trying to use influence with Al Gore or anyone else, but it wouldn't have worked. He didn't do it; it didn't happen.

But yes, on paper, it looked like a connection they would want to pursue, but they really found very little, if anything. My job was just to make sure that they got what they wanted, to comment on anything they needed to help them with their process, and to be the interface between Al Gore and the investigative team.

Riley: And all the while you thought this was a colossal waste of time.

Neel: No, not at that point. Because once that started, I believed, and a number of us believed, that while it was improbable that he would be chosen for all the obvious political reasons, or conventional political reasons, that it was a good idea. Clinton was still pretty far behind in the polls to Bush at the time but had come on a bit. The economy was still weakening and Clinton was getting his sea legs at that point. He had hit a stride. After the nominating process, he was beginning to hit a stride and Bush was beginning to look at least marginally vulnerable.

It would be a very different kind of ticket. It would be two contemporaries, two people who would see each other sort of as equals as opposed to something largely out of whack. What really made it look possible was the meeting that the two of them had in Washington in that process. I think Clinton interviewed Gore first in the process, or at least early in the process. I don't remember how many people were interviewed. Mark Gearan was intimately involved in this process and he can tell you. But they had an extraordinary meeting. They were supposed to meet for an hour at the Capitol Hilton one night, starting at 10 o'clock, and they talked until one or two in the morning. Al came back from that meeting thinking that they had hit it off and that he thought that probably Clinton would choose him.

Knott: Can I ask you, when you said you made this bet earlier when you thought that Senator Gore wouldn't be selected and Senator Gore thought he would be. Can you remember why Senator Gore made that—what was his thinking?

Neel: Well, he was the one in the meeting with Clinton. He was the only one who had first-hand knowledge of how they had gotten along and what they had talked about. He's the only one who had any reason to know how Clinton would think.

Riley: So that was made after the meeting.

Neel: No, this bet was made the night Clinton asked Gore to be on the ticket in July, early July. My reason for betting on the other side was that old classic thing of, "Well, don't even say what it is you want or you won't get it." So if you bet against it, then you won't threaten the gods somehow, you won't thumb your nose at the gods. So in other words, modesty is best. Downplay your chances so you won't be disappointed.

Riley: Sure.

Neel: Most of us had a lot of confidence in Al, we knew our candidate and the chemistry between the two. It's easy in hindsight to be positive about it, but it was bold enough to show a youthful ticket. The four of them would look good, it was a photogenic ticket and all made sense.

It's interesting to me and again Mark probably knows as well as anyone what went into the Clintons' decision, but it was always fascinating to me to find out later on the people that strongly opposed Gore who openly were taking credit for pushing Clinton to put him on the ticket once Gore had been an asset, had proved himself to be an asset. There was a faction within the Clinton campaign for several different candidates. I guess Cuomo, [Bill] Bradley maybe and others.

In any event, your question was what were we doing. We spent probably six weeks responding to requests from the Clinton team. It was obvious that it was important to vet all of these potential vice presidential running mates exhaustively because of all the questions about Clinton's own personal background. You couldn't afford to have a vice presidential nominee who suddenly has a skeleton unearthed in any fashion. So they went to great lengths to make sure that they had someone who would pass muster.

Riley: Was there any pressure from any sector within Gore's own political family telling him this was not a good thing to do?

Neel: Oh, sure. Before he responded to Christopher as to whether he wanted to be considered, there was a good deal of debate. There were those who thought this would be suicidal, that Clinton was going to go down and take whatever vice presidential nominee he had with him. This was at a time, right up until almost the convention, certainly up until the time he chose Gore, Clinton was not beloved within the Democratic Party, much less the electorate. You still had people just weeping because Mario Cuomo hadn't come into the race.

Clinton was not a choice that many Democrats were excited about. I mean, they were resigned to it. So there was a feeling that this would not be good for Al. Conventional wisdom was that the Vice Presidency itself—even if you win, what good is the Vice Presidency? No one other than George Bush had risen to the Presidency in a hundred years or something like that. Still, it wasn't the best path to the Presidency and clearly Al Gore wanted to be President and expected to run again some day.

He had a different perspective, in part because I think he instinctively knew that the Vice Presidency didn't have to be a dead end or just a guy waiting for something to happen to the President. He had had this conversation with Clinton. Now he may have read too much into it, and we may want to talk a little bit about communication with Clinton and how people often misunderstood Clinton and what he really meant, but Al believed that Clinton had had a vision for how he would govern with Al Gore that was very attractive to Al Gore. That he would be not an equal partner, but he would be a major player and not relegated to funerals and obscure commissions and miscellaneous things like that and raising money.

So he had a different sense of how it could be and knew that it would be, even if it didn't end up with him being in the Presidency, that it would be a great opportunity for him. Because you have

to always remember that what always drove Al Gore was the opportunity to govern in a certain way, not to get elected. I mean obviously, you've got to get elected, he wasn't so naïve as to ignore that, but, for Al Gore it was always about governing and doing it better and more creatively.

He knew fully well that to be in a position to really govern, you had to be in the executive branch. You had to be helping drive the truck. The Senate was okay for him. He had risen fast, he was young, but it can be a pretty stultifying institution if you're in a hurry, if you're ambitious, if you want to move quickly and make things happen, because the institution doesn't reward that. If anything, it dampens it down because it's full of old bulls who are going to do it their way and they don't look kindly on upstarts because in fact they think they should be President. The Senate, at any given time, is full of people who have run for President themselves or have made serious noises about running. How dare someone else, particularly someone 20 years younger than them, presume to want to be the President? You can rise quickly to a subcommittee chairmanship and have some tools to do things, but it ends there. Then it's a long time before you move into a position of institutional influence.

I think he saw this as a wonderful opportunity to go to the next level, more than a lot of us saw. I always thought it was a great idea, frankly. The experience I was most familiar with was the Mondale experience with Carter. I had seen how Mondale and Carter transformed the Vice Presidency. Up to that point no Vice President had had that kind of access and influence and resources and respect before. Mondale and Carter did it because of the mutual respect between the two of them and because Carter was deferential to Mondale and Mondale and his team honored that. That was the blueprint and I think that's what Al saw. We'll talk about that a little bit later, but that was always the goal. That's what made it work, that's what made it an attractive and exciting opportunity.

Riley: Tell us what happened then when he gets the call and the immediate aftermath.

Neel: A couple of days before the call came, we had been alerted when Clinton was going to make a decision. First of all, it was getting close to the convention. The convention was only three, four days away. We were told it was not going to happen at the convention, it was going to be done before.

So several of us decamped, as they used to say in Civil War days, to Carthage from Washington. Set up shop in Carthage, at Al's house.

Riley: He was down there?

Neel: He was down there, this was in the summer. Congress was out of session at the time, I believe. It was the week after July 4th, so Congress had gone home for a break. Al and his family were there. Frank Hunger may or may not have been there, that's Al's brother-in-law. His parents were of course next door, or down the road in their own home. Bob Squire was there, Carter Eskew may have been there also. I was there and Marla Romash, who was our press secretary in the Senate.

What we were doing was thinking through the "what-ifs." What if he did get the call, what would he say? What would we do in the 24 hours after that? Now, we assumed that the Clinton campaign would have a plan, too. But most of all we wanted to make sure of two things. We wanted to make sure that he was prepared, so the very first thing that came out would be thoughtful. We also wanted to know where the problems would be, where the questions were going to come from. In particular, reporters who were not stupid had figured out what the differences were between Gore and Clinton and they were going to hone in on those things and ask Gore and Clinton, "How are you going to deal with this?" Gore is against capital punishment; you're for it. Gore was this; you were that. Blah, blah, blah. So we worked through those things.

Then once we finished all of that, after a few hours one day, we were just hanging around waiting. It was a very sort of casual, laid-back thing. Out of nervousness, I bet Gore that he would not be on the ticket. I remember him coming out of a room and saying, "It's going to be me." I said, "I don't think so." And he said, "I'll bet you." I said, "You already owe me lunch from the other bet. We'll just double or nothing."

Riley: Was he always this late in paying off his gambling debts, by the way?

Neel: Well, you've got to know, no politician ever pays off a minor gambling debt or buys lunch. I never expected to collect—no, I would have collected, yes, I would have. Had Gore not been on the ticket, I wouldn't have had the nerve to try to collect. But had we not made the second bet, I would have collected.

Riley: Okay.

Neel: But anyway, he was pretty confident. Everyone was hearing from everyone. We had all these friends in Arkansas who claimed to be very close to Clinton and his people who were touting Gore, who would then call and say, "I'm sure it's going to be you," or someone else would say that. The only ones that really knew were Clinton, probably Hillary and Warren Christopher. He was probably talking to other people, but I don't believe he was sharing intimate details about this with Carville and [George] Stephanopoulos and those guys. This was a very closely held thing. Christopher was the ultimate confidant and discreet advisor.

Nobody was getting anything real, but Al just had a sense. It all came from that meeting they had in Washington. I wouldn't say it was tense, but there were probably 30 or 40 TV trucks and reporters at the bottom of the hill. The Gore farm sits up on a hill probably about a quarter of a mile down a road to the main road. At the bottom of the hill on the main road were dozens of TV trucks. At some point we decided to leave and go over to Al's parents house, which was kind of across the road and across the river. This was really cool—they were all paying attention to everything we were doing.

At one point we have binoculars looking at the reporters and seeing that they had binoculars looking at us, because they had nothing better to do. They were sent out there by the networks and whatever, in case it was Gore. I'm sure the same thing was in place with these other candidates, with these other potential running mates. So it went on, late into the evening, and I

think around 10:30 or so, the call came. Al went into the bedroom with Tipper and then they were talking for a while so it seemed like that was probably what it was going to be. But with Clinton you didn't know. I mean, he could have talked for a while and then said, "It's going to be Bentsen" or someone, and then chatted for another ten minutes. But we didn't know.

Al came out and said, "He asked me to join the ticket." Then everything started to happen. We all found phones and started calling supporters and letting them know. We wanted our closest supporters to know before they heard it in the news. But it came right out of Little Rock within a nanosecond right after the call was made and it had already been on the wires and on the late evening news a couple of places. So we got to probably a hundred people before people starting finding out about it. We spent the rest of the night calling people all over the country. Then Clinton's campaign sent a jet to Nashville and picked us up about seven in the morning. We flew to Little Rock and they did a joint appearance.

Riley: Who all was the traveling party?

Neel: I think Al and Tipper and maybe all their children. Al's parents. I'm pretty sure both of his parents. Frank Hunger and myself and Marla and probably Squire. That's my guess.

Riley: Okay.

Neel: So we flew to Little Rock and they went off into the mansion and visited with the Clintons. Marla and I went off and met with Clinton's staff people, the campaign staff people. After everybody had coffee, we went out to a stage set up on the grounds of the mansion. They gave their speeches. Then we rolled off to New York, to the convention.

Knott: Could you tell us a little bit about your roles and responsibilities as the campaign progressed?

Neel: I was still Chief of Staff in the Senate at the time. I never actually gave up that responsibility. They gave us the plane and we went back to Washington, the Gores and the kids and I went, maybe Marla as well. Basically repacked our bags and went to New York, to the convention.

My job at that point—let me back up a little bit. When we got to Little Rock that morning, Clinton came out and Al introduced Clinton to me and Clinton said, "Well, I'm glad you're here, Roy, because I've got Mark Gearan here whose going to be our liaison. Use him or not, but he's the guy we're going to give you guys to help you put this thing together." Well, I had known Mark casually and we hit it off immediately. We went off in a room and figured out how we were going to do this, that he would be on the plane and I would be in Little Rock. The reason was, we had all the Gore people on the plane and they were all Clinton people in Little Rock and so we did a cross-pollinization. So I went to Little Rock to run the vice presidential campaign and he was on the plane as the traveling campaign manager for the Vice President, for Senator Gore in that campaign. So he was working with Gore people and I was working with Clinton people.

Once every week, I guess, we would flip and I would go on the plane for a day or two and he would come to Little Rock. Then once every two weeks I would go to Washington, because Gore lived in Washington still and there were even two or three times where he had to go back and vote on really important issues. So I would get a day or so in Washington, a couple of days a month in Washington. I still continued as the nominal Chief of Staff for the Senate office in Washington, but I went on the campaign payroll.

Knott: So you were in the war room in Little Rock, is that the correct?

Neel: Well, the headquarters was the old *Arkansas Gazette* newspaper building. It's a perfect facility for a campaign. You had four floors so you could tier the activities for security and everything. The room, it couldn't have been better. For that matter, running it out of Little Rock was an absolutely brilliant decision. I don't know that it was ever a decision, it was a foregone conclusion. But it made it casual and laid back, more comfortable, more fun certainly than being in Washington. It made it a little bit easier to manage press relations. You didn't have to worry about all the hangers-on in Washington getting in your way, coming to the campaign, bothering you, or also trying to muck it up.

The top floor was the management team. We had two or three offices assigned to the Vice President's team. What we did—and it became the model for once he was elected—we put Gore people in all of the different parts of the Clinton campaign to try to make it a truly integrated campaign. All of what we had known about campaigns and certainly governing was that the relationship breaks down and you get in trouble if you're an isolated little piece of it. But if you can be included in everything that's going on and put good people that are viewed to be not Gore people but Clinton-Gore people, then you just go a long way toward eliminating the traditional tensions that occur between presidential and vice presidential operations.

So we made sure we had Gore people working in every area. We had a big scheduling operation, but our scheduling people also worked side-by-side with the Clinton scheduling people. Same thing with press. The war room, which was a policy operation that James and George ran, that James ran, we had two people in there. They worked for James, they just happened to be Gore designees. So that kind of integration is what really made it work.

I was a part of the senior staff meetings every morning. When I would travel and Mark was back, he would sit in. We brought down four or five people from our Senate office, four or five people doing policy work. They went on the campaign payroll. I brought my assistant. We just sort of settled in as part of the Clinton campaign team. They already had it set up and it expanded after the convention because you get the federal money. They didn't have any money to spend until then, but the whole campaign exploded after the convention.

Knott: Can you talk a little bit about James Carville and perhaps George Stephanopoulos and give us your assessment of the two of them?

Riley: And Mickey Kantor, was he the—

Neel: Mickey was the titular campaign chairman. The campaign manager was David Wilhelm. The Chief of Staff was Eli Segal. James was just sort of a consultant to the campaign. George was communications director. But the titles didn't really reflect the roles so much.

Up until the convention, it had been not a rag-tag operation, but a volatile operation. It wasn't until probably early in the summer, two weeks before the convention, that James even came in full time and really took on a very serious senior role. George's role all along had been press relations more or less, but Dee Dee [Myers] was the press secretary and was on the road with the candidate and George was back in Little Rock. George was a press guy and a strategist in between the policy shop and the press relations and the candidate, but was new to Clinton. He didn't have a long background with Clinton. I don't remember when George came on the campaign, but he was not there from the beginning.

