INTERVIEW WITH JEAN BECKER

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Interviewer

University of Virginia
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Riley: We get questions all the time about video, particularly from the library people, because they love to have exhibits.

Becker: They love to have video.

Riley: This actually started with the idea that there would be a lot of video, and I think it survived one episode with Brent Scowcroft, where he got so furious with the fussing and the lighting and everything.

Becker: Yes. I bet most of your subjects are just so relieved. I know I was. It’s just more comfortable and you don’t have to worry about all sorts of things.

Riley: What you look like. Most of the people we deal with are used to being on television, but not everybody, and I still think people are more self-conscious about cameras.

Becker: Absolutely. I think you’re absolutely right.

Riley: All right, just for the record, this is the Jean Becker interview as part of the George H. W. Bush Oral History Project. We’re doing this in Jean’s office on Walker’s Point, at Kennebunkport, which I’m thrilled to be invited to.

Becker: Are you going to talk about the view?

Riley: There’s a wonderful view behind her head that I can watch as we converse. We talked about the ground rules before we came on, the number one being confidentiality. Just as a start, tell me about the seasonal dynamic with your schedule. We’re here in Maine now, but you were in Texas up until just a little while ago. What’s the pattern and what’s the daily rhythm like here?

Becker: It’s like clockwork. The seasonal schedule is the Bushes spend five months in Maine and seven months in Houston—May through October here, and then October back to May. Three staff people come with them: President Bush’s aide, Mrs. [Barbara] Bush’s aide, and myself. Somebody has to do it, so I fall on my sword and come to Kennebunkport. The work and everything come with us, but as I tell the Houston staff who gets left behind, the minus is they miss us terribly; the plus is we bring the troublemaker with us. That would be George Bush. It’s a little different here, because he spends a lot of time on his boat. You know, it’s just a great place to have to go to work every day.

Riley: Do you ever go out on the boat with him?
Becker: Oh, yes. It’s my duty to go out there.

Riley: Of course.

Becker: Of course, yes.

Riley: Are you okay on waves?

Becker: I have great sea legs. I grew up on a farm in Missouri, so it’s a miracle that I have great sea legs, but I do.

Riley: Are there differences between the day-to-day life up here, compared to life there?

Becker: Very much so, because the whole family comes here. This is where the family comes to spend time with their parents and grandparents. In Houston—I’ll go back a couple of years. The President is almost 87, so his life has changed a lot in the last couple of years. He has a form of Parkinson’s disease, and he is increasingly more frail. He probably is now a normal 87 year-old. Up until he was 83 or 84, President Bush came to the office every single day. He would get there before 8:00 and would stay until 6:00. His work ethic was unbelievable. Ten years ago, he would get there between 7:00 and 7:30, but even then…. Houston’s much more of a normal—It’s an office work life. Here, because our office is located at Walker’s Point where their home is, he sort of drifts in and out of the office, and there are always other people here.

There’s a granddaughter here now, who goes to SMU [Southern Methodist University], and five of her friends: two girlfriends and three boyfriends. That’s been amusing. The Bushes have been the chaperones. It’s been really fun to watch. But they’re thrilled. Their grandson, Jebby [John Ellis Bush Jr.] and his wife, who’s expecting their first great-grandchild, arrive tomorrow. Their daughter, Doro [Dorothy Walker Bush Koch]—One of her daughters arrives today for the weekend, and that’s how it is all summer. There will not be a day between now and Labor Day that there’s not one family member here. Sometimes every bed on the Point is full and it’s chaos.

Riley: Do you have to make reservations or make arrangements, or do they just show up?

Becker: I tease Barbara Bush’s aide that her job turns almost into being the concierge of Walker’s Point in the summertime. Everybody emails their mom. Mrs. Bush sort of runs the hotel business here. Starting right after Christmas, people will start emailing Mrs. Bush, their mom, asking, “How are these dates?” It’s seldom that she would have to say to someone, “I’m out of beds,” but they do have to—We’ve been full a couple of times. It depends on how many people you want to bring with you.

Riley: I see.

Becker: The grandkids, in particular, like to bring friends, and even some of the kids like to have overnight guests. Then we can get sort of full.

Riley: Do you know how many people it sleeps here?
Becker: One time I counted and I thought I counted 33, which almost seems low, because there’s a couple of guest cottages and the big house. The third floor of the big house is a dorm with bunk beds where the grandkids always used to sleep, but they’re all growing up now. That dorm isn’t as valuable as it used to be. When the grandkids were little, that’s where they all stayed. Well, now they’re getting married and they don’t want to go up in the dorm and sleep up there. Sometimes there’s definitely overflow in the dorm. I think the Point sleeps somewhere between 33 and 40.

Riley: And there are cottages on the outside?

Becker: Right.

Riley: Is that privileged property, too, or does everybody want to be in the main house?

Becker: Well, over the years, people have sort of settled into patterns of where they stay. I’ll tell you a great story, when George W. [Bush] was President, I don’t know the year but it was over the Fourth of July weekend. North Korea had shot off some missiles. It was the first working day after the Fourth of July. I usually watch CNN [Cable News Network] all day in my office, and there was the CNN reporter saying, “We’re expecting the President to come into the briefing room any moment to brief the nation. His aide said he’ll be here any moment.”

Our intern buzzes me and says, “The President’s on the phone for you.” I said, “Really?” I was very surprised, mainly because CNN is saying “any minute now,” and I’m thinking, Okay, I guess he’s going to ask me my thoughts on North Korea. So I get on the phone— I think Jeb [John Ellis Bush], Doro, and Neil [Bush] were all here—and he was curious about where everyone was staying. He said, “So how was the Fourth of July weekend? What’s going on up there? Who all is there? Where’s everyone staying?” So I went through where everyone was staying and he said, “Okay, I’ve got to go.” And literally 30 seconds later . . . It was just such a funny conversation.

Right now, they all stay in the same place. That’s where it gets sort of funny. If you come at the same time as one of your siblings and you both like to stay in the same house or the same bedroom, it’s first come, first served.

Riley: But they don’t have—When I go home, I know where I’m going to stay, because in my parents’ home—

Becker: Normally it is like that, unless all of them are here. The Bushes have given to Doro what’s called the Bungalow, which is actually the house that President Bush grew up in. When his mother married Prescott Bush, her parents, who owned Walker’s Point, built her a cottage as a wedding gift, on Walker’s Point, and it’s still up there. I’ll walk you around the Point when we’re done and give you a tour. They actually gave that to Doro a couple of years ago. That is now Doro’s.

There’s a little guesthouse right off the guesthouse, called the Wave, which is where Jeb and Colu [Columba Bush] and George and Laura [Bush] both like to stay. George and Laura also like to stay in the big house, so they’ll alternate. Jeb and Colu really like the Wave. Marvin [Bush] and Margaret [Bush] usually stay in the big house or the Wandby. Neil and his clan always stay
in the Wandby, which is a little guest cottage right off the parking lot over here. They like that because they have the most houseguests and it’s a zoo. They have the youngest kids. The U.S. government built the Wandby.

Riley: That was when President Bush was President?

Becker: When he became President, they decided they wanted the military aide and the doctor to stay on the Point, so they put in this—I don’t know if it’s a Sears, but it’s one of those prefabbed houses. When he lost the election in 1992, they were going to tear it down. They were going to come in and dismantle it, and President Bush offered to buy it. He said, “I would like to keep it, as we always need more beds here.”

His then chief of staff, Rose Zamaria, was dealing with GSA [U.S. General Services Administration]. She found out how much it cost to build it, to say, “We’ll buy it at cost.” Well, they tried to charge President Bush—some GSA person—I don’t know how much more money than what it was built for. Their reason was, “Look at the location.” Rose said, “We know, and President Bush owns the location. You can’t charge him. You can’t say, ‘Look at that view.’ It’s his view.” He loves that story. Some poor GSA person was trying to milk the former President. Anyway, he bought it and they turned it—

Riley: Did President [William J.] Clinton have to intervene on this?

Becker: No. I think it was—I don’t know. I wasn’t chief of staff then. The story has become legend and probably has been embellished. Did Rose do an oral history?

Riley: No.

Becker: Rose is the one who dealt with it. President Bush loves telling that story. I don’t know who—I think some more practical-minded person said, “Yes, we can’t charge for the location; it’s at his property.” So that’s the other guest cottage.

Riley: You were saying that there had been a PBS [Public Broadcasting Service] crew that had come through at one point. Has anybody gone through the house with the President, to talk with him about the—

Becker: No. They have always kept the house off-limits. We’ve done a ton of interviews up there, but Mrs. Bush has always been very protective of Walker’s Point.

Riley: Well, of course, sure.

Becker: So there’s never been the house tour. And even with the interviews, she’s a little reluctant, just because she’s kept it very private. Over the years, we have done a lot, but.…

Riley: Well, I don’t know whether this would work or not. I’m just throwing out the idea and I’m not fishing to be involved in this at all. I’m interested for history’s sake. At some point—it wouldn’t even have to be a video camera—you could take a handheld recorder like this, and just ask Mrs. Bush if she would take an hour or so—
**Becker:** And talk about the house?

**Riley:** And walk through it from room to room and say where you are, what’s there, and what experiences have happened there, and you could just put the darn thing in the library for 50 years if you wanted to.

**Becker:** It’s an incredible history, a lot of history.

**Riley:** It is.

**Becker:** When we have groups here—One of the beauties of Walker’s Point that different groups have definitely taken advantage of, at the Bushes’ invitation of course—groups like MD Anderson, Points of Light, the Mayo Clinic, all these different groups we’re involved in—we do a lot of what we call “cultivation events,” trying to get big donors interested.

**Riley:** Sure.

**Becker:** President Bush has a wonderful, what I call “dog-and-pony show.” He begins all of those with the history of Walker’s Point, and he’s wonderful at it. We should at the very least get him—I’m sure that we have that tape somewhere.

**Riley:** You really ought to.

**Becker:** He actually did an oral history for the Kennebunk Historical Society. I need to find out what happened to that tape.

**Riley:** I think that that was the one for his dad. I think maybe there was a project on Prescott.

**Becker:** On his dad? There was? I wasn’t even aware of that.

**Riley:** I partly raise the issue because my colleague, Jim Young, has done an authorized project on [Edward M.] Ted Kennedy, and Jim did this. Jim used to go back and forth to—

**Becker:** To Hyannis Port?

**Riley:** Yes.

**Becker:** What a great idea.

**Riley:** He actually went with Senator Kennedy through the Kennedy Compound, to get him to talk about things there. I don’t know where the recording is and what the ground rules will be, but it just—

**Becker:** It’s part of history.

**Riley:** It really is.
Becker: Walker’s Point—I’m sort of making this up, but my guess is this was partially inspired by the [Lyndon B.] Johnson Ranch. The Johnson Ranch is now owned and controlled by the National Historical Preservation Society.

Riley: Is that right?

Becker: I think. I might be a little off.

Riley: Is it in the National Park Service?

Becker: I’m not sure of the answer to that. Maybe. But those people came to see us years ago. I had just become chief of staff, and this was before George W. was President. We had a great meeting with them. President Bush’s lawyer was here and they basically said, “If the family is ever going to sell this, we would like first rights.” Again, this is way before W. They compared it to the Johnson Ranch. “We would like an opportunity to talk to the family.”

