WILLIAM J. CLINTON PRESIDENTIAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH DAVID KUSNET

March 19, 2010
Charlottesville, Virginia

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TRANSCRIPT

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Riley: This is the David Kusnet interview as a part of the Clinton Presidential History Project. We're very appreciative of your coming to Charlottesville to do this. We've just had a conversation before the recording about the fundamental ground rules to understand the confidentiality of the proceedings. The other housekeeping thing we always do is to start out with a voice identification. So I'll ask everybody to identify himself and say a few words just so the transcriber will know who we are.

I'm Russell Riley. I head the Clinton project in the oral history program here. I have been at the Miller Center for ten years now.

Nelson: I'm Mike Nelson and I'm here in town from Memphis, Tennessee, to do this interview.

Kusnet: I'm David Kusnet. Thank you for having me out here.

Riley: Delighted to have you here. We had an email exchange beforehand where you said that you had some things that you'd like to start with. I wonder if you want to do that, or would you prefer for us to bore in with questions first?

Kusnet: I'm thinking of this not as an introductory statement, but sort of as a menu of things that I'm prepared to talk about.

Riley: Excellent.

Kusnet: I have one disclaimer. One rule of speechmaking and speechwriting, which I'm probably going to break, is you should never talk for more minutes than there are people in the room. I am most certainly going to break that rule. I'll try to address the questions you had at the end of the briefing book to see if there is some unifying framework for them.

I worked in the Clinton campaign in 1992 and the first two years in the White House, which in a sense flowed from the campaign. Nineteen ninety-two was a very unusual year politically. The first President [George H.W.] Bush started out that election cycle prohibitively ahead of any possible opponent, and as a result a lot of the punditry in the early drafts of history says that none of the first-tier Democrats ran for President that year because they didn't think they could win.

Maybe I'm a partisan, but I would argue that one first-tier Democrat *did* run and won, and his name was Bill Clinton. Of all the Democrats at that time who were seen as credible Presidents—Bill Bradley, Sam Nunn, Al Gore, Mario Cuomo, Lloyd Bentsen, and others—the only one who did run was Bill Clinton. He was someone who had been preparing to run for President and to be President almost all of his life. He was someone who had given a great deal of thought, not just to what it took to be elected President, but to what he would do after becoming President.

He came into the campaign and into the Presidency with a distinct political philosophy, a distinct strategy, a distinct policy outlook. He came in with his own way of talking and speaking, which flowed from his experience in politics in Arkansas, where I believe he ran for office somewhere between five and seven times and lost only two elections, one for Congress the first time—the first election he ever ran in—and one for reelection as Governor, and won every other election that he was in.

There was a way of talking that flowed from a whole bunch of things, including a lot about him that is fairly well known. I guess one thing that is well known, but people maybe haven't thought of the consequences of it—Arkansas is a small state. It doesn't have the kind of dense array of institutions that you have in a place like New York or Pennsylvania or Michigan, so he was mostly used to talking to small audiences. You don't have much of a labor movement in Arkansas, so he's not used to, as someone coming up not only in New York and Pennsylvania but a state like Minnesota would be used to, talking to a large union audience. He never had that experience.

It's a Democratic state, but it doesn't have the huge, well-organized Democratic Party that you have, say, in Chicago. So he's not used to addressing a big torchlight parade the night before an election as Democrats used to do in Chicago. Before he ran for President, he was used to addressing small audiences. Probably the largest audiences that he was used to addressing were in churches. That's the major social institution in Arkansas that brings a large number of people together to hear speakers. So he's a man of parts as a speaker. He can be a teacher and he can be a preacher. He can be a policy wonk. But he was most of all used to speaking to small audiences and to trying to relate to people as individuals, even if they were individuals that happened to be gathered together to hear him talk.

As one of his biographers, David Maraniss, said, he was first in his class. He was part of a cohort of Democratic Party office holders, political operatives, policy experts, sort of the early edge of the baby-boom generation. He came with a cohort including, I think, mostly baby boomers, some like me, younger baby boomers than he was, some people younger than that. This was a Democratic Party cohort that roughly spanned the period from the end of the [Jimmy] Carter administration to the Clinton administration. Both parties have cohorts. I think the Democratic Party, until recently at least, hasn't been as good as the Republican Party at developing and nurturing a cohort of people.

If you go back to 1991, 1992, there really wasn't any successful model for a Democratic Presidency until you went back maybe to President [John F.] Kennedy. President Carter—a very good man, but he was not a successful President.

Lyndon Johnson had an enormous positive impact on American life, but his Presidency did not end happily either. John Kennedy's Presidency of course did not end happily, but that was not through circumstances under his control, and as there should be, there is the aura of success and greatness about him. You've got to go back that far. Theodore Sorensen would be advising us from the sidelines, but he's not about to move out to Little Rock and work in a Democratic Presidential campaign. So what you had was a cohort of people who may have been successful or unsuccessful in other things in life, but they had not known victory in national politics. I wrote campaign literature for the public employee union, AFSCME [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees] for Senator Kennedy in the 1980 primaries, but my real beginning in Presidential politics was as a speechwriter for Walter Mondale in 1984 and then for Michael Dukakis in 1988. So I had been on a losing team twice.

Coming into the Clinton campaign, I noticed a lot of people whom I had known from the Mondale and especially Dukakis campaigns. So this was a cadre of people who probably had a relatively high opinion of themselves and even of each other, but had not yet played on a winning team in national politics. I think it is kind of a metaphor for the whole cohort of Democratic Party consultants, policy experts.

Nelson: They knew how to get a nomination but not win a general.

Kusnet: Right, in '91 and '92. There was something that the journalist and later Clinton staffer, Sidney Blumenthal, called "the conversation." There was quite a discussion during that period, especially—I guess the period from 1988 through 1992—of what it would take to elect a Democratic President and what a Democratic President should do after being elected. There was an enormous amount of articles, talks, discussions back and forth about what kind of strategy could elect a President and then make a President worth electing.

I think more than any Democrat who ran in '92 and probably more than any Democrat who didn't run, Bill Clinton was part of that conversation. As a successful Governor of a conservative state, as a leader in the Democratic Leadership Council, a group of moderate Democrats, as a leader in the National Governors Association, a leader in the Democratic Governors Association. He had offered all kinds of strategic advice, all kinds of policy solutions, and then as now he is very much a networker. He was in touch with a lot of the people in that cohort who were thinking about political strategy and policy ideas.

Then he puts these into practice, and lo and behold he gets nominated, which did not look that likely when he started out. People thought Mario Cuomo would be nominated if he ran, and if Cuomo didn't run coming off of the Gulf War, Bob Kerrey, as a war hero, could best challenge President Bush.

Bill Clinton gets nominated, he gets elected, and he becomes President. He gets reelected, survives an impeachment, and appears in the year 2001, when he leaves office, to have been successful in policy. The country is prosperous and at peace. A lot of the social divisions have either been healed or projected onto him so that he is enormously controversial, but I think Americans are more at ease with each other in the year 2000 than they were in the year 1991. I think there was a little less racial and social and class antagonism in the country than there had been before Clinton came in.

It looked at that time that he had come up with a successful formula, not only for moderate progressive politics in this country, but for moderate progressive politics internationally. There was something called the Third Way, which was a new way for progressives around the world to present themselves and govern. Most famously, Tony Blair in Britain got elected and reelected when there had not been a Labour Party Prime Minister in Britain since before Margaret Thatcher.

He and President Clinton are close with each other. Some other leaders around the world—[Lionel] Jospin in France, Alan Garcia in Peru, Ehud Barak in Israel, were also seen as following this strategy. Fast-forward eight years and a lot of it seems washed away. The country is not at peace; the country is not prosperous. Looking back from the vantage point of eight years afterward it looks like the ’90s were a time in between serious things happening in the country and in the world and there is a tendency to minimize Clinton, to see him as someone of great talent who didn’t achieve what he could have achieved, and Clintonism was more a matter of strategy and tactics than of philosophy and accomplishment.

Both George W. Bush, and in the Democratic primaries in 2008 Barack Obama, talked about the Clinton years in similar ways: as a time of not taking on serious issues, just looking for political advantage. I would mostly disagree with that. But that’s certainly something for us to talk about. I think I’m 50 percent a Clinton Democrat and 50 percent a Democrat who was working for Bill Clinton.

Prior to working for Clinton I had worked for Mondale and Dukakis. I worked for the Public Employee Union, AFSCME for about ten years, for the civil liberties group People for the American Way for several years, and suburban newspapers in New York and Connecticut before that. I was part of the conversation before ’92. I wrote a book called *Speaking American* that was one of these prescriptive books for the Democratic Party that focused on rhetoric as a way of talking about other things as well.

The one thing that united the conversation was a sense that whatever we had done in 1984 and in 1988 clearly had not been working, and we had to do something different if we intended to win. As Bill Clinton used to say, the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and thinking if you keep on doing it you’re going to get a different result. There was, I think, a consensus in the Democratic Party between ’88 and ’92 that whatever we did, if we wanted to get a different result from ’84 and ’88, it had to be different from what we did in ’84 and ’88.

Speaking American argued for being more populist in economics than Dukakis had been. It argued for making a more explicit effort to be mainstream on social issues than Mondale and Dukakis, even though they were both very responsible, middle-class Americans. As members of what was called the “silent generation,” they both didn’t think they had to belabor their sharing the values of most Americans. It ventured into some speculation about how Democrats could change Americans’ minds, not only about the Democratic Party and its leaders but also about America itself. How there would be ways of getting what was then at least demographically a non-Hispanic, white, middle-class majority in the country to look differently at those who were different from them or appeared to be different from them. How unions could reintroduce themselves to people, how the idea of public service in government could be reintroduced to people. So there was a lot about what later came to be called reframing.

About how you could stand for many of the same things but present it differently. That led to the title, *Speaking American,* which had a double meaning. First it was just how you can talk plainspoken American English, but secondly how you could speak to American values and American experiences better than we had done in ’84 and ’88.

The book reintroduced me to people I already knew as someone who had also been doing some rethinking and was part of “the conversation.” Bill Clinton read the book. That gave me a vantage point in the campaign and in the first two years in the administration of being seen as somebody who wasn’t just a practitioner, but also had a point of view. Anyhow, that’s a lengthy menu of some things we might talk about.

Riley: That’s a fabulous arc, and there’s an awful lot in there that we want to bore into. Let me begin by asking, if you wouldn’t mind—you said that you felt like you were 50 percent a Clinton Democrat and 50 percent a Democrat working for Clinton. We’re always interested in finding out a bit more about how you came by your own Democratic principles and sensibilities, your own biography as you’re working up to the point that you get involved in Presidential politics. Could you take a couple of minutes and tell us about your personal background and how your partisanship gets shaped?

Kusnet: I grew up mostly in Brooklyn, New York. You really didn’t know too many Republicans there.

Riley: Well, I grew up in Alabama and I didn’t know too many Republicans either.

Kusnet: To talk about Clinton, one of his many talents was he was able to drop cultural signifiers with people. They would get very different groups of people to think, *This guy gets it.* Introducing himself to Democrats from outside of Arkansas in ’91 and the ’92 primaries, he had some challenges. First, people mistakenly thought he was from a privileged background when he wasn’t, because he had been out of Georgetown and Yale and Oxford and was so well spoken and young looking.

They also thought, since he was from the DLC [Democratic Leadership Council] and from Arkansas that he might be a conservative. In order to get Democratic audiences to identify with him, he would say—I’m not southern so I can’t say it the way he did—“My grand pappy, my granddad thought that when he died and he went to see Jesus he’d meet [Franklin D.] Roosevelt.” That would send the cultural signifier he was a real Democrat.

As a baby boomer, when I was growing up the older people were the depression generation. They had been Roosevelt Democrats, and they probably never thought of voting for any Republican other than maybe Jacob Javits. So that’s the world that I grew up in. My parents were the first in their families to go to college and have white-collar jobs. I grew up in one of these co-op housing developments in New York City, a smaller version of Co-op City, much smaller. But I think it was ultimately sponsored and funded by unions. My parents had been union members earlier in their lives, and a lot of the people in the housing development were union members or retired union members.

I grew up in the traditions of the Democratic Party. I think part of what the ’80s meant for me and probably for a lot of people in that cohort was seeing that what we had thought was a

majority in looking at this country wasn't anymore. Someone like Mondale could run around America saying things you believed in and almost took for granted and only get 41 percent of the vote. And Clinton dropped enough cultural signifiers with people like me to suggest that he really deep inside shared our way of looking at the world but knew that it wasn't the way that most people looked at the world any longer.

Nelson: How'd you get interested in politics and active in politics at first?

Kusnet: I grew up, not around people who were running for office or working for people who were running for office, but people who talked about politics. I remember, it must have been 1956, wanting to watch some kid show on TV and my father wanting to watch Adlai Stevenson make a speech. It would be nice to tell a story that I listened and was inspired, but I probably just left the room.

I don't think there were too many [Richard] Nixon bumper stickers in Brooklyn in 1960, but I remember tearing down one of them. So it was just sort of assumed that that was something you were. You might be critical of the Democrats when they were in office or if they were losing a campaign, but you certainly wouldn't be a Republican.

I was in high school in New York City in '68. That generational cohort—sometimes they call it in this country "the '68-ers," people for whom 1968 was the introductory or the formative experience in politics—had been influential ever since. I remember in '68 having been, in succession, for Eugene McCarthy, then Robert Kennedy, then very reluctantly for Hubert Humphrey, and getting into all kinds of arguments. Doing canvassing in different places for them, and also for Paul O'Dwyer who ran for Senator as a peace Democrat and got clobbered.

A funny story is that I met Dick Morris at that time. He was something very different from what he became. At that time he was a student at Columbia and he was, I think, organizing for a new generation of reform Democrats on the west side of Manhattan who were challenging the old generation. The old generation was pretty honorable people and I'm not sure the new generation turned out any better than the old generation did. But I remember at that time some friends of mine had some lists—this is long before the Internet or any modern communication technology. At that time in New York City, politics was largely a matter of figuring out a way to get into an apartment building and then going door-to-door and canvassing it.

We had a bunch of index cards of high school kids who were willing to do campaign work, and that was a very valuable commodity then. I remember Dick Morris really trying to cajole different ones of us to give him this list of young people who would be willing to be foot soldiers in primaries in New York City. So that got me into it. I think at that time I wanted to be a writer. It never entered my head that I'd run for office myself. I don't think I had any fantasies about working in the White House or working on campaigns.

There was much less of a mystique then about speechwriting and about campaign operatives than there is now. There was as much or more of a mystique about writers than there is now.

Nelson: Writing in journalism?

Kusnet: Yes, journalism. I don't think I ever thought I had it in me to write fiction, but maybe to write works of nonfiction—write *The Other America* 30 years later, some kind of social criticism.

After college I worked at newspapers. Then I had a friend who was heading up the AFSCME organizing campaign in Illinois and she wanted me to work for her. I got interviewed by AFSCME. At that time it was a very dynamic but also a fluid organization. I ended up getting a job in their headquarters in Washington, D.C. Then just through shaking up staff, they needed someone to write speeches for the national president, and they gave me a chance.

About a year and a half later they remembered I wanted to go to Illinois and they sent me to Illinois where AFSCME was concluding the campaign to organize more than 40,000 state employees and negotiate their first union contracts. When I came back from Illinois, I became a traveling PR trouble-shooter and then the national coordinator for what they called the field PR staff.

But, once a speechwriter, always a speechwriter. There is a Eugene McCarthy line that to be a football coach you have to be smart enough to know how to do it and dumb enough to think it's important. There would always be jobs for football coaches because they all knew each other and took care of each other.

Back in the late 1970s and early 80s before databases, but with Rolodexes, having been the speechwriter for the President of AFSCME, I was in the roster of Democratic speechwriters. In 1979, Vice President Mondale's chief speechwriter, Marty Kaplan, was looking for another speechwriter and called me up.

I turned it down. I thought correctly that Carter and Mondale were not going to get reelected and I'd be out of work in about a year, as exciting as it would be to work for them. I thought Teddy Kennedy might run and I thought I might be for him. I said no, but I said no with my best effort at civility and friendliness and gratitude. So I kept up—at least I didn't antagonize him.

One rule is, be nice to people when they're down. I was working in an AFSCME organizing campaign in Connecticut the day after Election Day 1980 when Carter and Mondale lost, but I made a point to call Marty Kaplan up that day and thank him for having offered me the job, and while he didn't need my help, offering to help him. So that maintained the relationship. Then when I had just left AFSCME in the summer of '84 he called me up again and asked me if I wanted to work as a speechwriter for Mondale on the campaign. I said yes, and that got me into Presidential politics.

I imagine that, of the people you talk to, my background might be a little bit unusual because I never worked full time in a campaign for any office except President of the United States. Before working in the White House I had never worked in the government. That may have some bearing on how I related to things afterward, because essentially I had been an oppositionist. I had not been someone on the inside, I'd been someone on the outside saying that the people on the inside were doing things wrong.

Nelson: When you write for one Presidential candidate, when you write for Mondale, does that make it easier or harder to write for Dukakis four years later? Does that make it easier or harder

after Clinton, in the sense of adapting to their style, the way they like to do things, and so on? In other words, you wrote for Mondale, the first candidate you'd ever written for.

Kusnet: Right.

Nelson: Did you form the impression of, *Okay, this is what a speechwriter for a Presidential candidate does*, and then when you wrote for Dukakis and so on you had to make some adjustments on the fly that maybe you didn't anticipate having to make?

Kusnet: That's a very good question. What you have to do as a speechwriter is reach a point where you can hear the voice of the person you're writing for, and where that becomes a natural way of writing words to be spoken. The first person I wrote speeches for was someone who had a voice that was very familiar to me, the president of AFSCME until 1981, Jerry Wurf, who was from Brooklyn, a political radical, so it was like the voices I had heard growing up. That was not a difficult voice for me to get.

Other voices I had to make a conscious effort to get. Mondale was a soft-spoken Midwesterner in person. In public, his voice was a soft-spoken person trying to be a loud-spoken person. To go with that small state/large state dichotomy we were talking about before, he had grown up in a relatively small state but a state that was dense with institutions. They had a union movement, they had a very well organized Democratic farmer labor party; the agricultural co-ops. So he was used to talking to large crowds of people who wanted to cheer.

To quote Eugene McCarthy again, he said that in Minnesota it gets so cold people have to clap just to keep warm. So Humphrey was a master at giving rousing speeches at rallies, and Mondale and McCarthy and others learned how to do it. Speaking to rallies was part of the Democratic Party culture in Minnesota.

So in a sense there were two Mondale voices. One was the rally speaker who just used the basic repertoire of rally speaking techniques, but it's something I really learned as much working with him as before that. You use litany to say the same thing over and over again so people get in their rhythm and know when to clap. You end with almost any positive, upbeat statement that is more than likely to get applause than the cleverest negative line. I learned basic techniques of how you get people applauding. That was his voice for a rally.

His voice for a policy speech was more like what he really was, someone who was low- key, thoughtful, had a dry sense of humor, so it was a very different voice. Pretty much he had two voices. Dukakis had really only one voice. He would always speak in threes. Almost every sentence had three clauses of roughly equal length—"America is running in place, losing ground, falling behind our rivals." It was like a metronome. After the campaign was over, I found that I was writing for everyone like they were Dukakis—a one, two, three metronome was so much in my head that I had to really make a conscious effort to get it out of my head.

Clinton was different. Not just because he was southern. During the 1980s, when I wrote for the chairman of the People for the American Way, John Buchanan, a former Congressman and Southern Baptist minister from Birmingham, Alabama, I got the rhythms of someone who "spoke Southern" and had been trained as a preacher.

But Clinton just had such a variety of rhythms, there's no one rhythm to how he speaks. He will sound more southern with a southern audience than with a northern audience. He is a man of so many parts that he is very difficult to write for. There is not one voice that you can get in your head in the way that with many other public figures there's one voice you can get in your head.

One thing I made a point of doing when I was in Little Rock, was to get the transcripts of anything he had said as Governor of Arkansas. I called up all kinds of people we never met in the campaign—his press secretary in the state government, his personal secretary in the state, the Governor's mansion, the state house, just to get a folder of anything he had ever said or done that was on paper. There wasn't a lot of it and they were very apologetic about giving me any of it because they didn't think it was that good. One thing that I got was a transcript of I think literally hundreds of pages of interviews he had done with Bill Moyers for some purpose, I forget. Sometime between '90 and when the campaign began.

Here you have two people who came from the South. Moyers who—it's not well known, but he's an ordained minister. Clinton knows his Bible. So they're speaking to each other as liberal southerners. I really got a sense of Clinton's natural voice as much from reading those transcripts as from anything else.

I pulled out a lot of ways he turns a phrase that he hadn't used in public before, and started putting them in speech drafts. It gave me one aspect of his natural way of talking and thinking about things.

Riley: How did you train yourself to hear Mondale's voice and Dukakis's?

Kusnet: For Mondale I traveled with him for almost three months before the election, so I heard everything he said.

Riley: But you were asked to write for him off the bat.

Kusnet: I'm enough of a political junkie that I would have followed someone who was Vice President, and I had seen him on TV. So I had some sense. I didn't have a chance to bone up on him the way I did with Clinton. He was well known. Dukakis was less well known, but the same. Dukakis had a very easy voice to get. Maybe easier if you're from the Northeast. It was easy to write in ways that he would recognize as his own.

Nelson: Were you part of the Mondale campaign for the nomination?

Kusnet: No.

Nelson: Only with the general.

Kusnet: Only the general.

Nelson: How did you connect with the Dukakis campaign?

Kusnet: Through the cohort who worked in Democratic Presidential campaigns at that time.

Riley: No, no, we're interested in both.

Kusnet: The fact is that a lot of the same people were involved in the Mondale campaign, which was one of the least successful campaigns in modern history; the Dukakis campaign, which was one of the worst run campaigns in modern history; and the Clinton campaign in '92, which was one of the best run campaigns in American history. I think maybe there is a lesson there, not just for politics but for organizational management. It wasn't the caliber of the people; the caliber of the people was no different in '92 from '88 or '84. It was pretty much the same people; but the times were different, the candidate was different, and the ways of running the campaign were different.

I had met both people who, at different times, managed Dukakis' Presidential campaign during 1984. John Sasso ran Geraldine Ferraro's Vice Presidential campaign, and Susan Estrich was an issues expert on the Mondale plane.

I don't know if you remember Rosie Ruiz?

Riley: Sure, the marathoner.

Kusnet: Just as she ran the beginning and the end of the New York marathon but didn't run the middle of the race, I helped to write Dukakis's announcement speech and worked on the last ten weeks of the campaign.

Nelson: How come?