James had been a consultant to the campaign but didn't come on full-time until that summer, I think. The war room took on a life of its own in part because of the way James ran it. It became a popular place for the press to stop by and take a look at what was going on. James was a magnet for the press and Little Rock was a great place to be managing your business if you were doing the campaign, because you had a fortress in the *Gazette* building and you could take people to various hotel bars and restaurants. It worked well.

James became kind of an overnight celebrity because of that. News got out about how the war room was run. It was called the war room but what everyone saw it as was just a rapid response operation in which maybe 15 people worked from 5 a.m. until 1 or 2 in the morning. Constantly looking at what Bush was doing, looking at issues coming out of Congress and the national news, looking for a niche, looking for something to take a hit and pumping it out there quickly. They were all hungry. Nobody in that room had ever won a presidential campaign. No one in that room had ever worked in the White House and they were hungry. They were ardent Democrats. They all had some policy and communications experience and they all desperately wanted to win this election and they were tireless. So it wasn't so much a well-oiled machine as much as it was a kind of a constantly chugging-along machine.

James was not a manager. It was just sort of free-floating—I don't know what to compare it to, but it was like a house party on speed that never stopped.

Riley: But there was nobody in that operation that had a long experience with Clinton. I raised Mickey Kantor's name. Was there somebody else in the operation that had kind of day-to-day responsibility that was a longtime Clinton—?

Neel: Not longtime. The longest serving Clinton loyalist was Bruce Lindsey. He was on the plane with Clinton. There were very few people that came out of Clinton's gubernatorial service that were active in the campaign. Betsy Wright was part of the campaign but she was not in the headquarters. She had been his Chief of Staff as Governor but had been marginalized at some point, came back into it during the campaign to do some damage control from the so-called "bimbo eruptions." But she was not a part of the campaign operation in Little Rock. She was running an outside enterprise.

Bruce was on the plane and was at Clinton's side constantly. Clinton went nowhere without Bruce. David Watkins was an administrative officer of the campaign. There were other people that he'd had a relationship with, Webb Hubbell and so on, but they weren't part of that central campaign operation. These were all people that had come on board since '91, pretty much exclusively.

Knott: One of the major events that takes place that fall, at least for Vice President Gore, was the vice presidential debate. Could you tell us about any role you may have played in preparation for that event?

Neel: It was my job to manage the debate preparation, which really meant picking people to do certain things and then it ran itself. I was there for the debate preparation. We found a farm in middle Tennessee with an equipment building that was fairly new. We turned it into a debate setting, a mock debate setting. We had people playing Quayle and [James] Stockdale and we did mock debates. We had a scheduling team, we had an advance team that did all this stuff. Somebody produced a poster. All the regular campaign stuff. I was just sort of overseeing the whole thing and I was there for the duration. It was on a kind of a day like today, in October, before the debate in Atlanta. And it was fun. There is nothing that we looked forward to more than debating Quayle.

And Quayle did not do badly. I had my first major television appearance after that debate in which we had kind of a subsequent debate between Bill Kristol, who was Quayle's guy, and myself, and a guy who was working for [H. Ross] Perot at the time, who was sitting in to spin for Stockdale. We did a kind of a mini-debate on *Larry King* out of Atlanta and it was a lot of fun. So Quayle did not do poorly. Gore was certainly more assertive and more aggressive. We were certain that Gore won the debate and would be perceived to have won the debate. The press the next day basically gave Gore the points on most things but they were respectful to Quayle. Quayle didn't do anything really bad, didn't make any big mistakes at the debate. It was an afterthought in some respects.

We believe, the Gore crowd believe, that we were central to Clinton's pulling ahead in the polls and winning. I know it is a fairly egocentric analysis. We were convinced that Clinton would not have won without Gore. Many of the ideas in that campaign were at least advanced and made even stronger by Gore's contribution. The bus trips—they were going to end the bus trip after the convention and that was going to be it. Gore convinced Clinton to keep doing the bus trips all around the country, much against the advice of Clinton's staff.

Susan Thomases, who worked for Clinton, was dead set against it, adamant that it should not happen. Big mistake. So that was our first internal problem, with Susan. In any event, we were sort of egocentric about this. In the end the vice presidential debate was kind of meaningless. Actually I think that it was somewhat of an issue in 2000. We don't need to get into that, but I thought [Joseph] Lieberman was miserable. Nevertheless, we didn't do a lot better in the Gore debate either—but the Quayle-Gore debate was not a significant event in the campaign. The three Clinton-Bush debates were really electrifying for our campaign and devastating to Bush's campaign.

Riley: Were you involved in those?

Neel: None whatsoever. Only in terms of coordinating resources and schedule. We were basically negotiating dates for all these debates. We had ideas about it but we were at the mercy of the Clinton people who scheduled our debate around theirs. There was a little issue when during the vice presidential debate, there were some in the Clinton camp who believed that Gore was not aggressive enough in defending Clinton's character. I was told later by Clinton, who I have no reason to doubt, he had no reason to say this to me, that that was not his view. He was never the least bit concerned that Al didn't go out of his way. He said, "It would have looked contrived and false to do that and programmed." He thought Al did fine. But some of Clinton's people thought Al was not aggressive enough in defending or being an advocate for Clinton's character as Quayle was trying to go after.

Quayle was trying to turn the debate into a Quayle-Clinton debate, which looked a little weird too. Still, it stung a little because we had been trying, and certainly Gore was, to bend over backwards being soldiers for Clinton. We wouldn't have been there if it hadn't been for Clinton. We looked at the debate afterwards and we could understand why they thought that. It may have been Hillary who had this idea and that kind of spun out. It sort of makes sense that that might have been the case.

Riley: Were there other aspects of the campaign in which the Clinton-Gore people found themselves working at cross purposes?

Neel: We were always at cross purposes with Susan Thomases, who was Clinton's scheduler. I had a good relationship with Susan but it was tough.

Riley: What was the underlying problem?
Neel: Susan was just a difficult person to begin with. She was not only an advocate for Clinton, which everyone would expect, and for doing things a certain way as opposed to accommodating then-Senator Gore, but she was often not the least bit diplomatic about it, to the point of being rude and dismissive. That was fine if she was going to be dismissive of me, it didn't matter. But in a very painful phone conversation she was dismissive of then Senator Gore during a conference call, basically calling Al's idea to continue the bus trip "stupid." You just don't do that. It was very undiplomatic of her and it really did almost poison the relationship. It didn't poison the relationship between the Clinton people and the Gore people or between Clinton and Gore. Clinton laughed at it. He just assumed if he had to tolerate Susan, we did too. We learned to do so and we got through the campaign. Fortunately she didn't come into the White House. Again, she was a disaster waiting to happen.

In any event, the tension really was nominal. The strategy about how to use the bus trips, which Clinton instinctively liked and Gore pushed hard—the Clinton staff was repelled by the idea but it turned out to be a big success and everything went well. This little dust up, the other dust up, and then the debate thing. But it was a minor thing. I'd say all things considered, everybody got along really well, in part because we were starting to win. I mean, if you're winning, it does wonders to internal comity. If we had been declared President in 2000 we would have all looked like geniuses, having won Florida. Nobody would have been criticizing Gore's style or any of

the consultants. So a few votes change everything, how you're looked at. If you're winning, everybody's happy. You have tensions, there were budget issues and so on, but it's wonderful. All your fights have happy endings when you're winning.

Knott: Can you comment on the so-called Perot factor? This is a little bit off the path that we're on here, but there's been a lot of discussion, if he hadn't been in the race, what the impact of that would have been. Do you have any speculation?

Neel: Nobody knows. Some of the analysts felt that Perot getting back in the race was a huge boost to us, because most of the Perot votes would not have gone to Clinton. But our polling showed something very different, that it really had very little difference. That the final numbers would have been about the same: Clinton's numbers would have been higher and Bush's number would have been higher too, but the final result would have been about the same. I mean, we loved having Perot in the race for obvious reasons. And he was entertaining, too. That Stockdale thing was just, I'll never forget Stockdale saying, "Who am I and why am I here?" You've never heard a more innocent, heartfelt, candid statement by a candidate.

Riley: For some people that was Dan Quayle's line.

Neel: Well, maybe so. I always thought Quayle was much maligned. I always thought he was smarter than he was given credit for, but he was prone to bizarre statements.

I thought you were going to ask about the Perot factor later on with the Gore-Perot debate on *Larry King,* but it was background noise in the campaign. The press loved having him. It drove the Bush people crazy because it was just one more bit of noise they had to compete with. Bush was on the ropes because he was trying to scramble and catch up and get out an economic message, primarily. It was just lost because Perot's message was all about the budget and the economy. It made it possible for Clinton to look downright statesmanlike, to stand over here and say, "This is very entertaining but here's really what we have to do," and to appeal to centrists or most people who were just looking for somebody who sounded intelligent.

It was a good thing for us to have Perot in the race, but we always knew it was a Clinton-Bush race and the final numbers were going to reflect that. So the final numbers were probably not affected greatly. Now, political scientists may have better information and can argue with that.

Riley: I think most of the polling evidence has supported the position that you're taking. My competing claim has always been that Perot's presence in dropping in and out of the race altered the dynamics of the race such that it might not have mattered exactly how it showed up on Election Day. That dynamic took on a life of its own, the best illustration of that being his decision to pull out almost immediately after Gore was nominated as Vice President, as I recall, because his sense was that the Democratic Party was in good healthy form and that he didn't need to be in the race anymore. But then coming back in later—it's difficult to measure these things.

Neel: In that regard, the dynamic was all good for us then, because it allowed the picture to be all about Clinton and Gore, so we didn't have to compete with Perot's stuff then. Then when he came back in, he looked a little goofy in the process.

Riley: That's sort of how I've interpreted it, but I don't know that I have the evidence to back it up.

I want to ask what may be a naïve question. That is, the Clinton people did an awful lot of sniffing around and digging on Al Gore before they invited him to be Vice President. Was there a research operation by the Gore people on Clinton? I mean, there's all of this stuff out there. Do you not want to be blind-sided? Is there a point at which you go into a closed room with Clinton or his senior people and say, "Okay, what do I need to know?"

Neel: You don't grill the nominee and his people. You're in a subordinate position at that point. They had a very candid conversation for those three hours that night on what the problems would be in a campaign, what problems the two of them would have, how it would be perceived and so on and so forth. I think that there were conversations about Clinton and his campaign but not so much in the context of, Well, do we want to be on the ticket, therefore we need to know some things.

First of all, at that point, you had to assume you knew everything. What more could you find out? I mean, you had Gennifer Flowers, you'd had the draft letter from Oxford. You had Lord knows what else. You had a sense that it was all out there. At that point, it's really much more about the politics of it. Is it good for the ticket? Would you be good for the ticket? Would it be a good experience for you, and so on. And you have to make those decisions yourself. Al may have talked to some people about these things. But he didn't have another conversation with Clinton and I didn't have any conversations with any Clinton people along those lines.

Knott: Could I just interject here? As someone who had served in Vietnam, were you at all bothered by what you knew about President Clinton, the way he dealt with his draft situation?

Neel: I was a very much an anti-war veteran, so I had mixed feelings about it. It was offensive on one level, but not from the standpoint of a patriot and someone who had served in the war. I wasn't particularly proud or boastful of my service in Vietnam. I wasn't ashamed of it. I knew countless young guys who got out of going. It didn't bother me so much.

I mean, we don't want to go too far down this road, but if there's any group of people in politics that I despise, it's the so-called "chicken hawks," those who used every deferment, every way possible to get out of going into the military during the Vietnam years, but then got elected and became hawks and became sword rattlers. They would be the first to send my sons into a combat just to show their own *cajones* and their own strength. [Newt] Gingrich, your former Senator from Virginia, whose name I block out, Paul somebody—

Riley: Trible?

Neel: Paul Trible. I hope I don't offend anybody, but he was one of the worst. All these guys who used every, every tool. Saxby Chambliss, the guy who just got elected in Georgia, who incredibly trashed Max Cleland's patriotism. Here's a guy who used every trick possible to get out of going into the military in the Vietnam war. I save all of my contempt for those guys. Had Clinton been a sword rattler, a war monger, it would have been a different matter. But that wasn't the case. I don't understand people who are pro-war anyway, and there are some. There are politicians that love nothing more than being in a war, particularly against a semi-defenseless opponent. I never had a sense that Clinton was going to be that kind.

I thought the letter was cynical. I knew it would be offensive to veterans everywhere, not just veterans, everybody that identifies with veterans. I thought it would be a big problem. I actually thought it was much worse then the Gennifer Flowers thing, politically. But I wasn't personally offended by it and I—you know, Al and I talked about it when it came out. He was troubled by it for the same reason. Al and I had similar experiences in Vietnam; we weren't hand-to-hand combat troops over there. Neither of us were gung-ho in Vietnam anyway, so you have to have mixed feelings about that. Actually, it would be kind of disingenuous for me to be critical of Clinton about that.

Riley: You mentioned this morning in response to a question—

Neel: Thanks for letting me get in that dig on Paul Trible. [laughter]

Riley: You mentioned this morning in response to a question about temper, you said that there was an episode in the '92 campaign about Gore and temper.

Neel: It amazes me these things don't happen more, but this was a little accident of technology. We knew in the campaign, the '92 campaign, that Gore's book *Earth in the Balance* would be controversial and would give some ammunition to the Republicans that would take a lot of what he said and try to scare the business community, auto workers, as well as all kinds of folks, with either what he said or how they would characterize what he said.

So we scoured the book. We asked a guy that we knew, a friend of our campaign that was involved on the periphery of our campaign, a guy by the name of Jonathan Sallet, to organize a team of smart people to take that book and break it down and to annotate and highlight everything in that book that could be used against Gore in the '92 vice presidential campaign. So Jonathan did that. He convened five or six guys. He parceled out assignments. Each one of them was to look at a different chapter, and then give him their analysis. He would package it and get it to us in Little Rock and on the campaign plane for us to consider, so we would be prepared, so Marla on the plane, the press secretary, and the policy people and even the Clinton people would have responses. If somebody challenged Gore for calling for an end to the combustion engine or something like that, or anything else that's in the book.

Well, Jonathan did a great job with this. In fact, it was so good, he put these things together in terms of challenges: here are the worst things that can be said about *Earth in the Balance,* and enumerated them. I don't think we were at the point in the analysis where he then would come

back and say, “Of course, this is an outrage because of this,” or, “This is clearly a misreading.” They were just the 20 horrible things in this book that could be used against Gore.