Well, they’re not going to sell. I don’t think that is ever going to happen. But particularly after W. became President—a lot has happened here.

Riley: It’s as historic a residence as there is in the country. The property came into the possession of the family—?

Becker: In the early 1900s. President Bush could tell you exactly when. Nineteen-0-something. It’s like ’02, ’03, ’04. We actually had a big 100th anniversary party when it was 100 years old. His grandfather, George Herbert Walker, from St. Louis, Missouri, is the one who bought it. His grandfather was the first owner. Then his oldest son, another George Herbert Walker [Jr.] but called Herbie Walker, bought the Point from his father’s estate and he was the patriarch of the family at the time.

When he died, his widow wanted to sell. A huge storm had just come through and the place was heavily damaged, and she wanted to sell. She did not want Walker’s Point, and no one of 41’s generation wanted to buy it—none of his siblings, none of his cousins, none of Herbie Walker’s kids—for a couple of reasons. Most of them who loved Kennebunkport had a house here. George and Barbara Bush found—Do you see that gray house?

Riley: Yes.

Becker: They owned that house for about ten years.

Riley: That’s not the one with the planked up windows, is it?

Becker: No, that’s really sad. It’s the one to the left of the planked up windows. I’ve been dying to know what’s going on there.

Riley: I thought it was Secret Service.
Becker: No. I wonder—it’s very interesting. Anyway, various other family members owned houses here and no one wanted to buy it from her, so it was sort of a family crisis, and they were going to sell it. They had a buyer. I think it was Howard Johnson’s.

Riley: The hotel chain?

Becker: Yes.

Riley: Not to convert this into a Howard Johnson’s?

Becker: Yes. What happened was Dorothy Walker Bush, President Bush’s mother—By that time, Prescott Bush had died. She owned the Bungalow, her house, because it was a wedding gift. And she wouldn’t sell it. She said to Mary—I’m pretty sure her name was Mary Walker—“Fine, you can sell the rest of Walker’s Point, but I’m not selling.” Well, that was a deal breaker, that she wouldn’t sell her cottage. No one wanted to buy this place when you had a house right in the middle of it.

To resolve the family crisis, George and Barbara Bush bought it. They really did not want to buy it. I found all the paperwork on this when I was researching his letters book, All the Best. I didn’t know any of this and I asked him about it and he said, “No, we didn’t want to buy it. We were living in Houston, Texas and we had a great house here.” But anyway, it was sort of a family crisis, so they stepped up to the plate and bought it, and as President Bush would say, the rest is history. Life is weird, because right after he bought it—He bought it in ’80, after he had dropped out of the race.

Riley: Is that right?

Becker: It was in that time frame. And then he became Vice President of the United States. Anyway, it’s amazing.

Riley: Well, the house itself—My guess is it’s like a lot of properties; it’s probably in really good shape now, and you’re talking about a period of time when there had been damage to the house.

Becker: Yes. The whole bottom floor was destroyed when he was President. It was totally wiped out.

Riley: Oh, is that right?

Becker: Did you read the book or see the movie, The Perfect Storm?

Riley: Yes, of course.

Becker: That storm, Halloween 1991, the entire bottom floor of the big house was destroyed.

Riley: Along with George Clooney’s boat, right?
Becker: Along with George Clooney’s boat. They had to totally rebuild the bottom. There’s video somewhere of the Atlantic Ocean breaking over the top of the house. Then the living room was destroyed just a couple of years ago. The big storm and a Nor’easter came up in April and blew open two glass doors in the living room and totally flooded it, and Mrs. Bush had to replace everything.

Riley: Well, that explains why you go back to Houston in October.

Becker: Exactly. It’s beautiful property, but like everyone who owns property on the ocean, with it comes—Every once in a while you’re going to have a lot of maintenance or you’re going to have to rebuild.

Riley: Is it insurable?

Becker: It is, but it’s like everything—I found this out with Hurricane Ike. Hurricane Ike damaged, of all things, my townhouse in Houston. I couldn’t believe it. It rained so much that the water seeped in through the roof. It is insurable, but hurricane insurance like that is—They don’t insure anything for 100 percent.

Riley: What about when you come here? Do you stay on the compound?

Becker: No. I rent a house in town.

Riley: In Kennebunkport?

Becker: I walk to work. For ten years, I’ve rented the guest cottage—You can’t see it—of one of the big houses along Ocean Avenue. It’s wonderful.

Riley: You said you walk to work.

Becker: When it’s nice. I walked this morning.

Riley: When is it nice?

Becker: I walked yesterday for the first time all year.

Riley: Just for the record, Jean and I were supposed to do this last week, and the weather all up and down the Eastern Seaboard made travel from Charlottesville impossible. Today is the second or third nice day.

Becker: The second nice day.

Riley: During the summers is the weather normally good?

Becker: It is normally spectacular, but we have had a couple of summers that were dreadful. Two summers ago, they set a record for cold and rain, blew every record out of the book. It was just a cold, rainy summer. There was another summer where it was foggy the whole summer. I had one staff person who I thought was going to go crazy. But usually July and August can be just gorgeous here. Nothing’s air-conditioned, and you really don’t need it. You may have one
week of 90-degree weather and you think you’re going to die, but about the time you think, *Maybe I should go get an AC* [air conditioner], it all goes away.

**Riley:** Do they travel when they’re up here?

**Becker:** Not any more. Travel was less in the summertime, but President Bush would continue to travel, when he was still traveling a lot, but much less than when we’re in Houston, mainly because the family’s here. He would occasionally go do something that he really wanted to do, but we turned more down in the summer than we accepted. This is his time with his kids and grandkids, to fish and sort of recharge his batteries.

**Riley:** Do they ever go into town here?

**Becker:** Oh, they go into town a lot.

**Riley:** To eat, or to the hardware store?

**Becker:** The other day they went to the Dollar Store. I’ve never been to the Dollar Store. They used to go to Walmart; now it’s a Dollar Store. They go out to eat and they go to church.

**Riley:** Does it create a big fuss?

**Becker:** No. You know, in July and August more so, when a lot of tourists are here, but right now people are sort of used to them. People love seeing them. I would like to have gone to the Dollar Store with them. For the most part people are like, “Hello, Mr. President.”

**Riley:** You said they both go, when they’re going to the Dollar Store?

**Becker:** Yes, they both went to the Dollar Store together the other day.

**Riley:** Were they shopping for anything in particular?

**Becker:** I don’t know what they were—reading glasses.

**Riley:** All right. I’m sure we’ll come back to some of this, but let’s turn the clock back. Tell me a little bit about your career. You were a journalist.

**Becker:** I was a journalist, yes.

**Riley:** Tell me a little bit about your journalism career and then let’s talk about you getting into the Bush network.

**Becker:** I was a newspaper reporter for ten years and my last paper was *USA Today*. I covered the 1988 campaign the year he was elected. I was on *USA Today*’s political team. I was the feature writer, which was really fun. The first thing I did was great: *USA Today* did an “At Home” series with all the candidates. There were 15 that year and I went to all of their homes, with the exception of [Pierre] Pete DuPont and Bob Dole. I had to interview them elsewhere; they did not invite me over. Everybody else, I went to their homes and we did this “At Home,” before the Iowa Caucus began. It was a great gig. I loved it.
Riley: I have to interrupt and tell you that it’s really interesting to me that you’ve said this because, coming the first time to Kennebunkport myself, I was walking around yesterday thinking, If you want to understand George Bush, you’ve got to come places. You’ve got to come here.

Becker: You really do.

Riley: I remember going years ago to do an interview with Leon Panetta, and I read on the airplane—It was a horrible flight through Chicago—that Panetta, when he was a member of Congress, went home every weekend to his district.

Becker: Wow.

Riley: Which I thought was—

Becker: He’s from where?

Riley: Monterey.

Becker: I was going to say, isn’t he from California?

Riley: He’s from California. So I’m thinking, This is crazy, until—You know, I take the cab to the hotel, I wake up the next day, I get out of the hotel and see what Monterey is like, and now I know.

Becker: Then you understood why.

Riley: Forgive me for interrupting, but I think that going places—You went places.

Becker: I went to all their places. It was so much fun. I loved it. The DuPonts and the Doles were not comfortable with that. Bob Dole lived at Watergate. Anyway, it was interesting, it was fun, and I got to know all the candidates.

In the fall, USA Today talked Barbara Bush and [Katherine D.] Kitty Dukakis into doing a weekly campaign diary for us. It ran every Monday. I helped facilitate getting it set up, because by that time I’d gotten to know both of them. Very unhappily, I was then assigned to this project. I really didn’t want to do it, but I was sort of their editor. I loved it, as it turned out.

Riley: For the two women?

Becker: The two women. I got to know both of them really well. They would have to turn their columns in to me every Sunday night, and they usually had to be cut. They were usually too long, and I would call—On the [Michael] Dukakis campaign, I dealt with Kitty’s press secretary. I dealt with Mrs. Bush directly. She was very hands-on with this. Usually once a week I would catch up with them on the campaign trail somewhere and spend a flight with them, because in the beginning the columns were really bad. They were full of policy wonk stuff: “This is how my husband feels about health care.” I would call their press secretaries and say, “No, that is not what we want. We want color.” We wanted it to be behind the scenes of the campaign trail.
They both got really good at it, but to assure that they got it I would catch up with them toward the end of the week and have them tell me about their week and say, “That’s a great story,” or, “We don’t want to hear that.” Anyway, I got to know both women very well, and after the election was over, Barbara Bush’s chief of staff offered me a job on her press staff. I was totally taken aback. I really didn’t want to do it because I was really happy where I was.

Riley: That’s a big step for a journalist, right?

Becker: It’s a big step, it was going to be a pay cut, and I loved my job. After agonizing over it, it was my dad who said, “What the hell are you thinking? What are you doing? You’ve been offered a job—Are you crazy?” So I was her deputy press secretary at the White House.

I went back to Houston in ’92 to help her with her book, her memoirs, and I was going to leave after that. You’re going to swear I’m making this up, but it’s a true story: We’re done with the book in March of ’94, and I was getting ready to leave and go back to D.C. I was going to go back to my journalism career. President Bush’s chief of staff, Rose Zamaria, retired, and he called me in and he said, “I have no idea who to hire. I’ve got to figure this out. Barbara suggested that you might be willing to stay and help out for a while.” I said, “Sure. I don’t know how to be a chief of staff,” and I think he literally said, “I just need a warm body.”

I agreed to do it until Labor Day, and we never talked about it again. We’ve never talked about it ever again. I guess he’s still looking, Russell. I guess any day he might come in and say, “Oh, Jean…” We were off and running and fell into a rhythm, and we just never talked about it.

Riley: I don’t want to let you get away with not saying anything more about your experience with the First Lady’s office. I’d like to hear more about your time there, because you clearly had—

Becker: Yes, it was great.

Riley: And you were there for all four years?

Becker: All four years, I was.

Riley: You said you were the deputy press secretary.

Becker: I was one of two deputy press secretaries. Anna Perez was the Press Secretary. It was great. I traveled—There were two deputy press secretaries: Sondra Haley and myself. The First Lady did not have an advance office. Susan Porter Rose, as chief of staff, later hired a logistics coordinator, but our staff was pretty bare-bones. Sondra and I ended up almost becoming her advance people. We both did press stuff and we were the ones who would be sent out ahead, mainly to set up the press coverage, initially to set up the press coverage of the First Lady and to deal with the local press and figure out the press component. Because there was no advance person, no advance office, we turned into the advance people. I traveled almost 80 percent of the time for those four years.