Kusnet: I guess I did not want to work that long in a campaign and I had no problem with Dukakis, but I wasn't for him for the nomination. I knew Estrich and Sasso and Jack Corrigan and other people who were all for Dukakis and working for him. I thought Dukakis was perfectly okay. I wasn't against him. But I liked a lot of what [Richard] Gephardt said—the economic populism. I didn't do anything on behalf of him at that time. But I sort of found myself rooting for him. I didn't want to work against someone who was saying what I believed in in favor of someone who wasn't really saying what I believed in.

Nelson: So you're at People for the American Way. I guess you take a leave of absence to work for the Dukakis campaign and then come back?

Kusnet: Yes.

Nelson: I think many people's impression of People for the American Way was that its agenda was mostly about civil liberties. In other words, not the kind of thing that you thought in your book ought to be at the heart of a Democratic campaign. Did you see People for the American Way, for example, as exactly the kind of organization that Democratic candidates shouldn't pay too much attention to if they were going to win elections even while you were working there?

Kusnet: It's interesting that you see it that way. I think that's how most people who were aware of it probably saw it, since it was an organization that had been founded by Norman Lear, the TV producer who was so oriented to communications. I was communications director. A large part of what we were about was yes, trying to advocate for Constitutional liberties and trying to

oppose the religious right. But we also wanted to "speak American." To do our advocacy work in a way that would make the positions that we had more mainstream than they had been.

The best-known civil liberties organization then and now is the American Civil Liberties Union, which—in part because its role is to represent unpopular issues and unpopular people in court—takes an absolutist position. I think the original purpose of People for the American Way, which was never stated because it could be misinterpreted if you ever stated it directly, was to advocate for some of the same general positions—civil liberties, Constitutional liberties, separation of church and state—but to do it in a way that could gain majority support and could change ideas about such things.

The people who played leading roles in it in the period I worked for it were not liberal absolutists. Tony Podesta was president of it at that time. He had been a prosecutor in the District of Columbia. He describes himself as being in some ways a product of Chicago machine politics. He had a 65th birthday party recently and people were looking for Google news, for Google photographs online, and we found a photograph of him when he must have been a teenager or something posing with the first Mayor [Richard M.] Daley. He was from the 39th ward in Chicago. He is a liberal—he was then—a liberal political activist, but he was not an absolutist.

The legislative director was Melanne Verveer, who later became chief of staff for Hillary Clinton. She had worked in the U.S. Catholic Conference. She is very religious herself. She wanted to find some ways to get religious people involved in defending and defining separation of church and state but not the separation of religion and society. Then, there was someone who died before his time. He was quite an influence on me and actually got me to write *Speaking American,* a man named Jim Castelli who had been in Catholic journalism. He worked for *National Catholic Reporter, Our Sunday Visitor*. He did a column on religious issues, among other things. He did a lot of writing about how you can mix religion and politics without destroying the wall between church and state.

So we tried to define a position that was civil libertarian but not absolutist and wouldn't have to be unpopular. Just in preparing for this oral exam I reread parts of Clinton's biography, *My Life*. I was reminded of something that I had known and then completely forgotten, which was after he lost the Governorship of Arkansas in the 1980s he was offered a few jobs, and one of them was being president of People for the American Way. Norman Lear had offered it to him. The idea was that they didn't want to get some civil liberties lawyer from New York. They wanted to get somebody who came from a part of the country where religion was very salient. Even though he had lost in '80, he was someone who could win an election in a state that had voted for George Wallace in 1968, a state where William Fulbright had been defeated.

He says of all the jobs that he was offered that he didn't take, that was the one that he gave the most serious consideration to. So from the first the idea was that you could find some ways to speak American about civil liberties issues; it wasn't to be absolutist.

Riley: Mike, you have any more questions before we get to up to '92?

Nelson: Well, when you think of Dukakis and you think of Clinton, you think of Clinton's nominating speech at the convention. What did you make of that at the time, and was that in your mind when you were originally thinking of working for Clinton?

Kusnet: Yes, that was before I worked for Dukakis. At least the political community knew that Clinton was a much greater talent than that speech revealed. It was sort of like saying Sandy Koufax in his first season in the major leagues was terrible. He had great power, but he couldn't get the ball in the strike zone. People knew that Koufax was a great talent and he needed some seasoning. To carry that metaphor a little further, maybe to mangle it, it wasn't that Clinton had no control. Maybe he was used to playing in a different ballpark or something.

That goes with the large audience/small audience theory. Clinton was someone who had been around politics since he was a teenager, a high school kid. He had run for office at that point I don't know, five, six, seven times, won five out of seven, whatever, clearly a great talent. But he had managed to go that far without ever speaking to the national television audience in prime time.

I don't think he had ever been on national television before in prime time. I think he had spoken at the 1980 convention, but in the daytime and before C-SPAN [cable-satellite public affairs network]. So he had never spoken to a national television audience. He had probably never spoken to that many people. I guess the other dimension is time. He had rarely spoken in a situation where you can talk for only ten minutes, whatever amount of time a nominator is supposed to have at a Presidential convention.

The other thing with him, of course, is that it was a speech that was written for him, it was not a speech that he had written. He not only had never in his life before May of 1992 had someone who worked for him in government or in a campaign full-time who had the title and responsibility of being a speechwriter, he had probably never gotten up and read words to a crowd of people that someone else had written. He had only rarely gotten up in front of a crowd to read words that *he* had written. His natural manner of speaking is extemporizing.

He would speak at the Democratic Leadership Council. He would just write one page of notes for himself, maybe six talking points, get up, maybe not even look at it when he's up at the podium, and give these elegantly crafted speeches. You would be sure there was a text, sentences that parse, paragraphs with a topic sentence and so on, paragraphs that flow from each other, and it was all in his head, it was not on paper. That's his natural way of speaking.

Running for President of the United States and then being President of the United States, at some point you have to make the transition from functioning like that to dealing with text, because even if he doesn't need a text to make a good speech, a President needs to have a text vetted. You need to make sure there's nothing in the text that will cause a stock market crash or a war. You have to have people prepared to defend what you're saying immediately after you've said it. So you need texts to be a President. But that was not his usual, his preferred, his natural way of speaking.

Nelson: All these thoughts you just shared with us were those thoughts you had even at the time you were watching that speech and even at the time you were thinking of writing for Clinton?

Kusnet: I don't think I watched Clinton's nominating speech, but I did read about it the next day. I knew then that he was a great talent who had had a bad night.

Nelson: One more question about previous campaigns, and that is, were you involved in debate prep at all for Mondale or Dukakis?

Kusnet: I was not with Mondale during the debate prep. The campaign had the speechwriters write responses to likely questions for drafts for the summations at the end of the debates, and I submitted them, but I was not physically in the room. I was with Dukakis during several of the debate prep sessions. I think the idea was a good idea, just to get me acquainted with him. I was there in the room and actually got something of a sense of what he was like beyond what I had read about him and beyond what he would say in speeches.

So some of the sense I got of him was so different from how he presented himself in public speeches that it was really of no value. If I had been working for him a year before—it would have been helpful to write his announcement speech. Two months away from Election Day there's nothing really that you can do with what I think I learned about him.

What I think I learned about him was that he had actually much more of the ethnic feeling as an outsider in America than he let on. The conventional wisdom about him was that he was a thoroughly assimilated American meritocrat who ran as an ethnic Greek because it gave him some identity. What I think I learned from hearing him talk to people and speak extemporaneously and then say, "Oh, my God, I can't say that," was that he really did feel something of an outsider in this country, beyond the world he knew in Massachusetts.

The other thing that I think I learned is that a formative experience for him had been being an American exchange student in Peru as a college kid. He had stayed with a family that was part of the social democratic party in Peru (the Apristas), which was being persecuted by the military government in Peru, which was being supported by the United States. He really identified not with the Sandinistas, but with the Latin Americans opposing North American meddling. He wasn't about to pretend to be more hawkish about Nicaragua and El Salvador than his record showed. If anything he was even more dovish about those places than his record showed. So I think I learned those two things about him, and there's nothing you can do with those two things in an election.

Riley: But there was a sense with Dukakis that in the final stages of the campaign—the conventional wisdom—and maybe I'm wrong because I haven't reflected on this for a while—was that he ran from the liberal label for very long and then towards the end of the campaign sort of embraced it and tried to put his own gloss on what it meant to be a liberal in American politics. Am I mistaken in recalling that?

Kusnet: There's a story there, I'm actually part of it, and some of it is in public records.

Riley: Tell us more.

Kusnet: The *Boston Herald*, around Labor Day of '88, the *Boston Globe* two weeks before the election, and Sidney Blumenthal's book about the 1988 campaign, *Pledging Allegiance: The Last Campaign of the Cold War*, all tell the story of my role in helping Dukakis find a more

populist voice in his speeches. I had no prior relationship with Dukakis at all. I had some with Estrich and Sasso. Shortly after I joined the campaign, they had me write Labor Day week's speeches for him. I included some economic populism—tougher than he had done before. Dukakis did not like it. I think actually it would have been the debate prep, but there was some setting where I met him for the first time with a bunch of staff around, sometime in September. I was introduced to him—in campaigns and in the White House you put your name or your initials on the speech draft so people know who wrote something.

I think he was kind of tired and in a bad mood. He's shorter than I am and he just started sticking his finger in my face and saying, "Don't write that kind of crap about country clubs or whatnot. It's not me." I wasn't mentioned by name, but the fact that Dukakis had lost his temper at some staffer who had written populist stuff got in the *Boston Herald,* which did not like Dukakis at all. Then you have that disastrous second debate, which is remembered for him giving a factual rather than an emotional answer to Bernie Shaw—he called him Bernard—asking him what he would do if his wife was raped and murdered. Anyone who knows Michael Dukakis knows he loves his wife and would strangle with his bare hands anyone who laid a finger on her, but he was acting like a President, not like a husband and human being, and said that.

After that debate he's 17 points behind. He gave this kind of speech that Democrats at that time would often give, when it's two weeks out but no one knows who they are or what they stand for, so they're going to reintroduce myself. He gave a speech at Faneuil Hall in Boston where he was going to redefine themselves. He gave it on a Sunday, and they had me write it in one day, on a Saturday, in the campaign headquarters.

This story shows that having a defined point of view—in my case, economic populism—can be an advantage for a campaign staffer. Here I had been yelled at by the Presidential nominee for having a defined point of view. Several weeks later, when the nominee is 17 points behind and needs to define himself, the people running the campaign remember that my defined point of view might not have been such a bad idea. They had me write this speech for Dukakis, the point of which was not to define him as a liberal but to define him as a populist. That's the Faneuil Hall speech that the *Globe* wrote about and credited me with writing the speech.

The Faneuil Hall speech evolved into Dukakis' stump speech for the last two weeks of the campaign, where the big point was, "I'm on your side." The stump speech presented a series of conflicts between Dukakis and Bush, along the lines of, "Bush wants to do this for rich people, I want to do that for regular people. I'm on your side." That became his stump speech for the last two weeks of the campaign. That was a kind of self-definition he had resisted very much back at the beginning of September. That was to define him as a populist and as a Democrat in some line that went back to [Harry] Truman and Roosevelt.

At some point, and this was not the doing of the staff, he sort of said, "The hell with it, I'm going to define myself as a liberal too," which was not what the staff wanted him to do. I guess, come to think of it, it was the real self that I had heard at the debate prep, the guy who went to Peru, saw what it was like to live under a military dictatorship, saw that the United States is basically decent but isn't always right, and that probably was a defining experience of his life. At some point I think the real Michael Dukakis who was a liberal Democrat came out. While the staff didn't want it, he finished out the three days as much as a liberal as a populist. I don't know if it

made any difference. That's what they call "stepping on the message." But that's who he was. He got to finish up, in some ways, the defining experience of his public life in terms that he would be proud of.

Riley: In looking back, as part of the conversation between '88 and '92, was it your perception that the party's problem was more a function of the messengers in '84 and '88, or was it the basic message itself that was flawed and had to be revisited for the Democrats to succeed?

Kusnet: I think the latter. I mean just about everything. Nobody, including Walter Mondale and Michael Dukakis, would have said in 1990 that what we need to do is rerun the 1984 campaign or the 1988 campaign. The consensus of the conversation was that we had to say and do something different. In some ways the debates then foreshadow the debates now. In some ways they're different. There was still a Soviet Union then, though it was on its last legs. No one knew what a blogger was going to be back then. You had different points of view. You had the Jesse Jackson point of view; it's well known. I don't have to repeat what it is. You had the just flat-out conservative Democrat point of view, maybe for shorthand Lloyd Bentsen, Sam Nunn. You had the DLC point of view. You had the economic populists. You had all kinds of people out there saying one thing or another. You had Paul Tsongas being a fiscal conservative and a social liberal.

The genius of Clinton was that he was able to encompass a whole bunch of those points of view. There were some things he clearly wasn't. He wasn't Jesse Jackson. He was southern but he was not an old-line southern conservative like Bentsen or Nunn. He wasn't someone who would lead with social liberalism like Dukakis had. But he encompassed a whole bunch of viewpoints—he headed the DLC, but at least to someone like me he seemed to be more than the DLC. He could drop cultural signifiers that he was really an economic populist. He could drop cultural signifiers that he was, if not a fiscal conservative, someone who understood the needs of corporate America and would not be hostile to them. He could drop all kinds of signifiers to all kinds of audiences that he really was one of them, without offending other elements of the Democratic coalition.

His campaign was sort of—I wouldn't say unwieldy, because it worked very well, but rather *wieldy* if there is such a word—a wieldy coalition of the DLC and the economic populists. If you'd asked us in 1990 and 1991 what we were, James Carville, Paul Begala, Stan Greenberg, Frank Greer, David Wilhelm, and I would have said that we were economic populists. With economic populists at that time, whatever your views on social issues would be—and I think all the people I mentioned were social liberals—you couldn't really say that you were an absolutist social liberal because that would overshadow the economic populism.

So even though there were tensions, there was some commonality between the economic populists and the DLC people then. With sides, there were elements of a "communitarian" philosophy. If you're an economic populist, it is more than just bashing irresponsible people in positions of power and privilege. It was more than just wanting a whole bunch of economic benefits for people who needed some help. You have to have some idea of some common communities and common society that is going to hold people on top to some standard of responsibility and is going to offer some kind of help for people in need. Because otherwise how can you do it? How can you ask some big company to be responsible to the community if there is

no idea of community? If there's no community, how can you say that we owe it to people to help them?

The economic populists may not have been systematic social thinkers, but we had some idea that you had to have some kind of American community or else you can't do the other things we wanted to do. That's a big part of what the DLC was about or united itself around.

Riley: That was going to be my next question.

Kusnet: You could get someone like me or Carville, Begala, Greenberg in a room with somebody from the DLC like Al From or Will Marshall or Bill Galston and we wouldn't agree on economic issues, but we'd have some common instructs on other issues.

Riley: Sure, but your union background was not something that was very typical of the people who were hardcore DLCers. I guess one of the questions that I had coming into our session was how do you get from the background that you had into a network of people, many of whom seem to be setting themselves up in opposition to the kind of Democratic Party, labor-based background that you had experienced? Was it just the fact that you had lost two national elections?

Kusnet: That was part of it. In 1972, we learned that, if the Democratic coalition was divided, with labor and the liberals at each other's throats, we would get clobbered.

What the Mondale campaign showed was that if all those groups in the Democratic coalition, including labor, liberals, minorities and women's rights advocates, were in the same tent, we could still get clobbered. Most of the organizational divisions in the Democratic Party had been healed by '84. Mondale was the master at assembling a Democratic coalition of all the groups, but you could still get us all under the same banner and we'd do about one or two points better than [George] McGovern had done with all of us being fragmented.

Riley: The base isn't big enough.

Kusnet: Exactly. So almost anybody who wanted to win reached two conclusions: First, we had to all pull together, but that wasn't enough. So, second, we had to reach out beyond our base and do things differently from in the past. You could have all kinds of arguments about what would be enough, but the basic premise was that we'd get clobbered if we were at odds with each other, but we could all be in harness together and if no one else was with us, we'd still get beat. So in '84 or '88 or '68 or '72, the forerunners to the people who were mentors or forerunners to the people who were working together in '92 probably would not have gotten along at all. In '92 we didn't agree with each other on everything, but we realized both that we had to get along and that we had to do some things differently from in the past.

Riley: Got you.

Kusnet: Clinton was more than an economic populist. But he was also more than just a DLCer. He was a student of history from a working-class background. He had some understanding of unions. This was something we knew at AFSCME many years before Clinton ran for President. We must have had a thousand members or fewer in Arkansas.

As Attorney General of the state of Arkansas, Clinton made a point of joining AFSCME because he was a state employee. If there had really been collective bargaining he couldn't have because he would have been a manager, but there wasn't. Anyone could join. So he joined. He always understood that was part of the Democratic Party. He dropped all kinds of cultural signifiers to union people to suggest that he was one of them. He understood that. I had left AFSCME by then, but AFSCME endorsed him early on for the nomination against people like [Thomas] Harkin and others who maybe had a better record. My wife worked for the American Federation of Teachers for many years, and she remembered that Bill and Hillary Clinton worked with the AFT's national president, Albert Shanker, to develop an education reform plan in Arkansas that was not punitive towards the teachers. Clinton through education reform became very close with Albert Shanker. That union also endorsed him very early. His support for trade was a barrier with the industrial unions, but he had some support among other unions from the start.

Nelson: Sounds like your background and the union presence in Arkansas that he related to were public employee unions rather than industrial or trade unions.

Kusnet: That's right.

Nelson: That's the rising sector in the union movement.

Kusnet: This is a rather arcane point, but when I worked for Clinton I remember having people in the unions being critical of him and I was trying to explain him. I remember when I worked for AFSCME there was an older generation of public officials who understood private sector unions but not public sector unions. Clinton was the mirror image: He understood public sector unions better than private sector unions.

Nelson: I think we're ready to move to '92.

Riley: I think so. I think we'll go on about another five minutes and then take a break. Go ahead, Mike.

Nelson: First of all, you leave People for the American Way in 1990, is that right?

Kusnet: I think so.

Nelson: And then what do you—?

Kusnet: It was sort of a loose place. You could come and go. You could leave to work on a campaign and you could come back or you could become a consultant. You could do work for them and get paid for it under different terms.

Nelson: One thing I'm not clear on is where were you living all this time?

Kusnet: In D.C.

Nelson: Then what are you doing between, say, 1990 and when you are approached about the Clinton campaign?

Kusnet: I wrote the book *Speaking American*. I did consulting work for People for the American Way, some for AFSCME. I wrote Jerry McEntee's [AFSCME President] convention speech in 1990 at the convention. Some for the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, some for American Association of University Women, and various other clients.

Nelson: You're one of the rare freelance writers then who were able to make a living.

Kusnet: I did it by ghostwriting. I got more money for writing all kinds of things that I have completely forgotten than I got for writing *Speaking American*.

Nelson: As the '92 nomination campaign approached, were you looking actively to get involved in a campaign?

Kusnet: No. I think in addition to just trying to make a living and pay the bills and gratify whatever ambitions I had to see my name in print and so on, I think I was probably more positioning myself to be a commentator on the '92 election. I figured if you had worked for—two strikes and you're out. I didn't think *Speaking American* would be a job application.

Nelson: It wasn't a job application.

Kusnet: It wasn't a job application. It turned out to be one, but it wasn't intended to be one. It was more like a job application to go on CNN and comment on things or something.

Nelson: So how does it happen? How do you end up with the Clinton campaign?

Kusnet: I think you have to go back to that idea of the cohort of people who worked not only in the Mondale and Dukakis campaigns, but also for organizations like AFSCME and People for the American Way.

In May of '92 Melanne Verveer, who I think was still at People for the American Way then, asked me if I would write a speech for Hillary Clinton, who was giving two commencement speeches that year. One was at Wellesley, where she was a graduate. The other one was at Hendrix College, a Methodist women's college in Arkansas. She's a serious Methodist.

Melanne told me that the speech for Hendrix College would be a first draft for her Wellesley speech, as it was, and it would also be a document that would then inform the Clinton campaign's approach to religion and politics. I went to work on the Methodist women's speech and learned that Methodism had begun as a movement of working-class social reform in Britain in the 1700s founded by John Wesley and espousing an earlier version of communitarianism.

Riley: You mentioned religion a couple of times. Your own religious background?

Kusnet: I'm Jewish, a secular Jewish liberal. But partly through an interest in such things, and partly because I had worked at AFSCME and for civil rights organizations, I had written a lot of speeches for African-American churches—they were always supporters of AFSCME, especially in the historic Memphis strike—so I know more than you might expect about Baptist rhetoric. Working in the labor movement I became familiar with Catholic social teaching.

A labor lawyer in Chicago, Tom Geoghegan, has the great line that every segment of American life has some representation in the labor movement, but there are disproportionate numbers of Irish Catholics, like Geoghegan, and of Jews because those two groups have the most highly developed guilt complexes and they are therefore drawn into it. Anyhow, I immersed myself for about a week in Methodism. Then, before I had turned in the speech, I get a call from George Stephanopoulos. That was before email. As a freelance writer I had an answering machine. I get a message from George Stephanopoulos, who I knew was working for Clinton but I had not been in touch with him. I knew him from the Dukakis campaign.

Putting two and two together and getting five, assuming a greater degree of coordination in the Clinton operation than existed then or ever, I assumed that since he was working full-time for Clinton, and Melanne was just a friend of Hillary's, that he was calling to dun me about the Hillary speech. I hadn't done it yet and he was calling to dun me about it. I'm feeling awkward and guilty that I haven't turned in my speech yet, and he doesn't know what the hell I'm talking about.

It developed that he wasn't calling about the Hillary speech. Instead, he asked me if I wanted to be chief speechwriter in the Clinton campaign. I had not known this, but *Speaking American* had made its way around the campaign and Clinton had read it, and they saw me as something more than someone who had worked the two losing campaigns. Even though it sounded like I'd been offered the job, I was going to go through a tryout. I don't think, at least at that moment, anyone else was going through the same tryout.

Early in June, 1992, the campaign had me travel with him for a week when, among other events, he clinched the nomination by winning the California primary and spoke at the AARP [American Association of Retired Persons] at San Antonio. I wrote both speeches. I worked with Clinton on the speech he gave in Los Angeles after winning the primary and the nomination—in effect, that was my job interview with Clinton himself—and I was interviewed by the campaign consultants, James Carville, Paul Begala, Stan Greenberg and Mandy Grunwald.

Nelson: These interviews—what did they want to find out about you?

Riley: Mike, can I interject—

Nelson: Do you want to take a break right now?

Kusnet: If you want to keep going, I can keep going.

Riley: If you're fine, go ahead.

Kusnet: Carville and Begala interviewed me in Los Angeles on primary day. I think the closest to a formal interview was with Grunwald in Washington. Stan Greenberg also interviewed me in Washington.

Nelson: But you knew him.

Kusnet: I knew him [Greenberg].