He then took the list, or the collection, and faxed it back to the ten guys who were supposed to look at this one more time before it came to us in Little Rock and on the plane. One of the guys who was supposed to get the fax, his fax number was 224-7682. Someone in Jonathan’s office, or Jonathan, mistakenly faxed it to 224-7683. In other words, miss-hit one digit. Who does that fax belong to but Richard Armey, at that time Republican Congressman from Texas. Well Armey’s staff, they pull this off the fax and it says, “From Jonathan Sallet, Gore campaign.” They think it’s a hoax. They don’t believe it, that they’ve been set up somehow. Why is this being faxed to them? They don’t believe it. But they give it to a *Wall Street Journal* reporter, who then doubles back and follows up and does the research and finds out in fact what it was.

The *Wall Street Journal* reporter on the campaign confronts Marla, who is on the plane with Gore. Marla freaks out, calls me, “What happened?” Calls Jonathan, we sort of figure out what happened. Then Gore finally says, “What is going on here?” I mean, he knows there’s some crisis brewing and Marla has to tell him. He doesn’t call Jonathan, he calls me. And for 20 minutes gives me hell. I mean, I don’t need to repeat it all; it’s still emblazoned on my mind. At that point I think, *God, we’ve blown the whole campaign*. Because what it was is that the *Wall Street Journal* then uses it to ridicule the book, the campaign, everybody. It just makes everybody look absolutely idiotic and totally incompetent.

It was clearly the low point in the campaign. I can’t remember when it happened. It was probably late September or something like that. I thought we had just by our sheer stupidity blown this campaign somehow. Well, that’s what happens. You’re in a bunker. In a campaign, you’re in a bunker and you think that every little thing that happens is going to blow you up. Sort of like later on when you’re in the White House. Of course it blew over very quickly and was not really much of an issue, but it seemed to be a catastrophic event at the time, all because of a misdialing of a fax number one digit.

That, I think, was when I saw Al’s temper in full bloom. At that point for all I knew, we were all going to be fired and would start over. *How could we be so stupid?* But usually it was not quite like that. He would reserve his temper for maybe just me or Peter or someone and then we would have to figure out what to do with it. That’s what you’re supposed to do.

Riley: Are there some important things about the campaign that we’re missing?

Neel: It was a great adventure and a lot of fun and like I said before, when you’re winning, particularly when you come from behind and you’re winning, everyone loves everyone. All of the differences and conflicts and everything became totally meaningless at that point, because you’re winning. Election night was just a great love-in at Little Rock for everyone. I can’t remember anyone not just being the happiest they’d ever been. The next day began a different kind of cycle.

The campaign itself was a study in how everything tends to go right when you’re winning. Not just that when you do things right you win, but when things start to go right for you it has a

snowball effect. You can almost do no wrong. We were probably doing some really dumb things in the last three weeks of the campaign, but it was won. The numbers were such that we knew we were going to win three weeks out. It was just a matter of whether we were going to win by ten points or five points.

Riley: The Bush people, when you talk with them, they point to the [E. Lawrence] Walsh indictments the last weekend. They suggest that there was some evidence in their internal polling that showed—

Neel: Not in ours. We thought it was virtually irrelevant. Bush was closing pretty strong in the last week. I mean, he closed from twelve points to six points in one week. Part of that is just in the final days things begin to settle in. We saw virtually no legs to the story. We thought it would be a big deal because we thought they were going to say, "These people basically violated the Constitution," and there was a huge scandal. Well, most of the public didn't really much care about Iran-Contra. That was, in the end, the lesson. It was almost a non-issue. I mean, only the real believers on one side or the other, either G. Gordon Liddy on one side or Father [Robert] Drinan on the other side, but other than that, nobody really cared much.

Knott: Maybe we could talk a bit about the transition period, in particular what your roles and responsibilities were during the transition?

Riley: You said the next day it's a different universe.

Neel: Well, yes, it was. In one respect it's a warm glow because you've won. Now you're going to take office, you're now going to get to do what you've been wanting to do for two years. But almost overnight problems arose.

There was an internal coup. Well, let me back it up. After the convention, Mickey Kantor came to Little Rock as chairman, ostensibly to bring some order to the campaign. Because, as I said, it wasn't anarchy. There was a kind of odd order; everybody knew what they were supposed to do but there wasn't tight management. David Wilhelm was a good man, but he wasn't the kind of strong, senior authority figure that was going to corral George and James and all these other people. He was basically running the budget along with Eli. So it was kind of a loose operation. That didn't sit very well with the campaign staff, for Mickey to sort of sweep into Little Rock and ostensibly take over. Mickey immediately took over the negotiations for the debates and kind of cut a wide swath and flew in from Los Angeles to do that.

One thing that happens in campaigns like this, when you appear to be new—I mean, Mickey had been involved with the Clintons, had raised money, had done things—but if you weren't there in the snows of New Hampshire, you had not been truly initiated. You weren't really a devoted loyalist.

Riley: Whose decision was it to bring Mickey back in?

Neel: The Clintons asked him to come.

Riley: Where were they getting the feedback from?

Neel: This again goes to a kind of lack of discipline in the Clinton operation. Probably what happened—and remember, we were not on board at the time. I don't know all that was going on during the campaign at the time because we were not part of it. I'm sure there were all kinds of problems and backbiting and some people thought to be doing their job well and others not. Everybody had a pipeline into Clinton. If not to Clinton, to Hillary. And everybody was kind of getting their licks in. All the senior people had detractors and advocates and Clinton was hearing all this stuff and probably taking it all on board. This is just a guess, that probably he and Hillary just decided, "We've got to get some order in this thing, let's get Mickey to come in and run it."

On the face of it, it was a pretty good idea but it didn't really work. Very quickly there was a tension that set in. Fortunately we were winning, but Mickey's role became marginalized. He was chairman but he was not running the campaign. He took on the debate role and that was about it. One of Mickey's responsibilities from the Clintons was to set up a transition operation. The Clintons had been told that you have to start doing this before the election. Traditionally, or at least going back to [Richard] Neustadt with [John] Kennedy, you started doing some of this planning even before the election. Usually the candidates don't like to do that. They're loathe to do it for reasons of superstition—

Riley: Tempting the gods.

Neel: Yes, superstition or whatever. And you don't want to take resources away from the campaign and you don't want to create anxiety within the campaign staff that some group is deciding your future, which office you're going to sit in, whatever. Well, Mickey brought in a couple of people. John Hart from Washington, a really good guy, and Gerry [Stern]—who had been with Occidental as a matter of fact, who came through Mickey.

Anyway, they set up an office in Little Rock to begin pre-election campaign planning. They came to Washington and did some meetings. They were doing the boilerplate stuff, the stuff you have to do. Collecting information, finding what the laws are, all this stuff that anybody responsibly doing pre-election campaign planning would have to do. Interviewing various people and so on. Stopping short of names, of anything that would be radioactive.

Well, the problem was that the senior campaign staff was never made comfortable with that. Partly because they saw Mickey as an outsider. Mickey had an operation going that they knew nothing about. While they were trying to get Bill Clinton elected, Mickey Kantor was running an operation to decide who was going to do what after the election. Well, that wasn't what was happening. Mickey didn't handle the internal politics of that very well at all. There were ways that it could have been done better. But Mickey could appear abrasive.

Mickey and I got along great; I got along great with everybody because I was not a threat to anyone. Everybody knew what my role was, I was going to be the Vice President's Chief of Staff after the election if he won. There were no issues there, so it was easy for me. I can see why the Clinton people were nervous about it, but I was also very sympathetic with Mickey.

What they decided to do was keep it totally away from the campaign and have no interaction so there wouldn't be a distraction. Instead what it did, it created anxiety because people in the campaign wanted to go to work for Bill Clinton in the White House, in the administration, and they didn't know the people doing this transition work. Nobody really briefed them, nobody really made them comfortable with the process. But they did their job as expected. As part of that, Mickey and his team put together a transition plan in the form of a proposal that represented how the transition would be run.

The morning after the election in Little Rock, a large group of us gathered at the mansion. The Gores, the Clintons, myself. I don't know who else from the Gore operation, probably no one else other than me. Then probably a dozen Clinton campaign staffers, people like George. James may not have even been there; James didn't want anything to do with governing at that point, so he was probably gone. But he may have sat in the meeting. In any event we had all these people there. Certainly Eli and David Wilhelm and George would have been there and some other people as well. All gathered to start the transition process.

Mickey came in, maybe by himself, maybe with a few of his people, and laid out this plan for the transition. It had the ring to some people as being a foregone conclusion. That what he expected was for the President-elect to rubber stamp this and say, "Okay Mickey, you're going to be the transition director, put this in place." Or, "Let's take comments and then get started." Didn't happen. The fix was in at that point, or the long knives were out, I should say, to use a different metaphor for Mickey and his operation. So they listened to Mickey lay out his plan and dismissed him. Said, "Okay, thanks, we'll get back to you."

Mickey went away from that meeting I think not having a clue what was going on. He presumed that he would be running the transition, I suppose. They had their plan, it was a reasonable one. Well, within 24 hours Mickey was history. Mickey would not run the transition; the transition would be run by Vernon Jordan and Warren Christopher and they would set up an operation. Mark Gearan would go to Washington with Alexis Herman and Dick Riley and set up the transition headquarters. The Clintons would stay in Little Rock and do their work out of there. There would continue to be a modest transition office there. Gore would be involved in this process out of Little Rock.

But Mickey just disappeared. He basically, like something happening in the Gulag, was just disappeared. Nobody saw Mickey after that for a while. The same with Eli Segal, who was marginalized and was out. I remember a party the next night, the night after the election that was supposed to be a kind of barbecue, country music thing, good time. And I've never seen so many unhappy people.

Knott: The night after the election?

Neel: It was either the night after the election or two nights, but it was probably the night after the election. I saw Eli and he was just ashen. He had been basically told he wasn't going to be involved or included; he wasn't going to have a role in this transition. This will be great stuff for you to mine for facts, because mine is all hearsay. Again, since I wasn't directly affected, I was

getting it from all sides. You would hear that George and Susan had basically knifed Mickey and Eli and there was this and that and so on and so forth.

I never knew for sure what happened because I had to get busy immediately. It was made clear the next morning, or I guess that night, after the speeches that night, at the old State House in Little Rock, we went back to a Gore party in the Excelsior Hotel where a lot of the Gore people were. Al told the crowd then that I was going to be his Chief of Staff. So I was the first White House staffer named and designated, and remained so for many weeks, because Clinton couldn't figure out what he wanted to do with the White House.

I had to get started right away putting together the vice presidential operation. At the same time, Gore and Clinton had agreed that Gore would be involved in the day-to-day decision making process on the Cabinet out of Little Rock. The Cabinet and the top Subcabinet positions would be done in Little Rock at the Governor's mansion, in deliberations with Christopher and Vernon. There would be a small group around a table in Little Rock doing this work every day. Christopher would come in and brief the group. It was basically Clinton and Christopher and Vernon usually at all the meetings, and Gore and sometimes Hillary, and I was included with Gore. Clinton was very gracious to me and said, "You should stay." So I'm at a table, about like this, smaller than this, with these guys and I'm thinking, like Stockdale, *Why am I here? At any moment some Secret Service guy is going to tap me on the shoulder and say, "You're not supposed to be here."* But it was really intoxicating.

They used Gore very well. We were the only two around that table other than Christopher who had ever worked in Washington, in government. Christopher, within 24 hours he had the briefing books. We sat down and—I don't think that very afternoon, but the next day—they got their marching orders. You had Clinton and Gore and Hillary to a certain extent, and Christopher and Vernon sometimes, basically talking about their philosophy about how they wanted to govern and then looking at a plan.

Christopher would present a plan, then we were going to look at every department and we're going to talk about the mission of these departments. Then, how do you want to govern, how do you want to proceed? They would arrive at a process where Christopher would bring in a notebook about the agency and with a list of maybe ten potential candidates for that Cabinet position and they would debate them around the table. They would take some off, add some on, and then try to whittle the list down and send Christopher back to vet the ones that they had chosen. Maybe four or five for each Cabinet position.

Riley: This was everything exclusive of the White House staff?

Neel: Exactly. The White House staff was not to be discussed. We had had a meeting in Washington of some of Mickey's people, with some people in Washington that had been around. They wanted just to talk transition and White House. That meeting was run by Harrison Wellford, whose house we were at. Harrison Wellford had done this before. Basically it's boilerplate stuff. Here are your options, here's how you can organize the White House, here's what worked. Not talking about names, a very workman-like process. A week or so later I asked Bruce, we were out on a bus trip, I said, "What about Harrison's group? What should we be

doing with that group?" Basically, Bruce and I were in similar roles. He said, "The Governor doesn't want any talk about White House staff. We're shutting that operation down."

Riley: This is on the bus trip—

Neel: This is Bruce basically telling me, "We're not going to touch the White House. We're not going to do anything about that." I think the intention was probably good, or the motive was good, that you don't want to create anxiety that people are organizing the White House behind your back if you're on the campaign staff, but it was a mistake. Somebody should have pushed back and said, "No, we've got to keep doing this work. We've got to be ready." So the work on the White House organization was largely suspended. Mickey's operation out of Little Rock, to my understanding, stopped looking at the White House. So the day after the election, you know, it was just like this monster in the corner. No one was looking at the White House and doing anything about the White House.

Now, it got out pretty quickly that Susan Thomases had a yardstick and was over at the West Wing and the Old Executive Office Building measuring offices and deciding who is going to sit where. Well, you couldn't have had a worse person to be alleged to be organizing anything for anyone, because that pissed off everybody, including the Gore people. Because the rumor then that came back was that Susan had decided that Gore wouldn't have the traditional Vice President's office in the West Wing, that that would go to Hillary. That Gore would have his office over in the Old Executive Office Building. At this point you should be thinking about big things, important things, but people can devolve into the worst sentiments. Little human insecurities.

Anyway, all these things were happening and that was creating havoc.

Riley: Was there any presumption about organization, in terms of definitely we're going to have a Chief of Staff, as opposed to a troika, or as opposed to—?

Neel: No, to my knowledge, no decision had been made at all. I mean, all kinds of people probably encouraged Clinton to do it one way or the other. He may have had some ideas himself, but—

Riley: Just suspended, that's all?

Neel: It seemed to me to be suspended. If anybody was thinking about it, I didn't know about it and Gore didn't know about it. We asked on several occasions and basically were told, "We'll do that later."

You asked about my role. My role was basically to put together the vice presidential operation and to assist Gore in Little Rock with his participation in the Cabinet selection. So I would come out of those meetings and be on the phone calling so-and-so, "What do we know about such-and-such?" Gore could be an advocate or an adversary for a name as he saw fit and would be intelligent about this. We'd get the briefing books and those were closely held. I saw some of

them but they were really for Gore's consumption. They were closely held and Christopher did a good job with that process.