When she was not traveling, I was one of her backup speechwriters. I was probably the number-four speechwriter. Everybody else had to have pneumonia. And then I wrote all her speeches.
post-Presidency, which was really fun, when I was President Bush’s chief of staff. It was unbelievable. She was really fun to work with.

I remember the very first day at the White House, or the second or third day, she had a coffee for her staff and she said, “I want to do something every single day that makes a difference.” And so we did. Sometimes it was a big event, and sometimes it would be something with her husband, traveling. Sometimes she would host a coffee for teachers, for nurses, for caregivers. So sometimes it would be a little thing and sometimes it would be a really big thing, and some things would be spontaneous. It was a lot of fun.

Riley: Let me ask you—My memory on this is a little fuzzy and I haven’t gone back to look at it, but my recollection is that she had a very low profile during the period when President Bush was Vice President.

Becker: She did.

Riley: A lot of Americans had no idea who she was, what she looked like.

Becker: Right.

Riley: During the Republican Convention, I remember hearing people say that there’s a secret weapon that the American people don’t know about, which is Barbara Bush.

Becker: Right, because they fell in love with her.

Riley: Can you talk a little bit about moving from the low profile to—

Becker: Well, I think her low profile was by design. Most Vice Presidents’ wives have pretty low profiles though. I know she definitely felt she should, because Nancy Reagan was First Lady. It’s when she got started in literacy—I wasn’t there then, so this isn’t an eyewitness report but I’m pretty sure this is right. It’s when she started her literacy project that she became very well known, certainly in literacy circles in this country. Outside of the literacy circles, you’re absolutely right, she would not be well known. And she traveled with him. She went on almost all his foreign trips and he set a record for foreign travel. There was the famous line Jim Baker said, “You die, I fly,” because he went to so many funerals.

As a reporter covering the ’88 convention—I remember this really well. She burst onto the national scene. Her speech brought the house down. And there was this wonderful cover of her on TIME magazine—I actually have it framed, hanging in my office—after the election. It’s a beautiful picture of her and says, “The Silver Fox,” which was President Bush’s nickname for her. She rose to instant stardom, because she was funny and down to earth, had a very quick wit. People just love her. She was a very popular First Lady.

Riley: You said that they traveled together a lot. Tell me a little bit about the relationship between the two people and the extent to which they’re reliant on one another, or maybe how they complement one another. How are they different and how are they alike?
**Becker**: Oh, my gosh. I have felt for years that one of the great, untold stories about George and Barbara Bush is their love story. They are just amazing. They’ve been married now 66 years, the longest of any President and First Lady. I did some research on that when they celebrated their 65th. I figured they would be the longest because they got married when they were 19 and 20. Jimmy [Carter] and Rosalynn [Carter] are behind them by about five years, I think.

**Riley**: Is that right?

**Becker**: I think so. They’re next. They’re just great partners and they’re at such a good time of their life now. I love how much they enjoy each other’s company, whether it’s watching TV or reading. He likes when she goes with him. They’re sort of yin and yang.

**Riley**: A good sense of humor for both of them?

**Becker**: They both have great senses of humor.

**Riley**: Is it the same kind of humor?

**Becker**: No. Mrs. Bush is the queen of the quips, and President Bush has a very subtle, dry humor. He loves to tease her. This is such a silly thing to tell you: It was post-Presidency but it was a long time ago. We were working on her book, so it was 1993 or ’94. We were in a room together at the house, going over the book, and she heard him come in and she went over to a mirror and pinched her cheeks. I just loved that, Russell. By that time, they’d been married 50 years, I think. And we were here. Everybody’s very casual here. President Bush looks like a homeless person most of the time here. I don’t even think she knew she did it. It was just instinct, that she just went and pinched her cheeks and sort of did that.

**Riley**: Fussed with her hair?

**Becker**: Oh, my God, every married couple should be like that.

**Riley**: Exactly.

**Becker**: It was really cute. Theirs is a great love story. When one of them is sick, the other one is just—and they both have had some major health issues in the last five years. There’s this wonderful press conference of President Bush—the Today Show did a really nice piece after this. Mrs. Bush had open heart surgery a couple of years ago and the press was just going wild, so I talked President Bush into doing a press conference with her doctors at Methodist in Houston. I just wanted to get the press off my back. This was all about me. I said, “Please go out there and talk to them—please, oh please, oh please—so they’ll quit calling me.” Oh, my God, he sobbed through the whole thing and I felt so bad that I had asked him to do it. Really, it was so sweet and the Today Show did a really nice thing about their love story and how sweet it is. They’re pretty cute together.

**Riley**: There’s the piece of conventional wisdom that the younger President Bush, 43, is more like his mom than his dad. Do you think that’s the truth?
Becker: I think that’s true, yes. He’s a little more like his mother than his dad. The same kind of sense of humor, definitely.

Riley: The same kind of sense of humor. Anything else, in terms of traits or outlook on life or anything?

Becker: No, he’s an interesting combination of both his parents, like most kids are, but his sense of humor is definitely, dominantly, his mother.

Riley: So you had the experience of working in the First Lady’s office. Ninety-two must have been a disappointing year.

Becker: Yes, it was. It was hard, really hard. I knew, in the fall of ’92, that President Bush was going to lose, because it seemed that everywhere I went with the First Lady, the then-Governor Clinton had just been, or he was coming. You could just feel it coming. It was a very tough year. And going to the White House the day after the election was hard because they immediately started treating us like short-termers.

Riley: “They” being the staff or the press?

Becker: No. The day after the election, every time we left the White House, the Secret Service started searching our bags, to make sure we weren’t stealing things. I guess there had been a President in the past, after an election, where the staff would start carrying stuff home. It was really odd. You had to open your bag, and they would be so apologetic. The guys just felt horrible. You just immediately go into transition.

The President and First Lady came back from Houston and there was a big welcome home on the White House lawn. I just can’t imagine going through that if I were he. The entire White House was very morose. Then President Bush’s mother died right after the election.

Riley: I had forgotten that.

Becker: Yes. She died within a month of his losing the election, which was really hard for him. I’m trying to remember if the Christmas decorations were up yet. I don’t think so. I think we were still in November. We get this message one day that the President wants the entire White House staff in the East Room, because he has an announcement to make. Everybody was just, Oh, my God. The rumor was that he was going to resign early because he felt the country would be better off if he just got out. That makes no sense. It’s the dumbest rumor ever, but at the time we were like, Oh, my God. So we go to the East Room. Do you know what I’m about ready to tell you?

Riley: No.

Becker: Of course the East Wing—We were just stunned to be invited. It’s like, Oh, my God, even the East Wing. We all crowded into the East Room and everyone’s really nervous. There’s the typical announcement, “Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States of America.” And out walks Dana Carvey. He had called Dana Carvey. Dana Carvey is just hilarious. We’ve become great friends with him. Dana’s hilarious, talking about this. President
Bush decided—He could feel that people were just beyond sad, and he took it upon himself to break the tension, and he called Dana Carvey. Dana says when the White House Operator called him and said, “I have the President of the United States on the phone,” he thought it was a joke; he thought it was one of his friends playing a joke on him. Anyway, the President called him himself and said, “Dana, I need a favor.” And so Dana Carvey came. Oh, my gosh, he came out and started doing President Bush, and then President Bush came out and joined him, and they did it together. It was unbelievable, and that did it.

Riley: It got you through.

Becker: Yes. It’s like everyone just got over their bad self.

Riley: Had he taken—I don’t even know how to phrase the question. I can’t imagine he was terrifically happy with Carvey up until that point.

Becker: Let me just say for the record, I did not know him at the White House.

Riley: Being the President.

Becker: I did not know the President at all. No, I was way too low level.

Riley: Right.

Becker: I encountered him a couple of times but just in passing. I did not know him. If you had asked him about “Jean Becker in your wife’s press office,” he’d be like, “Huh?”

Riley: Gotcha, okay.

Becker: What President Bush says about Dana Carvey is—I think he was a fan. He felt he never crossed the line. He thought he was funny. He thought he never, ever, crossed the line of being inappropriate. A couple of years ago Dana Carvey came to Houston to do a charitable thing and we reached out to him. We knew he was coming, and President Bush did a drop-by at the charity event. Dana knew we were coming. I went. It was before dinner. Oh, my gosh, that charity—It was for a Boys and Girls Club thing. They should have gone around the room and made everybody give another thousand dollars, because it was just unbelievable. I don’t think we have it on tape. I was standing at the back of the room, and waiters were putting down their trays so they could clap. Dana comes out and starts doing his shtick and then you hear this voice of God say, “Now wait one minute.” Of course in Houston, in particular, everyone immediately recognized 41’s voice. He has that distinctive, reedy voice.

Riley: Sure.

Becker: He walked out and the place just went wild. They were very funny together.

Riley: When did the President go on Saturday Night Live? Was that after he had left office?

Becker: That was after—right. I was his chief of staff by then, which means that it had to be ’94 or later. That was really fun.
Riley: How did that work?

Becker: Well, they wanted him to come to New York to do it live, and he did not want to do that. He couldn’t imagine being up at 11:30 at night, for one thing. So he taped it, and you know who came to Houston to tape it with him was Al Franken.

Riley: No kidding?

Becker: Now Senator Franken.

Riley: He was one of the writers?

Becker: He was one of the writers.

Riley: Okay, so they wrote the script.

Becker: They wrote the script. And what they did—

Riley: They submit that to you for approval?

Becker: Yes, they did. We actually shot it in the library. There’s a place in the library where we have a continuous loop of—We call it our blooper tape. It’s really just funny things and that’s part of it. Dana’s hosting Saturday Night Live. He’s gone from the show by then so he’s the host this particular night, and he comes out and it’s sort of the same thing they’ve done now live a couple of times. He starts doing his George Bush shtick, and then they go to the video of President Bush saying, “Now wait one minute, Dana.” The crowd just died laughing.

Riley: I think I was watching it live.

Becker: It was so funny. It was really, really funny. I wish he’d gone, because I think he would have been really good, but he just had no interest of going to be on Saturday Night Live, even for Dana. But he did do the tape for him.

Riley: After you leave office, then you become—There was one other question I wanted to ask you about that period. You knew Mrs. Bush really well.

Becker: Really well.

Riley: What are the difficulties of being a loving spouse and a First Lady in a brutal campaign season? I would think that serving as a First Lady in any circumstance would sometimes be difficult, because the arrows are always incoming. I can remember reading the material on President Bush, saying that it was in many ways more difficult for him when the arrows were being shot at his son than they were coming into him.

Becker: Absolutely. You know, having traveled with Mrs. Bush in the whole fall of ’92, what amazed me was—Of course the President’s the same way, but I’ll just talk about her, since I was with her—how you have to go out every single day and smile and shake hands and be up;
whereas, for most people going through something like that, the inclination is to stay home and pull the covers over your head.

**Riley:** Sure.

**Becker:** You just want to lock the doors and turn off TV and eat ice cream and watch junk television.

**Riley:** Or come to Walker’s Point and watch the waves roll in.

**Becker:** Right, that’s everyone’s—I don’t know about you, but when I have a really bad day at work, I love it when I can go home and just veg out and watch a *Law & Order* marathon. You don’t have that option when you’re President and First Lady. You have to constantly keep going out there, and that’s the thing that I’m still in awe of with them. You just dig deep and you get out there and you carry on.