Clinton was different from the other Presidential nominees I had worked for. I had met Mondale and Dukakis and they were both somewhat forbidding figures. The first time I met them, they were wearing suits. Of course, they were much older than me. Clinton, the first time I met him I think he was wearing blue jeans, a tee shirt, running shoes, and very informal in manner. He would spend the most attention on whoever was new. He just had a very good way with people, can treat you like his best friend in the world when he's first met you. Everything about him, the body language. He just beckons. Everything about him is just to draw you in.

There is a funny, an arcane reference, but I remember reading something that Norman Mailer wrote about when he met President [John F.] Kennedy. Kennedy told Mailer that he had read *Barbary Shore* and his other books. *Barbary Shore* was a novel that Mailer wrote that he was very proud of but never got anywhere. It was not well reviewed, didn't sell any copies. Everyone knew Mailer from *The Naked and the Dead*. Mailer wrote that he had assumed that because *The Naked and the Dead* was what everyone associated him with—it was about the war in the Pacific and Kennedy had served in the war in the Pacific—he was certain that Kennedy would pretend to have read and loved *The Naked and the Dead.* Instead Kennedy engages him in a conversation about *Barbary Shore*.

Mailer writes that he just fell in love with Kennedy then, because here Kennedy liked his favorite book and Kennedy clearly had actually read something that he wrote. But Mailer has enough self-knowledge to write that politicians should understand that if they ever meet an author, compliment them on something obscure, because that's what will really flatter them.

I'd only written one book at that time, so Clinton couldn't comment on another book, but he engaged me in some obscure part of *Speaking American*. It wasn't the main point, but it was about unions. So he understood that that mattered to me and also that that would prove to me that he had really read it, he hadn't just read the first few pages—he started discussing with me something in the middle of the book. So that won me over. I could tell he had really read my book.

The other thing I learned about how he treated people then—what I ended up writing for him for the California primary wasn't right. It was more like an "I won the Democratic nomination" speech rather than an "I'm running for President" speech. It was written more for Democrats with whom he had already prevailed than for the general public with whom he had not yet prevailed. But for all the talk about him having a temper, which he has, or being difficult, which he can be, his natural way of dealing with speechwriters is to ask you to join with him in critiquing your own work. As a speechwriter, it is very common that if someone is making major changes in what you're doing, will blame you—as they have every right to do—for what you've done. That makes you defensive, and so on.

Unless he's in an unusually bad mood, Clinton will ask you to be co-editor with him of your own work and it becomes detached from you. That's a very good way to deal with speechwriters, because there's no defensiveness. Then you can just join him in revising what you've written. You're not bleeding with every word because you're the surgeon, you're not the patient. He did that with me that evening. So my initial judgment, which isn't all that different from my judgment now, is a very favorable one.

Everyone already knew he had an enormous grasp of policy. Everyone already knew he was a very skillful politician, but also not just that he had people skills, but that at some level he cared about people and knew how to bring out the best in people.

Riley: All right. Let's break here because we have only a little over an hour before we're going to break for lunch. We'll take a five-minute break.

[BREAK]

Riley: He's taking pictures for internal purposes, if you don't mind. Mike, you want to continue with that?

Nelson: Had Clinton ever had a speechwriter?

Kusnet: No.

Nelson: So he'd gotten through May of '92, essentially winning the nomination without a speechwriter.

Kusnet: That's right.

Nelson: That's extraordinary.

Kusnet: I tried to find out, but really couldn't find out, what his practice had been as Governor of Arkansas. Clearly there were prepared texts. Not so many speeches, but the State of the State speeches.

Riley: Sure.

Kusnet: No one ever came forward, not just to me but in anything I've ever read about Clinton, and said they had been a speechwriter for him or even had dabbled in writing speeches when he was Governor. In the campaign I was the first person he ever hired, in any of the public offices that he held, with the title of speechwriter. That was at the end of May of '92.

In the campaign there were people who worked with him on speeches—Bruce Reed, Paul Begala, probably others, but those two in particular. Reed was the policy advisor; Begala with Carville was the political strategist. So that [speechwriting] wasn't their primary role. Someone from the Dukakis campaign had written the nominating speech that Clinton got up and read. That was the first and probably the last time he had gotten up and read words that someone else wrote for him. It wasn't his style even to write words for himself on paper. He'd just write notes for himself. In terms of my relationship with him, which on a personal level was always a good one, the fact that I got started when things were proceeding at breakneck speed rather than at some leisurely moment at the beginning of the campaign meant that he never really figured out what to do with the job title of speechwriter.

Riley: Did you have specific requirements or questions as you went into this? Or you just thought, *This guy is going to be the nominee, I've got to do it.*

Kusnet: I hadn't done anything for the campaign other than the college commencement speech for Hillary Clinton, but I was rooting for him to get nominated. Except for Clinton, none of the top-tier Democrats ran. Clinton, when he announced, was not perceived as a top-tier Democrat. He was perceived as one more of a field of second-ranked people who were running.

Riley: Not that it mattered, because nobody was going to beat George Bush anyway.

Kusnet: Right. And none of the people who were seen by the media as real heavyweights—Cuomo, Bradley, Gephardt, Gore, Bentsen, Nunn—decided to run that year. In addition to Clinton, the candidates who the media took at all seriously were Bob Kerrey, Tom Harkin, and Doug Wilder. Wilder withdrew before the primaries began, and Harkin and Kerrey lost the early primaries and withdrew. That left Clinton against two candidates who were seen as has-beens, and eccentric, marginal figures—Paul Tsongas and Jerry Brown.

Riley: Sure.

Kusnet: Then at the time that I joined the campaign, Bush was still running first and Ross Perot was running ahead of Clinton. My exposure to the campaign before joining the Clinton campaign had been sort of vicarious. With *Speaking American* I did sort of the poor man's book tour, which was I went on any radio show that would have me on. Very few of the talk show hosts gave any indication that they had read a word of the book. Here's some guy who admits he worked for Mondale and Dukakis who wrote a book and we've got to have someone on the show so here he is. So I was sort of like a generic Democrat being yelled at by angry people. I just got exposed to all the anger that was out there.

Fortunately this was from the safety of my home, these people weren't in the same room with me and they couldn't see me and I couldn't see them, but I got exposed to all of these angry voices at the other end of the phone line from about February through May of 1992. Most of them were right-wingers who weren't crazy about Bush but hated Clinton even more, or hated Democrats even more. Some of them were Perot people, some of them Democrats who didn't like Clinton. I don't think I ever got a single caller who thought Clinton was great. As a Democrat, I found myself defending and even representing Clinton, who I had never met and had no relationship with. It was very tough.

Two voices stick in my mind. The first was a very conservative, very erudite talk-show host in Baltimore who told me he had read *Speaking American*—this was not on the air, I think it was at like some pre-interview, and he said, "I know what it really is." I said, "Tell me what it really is." He said, "It's really a blueprint for how you can present socialism to the American people without revealing what you are all about." The interview wasn't that terribly different from that. He was a very erudite guy.

Nelson: Alan somebody?

Kusnet: Don't know. The other voice that sticks in my mind, on some show there was a Democrat who was very angry. I remember, Clinton—and I'm not proud of him for this—went back to Arkansas to execute a man who was mentally disabled.

Nelson: Right.

Riley: [Ricky Ray] Rector.

Kusnet: She asked me, something like, "I'm a Democrat. I know that Clinton is going to get nominated. I want to be for him. Give me some reason why I should be for him." I tried to give some reasons and wasn't terribly convincing. She said, "I'm sorry, but the only things I know about him are he dodged the draft, he slept with some cocktail waitress, and he electrocuted somebody." I'm not saying these people were a focus group. Clinton was winning a lot of primaries, but he wasn't held in terribly high esteem.

When I joined the Clinton campaign, I learned they had been trying to give the voters a better idea of who Clinton was. I remember Mandy Grunwald told me about when she interviewed me that they were conducting something she called the Manhattan Project. They asked focus groups about what they thought Clinton was. For all his skill at cultural signifiers, people who didn't know that much about him assumed he was a rich kid whose family were big shots in Arkansas and who had bought his way into the Governorship or inherited it or something. They put together Yale, Georgetown, Oxford—

Nelson: Hillary.

Kusnet: —not serving in the draft, wife with a different name, and his seeming ease in public settings to think that he was something very different from what he really was. People assumed he had grown up in very different circumstances from how he had actually grown up—the son of a single mother who worked as a nurse anesthetist.

Nelson: Do you have a sense of why in May of '92 they need a speechwriter?

Kusnet: I think that Clinton could have gone through most of the campaign without a speechwriter, just as he had done before with Bruce Reed feeding him policy, Paul Begala feeding him good lines. They could have had one or two more hangers-on giving him lines or something. But, once a candidate has won a Presidential nomination, you need written texts. For one thing you get into situations like the convention speech where how long you speak matters. It's okay to speak for 45 minutes; but if you speak for an hour and a half, especially with his previous experience at the Democratic convention in 1988, you become a laughing stock. You also need to have a prepared text because you need to have something to vet with people. You need to have something fact-checked and policy-checked by the campaign's policy experts. You need to have something to show interest groups and interested groups beforehand so that they'll be onboard or at least not be blindsided. You need to have something to give reporters before they cover you. So you need texts.

With Clinton, you're not a speechwriter as much as you're a text writer. You do the document that gets him thinking and that can be vetted inside and outside the campaign and so on. So you needed someone to write a prepared text. I'm not sure they saw it explicitly that way. When they

hired me they didn't tell me that's what we need you for, but I think they understood it intuitively and they were right. You need someone like that.

Riley: There was no screw-up or gaff at any point leading up to this where they felt like, *Oh, we've stumbled.*

Kusnet: No.

Riley: And in the course of your discussions, was the acceptance address explicitly mentioned? Or was it still uncertain enough about the nomination that they didn't want to—

Kusnet: They were staffing up. They knew he was going to be nominated. That was clear, he was going to be nominated.

Riley: Was that explicitly talked about?

Kusnet: No, but it was understood that that would be the first major thing.

Riley: Did they want you to go to Arkansas?

Kusnet: Yes, you had to move to Arkansas. I was on the plane some of the time, not most of the time. They did not—this is more for campaign history than for Presidential history.

Riley: But that's a part of what we're doing.

Kusnet: Maybe because he had been Vice President and was familiar with Air Force Two [the Vice President's plane], the Mondale plane was actually much more highly staffed than Dukakis or Clinton. Mondale pretty much had recreated Air Force Two. The senior staff and even people like me who weren't but had some function to play were on the plane. It was a big plane, physically a big plane, and within the limits of the technology that existed in 1984 it was very high-tech. Gary Hart may have had the image of being high-tech, but the Mondale campaign was very high-tech. You had then what were advanced computers for the speechwriters. You had an early primitive form of email, which was not widely used then. There was a capacity when the plane landed to send documents electronically to and from headquarters and to and from some other places. The equipment was high-quality. It did not break down.

With Dukakis the plane became a joke; it was called Sky Pig. It was not large. It was, I think, not just relative to its times, but in absolute terms, less technically advanced than the Mondale plane. I'm not sure they had the capacity to send documents electronically from one place to another. I think we had faxes and all kinds of real primitive stuff. The laptops were horrendously bad. I remember being in a car or a van and having to write something and the sunlight on the screen made it impossible to read what was on the screen of the laptop. Then you couldn't plug it into anything, and the battery died. The equipment was just horrendously bad.

The Clinton plane—certainly before he got nominated, then you get all the federal money, but even afterwards—was better than the Dukakis plane, but it wasn't unusually well- staffed, well-stocked, or whatever. Clinton had a circle of advisors who were on the plane with him, but the headquarters was well staffed. This is sort of a metaphor for the cohort. The same day that I

started full-time in Little Rock, Gene Sperling started and Nancy Soderberg, foreign policy advisor, started. People like that were in the headquarters, not for the most part on the plane. I went on the plane on some trips, but most of the time I was in the headquarters.

They did have email. They didn't call it email, but you could send files electronically from the headquarters to the plane. The plane, if I remember right, was Clinton and very senior generalists, Carville or Begala. People would sort of filter the documents through them, but it wasn't the people who produced the stuff.

Riley: That was not a problem for you to move to Little Rock?

Kusnet: Sort of. I had just gotten married. I had just written a book. This is a monstrous way to start a marriage. First you write a book, then you go on a campaign. My wife's pretty close to 100 percent Clinton supporter, then and now. She really urged me to do it. I think she understood that that was like—certainly if we won it would be a defining experience of a lifetime.

Riley: Sure.

Nelson: Did Clinton have any trouble adjusting to having a speechwriter?

Kusnet: Yes.

Nelson: Could you talk about that?

Kusnet: Two points come to mind: First, he is such a gifted speaker and such a gifted composer of speeches, not so much on paper but in his own mind, that he must have wondered, with good reason, why he needed a speechwriter. Second, his ways of talking, his background, and his frame of references are so wide-ranging, that no one could capture all his voices. He is just such an eclectic personality. He is a Southern Baptist, who grew up, first in a small town (Hope, Arkansas) and then in a free-wheeling city (Hot Springs, Arkansas). He went to a leading Catholic University (Georgetown University); he studied at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar; and he went to Yale Law School. He worked on campaigns in Arkansas, in Connecticut, and in Texas, and then he went home to run for office in Arkansas. He supported the civil rights movement, was active in the antiwar movement, and then became a leader of centrist Democrats, while retaining his links to the liberal community. It is hard for a speechwriter to capture one of his voices and almost impossible to capture all of his voices.

He is a man of parts, and he has always been drawn to outsiders. You meet Bill Clinton's friends from when he's growing up, you meet a Greek-American, you meet a Jew. He goes to Yale Law School and he sits at the table with the African-Americans.

He goes on the boat to Britain to become a Rhodes Scholar, he brings Bob Reich chicken soup in Reich's cabin—just such a tendency on Clinton's part to reach out to the outsider. Someone from his background wouldn't have his life experience either. As is true with President Obama, God only made one Bill Clinton, he only made one Barack Obama.

So there's really no one individual who could be an alter ego for him. It's interesting to the extent that post-Presidentially he picks someone to be his amanuensis, his Sorensen. It's Taylor

Branch, another liberal white southerner of literary bent and historic knowledge and religious interests. It's not someone who ever worked for him in a campaign (well, yes, Branch did work with Clinton in the McGovern campaign in Texas in 1972) or in the White House.

Nelson: I guess my question was more about just the nuts and bolts. You're used to writing for Presidential candidates; he's a Presidential candidate but he's not used to working with a speechwriter.

Kusnet: But I knew it would be different. I knew it would be different and difficult. I didn't know the details of how it would be different and difficult. I knew it would be different.

Riley: Can you recount some of the details? We'll want to get to the acceptance address as the big thing that is on the horizon, but are there some memorable speeches that you did between the California address and the acceptance speech that helped—

Kusnet: The three major campaign speeches that I worked on were the acceptance speech at the convention, the speech at the Detroit Economic Club (August 21, 1992), which set forth his economic policy, and the speech at Notre Dame University (September 11, 1992), which addressed religious and social issues. I was the writer on that. That was meant to be an outreach to the Catholic community and a general statement on religious and social issues. We were talking about President Kennedy during the break—speaking at Notre Dame had a special appeal to President Clinton because it was a kind of historic mirror image of when President Kennedy spoke to the Baptist ministers in Texas about church-state issues. That was a major hurdle for John Kennedy in the 1960 campaign.

Bill Clinton was a Southern Baptist speaking to a leading Catholic university in '92, and that was a hurdle for him. Also, and this is unusual for a Southern Baptist from Arkansas, he was a graduate of another great Catholic university—Georgetown. It was a major speech in his mind, in the campaign's mind, and through circumstances it became a major speech in the campaign.

About that same time in August of '92 he gave a speech at the Detroit Economic Club that was a major statement on economic issues, and then—it's in your briefing book—he had a NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) speech; since I was opposed to NAFTA, it turned out just as well for me personally that I had not a major role in it. But those were all speeches with texts where he got up and read something resembling the texts that had been prepared for him. Other than foreign policy speeches, I don't think there were any other speeches in that period where he actually read the words that were on paper.

Riley: Let me come back to the preliminary period, since there aren't any memorable speeches, and just ask you one question, and then we can probably move on to the acceptance address where there must have been some preparation. Can you paint us a picture of what you find when you get to Little Rock? I mean there's such an allure that circulates around the war room there. You've had significant experiences in two previous Presidential campaigns. Does this look like an odd duck to you? Is it a well-oiled machine? What's the picture of the campaign organization?

Kusnet: Again, hindsight is always 20/20. You have to filter out how it looks to me now and how it looked to me then. As a freelancer, I had written several articles about labor-management cooperation. While I hadn't visited the Saturn plant in Spring Hill, Tennessee. I had done a lot of

research about it and visited and written articles about auto plants and steel mills in Ohio, with similar experiments in labor-management cooperation. I think the Clinton campaign headquarters in Little Rock—and especially the war room—was the Saturn Project of political campaigns. The notion with Saturn was General Motors wasn't doing that well, so we'll set up this plant in Tennessee and we'll do things differently, more egalitarian, but also in a more results-oriented way than General Motors had done it before.

What's sort of forgotten about Saturn is that Saturn moved to Springhill, Tennessee, but most of the workers at Springhill, Tennessee, were the workers from somewhere else. There were so many unemployed people you could get UAW members from Michigan and Ohio and Indiana to move to Tennessee and work for Saturn. This was sort of the Saturn project of political campaigns. You had veteran Democrats, people in their 20s, 30s, and 40s, but people who had been in campaigns before. We moved to Little Rock and we worked together in a more collaborative fashion than we had done in previous efforts.

At that time Saturn was arranging all kinds of tours for all kinds of people from outside the auto industry to come and see how Saturn ran. It was a big thing in the education world that teachers and principals and union leaders and education policy thinkers would make the pilgrimage to Springhill, Tennessee, and see how the Saturn plant ran. I know Albert Shanker went there quite a few times. I don't know if Bill Clinton had ever been on a pilgrimage to Saturn, but you had this building, one of the two newspapers in Little Rock. Only one survived. The one that didn't survive left its building behind and we were in that building. So if you worked there, things that were still there looked familiar to me from a newspaper building. You had the newsroom; you had the pressroom. You had the place for the phone solicitors where the solicitors received classified ads. It was identifiable to me as an old- fashioned newspaper building.

It was staffed up. It was just filled to the brim with people. Some of them were this Democratic Party cohort that I knew. Others were people from Arkansas. Others were people who were new, and this was their first campaign. I guess my frame of reference was the Mondale campaign and the Dukakis campaign. Mondale's headquarters probably in hindsight should have been in Minnesota, but it was in Washington, D.C. Dukakis's headquarters was in Boston. The Mondale campaign, there was a sort of a method in its madness. The real campaign was on the plane and the Washington headquarters was for everybody who wanted to say they had a piece of the action but they weren't going to get listened to.

Dukakis was more like Clinton. He had a narrow group of people who traveled with him regularly on the plane, but all kinds of people who had a role in the campaign were in the building in Boston. The Clinton campaign resembled the Dukakis campaign in that most of the senior people were actually in the headquarters. The difference was that the Dukakis campaign was very hierarchical. Estrich and Sasso and the senior people were on the ninth floor. The speechwriters were literally in the basement. We had the Xerox machines and the people selling trinkets. You had one floor for everything. You had senior staff meetings; it was very hierarchical.

The Clinton campaign was consciously not hierarchical. What is remembered about the war room is the war metaphor and the quick response. But the other thing about it was that it was, I think, intended to be egalitarian and information sharing. That was the original point of it, that

you would have one person from every function there. It was like Michael Bloomberg's bullpen in City Hall in New York City. There were no walls. You could hear what everyone was saying and doing. It was the high-status place to be. That's where Carville was, that's where Stephanopoulos was.

You would have a meeting there every morning, I forget when, but relatively early in the morning, and then every evening. Everyone and anyone could go to the meeting and was encouraged to do so. I don't think there were any offices with doors, never a closed-door meeting at the headquarters, although there were private meetings at the Governor's mansion and other places away from the headquarters. Everything was about equally ramshackle and it was just sort of the premise that you're being trusted with stuff. Of course, the really important stuff you weren't trusted with. But still, there was much more sharing of information than there was in the Mondale and Dukakis campaigns. And, because we were in the South in the summer, no one wore a tie. Carville wore blue jeans and tee shirts and whatnot. You see the movie of the war room, no one is wearing a tie. There's nothing corporate about the place.

So it was a friendly, happy place, which I would not have said of the Dukakis or Mondale headquarters. It wasn't in Washington. Unlike Boston, it wasn't just one plane ride from Washington. So you really could not get big shots from outside the campaign coming in and telling you you were a jerk or something. To get out there, you had to make a major effort. At that time at least you had to take a connecting flight. If you were going to go out there you had to say, "I'm going to spend two days going to Little Rock to talk to people."

Riley: What about the acceptance address? How early do you start working on it, and is this a corporate effort? Are you given marching orders from Clinton or from somebody else about how to go about doing this?

Kusnet: I remember reading about Michael Gerson getting a month from George Bush to write the acceptance speech. I don't think Clinton took a month to write his 900-page memoir. Clinton's way, at least at that time, of putting someone out to pasture was to give them something to do in the long term.

I think something like two or three weeks at most before the convention we had a meeting in the Governor's mansion in Little Rock, my recollection is a lot of Clinton meetings were sort of a floating thing. People came in, people came out. He dressed informally. Half of it is just banter. But obviously Bill Clinton is there, Hillary Clinton is there part of the time, Paul Begala, me, Carville may be drifting in and out. I think that might have been it, but for all I know I may be leaving out someone who played a major role and made a major contribution or something.

He [Clinton] starts talking about the acceptance speech. A lot of it is sort of banter about we have to have some joke about his nominating speech of Dukakis. We went through all kinds of jokes. "It wasn't my finest hour; it wasn't even my finest hour and a half. The real reason I ran was so I could get to finish that speech I was giving four years ago." Just all kinds. "I would do anything to audition for the Johnny Carson show." It was every possible joke you could tell about his nominating speech.

Then he went through what he liked about his stump speech, what he had to do differently, but it was structured—he didn't say, "I want to lead with this." I think there is always this element of productive disorganization. I think it was sort of understood that he would be thinking about it on his own. Hillary would probably be thinking about it on her own and with him. Begala if he had the time might draft something and I would draft something, but the fate of the campaign did not depend on every word in our early drafts. I remember taking a flight home and writing a first draft for the speech in longhand on a legal pad. I write at a keyboard, not longhand, but I didn't have a laptop, so I had to write in longhand.

In the briefing book, rereading the speech—and the same thing happened with the inaugural—there was one thing from my absolute first draft that made it in. With the inaugural it was the most quoted line [the most quoted line in the inaugural address was in my first draft], with this it wasn't, but I think it had something to do with the organizing principle of the speech. Part of the strategic doctrine of the Clinton campaign at that time was that he was saying things that people agreed with, but the people didn't trust him both because of the character issues that had been raised against him and the widespread but inaccurate view that he came from a privileged background and hadn't been tested by tough times. There were some basic doubts about him as a person that he had to overcome. It wasn't so much the personal life at that time, but this misconception of him, that he was young, callow, untested and overprivileged and that the perceived slickness followed from that and that you had to do something to get people to see him differently so that they would listen to him.