This was what we were doing basically every day, or at least four days a week. We would fly in on Monday morning from Washington and spend all week there poring over briefing books about potential Cabinet appointees. Then we'd fly back to Washington either on Thursday or Friday. We would fly back Thursday usually, only because we were told there would be no work done on the Cabinet on Friday. Gore, of course, correctly believed that there would be work done there and he would want to stay. But if it was being done, it was being done by Clinton privately on the phone or whatever, and we finally just didn't fight those fights anymore.

In any event, Clinton was pretty good about involving Gore and not only informing him but including him in all these deliberations. Gore clearly had an impact on both the Cabinet selection and some key Subcabinet selections. There was never some kind of agreement with Clinton to the extent that, "Well, Al Gore you can name the head of EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] or the head of the FCC [Federal Communications Commission]," or whatever. It didn't work like that. But Al was an aggressive advocate for some candidates and basically helped take some people off the table. Having been in Washington 16 years he knew a good bit, or could steer Clinton towards some advice that would add to the process.

So until the last few days of the Cabinet selection, Al Gore, and by extension, myself, were pretty intimately involved in that. It broke down in the last few days.

Riley: This would have been mid-December?

Neel: Late December, like the week before Christmas. Like the 20th of December. We had made the promise that the Cabinet would all be selected by Christmas, which was a mistake. So we had a deadline. He had made certain promises about diversity in the Cabinet, which was a mistake. It was going to be a diverse Cabinet but we set ourselves up. So the last four Cabinet selections were made at the eleventh hour under a bit of stress, and were probably not the best selections. They weren't given the kind of deliberations they might have been otherwise.

The process up to that point, the six weeks leading up to that, there was a fairly thorough process and very professionally done by Christopher and his team. Meanwhile, Mickey Kantor had been relegated to organize the economic summit, because Clinton, I'm sure, felt sorry for him, having sent him to Siberia. Mickey to his credit did a bang-up job with that and got himself back into not only good graces but a position of stature and became the trade representative. So he was tough enough to be able to do that.

Virtually no White House planning seemed to be done until fairly late in the process, when it was apparent that the Clintons had gotten Harold Ickes to start putting together a White House staff. By this time [Thomas] Mack McLarty had been chosen to be Chief of Staff, sometime in early December, I think. About a month after the election. We lost a very valuable month.

You must pick your Chief of Staff early and let that person start putting together an operation that's got to hit the ground running. Well, not only was Mack not named until about December

5th, there was no White House operation coming together. Harold Ickes was then tasked to put together a plan and a chart and names. The assumption was that Harold would become Deputy Chief of Staff.

Well, that was blown up 72 hours before, or three or four days before inauguration, in Little Rock, the night before the White House staff was named in a big press conference. So the chart was all jumbled. Instead of having Harold up here as Deputy Chief of Staff, he was pulled out because of some alleged problems with his law practice in New York that ultimately went away, I think. Mark Gearan was shoved into that role. Dee Dee Myers was shoved here.

All these things began to flop around and none of this had been done at Mack McLarty's direction, who was going to have to run this operation. Mack was seen as an outsider with little experience in Washington, which was true. So Harold, the guy who is supposed to be the mastermind and the disciplinarian of this process, was gone all of a sudden. People were slotted into roles because we had to cover this base or that base. It was an absolute disaster.
We all met in Little Rock at the mansion to announce the senior White House staff, the day before we headed to Charlottesville to start the final roll into Washington for the inauguration. So there would have been 35 people in that picture—the assistants to the President and perhaps some of the deputy assistants to the President. I looked around that room. There was a riser and there were probably four steps and we were all up there like a high school graduation photo. I didn't know half the people in the room. Actually, I probably knew more than most because a lot of them were out of Washington, but I asked somebody who had been with the Clinton campaign who was there, "Do you know all these people?" She said, "I don't have a clue; I have no idea." It was a nightmare.

That group moved to Washington, some of us to Charlottesville to start the bus trip. They've got to figure out at that point how they're going to work together, what they're going to do. So they go to the transition office and they've got to just sort of wing it, figure it out on their own. Where they're supposed to work, who they're supposed to be working with and how they do their job. Only a handful of the people had done anything like these jobs before.

I was removed from that to the extent that I had my little part of the world to organize and get going and we had some success. We had our senior staff in place within two weeks after the election. We knew where our offices were going to be, we knew how it was going to work and so we didn't have those same anxieties. But there was anxiety because the White House staff was in such disarray. We came into our offices after the inauguration that afternoon and started work.

Even before that, McLarty was convening 7 a.m. meetings and bringing in people from former administrations to talk, but they were more like jam sessions. There was still no real serious team-building being done and in a few hours we were going to have to run the White House and ostensibly the government. So it was a disaster waiting to happen.

Riley: You commented at lunch that you wish some of the energy that had gone into planning the inaugural parties had been diverted to—is this merely reiterating, elaborating on—?

Neel: Clinton himself has said this. He called into my class at Vanderbilt this spring, and one of the questions was, "Would you have done anything differently in the beginning?" He was very candid about that and he had been told a thousand times and certainly had known himself that he made a big mistake waiting too long to organize the White House. And it was very apparent.

In hindsight, it was something of a minor miracle that we didn't have more small disasters like the travel office problem, like the so-called "haircut on the tarmac," things like that, because we had a lot of people who were miscast. They were good people but they were in the wrong jobs. If they wanted to serve in government they should have been somewhere else, either somewhere else in the White House or out in one of the agencies. We had too many people that were having to do on-the-job training. The problem with on-the-job training is they didn't have anybody managing their work who knew what they were doing either and no serious team-building.

We were getting by because people were smart and they were totally dedicated to Clinton and Gore and were committed to making it work. But the analogy I would use is putting on your running shoes in the middle of a hundred yard sprint in the Olympics. It was madness, in a way.

Riley: At the time, did you take any of this as evidence of something essential in Bill Clinton's operating style? Or did you think this is just a function of lack of experience at this level?

Neel: You could dismiss 30 percent of it to the fact that we had been out of office for 12 years, the Democrats, and most of the people coming into the White House were going to be newcomers to White House involvement or management or employment or whatever. The rest of it was a very obvious indication of the lack of discipline coming from the President-elect himself. Either he was getting confused, disorganized advice, or he was letting too many people get to him, basically immobilizing the process. That was pretty obvious and it was scary.

Riley: And you were picking this up, during the course of your transition?

Neel: You picked it up before the campaign ended. The storm clouds in this were looming well before that, when Mickey came to Little Rock and for the first time you began to see the tension between the senior staff people. This foretold problems in setting up the White House, unless Bill Clinton was very decisive in naming a Chief of Staff who was clearly going to be in charge, a la James Baker for Reagan. And he didn't do that.

The fact that it was dragging on after the election and still no White House Chief of Staff designated, those of us who at least had studied it a little bit and knew previous administrations—I mean, the closest experience I had was in the Carter White House. And what a nightmare that was, with Jack Watson tasked to do the pre-election transition planning and then getting blown up by Hamilton Jordan afterwards. Then having a total disarray in the early White House years, the infighting between Hamilton and Jack Watson and [Stuart] Eizenstat and all those people. It was all because the lines of authority were not drawn clearly by the President-elect and delegated. That was the problem.

In a way, it seems to be one reason that Republicans seem to do transitions better than Democrats, notwithstanding the elder Bush. The really outstanding transitions of Reagan and W.

stand out. They stand out because the Presidents-elect in those cases clearly delegated authority. They didn't get in the way; they didn't try to micromanage the process. They didn't have rabbit ears; they didn't then seem to undermine everything that their senior staff was doing, or at least their top people.

Knott: You put forward three theories as to why you thought this might have happened. I'm wondering if you have a favorite of your own. What's your explanation for this, in your gut?

Neel: I think it's at the root of Clinton's personality. The very thing that makes him the most seductive political personality in my lifetime, and the very reason I'm devoted to him and like him so much, was the very reason that he seemed to be incapable of organizing a White House effectively early on. It was painful to him to say no to people who had been with him a long time, who he was loyal to, but who had no business working in senior White House jobs.

He had a hard time putting his foot down. Early on, no decision was ever final, and that undermined the authority of anyone you have working for you. Mack's job was extremely difficult. So was Leon's [Panetta] and all the rest of them, and Erskine [Bowles] and John and all of them. But in Mack's job in particular, he came from the outside, he didn't come in with political stature or government stature or anything. He had an undoable job. Part of it was that he was miscast in the job, but also he didn't have the authority from the President to make the thing work right. The sharks were in the water all the time.

Knott: Was there a point in the midst of all this when you thought, *Gee, maybe I've made a mistake in making a commitment. . . .* I mean, I understand you're working for the Vice President and not the President, but how much did it shake your faith in Bill Clinton at this point?

Neel: I just took it as kind of a necessary evil. I thought the guy had so many compelling assets and positive things that they vastly overwhelmed the more administrative concerns I would have. I was dismayed, first of all, by the long delay in organizing the White House. That frightened me a little bit. Our very being, our ability to really contribute in a vice presidential operation and the Vice President-elect's ability, was going to depend on a successful White House operation. Not just the good will from the President but a White House operation that would be very proficient. So that troubled me that it would not be a strong operation.

Riley: Can I ask you if on these return flights from Little Rock, you and the Vice President are sitting with one another, did he share your concern about this sort of indiscipline that you are describing?

Neel: He certainly shared the concern about the delay in naming the White House, but he was in a different situation. He was focused on the selection of the Cabinet, finding a Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, which was much more important. He was concerned that there was a delay in naming the White House Chief of Staff. He was always concerned about the freewheeling lack of discipline in the campaign operation, but it was hard to criticize success. You win it one way, you don't have to govern the same way. But yes, he was concerned about the long delay in putting the White House together.

Riley: Then we come into the White House. I assume it's not very long before you begin to sense that the indiscipline that you recognized from the campaign was being carried over into the way that the White House was being run?

Neel: You asked, did it shake me? No, I didn't question my role. I was a Gore guy. I had come there with Gore, I was going to stay. I was thrown in a different situation by mid-spring or late spring, right after the travel office debacle. Then things looked totally out of control. So Mack and the President asked Gore if I would consider coming over and helping Mack.

That's when it began to become clear to me that I wasn't going to be there forever. In part because the Deputy Chief of Staff is an odd position. You have a lot of responsibility but you don't have clear authority. Your authority derives from the Chief of Staff and the trust of the President. When you have a weak Chief of Staff and you don't have the authority to make things work right, then you're dead. I saw pretty quickly that if Mack's job was undoable, mine was doubly undoable. But I wanted to make whatever contribution I could. I loved working there. I really valued my relationships with all those people. I thought they were, to a man and a woman, dedicated and fiercely hard working and completely loyal people. It was the best work environment, the best collection of people I've ever worked with. I was really happy to be there. And I got to ride on Air Force One.

There were a few incidents that made me realize that it was a management job that could not be done under those circumstances. If I had been in a different situation, if I had been fairly new to government at the time, then I would have stayed. I would have stayed probably for the duration. But at that point I had been with Gore 16 years and a year in the White House and two presidential campaigns and I had young children. I was vulnerable to being picked off from the outside.

Knott: I don't know if we're closing in on a break or what your plans are. I was going to follow up on this, you suggested—

Riley: Do you want to go another ten or fifteen minutes before we take a break?

Neel: Yes, another ten or fifteen minutes, then take a break.

Knott: What were these incidents other than the travel situation that led you to believe it was a hopeless situation?

Neel: The travel office thing, that didn't have me thinking that I needed to leave or anything. It was a debacle first of all because it happened and then the way it was handled afterwards. Everyone was in agreement that it was a disaster for the White House. I attributed it to, once again, a miscast staffing decision, putting David Watkins in as the Assistant to the President for Administration. David was a nice guy, had been a golfing friend of the President's, but was in way over his head. He was a little too receptive to ideas from people who didn't have a clue about White House operations or what was appropriate.

So putting a plant in the White House travel office because somebody had whispered in his ear that it was not being run inefficiently, that there was some petty corruption going on there, was about as stupid as you could get. And he did that. Then they went so far as to fire those people without sufficiently documenting it and attributing it to some malfeasance, all of which was unnecessary. They could have just let them go because they weren't protected employees anyway. They could have done this in a very professional way. A professional could have figured out how to do this if they wanted to make changes in the travel office, but the whole scheme was nonsense, and mishandled, and it was awful.

Watkins was a disaster, he just didn't have a clue. He wasn't a bad man. He had managed a small travel agency in Little Rock and he didn't have a clue about how to run a White House. And that's a very important job. The Assistant to the President for Administration makes sure that things don't go wrong. It's a zero-defect job and this was not a guy that could do that. He didn't have the skills or the background.

Had I not moved over to the President's staff, I would have probably stayed two or three more years, because I was devoted to Gore and was close to him. I couldn't have had a better relationship, a working relationship, and didn't have any of the problems that McLarty had with the Clintons and the senior staff there. But one incident if you will—Clinton was great for me, because he was like a sponge. If you had ideas for making improvements, he was agreeable for trying anything.

I had the support and maybe a little bit of respect from the rest of the senior Clinton staff because I'd been in the campaign and because I wasn't some arrogant son-of-a-bitch who was just going to tell them how to do their job. I was there to try to help them do their job when I became Deputy Chief of Staff. I don't think anyone saw me as a whip-cracking task master, I know they didn't. I was going to be more of a resource for Mack to make it work smoothly. So I didn't have those problems either, from the rest of the staff. I tended to get along with most of the people.

But it was very hard to inject discipline in areas of scheduling, in terms of managing the President's time, in terms of keeping people working on what they're supposed to be working on. Much was made of the Clinton open door policy, that anyone could wander in and kibitz with the President. That was bad enough, but that wasn't the worst thing. The worst thing was that people weren't doing their job, they weren't sticking to what they were supposed to be doing. In part because a lot of them didn't really quite know how to do their job or didn't know quite what they were supposed to do or how to do it. They were all busy. I mean, they were all energetic people and they had the right motivation, so they would wander into somebody else's territory and play in that sandbox. No one was managing this thing.

We had a retreat that was supposed to be a retreat for Cabinet and deputies at Camp David with the senior-most White House staff. This was an activity right after the inauguration that Al and Tipper, as well, convinced Clinton and Hillary would be good for team-building. Bring in the senior White House staff and the Cabinet and we'll go off to Camp David and spend two days figuring out how we're going to do this work. Well, people started getting to the Clintons, "Well, don't you think so-and-so should be there?" "So-and-so would be devastated if they're not there."