Despite the fact that I work for a very public family, I would hate to be a celebrity. That is one of the things I will take away from this job: I would hate to be famous. I’m always amazed at these people who desperately seek fame. I’m like, *Really?* I do think it’s part of your makeup. But particularly when you’re going through something like 1992, the ability to pretend with every single person they meet, that, “I’m just thrilled to meet you. I’m just thrilled to be here.” I do think they believe it sometimes. It energizes them.

**Riley:** Did you ever sense from Mrs. Bush any frustration with the support network with her husband?

**Becker:** No.

**Riley:** In the interviews, frankly, we get a fair number of people—I want to be clear: It’s not people directing criticism at others; it’s people being self-critical, saying, “We served the President terribly in 1992.”

**Becker:** I know there’s a lot of angst over that. But no, I don’t ever remember her talking about it. I would say her angst was all directed at Ross Perot, much more so than Bill Clinton. The Bushes are very pragmatic when it comes to politics, and people who are so surprised by their friendship with President Clinton—Honestly, this group in Washington could take a page out of their playbook, that politics shouldn’t be personal; it should be about the issues. What Bill and Hillary Clinton were doing was what they were supposed to be doing: they’re running for President. Mrs. Bush’s angst was directed at Ross Perot, and most Bush people would tell you that 41 very likely would have won the election in 1992 if Perot had not been running.

**Riley:** I agree with them.

**Becker:** You never know, but assuming—Anyway, I do remember a lot of Perot angst, but angst directed at the 41 team? No, not at all.

**Riley:** Had they known the Perots?
Becker: Oh, yes. Ross Perot offered him a job. Has anyone told you—? President Bush thinks he knows how he got off on the wrong foot with Ross Perot.

Riley: I’m not sure whether I heard it or not.

Becker: Do you know the story?

Riley: No, tell the story.

Becker: They knew the Perots well in Texas, and Ross Perot offered him a job, probably after CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], because when he left the CIA, they moved back to Houston for the first time in a long time, permanently, and Perot offered him a job, which he turned down. He didn’t have any interest in doing that. But he felt they were still on very good terms.

When [Ronald] Reagan was President, Ross Perot got very involved in the whole POW/MIA [prisoner of war/missing in action] issue in Vietnam. I’m just telling you this from memory, but this is 99 percent. I might get one little thing wrong. The Reagan administration felt that he was not helping. They felt they were making huge progress on the issue with Vietnam, behind the scenes, quietly, and they never thought there were POWs there. No one thought that. Ross Perot did. But there were a lot of MIA issues, and they wanted to recover bodies.

Ross Perot was trying to send missions into Vietnam to recover people, and the Reagan administration wanted him to stop, because it was, they felt, insane. They were in a meeting talking about this, and the Vice President said, “I will talk to him. I know him well. He’s a friend. I’ll do this.” President Bush said that was it. He was livid. President Bush said, “I think that was the turning point.” He personally and viscerally hated him after that. That’s his theory.

Riley: I’ve heard this, but I’m not sure through what channels they were.

Becker: Well, this is secondhand. This is what President Bush told me in a conversation. Again, who knows? But I don’t remember him ever complaining.

Riley: You used the word “angst.” They were angry with him for the challenge?

Becker: I think they knew that his presence in the race—[Albert, Jr.] Al Gore could probably say the same thing about Ralph Nader in 2000, although the percentage of vote he got was miniscule. The race was miniscule.

Riley: It was enough. Exactly.

Becker: It was just like, Why is he doing this? He’s not going to win. Quite frankly, I never understood the Bushes’ continued friendship with Larry King after that, because Ross Perot was a creation of Larry King. His entire campaign was on the Larry King Show. He was on Larry King at least two or three times a month.

Riley: Did he announce he was going to run?

Becker: Yes, my gosh.
Riley: Then he announced he wouldn’t run.

Becker: Honestly, I don’t remember this. I was traveling so much myself. I don’t even know how much campaigning he did. I think he mainly went on the *Larry King Show*.

Riley: Which was enough.

Becker: Which was enough, yes. I don’t remember her ever expressing anger at the campaign. She was an absolute tireless campaigner. I spent the entire fall in Pennsylvania and Ohio. I mean, once in a while I would go somewhere else, but I almost lived in Pennsylvania and Ohio in September and October.

Riley: But Mrs. Bush was elsewhere.

Becker: She was all over the country.

Riley: So they left you behind to do this. You were on a leave of absence—

Becker: I didn’t travel with her. I would see her probably three or four times a week, but she would leave me and go somewhere else, and I would go probably to two—We hired two extra people that year. I probably saw her every fourth or fifth campaign stop.

Riley: She was coming into the states that you were working in?

Becker: Right.

Riley: And you were on a leave of absence from the White House at that time?

Becker: Yes.

Riley: We come to January of ’93 and the new President is inaugurated. At that point do you go to work for Mrs. Bush on the book?

Becker: On the book, right. I went to Houston. She asked me to come to Houston to help her on her book, and I said yes, I would be happy to do that.

Riley: So you went to Houston.

Becker: Right. It took us about a year. She wrote the book.

Riley: How was the decompression from the White House? Was it sadness or relief?

Becker: No, no. Sadness? President Bush is amazing. He came to the office every day. I was slowly beginning to know him. I sat at a card table in his kitchen, so I mainly got to know him when he would come make his coffee.

Riley: That’s where your office was?
Becker: Yes, I did not have an office. I was sort of a stepchild in the office, so they set up a little card table in his kitchen.

Riley: At the office, or in the residence?

Becker: At the office in Houston. It was tough. I’ll never forget—His dog Ranger died of cancer some time that winter of ’93.

Riley: Oh, gosh.

Becker: And then—this had to be that summer—his boat crashed on the rocks up here during a big storm. It broke off his mooring. It would have been moored right here, and it broke off in a big storm.

Riley: Is that his boat that’s out the window?

Becker: That’s his boat, yes. That’s Fidelity V, which he took out yesterday. It was after the boat crashed on the rocks and we were up here, he said to me, “I lost the election, my mother died, my dog died, and my boat crashed. There’s not much else left that can happen to me this year.”

You could watch them going through trying to figure out life, just trying to figure out a new rhythm. It was hard, you know, trying to figure out, What am I going to do? I think that whole first year was a journey of trying to figure out what to do. They began to build the library, and he started giving speeches, but he really didn’t get involved in too much until about the time I became chief of staff.

Riley: Which was again?

Becker: March of ’94.

Riley: What personal reserves does the man draw on as he’s trying to deal with all of these things?

Becker: I told him once that when he died, we should dissect him and try to figure out what makes him tick. I don’t know, Russell. It’s faith, definitely faith for them, and just unbelievable strength. I don’t know where that comes from. I think it comes from a life’s worth of experiences. I do know that President Bush has talked about it in the past, how all sorts of things get you ready for something like that: certainly World War II, certainly Robin [Pauline Robinson Bush] dying. The hugest—he basically got fired by the American people, and you have no choice but to carry on and you just do.

Riley: You mentioned faith. He’s not somebody who wears his faith on his sleeve.

Becker: Well, I love that they call Episcopalians “the frozen chosen.” I love that term. But absolutely, their faith is so strong. I remember, a day or two after the election, or the day they got back—they were in Houston on election night—Barbara Bush had a coffee for her staff. She said, “Okay, this is what we need to accomplish before we leave.” They just move on. Again, I wasn’t there with him, but from what I’ve heard, he was the same way. “Here’s our to-do list.
We’re going to do an orderly and honorable transition.” We were all under orders to do everything we could for the Clinton people, and we spent hours—even I spent hours with Hillary’s incoming staff. The President said, “Do everything. Go out of your way.”

You know, they’re just so goal-oriented. You don’t wallow. I’ve learned so much about handling life from being around them. The 2000 election, and to some extent during 2004—I’m jumping ahead a little bit—was really hard for President Bush. He would sit in my office and agonize over what Al Gore was saying or what John Kerry was saying and what the polls were saying. He even shed a tear a couple of times. He was so stressed out and worried and anxious. But that would last about five minutes and then it’s done. He’s really good at compartmentalizing. He would get it out and maybe even cry, and then it’s like, “Do you want to go on the boat for lunch?” I love that. You don’t wallow. They’re not wallowers. You just move on. It might be a generational thing.

Riley: Maybe.

Becker: I think the baby boomers wallow a little more. Are you a baby boomer? How old are you?

Riley: I’m right at the tail end.

Becker: I bet you’re right at the line. What year were you born?

Riley: Fifty-eight.

Becker: Oh yes, you’re a baby boomer.

Riley: Then my wife’s at the tail end of it.

Becker: Yes, you are. We’re wallowers.

Riley: I wallow; it’s true. Certainly I don’t have the experience that he had in World War II.

Becker: I think all that helps. It builds character.

Riley: Yes, I think so. You mentioned Robin. Does he talk about Robin still?

Becker: Robin will come up sporadically. They’ve had this huge involvement with cancer, post- Presidency, and certainly Robin’s been a big part of that. I talked President Bush into—This crew in California has done a documentary about him that we saw for the first time last week. I’m not sure this documentary will ever see the light of day. It’s wonderful; it’s fabulous. They did an outstanding job.

Riley: It’s done by or for whom, the documentary?

Becker: It’s this independent filmmaker we met.

Riley: A filmmaker, okay, so it’s not PBS.
Becker: No. He’s an independent filmmaker we met through a project he was doing about the Apollo space missions, and he decided he wanted his next subject to be President Bush, and I talked President Bush into cooperating. I can’t believe I talked him into that. They’re done and we saw it last week, and they’re now going to try to sell it. I just don’t know if there’s a market for a documentary on a former President, though, in this country.

Riley: I suspect there is.

Becker: I hope so.

Riley: It depends on which market. I mean the History channel or somebody.

Becker: I know, but they have bigger ideas than that. I think they’re pie in the sky. Anyway, there was a lot about Robin in that documentary and, oh my God, he just cried through the whole thing.

Riley: Two points on that: One is the gravesite in Texas. When you first encounter that, it is moving.

Becker: They moved her, once her gravesite was complete. She was buried next to his parents in Greenwich. That’s where she was buried, and then when their gravesite was completed, they had her moved to Texas.

Riley: Were you around for the discussions about that?

Becker: I was. It was sort of automatic. It wasn’t a big decision. They just said, “We need to move Robin.”

Riley: But there was a decision that they were going to be buried.

Becker: That was a huge discussion. I was around for that, because they actually thought about being buried here.

Riley: Of course.

Becker: They actually own two burial plots here, at the church cemetery here in town.

Riley: There’s a stone church?

Becker: Saint Ann’s down here, which you went right by.

Riley: Right.

Becker: There’s no cemetery there. That’s their summer church.

Riley: Then there’s a congregational church in town.

Becker: Right, which they go to in the spring and fall. Saint Ann’s is only open from June until Labor Day.
Riley: The inn that I’m staying at—

Becker: Kennebunkport Inn.

Riley: I guess it is right next to—

Becker: No, that is not the church they go to. That is a little ways out of town. It’s a little further out.

Riley: In this direction?

Becker: No. You would not have come in on that road. It would be like if you went to Portland.

Riley: In any event, they have two plots there.