A lot of what was done then, *The Man from Hope* video at the convention, the biographical stuff, was to overcome that. I was thinking on the plane, and then put it in longhand, how we could do that in the acceptance speech. I've always had the idea that a speech like that has to have an emotional rhythm to it. The structure is similar to a lot of sermons, where you start out on something of a high note, then you bring people down, and then you bring them up to a higher level than they started out on. There is something emotionally and perhaps spiritually cleansing and uplifting about the process of bringing people down from a kind of false happiness to understand the grim realities, to bring them up to a higher level.

I was thinking, *How could Clinton do that?* What I thought of as the structure of the speech would be built on an anecdote I read of something that actually did happen to him on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. If there's any one group of people who would do this to him, it would be New Yorkers. But what I would do would be begin with just the basic case for a change, which was not a difficult one to make: unemployment, the economic crisis, the sense of drift after the victory in the Gulf War, the sense that if President Bush had a job to do he had already done it. Just make the easy case for him. Then people would naturally think he's going to keep going at the same emotional pitch—that would get a convention audience rocking and rolling. But instead, he would bring them down.

What I did was just have him repeat something that actually happened to him in the New York primary. He would say, "I told this to an audience in the Lower East Side of Manhattan." The audience for the convention speech would expect Clinton to say, "And they said, 'Yes, we've got to change.' But in fact what really happened was a man got up and said, 'Well, you're just a politician. Why should I believe a word you're saying?'" So all of a sudden he would get the audience for the convention speech to wake up and listen carefully. This section of the

convention speech would not be what the audience, in the convention hall and, more importantly, the national television audience, would expect a supposedly slick politician like Bill Clinton to be saying. Then, after telling the story of the voter who asked why he should believe a word he's saying, Clinton would tell his personal story, which was very different from the privileged upbringing that many voters thought he had. Clinton introduced this section with these words—which also made it from the first draft on my legal pad on the plane to the spoken version—something like, "Let me tell you as clearly as I can who I am, what I believe, and what I want to do as President."

Then you get a whole bunch of stuff that isn't applause lines. At the end it comes back to being something emotional. But it goes through an emotional low point, a section of the speech that is both somewhat personal, philosophical, and has no applause lines. Then it gets back up again. Now, in general, with the major speeches with Clinton both as candidate and as President, at least the time I was there, you'd almost have two patterns for the preparation of the speech. Either the speech would go through one draft or it would go through about 50 drafts, there was almost no middle ground.

When there was only one draft for a speech, it was usually not one of the most important speeches. We would give him a draft and then he'd say whatever he wanted to say. With a major speech, we'd go through 50 drafts, because then he realized that the text he went up there with would have to bear a very strong resemblance to the words he would speak. He takes the words very seriously. He would belabor every word. The convention speech was like that, the inaugural was like that, the joint session speeches would be like that. Some foreign policy speeches would be like that.

The convention speech was my first experience with the 50-draft Clinton speech, but the basic structure was not that different from my first draft on the plane. First, it began with the basic case against Bush. Then, it brought the audience down, addressing their doubts about Bill Clinton and the political system in general. And, then, the emotional tone of the speech went back up—more upbeat, more inspirational—so he would conclude on a higher note than he began. The details of the speech went through me and Begala at a keyboard off and on very intensively, and during meetings with Clinton. His way of editing a speech then and throughout my work with him was not to edit it, but to rehearse it, editing while rehearsing.

He would get up at an improvised podium in the room where he was rehearsing/editing the speech and either read from the latest draft or extemporize. We'd have tape recorders and note pads. He would edit while speaking. His schedule would describe our meetings with the ambiguous title of "speech preparation." But the man didn't need to rehearse, it was editing by speaking. There was a lot of that. There was also just sending it around to all kinds of people inside and outside the campaign. So Bruce Reed and the DLC contingent had some input into it and a lot went in about the New Covenant, which was the formulation that Clinton had developed early in the campaign for linking opportunity and responsibility—a big part of the DLC approach. [Samuel] Sandy Berger and the foreign policy people had some input and we had a bit about foreign policy. Rodney Slater and other longtime friends from Arkansas would have an input into it.

There was Roy Spence, a media consultant from Texas who I don't think ever actually produced paid TV spots for the campaign but who may have been involved in producing *The Man from Hope* video. He is a football fan. He had the crew working on the speech—Begala, me, him and others—put our hands together like we were a team going back on the field after halftime. The great thing he contributed was that we had to incorporate *The Man from Hope* into the speech. "I still believe in a place called Hope" is probably the most quoted line from his acceptance speech. The line was especially effective because Clinton delivered his convention speech right after *The Man from Hope* film was shown. Together, the film and the speech showed and told the American people who Bill Clinton really is—someone who has overcome adversity in his own life and who understands hardworking Americans.

If a speech is "written by committee," it usually isn't that good. But I think this speech benefited by having so many people have input into it. It's not an elegant speech, but I think it served the purpose perfectly of telling Clinton's story, presenting his point of view, and making the critique of Bush. And the proof of its effectiveness is that it helped to take him from running third behind Bush and Perot before the convention to running first from after the convention through Election Day.

Riley: Did you have the benefit of feedback from the Manhattan project when you were engaged in the process of drafting the speech? I can't recall whether the project was principally polling or—

Kusnet: This has all been written at great length in all the history of the campaign. When you say the consultants, you mean James Carville, Paul Begala, Stan Greenberg, and Mandy Grunwald. Frank Greer at the beginning, but for whatever reason, he played less of a visible personal role as the campaign went on. As I understood it, the Manhattan Project was the consultants, perhaps Greer and Greenberg more than Carville and Begala, because they were less physically present. There was polling and focus grouping. I think *The Man from Hope* was a response to it. That involved Roy Spence, the person I described from Texas, as well as others.

It just became so much a part of the culture of the campaign that I would hear things and just assume they were from the Manhattan Project. If it had ever at all been on paper it would have been leaked and it would have humiliated us. I think that's probably the reason why they called it the Manhattan project; that was big, important, game changing in secret. I don't think there was ever a document that from start to finish was the Manhattan project, because it would have been leaked and would have hurt us.

Riley: Did you have the text of *The Man from Hope* video available to you as you were writing the speech?

Kusnet: I know I watched it at some point before the convention. I watched some version of it. I think there, too, they probably didn't want it on paper too much. The campaign was about information sharing, it wasn't about paper sharing. You would not have wanted the video in circulation before the convention. But I had an idea about the video that would be shown before Clinton's convention speech, that it was about his upbringing and about literally and figuratively bringing him down to earth.

The political class always knew who he was—someone from a troubled background who had risen through education and hard work. But the American people's first exposure to him was [Gennifer] Flowers and the draft. Many people's first idea about him probably was he was this guy you wouldn't want your teenage daughter around by herself. Then many people got the idea that he's really some overeducated, untested person. We had to bring him back down to earth again.

Riley: Did Clinton like the speech? Did you get the sense that he felt that it was—

Kusnet: I think it was an up. I think he liked the experience of producing and giving the speech and certainly liked the idea that the day after he was first in the polls, while a week before he had been third. I don't think he would have said it was a great speech. I'm sure not in an unpleasant way. But he would have said that if he had had the time he could have written a better one by himself than two dozen people wrote with him and for him.

Nelson: Did you have any hand in writing or reviewing Gore's speech at the convention?

Kusnet: The short answer is no. The long answer—this is a funny thing for me to claim credit for, because no one is ever going to give me credit and I'm not 100 percent sure I deserve credit for it. Once Gore joined the ticket, throughout the campaign and then in the White House, there was a sharing of information with Gore and his staff. So we shared speech drafts. His staff got everything we did.

I think this was one of these stump speeches where I gave Clinton something, but he doesn't use it. I came up with the idea that every economic statistic that should be going up was going down in the Bush Presidency—and every one that should be going down was going up. The Gore people got it, and after a decent interval waiting for Clinton to use it and he didn't use it—Gore started using it. It was a big part of his stump speech.

Riley: Anything else from the convention address?

Nelson: Just this. Does Clinton have a good sense of humor? If so, is he funny himself or does he just like other people being funny?

Kusnet: I think one definition of humor is to be able to laugh, and especially to be able to laugh at yourself. He's been accused of just about every vice on earth. I don't think anyone has ever accused him of taking himself too seriously and not being able to laugh at himself. The first meeting we had about the convention speech all of us were coming up with the most self-deprecating joke you can about his Dukakis speech. He was coming up with half of them. He can laugh at himself.

He's not someone like I imagine Eugene McCarthy was, with one-line aphorisms that people are going to be quoting after he's dead, the clever, nonscatological one-liners. Clinton is someone who tells jokes, including off-color jokes. When we were preparing the convention speech, he kept telling us to put something in about agriculture. Most of us on the staff were city kids. And to put us at ease he told us this story about sheep-fucking. Some story about someone in a small town in Arkansas is brought to a jury trial and being accused of having had carnal relations with a sheep, and it goes from there. The punch line is that a juror blurts out, "They'll do that, you

know." The point is that, while the defendant denies having had carnal relations with a sheep, at least one member of the jury inadvertently reveals that he has, shall we say, intimalte familiarity with what a sheep would do in such a situation.

Anyhow, so he tells the story. He didn't claim to have made up the story. It's more like someone who tells stories he heard somewhere else. I don't think he's a joke writer, but he's someone with a sense of humor. He appreciates a good joke and I think can improve a joke he's heard, can deliver it well and so on.

Riley: All right, so that gets us to the next big address that you worked on. I don't know whether there's anything for us to probe into about the general election campaign season, other than the major addresses that you talk about.

Kusnet: There were, I think, one or two major foreign policy speeches that were drafted by a team—Anthony Lake, Nancy Soderberg, and others many of whom would work on the National Security Council staff during the Clinton Administration. Part of Clinton's approach was to relate foreign policy to domestic policy, so he went to Milwaukee with a lot of people of European ancestry to talk about democracy in the world. That wasn't an abstraction to people there who had their roots in Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. It was a very good speech and I had not one word to do with it. There may have been another one. So one or two foreign policy speeches that were made establishing him as somebody who had credibility as a potential President.

There was also a speech about NAFTA, which I think ended up being written by Clinton himself. I was against NAFTA. Most people on the campaign had very defined views for or against NAFTA, like that county in West Virginia with the song, "There are no neutrals here." I think the only person in the whole campaign who had a nuanced view of NAFTA was Bill Clinton himself. I think everyone else—pretty much the populists were against it, the DLC people were for it, the corporate people were for it. He was for it but understood all the arguments against it. There were no neutrals, but the candidate took a complex view. There was just no one who could have written a NAFTA speech for Bill Clinton but Bill Clinton. There was a NAFTA speech.

Nelson: Did you resist having that speech assigned to you?

Kusnet: You couldn't be a conscientious objector on the speech. He ended up giving a nuanced speech. I can't really claim credit for the nuance in it. But I thought it was an opportunity to slow down the moving train of having Clinton support NAFTA without reservations and thereby offend Americans who were suffering from the downside of globalization. Fortunately, he was too smart and too sensitive and too in touch to do that.

Nelson: I was wondering if maybe you were assigned to write it because if you could write a speech defending NAFTA from the vantage point of someone who opposed it, then you would have to come up with the arguments that might convince the other people.

Kusnet: I resisted doing that. There was some idea that you'd have a process that would involve him getting a bunch of voices and at some point he'd synthesize it all. Not just synthesize, he'd bring it to a higher level. I think that's what he did. Actually, I was against NAFTA but he was for it, on balance. I was not going to change his mind. At that late stage, for him to be against it

would not have been seen as him changing his mind because his intellectual processes had led him to change his mind. It would have been seen as pure politics.

So I think what he ended up doing, which was to be for it in a nuanced way, was the best politics. I think the actual NAFTA agreement was a bad one. The actual agreement was not worthy of the speech that he wrote for himself in the campaign. But that's a different matter. Listening to the speech, I actually surprisingly found myself much more favorable to him than I had been before the speech began.

Nelson: You mean in general, or about NAFTA?

Kusnet: More favorable to Clinton in general, not more favorable to NAFTA. Trade wasn't important to me, but the condition of working Americans was important to me.

I actually have some points to make about NAFTA that I don't think others who you have interviewed would be familiar with.

Riley: Good, okay.

Kusnet: During the campaign, Clinton had a very nuanced position on NAFTA that he was not really able to put—even assuming that the will had been there—was not able to put into practice as President because it would have involved all kinds of domestic public investments that economic conditions and the course he chose [emphasizing deficit-cutting over public investments] did not allow him to pursue. But I remember when he gave a speech, that he gave before the California AFL-CIO during the primary in that state in 1992. By that time, Clinton's only opponent was Jerry Brown [at that time, the former Governor of California], who was against NAFTA. Brown was being seen as an eccentric, underfunded, so that Clinton, even in Brown's home state, had a very strong chance of winning, as he did.

Clinton gave an entirely extemporaneous, and I think uncovered and perhaps closed-meeting speech to the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations] in California about NAFTA. I had a friend who did trade issues for the AFL-CIO—they had a transcript, and she showed it to me after I joined the Clinton campaign. My friend was very impressed with it as was Richard Rothstein, who was a journalist. Rothstein has been a union organizer in the clothing and textile industry, which had been hit very hard by imports. But he was still very impressed with Clinton's approach to trade in general and NAFTA in particular. Now he is best known as an education expert.

He was, as with me, someone who came from a union background. I remember that my friend at the AFL-CIO and Richard Rothstein, when I went to work for Clinton, both reached out to me and said, "You've just got to find out what he said in California and have him say that about NAFTA."

What he said—and this is very Clintonian, very complex—was, at least in my view not a way to fool people but a way to explore complex issues. He began with his usual rap in '92. "The American people, working Americans, are taking it on the chin." There were stagnant wages, rising unemployment, the whole litany. Then he asked the key questions: "Why is this happening? And what can we do about it? Part of it is globalization, but the world economy is

being more global, we can't stop globalization, we can only adapt to it. A large part of it is our failure to adapt properly. West Germany, other countries are in the same global economy that we are in, but they provide better for their people and their workers without taking it on the chin the way ours are. I know that Americans, especially here in California, in Texas, are concerned about trade with a low-wage economy like Mexico." Then he gave a whole litany of abuses that were already happening to workers on both sides of the border, even without NAFTA.

He had a whole litany of what was happening on the border, the maquiladoras [assembly plants in free-trade zones in Mexico, where U.S. companies would ship work to take advantage of low wages and lax enforcement of labor standards], the jobs fleeing to Mexico and so on. Then he said, in effect, "But I have a secret for you. This is all happening now before NAFTA has gone into effect. You and I can argue about whether NAFTA will have a positive effect or a negative effect, but here's one thing I can tell you. Everything that you are afraid of happening with NAFTA is already happening. That's God's honest truth." That got people thinking. Because they knew the Bush approach to NAFTA was: it's going to be this great thing, trade is great, everything's great. Clinton was showing that he was not only in touch with reality, but maybe even a little more in touch with reality than some opponents of NAFTA, because he knew the problems that people were afraid that NAFTA would cause were already happening.

Then he says, "If we do NAFTA wrong, things will get worse." He didn't remember that by '93. [*laughter*] "But if we do NAFTA right, things will not get better, but maybe we'll be able to do the things that really matter." Then he goes into his domestic program, which included job training and retraining for workers displaced by trade, and public investments in infrastructure and technology to provide jobs for unemployed workers. That was the structure of his speech at the California AFL-CIO. While I tried to include these points in the draft for his NAFTA speech, in hindsight I should have said, "You should give that speech [the California AFL-CIO speech, minus what was specific to that audience] as your NAFTA speech."

Riley: Right.

Kusnet: Mostly, left to his own devices and through a process that began with me and a very good, decent, smart guy named Bennett Freeman—who worked for General Electric at that time, was on leave for the campaign, and was seen as the polar opposite to me—we came up with something that you could see the cutting and pasting in it. Bennett and I were probably paired together because we represented business and labor viewpoints. We came up with a very complex draft that included both perspectives and came out for NAFTA with all kinds of conditions. It was not terribly usable. They [other campaign staffers and consultants] showed it to Gephardt and a whole bunch of other people. At some point I think, Clinton took it apart and put it back together again, mostly in his own words. It [Clinton's final version of the speech] was much better than anyone could have done for him, because it reflected a way of looking at it and talking about it.

Essentially he had a lot of the assumptions of the anti-NAFTA people and the conclusions of the pro-NAFTA people and you really couldn't find any human being on earth except him who saw it that way.

Nelson: It amazed me that in the height of the campaign he would have time to write or rewrite a speech like that.

Kusnet: He just knew the issues, he knew his own mind, and he knew how to explain complex ideas in simple terms—his skills and knowledge were a kind of a safety net for himself and for the campaign staff.

With Clinton there was just such a great knowledge base, such great political instincts, and I think at least at that time, such a basic being in touch with how most people lived and thought that on domestic policy you did not have to be afraid that if you gave him something that was factually or politically wrong, that he would get up and speak those words. He just started out knowing so much and having such good instincts that any words—I don't want to sound like hero worship, there's a lot wrong with him—but any words that he would speak would almost certainly serve him well or at least not do him harm.

One thing that impressed me so much with the NAFTA speech that he gave in August in North Carolina, and with the Detroit Economic Club speech that I worked on, where the words that he spoke bore some resemblance to the words that I wrote—they both ended up having large sections where he extemporized about job training and career education programs, mostly in Germany, apprenticeships, comparing what the United States does for people who finish high school but don't go on to a four-year college and are headed for jobs that don't require a four-year college degree and what other advanced countries do. At that time he knew so much about it and he had ideas to improve career training in the United States. There are all kinds of reasons why the United States lags behind Germany in career training for the majority of workers and one of them has honorable origins: there's a predisposition here against tracking, as you have in some other countries and so the question was: How you could do it in this country without tracking and without having everybody in some rigid apprenticeship program, which set the course for their careers for the rest of their lives?

I remember both times being so impressed, not only with his knowledge, but also with the fact that he had chosen to learn about job training and career preparation programs for workers without four-year college degrees. I thought the fact that he had learned so much about this showed some commitment to social justice. If you just wanted to make it big in this country you wouldn't set out and learn what does this country do for people who finish high school but don't go on to four-year colleges. That's not something you can make a lot of money knowing about. It's not something you'd get a lot of votes knowing about because it's the more affluent people who have the highest voter turnout. It just seemed that to have that degree of knowledge you had to have some degree of commitment.

Riley: Okay. Anything else on that? We're actually due to break for lunch. We haven't worn you out yet?

Kusnet: No, have I worn you out?

Riley: No, absolutely not. I'm reluctant to break, but I think we're scheduled by other folks to do this.

[BREAK]

Nelson: Do you want to start by catching up on those things that came up at lunch?

Riley: Yes I did. There were a couple of things that we talked about over lunch. What do you have in mind?

Nelson: One was, David, would you go back and fill in the Bill Halter part of the Gore acceptance speech at the '92-'93 convention?

Kusnet: This is a memory that I honestly have. It may have the added virtue of being true. [*laughter*] I know that a very young, very smart, very energetic man named Bill Halter was in the Clinton-Gore campaign headquarters in Little Rock, and this is a memory I had before I was aware that he had become Lieutenant Governor of Arkansas and was running for Senator. [Halter ran for U.S. Senator from Arkansas in 2010. He lost the Democratic primary to the incumbent, Se. Blanche Lincoln, who lost in the general election to the Republican candidate, John Boozman.] I believe that at least one of his roles was to be a kind of eyes and ears for the Gore campaign in the Clinton campaign and that he was well suited for that because among other things he was an Arkansan and knew Clinton and knew Arkansas. Before the wide use of email even within organizations, he would go through all the paper, including speech drafts, that the Clinton campaign generated, and bring the Gore campaign what he culled from it that was useful for them.

Assuming that this memory is accurate, I think he may have culled the line that everything that should be going up was going down and everything that should be going down was going up and recommended it to Gore, who made better use of it than we did.

Riley: But you also made a comment about his energy level that I thought was kind of constructive.

Kusnet: That's fine. Clinton was never Lieutenant Governor of Arkansas, but Bill Halter does seem to be in the Bill Clinton mold of very young, very smart, very energetic, very personable guy who is going places. Bill Clinton clearly is a very high-energy person, but at least my impression of him was when you met him you didn't necessarily think of him as high energy, because he always seemed both mellow and tired and not in much of a hurry. I remember one of his great strengths is when he was spending time with you, it never seemed that he had something better to do and you'd better hurry up so he could do something better than talk to you. Whoever you were, he always seemed that you were the most important person in the world he could be talking to at that moment.

Bill Halter, even then, didn't give the impression he'd rather be talking to someone else, but he just seemed like this dynamo of nervous energy.

Nelson: We also had occasion of mentioning Bruce Lindsey during the break. He obviously is an important figure in the Clinton Presidency, but also in the Clinton campaign. Could you just talk

about Bruce and your relationship with him and the role he played in the campaign as you saw it?

Kusnet: I guess based on having worked on three campaigns, a candidate needs a friend—everyone needs a friend, but a candidate really needs a friend—someone who is a peer who can talk straight to them, who knows their history, who can see things the way they do, can be a little bit of a buffer between them and the outside world and sit next to them on the campaign plane, among other things. My recollection was that with Mondale it was a man whose last name was Reilly, but spelled differently from yours. I'm blanking on—

Riley: Was it John?

Kusnet: John Reilly. He was about Mondale's age and had been around Democratic politics a long time. [John Reilly died in 2008.]

Riley: Was a Kennedy aide in the Justice Department.

Kusnet: That's right.

Riley: Was married to Margaret Warner?

Kusnet: That's right. That's why I was thinking about him, from the photo. He played that role with Mondale.

Riley: I didn't know that.

Kusnet: Paul Brountas played that role with Dukakis.

Riley: For the first time I'll have to go back and say I met John Reilly, and my first comment to him was that he misspelled his last name, to which he replied, "Well, my daddy used to tell me that people who spelled it the way you spell it were sheep thieves." So we've got that on the record. Go ahead.

Kusnet: Brountas played that role with Dukakis, and Bruce Lindsey, in addition to many other roles, played the role with Bill Clinton. I'm sure my experience wasn't different from many others, but here I am, I'm out in Arkansas, I didn't know Bill Clinton, I didn't know Arkansas other than what I read in the newspapers. I didn't know Clinton's record, I didn't know who would know him. For me as for many other people, Bruce Lindsey and to a slightly lesser extent Rodney Slater played that role of being people who would explain Clinton and Arkansas to me.