The first night we had the Cabinet and we had the deputies and we had most of the senior White House staff. It was a kind of touchy-feely thing and it was a get-to-know-you deal, not much more than that. The next day, however, they included 120 people, all the way down to a lot of clerical-type people. It became just a big monstrous rally, so nothing was done for team-building at that point. And there was no follow up. No one then put together mechanical, department-by-department things, where you bring in somebody from the Carter administration, or even from—for that matter, the Bush people were very helpful, everybody wanted to help—even the other administrations, Republican administrations, to help you figure out how to do your job, to make you more effective. Nobody did any of that.

So there was very little management. Every morning we had a meeting of the assistants to the President. That began to balloon up, including the deputies. Then other people would come and sit on the outside, because they wanted to be there. Nobody told them no. We had dozens of people, private citizens walking around the White House with so-called "hard passes." These were the permanent hard pass that let you in anywhere. You walk in, wave it, you can wander anywhere in the White House, into the Oval Office. Susan Thomases, Harold Ickes, Harry Thomasson, all kinds of people.

And it was well known. People were talking about it, ridiculing it. It even became the subject of a potential congressional investigation. What were these private citizens, lobbyists, doing with permanent White House passes? One of the first things I had to do was pull these hard passes. I had to call each one and say, "You've got to turn it in. When you come back, give us the pass. You can't have that." There were things like that.

So we made a little bit of progress in bringing discipline in the White House, but there was one point in which it was decided at the highest level that certain people were miscast and had to go. They had to be out of the White House or they had to be put in other jobs in the administration or somewhere else, some other White House office. It was my job to make it happen. To fire some people, to relocate some people, which I did. But within a week, several of them were back. They were just like stray dogs that found their way home when they were really dumped out on the side of the interstate. I remember asking this one person, "Why are you still here? We had this understanding." And she said, I'll never forget it, "Well, I went to see the President and he said I didn't have to go." If you are going to try to impose discipline and literally run the White House in a professional way and you had the responsibility, but whatever authority you had would be undermined by the President himself—and I don't want to make too much of that, but it was an example of the kind of thing that drove you crazy.

This is not the kind of stuff that ever made the papers. It is definitely inside baseball, inside the White House, but it did represent to me a kind of hopelessness. Now I don't think I did enough and to this day I have to say I believe I let the President down. Because at about the time all this was happening—I had become Deputy Chief of Staff in May, something like that. So this would have been in probably September. Several things happened that made me think I had no life. I had pretty much taken myself out of my kids' lives. Up to that point I had been extremely involved in everything they did, particularly their sports events. I'd coach their Little League teams and everything.

Just one anecdote that encapsulated my feeling at the time: I left work early, about 4:30, one afternoon to go take my son Walter to a soccer game. He was in a tournament; he was a select soccer player and was one of the team stars and was very proud of it. I had not seen him play soccer all fall. In fact, I hadn't seen him in the spring or the previous fall, for that matter. And he said, "Will you take me? Mom's somewhere, and I'd really like for you to go." And I said, "I'll be there, I'll do it." I drove home, 15 minutes from the White House. Got home, Walter was dressing. We were getting ready to walk out the door and the phone rang.

I picked it up and it was the President and he started screaming at me—after opening pleasantries—screaming about his day, about how he had just been put through the most horrible schedule ever, he had been asked to do things no previous President had been asked to do. I'll omit the expletives in this account, but he was just outraged. "If we don't fix it, if you don't fix this White House, we'll never—I'll never be effective," and so on. It was incredible. After about 30 minutes, it seemed like there was a total switch and the sun came out and he said something like, "Did you see the PGA [Professional Golfers' Association]? Did you see Payne Stewart?" I said, "Wait a minute, we've gone from that. . . ." He said, "We should try to play golf when we go to Hawaii before we go to Japan, or on our way back from Japan." I said, "Yes, Mr. President. Fine." He said, "Okay, I'll see you tomorrow."

As it turned out, he had been cornered by his family, I guess, for being way late to some family event that evening. To basically get them off his back, I think, he picked up the phone and called me to yell at me. There's a old thing, pecking order. I remember I used to have cats and dogs a long time ago. Somebody in the family would hit the dog or somehow do something to the dog. The dog couldn't come back at us, so he would go and attack the cat. The cat would then attack the youngest cat. So it would be kind of a pecking order. This is what was happening, I think. Hillary jumped all over Clinton about being late for dinner, so Clinton picks up the phone and calls me to jump all over me. I'm the designated jumpee at that point. Anyway, it's no big deal. That is not a big deal. That sort of thing went on all the time and that was the famous Clinton temper that washes over and everything's fine, no problem. But in the meantime, my son had disappeared.

I had been on the phone for 30 minutes and Walter had just disappeared. He had given up on me, had walked down the street, found a ride to the soccer game. I didn't even know where the soccer game was being played. So I had to sit there at home waiting for everybody to come home and it was horrible, absolutely horrible. I thought this is just not—you can't do this. The idea of a family-friendly White House, that is an oxymoron. There are certain jobs in the White House that have to be done a certain way. You have to live, eat, and breathe them, and you can't have room for anything else in your life. I didn't realize how much I was not ready for that or how much I didn't want that until that moment.

It was probably three weeks later that an outside group approached me and recruited me for a job and I was vulnerable. I really didn't want to go, but you know, at that point I was vulnerable to being picked off. I did justify it partly to myself that the job I was in was almost undoable. I know this is rambling and getting off the subject—

Riley: No it's not at all.

Neel: But the point I wanted to make was that I don't think I served the President as well as I should have. I believe now, and I did a few years afterwards, that I made a big mistake not confronting the President more aggressively—and Hillary—about what I thought should happen in the White House. I was too much the executioner and too much trying to make the trains run, as opposed to redesigning the train. Because the White House needed to be rebuilt from the top down. We had a lot of very good, energetic young people. The irony was the President and the White House got all this criticism about the young people, symbolized by George Stephanopoulos who looked younger than he was. There was all this talk about these young, arrogant people.

The fact of the matter is, that White House would not have survived or ultimately succeeded without those young people. The young people were not the problem in that White House. It was the old farts who were doing these really stupid things. Watkins was about the oldest guy in the White House and he did about the stupidest thing of all. It was the people who were managing these young people that were dropping the ball. I didn't sufficiently make a serious effort at putting my job on the line and confronting the President and Hillary, with the support of the Vice President, and saying, "You've got to blow this place up." Take myself out of it, because it would have looked self-serving, like maybe I wanted to be Chief of Staff. I didn't want to be Chief of Staff. I didn't want to usurp Mack McLarty and take that job. It's just not in me to do that sort of thing. But I should have put myself on the line and put my job at risk that it would be taken the wrong way. I should have been very aggressive in documenting and confronting that.

First of all, a lot of small disasters never made the light of day, but all of the things that went wrong, all of the problems that began to undermine the cohesiveness of the office—you know, they not only survived but they prevailed. They got reelected, the President weathered all kinds of things. I've had a theory for some time and I will not go into this at any length, that you can almost trace, you can almost draw a line from the White House non-transition after the election or prior to the election of '92 to the Monica Lewinsky fiasco. I'm not so egocentric to think that I could have made that not happen, but I do believe that in my time, directly serving the President, that I lost an opportunity to be of greater service to him. I had experience, I knew how to run offices, I'd done this for a long time. I knew what was going on with these folks, I had some objectivity, and I didn't do it. I dropped the ball.

Riley: We'll take a break in just a minute, but I want to press you on this because I understand what you're saying, but I wonder how susceptible to change this particular White House is when it seems that the principal himself, the President himself, has certain characteristics that evidently would have made him highly resistant to the kind of changes that you're talking about, this openness and inclusiveness that you talk about.

Even more to the point is this question of his own personal discipline with his time and his appetites, his late-night schedule. I'm not talking about personal schedule but I'm talking about a propensity to want to stay up until late in the night shooting the breeze with people or engaged even in serious policy discussions. Is that kind of President going to be in any way receptive to the kind of advice you're giving? In fact, weren't there people who did try? People who had

known the President longer, who tried to counsel him that we really need to get this under control?

Neel: You want to take that up after the break?

Riley: That's fine.

[BREAK]

Riley: …people is one thing, but for the strange situation you alluded to, where you've got somebody upstairs reversing, that seems to me to be a pretty good illustration of your not really having the authority to do what they wanted you to do. This relates more to the question of, I guess, the President's time, which has got to be the most valuable commodity in the White House. How he spends it, how he takes care of himself, reeling in these fabled meetings. I'd also like to get a portrait from you of what these meetings were like, if you could, some of these open sessions that we hear so much about.

Neel: Well, let me address the first point because this is something I've thought a lot about and I feel very strongly about. Clinton has taken a lot of hits in two areas in particular. One, his lack of discipline, freewheeling meetings, his tendency to want to say yes to everybody. Secondly, the alleged undue influence of Hillary on the process.

To both of those points, I think they're unfair. It's a cop-out for advisors and staff people like me, for this reason. Bill Clinton won the Presidency in '92 for all of us who wanted to win and return the White House to the Democratic Party. And he won precisely because he was the kind of guy he was. It was not his job to change, frankly. So I believed that he was not well served by a lot of people. But I think a lot of people used his personal quirks as an excuse for their inability to get their job done right. For instance, let me take the Hillary case.

The day after I took my job as Clinton's Deputy Chief of Staff I went to see Hillary. I always liked her, had a lot of respect for her, knew she was smart. I really liked her staff people, I worked closely with them and liked them and trusted them. The first thing she said to me, she said, "I am tired of hearing that people are saying it's got to be done this way because Hillary says it's got to be done this way," or, "This person has to be hired or that one can't be hired because Hillary approves or disapproves. None of these people say this to my face, are willing to stand up to me. I'm really tired of that." My experience bore that out. The very people who would squawk about Hillary's influence on the process were the very ones who would not go and knock on her door and close the door and say, "Are you doing this? What are you doing? I disagree with you and I think this is not good for the President."

So a lot of this excuse-making is kind of cowardly. If you're hired to be an Assistant to the President for whatever, communications, scheduling, if you're the Deputy Chief of Staff or the

Chief of Staff, you're expected to perform in a certain way, to bring certain experience to that job or to learn it and get it and bring a certain boldness to that job and not to behave as a bureaucrat. It was not Bill Clinton's responsibility to change his personality and his style. Now this case of reverse firing notwithstanding—there were different issues involved there—I didn't see any case where Clinton was presented with an idea for change that would amount to some sacrifice or difficulty and then not take that and go with it.

The White House management is not a linear process. It's not like getting capital, building a plant, making widgets, sending them to market, making a profit, pouring that back into the company or giving it to investors. It's not linear like that. You're going to have mistakes, you're going to make some wrong decisions. You're going to do all these things differently, because it's a highly personalized process. The White House reflects the personality of the President and it has to. It was not Clinton's responsibility to change his style of working.

It was, however, the responsibility of his senior staff to coordinate that process and make the best out of it, utilize and exploit his strengths and the good things about his personality and somehow protect him from his more damaging tendencies. If you couldn't do that, you should leave the job and let him get somebody who could. If you can't stand up to the President, behind closed doors obviously, and say, "This is a mistake, you're doing this wrong. I believe for this reason this is wrong and you've got to change it," then you've got no business being in this job. This is the big show, this is the big enchilada. You want to be there. You ask for those jobs. Some people fight for those jobs. They campaign, they cut people down. They do everything they can to become this or that in the White House. You get that job, you've got to figure out how to do it right in the full service of the President.

I believe that Clinton was sorely mis-served in many respects there. Every time I would read a story about Clinton's tendencies to do this or that, I would say, "So what, grow up. Figure out how to work with it, make the best of it." If Clinton wants to stay up all night shooting the bull about welfare reform, then you can say, "Look, tomorrow we've got a big day and you've got to be sharp at 8 o'clock in the morning. Can't we cut this off at two and come back tomorrow night." Or, "Let's change tomorrow's schedule to give you a lighter schedule in the morning." But no, that's not what people did. Too many of us were dumb terminals rather than being active PCs. We were just dumb terminals waiting to do and then we would grouse about it. Everybody would grouse about Clinton's lack of discipline but they were the very ones that were exacerbating that. I have to tell you, I don't have a lot of sympathy for those in senior positions. It's one thing if you're a critic, if you're an analyst, if you're an historian, that's your right and responsibility to point out how screwed up the operation was and it goes right to Clinton's feet.

Now, if Clinton made a mistake, and he made many, it was that he didn't value strong independent leadership within his senior staff enough to put people in that he might have in the beginning not fully trusted. By that I mean people who weren't there in the snows of New Hampshire. Case in point. We had a very senior staffer who was mis-cast. It was generally concluded that she wasn't up to the job. I'm not going to mention names or the job; it's been out there but I'm not going to do it. We needed to find a replacement. I was tasked to go scour about for the best person and I found what I thought was the best person. It was the consensus of

everyone I talked to and bore out my own instincts that this was the best person who could be in this job for the President.

We brought that back and it was torpedoed because this guy had worked for Bob Kerrey in the primaries and Kerrey had skewered Clinton some and there wasn't good feeling there. That sort of thing. If Clinton can be fairly and harshly criticized, it's for that kind of mentality. It is painful for me to note—and this was part of the course I taught at Vanderbilt last spring, spent a lot of time on this—one of the real keys to the success of Reagan and George W. Bush in their transition was they both bit the bullet and brought on board people that were not long-term loyalists. Reagan with Jim Baker and W. with Andy Card, who were tough, experienced and able, and had stature. Something prevented Clinton from doing that, and I don't know what it was, and I don't know to what extent Hillary would have been involved or anyone else, but the veto power was too broad.
They allowed themselves to listen to and act on information coming from disparate sources that may not have been credible, where people had their own agendas, their own axes to grind. It began, as I said, the day after the election. Mickey Kantor was probably not the right guy to lead the transition. The right guy was Warren Christopher, who ended up doing it. But Mickey was undermined for the wrong reasons.

For the same reason, in this other case I mentioned, the guy ultimately ended up in the administration and was a resounding success. But they let a petty doubt get in the way of a very smart hire that could have made a big difference at the time. It's a human trait, particularly in the first year of your Presidency, because you're bringing in all this hubris and confidence that you know best and you have the best judgment of people and character and skills. But it's flawed. It's flawed because you are in a bunker and your information is inadequate and distorted, and sometimes you make bad decisions.

So the central point that you raised, was it possible even to do this job given Clinton's personality? For the right people, yes, it was absolutely possible. You saw a bit of that when Leon Panetta came in following Mack because Leon wasn't going to come in unless he had unquestioned authority on staffing. Now, there were other things that continued that were signs of lack of discipline and there were other problems. But Leon at least did have that authority and it was unquestioned. People knew that Leon could fire them and the President was going to back him up. That was one thing he had that was very important. And he could hire people. He brought stature to the job as OMB [Office of Management and Budget] Director and a former Congressman and it was progress. So it can be done.