Becker: Right. I think they have sold them now, but they were thinking about being buried here, and what changed their minds was Richard Nixon’s funeral. They went to Richard Nixon’s funeral and it was after that funeral that we had a huge discussion about it.

Riley: Nixon’s funeral was in—?

Becker: It was at his library, and he was buried right there, and that sort of made an impression on them. I definitely was an advocate for their being buried at the library, too, because I’ve been to a lot of Presidential gravesites and it leaves an impression upon you. I just felt that is where—and I also thought they should be buried in Texas. At the end of the day, they decided, “You’re absolutely right; we need to be buried in Texas.” As much as they love it here, most of their life was in Texas, and so they decided to be buried there.

Riley: And the spot itself had been designated, once you were through negotiating that was a place where you thought that they would go?

Becker: They picked that spot out, I think. I call it “over the river and through the woods,” because you walk, and there’s a little creek.

Riley: You don’t know that it’s there.

Becker: You don’t know that it’s there.

Riley: When I made my first trip there—I think it was to go to a conference at the Bush School, for something completely apart from it, and I was out stretching my legs one day—

Becker: And you just came across it.

Riley: I came across it and it took my breath away.

Becker: Yes. Because it’s just there, waiting. When they’re buried there, there will be a sign at the library, directing people there. Years ago, President Bush—It’s amazing to me how much work goes into these Presidential funerals. That whole bottom drawer is my funeral file. Even the
media. The media already can tell you who the pool cameras will be when he dies, because they take turns. They’ve already decided who is the pool for the different venues for his funeral.

*Fox News* is the pool for the gravesite. They called and they wanted to come and do a walkthrough. They just wanted to get ready ahead of time. I was telling President Bush and I said, “This is sort of curious: *Fox* wants to do a walkthrough of your gravesite today.” He said, “What would you pay me if I went and laid on top? Wouldn’t that be funny if they got out there and I’m lying there on the ground?” I said, “I don’t think so.” Of course for the funeral, the military team practice all the time, every time a new hierarchy comes in, so they always notify me when they’re going to be doing a drill.

About five years ago, they were going to practice at Saint Martin’s in Houston. He’ll lie in state at Saint Martin’s during the night, and they were going to practice that, and President Bush said, “Should we go and sit in the back of the church? Wouldn’t it be sort of fun?” I said, “No, we’re not going to go.”

**Riley:** I guess this gallows humor must be—what?

**Becker:** He’s just so comfortable with it. He’s just really comfortable with it. We talk about his funeral, not a lot, but we’ve worked on it a lot, and I actually hope to finish it this summer. I have lots of nuts and bolts.

**Riley:** Finish it? Careful, watch your language.

**Becker:** The planning of it, because the big—I want to finish the nuts and bolts.

**Riley:** So that’s your big project.

**Becker:** It is, every time I think about it. The plan’s in place but here’s the kind of stuff I have to do. Boy, I get why you have to do it, because once it happens, you don’t have time for anything. I have to manifest Air Force One, who gets on that plane.

**Riley:** Who gets on the plane, and that changes, right?

**Becker:** It’s a big problem because his family is so big. I already know I don’t have enough seats for everybody. I have to seat the National Cathedral, which is just going to be a nightmare, really a nightmare. And I’ve walked through it.

**Riley:** So you know how many seats you’ve got.

**Becker:** I know exactly how many seats I have.

**Riley:** And you’ve got to have everybody in a specific seat, or do you just have numbers?

**Becker:** It’s up to me, but we don’t have room for everybody there, either, because all of Congress gets invited, the entire Diplomatic Corps gets invited. We just have to figure this out. I need to seat it, to figure out how much space I have. It’s just that this family is so big.
Riley: When did you begin planning this?

Becker: I began in earnest probably five years ago. You sort of piddle at it. They all come meet with the President and First Lady, and they do that when they’re still—there’s a person in charge of military funerals who’s connected with the Pentagon. When you’re President, they want you to have a plan. About once every five years they would show up. Now they want me and Jimmy Carter to be done. “You need to finish this, Jean.” I get the emails from a very nice man named Mike Wagner. Because once it happens—

Riley: You’ve got no time to think.

Becker: You don’t have any time to think. You just have to execute. There’s no time to plan; you just have to execute.

Riley: And you’re dealing with grief also.

Becker: That’s right. I carry, on the back of my driver’s license, Mike Wagner’s phone number, his assistant’s phone number, because Mike says you probably have one hour, from the minute he dies until the press finds out, and you’ve just got to make the most of that hour to try to notify the people you want notified. You don’t have time, so I carry his numbers with me everywhere.

Riley: Is there a press person on site here all the time?

Becker: No.

Riley: So you’re off the radar now, off the immediate radar.

Becker: Right.

Riley: But once the notices are issued—I’m not going to ask you to reveal particulars of this, but would you call the family first, and then the President, or is there a phone tree?

Becker: I’d call Mike Wagner first.

Riley: You’d call Mike Wagner first?

Becker: Absolutely. Everything is based on assuming Mrs. Bush is alive and assuming that I am with her. I probably would call Mike Wagner first, believe it or not. Then, depending on what she wants me to do—Is she going to call the five kids or does she want me to call the five kids? As of right now, she will call the five kids. I would call Mike Wagner and then I’d call Jim McGrath, who is President Bush’s speechwriter and our press person. Jim is really a huge part of my plan.

Riley: Then he does the public notice?

Becker: And then we have a phone tree. Yes, he does the public notice. And then I call one member of our staff, who then calls everybody else. It’s like a phone tree.
Riley: In doing this, is there a template that you—I’m guessing Mike Wagner has done this before.

Becker: There’s a template.

Riley: Have you had conversations with President Carter’s staff about comparing notes?

Becker: No. I have talked to President [Gerald R.] Ford’s and President Reagan’s Chief of Staff, after the fact, and they have been enormously helpful. Like most things, they’re mainly helpful on what didn’t work: “Here’s what we would do differently.” They both kindly wrote voluminous emails, memos for me.

Riley: After it was over.

Becker: Yes, after it was over, which has all been very helpful. And Mike is extremely helpful. He runs it, but there are certain things I have to do that he can’t do, decisions to be made.

Riley: I see. We’ve sort of gotten off on this.

Becker: Yes, we totally got off on this.

Riley: Well, that’s fine.

Becker: I don’t remember what we were talking about.

Riley: I do, fortunately. That’s a skill that I’ve had to develop over time—figuring out when we’re chasing rabbits and when to go back. We never really dealt much with your working with Mrs. Bush on her book, and that merits some—You’re okay to continue?

Becker: Sure.

Riley: All right. We left you at the kitchen table.

Becker: I got to Houston about a month after they did. I needed time to pack up in D.C. and move to Houston and all that. When I got to Houston, she was hilarious. She was waking up every morning and just writing what she felt about. She would have a chapter, or sometimes more of an essay than a chapter—I remember one of them was about Sam Donaldson; it was that random. I can’t remember what the others were about, but I know one was about Sam Donaldson.

Riley: She didn’t have a thing for Sam Donaldson, I’m thinking.

Becker: No. So the editor in New York, Lisa Drew, was absolutely panicked, and Lisa told me the first thing I needed to do was to bring structure to this project. I had never done a book, either, but I did an outline for her and we wrote it chronologically. I said, “You can get up and write what you feel like, absolutely. If you feel inspired to write about San Donaldson, write it down, but you need to start at the beginning.” She was a big diary-keeper her whole life.

Riley: No kidding.
**Becker:** She kept a diary her whole life. She actually gave me the diaries, and my job was to read the diaries. She was reading them too, but she let me read them and pull out what I thought we needed for the book. That was my first job, to start reading her diaries, which was really overwhelming.

**Riley:** Overwhelming because of the volume or because of what you’re finding out about the person?

**Becker:** The volume. Both, probably. Her diaries are wonderful.

**Riley:** How far did they go back?

**Becker:** Religiously, starting with when they lived in China.

**Riley:** So it’s at the time when they’re trying to have a public life.

**Becker:** A public life. There was some earlier stuff but it was pretty sporadic and tended to be more about baseball games and PTA [Parent Teacher Association]. They reminded me of my mom’s diaries: not much color or insight, just sort of, “Went to the kids’ baseball games; they lost. Came home, did a little laundry, went to bed.” That kind of stuff. But starting with China, she wrote voluminously almost every day. I think she started in China for that reason, because it was such an unbelievable experience. So I read the diaries.

**Riley:** One other interruption: You’re a journalist, somebody who’s trained to observe and account. Did you find that she had a good eye for what she was doing?

**Becker:** An unbelievable eye. She’s a great writer. They’re both really good writers. Both of the Bushes are great writers. A very good eye, and she would say absolutely everything in her diary. Her diaries will be open to the public 50 years after she dies, and there’s a reason for that.

**Riley:** I’m sure. I’m disappointed I won’t be able to see them.

**Becker:** I know. His diaries, we have already turned over to Jon Meacham. He only kept a diary V.P. and White House, very sporadic. They’re wonderful though, wonderful. We’ve given them to Jon Meacham, who’s doing his biography. Also, we’ll do a book just on the diaries that will be published after he dies.

So my job was to read them and pull out sections that I felt would be great for the book. Sometimes we would literally just republish what she wrote at the time, and others we would use for inspiration. We need to write about this incident. I would copy or mark in the diary what I wanted her to see, and she would do the writing and after she wrote a chapter, I would edit it. I was her editor, which was very interesting. I did both of her books.

**Riley:** How so?

**Becker:** Well, it’s tough to edit your boss. We would spend hours arguing, particularly on the second one. The second one was actually harder but my *USA Today* training came in really well. Lisa Drew, our editor in New York, gave us sort of a framework for the chapters. She didn’t
want any more than, I’m going to say 40 double-spaced pages, and Barbara Bush would sometimes give me 80, so it was my job to go through and tell her, “I think we can cut this, this, and this.” “This was actually in chapter two. This is repetitive.” “This isn’t interesting.” I edited behind her and did all the footnotes. I was the footnoter and fact-checker. I learned to hate footnotes. I’m the one who would initially—I learned a lot. In the beginning, Lisa would send it back marked up: “You need to footnote this, you need to footnote this, you need to footnote this.” Eventually, I caught on to what had to be footnoted, explaining people, places, or events in a footnote.

Riley: Right.

Becker: I had never footnoted in my life. Newspaper reporters don’t footnote, but I actually became quite good at it. I hate them. Anyway, that’s what I did.

Riley: Well, as scholars, we live by footnotes. So you do that, and then she’s happy with the end product?

Becker: Yes, and it was a huge bestseller. We finally got it done and knew the book by heart, and then she did a sequel ten years later and I did the same thing with that book, except I was her husband’s chief of staff at the time. That was really hard. I was really busy during that time period.

Riley: Because the workload was so great?

Becker: Oh, my God, yes. That was really tough.

Riley: You said that you finished the book in—

Becker: In a year. In ’94. I don’t know why I remember this, but we turned it in by March 1, 1994. It took us exactly one year. I took two weeks off and came back and started being his acting chief of staff.

Riley: When you were writing the book, did you go back and read other First Lady’s memoirs or Presidential memoirs?

Becker: I did, yes.

Riley: Did you find any of them particularly helpful, where you think, Oh, this is great?

Becker: I don’t remember, but I read Nancy Reagan’s and I read Betty Ford’s. I can’t remember, I think that’s maybe it.