I guess one other anecdote about Lindsey—funny, coincides with NAFTA; I guess maybe showing the stress I was under with that speech. I've had terrible eye trouble the last ten years. My first indication of eye trouble was after staying up all night working with Bennett Freeman on that first draft of the NAFTA speech, I woke up bleary-eyed with my eyes swollen and whatnot. I had to go to an ophthalmologist. My guide to Little Rock was Bruce Lindsey, and Bruce Lindsey recommended his and Bill Clinton's personal ophthalmologist and got me in there, which as an outsider in Little Rock would not have happened to me otherwise. I got to see probably the best eye specialist in the state. I think he did that kind of thing for a lot of people.

Nelson: Were you involved in debate preparation in the ’92 campaign?

Kusnet: I think, as in other campaigns, they had us draft closing statements and some answers and so on. I think I’d remember if I was [directly involved in debate preparation] and I don’t remember, so I probably wasn’t. Tom Donilon—it’s sort of interesting, another example of the Democratic Party cohort—Donilon I think played the role of coordinating debate prep, certainly for Clinton in ’92, and I think he had played a role with Dukakis and Mondale before that. He probably played a role after ’92.

Riley: You had mentioned earlier that you had a role in the drafting of the Notre Dame speech.

Kusnet: Yes.

Riley: I wonder, did you have occasion in the context of that speech to talk with Clinton about religion and—

Kusnet: I’d like to say yes. But, because of the busy-ness in the campaign, not that much. Our discussions about the convention speech gave me some sense about his background, his outlook, and his voice. And we made some fast revisions on the Notre Dame speech on the plane from Little Rock to South Bend. That long transcript of the interview with him and Bill Moyers was very helpful and sort of a secret asset I had that I don’t think he knew I had because I had just gotten a copy of that and read it. Moyers is an ordained Southern Baptist minister. We were talking about this at lunch. Clinton by his own admission is a sinner as we all are, but is also a churchgoer and a man who knows his Bible and a man, I think, of religious faith. Since they’re both in the liberal grouping of Southern Baptists, there’s a lot of talk there about religion. So I really got some idea of Clinton’s views.

Also, the ironic thing, People for the American Way is seen as a secularist organization. It’s really not. At least in the ’80s, it was an organization largely of religious people who believed in separation of church and state, which is part of the Southern Baptist tradition. So I knew a number of people and had remained in touch with a number of people who were real thinkers about religious issues. The Reverend James Dunn, who was head of the Baptist Joint Committee in Washington D.C. Jim Castelli, who was a writer on church-state issues generally and had come out of Catholic journalism. At that time I could occasionally call up Martin Marty and he would talk to me. He’s not an inaccessible guy, but he had more reason to talk to me then. I should have called Moyers, but didn’t. I’ve gotten to know him since then. I did not know him at all then. And others, including the Rev. Charles Bergstrom who was a representative of the Lutheran church in Washington, David Saperstein of the Religious Action Council of Reform Judaism.

I talked to a lot of people for the Notre Dame speech—Melanne Verveer and one person in particular who is a big part of the story of the inaugural address and who is a friend of Clinton’s, Father Timothy Healy, who had been president of Georgetown and was then head of the New York Public Library. I spoke at length with Father Healy. He drafted portions of it and gave me ideas for a lot of other portions.

Then partly so that we would have called these folks and partly because some of them really had a lot to say, I called others as well. I didn’t know Mario Cuomo, but I knew his speechwriter,

Luciano Siracusano. I called him. I think he spoke with the Governor himself, so I think I was getting Cuomo as well as his staffer. I'm blanking on the name, but the Democratic Congress member who represented South Bend [Tim Roemer], I spoke with him and many others. Really I don't think there's any speech, certainly below an inaugural address or a joint session of Congress, that so many people were consulted, and really got a story line out of it. Stephanopoulos—Greek Orthodox priests can marry and have children. Stephanopoulos' father is a Greek Orthodox priest. So we got a lot of input. Carville and Begala are serious Catholics. Got a lot of input from not only Catholics, but others with an interest in religion.

Nelson: You consult that widely for a speech like that because you are genuinely interested in their perspectives, or because you want them to feel some sort of ownership in your candidate on an issue they care about, or both?

Kusnet: Everyone I mentioned was an example of, not only that point that you are making about talking with people in order to touch base with them, but each of them also had something of great value to contribute. There were probably some others we called—it's certainly understandable if they didn't come up with language or some new thinking about the role of religion in society, but for the reason you mentioned also, to give them the opportunity if they happened to have the time and inclination. Just got an enormous amount of input.

It's an example of how you make your own luck in speeches as in other things in life. He [Clinton] accepted the invitation months before; he thought it was an important thing to do. Then it [the date of the speech] turns out to be a week after the Republican national convention, we did not know what would happen at the Republican national convention. It turns out that you have this kind of, I don't want to use overly loaded words, this kind of rally of the religious right there. I don't know what possessed whoever plans the Republican national convention, on behalf of an incumbent President who is not unreasonable, no one thought that George H. W. Bush was unreasonable on church-state issues or that he was an extremist on social issues, but for reasons best known to them, they just had speaker after speaker, Marilyn Quayle—

Nelson: Pat Buchanan.

Kusnet: That's what I'm leading up to. Then you have Pat Buchanan saying what the United States needs is a religious war. We had planned the Notre Dame speech, arranged it, and I had gotten to work on it weeks before this, but all of a sudden you had Pat Buchanan getting up at the Republican national convention addressing a country in economic recession and I think growing weary of social division and saying what the United States needs is a religious war. He's a good writer and a very learned student of history, and all kinds of favorable things could be said about Pat Buchanan, but he gives this absolutely horrific speech. I don't even want to repeat parts of it. It's just horrific.

Riley: That's the one that somebody said actually sounded better in the original German? [*laughter*]

Kusnet: Right, it's absolutely horrific. It may even have been that, since he had run against Bush in the primaries, and he didn't like Bush, he figured he was just going to destroy Bush's chances for reelection by giving a more extreme speech on behalf of Bush than he had ever given on

behalf of himself. But he gives this absolutely horrific speech. I think it appalled almost everyone in America who listened to it. But I'm inclined to suspect that the two sectors of society who were appalled were American Catholics, who wanted no part of a religious war, and moderate Republicans who wanted no part of such a thing either. So two groups who were very much in play.

I think he [Buchanan] probably, whether intentionally or not, no pun intended, scared the hell out of them. Here you had the opportunity for a Southern Baptist from Arkansas to speak at a leading Catholic institution, to be a voice of reason and to speak in terms of elements of Catholic social thought that are shared by people of every faith. So we just had this opportunity, not handed to us, we had already positioned ourselves to take advantage of an opportunity that we did not know would emerge and to do it as a mirror image. The last time religious intolerance had been part of a Presidential campaign it was directed against a Catholic candidate for President. Here you have a Southern Baptist who is running for President speaking to Catholics instead of a Catholic speaking to Southern Baptists.

So we pretty much continued the speech as it had already been written, but we added, and here I am speaking from memory, "Last week we heard Americans of every faith and of every political viewpoint, heard extreme voices that appalled us all. We heard that America needs a religious war. That is the last thing America needs. We need a revival of the commitment to the common good that many of us learned from our religious heritage, and that unites us all." I'm not saying it word for word, but that's essentially what he said. That became, not the sound bite, but the essence of the speech. So essentially it was a plea for religious tolerance, referring back to President Kennedy's speech in 1960, and it was an appeal for a commitment to the common good and social justice and all kinds of concepts that may have a specific role in Catholic social teaching but that resonate with Americans of every faith and viewpoint.

Part of it now is called the "optics." You had Clinton going to South Bend and speaking to this audience. Harris Wofford was another. He's a convert to Catholicism. He's another person I spoke to at some length. He had taught at Notre Dame and that's where he converted to Catholicism. The optics—you had peaceful right to life people with signs, but they weren't anti-Clinton, they were just right to life. You had the optics of him speaking there and being very well received, including by the pro-life. They were more than civil to him.

The words but also the event itself just seemed so different from what people had seen and heard at the Republican convention the week before.

Nelson: Is there anything else on the campaign before we get you to the White House?

Kusnet: I guess just with the Notre Dame. I was sort of—not high-anxiety, because I knew if we gave Clinton a bad text he'd make it into something good—but I was sort of concerned that here was a major speech we'd sent to the plane the night before. He knew I wasn't Catholic. I did a cover memo explaining to everyone I had talked to to legitimize it. I was sort of concerned, and I went on the plane. I think it was only an hour-and-a-half flight from Little Rock to South Bend. I was sort of concerned that he'd grill me on it. But he was okay with it. You can never know more about anything than Bill Clinton knows.

I had just researched this to death. I had read about Kennedy with the Southern Baptists in Texas. I read about the Al Smith [New York Governor, Democrat, first Catholic to be nominated for President] campaign. I should have caught something that Clinton knew, which is that Al Smith's running mate was from Arkansas, Joe Robinson, so he added that Al Smith's running mate was from Arkansas, and while Al Smith lost so many southern states because of his religion, he carried Arkansas. Not being a football fan I didn't know that Lou Holtz had been coach at both Notre Dame and Arkansas. He added that. So it was all sins of omission, not sins of commission. There was nothing in there that he said, "This is terrible. I can't say that." But he just knew all these facts that I didn't know and didn't know enough to look for.

Riley: Let me ask you a question about—and this will bridge from your—

Kusnet: Also, just to give credit where credit is due, among the briefing materials we had read was Mario Cuomo's talk at Notre Dame in I think '85 or '86, which is very intellectually serious.

Riley: I want to ask a general question about preparing speeches for Clinton, prompted by—you just made the comment that you were sure if you gave him a decent speech he would make a good speech out of it.

Kusnet: Yes.

Riley: What we hear from people who have written for Clinton is that he is an extemporizer—

Kusnet: That's right.

Riley: He takes a text and very rarely will he start at the first sentence and read word for word, verbatim.

Kusnet: That's right.

Riley: Until he's reached the last word. You're nodding your head and saying that's right. I wonder if you could elaborate on that first, and secondly, how do you go about writing a speech for somebody that you know is not going to stay with it word for word? Are there places where you just put brackets in there where you know he's going to take off, or do you just assume he's going to take off in places where you can't predict and you just hope it all works?

Kusnet: I think, after I left, people may have found better ways to do it. This will sound flippant. My hope was just that, whenever he took off, that he would land somewhere near where he took off. I guess the one thing that did give me—this is before the story that we'll get to about Clinton having the wrong speech on the Teleprompter. I'm sure you've heard that story already. But being with a Teleprompter operator while Bill Clinton is speaking is a way to take years off of your life. [*laughter*] I think maybe with both the Notre Dame speech and the Detroit Economic Club Speech they had Teleprompters.

The Teleprompter operator I think wasn't even someone in the campaign, At least at that time they [Teleprompter operators] were people you could hire, like interpreters or stenographers or something. So it wasn't even someone who had a rudimentary knowledge of Clinton that any campaign worker would have had. I was assigned to be there with the Teleprompter operator to

make sure that they would be scrolling something resembling what he was speaking. I think it was Notre Dame because I don't remember being somewhere else in the audience for Notre Dame. It may also have been with Detroit Economic Club. He actually stuck much closer to those texts than he would ordinarily do, but he would go off, do Lou Holtz stories, Joe Robinson. I just had to tell the Teleprompter operator, "This is where he departed from the text, don't move it any further, keep it there. If he wants to come back he'll be there. Then if he skips something, we'll know."

I think that what we eventually learned—I'm saying "we" as the cadre, the cohort of people who worked for Clinton, including people who were there after I left—is you really give him something very spare and hope that either he'll use something spare and he'll be faulted, as he rarely is, for saying too little, or else at least he won't be improvising off of something that was too long to begin with. I think this is Michael Waldman's line: "You give him [Ernest] Hemingway and he'll turn it into [William] Faulkner."

Riley: He liked plainspoken English?

Kusnet: Among other things.

Riley: Is it proper to say that he didn't prefer a sort of Kennedy-esque—

Kusnet: He's a great admirer of Kennedy. He didn't do the reversible raincoat. Actually—

Riley: What does that mean, "he didn't do the reversible raincoat"?

Kusnet: Speechwriters have a phrase, the reversible raincoat sentence, like Theodore Sorensen would write, "We will not negotiate out of fear, but we will not fear to negotiate."

Riley: Mike, you probably already knew that phrase.

Kusnet: He didn't go for those Sorensenian, turnaround—although I wrote what I think was the most quoted sentence of his inaugural address, which is a little bit like that, "There is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured with what is right with America." It is a parallelism, but it is not an inverted parallelism. You could do parallelism. He didn't want to do inverted parallelism. He was a student of rhetoric and he understood that, if he had used the inverted parallelisms, people would have said he was trying to imitate President Kennedy.

Riley: I wonder if it is something about Arkansas, that southern—it's peculiar because, for somebody who came out of his background, if you put flowery words in his mouth there might have appeared to be something unnatural about it. Yet the Southern Baptist tradition he comes out of is heavily laden with people who have modest backgrounds but are very comfortable with the King James version of English.

Kusnet: Clinton is very comfortable and very fluent with lyrical language that is rooted in southern ways of speaking. One thing I remember in the drafts for Clinton's first inaugural address, there was a passage where I wrote, "Americans have always been a restless, questing people." Taylor Branch, who is from Georgia and writes like a poet, changed "always" to "ever," and Clinton wisely went with Branch's revision, so he said: "Americans have ever been a

restless, questing people." This was a lyrical, elegant way of speaking that might come naturally to literary southerners and that a northeasterner might not have captured.

I had never heard "ever" by itself being used as a more elegant way of saying always. But it sounds beautiful, it sounds much better to the ear than "always." Clinton, at least in a formal setting like that, was more comfortable with it. So I think he liked that kind of understated elegance.

Riley: Were there—

Kusnet: That sticks in my mind. I think you could find other examples of ways of talking he had that were—in his stump speeches down to earth southern ways of talking, ways of talking that were maybe elevated southern ways of talking that a northeasterner would not have thought of.

Nelson: Did he give any speeches as a candidate talking straight to the camera? The equivalent of the Oval Office address, where—

Kusnet: No. I think you're getting into something very important. [Ronald] Reagan was just a master of talking into a camera and being terrific. Everyone knew it was what his professional background had been, with the camera, with the microphone. Clinton would not come to life if there weren't people around him. He's a people person.

If you just had him, as I think we did in the first month of his Presidency with the economic plan, with his televised address from the Oval Office before he gave the joint session speech about the economic plan, if you just had him in some studio somewhere with someone putting a camera on him, he was stiff. He was nowhere near as good as he could be. He just needs people around him. I think with the Saturday morning radio speeches, maybe the first or second one we had him just in the Oval Office with a microphone and a technician, no good. We discovered that there is a kind of synergy. If you got him somewhere with 50 people in the room he'd be a lot better, and that became a perk you could give people, which was to be in the room with him for his Saturday morning speech.

Later Oval Office addresses we just had people—they wouldn't be visible on camera, but we had people there. He was much better with the joint session speeches because there are people in the room. He was never more than adequate just with a camera and a microphone or just with a microphone. He needs someone there with him to be talking to.

Nelson: I was thinking, even if people are present, if they can't react, if they're supposed to be silent, which I guess was the case when he was giving his Saturday morning speech, if he's also having to stick to the text on a Teleprompter, those things too would subtract from his effectiveness?

Kusnet: Having people around makes a big difference for him even if they can't respond audibly to what he's saying. If you had people in the room he'd look at their facial expressions, either think of his history with them or I imagine he's the kind of person who might look—he would just try to imagine who this person is and what they might think of what he's saying. He wasn't that hungry for approval. He just needed people there. He just needed to think he was talking to a human being.

Nelson: So are you saying that he got good at Oval Office addresses?

Kusnet: Yes, I think if you had people there, he was good. This is also jumping the gun—remember the Saturday morning radio speeches, I think after the first or second one or unless it was something of epochal importance, he just got very, I won't say blasé, because I think he did them well, but I remember the writer who did them would usually stay up the night before and do it, or if you were really conscientious and they knew Friday morning what he wanted to say on Saturday morning, you could do it in the daytime. You'd bring it over to the staff secretary. You had visions of him reading it and editing it. But in fact, and it was something I at least, and I imagine other people looking out for themselves, writers would want to do, because you'd get to be in the Oval Office with him and you'd get to write something that had to be tight. But it was clear to me he never read the damn thing until the minute he gave it.

He's phenomenal. He could edit something while reading it. He could just look at it and he's going [*mimicking reading aloud*] and you almost wondered what—if you were a kamikaze or something, if you were going to write, "And so I commit myself today to the abolition of the capitalist system," if there was any danger that he would read it like Reagan, declare war on Russia or something. [While preparing for a Saturday morning radio address, and not knowing the mic was on, President Reagan once jokingly declared war on the Soviet Union.] As best I know, there is no record of him [Clinton] ever saying the wrong thing in a Saturday morning radio address or having something bad being in the draft and him speaking it.

I can remember there was one morning where we had some speech, I think it had some content in it that was new and different. Stephanopoulos, me, maybe one or two other people, we're trying to call his attention to it. He did not seem to read it until he sat there at the mike. He would just go [*sound effects*] and he'd talk and it comes out perfectly fine. I think he just thought—I don't know what the sports analogy would be—that if he couldn't do something as routine as a Saturday morning radio speech with no preparation, then he didn't belong in that job.

Nelson: Why do them? Why keep doing them? It was a fairly recent—

Kusnet: It's a tradition, I guess. It made news. Saturday morning is a slow day. It certainly was a way of testing out themes, getting some news out there during a dry run for a major speech, such as a State of the Union speech. It made sense to do it. I guess he figured that—I don't know what the analogy would be, Muhammad Ali fighting the champion of Belgium or something. He's going to be damned if he'll train for it, but he'll get in the ring and do it. [From the vantage point of two decades later, President Obama now has a Saturday Morning Address that is posted as a video on the White House web site, YouTube and other online media, as well as still being broadcast on radio stations.]

Riley: But it was a morning address too, right?

Kusnet: Yes.

Riley: Did that create problems for you?

Kusnet: He's not a morning person.

Riley: Not a morning person.

Kusnet: I think that's part of it, I remember one morning, that morning I'm thinking of, he just looked like he wasn't even fully awake. It looked like he was trying out his arms and legs to make sure that they worked. Then we put the microphone in front of him and a piece of paper in front of him, and he's perfectly fine.

Riley: All right. We've still got a lot to cover. The inaugural address—had they talked with you about a job in the White House before the drafting of the inaugural address?

Kusnet: Stephanopoulos was in charge of the staffing for what I did in the campaign or anything I might conceivably do in the Administration. If you had a job like mine in the campaign and you specifically say, as Carville did, "I have no intention of working in the White House," and if you hadn't been let go of or layered on top of during the campaign, it was assumed you would have a similar job in the administration.

My recollection is that Stephanopoulos specifically asked me whether I wanted to be chief speechwriter in the Administration shortly before January 15, when there was a news conference in Little Rock where a number of White House staff members, including me, were formally announced. But, before I was explicitly asked whether I wanted the job, Stephanopoulos had several discussions with me where he asked a number of questions, including how would you staff a speechwriting unit, how would you structure it, what would you do.

Meanwhile, since shortly after Election Night, Stephanopoulos had me working on the inaugural address. Having just gotten married, written a book, worked on a campaign, I made clear I did want to work in the administration but did not want to stay in Little Rock after election night, so I went home. A lot of people stayed in Little Rock, which is where the transition was and where Clinton was until the weekend before. I didn't. I just went home. During the period from Election Night until just before the Inauguration, the campaign/transition staff in Little Rock kept in touch with me by fax, phone, and Fedex—this was before the widespread use of email. I believe I went in to Little Rock several times for meetings during that period. There was this horrible transition headquarters in D.C. I did not have an office there or want to work there.

Riley: Horrible because of environment or because—

Kusnet: It was overcrowded, a poisonous atmosphere, a very different spirit from the campaign headquarters. I think I only went there once to make sure I was going to be paid for the weeks when I was working on the inaugural address.

Riley: Sure.

Kusnet: I remember I went into the transition headquarters. It was in some office building in downtown Washington, with long hallways and lots of rooms with no identifying markings on the doors, so a visitor wouldn't know who was working where. This is the only time in my life when people I didn't know knew who I was. I think people thought I was some kind of big shot—a few people started trailing me through the halls asking me to help them get jobs. I was there for a very normal working stiff reason, to get a paycheck.

But I think people thought I was there on some kind of mission or something. These crazed jobseekers started following me around, handing me résumés, yelling at me.

You want me to tell the story of the inaugural as I dealt with it?

Riley: Yes, sure.

Kusnet: So the day after the election, my wife, Ruth [Wattenberg], and I figured this was a chance for our second great drive.[When I went to work on the campaign in Little Rock in early June, we flew to Fayetteville, Arkansas, and drove across the state to Little Rock.] I had an apartment in Little Rock, had stuff in my office. So we rented a small U-Haul and we put all the junk from my apartment and from my office in the U-Haul and we drove from Arkansas back to D.C. going through Tennessee, if I can remember my geography correctly, Tennessee then Kentucky, right? Then I think West Virginia and Virginia. Ruth knew Virginia, so we spent a while in Virginia, and then home. I think we left on Wednesday, the day after Election Day, and we got home I think on Monday, took a leisurely time.

Then on Saturday, Stephanopoulos called me at home and said, "Start thinking about the inaugural, start thinking about staffing, ask around and see if you can find some speechwriters, but we don't know if we can use the ones from the campaign."

Largely because I was working at home, I had no idea what else was going on, who else was doing what else and so on. Stephanopoulos suggested that I select someone to work with me on drafting the inaugural address, and we agreed on Mike Waldman, who had worked in the campaign as a generalist on communications and policy issues, specializing in particular in campaign finance reform.

We had a meeting with Governor Clinton—he's still Governor Clinton—in the Governor's mansion where he talked about what he wanted to say in the speech. He referred mostly to the talk he gave at the Renaissance Weekend event about the changing of the guard. The metaphor was the changing of the guard—it was about generational change. We were taking notes.

We took notes and compared our notes afterwards. Then around the holiday season I received a fax on my fax machine at home.

The terrible news was that Father Healy had died of a heart attack in Newark Airport where he was getting ready to board a flight to go on vacation for the Christmas-New Year's season. He had had a cassette, maybe a tape recorder with a cassette in his jacket pocket. A stenographer transcribed what was on his cassette—it was a memo to Bill Clinton about the inaugural speech. It was riffing off the metaphor of "forcing the spring." Gardeners could force the spring trying to get plants to, whatever the right word, germinate?

Nelson: Bloom?