I don't know if you interview Leon whether he would think he was a big success at that job, probably not. Because yes, it was tough. In fact, what Mack would say is, "Look, I don't have one boss, I've got four, or three." Not counting Tipper, he's got Clinton and Hillary and Al. I mean, Al inserted himself into more decision-making than any Vice President ever at that point and it was a headache for Mack, I'm sure. Headache for Clinton, to a certain extent. But if you're good at what you do and you want those jobs and you think you can do it right, you've got to be willing to do your part of it. Put your rear on the line, put your job on the line if necessary sometimes. You've got to work all the time and you've got to be smart and you've got to

surround yourself with the best people, not just the people who worked in the campaign or people you just happen to like personally.

It's an almost unique management challenge in American society. You may have studied leadership and thought about these things certainly much more than I have, but I can't think of anything close to this, where you have to sort of create a new business overnight and make it successful from day one. You don't have a glide path. You're under the gun. Everything you do is noticed and it has great consequences. There's no management challenge even close to this in American society in my limited observation. So it's a tough and difficult job, but I think that it's unfair to put all this on the President. He's not supposed to be his own Chief of Staff.. You're supposed to manage the White House for the President.

Hopefully you keep him from giving in to his worst instincts. I remember Bob Haldeman writing that he believed, and up until Watergate thought he was successful, in probably the most important part of his job as Nixon's Chief of Staff, which was to humor Nixon. Listen to him, hear him give commands that somebody should be fired or we should get rid of all the Jews in the administration or bring more good-old-boys from Ohio State and get rid of the Harvard-educated, the elite in the administration. Or audit this guy's tax return, or whatever. "Yes, Mr. President we'll look into it." Then your job is to not do it, to basically be a buffer between the President's ranting and actions.

I think that there's something to that. But the reverse is also true. You have to be better than you would otherwise be in most jobs because there's no running and hiding. If you're not up to it, you're not serving the President as you should.

Knott: They bring in David Gergen in May '93. Judging by what you've just said, that must have really caused some ripples throughout the White House staff. Is that the case, and did he provide, in your assessment, any kind of valuable service as a kind of outside senior influence?

Neel: Clinton, and I guess Hillary, and then I guess to a considerable extent Al Gore, decided that the image of the White House wasn't serving them well. Basically what it boiled down to were the press accounts about inappropriate behavior among junior staffers. George's image, the fact that George had rankled some in the press corps, probably doing things that the Clintons told him to do. But that the image wasn't right, that there were no adults in the White House and so on and so forth. They arrived at Gergen as being the solution.

They were right in one respect. They were right that the Clintons, and to a lesser extent Al, needed to have someone in the White House that they could use as a sounding board and to take unfiltered advice that would not be part of the regular orthodoxy and wouldn't have come from a long campaign experience, that would reflect a broader understanding of the body politic in Washington. The Clintons had liked Gergen. They had known him a long time, and he is exactly the kind of guy you like having around. He makes you feel better about whatever process you're in, in terms of making a decision and assessing a situation.

In the end—and I don't know if it could have been done any differently—it was made to look like a bigger deal than it really was. David did not want to be the key, he did not want a title. He

did not want to be the communications director. I think he was Counselor to the President, I'm not sure what his title was.

Knott: Correct.

Neel: But he did not want the title. He did not want the responsibility, the press responsibility. He didn't want management responsibility. He wanted an office and an assistant and unfettered access to the President. I don't blame him. That's what I would have wanted under the circumstances as well. I drove out to David's house and picked him up and took him back to the residence and took him up to the Clintons' study for them to seal a deal there, which they did. And it served a purpose.

It sent a message to the press that Clinton wanted to broaden and deepen his base of advice from nontraditional sources. Clinton had always done this sort of thing. There's no telling all the people Clinton called to ask their opinion about this or that. I mean Republicans, Democrats, old-timers, Carter people, whomever. This symbolized a new approach to thinking at the White House and it created a bit of a stir. It was announced on the White House lawn and George's new role was announced and so on and so forth. Gore personally typed the statement on my computer. Everybody was around my desk and we were trying to put the finishing touches on the formal statement about Gergen coming to the White House. So I would type a little bit and everybody would talk, "Read that back." I was basically the stenographer for the group. And about halfway through it Gore said, "Let me do that." And he sits down at my desk and starts doing this himself, because he surely knows how to do this better than I can, I guess. They finish it off. There was kind of a good feeling about the whole thing. I think George was in there too.

We go out and do this in the Rose Garden. And we make too big a deal out of it, frankly, so it gives even further fuel to the idea that the White House is in disarray and you have to bring someone like David Gergen in. The fact that David was a Republican was difficult for a lot of the White House staff to swallow. David's introduction was not handled as well as it should have been and it further undermined McLarty. This is just one more senior advisor in the White House who was going to be an adult voice, adviser to the Clintons. One more voice, one more player and it just further served to make Mack look like he had little authority with the process. Why was Mack not able to rein in George, if that was really a problem?

It did, however, serve the purpose of making the Clintons feel more comfortable. Maybe Al too, to a certain extent, with the advice he was getting. David did nothing to bring discipline to the organization or to manage anything differently. He didn't want that responsibility. But it probably did give them some comfort in the process. It didn't exactly give a lot of comfort to the rest of the White House staff, and it was a Band-Aid. You'd have to talk to others to determine what contribution David made, but I always saw him as thoughtful, objective, a moderating voice when you had extremes screaming and yelling and pounding the table. I thought he was a terrific addition to the White House. Still, again, it didn't address one of the fundamental problems of operating in the White House.

Riley: You made a reference earlier to the Vice President's involvement in this White House. I think the general consensus is that he was probably, at least before the current Vice President,

historically the most integrated Vice President that we've had. Can you tell us a little bit about the Vice President's working relationship with the President and some of your reflections on that, in the year that you were in the White House?

Neel: It all had its genesis in that meeting that the two of them had in Washington during the campaign in which they apparently had a kind of an understanding about how they would govern if elected.

Before the end of the campaign, when it looked like we were going to win, I began to have some very quiet discussions with some people who worked for Mondale. It had been widely known that up until Mondale's time and in a couple of cases since then, Vice Presidents were largely relegated to kind of make-work within the White House, to be seen and not heard. They weren't given much in the way of resources or responsibilities and they were just Presidents-in-waiting. They were often the subject of ridicule and disrespect among the President's staff, even the Presidents.

But Mondale and Carter had a different type of relationship. It was one that was more respectful, it was more peer-to-peer, and I wanted to find out how they did that. Was it a contrived design or was it just something that happened naturally between the two of them as if they became friends, and so on. So I did some inquiries and some research into that and found out—it had been a long time since I thought about it—they actually had a letter of understanding. They actually had a memorandum, an agreement between Carter and Mondale, which outlined how the relationship would work. So I got a copy of that shortly after the election.

It was difficult, in fact impossible, to broach this subject or to begin to formalize anything about the relationship between Clinton and Gore until Clinton had a Chief of Staff designated. So we cooled our heels for five weeks until we had somebody to deal with. It wasn't something that Al was going to be able to go to Clinton and say, "Can we talk about my role, the two of us?" It was going to have to be done in a more ministerial way.

I sat down with McLarty. I took the Mondale-Carter memo and used that as a basis and basically re-wrote it. Then by the time we finished, it was only a shadow of itself, but a few of the principles remained. It was the same concept, to lay out maybe a dozen principles that the two of them would agree to, that would govern the relationship between Clinton and Gore and the two White House staffs in the administration. Then sometime after Mack was named—perhaps within a week or so, I think it was right before Christmas—Mack and I went over this and he thought it looked fine.

Now, he didn't have any perspective to second guess it and I think he took it and wanted to talk to a couple of people. I suspect he may have talked to Stu Eizenstat, who by then I think had become somewhat of a confidant to Mack. But whatever he did, he then came back to me and said, "This looks real good, let's set up a meeting. I'll set up the meeting with Governor Clinton and the four of us will do this."

So one night after we'd done our transition work and after dinner, Al and I were waiting over at the Capitol Hotel, thinking the meeting would be about 7:30. About 10 o'clock we were called,

so we went over to the Governor's mansion. Mack and Clinton were there and there was some small talk and various other things about the day and whatnot. I think Al finally said, "What do you think about this approach?" We got into it and Clinton took the paper and started going down through each topic and asking some questions, "Well, has this ever happened before?" so on and so forth. Minor things.

One of the things is that Gore's Chief of Staff would become an Assistant to the President as well. He says, "This is very impressive, has this ever happened?" And I pointed out that yes, Mondale's Chief of Staff was an Assistant to the President under Carter. He said, "Well, that sounds fine," and he made some joke about me. Clinton and I had been playing golf a few days before and he made some reference to that. He was always very kind to me. I mean, he did this to everybody, everybody fell in love with him. He made everybody feel like he was their best friend.

He was very gracious and they pretty much agreed to everything. I don't think that there was any exception taken on anything. There may have been one or two things where they said, "Well, we need to wait and see about this and that, but in principle this sounds fine." So we had the agreement, with everyone in the room at the same time, understanding what these points were and that we were going to make them happen.

There were things that sound small, I guess, to an outsider, but they were very substantial within the White House. There would be a weekly lunch set aside between Gore and Clinton and it would take precedence over anything else unless there was an emergency. There would be a senior Gore staffer placed on the National Security Council, on the Economic Policy Council, the Domestic Policy Council, and so on.

Riley: Was there an issue orientation to any of those points?

Neel: The only issue orientation was not in the memo, but it was talked about and understood. Gore would have a particularly important—I don't remember the term that we used—a particularly important role, not a deciding role, but an important role in filling several positions in the administration: the FCC, the Office of Science and Technology Policy, the EPA, and so on.

Riley: This was a verbal understanding rather than something that was written in a document?

Neel: Yes, this was really more directed at Subcabinet stuff. By this time I think we'd already chosen EPA. I don't even have a copy of the memo. I don't know why I didn't keep a copy, I should have.

Riley: I'm sure it's in the archives.

Neel: Don't be so sure.

Riley: That's part of the reason why we're doing this, you understand.

Neel: We didn't do anything formal, like having it signed. It was before we had word processing so I don't have it in a computer anywhere. It may have said something like "the Vice President would be consulted in depth on areas where he has had significant involvement," or something like that. They had an understanding.

The most important thing was that Clinton took this one step further. We had the first Cabinet meeting the day after the inauguration. The first thing he said was, he basically reaffirmed Gore's role in the administration. If Gore spoke, if Gore called and talked to them, it would be the same as him. He went further down through some of the points about Gore's senior staff, the same thing. They're to be treated as mine, and so on and so forth. He made it abundantly clear to all of them, and that set the tone within his own staff as well.

There was grousing on the Clinton staff because of some of the demands it created. We got a bigger budget than any Vice President before, bigger staff allocation, offices, everything. The sacrosanct Thursday lunch was a real nightmare to the President's staff because you don't want anything that's locked in. None of it was personal—I think probably they admired Gore for getting all those concessions. But nevertheless it was what drove the early part of the relationship.

What made it work was that the President continued to show trust and respect for the Vice President. And two other things. The Vice President's staff and advisors never undermined the President and his staff in either their day-to-day workings or through unattributed quotes. You could read Bill Kristol's name on half of the unattributed quotes criticizing George Bush when he was Quayle's Chief of Staff. They were obvious. It was rampant. The same thing happened with Bush and Reagan and certainly going back to Johnson and Kennedy. Legendary. We just didn't do that.

So that helped foster trust and respect. If at any point the President had lost trust or confidence in Gore, the relationship was going to be blown up. It wasn't going to exist simply because there was a memorandum of understanding. So we tried to get that in place early on and it generally worked. It certainly made my job easier. The principal job of the Vice President's Chief of Staff is being the Vice President's advocate with the President's staff. You're basically fighting the Vice President's fights with the President's staff for scheduling, resources, and everything else.

Riley: Where was your office?

Neel: I had two offices. I had a little cubbyhole off the Vice President's suite and then I had a very large office just off the ceremonial office in the Old Executive Office Building. After awhile I didn't hang out in the cubbyhole. I thought it would be a good thing to have because I'd hang out there more, but I had things to do. I just quit using it and gave it to Gore's personal assistant for her assistant.

Riley: Steve, go ahead.

Knott: I was going to switch gears a little bit. I wanted to ask you your reflections on the sort of atmosphere in Washington during that first year of the Clinton administration. You have this

awful incident where Vince Foster committed suicide, which in turn leads to all sorts of bizarre conspiracy rumors on the right and endless investigations of Whitewater and Travelgate and FBI files and this and that and the other thing. As somebody who had been up on the Hill for quite some time, how do you explain this? What caused this incredible partisan animosity that seemed to animate Washington during that first year? Or beyond the first year, throughout the Clinton years. What's your take on that?

Neel: Well, the social conservatives absolutely hated Clinton and they do to this day. They still can't bear the thought that he was the President and that he got reelected. Clinton did not come into office with much good will from his adversaries.

Knott: Why? Why is that?

Neel: I think part of it is the nature of what's happened to partisan politics now and the passion that certain people bring to politics. One reason the Republicans are as successful as they are now is because they're much more passionate about politics and what they believe in and what they want to accomplish than are Democrats, than liberals. Conservatives more than liberals, especially the social conservatives, but the Republicans in general.

So, while there may have been for instance scorn among liberals about Ronald Reagan's intelligence, let's say, or his background as an actor, and it might have been joked about, there was never, to my knowledge, a kind of open warfare to discredit him. To attack him personally, to attack anything about his personal life, his first marriage, his private life, anything like that. It just never happened. You can have all kinds of theories about the differences between liberals and conservatives and whatever. Clinton was everything that the social conservatives hated, in a visceral, personal kind of way. He was an alleged womanizer. So that alone was grounds for condemnation. He had beaten a Republican. He had ended Ronald Reagan's legacy, basically. And he was perceived to be a liberal. I mean, to them he was a liberal, for sure.

Moreover, many of them hated Hillary. And when I use "hate," I use that advisedly. I've experienced those attacks from literally hundreds of people, certainly when I would go back and forth to Tennessee and in the South and elsewhere, because she appeared to be something of an affront to their sense of who they were, to women. I found more women who despise Hillary Clinton than men, ironically. Because to many of them, she appears to be a commentary on the life they've chosen. She didn't help herself with the "stay home and bake cookies" comment during the campaign, but on the other hand, I don't think she ever really quite deserved their wrath.

Anyway, he had all those things going for him with social conservatives, which amounted to not just a political opposition and a challenge to his policy making, but a kind of personal vendetta. Also, there were a handful of very, very wealthy, mean-spirited haters who were determined to bring Bill Clinton down. There were more than a few, there were quite a lot of them actually, but there were some who were notorious, who funded witch hunts, [Richard] Scaife being the most notorious among the crowd. It's one thing to go after a President's policy making, but after he's elected to continue this sort of thing to try to hound this guy out of office. Of course, it culminated in the impeachment process.