Riley: During this period of time, President Bush was keeping a pretty low profile.

Becker: A pretty low profile. He had started giving speeches, but I would say he was still pretty low profile during that time period.

Riley: Already, I’m sure, there must have been Presidential library stuff going on.
**Becker:** A lot of Presidential library going on. I was on the periphery of all that, but a lot of planning for the library, exactly.

**Riley:** What’s big on the agenda when you finally come over and formally take the chief of staff job for a few weeks, until he can find somebody?

**Becker:** Still working on his library. His library opened in ’97 and he was just then beginning to decide to get involved in certain groups. The first one I remember is the Eisenhower Fellowship Foundation in Philadelphia. Actually, when I was brainstorming, I looked up to see when he first started doing that. It was in ’93, so he did that before I came onboard. That was his first outside involvement. He was doing a lot of paid speaking, or as he calls it, “white-collar crime.” When I became his chief of staff, there was the first midterm election. I remember he really struggled with trying to figure out how active to be in politics. He really didn’t want to do anything, but candidates were begging him to come campaign for them.

**Riley:** That’s the Contract [with America] year, right? In 1994.

**Becker:** Yes. That was probably one of the biggest things on our agenda, to try to figure out the rhythm of that. And both George and Jeb ran for Governor that year, which was huge. That was huge.

**Riley:** So that’s the beginning of their political careers.

**Becker:** I would say that politics was huge that year, and they campaigned a ton for George and Jeb, a ton. They devoted themselves to those two campaigns.

**Riley:** Was it hard for him to figure out how to calibrate his participation in those races?

**Becker:** He basically did everything they asked.

**Riley:** So it was up and down.

**Becker:** Yes, it was madness.

**Riley:** Whatever they wanted to do.

**Becker:** It was more the other candidates. What happened in the fall—He ended up doing more than he intended to, but he still had a lot of friends in office, and what he tended to do was to campaign for his friends.

**Riley:** So the struggle is the proper role for a former President to play in politics?

**Becker:** Yes. Plus, he had just lost the election. You know, there was a little bit of that, not with his sons, but at first President Bush wasn’t sure how helpful he could be. Now wait a minute. I’ll tell you, what he did more than anything was fundraise, as opposed to campaign rallies, which he has never done since leaving office, for other candidates. He felt the way he could help these candidates most was to help them raise money, so he did a ton of fundraising.
Riley: And is this working the telephones, or doing events?

Becker: Doing events but not doing telephone at all—attending fundraising events.

Riley: I want to get you to comment on this more generally, and I’ll tell you when it came to my attention. I went to Dallas to talk with people about the 43 project that’s now ongoing, and was invited by Mark Langdale to go to dinner with some fundraisers, President Bush 43, and Laura, which was a fascinating evening, a very small dinner in Dallas. One of the things that occurred to me during the course of dinner was, I’m sitting there with a man who has spent a good part of his adult life thinking about politics and being very actively engaged in Republican Party politics, and was at the pinnacle of the world as a political actor, the leader of the free world. And then the curtain drops on that and here’s a man who has to reinvent himself, not just in taking a different role, but it is almost as though that which he was best at, he no longer is seen to be—It would be inappropriate for him to continue doing what—

Becker: Are you talking about 43?

Riley: I’m talking about 43. What I’m saying is, having witnessed this, it has alerted me to the existence of a universal question for former Presidents, or a universal problem, which is that they’re almost by definition the best political actor in the universe, and then the next day, they’re cut off from that. How do they reconcile all of this?

Becker: I think it’s really hard. That first year out, it’s like you almost have to reinvent yourself. I hate that word though, because there’s something sort of phony about it. Maybe rediscover yourself. And it’s obviously harder when you’ve lost the election, because you really lose your bearings, particularly when it comes to politics. I didn’t know anything about politics. This is where I’m thinking, Oh my God, I’m not the right person to be chief of staff for you, because I had no judgment on any of this. Ron Kaufman, who was one of his top political advisors, who I’m sure you interviewed—

Riley: Sure.

Becker: Ron became a huge—I brought Ron in. Ron basically was his advisor in ’94, not me, because I didn’t know anything, but I was there at the table learning a lot. President Bush’s concern was that all of these candidates wanted him to help, and he’s like, “Really? Are you sure about that? I just lost the election. Remember? I lost.” But by that time, now he’s an absolute iconic figure in the country, in the party—almost more in the country than the party.

Riley: I think so.

Becker: But he wasn’t there yet.

Riley: No, not in ’94. It’s too close.

Becker: It was too close. His compromise was to go campaign for friends, and to raise money among the party loyalists. They would still pay a thousand dollars or twenty-five hundred dollars, whatever it was, to come get their photo taken. So we decided that’s how he could help.
Riley: But I was struck by the phrase you used, that he lost his bearings.

Becker: I think you lose your bearings.

Riley: It’s striking because from the outside you think, okay, this person can’t go campaign because everybody around them views them as radioactive. But what you’re suggesting actually is consistent with what I was picking up from this dinnertime event, although more so in this case, because of the loss. You’re knocked off your feet by a loss and you don’t have anything to compensate for that, to give you the confidence that your political judgment is sound in a way that you thought before.

Becker: That’s right, that’s exactly right. And I’m sure there are other examples of where your life is one thing one day and then the next day it’s totally different. I don’t think there are many others, though, particularly when you bring in the Commander-in-Chief aspect of it, that one day you’re Commander-in-Chief and the next day you’re not. It’s like, “Okay, sir, we need that football. Wait, give it back.” You know, you really do go from being the center of the universe to not so much.

Riley: Again, to further the point that you were making, if you’re Commander in Chief—my guess is that almost nobody questioned President Bush’s dominating grasp of foreign policy.

Becker: Right.

Riley: I can’t imagine that there would have been anybody who would have questioned the value of Bill Clinton picking up the phone and saying, “I’ve got a problem in Somalia,” or wherever. “I need you.” It’s the political side of it that you’re talking about.

Becker: The political side, right.

Riley: Having lost the election, there has to be, unless you just have an inhuman gyroscope inside that rights you after a kind of electoral repudiation, you have to lose your bearings, as you say.

Becker: You lose your bearings, and I watched him find them again. I don’t think, at the time, I knew what I was watching, but looking back, I do. I wish I could relive—I really don’t want to relive it. I remember that those of us who were in Maine that summer, after it was all over, we decided we should have had tee-shirts made, “I survived the summer of ’93.” I think we decided that the day the boat crashed. You’re watching someone—again, I hate this term—“reinvent” himself, but that’s really what he’s doing. It’s like, Okay, well, what do I do now?

Riley: But you said re-find yourself.

Becker: Or rediscover.

Riley: Rediscover was your word.

Becker: That’s more accurate because it’s not like they wanted to become a different person. It’s just that they had to figure out, where do we go from here?
Riley: Although that limits the point that we were just talking about, the loss of bearings. So in ’94 he’s becoming politically active again.

Becker: Right. Well, his sons’ running made it mandatory, and he wanted to be a part of that. The other people—I think he was surprised by how in-demand he was. He was still the leader of the party. He didn’t consider himself that but, de facto, he was. It wasn’t Gerald Ford, and—I don’t know if Reagan had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s by then.

Riley: I think so, by that time.

Becker: That was pretty early on. I would say that politics dominated my first year of being chief of staff, for that reason.

Riley: Two questions on things that you just raised: One was about Reagan himself. Did the President ever talk about his time as Vice President with Reagan, with you?

Becker: Yes. And actually a lot, recently, because Ronald Reagan’s 100th birthday is this year, and I talked him into doing a couple of interviews. He’s sort of done with interviews, but he did one with my good friend Judy Keen at USA Today, which I felt a little guilty about, but I knew Judy would be perfect, and she was great. Then he did a TV one with Greta Van Susteren.

He loved Ronald Reagan. He said he was a wonderful man, and they were very close. They had a very close relationship, and a great partnership. It was like the Ross Perot story I told you. President Bush did a lot for President Reagan that I don’t think a lot of us know. Boyden Gray is very articulate on this subject. I’m sure if he dragged you into—Boyden’s always obsessed with the fact that 41 is really the one who negotiated Germany’s having some missile program that was key at the time. Boyden is obsessed with that.

Riley: Getting the Germans to accept the missiles.

Becker: Getting the Germans to accept it, and how difficult it was. The Vice President took that on and said, “I will get this done.” I think they had a wonderful relationship. He went to see him after he was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s but before he totally disappeared from public sight, and it was tough, it was hard. He knew him, but President Bush said he was—we just talked about this in the interview with Judy. I remember he came home from the trip, and Mrs. Bush went with him. It was in his office in California, or wherever it was, and he took President Bush to the window and said, “Look, George, look at this gorgeous view I have of the Pacific Ocean.” Well, it was of downtown. President Bush said they were looking east; they weren’t even looking west. It was downtown. I can’t remember where his office was, but there were a bunch of buildings. President Bush didn’t argue with him. He didn’t say, “What? The ocean’s that way.” Anyway, they were very close.

Riley: The other question that I have to ask you again, because this is something that pops up in accounts of the President and the family, is the sense that everybody’s expectations were always that Jeb was going to be the one that was the rising political star of this generation.

Becker: Right.
Riley: And there was a certain amount of surprise, if you will, over the star of the other son rising. Does that comport with your recollections?

Becker: What you read and hear is a little exaggerated, definitely. A lot of that is because George W., by that time, was the managing partner of the Rangers, a job that he loved and excelled at. Everyone knew that Jeb had political ambitions.

Riley: Had political ambitions, okay.

Becker: And was going to run for Governor. It was his plan. George’s decision came later and surprised the hell out of everyone. So it wasn’t as much about who the two of them were, because you read that Jeb was the ordained one.

I love the Bushes, when they talk about that, because they used to get asked this a lot in interviews. People really think they sit around the table and decide, “Okay, you move to Florida to run for—” There was this ridiculous piece that came out in the New Republic, or something like that, that was just ridiculous, years ago, that was full of so many myths and out-and-out lies. One of the things in that article was that the Bushes, since the beginning of time, would determine where the kids would move: “Neil, you go to Denver, and Jeb, you go to Florida, and we will take over that state.” The Bushes would say, “Yes, we talked about baseball scores, and ‘Get your feet off the chair,’ but we never talked about any of this.”

I think that where that whole myth got started is that everyone knew Jeb was going to run for Governor, and then all of a sudden, George W. decided to run for Governor and everyone was really surprised because Jeb had been, not in training, but he had spent a couple of years laying the groundwork, while George W. ran a baseball team. And Ann Richards was very popular. Mrs. Bush constantly pokes fun at herself because she said to him, “You’re not going to win.” We all know what happened. He won, and Jeb didn’t.

Riley: Exactly.

Becker: Election night was tough; it was really tough.

Riley: You were there?

Becker: I was there. I’ve read and heard a lot about election night, and I think a lot of it is myth. The Bushes decided not to go either place; that was one agonizing decision. They decided to stay home.

Riley: Home being?

Becker: Houston. President Bush came to the office and Mrs. Bush was at the office, too. They both came and watched election returns there, and we were going to have a press conference that evening, which I ended up canceling. It was hard. They were overjoyed that George won. Do you have kids?