Kusnet: Yes, bloom before their natural time. His memo included these phrasings—I'm reciting them from memory—which would be included in the inaugural address: "We meet in the depths of winter but through the words we speak"—he said it better—"and what we show the world, we force the spring." And then [Father Healy in his memo] he introduced this metaphor,

"Pentecostal fire in the dark time of year." Easter and Christmas were the metaphors. The cover note from Stephanopoulos said something like, "See if you can do something with this." Clearly Clinton in his own mind was doing something with this also. So I did a first draft, which I faxed to Stephanopoulos in Little Rock with the understanding that Clinton would see it, but it was addressed to Stephanopoulos, not to Clinton. Even if we meant something for Clinton, a lot of us were much more comfortable addressing something to someone other than the next President. It was this kind of awe, not so much about the man but about the office.

In addition to making some use of the Father Healy metaphor, forcing the spring, my first draft had the paragraph that leads up to the line, "There is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right with America." The section leading up to that line said: "Our democracy, which is the envy of the world, can be the engine of our renewal." And then, "There is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right with America." I think those are the only two sentences next to each other that made it into the words that he spoke, but they did, word for word.

Then, if I remember right, I went back to Little Rock at least once for the news conference [January 14, 1993] announcing some of the White House staff. Waldman and I kept on doing drafts and dealing with Stephanopoulos. There was one point where Stephanopoulos said Clinton didn't really like much of any of it. In response, I had one good idea of how to move the process along. I said, "Could you just maybe do triage with it? Cross out what you know he has absolutely no use for and underline what you think he might like." Stephanopoulos did that. Fortunately "nothing wrong with America" made the cut. At least it wasn't "no use for." I don't know if he underlined it, but at least he didn't say, "Get this crap out of there." That gave us something to work from because we weren't able to meet with Clinton for a while.

Then there was the trip that Clinton did through Virginia, the Jefferson shrine and so on, just before the inaugural. We were on that trip, on the bus, and we got little or no time with him. Then we're in Washington, holed up in George Washington University, and we keep on editing it and re-editing it. Clinton was at Blair House, and, with the inaugural address, he was mostly dealing with Stephanopoulos. During the days just before the inauguration, we worked in Blair House, with Taylor Branch and [Tommy] Caplan of Baltimore—both of them are writers, old friends of Clinton, and residents of Baltimore, as part of the process. Bruce Lindsey and Rodney Slater were there and part of the process. Hillary Clinton and Al Gore reviewed the drafts. The night before the inaugural, there was a marathon rehearsal/rewriting session.

The basic structure of the inaugural address remained remarkably constant, just as with the acceptance speech at the convention. The basic structure was there, and some core phrases were there, and all kinds of other stuff was added on as well. I think I did an annotation on the briefing book [This refers to the briefing book for my interview for the oral history, not a briefing book for President Clinton] of what seemed to come from where and what it all might have meant. Remember where the inaugural—

Riley: Can we make a photocopy of this?

Kusnet: Yes. Forcing the spring, the beginning is Father Healy, and that's just a lightly edited version of what he had in his jacket pocket. Then, "Today, a generation raised in the shadows of

the Cold War assumes new responsibilities in a world warmed—" something like that I think is all of the drafts. "Ancient hatreds and new plagues"—I think I might have contributed that phrase—"Raised in unrivaled prosperity, we inherit an economy—" There's a little bit of the Port Huron Statement—in this.

Nelson: SDS [Students for a Democratic Society].

Kusnet: The Port Huron Statement was not terribly radical.

Nelson: No.

Kusnet: This reads a little like the beginning of the Port Huron Statement.

Nelson: Yes.

Kusnet: Fortunately no one noticed it at the time. I certainly did not have a copy of it open when I wrote about the generation raised in the shadows of the Cold War, but many politically active Baby Boomers had internalized the Port Huron Statement.

As part of the staffing process, I approached a number of people, and all kinds of people approached me, about being speechwriters for Clinton. Two of the more seasoned people that I talked to were Bob Lehrman and Alan Stone. Lehrman had been a speechwriter for Bill Gray and David Bonior in the House of Representatives and became chief speechwriter for Vice President Gore. Lehrman has a book out now about speechwriting that's worth reading. Alan Stone had worked for Hubert Humphrey and George McGovern in the Senate, had been Tom Harkin's speechwriter during the Presidential primaries, and had been a speechwriter for Clinton during the general election campaign.

I asked all of the applicants for speechwriting jobs to draft sample material for the inaugural, and I included material from Lehrman's and Stone's drafts in the draft for the inaugural. Their lines survived all the rewrites, and Lehrman and Stone both got speechwriting jobs in the Administration—Stone as a speechwriter for President Clinton, and Lehrman as a speechwriter for Vice President Gore. Would you like me to say which lines they contributed?

Nelson: The one about—

Kusnet: The one about how news traveled during George Washington's era—that was from Bob Lehrman's sample speech, sent for the inaugural. The line about "Communication and commerce are global, investment is mobile, technology is almost magical, and ambition for a better life is universal." That came from Alan Stone.

I assumed that anyone who wanted to be a White House speechwriter would read the inaugural speech and recognize their lines. Alan Stone, of course, knew that we had borrowed his line. I thanked him profusely. But this is sort of a funny story: Bob Lehrman somehow did not know or forgot that a line that we got from him ended up in the inaugural speech. I helped him get a job with Gore, so I figured I repaid him. And I always thought I had thanked him specifically for that line. But anyhow he interviewed me for his book about speechwriting and I said, "Of course, we have your line in there [the inaugural address]." He said, "What? I had a line?" I read him the

line. He said, "I didn't know that that was in the inaugural." He tells that story himself in his book about speechwriting.

Now the next paragraph is really the part of the core of Clinton's understanding of the economy. That globalization requires investment in individuals. To back up, when you do this kind of deconstruction of the inaugural you find that it's not—there's a famous Mario Cuomo line, "You campaign in poetry, you govern in prose." In a sense the inaugural was your last exercise in poetry before the prose comes. But this inaugural is more, whatever its merits as poetry. It actually is a foreshadowing of what his administration would be about, especially the first few years. There you have, "We earn our livelihood in America today in peaceful competition with people all across the earth—" That really is the case for his public investment program—investing in American workers and communities so we can compete in the global economy, the "putting people first," [This was a campaign slogan in 1992 and the title of the campaign's policy book], the understanding of the world that in large measure he derives from and shares with Robert Reich, the advocate of public investment in the administration.

That's thesis. Then you begin to get into antithesis, which was the need to pay down the debts. This became the conflict about the economic plan in the first year and became a theme throughout. Bill Clinton believed you had to do all kinds of public investments in people's skills and also in infrastructure. He also became persuaded by a different faction in the administration—Bentsen, [Robert] Rubin—that you had to pay down the debts and that paying down the debts would lead to an economic expansion because interest rates would go down. You find that here [in the inaugural address], when you go to the second full paragraph on the second page, "We must do what no generation has had to do before. We must invest more in our own people, the jobs…and we must do…and at the same time cut our massive debt." So that sentence and that paragraph really are a foreshadowing of the great economic debate in the first year and throughout his administration of public investment versus debt reduction.

Then you have this sort of poetic—I know we were talking about whether Clinton likes poetry. "This beautiful capital, like every capital since the dawn of our civilization, is often a place of intrigue and calculation." It's very good. I know I didn't write it. I think that it's some combination of Clinton and the Baltimore literati, Clinton and Branch and Caplan. That's a very eloquent and elegant language that I think was him with the literary people.

Nelson: Who are interested in public affairs but have chosen to live in Baltimore instead of Washington, so it's not a surprise that this would be their point of view. [Thomas Caplan grew up in Baltimore and still lives there.]

Kusnet: That's right.

Nelson: It turns out it was.

Kusnet: I think just to find whatever influences there might have been. At that time in particular Waldman's great concern was political reform and campaign finance reform, so you find a lot about—which I was not an expert or an activist on but certainly agreed with—I think you find a lot of that in here [the inaugural address]. Some of that is his words, some of that is just arguing for it and other people putting it into words. Then you go back to Father Healy, "You, my fellow

Americans, have forced the spring. Now we must do the work the season demands." That's not word-for-word from his memo, but that's carrying forward his metaphor.

Going back to the text, you get my paragraph—"Our democracy must be not only the envy of the world but the engine of our own renewal. There is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right with America. And so today…." That last sentence was sort of like windy campaign rhetoric that made it through, "And so today we pledge an end to the era of deadlock and drift—a new season of American renewal has begun." You can see how even in the first draft, and I don't think that's terribly wonderful rhetoric, but I'm playing off of forcing the spring, season. I'm not sure I would have written about seasons had we not had the seasonal metaphor.

Nelson: Can I ask you this? Who knows what "forced the spring" means? In other words, did you recognize that phrase?

Kusnet: No, not before reading Father Healy's memo.

Nelson: I grew up in the suburbs, so we had flowers. I didn't recognize that phrase. Did anybody say that this is a phrase that people might not get the metaphor because they'd never heard the phrase or knew what it meant?

Kusnet: Because of who Father Healy was—and because of the tragic circumstances through which him memo arrived—I found the phrase very moving and wasn't inclined to question it. Father Healy was a man of God, to whom Clinton owed so much—a man with a vivid sense of humor but little visible ego. He actually swore me not to credit him with anything in the Notre Dame speech, not publicly. Even looking back at the memo, there is something mystical about it. After all, inaugurals are supposed to foreshadow a President's term in office, right?

Nelson: Yes.

Kusnet: We read, "We shall pay any price, bear any burden—" Beautiful as it is, people think, *Oh, my God, this is what got us into Vietnam and killed so many people.* Forcing the spring—on the one hand I had never heard that metaphor before. On the other hand you could argue that that's a foreshadowing maybe of Clinton's first two years and now also Obama's first two years, as "forcing the spring," trying to make a lot happen against the ordinary forces of politics.

I once toyed with the idea of writing some memoir of the first two of my years with Clinton and calling it "forcing the spring." You look at what happened with him, and I hope this will not turn out to be true, but what is happening now with President Obama is that you have a sense of someone who is a reformer who wants to have a kind of Prague spring in this country, just forcing things, making things happen beyond how they would naturally happen and maybe suffering in the process. I think even I did some reading about forcing—you may know better than I, but when you force the spring with plants, when you make them bloom before their time, it's not often good for the plant.

Nelson: Right.

Kusnet: So it is a funny metaphor.

Riley: You have to keep them in the dark, too.

Kusnet: The fact that it came from a man of God before he died gives it a kind of mysticism. What did he know was going to happen? Was that speech language or was that a warning? You don't quite know, or both?

Riley: Two questions—I'm not cutting you off, am I?

Kusnet: No.

Riley: Two questions. One is, did you go back and read other inaugural addresses?

Kusnet: Of course. One person I should credit. I don't know if you have talked to him, Carter Wilkie, has he been on your list? He was the youngest of us [the original team of Clinton White House speechwriters] and the one with the greatest historical sense. One game we used to play was what we could get—not smuggle policy into a speech, although anything is policy coming from the President, but what quotations we could get into a speech, get Clinton to say. That was a game some of us used to play with each other.

I had a bet about how many times I could get him to cite Walter Reuther [the legendary UAW president]. Of course, when he went to Detroit, I could often get him to quote Walter Reuther. Carter [Wilkie] was much more literary and erudite. Carter wanted him to quote Faulkner. You know from that prize oration, the quote, I can't do it, the quote from Faulkner about the important lasting things in life, honor, whatever. Carter Wilkie put that in a speech and got Clinton to quote it once. Not a speech about Faulkner, a speech in Mississippi, but a speech about God knows what. The trick is to put it in context. You don't want it to stick out like a sore thumb. Carter Wilkie was able to construct a speech where William Faulkner's Nobel Prize oration actually segued into it.

Anyhow, Carter Wilkie was in charge of our historic research and he went through every inaugural in history to find some historic parallel, and, appropriately enough to recall this in Virginia, he was convinced that Woodrow Wilson in 1913 was the historic parallel because Wilson had won a three-way election, it was a demand for change. He was the first in his party to be elected for a long time. He'd beaten an incumbent President. He'd won political reform. He made a case that we had to model it [Clinton's inaugural] after Wilson's 1913 inaugural.

One thing we took from Kennedy's inaugural was we wanted to make it even shorter so that Clinton could shake off his reputation for long-windedness.

Riley: The New Covenant gets lost?

Kusnet: The New Covenant was in the acceptance speech.

Riley: I mean thoroughly in the acceptance speech but it is no longer—

Kusnet: I think the phrase itself is not in there, but the concepts associated with the New Democrats—the triad of opportunity, responsibility, and community—are in the inaugural address. There is something approximating the slogan, "no more something for nothing."

Riley: Okay, got it.

Kusnet: And the word responsibility is in here, but New Covenant did not make it in.

Riley: It had been jettisoned by this point.

Kusnet: It would come back a few times. It did not—

Riley: The individual, the specific components of it would come back also. The other thing I wanted to ask you—

Kusnet: Yes, and the valley, I think the valley and the mountain ["From this joyful mountaintop of celebration, we hear a call to service in the valley"—towards the end of the inaugural address], I think this was by Taylor Branch, and these words were partly from a church service he [Clinton] had attended before the inaugural in honor of Martin Luther King's birthday, which was around that time.

Nelson: Or a talk he'd given at Howard, maybe?

Kusnet: Yes—and the "answer the call," that actually does go back to the changing of the guard and the Renaissance Weekend speech.

Riley: If I could get a copy of that to go with the transcript it would be very helpful. When we finish I'll make a photocopy.

Kusnet: Okay.

Riley: I wanted to ask, in your recollection were there other major thematic approaches that you tried or major dead-ends that you worked on that you thought were sort of in a competitive nature with the way this address worked?

Kusnet: It was clear, first from our talk with Clinton in the Governor's mansion and also probably just from the facts of the case that renewal, generational change, that would have to be part of it. I mean anybody approaching that would have thought that would be part of it. "There is nothing wrong with America—" that was my contribution. Then I tried to build things before it and after it so it would stay in there. But that sort of does fit in with renewal—what is good with this country can overcome and transform what is wrong in the country. I think it was clear we would have, as on the campaign, some kind of statement of understanding and commitment to people—to use the language that Americans had been working longer and harder for less with some understanding of the economic pain in the country. The inaugural is like the border between the campaign and the administration. You campaign in poetry, you govern in prose, but you inaugurate in poetry.

At the same time it cannot be partisan. You cannot be attacking your predecessor. So we had to praise President Bush now, not attack him. You can't be explicitly attacking what came before, you're no longer calling attention to problems, but you have to indicate that you are aware of the problems. Also for the first time you're talking to the rest of the world. As has been widely observed, in another way in which he is kind of a mirror image of President Kennedy, all but I

think two words in President Kennedy's inaugural were about world affairs, not about domestic problems. They actually just had to add "at home," two words, so there would be some understanding, some way of signaling that he understood that the American people had some needs and that the responsibilities of the President include our own country.

With us it is the mirror image—the first drafts that we did had nothing specifically about the rest of the world, except the discussion of the imperatives of the global economy. I remember sitting with Nancy Soderberg—at that time she was the conduit for Tony Lake and Sandy Berger, the foreign policy people. At one point she said, almost, "I don't care what you say but there have to be some number of words about foreign policy." I don't remember what her quote was, 40 words, 50 words, one paragraph. We have it, I think, on the paragraph that begins, "While America rebuilds at home we will not shrink from the challenges—" This I guess is our Kennedy rhetoric "—nor fail to seize the opportunities of this new world. Together, our friends and allies, we will work to shape change, lest it engulf us. When our vital interests are challenged, or the will and conscience of the international community is defied, we will act with peaceful diplomacy whenever possible and force when necessary." And so on. I think Tony Lake, who was a very elegant writer, probably wrote most of it and I may have put in a transition at the beginning and the end so it would not stick out too much from the rest of the speech.

Riley: Did you get to go to any of the balls?

Kusnet: That night we did. Remember, I was just exhausted beyond belief. I remember that Ruth introduced me to someone she knew and she said, "Here's my husband, or I should say my zombie." [*laughter*] I was just exhausted beyond all belief.

Riley: Was there anybody within the inner circle who could prepare the President for the odd dynamic of actually physically delivering an inaugural address? Were there people telling him what to expect?

Kusnet: No. I don't think anyone in the inner circle had been involved in a previous President's inaugural address. The campaign, the transition and the administration received advice from Theodore Sorensen, Richard Goodwin, and Bill Moyers, among others, but they were not directly involved with the inaugural address.

Nelson: One thing we heard in a public program here on speechwriting, and this I guess would only apply to the era after Reagan moved it to the—is that the setting there is, words take a long time to travel and the crowd response takes a long time to travel back, which means that a speaker's rhythm could very well be thrown off by just the delay in applause beginning. Did you notice that at all?

Kusnet: I didn't. We probably should have. I think one thing—and here I'm a bit sketchy because I was just involved in the writing of it, that there was *Voices of Hope,* an event in the same area before where I think Clinton spoke. So he may have had the physical experience of speaking around there to a crowd of people.

Riley: From the other end of the mall, didn't he speak at the Lincoln Memorial?

Kusnet: I guess it may be similar, that at least the idea that I'm giving an outdoor talk at an historic setting in D.C. wasn't a whole new thing for him.

Riley: Interesting. I wouldn't have thought about that. But that was what I was getting at, the muffled applause. This is a guy—

Kusnet: I may be wrong. I don't remember that. Gore had attended—Gore had grown up—but I don't remember that. And Clinton, I don't think that would have daunted him had he been told.

Nelson: Should we move on to the first joint session speech of '93?

Riley: Sure, go ahead.

Nelson: Could you talk about the preparation for that speech, which I guess came two days after the Oval Office speech, February 17?

Kusnet: That whole period was a chaotic period. I think ultimately successful, but a chaotic period. All of a sudden we're in effect presenting a budget. I don't think you can separate the wordsmithing from the policy there. You have an economic team—I'm not saying in order of importance necessarily—an economic team that has just been assembled. Some of them like Bob Reich go back with Clinton to Rhodes Scholar days. Some of them like Gene Sperling were in the campaign. Some of them like Bob Rubin are in an orbit that he's been in before. I don't think that he had any prior relationship to speak of with Lloyd Bentsen, the Secretary of the Treasury, the Senate Finance Committee chair, a World War II veteran. Bentsen was put off by the baby-boomer culture and the constant talk at meetings and surface egalitarianism and so on.

So you had these people, some of whom we knew, some of whom we didn't know, some of whom worked with each other, some of whom had not. We already had an economic plan, the "Putting People First" document in the campaign. That was almost entirely about public investment. Debt reduction had been Perot's issue, not ours, and every administration comes in and says, "Oh, my God, things are much worse than we thought." I think that was generally true with us. Remember [Richard] Darman, was he budget director with Bush?

Riley: Yes.

Kusnet: And he was a very political guy.

Riley: Yes.

Kusnet: Very smart guy but very political. They kept on suppressing what turned out to be the very bad news. All of a sudden, after the election, they can't conceal it, they have no more particular motive to conceal it, they tell Clinton that things are much worse than we thought, and here is what the deficit really is. He also then takes on a national economic team, an outstanding team, but somewhat different generationally, in background, outlook from his own. Senator Bentsen is Treasury Secretary, Bob Rubin is head of the National Economic Council, and the more liberal people get shunted off somewhere else. Laura Tyson is head of the Council of Economic Advisors, but they're advisors, they don't do the budget.

Leon Panetta is a deficit hawk, becomes the budget director. Sperling is deputy head of the National Economic Council. Bob Reich is Secretary of Labor. So all of a sudden—and this I think happens with parties of the center left all over the world, not just here. All of a sudden the more fiscally conservative people are running fiscal policy. The news is worse than we thought and the balance between public investment and deficit reduction begins to change. Even the rhetoric begins to change.

The ideological balance of the campaign, the Clinton self-presentation, was that he was a populist on economics. Not a class struggle populist, but a populist on economics.

But fiscal conservatism had not been part of his appeal. A certain measure of fiscal responsibility was implicit, but it wasn't his selling-point. I mean no one is going to say, "I'm going to be profligate and waste your money." Everyone is going to say, "I'll find some secret way to reduce the deficit." But deficit reduction had not—at least as I understood it—been a major part of his appeal. That was Paul Tsongas' issue in the primaries and that was Perot's issue in the general election. Deficit reduction as an end in itself, or as a touchstone of economic policy, had not been, as I understood it, central to the Clinton campaign. The title of our campaign document was "Putting People First." It wasn't "Getting America's Fiscal House in Order."

All of a sudden it [deficit reduction] keeps on gaining in importance, and the public investment keeps on declining in importance. An economic plan was taking shape concurrently with my knowing that we were writing an Oval Office address and then a joint session address. It wasn't as I would hope or imagine would be in other administrations—you come up with the economic plan, then you write the speech. They're both going on at the same time and you can't really write a speech about a plan that doesn't exist yet. Actually they did invite me to one meeting, but people were talking, there was no resolution. I couldn't tell what was going on. So we were several days out from the joint session speech. We didn't know what the economic plan was.

So what we did was we had a rhetorical framework. We, meaning some combination of me, Michael Waldman, Paul Begala, Sperling. I imagine if you've done interviews with the Clinton people at that time, Sperling was legendary for not sleeping. So you'd have access to Sperling at 11:00 at night or 3:00 in the morning, but it would be much more difficult to meet with him in the daytime. He'd be off at meetings. At that point [at the beginning of the Administration], no one who worked for Sperling knew what Sperling knew. We certainly did not know what Lloyd Bentsen and Bob Rubin and Leon Panetta knew. So we wrote sort of a rehash of the Detroit Economic Club speech with the economic language from the campaign, which was not in synch with how the economic plan was evolving.

Then when we got some inkling of the economic plan, we wrote something that pretty much was still a public investment speech but had content in it about the deficit reduction. But still the emphasis was on public investment. Then we're into the morning of the day of the speech. Clinton sees the draft, and, while he's not visibly angry with us as individuals, he's not happy with the speech. Also there's not enough of the New Democratic rhetoric in it, in part because none of us were New Democrats and also because the New Democrats had been more about social issues than economic issues. That was what happened in the campaign and the transition: Bob Reich got the economy; Al From [the chairman of the Democratic Leadership Council] got social policy.

So then Clinton drew in some of the New Democrats, Bruce Reed and Jeremy Rosner, to do some rhetoric reflecting the New Democrats' approach. The result was an elegant preamble to the speech, stressing deficit reduction. It's very good. You can see where it is in the speech. It's very good language and it's added on to what had been the body of the speech. You get a very panoramic view of things that at this point has everything in it. At this point, we're in the afternoon of the day of the speech. The speech now stresses deficit reduction at least as much as public investment. Complicating things even more, Clinton was asking for two kinds of public investments—long-term public investments and short-term public investments in his stimulus program, which totaled $60 billion. In those far-away days you could have a stimulus program for only 60 billion dollars.