Clinton obviously made it a lot easier for them and was his own worst enemy in that regard. Also, he basically stole some of their issues. They were dumbfounded that he was able to command the welfare reform agenda, which was theirs. That was a long-time Republican agenda to end most welfare as we know it. Clinton actually took that step. Now it caused him great pain with liberals, but he did it and it was a source of real frustration. I think much of it was based on frustration that Clinton was so successful politically that they just couldn't bear it. For a whole variety of reasons he became a polarizing character and he didn't give himself enough time in between crises and so-called scandals to let people think of him differently.

It's also fair to say that the Republicans, particularly once they recaptured the House in '94, used those tools very effectively. Eighty percent of the resources and the time devoted to those hearings in the House Government Operations Committee in particular were pure political vendettas. I'm not talking about the Lewinsky impeachment thing, because that's in a whole different category. But all the investigation into Vince Foster's suicide and the Whitewater thing and the travel office mess. It had all been gone through with the press, actions had been taken, things had happened. But because they controlled that committee that Dan Burton chaired, they unleashed investigators to make life miserable for Clinton. They leaked these things and they were very effective in using those tools to try to discredit the President. And to a certain extent they did. To a certain extent they certainly helped inflame contempt for Clinton, personally, and for Hillary to a lesser extent.

I can't fathom the Democratic leadership in the Congress, whomever they ultimately are if they ever get the Congress back, waging those kinds of witch hunts against any Republican President. I can see them going hard at a President on policy, but I can't imagine it ever getting that personal and mean-spirited. Again, Clinton didn't have to give them the ammunition. Nobody made him fool around with Monica Lewinsky, there's no question about that. But much of that was based on other things. He had enemies in Arkansas who were viscerally opposed to him and determined to bring him down in any way. People who had a lot of money and were willing to spend it to discredit him.

Knott: How much of your time was spent, as Deputy Chief of Staff, in terms of just answering questions or having to participate in these investigations? You referred in our break this morning, you made a joke about feeling like you were testifying.

Neel: To answer your question, virtually none. I had left the White House before those '94-'95 investigations began. I did have to spend a lot of time, right after I left the White House, and spend a lot of money on lawyers during the FBI investigations on a variety of things. In hindsight I shouldn't have. I don't know why I hired a lawyer, I guess it is because a lawyer told me I had to hire a lawyer. I spent $40,000 and I was never the subject of any investigation, I was just information. They were all kind of ridiculous witch hunts, but I would sit through countless hours.

Ken Starr had a grand jury impaneled, either on the travel office or the Vince Foster thing. I sat outside the grand jury office two whole days, with a lawyer at $350 an hour, and was never called. But all of that was after I left the White House.

Riley: One of the things that you were involved in, according to the briefing materials, was the Lani Guinier appointment and trying to deal with that early on. I wonder if we could dial back a little bit and get your story on what had happened there and your involvement and sort of how things had unfolded.

Neel: Well, Lani was the leading candidate, in fact the designee to be, the head of the Civil Rights Division in the Justice Department. She had a long and distinguished record as a scholar. I don't know who her patron was. What happened is pretty simple. Once her name was surfaced and the committee began consideration of her, then those who opposed her ideology or whatever, very effectively used her writings to begin trying to embarrass the President with a candidate that looked extreme on the issue of civil rights enforcement.

The White House did what it had to do. The problem was there was indecision and there was delay. These kinds of things are going to happen. You're going to make mistakes, something is going to come out of the woodwork about a nominee or something. The longer you dither, the more you make things worse and that was the problem with Lani. It went on too long. I think this was a classic example of Clinton's internal conflict being torn by not wanting to abandon what was obviously a good woman whom he respected, but at the same time someone whom he would probably not have nominated had this been laid out for him.

Riley: So another illustration of staff not serving him well?

Neel: Well, I think so. I think that the problem was that it became public. I think Bernie's [Nussbaum] office—it would have been the counsel's office—knew about these writings. Where they failed was in hammering those out before her name was even sent up, before she publicly became the President's nominee. To go to the President and anyone else, Hillary or whoever was going to be involved, the Vice President, and say, "This nominee may have a problem. She's a distinguished scholar, she's wonderful, she's a black woman. This would be a revolutionary appointment, but there is this issue. We think we need to take a second look at this. What do you think?" That's where the mistake was made.

Then it came out and Clinton got tagged with just being indecisive and abandoning his nominee. You know, what's he going to do? Once it became public, of course he was going to dither a little bit. If he had been cavalier and said, "Well, she's got to go," in five minutes, that would have been worse.

Riley: Sure.

Neel: So he was boxed in at that point. And whoever was in charge of managing Lani Guinier's nomination—and they should have known this was going to be controversial, whoever it was, because the position itself was high profile—did not serve the President well.

Riley: One of the accounts in the briefing materials indicated the President and Mrs. Clinton had directed you to look into this at some stage. I guess what I'm not clear about is what would they

have wanted you to look into. Did they depute you to go read the writings to see or were you tasked [inaudible]—

Neel: I don't remember. I don't know who would have said that. I think that it probably meant to either find out what the process was, who's her strongest advocate, let's get them in here, let's do a briefing and then we'll make a decision. It would have been a process thing. I would not have been tasked to pour over her legal writings because not only am I not a civil rights expert, I'm not even a lawyer. So I would not have been involved in a substantive way, but a process way.

Riley: Another event of that year that you might have been involved with was the Perot debate over NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement]. Were you involved in preparing—?

Neel: I was working directly for the President at the time and I didn't get involved in the preparation for Gore's appearance on *Larry King*. The problem was that Ross Perot represented a major roadblock for us in passing NAFTA. He had a big foghorn. He tapped into a small but deep and passionate opposition to a free trade agreement like this and he couldn't be ignored. When the invitation came forth from Larry King to have Perot on, King's people figured it out, "Let's get someone to come on from the White House." It was easy to determine that the President shouldn't do it, that was not a presidential activity. The obvious suspects were Bentsen or any number of people. But Al figured out that it was a big enough deal, and he had a lot of self-confidence that he could do this.

He also saw Perot as being vulnerable. It would be easy, if it was handled deftly, for Perot to look like a nut. You wouldn't have to go at him hard personally, but just that he was so volatile that he would rattle and the gloves would just come off if he were challenged in a certain way. Gore very quickly volunteered to do it. There were a number of people on Clinton's staff who strongly opposed it for a variety of reasons. None of those people could be found the next day. Some of the people who I know opposed it and pushed hard against it were out there talking to the press saying they had counseled the President, they felt like from the beginning that Gore was the guy to do this.
I wasn't directly involved in it. I was working for the President. I was working the NAFTA process, was trying to manage the schedule for the NAFTA initiative, because we had [William] Daley and Rahm Emanuel and a whole team of people pushing the NAFTA thing and trying to manage the President's schedule to work in enough time for him to call a thousand Congressmen and Senators and make sure we had all the tools in place. So I was on the periphery of that.

Riley: Were you much involved during your year there in congressional relations, given your background? Did you work very closely with, I guess it was Howard Paster, at the time?

Neel: I worked closely with Howard because much of what Howard had to do involved using the President, the Vice President, as tools in the Congress. When I was with the Vice President, I worked a lot with Howard on making sure that Al's role was appropriate, particularly in economic planning. Our big agenda, from day one, was to pass a budget that was the heart of our economic plan. It was going to be a challenge from day one and of course we ended up winning by one vote. It was the lynch pin of all that we were able to accomplish and it probably set us up to pass NAFTA as well. But that was my role.

My work on congressional relations was limited to occasional forays into offices where I had friends and relationships going back to my days in the House and the Senate with Gore, as well as scheduling and other kinds of overall coordination things. When I moved over to be Clinton's deputy, I worked a lot more with Howard on deploying a lot of the resources of the White House into legislative activities. Howard was often frustrated because he was the point guy, he was hearing it from all sides up in Congress about mistakes the White House was making and things we weren't doing right. If the President had just called this guy, or if someone had just called this Congressman's spouse to wish her a happy birthday, then everything would be well and whatnot. He was getting demands left and right. Howard was always the most frustrated guy in the White House. So I worked with him a lot. But I didn't have any particular responsibility in congressional relations.

Riley: How quick a study was the President for the ways of Capitol Hill? This is someone who came in with a lot of experience dealing with legislatures, but dealing with the Arkansas legislature and the United States Congress would seem to be two different beasts. Did he have a good ear for congressional politics?

Neel: He was a very quick study on the issues, he never embarrassed himself or the White House on his knowledge of the substance of whatever policy agenda we were working within the Congress. Most importantly, he had a feel for dealing with politicians. This is a guy who loves politics. He never shrank from calling a political adversary or trying to develop a relationship. He wanted everyone to love him and that would help him do his work better. He never rested until he could somehow convert people. Of course, a lot of people he never converted.

He may have been a newcomer to congressional politics, congressional relations, but he was a quick study, not only on the issues side but on the personal side. And he was a great vote counter. He had this great political sense, he always knew somebody who knew some member of Congress. He had traveled all over the country; he had this network of friends and associates from his work as Governor on issues and the Governors' conference. He always knew somebody who knew Congressman so-and-so, even though he may not have had a direct working relationship with him, he had some network that could tap into them.

He may have been a newcomer, but he wasn't a novice. It's still a political game and those guys are human and often they want things that have nothing to do with the merits of the issue. Clinton knew that game. That's one example where horse trading as Governor with the state legislature is a damn good résume for working with the Congress on a big legislative issue.

Riley: Were there any members of Congress that he found especially vexing to deal with, in your experience? Folks that were just, "I can't abide by the idea that I've got to talk with this person or be in this person's company"?

Neel: If he was, he never let on. He had some of Reagan's graciousness, but more of a casualness. Gracious is not the right word. Charm is a better word. He also had this breadth of interest, not "good old boy" stuff, but he could connect to most members of Congress on some level. He is a sports nut. He knew everything about a half dozen sports, down to who the number

three linebacker was on the Florida State team in 1991. He knew this stuff. He got into an argument with my youngest son about the relative merits of the Florida State defense versus the Notre Dame defense during some football game we were watching in the White House one evening. My son was 12 or 13 at the time, and thought he knew everything about sports, but Clinton knew even more.

So he could connect with you. He was a "guy's guy." He played golf, not as a purist, but he just loved to go out there and play golf. He loved sports, football, basketball. He knew everything about all that stuff. And of course his ability to connect with women was legendary, in terms of getting on the same wavelength to talk about something. When you're with him, you think you're the only person in the room. So he had those skills that he made pretty good use of.

Knott: Do we want to talk about some issues post-White House, or would you prefer to—?

Riley: I want to ask one question.

Neel: My public life ended when I left the White House.

Riley: I would like to ask one more question about the first year and then I'm happy to steer in that direction. The decision was taken, the budget being the major item, and I guess that passed sometime in the early fall or late summer. Then it was a question about what would be the next item on the agenda. There were some evidently pushing to do something on healthcare at that time rather than NAFTA. Do you recall which clique you were in or how you felt?

Neel: This was a big internal struggle at the time and it began even before we finished the work on the budget and the economic plan. NAFTA was coming into the pipeline, work was being done already and Clinton had already committed to it. The problem was there was both an ideological divide within the White House about whether to do NAFTA and the congressional leadership was adamantly opposed to it, Gephardt in particular. I think George was opposed to it and there were just a number of people in the White House who thought we would lose all of our ground that we'd gained in the budget by going after NAFTA.

Complicating it further was that the healthcare reform group was itching to go. There was a strong contingent determined that Hillary would take a symbolic role in the White House in the healthcare reform, which obviously grew into something more. There were those who thought we should move to welfare reform, in other words, build on one victory with another victory, as one more triangulation effort and also something that Clinton believed in.

The problem was several fold. One, you couldn't predict the outcome of any of these items, any of these agendas. They weren't necessarily uphill, but NAFTA was unclear. Certainly welfare reform was going to challenge our liberal base and healthcare reform was a complete unknown at that point. This came at a time when my work was focused largely on schedule because of this train wreck. I decided that this would probably end up being my major contribution to my time in the White House, to somehow organize these agendas so that they wouldn't completely immobilize, or even worse, bring down the White House with a series of failures.

Everyone who had an agenda was trying to use the President's goodwill and his commitment to that agenda as a justification for pushing that agenda over all others. There were divided camps. There were clearly distinct groups that thought it ought to go this way or that way. Not only which item should come up next, but who should be running each agenda item. And everybody was just talking. You'd get a group of people to the President and he'd say, "Yes, I think that's right." Then to the next group he'd say, "That makes sense." They would all come out thinking that they had the President's blessing. This goes back to one of the first things we talked about, when Clinton would say something—if you didn't have a real finely tuned translation device, you could very easily misunderstand what Clinton was saying.

In particular, I remember a specific case where Al Gore had asked Clinton about something, had made a suggestion that we take on a certain project and that we do it in a certain way. He came out of that meeting, maybe out one of his Thursday lunches, and he said, "The President has agreed to this, given us a green light to move on this."

There was something about it that bothered me. I think it was because I had heard from Bruce—I always went to Bruce to find out what Clinton really meant. So I went back to Bruce and he said, "No, no. Clinton hates that idea. He didn't want to offend the Vice President but what he ended up saying was, 'Let's talk more about that.'" What Gore heard was, "Yes, we're going to do that." But what Clinton was saying is, "That's interesting but I'm not going to commit to that right now. Don't put me on the spot right now. I'm not saying no, but don't move ahead yet." Gore heard something totally different. Gore developed a very keen filter, very quickly.

Riley: Sure.

Neel: More so than just about anybody in the White House. But you had to do that with Clinton. So anyway, back to this other thing.

You had all these people, all of whom thought they had Clinton's blessing to take their agenda first and be done in a certain way. Hillary and her people on healthcare, and Bentsen on NAFTA, and I don't know who else. Bruce Reed on welfare reform. There was some talk of Gore taking welfare reform, but they didn't think that made sense, Clinton ought to do that personally, and so on and so forth. Everybody had a green light and it was truly a train wreck about to happen. There was all this talk and no focus.

It occurred to me one day, I remembered something I had done with Gore early in our Senate days, or right after the '88 election. We were rebuilding our operation. I came up with a very crude technique to get everybody on the same song sheet on Gore's priorities. It was very simple. I simply took a whole bunch of large foam boards and created charts, calendars—January, February, March, so on—and then with different color codings, different agenda items and the amount of time that would have to be devoted.

You could come up with a project, say, "How many days are we going to have to devote to this?" Thirty days. "How are we going to pace them?" So you take little colored pieces of paper and put them in there. Very quickly, everybody would be in the room and they'd say, "It's not going to work. You can't front-load ten projects, each of which require 30 days of work and get

them done in two months." Then you could work this through and pace things and stage things better.