Riley: I do.
Becker: I don’t have kids, but I’ve been around parents enough to know that if one of your kids is hurting, that’s who you focus on. That’s what happened that night. Mrs. Bush eventually went home, and he was in his office for hours with the door closed. I remember at one point thinking, *Oh my God, I’d better go in there*. He was writing Jeb a letter. He wrote Jeb a letter. He wrote George W. a letter that night too, but the note to George is short. The note to Jeb is heart-wrenching.

Riley: Were those published? Were those in the book?

Becker: No, they’re not in the book, much to my dismay. There are no copies of them.

Riley: Because he wouldn’t let them go?

Becker: He put them in an envelope and sealed them and mailed them.

Riley: Oh, so you never saw them?

Becker: I never saw them. He’s told me about them, but I’ve never seen them. I know what he said to Jeb, though. He said, “I’ve been where you are. I want you to remember that I lost in 1964. It just happened to be exactly 30 years ago, and I went on to become President of the United States. This is not the end, this is the beginning.”

But you know, Russell, we’ve talked about this. Jeb of course went on to be a hugely successful, popular Governor of Florida. I think it was best if the two of their careers took a different track, because if they both had been elected, then they’re on the same time frame and one is the Governor of the second largest state; the other is the Governor—I think Florida’s the fourth largest state, believe it or not, population-wise. Then all of a sudden, it’s 2000 and it’s like, *Hm*mm. You know what? Life is weird. Jeb might disagree with this, but I think he was meant to lose that night.

Riley: You’ll have a chance to ask him before too long. There weren’t difficulties in the family, occasioned by these tensions?

Becker: No, there weren’t difficulties, and Jeb came to George W.’s inauguration. No. It’s just the way it was.

[RBREAK]

Riley: One of the big pieces of things that you were involved with was the library, and maybe the thing to do is just carve out some time now and talk about the process of developing the library and your role in that, and in particular the kinds of things that President Bush was involved with, big and small. Is it true that his decision to put the library at Texas A&M was done in a passing hallway conversation with people?
Becker: I would not know the answer to that. That was all way before my time. Did you talk to Jim Cicconi?

Riley: Yes.

Becker: As part of the oral history? Jim would know that better than I would.

Riley: I can’t remember whether we raised that with him or not.

Becker: Cicconi was a big part of the library. And George W. was, actually.

Riley: Is that right?

Becker: George W. was a big—Yes, he was definitely one of the—It was Cicconi and George W., and his lawyer, Terri Lacy. The decision was made before he left the White House, when I was out of sight and out of mind. I know the A&M decision was controversial in Houston, because Houston was dying to have it, and I think they were devastated. The decision was before my time.

Riley: By the time you came onboard, had all of the big decisions been made about the library?

Becker: Yes. All the big decisions had been made: where it was going to be, the design of it. What I got, the two big things for me—and this was sort of interesting because I wasn’t there during his Presidency—is I started having to sign off on all of the exhibits, as far as content, the wording. We outsourced all that. That was before “outsource” was even a popular term.

Riley: Right.

Becker: For example, I sent to Brent everything to do with foreign policy. I sent to probably Roger Porter everything to do with domestic policy. My biggest involvement was once the design was down and they started working on the exhibits and they would send me all these exhibits.

Riley: Right.

Becker: To watch the videos, review the photos, identify people in the captions. I learned a lot about President Bush, the man I was working for, in doing that. And then, planning for the opening of the library in 1997 was huge. It was our first big event that our office had done since he left office. That was a big deal; 1997 was an incredible year.

I’ll never forget, probably the year it opened—Don Wilson was the Archivist of the United States, and he’s the one who came to College Station to raise the money and build the library—the first time President Bush went through it, after some of the exhibits had been installed. I went through it with the Bushes, and Mrs. Bush did not come back to Houston with us. I don’t know if she left to go somewhere. She wasn’t with us. Through the whole exhibit—and this was still the time for him to make changes. Don wanted him to come and it was sort of now or never. If this doesn’t work, there was still time to make changes.
I will never forget this. He didn’t say a word to Don, and we get in the car and he said, “There were some things I didn’t like.” I said, “Okay, you were supposed to tell Don.” He said, “Well, I didn’t want to hurt his feelings.” I’m like, “Oh, my God,” so I get out a notebook. I still remember what they were, the three things: The color red in the China exhibit was wrong; that was not Chinese red. There was a very specific shade of red that is associated with China and this red was too pink. Okay. Some woman had given her elephant collection to the library, and in the part of the exhibit of when he was RNC [Republican National Committee] chairman, was a glass case with all of her elephants. There must have been a hundred elephants: glass ones, porcelain ones, ceramic ones. President Bush said, “I don’t even like elephants. Why do we have those elephants there?” I’m like, Get rid of elephant collection. And the third one was, it was too much about him. That was the one—Really? I said, “Okay, there’s a problem here. It is about you.” “Well,” he said, “I don’t know. There needs to be more Jim Baker and more Brent Scowcroft, and more team, team, team.” I’ll never forget it. It was just so him.

I would love to have a recording of the conversation with Don Wilson when I called him: The red? Easy. The elephants? He said, “Oh boy, okay. She’ll be crushed.” Don didn’t care, but he said, “Oh, my gosh, this woman’s going to be crushed.” And the third one—“Don, here’s the other one: It’s too much about him.” Don said, “What?” But you know what? They did replace some of the photos. There wasn’t a lot they could do, because it was a stupid complaint, because it’s the George Bush Presidential Library. But they did do more group photos.

Anyway, the run-up of the opening of the library, ’96 and ’97, was really intense, and getting ready for the event itself.

Riley: And the event itself was mostly yours to do?

Becker: Yes. I actually hired—working closely with Don Wilson, but our office really ended up doing the bulk of it, just because President Bush was so hands-on with it. It was huge, because all the Presidents came, the President came; 15 Governors came. We were shocked at how many Governors came. I remember 15 because President Bush decided we should do a reception just for them. John Major came. Brian Mulroney came. [Toshiki] Kaifu, from Japan, came. Lech Wałęsa came. It was exciting but it was a lot. It was a big deal.

Riley: And the protocol—did you have to have somebody to help you with the protocol stuff?

Becker: Yes. Protocol was tough. Don Wilson, for the most part, helped me, and the White House advance team was helpful, and then we brought in some of our old White House advance people to help, too. It was exciting. Something like 20,000 people came. That was the estimate. A lot of that was general public. Just wrangling the Bush family. Now I can do it in my sleep.

Actually, the groundbreaking of the library was my first big event. It was much smaller.

Riley: That would have been in ’95?

Becker: I think we broke ground in ’95, maybe ’94. It might have been the fall of ’94. The biggest mistake is I did it the week after Thanksgiving. We’ll never do that again. It was a huge mistake to do that. But by the time we commissioned the USS George H. W. Bush, I had figured this out. The funeral will be my last event and I’ll be very happy not to do any more. Having
been through George W.’s inaugurations, the opening of the library, then we reopened the library ten years later, the commissioning of the ship, “41@80,” which was huge, I’m done with big events.

Riley: You mentioned the reopening of the library.

Becker: Right.

Riley: I have a memory, and I can’t remember whether this is from talking with Clinton people or from Bush people, that one of the precipitating events there was his going to the Clinton Library.

Becker: I think so. What we were told—I don’t think we were sold a bill of goods, but we totally redid the library after ten years, I mean, part of it. Not totally. Parts of it were definitely intact. We were told by somebody—I can’t remember now who it was. Roman [Popadiuk] could tell you that. After the Clinton Library opening, our people—I didn’t actually go. I still haven’t been to the Clinton Library—were overwhelmed by the technology.

Riley: Right.

Becker: And after we did a little bit of scratching below the surface, the technology people told us the advances in technology in this time period were absolutely huge. One of my questions was—because once again, we start raising money and President Bush hates that—“Are we going to do this every ten years? You must be joking.” The answer that came back was, “No. You do have to reinvent yourself to stay fresh and to update, but technology-wise we may never see another decade like that, ever.” You can’t ever say ever.

Riley: That’s consistent with what I had heard, that they had gone through and the technical interactivity with exhibits was impressive.

Becker: We had—no pun intended—I was going to say “an elephant.” I really mean dinosaur. Our library was even more outdated than ten years, because the advances in technology had totally—so we just, not really started over, but we redid it.

Riley: Were you actively engaged in the new kinds of exhibits?

Becker: Very actively engaged in that. Much more actively engaged with that.

Riley: And this is something that President Bush himself was also attentive to or no?

Becker: No, he was opposed to the whole thing. At some point, President Bush—and I don’t know what it is and maybe he was always like that, but President Bush really got tired of talking about himself. I got it. You have to do it when you run for office. And at some point, he did decide that he was the most boring subject of all, and I did get it. It’s like, “I don’t blame you.” He’s told the same stories over and over and over again, and he’s just done. So when we redid the library, he was not thrilled. For the most part it didn’t involve him, because the story was there. We just needed to update how we told it. The truth is, we didn’t need him, and that’s what I told him: “You have nothing to do with this. We just want you to show up for the reopening.” It
really was the technological, and then we corrected some mistakes that we felt were—you know, you always learn if you can do it over again. Anyway, it was a big undertaking.

Riley: Well, I have to say that I went through the library the day of and the day before. It must have been the day before.

Becker: Were you there when it reopened?

Riley: No, I was not there for the reopening but I’ve seen it in its new iteration. I think it does a wonderful job of threading the needle.

Becker: I think it does too.

Riley: It is substantive for people who want substance, but it has the flash and the accessibility for people who are in from wherever and want to bring their kids through and see the story of the President in pictures and exhibits. It’s not an easy thing to do, to make it accessible and at the same time really informative for people who want more.

Becker: I think they did a remarkable job. I love the team. It was a California team that we hired. I say “we” hired. It was really Warren Finch and Patricia Burchfield. This was their baby. We became very close to them. They moved to College Station. We turned them into Texans. Anyway, it was fun.

Riley: How hard was it to find the airplane? You got an airplane. It’s not the same one.

Becker: Oh, from World War II. Again, I wasn’t part of this, but this is what I think I know: His best friend in World War II, in his squadron, Jack Guy, is the one who found it and donated it. That was Jack’s donation to the library. He paid for it; he found it. It probably wasn’t that hard, because we constantly get invitations from different aviation clubs who think they’re the first ones to call and say, “We have an old Grumman, TR-something. Would President Bush like to come take a ride?” And he says, “No, definitely not, definitely, definitely not.”

Riley: But he has jumped out of airplanes.

Becker: Yes.

Riley: Tell us about jumping out of airplanes.

Becker: Oh, my gosh.

Riley: You must have been around when this notion first—

Becker: Yes. The first one was in 1997. I remember that because in 1997 President Bush surprised me in the middle of the year—it wasn’t even Christmas. He sent me on a cruise for a week. I think he thought I was having a nervous breakdown and decided—’97 was just way too much, because it was also the year that—I was reminded of this and the whole tumultuousness of the year came back—Hofstra University—I’m sure you know what Hofstra does.
Riley: Of course, yes.

Becker: They started to do the first post-Presidency conference.

Riley: They do in a weekend what we do over—

Becker: Our Hofstra was in April of 1997. Mike Meece, in 43’s office, just emailed me and said, “I’m going to kill you because you all did so much for Hofstra, and they are throwing all this in our face and think 43 is going to do all this.” I said, “Sorry.” We did do a lot for Hofstra.