As of the late afternoon, the speech draft begins with the New Democrats' introduction, very good rhetoric that sets the stage for the sections about deficit reduction. Then the speech continues into the rhetoric that the rest of us had written that set the stage for public investment. The transition gets smoothed a bit. Under ordinary circumstances, this would be a day before the speech and we'd sand it down a little more and it would work a little better. At one point, I think, the New Democrat rhetoric says, "My program has four parts." Then it lists four concepts. If we all had more time to polish the speech, that would be a signpost, we're going to have four parts to the speech. First I'm going to do this; second I'm going to do that; third I'm going to do this; and fourth, I'm going to do that. But the rest of the speech is not structured that way. It's not structured in four parts. Fortunately, William Safire [New York *Times* columnist, former speechwriter for President Nixon, often commented on major Presidential speeches] didn't notice that about the speech.

I think the final draft for the speech was one iteration away from really being a good speech as a prepared text, but it was a perfectly presentable speech at this point. Clinton I think had time to rehearse it once, then went to the Joint Session in the Capitol. He made further revisions, either in the car or in his head or while speaking—I think someone counted it up, that about a quarter of it is different from the actual text, new material added, old stuff taken out. The totality of it is much better than the speech that we gave him. Just the fact that he says it with a kind of feeling, I don't think that it's just that he's a good speaker, but the feeling conveys that he understands it and understands how it all fits together. He says it with his own feeling, his own extemporizing. Personal revisions made it better. Also just in the rhythm of events he had had just such a rocky first month. There was the gays in the military issue, the Attorney Generals who kept on disappearing, and other things. All of a sudden, for the first time since the inaugural, here is a man standing before you confident and young, vigorous, informed. All of a sudden, the country has a President again, and he's doing it in the most Presidential of settings, in front of a joint session of Congress.

So the speech—you know the old line that [Richard] Wagner's music is much better than it sounds. The speech as delivered was an A plus speech, but I can barely give all of us writers together a B for the text of it.

Riley: I've got to step out. I'll be right back.

Nelson: By this time you've been head of the speechwriters' office for a month. What about all the other stuff that has to go on while you're focused on a major speech, minor speeches, the messages, the proclamations? How did you organize that office to handle all that business?

Kusnet: Do you think we should wait until he comes back?

Nelson: No, go ahead.

Kusnet: It's no secret that the Clinton staff organization was somewhat free-form. It is probably a law of life that the same things that help you succeed at one stage will work against you at another stage. The kind of free-form, nonhierarchical, hardworking but fun-loving kind of atmosphere that was so successful in the campaign persisted in the White House during the first year, with much less success.

In the speechwriting unit, we had fewer writers than in previous administrations serving a President who spoke much more frequently than his predecessors. Clinton promised a 25 percent staff cut and he actually kept that promise. We [the speechwriters] certainly got the brunt of it. We started out with only three senior speechwriters. There was me, Alan Stone, who had contributed that line to the inaugural address ["Communications and commerce are global…."] and had been a speechwriter during the campaign, and Carolyn [Curiel], whom I hired, who had been a writer for Ted Koppel.

[Riley re-enters]

Kusnet: We're talking about the speechwriting office in the early months. Carolyn Curiel came from broadcast journalism. I think that's where Peggy Noonan came from. I think that's maybe the best preparation for writing speeches that are meant to be spoken and listened to rather than read.

Now, this is a President who was talking more than any before in history. You couldn't staff such a President with only three people. So what other help did we have? In the past, there had been an office of speechwriting, which included researchers. As the communications department was structured at the beginning of the Clinton Administration, the researchers were a separate office and not under us, so they didn't have to do what we asked them to do—we could ask them real nice or we could yell and scream, but they were not part of the speechwriting office. There was a separate research office, which also did research for the White House beyond the speechwriters.

We sort of poached and eventually took Carter Wilkie, who was then I think in his 20s, very scholarly, had worked in the campaign from the beginning, very eclectic personal background. His father is Curtis Wilkie, the journalist [and no relation to Wendell Willkie]. I think he had grown up in Mississippi and Massachusetts. He was the youngest of us and the one with the most historic memory. He could quote to us from obscure speeches by Woodrow Wilson and Thomas Jefferson and lord knows what. First, we informally poached him, having him draft some Presidential remarks, and then, eventually, which was a great help, we got him to join the speechwriting team.

The larger picture was that there was something called the communications department. That was probably the largest communications department any White House had ever had, before or since. Stephanopoulos was Director of Communications. It included policy experts, experts on domestic social issues but not economic issues. Many of these communications staffers, some of whom were policy experts, were very good writers, some of whom either had a background in speechwriting or learned it very quickly and very well.

So Waldman, who had worked with me on the inaugural, was sort of a floater in the communications department with responsibility for the substance on campaign finance reform but available to do other things. Bob Boorstin, who had been a speechwriter for Mondale and had been a journalist, had a similar role and function. His specialty was going to be health care. Then you had the consultants, Begala, you had Bruce Reed, and you had David Dreyer, who was one of the deputy directors of communications who had worked in Gephardt's office and had worked for Gary Hart. I'm sure I'm forgetting some people.

So you had ridiculously few full-time speechwriters, people whose only responsibility was speechwriting whom you tell you've got to do this and they would do it. You had a large number of people who were good at doing it but who had other responsibilities and could opt in or opt out. We got through that way for quite some time. We grew gradually. Then you also had a First Lady who was giving substantive speeches. We eventually hired a speechwriter for her, Lissa Muscatine, who stayed with her I think to the State Department to this day, who had come from the *Washington Post.* But it was a much smaller unit than any President had had going back to Nixon. The usual number was, I think, six speechwriters and six researchers who worked for the speechwriters. We started out with only three full-time writers.

And Clinton spoke much more often than other Presidents had. Carter Wilkie did an analysis, I think after the first year, of how many times Clinton had spoken. He had spoken I think twice as much as any previous President and had a third as many speechwriters on staff. You can just extrapolate from that and tear your hair out.

Nelson: Robert Schlesinger in that book *White House Ghosts* says that this was the administration in which the National Security Council office sort of took charge of writing—

Kusnet: I do want to clear the record on this. In the Schlesinger book, Rosner is quoted as saying that I gave away the responsibility for writing foreign policy speeches to him and the NSA during a meeting between the two of us in the White House sometime around February, 1992. In fact, the speechwriting unit never had this responsibility, and I couldn't have given it away, nor would Stephanopoulos have allowed me to give something away from the Communications Department to the NSC if we had ever had it or hoped to have it.

When I was hired as chief speechwriter in the campaign and when Stephanopoulos asked me to do the same job in the White House, it was clear that we would not be writing the foreign policy speeches. During the campaign, the foreign policy speeches were written by the foreign policy team, which included Tony Lake, Nancy Soderberg, Jeremy Rosner and others, and I understood from the first that the same would be true in the White House.

Moreover, the speechwriting unit was severely understaffed for drafting the speeches for which we were responsible—speeches about domestic policy, about the general goals of the administration, and the usual run of ceremonial and political speeches. When I was asked to find and hire speechwriters for the speechwriting group, I was not asked to look for writers with a foreign policy background, and, while Carolyn Curiel had covered the Caribbean, no one else who approved her hiring asked her about that.

So, when Jeremy spoke with me about how we would mesh with each other on foreign policy speeches, I understood the meeting to be a courtesy call, not a negotiation, since the fact that the NSA staff would draft the foreign policy speeches was a fait accompli. Jeremy and I had a collegial relationship—we had worked together as speechwriters on the Mondale campaign and had kept in touch since then. During the meeting referred to in the Schlesinger book, Jeremy and I did talk about sharing information and speech drafts with each other, for speeches that were purely about foreign policy, speeches that covered a range of issues including foreign policy, and speeches that covered issues such as trade that straddle the border between domestic and foreign policy.

Having worked in and around unions for many years, I do know something about bargaining, and this meeting was not a negotiation—it was a courtesy call.

I think the larger reality here was that President Clinton wanted, as much as possible, to insulate foreign policy from domestic politics. He didn't want campaign people like me writing his foreign policy speeches, and he didn't want his political consultants, whom we were close to, vetting his foreign policy speeches. He knew he would have to make some foreign policy decisions that would be the right thing to do but not the politically popular thing to do.

The Taylor Branch book [*The Clinton Tapes*] and others go on at some length about this. He [President Clinton] knew that bailing out Mexico was not good domestic politics. He knew that intervening in Haiti was not good domestic politics. There were other things he did that he knew were not good domestic politics. He wanted to do it anyway, and he didn't want to have someone like me or Paul Begala in the room writing the speech, explaining that we'd be thinking about an election. He wanted someone in there to be thinking about foreign policy. So I think it may have come about for all kinds of reasons, but I think the outcome is a reasonable and probably desirable outcome.

Riley: Were there other addresses that you worked on that we didn't pick up, notable addresses that it's worth parking a few minutes on? Keep an eye on the clock here; we've got about another 90 minutes.

Kusnet: If you ask me what I wrote the first year that I am most proud of, the first speech that comes to mind is one that did not have an impact on public policy but was well-written, well-delivered and had a good impact on Clinton's morale and maybe on how he was perceived by those who happened to cover it. This is his speech at the memorial for Robert Kennedy in June of '93, the 25th anniversary of Robert Kennedy's assassination. If you can find it in those [published collections of Presidential speeches], or online, you don't have to be a professor of rhetoric to see the line between what Clinton added and I wrote, because it is a perfect wraparound.

He extemporized the beginning and I think he extemporized an end, and then there's the middle, which I wrote. The middle is a tribute to Robert Kennedy. Sitting Presidents always do tributes to historic figures, usually finding some similarity between historic heroes and themselves, "You didn't know it, but he's very much like me." I tried to avoid this and instead to define what Clinton admired about Kennedy and what Kennedy teaches us today. Once again, I don't get the exact words, one line in there, "We remember him almost in freeze-frame, campaigning in cities across this country with black hands and white hands reaching out to him, and it was his fondest hope that the hands which reached out to him would one day reach out to each other." There was that. Then there was the emphasis on the meld of conservatism and liberalism that Robert Kennedy was. He was tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime. He believed in law and order and he believed in justice and he knew that, far from being in conflict, they were mutually reinforcing and essential to each other.

There was some attempt at poetry about Kennedy but then some attempt to describe him in ways that would justify Clinton's own meld of liberalism and conservatism so as to gain moral authority from the fact that Kennedy had been able to appeal not only to whites and blacks but to conservative whites and to blacks, and Clinton either could or wanted to do the same thing. So that speech I was proud of.

There's a very personal beginning that Clinton added on to it about how he had heard about Kennedy's death while a student a Georgetown. Some riff that I thought at the moment was a little bit self-indulgent, but maybe it's just a writer's reaction to something he didn't write, ruining his otherwise perfect thing. There was something about being in two places at once. I guess for the '68ers they were always living in 1968 and living in the present and it was time to only live in the present. I have to admit I thought it was self-indulgent on his part, but he liked it and spoke it with feeling.

Riley: Let's take a short break and then we'll finish up. [break with tape still running] Great stuff, David.

Kusnet: You say you've talked with a hundred people. You must get so many different perspectives on the same thing.

Riley: It's like the story about the elephant. In some respects it's unfair. A lot of times when an interview is over I make a mental note. What is it that I learned that I haven't heard before? What's the net gain in the archive from this interview, as opposed to what we've done before? It's not a very fair way of looking at things because it puts a higher threshold at the people at the end than it does at the beginning. The other thing is that the users of the archive aren't going to have the experience we've had, which is starting with Warren Christopher in April 2002 and doing 130 interviews straight through. They will come in and examine a particular set of interviews that they believe are relevant to their research interests.

Kusnet: Like the speechwriters.

Riley: Exactly. There will be people interested in rhetoric, or interested in the campaign, and will recognize your contribution. So much of what you talk about here will be completely new to them, notwithstanding the fact there may be half a dozen people who saw bits and pieces of other

things. The stuff on the inauguration is fascinating and I genuinely want to get to the disc because I don't know if we've had any commentary on that. We did interview Michael Waldman years ago. But I can't remember anybody else who's really—I don't know whether Bruce Reed had a piece of the action then or not. Bruce had done the campaign speeches. But it still doesn't matter. You get flashes of light on all kinds of different pieces of the story.

Mike, I don't know whether you had a follow-up to where we were. One of the things that we've sometimes heard is that there was a persistent problem of after-the-fact litigation speeches, before the things were actually delivered.

Kusnet: That's right.

Riley: I wonder if you could comment. In other words, you'd think you'd have a speech in the can, good to go the next day, and then you'd find out that somehow overnight some magic fingers intruded on it. Did you have that experience?

Kusnet: I think Mark Gearan [White House Director of Communications, who replaced George Stephanopoulos]—did you speak with him?

Riley: Yes.

Kusnet: He had the great phrase, I don't know if he used it in his interview, but there was a "never ending court of appeals." [*laughter*]

Riley: I don't remember that line, but he may have said it.

Kusnet: I think things settled down at one point. I imagine losing the '94 election had a—I won't say settling effect, but it had a sobering effect. But, in a sense, the campaign kept going well into 1994, the campaign mentality, that everything's always fluid, everything's in flux. Not only was the content of the speeches litigated up until the President got up to the podium, but where and when he would be speaking, how many times in the day he would be speaking, what the subject of the speech would be. That kept on being litigated. As we saw with the joint session speech in '93, the nature of the policy was often indeterminate.

I think often in the Clinton administration we settled on the policy at a later stage in the process than most administrations would have finalized the speech. I think almost any administration, maybe since Carter, would have written the economic policy speech earlier in the process than the Clinton administration came up with what the policy was, much less what the speech was. It was just driving me crazy, but I remember it was a very common pattern that, towards the end of a normal workday on Friday, they would tell me where and about what the President would be speaking on Monday morning. Then we'd have this crazed weekend. And it's not like we're all in Little Rock.

You have this disjuncture between the White House staff, most of whom are still on a campaign schedule, and the agencies where normal people go home on the weekend. You can't call someone on the weekend in the Labor Department and find out what their new job-training policy is. They'll think you're crazy. It just was crazy making. It was maddening because you're

just getting people who were or aspired to be or their birth certificates or driver's licenses suggested they were grownups—and you ask them to work around the clock like kids.

Especially, for some reason, this maddening tendency to schedule a speech for Monday morning at five or six in the afternoon on a Friday. Then—this wouldn't just be a matter of rhetoric, it would be a matter of some substance, and I'd have to try and see who on earth can tell me the substance. You have some people like Gene Sperling, who I couldn't reach except at two in the morning or something, and you'd have other people who kept normal hours. I can't call someone at home on the weekend, a normal person. I'd do it, I'd do it apologetically, and that was before it was possible for White House staff to email beyond the White House complex. So they couldn't just email me the stuff. That was among the maddening things.

Imagine the staffing process—the staff secretary at that time was a wonderful person who has since gone on to greater prominence and is also the brother of my current boss. So with that preamble, John Podesta is a very competent guy, but I think the process must have maddened him at least as much as it maddened the rest of us. In theory, as I understand it, this is sort of a constant among administrations that the role of the staff secretary is to staff things out. You get a speech about economic policy, the staff secretary knows the government, makes the determination who in the government needs to see it, and then makes sure that they see it and then gets their comments and then makes some kind of a judgment about what is worth incorporating and what isn't. Doesn't rewrite the speech, but lets you know that the Treasury Department thinks you've got it all wrong about interest rates and the trade representative's office thinks you've got it all wrong about trade. Lets you know what the valid input is.

In order to vet a speech properly for facts and policy, the White House staff needs to be able to get a speech draft done sooner than the night before it's going to be delivered, which in turn depends on knowing about the speech sooner than the morning it is going to be delivered. That never quite got worked out, or didn't get worked out nearly as much as it should have been, during the first year or two.

You were asking me about notable speeches. I'd also single out the speech announcing the AmeriCorps [national service] program, just because the staffing and vetting process worked. I remember the substance of the speech was still being hashed out but I was part of the process. I wasn't part of making the decisions, but I got to sit in on it and I could understand what was going on. They explained it to me. We got the speech done in time, the President saw it and made the appropriate edits and it went over well. There was no Sturm und Drang connected with it, it just worked. I remember because it was a rarity. There were so many where the staffing and vetting process didn't work.

I have this one story that is just indicative of the time. Also it wasn't such a rarity that you could not get the policy people to tell—very often I could not get the policy people to tell me what the policy was. That was true with the Joint Session speech [February 17, 1993, presenting the economic plan]. The economic program was always a work in progress and they would keep on making deals and counter-deals and so on. [In the story that I'm telling now about a statement that I drafted sometime in the spring of 1993] I remember I had to write something the evening that Clinton had made some kind of a deal about the economic program, either with conservative Democrats or Republicans, I forget which. I remember I went up to someone in the OMB [Office

of Management and Budget] in the old executive office building and asked her what it was. She refused to tell me. I explained that I'm the speechwriter for the President of the United States, "You're not going to tell me what he just agreed to so I can put it in the speech tomorrow?"

She said, "You wouldn't understand," or "Leon [Panetta] is going to call someone else" or something. She just wouldn't tell me. I was beyond angry at just the humor of the situation. So I said, "Well, could I FOIA [Freedom of Information Act] it? Could I file a Freedom of Information—?" [*laughter]* She didn't get the joke. I don't remember what I did. I came up with something, but it wasn't right because I didn't know what was right. Very few people were using email then, even if we had an email system within the White House. So there was just no way of getting the appropriate documents. I didn't know Leon Panetta. I knew someone else in a high-level position at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), but he didn't know what was in the agreement. The person who knew wouldn't tell me. I wrote something that had only an accidental relationship to what the current state of the policy was. Part of the reason why I remember, that wasn't memorable in and of itself, but I remember that I had stayed up real late that night, got up real early the next morning in the hope that maybe I would get some greater enlightenment in the morning, at least maybe I'd read in the morning paper what it was. Is the *Times* the better source? Does the *Post* have better sources than I had? Would they have FOIA'd it?

I remember that afternoon I was very tired, as I was much of the time, and I came back to my office in the Old Executive Office Building and there is this attractive woman, a little older than me, in the office. I was a little bleary-eyed. At first I thought that it was the woman from OMB who had refused to tell me—she was a nice person, she just maybe had been sworn to secrecy, whatever—the person was smiling at me.

I thought at first it was the woman from OMB and she had come down to apologize to me, and that was so nice of her. Then I realized it wasn't her. I thought, *I should know who this person is, who is it?* It was Peggy Noonan. [The woman who worked at OMB did look a little like Peggy Noonan in 1993.] She must have thought I was completely out of it. I was a zombie or something. Fortunately, I don't spill the beans to her about the OMB not talking to the speechwriters, or call her by another name. Then I realize I know who it is, it's Peggy Noonan, whom I never met before but had seen on TV and so on. Then I'm thinking in a split second, *Why is she here? Does she come with the building?* Because you can't get into the White House without a pass. *Does she have—am I going to get a lifetime pass when I leave? A lifetime pass to be here? Is she my new boss? I mean, why is she here?*

So it takes me about a minute longer than it should to compose myself and say hello to her. It turned out that she was writing a book, and had a friend in the White House who had let her in and found out where I was, and she decided to camp out in my office so we could arrange an interview. That anecdote sort of sums up the highs and lows of that moment in time. Some perfectly competent functionary in OMB won't tell you anything, but some national celebrity wants to talk to you.

Riley: There's one other facet of—

Kusnet: I'm not making it up. She doesn't know the back story, but she tells the story in that book that she came to interview me and she thought I was a nice guy but much too tired—

Riley: Distracted.

Kusnet: That I understood that we [the speechwriting unit] were understaffed and that would cause problems.

Riley: What about the broader universe of Clinton friends who liked to dabble in speechwriting? Was that always a blessing, or was it sometimes a mixed bag?

Kusnet: Once again this cohort notion. I knew Taylor Branch. I was never going to have the kind of access to Clinton that he had, and it was good that I had a friend I respected who did have that access. Tommy Caplan—have you ever met him and talked to him?

Riley: No.

Kusnet: Do you know him from Baltimore?

Nelson: I don't.

Kusnet: He's a lovable eccentric. He had first surfaced during the acceptance speech. Then I think he showed up a few times in Little Rock just to hang out and then reemerged with the inaugural. I just made a point to befriend him. I'd call him up to schmooze in the campaign and so there too, I had no prior acquaintanceship with him. Unlike—I'm not going to presume to be a peer of Taylor Branch; I'm not a famous writer, I'm not a historian of the civil rights movement, but I had some rapport with him. I had some commonality on how I saw the world.

I had no prior relationship with Clinton and didn't delude myself that I was going to have a close relationship. So to whatever extent I could befriend people who did, who would be willing to talk to me, I did that. Rodney Slater [Secretary of Transportation in Clinton's second term] was very helpful. I think precisely because they [Branch, Caplan, Slater and others] were friends of Clinton and had a genuine friendship with him, they thought they were doing Clinton a favor by trying to guide me in a good direction instead of a bad direction.

So the FOBs, Friends of Clinton, Friends of Bill—Branch I knew already, Caplan I got to know, Rodney Slater I got to know. Bruce Lindsey was accessible to everybody. Then there are the public figures who will reach out to you when you have a position like that [Presidential speechwriter] and who you would never have access to again because they aren't reaching out to you because of who you are but because of the job you, temporarily, hold.

When I was working on the inaugural, the two cabinet nominees who reached out to me were exactly the two I would have wanted to reach out to myself. One was an FOB, one wasn't, but they both were the two world-class intellectuals in the Cabinet, Bob Reich and Henry Cisneros. They both reached out to me and faxed me stuff and would talk to me on the phone. Reich I was on a similar wavelength with; Cisneros, I knew who he was. He sent me, part on paper, part just talking it out with me, this—I don't know how to describe it—comprehensive view of the history of human civilization, culminating in our own times.

He said it a lot better than I will, but there are times in human civilization that all of a sudden humanity can take a quantum leap. I think he identified some of the obvious points, the Renaissance, ancient Greece at a certain point, ancient Rome at a certain point, Spain under the Muslims when three religions lived in harmony, and the United States during the founding. But now, he said, this was such a time. With the end of the Cold War, the United States is something of a universal country, with people from every other country on earth, and it is just a historic opportunity.

Everyone else would give you some concept for the inaugural that was too small. His [Cisneros' concept] was too big. I'm not a student of cinematic history, but it [Cisneros' memo to me] was like going to *Fantasia* or *Avatar,* it was almost mind-blowing in its detail and its scope and magnificence. He had all kinds of ideas, not just about urban policy, but about how everything fit into everything else.

To my eternal gratitude, as long as I was working in the White House, Reich and Cisneros would talk to me. Cisneros would even drop in on me. Deval Patrick, who has since gone on to greater things [Governor of Massachusetts] but who was Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights then, he would talk to me and he had ideas—that's why I defended Obama when he was accused of plagiarizing Deval Patrick. [I wrote an article on *The New Republic* website in 2008 defending candidate Barack Obama against charges that he had plagiarized Deval Patrick.] Deval Patrick lends ideas to people. It's in his nature.