That had been, I don't know, some five years earlier. I said, "We'll just try it with this crazy group." I mean, here we had all these people coming in the Oval Office, all standing around, everybody saying this or that, some staying on afterwards, getting Clinton's ear and so on, it was just out of control. So we did the same thing, I got somebody in the graphics office to make all these boards and got all these little colored pieces of paper, each representing a day's commitment of the President. Some were broken down into the President being one resource, the Vice President being another and so on and so forth. These things were huge. They covered an entire wall.

So I called a meeting to plan the fall agenda, the Sunday after the Friday when we passed the economic plan. "Now we're going to be doing welfare," on and on. They would come into my office and say, "Okay, I need offices, I need ten offices in the OEOB and I need 20 staffers and I need 100 detailees and you have to help me make this happen." Somebody else would come in and say, "Okay, we're going to do NAFTA now, how are we going to pay for dailies, travel, what are we going to do." And I would say ,"Whoa, wait a minute, where does all this come from?"

So we got this chart and I brought them all in. I brought all these charts in and they were covered up. Each one had just a piece of paper over them, and all these people were in there milling around and everybody was kind of jockeying, how are we going to make this work and whatever. Then finally Clinton and Hillary came in. Al was there, and about 15 people. A few consultants, [Paul] Begala, the woman who worked on healthcare. Everybody stopped talking and they were interested in what was behind these boards.

Then Clinton came in and he said, "What have you got, Roy?" And I said, "What we've got here is the fall schedule. We have to plan this. Everybody thinks that they know what you want. We've got everybody here now and this is the time to figure out what you really want to do and realistically allocate the time." It was probably my only serious successful contribution to the White House.

Riley: How many people were in the room, Roy?

Neel: There were probably 15-18 people in the room.

Riley: The assistants?

Neel: No, no, it wouldn't have been that. It would have been the people who had a reason to be there.

Riley: Okay.

Neel: It would have been George and Mack and Gergen.

Riley: [Ira] Magaziner?

Neel: Howard. No, Ira would not have been there. A couple of consultants. James may have been there, Begala may have been there. Stan Greenberg, maybe. Gore certainly, and a couple of other people. We've got all these things, these lines, each date has a box that runs all across a six-month period for healthcare. All these different agenda items. I said, "There it is. The only totally limited resource we have is your time, the Vice President's time and the First Lady's time. Let's go through each one of these things and figure out how much time is going to be devoted to each of these things." And it worked. Somehow, after about five or six hours, they came to the conclusion that they had to do NAFTA.

Now, we had this debate about NAFTA, but everybody was in the room. We knew how much time it was going to take to do NAFTA, what the deadlines were, what the external events were going to be outside the White House that would affect this. Somehow it worked. Right there the President committed to doing NAFTA next. We got a decision. We then empowered Daley and Rahm to go out and do their thing. People groused, some thought it was the wrong thing to do, but everybody was on the same song sheet. They plotted after that, then, that healthcare would come next.

Riley: You went ahead and made that decision at that point?

Neel: Yes. Gore was pushing his "reinventing government" initiative, which was already underway. He was determined to get the President's time devoted to that and we programmed that. The decision was made to simply put welfare off. Many believed, and I agree with them, that it was a mistake to put healthcare before welfare reform. But it's easy in hindsight because no one knew quite then how ambitious and undoable their agenda would be. It probably was a mistake.

The view was you've got to act in the first session of Congress, because the second session you're going to be running for re-election, you could never get healthcare done. In any event, the reason it would have been a better staging is it would have given us more time to develop our team, to build resources. Instead, we ended up diving into healthcare without the right kind of tools and it got us in trouble. The healthcare task force came under the gun and we got in trouble. That really, I would hope, reinforces what I said earlier. When staff take control of their role and push it to the limit and take some chances in ruffling some feathers, ultimately the President is better served. If it's done with an eye toward getting agreement and moving on. If it is done with an eye toward blowing things up and immobilizing the staff it's another matter.

There was nothing particular genius about this. Certainly it was not high-tech, it was just something simple. Almost the kind of thing that you would do in starting a small business, figuring out how you're going to stage your work. But that sort of thing had not been done, was not being done.

Riley: You didn't have any real difficulty in keeping closure in this particular instance because all the principals were in the room and knew what the President wanted?

Neel: Precisely, because these were principals. These were not just staff people. You had Lloyd Bentsen. I don't know who else actually was in the room. Ron Brown may have come in for a while, he was Commerce Secretary at the time. People heard, the President spoke, and it empowered the NAFTA people. They had been there. They heard it, this was what was going to happen. And Gore was an advocate of doing NAFTA as well, because the President said he was going to do it. So that was really the basis for keeping everybody on track. It doesn't mean everybody was happy with it; they weren't. There were people who were very unhappy with challenging labor at that point in the administration.

Knott: I don't know if you want to jump, I was considering jumping to the 2000 election—

Riley: I don't know, I'm a little bit torn about this. You said you didn't have much of a role after you left the White House and there was a reference on the timeline or something to the fact that you had been used as an informal advisor once the Lewinsky thing came up. Maybe I'm misreading.

Knott: The Gore fundraising investigation.

Riley: Sorry, yes, the Gore fundraising investigation. And I don't know whether we want to talk a little bit about what happened between your departure and 2000, or if you want to go straight to 2000?

Neel: Well, I'll go quickly. I'd like to finish at 5 if we can.

Knott: Sure, absolutely.

Neel: Again, I'd be happy some time in the future to come back if you want me.

Riley: That's part of the reason why I thought maybe we could save the 2000. I don't know how much there is. You'd have to help us with it. Why don't we talk about the fundraising thing a little bit.

Neel: The fundraising thing was easy for me, because I had virtually nothing to do with it. I was interviewed by the FBI but I didn't have anything to contribute. I wasn't involved in any way. I watched it closely. By that time I was involved in meetings, planning the 2000 campaign.

Knott: But you weren't part of an informal war council of outside advisors to the Vice President following the [Fred] Thompson committee hearings in the Senate?

Neel: I don't know what that means.

Riley: We're picking this up from press reports [multiple speaking at once]

Neel: There were a number of us who were meeting with the Vice President regularly to prepare for his 2000 campaign. I wasn't part of any group that was trying to do damage control or

anything like that. They did direct a lot of press to me, just to do spin, and I did that. But if there was a war council meeting regularly with some form and structure, I wasn't a part of it.

Riley: Was there anything that you were doing with respect to the White House before the 2000 election?

Neel: Oh, informal stuff. I would meet with them, do something socially with the Gores every now and then and Clinton as well. I didn't hang around the White House. I had a prohibition, first of all, a post-employment contact prohibition that I was totally faithful to. We in our wisdom had extended it to five years. We were going to be more ethical than the Reagan-Bush administration, though only Ralph Nader was concerned about that and he didn't vote for us. So it was a dumb thing, along with the 25 percent White House staff cut. But nevertheless, I took it to heart and I tried to stay away from anything that looked like policy stuff.

Riley: So there's not really anything that needs to be on the historical record until the 2000 election?

Neel: Well, there are things that I'm not going to talk about, particularly as they involve the Lewinsky thing.

Riley: I'm not going to press you on that because that's not our mission, but can we assume that it relates to your conversations with the Vice President about how he would handle this?

Neel: Yes.

Riley: Sure.

Neel: Like a lot of people, I was very angry with the President. He put the party and the White House at risk for such stupid behavior. Anyway, where I came back into the picture would have been in the evolution of Gore's presidential campaign. I'm in and out of that, and then taking on the transition planning role. That's a different issue, you may not want to get into it.

Riley: No, I think we do. We're not going to have time to do anything other than just scratch the surface, and I think the question for us will be, once we start looking at our resources and your time whether we might not want to grab an afternoon from you at some point to talk about this. Because historically that's a very important election and frankly, as somebody who is responsible for making sure that the Clinton record is historically complete, I'm not sure that you can do that without getting a full understanding of the 2000 election. We've got only about ten minutes. Why don't you take five of this so you can sort of lay out for us the broad parameters of what you did in the reelection and then we'll break at five?

Neel: I was part of a group that had been involved with Al Gore for many years, who met regularly with the Vice President, with Tipper and others, in the early planning of his presidential campaign. That began, I guess, in '98. When was the impeachment?

Riley: Late '98, he was impeached in early '99.

Neel: In ’97 and in early ’98 we began doing these things. He had identified people to do certain things, but the Lewinsky revelation basically froze the presidential campaign. Things were done, activities were underway. There was fundraising, there were meetings and so on, but there was very little campaigning and very little that you could do at that point. You had to pretty much stop what you were doing and Al basically had to come to the aid and defense of the President at that point. That really knocked us for a loop for a long time.

By the time they could pick up campaigning again, there had been a change. The guy who was running the campaign, Greg Smith, was replaced. It became a very different deal. Tony Coelho came in. I was not involved on a day-to-day basis. I did meetings, I did what I could, I was raising some money. My job made it difficult for me to do a lot more than that. Tony came to me to ask me to be involved in a much larger way, but for personal reasons I couldn’t do it. In the end they agreed and I didn’t.

What I did do is take on the role of putting together a transition plan. That was in early 2000. I went about that quietly, using personal relationships, people I knew to talk discretely with, to put together a plan. I met once with Gore and Daley, out at Al’s house, at the Observatory, to let them know what I was doing. I think I talked to Al on Air Force Two coming back from something. It may have been his father’s memorial service.

One thing I did do in that period was take charge of planning and organizing his father’s memorial service in Nashville, which was a very moving event. It was a real honor for me to manage it. Then after that he asked me to take on this transition planning role. So I did that, I met once with him in September, didn’t need to meet again. Did my work discreetly. Then, of course, the day after the election we were thrown into that weird situation where we didn’t know what to do. We didn’t know whether we should be actively doing any transition work or not, but we made a decision by the next night that we had to. So we started putting together a transition, everything short of moving into the transition headquarters. For five weeks we managed a virtual transition to the point of producing lists of names for a Gore Cabinet should he be declared the winner. Met frequently with Gore and Lieberman and senior people and laid out our work, much the way Christopher did it for Clinton eight years earlier. But always with that doubt hanging over us that it may never come to fruition.

The thing was shut down before we got to the point of having people vetted. We’d gotten the approval of the FBI and the White House and both campaigns. Both campaigns would submit names to the FBI for preliminary vetting, this was around December 1st I guess, or maybe a little later. We were ready to do that and I had the names ready to submit and take to the FBI the day the Florida Supreme Court ruled. Then we shut it down when the U.S. Supreme Court stepped in at that point, so it all stopped.

Riley: So your involvement in the campaign then was just restricted to doing this advance transition.

Neel: In the last few months, yes. I did travel and speak and I went to Tennessee and took on a surrogate role for several weeks. I did a lot of fundraising through the primary season. At the

convention I basically did a lot of surrogate work with key groups and did a lot of speaking at state delegation meetings and with Democratic constituency groups and that sort of thing. They just used me as another body and voice of someone who was identified with Gore.

Knott: Did it surprise you that the Vice President lost his home state?

Neel: No.

Knott: You could feel it coming?

Neel: Yes, we felt it coming a month before.

Knott: What was the problem, if you had to boil it down?

Neel: There were a number of problems, you can't pin it on any one thing. Probably four or five main things. One, he was not as active a figure in his state the way a sitting Governor might be. While he was respected in the state, he didn't have the kind of connection to the state even that Clinton had in Arkansas having been Governor. He had been gone from the state for about eight years as Vice President, had not been in the state as often as he would have liked.

And the state had changed a lot. The politics of the state has become driven largely by suburban white voters, though there are still pockets of staunch Democratic voters. Secondly, we had a Republican Governor and that can't be underestimated. The Governor can drive the politics. In a statewide election, it can make a huge difference, up to ten points difference, simply by putting the political infrastructure at the disposal of the candidate. In this case the Republican Governor went all out for Bush and did a good job at it.

I think another factor, which is more subtle but I'm absolutely convinced about, is that the Lewinsky affair really energized social conservatives and so angered a lot of people, and they had nowhere to vent that anger. They couldn't vote against Clinton. The Republicans made good use of Gore's defense of Clinton in that matter. It probably kept some people away from the polls that might have voted for Gore. If they had gone to the polls they would have voted for Gore, but they were just disgusted. It energized conservatives like we've never seen, they were just fit to be tied. Now, they did what they always do in elections, they turned out the religious conservatives and the NRAs [National Rifle Association], the gun lobby, that crowd, and the pro-life folks. Those are groups that always come to the fore in state-wide elections.

I think it was a combination of those things. We didn't control the Governor's office, the state has become marginal, if not Republican, it has become almost equally divided in the last 20 years. And the Lewinsky thing. You can't really exaggerate the importance of that. It's hard to fault the campaign. If we had spent a whole lot more time in Tennessee we would have been thought to be crazy and more vulnerable than we were. We wouldn't have come as close in Florida or won Michigan, or Pennsylvania, or some of those places. It's hard to fault the conduct of the campaign there. It was painful, but not a surprise.

Riley: Sixty seconds, I know, I sound like John McLaughlin, I don't mean to do that. Should he have run more closely to President Clinton in the re-election? Was it the wise thing to do, to keep a distance?

Neel: I don't think it mattered. I've looked at the electoral map and the places where arguably Clinton could have helped us. With the sole exception of West Virginia, I can't find a single state where Clinton could have made the difference. Now, I was always an advocate for using Clinton more, because I didn't think he was going to hurt us any more than he already had and he has great strengths, has been a real asset in a lot of ways. The relationship had become strained. That robbed the Gore campaign of some political skills and energy and advice that it would have had otherwise. It was a tactical decision, and you look around the map and I'm not sure where Gore could have won that he didn't win.

For all of the hand-wringing about the 2000 campaign, in addition to winning the popular vote, he almost won Florida. Arguably won Florida, and wasn't given the votes there. I mean it was quite phenomenal. He was six points behind in the polls ten days before the election, in the public polls. He won the popular vote. Had the Florida thing turned differently, nobody would be asking about Tennessee. It would be a little pinprick and it would have been considered phenomenal. It would have been the end of the Bush political dynasty, or whatever, the budding dynasty. That would have been it, it would have been all over. Just shows you how painfully close and to the point of almost being serendipitous this whole thing is.

Riley: I've broken my promise to get you out of here by five. Let me on the record say how deeply grateful we are for all of your time and your candor today. You've made a very fine contribution to our enterprise and we appreciate it.

Neel: Thanks.

Riley: And those reading this 50 or 100 years from now will also feel that way.

Neel: Well, I'm happy to help. I think it is an important project too, and I hope you're successful in getting all the other people into it. Some of those people have a whole lot more to contribute than I do.

Riley: I don't know about that.