Deval Patrick was one sub-cabinet official who contributed ideas to several speeches that I drafted. Another was Everett Ehrlich, who was chief economist in the Commerce Department and was just a fount of ideas. Also Jonathan [Sallet], who was also in the Commerce Department. There were a number of other people, some of them well known, some of them completely obscure, some friends of Bill Clinton, some he never even met, who would have ideas. So those plus the FOB—Branch, Caplan, and Slater—I would try to talk to as much as possible.

Riley: Sure. Mike?

Nelson: I wonder if there are any other particular speeches that you would like to talk about. I'm thinking of the health care speech, the MLK [Martin Luther King] speech in Memphis, the '94 State of the Union, any of those three in particular?

Kusnet: The MLK—I was not the primary author of any of the speeches you just mentioned. The Martin Luther King speech in Memphis, I want to correct the record on behalf of my colleague more than myself. That sort of went down in the history books as "Clinton discarded what his staff gave him and gave a wonderful speech." The second half is true. He gave a wonderful speech. The staffer who was assigned to that was Carolyn Curiel, who went on first to be Ambassador to Belize, then to be on the editorial board of the *New York Times,* and now is chief of staff and a professor at Purdue University. Before that she had worked as a writer for Ted Koppel on ABC Nightline and I think on the foreign desk of the *Washington Post* as an editor and had been with UPI in the Caribbean. So this is someone with great credentials.

Clinton was to speak at the Church of God in Christ in Memphis.

Nelson: Mason Temple.

Kusnet: Right, where Dr. King gave his final speech before he was killed, "I see the mountain top," right?

Nelson: That's right.

Kusnet: I had worked for ten years for AFSCME, the public employee union, and did all kinds of things including speechwriting for Jerry Wurf and also for Bill Lucy, the number two officer of AFSCME. He [Lucy] grew up in Memphis and was one of the staff who worked on the sanitation workers' strike in 1968 when Dr. King was killed.

So I had written speeches and articles about the Memphis strike before. I knew the "I have seen the mountain top" speech; I knew about that venue. The instructions we had gotten from the schedulers and Stephanopoulos' various deputies and other Administration officials—this was right before NAFTA came before Congress—were to work in stuff about NAFTA into the speech. I have to admit that was one point where my personal view was just—I really don't think you go to the site of Dr. King's final speech—he was there because of the strike for union recognition—to talk about NAFTA. It just seemed to me this is very wrong. Maybe you could make some argument that NAFTA would be good for working Americans, but I was not about to make that argument at a site that was sacred to the civil rights movement and the labor movement.

The other thing that occurred to me is that the Church of God in Christ is one of the leading Pentecostal denominations in this country.

Nelson: It is.

Kusnet: Pentecostals believe in speaking as the spirit moves and speaking in tongues, and Clinton is going to be talking to thousands of Pentecostal ministers. This is not where you give the man a prepared text. These are people who believe in spontaneity, and Bill Clinton is also a man of his generation [the Baby Boomers], grew up in the South, lived through school desegregation in Arkansas, memorized the "I have a dream" speech, and so on. He's not going to get up there and read something someone has written for him about Dr. King. The Bobby Kennedy memorial speech had already happened. This is the Kennedy memorial speech to the next level. He's not only going to improvise the beginning and the end and wrap it around a prepared text [as he did with the RFK Memorial speech], he's just going to get up and speak as the spirit moves.

So Carolyn and I figured we were going to give him talking points—you could call them "prompts"—we're not going to give him a full-blown speech draft. We gave him King's final speech, an article about the Memphis strike, excerpts that Taylor Branch, Dr. King's biographer, had written. Carolyn, to her great credit, had noticed a whole bunch of articles in the *Post* about children murdering children, and she gave him that. So we gave him a manageable number of articles. The news articles that Carolyn sent along—and the talking points that she drafted—prompted the best parts of the speech: Clinton's moving, eloquent, widely quoted and deservedly praised remarks about children murdering children.

We gave him some acknowledgements, something about NAFTA, and some material about unemployment among African-Americans, just some basic facts and language, but not a full-blown speech. We did a cover memo from both of us saying, "We know you will be great, here's something for you to read." And he was great. I always thought that our role was to serve him well, and for that context I think we served him well. I'm not claiming credit for what he did, but we gave him the kind of support that led him to do what he did.

No one other than Bill Clinton, not even Taylor Branch, could have sat down at a keyboard and written the speech that he gave then. It was what it was. Other than Obama, I can't think of anyone else in public life who could have given such a speech. But in the context of what happened, as proved by the results, I think we served him well. It just leant itself to the idea that we could produce material that fit the occasion.

The health care speech, the story about the Teleprompter is well known. I don't have anything to add to it. It's true.

Nelson: I guess I was surprised when I heard that you didn't write that speech.

Kusnet: That one Alan Stone started. That was one of the ones that took on a life of its own. Alan Stone had done the health care speeches in the campaign. He started with it. Sometimes you have these missions where if you start it, it is almost a guarantee you're not going to finish it. That was one of those. It went from Alan Stone to Lissa Muscatine. It just sort of went around and around and around and ended up I think at a very good place. It was one of these things, we almost had to—sometimes I think what speechwriters do is you walk down one road and it doesn't go where you want to, but you have performed a great if unrewarded and unrecognized service by walking down that road, because that means the next person walks down a different road.

Riley: Sure.

Kusnet: There were so many ways to write that. I think there was another thing—the policy was there but which aspects of the policy would be stressed kept on changing. It was a plan about as complicated as the one that is being debated now. One way to do it was to redo the campaign speeches, which was the way we did it, for us to talk about the pain and suffering of Americans who were uninsured or who have had their insurance cut back, or who live in fear that their insurance will be cut back. That was one way to do it. I think, if my memory serves me right, that's the way we did it at first.

Then there was another way to do it—it's funny because I could also be describing the different ways Obama has spoken about his healthcare reform too. Then there was another way to do it that said here is this great challenge and we have stepped up to the challenge but never quite completed it—Harry Truman, Franklin Roosevelt, his four freedoms and his economic bill of rights, Harry Truman wanted to do this. Richard Nixon wanted to do this, Carter wanted to do this. Now let us not fail. Lissa had a very eloquent speech based on that. She had written similar ones for Hillary, but she had one that was different enough, really even better, for President Clinton.

I remember there was a meeting I was at. You invite people to a meeting and they are going to pick anything apart. Someone picked it [Lissa's draft, using the approach described in the preceding paragraph] apart. This is a downer; you keep on mentioning failure, you might not have success. So that had been picked apart, then there was nothing to replace it. At this point two of the obvious ways of doing it had been done already, and both had been deemed not to be the right way to do it. For all I know, you could go back to those two and they might have been better than what it ended up being and which is perfectly fine.

If I remember right, the final way of doing it, which was sort of the New Democrat way of doing it—it will sound deprecating to you, but it was perfectly well done—was to talk about the American character and how bold and adventurous it is and Americans are being held back by job lock. If you're afraid of losing your health insurance, you're not going to take a new job, you're not going to learn a new skill for the new job, you're not going to set forth and found your own business. A perfectly good way of doing it.

There's one saying speechwriters have, "See how it writes." I don't know if it is the best way. It happened to end up being the best written way of doing it; was it the best for the politics of it? Was it the best for presenting how Bill Clinton thought about healthcare reform? It was perfectly fine the way it was done. Clinton just showed his absolute virtuosity. As is well known, the wrong speech appeared on the Teleprompter and from memory and ad lib and occasionally looking down at the safety net of the prepared text, he spoke so well that no one but his staff who were about to have heart attacks knew that the wrong speech was on the Teleprompter.

Riley: I wanted to ask a question about the relevance of the political advisors and polling in speechwriting. The perception is that this becomes a prominent fixture of the White House after the '94 midterm elections when "Charlie" [Richard Morris] appears.

Kusnet: Right.

Riley: My memory fails me about precisely when you leave.

Kusnet: If I remember right, in early October, 1994, before the 1994 elections, I told Mark Gearan, who by then had become communications director, that I was going to leave by the end of the year. [In fact, I left in January, 1995.] I wrote a letter to Clinton I think right before Thanksgiving, because I remember it was Thanksgiving weekend and he called me at home and gave me a nice talk at home. I physically left in the middle of January '95.

Riley: Okay.

Kusnet: But it was clear, it was on record that I had said, before the '94 election, that I would be leaving. I guess what I saw coming, among other things, was that we were going to get a shellacking in '94. I didn't want it to be thought I had chosen to leave after the election, so I made sure, even though it was difficult to do it, that it was on record that I had done it before. I can't claim that I saw Dick Morris coming. I think I saw something like him coming. I thought it would have been very difficult to work for someone like that. I didn't know it would be him, but I thought there would be a shift to the right or maybe some cynicism involved in it.

Also, especially if you're a campaign person, you pretty much work in the White House in two-year modules. If you are not going to be there for the reelection campaign, you shouldn't be there early in the year of the reelection campaign and then leave before the election, because they don't want people leaving during the reelection cycle. So if you're going to leave, you should leave at the end of the last even-numbered year before the reelection.

Riley: Given that as the predicate, was there a close relationship between the polling operation—I guess Stan Greenberg must have been doing polling at the time. Were you poll-testing speech ideas ever, or verbiage?

Kusnet: There were pretty much the same consultants from the '92 election through the end of '94. When you talked about the consultants, you meant James Carville, Paul Begala, Stan Greenberg, and Mandy Grunwald. Carville and Begala were general consultants about politics and message, Greenberg being the pollster, Grunwald advertising. At that time Celinda Lake, who was well known, was a business partner of Stan Greenberg but she didn't meet with the President. She was someone you would talk to. Frank Greer was the head of the firm that Mandy Grunwald was in, but she was the one you always saw, not him.

Riley: Right.

Kusnet: He [Greenberg] was very much a part of things. He got a lot of the credit for the '92 election, which I think he deserves. He got some of the blame for '94, which I don't think he deserves. There were all kinds of polling, there was regular polling—numerical polling, samplings of people. There was focus grouping, and there was something else. Technology has gotten more advanced since '93 or '94, but, at that time, we used "dial groups." You gathered focus groups who would sit somewhere and either in real time or afterwards, watch a speech on TV. They'd be given dials. A person in the group would dial it up to maybe ten if she really liked what was being said and she'd dial it to one or zero if she didn't like it at all, and it would be in the middle if she didn't hate it but she didn't love it.

The pollsters would then write up these reports on what people liked and what they didn't like. This kind of research had some good parts to it and some bad parts to it. The good part is that you knew what people liked and you knew what they hated. The bad part of it goes back to what I learned with Mondale about stump speeches. Mondale taught us [his speechwriters] that audiences would applaud any upbeat statement they agreed with, especially a promise to do something positive for the American people, more than they would applaud a philosophical generality or the cleverest negative thing you could say about your opponent. The same is sort of true of the dial groups.

To their great credit, people are citizens, they're not students of rhetoric and they're not, at least then they were not rabid partisans, they're not political philosophers. So you'd say, "We're going to provide health insurance for every child in America because no child should grow up without being able to see a family physician." That's not the most inspired rhetoric in the world, but it's a good and decent idea that people agree with, that will score a 10. You say, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself," that might score lower because it is just rhetoric. So essentially it really was polling about concepts as much as it was polling about language, ways of saying things.

Basically policy ideas that people liked would score high. Good rhetoric wouldn't score that high, bad rhetoric would score even worse. A statement of political philosophy would not score all that well. "I want to raise the minimum wage" is going to score higher than the most profound statement of political philosophy.

So one thing that united me and Al From was some skepticism about how dial-grouping tended to favor programmatic promises over rhetorical flourishes and philosophical statements. There might be soaring rhetoric in a speech—and Stan Greenberg would do some dial-grouping and come back and say, "Oh, people say that's okay," but they didn't really care. There might be a philosophical statement, like the New Covenant and the New Democratic triad of "opportunity, responsibility, and community" and "no more something for nothing" and "we all must give in order to get," all the statements of Clintonism and the New Democrat creed, and they would not score that high either. So the lofty rhetoric and New Democratic philosophy both sort of got banished in the first two years. There became less and less of an interest in having lofty rhetoric in speeches like the Joint Session speech.

That was one reason why, as you pointed out, the New Covenant disappeared in the first two years. It never polled well, in focus groups in the campaign and during the first two years of the Administration. The turn back to the New Covenant came when I was leaving and after I left. But, having just called Dick Morris a cynic, I have to give the devil his due. After the '94 election, when Clinton decided he had to—the cliché is move to the center—but, really, he had to define some philosophy and identity for himself. Morris' advice—and Clinton's own instinct—was to do what was called "triangulation," to define himself as different from the Congressional Democrats as well as different from the Republican majority in the Congress. This meshed with the "New Democrat" approach of being different from conservatism and traditional liberalism.

He [Clinton] went back to Bruce Reed, he went back to the Georgetown New Covenant speeches [the speeches that he gave at Georgetown University towards the end of 1991 to define his philosophical and programmatic approach—these speeches reflected the "New Democrat" viewpoint.] At this point, Greenberg was being pushed aside and Morris and his crew of pollsters [Mark] Penn and [Douglas] Schoen were being brought in. I wasn't in the room anymore, but I have been reliably told that, if there was someone in the room who had said to Clinton, "Oh, but the New Covenant doesn't poll well—" he would say, "That's what I am." And that was to Clinton's credit. Because the dial grouping would just give you policy stuff without any soaring rhetoric or underlying philosophy—all bones and no cartilage. There would not be the connective tissue that explained why Bill Clinton is for these ideas and why do they all hold together.

I am in no way a fan of Dick Morris, but in a funny way, Morris the cynic provided a kind of cover for Clinton, in his first State of the Union in '95, and then the succeeding ones, to expound the centrist philosophy that may not have done well in dial groups, but that gave people some way to understand all the stuff he was for that did poll well. I doubt that the dials went up to ten when he talked about a New Covenant, and his trio of opportunity, responsibility, community. But it gave people a way to understand him that he didn't have when he was doing purely programmatic speeches.

Nelson: Got one more question, but if you have any more, go ahead.

Riley: No, I'll think while you ask. That's why we do these with two interviewers.

Nelson: Something that is not in the briefing book I found out last night on the web is that you identified Joe Klein as the author of *Primary Colors.*

Kusnet: In the *Baltimore Sun.*

Nelson: How did you do that?

Kusnet: That was the *Baltimore Sun* that you [Michael Nelson] and I used to write for.

Nelson: How did you do that? Because that novel was such a sensation when it came out, and the guessing game was just so widespread and so generally off the mark.

Kusnet: You wrote for the *Baltimore Sun*.

Nelson: No, I just found it on the web.

Kusnet: No, I mean you wrote for them so you know what a high quality newspaper it is.

Nelson: Yes.

Kusnet: Because I had worked for Clinton, they had me do the review of *Primary Colors.* I turned it in. They used to have a Sunday feature called *The Argument,* which consisted of essays that tried to draw some larger point about some book or books or authors, and they had me do an "Argument" piece about *Primary Colors.* I did a review of it and I expounded at some length about Clinton and the book and whether it was accurate.

The book review editor, Michael Pakenham, said, "Who wrote this? Really, I can't run this thing without you telling me who wrote it." I said, "It reads to me like Joe Klein." He said, "You go back and you write an article making the case for why Joe Klein wrote it. Your gut is probably right." It was before anyone else had fingered Joe Klein. I read a lot of Joe Klein stuff and I knew him a little and it just read like him. I reread it again and the thing is—did you read *Primary Colors*?

Nelson: Oh, yes.

Kusnet: Klein for a long time wrote for *New York* magazine and he covered New York politics. First, he knew a lot of New York politics and he had some preoccupations. Of all the things to write about the Clinton campaign, it [*Primary Colors*] seemed to be about a third about the New York primary. So you figure whoever wrote this had to have some interest and a knowledge of New York. I remember in particular it had some disguised characters. It had someone in there who I knew, a guy named Bill Lynch who was deputy mayor under Mayor [David] Dinkins. Even people who knew him didn't know that his family was from Long Island and had been potato farmers.

He writes about some character in New York who is active in African-American politics, is from Long Island, and whose family had been potato farmers—Bill Lynch. I figured who on earth could have written *Primary Colors* and would know Bill Lynch. Once again it was Joe Klein. So many others—for instance, Sidney Blumenthal—got mentioned. Blumenthal didn't know Bill Lynch. Blumenthal had never worked in New York. All the other people who were being mentioned had never covered New York politics, had never covered Mayor Dinkins, would not have known Bill Lynch. So I figured it had to be Klein, and it had his views on things.

Nelson: His view on Clinton.

Kusnet: He had always seen Clinton's promiscuity as a metaphor for his ideological eclecticness. So it just seemed to match so much with the intangibles, his writing style just read to me like him, his knowledge, his interests, and his outlook, so I figured it had to be. So I just made the case. It's one of these things, if you get it wrong no one is going to remember, but if you get it right—

The great thing about the *Baltimore Sun* was that once they had this "scoop," they just ran with it like crazy. They did about a half dozen articles afterward, bragging, "We identified it first; we got it here."

Nelson: I think it's interesting that the end of your story today takes you back to the beginning, which is growing up in New York and learning about politics by being in New York.

Kusnet: It's a good place to learn things, as is Chicago and Boston, and Arkansas in some ways.

Riley: One more question from me, and then I think we can say that we've done it—

Nelson: A full day's work.

Riley: A full day's work and a well-done job. It has been fascinating throughout. We haven't really talked about the scandal side of things, which surely by the second year had been generated. Bits and pieces of this obviously have cropped up during the campaign. I wonder if you had any observations about the extent to which the scandals had diverted the White House's attention, or the extent to which it weighed on people. You had Vince Foster obviously in '93 committing suicide over this.

As somebody who was an insider in the White House, do you have any observations in general about how that outside effort to undermine Clinton played out inside?

Kusnet: I guess the short answer is no. Safire had this great line that no speechwriter was ever indicted in Watergate. [*laughter*] The short answer is no, but the long answer is just—no, obviously I never had to write a speech dealing directly with such stuff. The Manhattan Project was designed to dispel the popular view that he was privileged, entitled, self-centered. The speeches we wrote presented him as a down-to-earth policy expert who felt people's pain and was fighting to make their lives better.

I never met Monica Lewinsky. That was way after my time. I don't think anyone ever understood what Whitewater was about. I think Carville had the great line that a lot of the special

prosecutors weren't investigating the scandal, they were investigating Clinton. They went from one thing to another thing.

Clinton was less distracted by all the scandal-mongering than most politicians would have been. He was such a multitasker that you had a sense that he was so intellectually adventurous that he was always doing more than one thing at the same time. You didn't get the sense that his mind was so clouded by the scandals that he couldn't concentrate.

There were other people who had to work on that stuff. I guess half of them complained about being overworked and so on. I'm lucky I never had to get anywhere near that stuff.

Riley: Is there any piece of this that we haven't dealt with that you thought we'd talk about?

Kusnet: We've gone over so much. I guess, because we're getting back into the speculative realm, two things. I think this was an insight he shared with Reagan, not with George W. Bush, and maybe not even with President Obama. He said you get elected because you promised the people you're going to do one, two, or three things at most. The people remember what that is, and you have to keep on going back to that. That was something he kept on impressing on us. I remember reading that Reagan had the same idea. He might have gotten it from Reagan. Reagan said he was elected to cut taxes, cut the deficit, and defend freedom. He did two out of three [cutting taxes and winning the Cold War], and two out of three ain't bad. That was Reagan's line all along.

Clinton was a little more abstract, but what he saw as the triad was to revive the economy, reform the political system, and restore the social fabric. Maybe, since I don't think he ever claimed to have reformed the political system, he would also have said two out of three ain't bad.

I think with the third one—restoring the social fabric—he had a special sense of people's need for order in their lives because of the constant presence of disorder in his own life, from growing up and having to prevent at least one of his various stepfathers from attacking his mother, his having to order the state police in Arkansas to arrest his own brother for narcotics. Then dealing with his own demons, which were never terribly secret, we didn't know the dimensions of it, but he would eye attractive women in our presence and comment to us. He never pretended otherwise; he wasn't a hypocrite. But controlling his own impulses was, I think, a kind of a theme in his own outlook on life, maybe the border of what he said in public and what he'd say in meetings. I don't think I'm talking out of school, because this does him credit. He used to use the phrase "a normal life" a lot. I think he meant that a normal life isn't a given—a normal life is an achievement. That was part of his view of the middle class as a norm.

He wasn't born into anything people would recognize as middle class, either in economic standing or in stable home life. His life's journey is an achievement—not only to grow up in difficult circumstances and become a Rhodes Scholar, a Governor, and a President—just to have a normal life is an achievement. That was something he would often say.

It wasn't a platitude coming from him, because he grew up with a single mom. She went to nursing school in New Orleans, and he was raised by his grandparents.

He grew up very close to not just economic insecurity but emotional insecurity. I think a lot of his version of social conservatism wasn't at all censorious. It wasn't, we've got to crack down on this, that, and the other thing; it was much more, m"There but for the grace of God go I." In a way, you need work in your life to structure your life, not just for a paycheck. He would talk at great length about the need for order in life, why people could be drawn to various movements that were very simplistic or worse, but that had some structure to them. That was really a theme with him.

He was someone who knew all kinds of people, such as those in the DLC [Democratic Leadership Council, the centrist Democrats] who were big on welfare reform. I think he was the only one who really saw it from the point of view of the kid growing up with a single mom and how much pride the kid has when his mom gets and keeps a job. He didn't forget what it was like to be close to the edge, economically and socially. It was just such a part of him. I think that's part of why so many people identified with him, and part of why he could have welfare reform, have an anti-crime program, and no one thought that he was doing it out of mean-spiritedness—some people thought he was doing it out of expediency, but no one thought he was doing it out of hatred. He just was in touch with people on the edge of insecurity—I don't know if he's like that now, but at that time he was in touch with so much.

The Governor of Arkansas, I was rereading some stuff before coming here. His last salary before being President of the United States was $35,000 a year. His wife made decent money as a lawyer, but the Governor's mansion in Arkansas would not be considered much of a home in northwest Washington. He shopped. You didn't have to have a briefing with him; he knew how much groceries cost. He was in touch with everyday life. Before becoming President he was in touch with life as it is lived in this country.

I think people recognized that in him. Reagan used to say that the American people know that he liked them. For all his many faults, I think the people knew that Bill Clinton liked them. They knew that he cared about them, and they knew that he understood how they lived.

Riley: David, that's a wonderful synopsis, and we very much appreciate your time. This has been enjoyable for us.

Kusnet: Very enjoyable. It's not very often I can get anybody to listen to me.

Riley: Terrifically illuminating for us. We appreciate your coming down. It is a singular contribution. I'll express the thanks of those who will have an opportunity to use your words at some future date. Thank you.

Kusnet: Thank you.