He jumped out of his first airplane in February of ’97. Hofstra was in April, and we opened the library in November. It was a wild year. He became enamored of jumping out of a plane. I wish I could remember exactly what triggered it, but what he said was that he had wanted to do it ever since World War II because he had parachuted out of his plane and he didn’t do it right.

Riley: Is that the only time he’s ever—

Becker: That was the only time he’d ever—he had not parachuted since World War II.

Riley: Because he’s an aviator, not a paratrooper, so he wouldn’t have had training.

Becker: The only time he parachuted was when he was shot down. He hit his head on the wing and his chute opened, but not properly, and he didn’t remember it. He remembered it, but President Bush said you’re sort of in a state of shock.

Riley: Of course.

Becker: He didn’t really remember it. Let’s put it this way, it was not fun.

Riley: He didn’t enjoy it.

Becker: He didn’t enjoy it. He said he always thought about it. I knew this at one point and now I can’t wrap my mind around why he wanted to do this, I mean what happened in ’97. He started thinking about it, and I know he called Colin Powell and asked his opinion and Colin Powell did not want him to do it. He thought it was crazy. And he asked his five kids, all of whom thought it was crazy.

Riley: He’s doing this before you know about it?

Becker: No, I knew about it. I knew he was thinking about it. He came home from an air show or something. It was something like that, and he said, “I’m thinking I want to parachute jump.” So he parachute-jumped in Yuma, Arizona, which is where the Golden Knights—he’s done all his jumps with the Golden Knights. That’s where they train in the wintertime. He just decided he was going to do it, that this was on his life—the term “bucket list” did not exist then, but that’s what it was. This was on his bucket list. I’ll have to tell you about his other bucket list after this.

Riley: Good.

Becker: I couldn’t believe it. But anyway, he jumped.
Riley: Did Barbara try to talk him out of doing this?

Becker: You know, I think she wasn’t wild about it, but Mrs. Bush had by that time definitely been married to George Bush long enough to know that when he makes his mind up about something, he’s going to do it. She was not wild about the idea and she did tell him, “I want you to call your five children.” None of them were wild about it. He actually wrote—it might be in All the Best.

Riley: Yes, that piece is there.

Becker: Is it in All the Best, what he wrote? I think it is.

Riley: He quoted Jeb as saying something about, “Don’t change your sexual orientation.”

Becker: Yes. I was going to say, did we put that in All the Best? I think we did. “Fine, Dad, but don’t change your sexual orientation.” He called all the kids and then he—is it in a letter to Hugh Sidey? He wrote all those great letters to Hugh Sidey. I think that’s one of the Hugh Sidey letters that we put in All the Best.

Anyway, he decided he was going to do this, and by that time I had worked for him long enough to know that he comes—One of my favorite and least favorite things for him to say to me for years was, “I have an idea.” I would always think, Oh, my God. You know, things would have been moving along so nicely, at a nice little pace, and then he says, “I have an idea, Jean.” Then it’s just like, Okay. It could be, “Let’s go to lunch on the boat,” or it could be, “I’m going to jump out of an airplane.” He jumped first in ’97, and I think he has jumped a total of seven times.

Riley: So when he went out in ’97, he didn’t get it out of his system?

Becker: He didn’t get it out of his system, because he loved it. And we were shocked at the press coverage. The press coverage was huge and the picture of him jumping was on the front page of almost every newspaper in the country and all over the world. People were sending us newspapers. We were totally caught off-guard by the human interest in his doing that. We were shocked, absolutely shocked.

Riley: This was ’97. By ’97, is it your sense that maybe the state of public opinion had changed?

Becker: I think it was beginning to change.

Riley: That the warmth factor, the warmth had come back in the relationship.

Becker: Yes, between George Bush and the American public?

Riley: Yes.

Becker: Yes, I do think so. Things like the parachute jump—I haven’t really thought about this, but the parachute jump was part of the journey. Absolutely. The parachute jump just made him—
maybe it even was part of the beginning, where people just became crazy about him: *This crazy former President went to Yuma, Arizona, and jumped out of an airplane.*

**Riley:** Well, that, and they’ve seen him doing Dana Carvey stuff.

**Becker:** Dana Carvey stuff. And none of it was planned. It was just him being him. There was no grand plan. I’ve been asked that before. It started the rehabilitation or rejuvenation of George Bush. I guess part of me would like to say, “Yes, we sat down and said, ‘Now what can we do?’ and we came up with all these great ideas.” No, it wasn’t like that.

**Riley:** It’s him coming to you and saying, “Jean, I’ve got an idea.”

**Becker:** Yes, “I have an idea.” He got the joy back in life. It didn’t take him that long to get the joy back in life, but life is an adventure. He really did think that and he loved that parachute jump. He *loved* it. It got into his blood and then we just started looking for other opportunities. Almost all the others, except for his 85th birthday, were for charity.

**Riley:** Is that right?

**Becker:** Well, he jumped into the reopening of the library. That was a surprise. I almost killed him. He jumped for MD Anderson, their 75th birthday party, and then “41@80” he jumped, as part of his 80th birthday celebration, and then he surprise-jumped into the reopening of the library, and I was a nervous wreck about that. I was one of the only people who knew he was doing this. It was a huge secret. He didn’t tell Mrs. Bush until the day before and I was really a wreck over that, for a lot of reasons. He was a lot older then. He did a tandem.

**Riley:** Was the first jump an assisted jump also?

**Becker:** No.

**Riley:** He was just by himself?

**Becker:** By himself. Well, he would come out of the plane with the Golden Knights and then they would let go. Before he opened his parachute, he freefell. On his 80th birthday they did not let him freefall, because it was really windy. He was going to freefall, and that morning they came to him—He did the first two freefall, and on the morning of his 80th birthday, the head of the Golden Knights came to me and said, “We have a real issue. It is not a perfect day. It is really windy. We can jump but we don’t think he should jump without——” and boy, he was really opposed to it, but they talked him into it.

**Riley:** That was the assisted jump?

**Becker:** That was the first assisted jump, and then his next two jumps have been assisted jumps.

**Riley:** So he likes doing it.

**Becker:** He loves doing it.
Riley: Is he going to do another one?

Becker: He swears on his 90th, which I find rather interesting, because his legs are really frail. I mean we’re pretty well using scooters, wheelchairs. You saw his walker. When he walks unassisted, he has to have a walker, but he doesn’t think that matters. He can still jump.

Riley: Who’s the oldest man ever to jump out of an airplane?

Becker: It’s not him. I don’t know if anyone’s ever—

Riley: But at 90?

Becker: I don’t think he’ll be the oldest, still, but he has inspired—we get letters all the time from people who jump on their 80th birthday, their 90th birthday. “I jumped because of you. You inspired me.” So now he feels like it’s for the greater good. It’s inspiring. You know, his people need for him to jump.

Riley: In addition to the fact that he just gets a great deal out of it.

Becker: Oh, he just loves it. He gets a great thrill out of it. He says there’s nothing like it.

Riley: Have you ever been moved to jump out of an airplane, Jean?

Becker: No, I haven’t. Maybe one day. I’m afraid of heights. I’m not great at heights. I just can’t imagine looking out the open door of that plane. Even if I am strapped to a gorgeous, hunky Golden Knight, I just don’t quite see myself doing it.

Riley: It wasn’t that pairing that had Jeb wondering about the sexual preference?

Becker: No, no. He was still freefalling then. Mrs. Bush, I was writing her speeches at the time and we had a lot of fun with that. We loved when something would happen that would give the speech fodder, but she loved to say that she hadn’t seen a freefall like that since the ’92 election.

Riley: Oh, boy.

Becker: Yes. That got a lot of laughs.

Riley: Was that her line?

Becker: That was her line. Actually, I think it was President Bush’s line.

Riley: But she stole it. She knows a good line.

Becker: She stole it. We stole it. We shamelessly stole it for her speeches.

Riley: All right, so that’s jumping out of an airplane. Does he have any other daredevil—Does he like to go fast in his boat?
**Becker:** Yes. He has slowed down this year. We were really worried about it. He is a real cowboy in his boat.

**Riley:** He drives it himself?

**Becker:** He drives it himself.

**Riley:** He goes out with help?

**Becker:** Help. Jim [Appleby] will go with him. You’ll be fine. You’ll be safe. We were worried about this year and he’s doing great. He’s been out three times. I’ve been out with him once, and he did really, really well. There will always be someone on the boat with him now who can drive the boat, like you and I would not go out there by ourselves with him. Either a Secret Service Agent, or—Jim is a great boat handler.

**Riley:** That’s the Secret Service Agent?

**Becker:** No, Jim is the guy—

**Riley:** Oh, that we were downstairs with.

**Becker:** He’s his personal aide. We call him Nurse Jim, because Jim is in charge of all his medical issues. As you can tell, he’s not a good patient. He never thinks he should go to the doctor, ever. He could be really sick. There were a couple of times this past winter when I thought he should go to the emergency room, but he never thinks he needs to go to the doctor. That was a very typical scene that you just saw. “Why am I going to the doctor? I don’t want to. I go every 20 minutes.” Okay, really? He did have diverticulitis just last week, a flare-up of it.

Let me tell you his other bucket list thing before I forget, because I totally forgot about this when I was brainstorming. It was January 2, 2001, or maybe January 3rd, whatever the first workday was after the holidays. We had just survived the absolutely impossible 2000 election year, with the hanging chads, and it had been a really difficult year, a very difficult fall. George W. was getting inaugurated in 20 days, and even just getting ready for his inauguration—I was helping them a lot to get ready for it. I still remember thinking, *Oh, my gosh, this is going to be such a better year. It’s going to be a normal year and it’s not going to be 80-hour weeks.* I was really excited about getting back to some sense of normalcy in the office. He comes in—it’s the first day back after the holidays, and he sits in my office and says, “I’ve made my life to-do list over the holidays.” That’s exactly what he said to me.

**Riley:** He’s how old at this time? Is this 2000?

**Becker:** It was the first of the year, 2001. He was born in ’24, so he would have been 76. He says, “I made my life to-do list, things I would like to do before I die.” I said okay. Really, I can’t remember what else was on it, except that he wanted to go back to Chichi Jima, where he’d been shot down. I was stunned by that. I had never heard him talk about it. He said he had always wanted to go back after he’d been shot down, and he said, “I need to go back there.” He hates words like closure. He calls them bullshit bingo words. We play this imaginary game called BS [bullshit] bingo, which I can explain if you want to hear about it.
Riley: Yes.

Becker: But that’s what it was. It was absolutely all about closure, although he certainly did not use that word.

Riley: I had asked earlier about Robin and you said that he does occasionally talk about her.

Becker: Yes. Only in context. He wouldn’t just talk about it, apropos of nothing.

Riley: Of course.

Becker: It would have to be that something triggered it.

Riley: Maybe the loss of a child for somebody, or her birthday?

Becker: Someone else, exactly.

Riley: Do they still keep her birthday, or recognize it?

Becker: No. Once in a while one of them will mention, “Did she just have a birthday?” Or that she would have been 65 or something. That’s more—Mrs. Bush might say something like that.

Riley: So there are occasions when he would refer back to that very painful moment in his life or episode of his life.

Becker: Right.

Riley: But in this case that wasn’t true.

Becker: Well, I think what partially brought this on is that the man who wrote Flags of Our Fathers, James Bradley—He’s the son of one of the Marines who raised the flag on Iwo Jima. It was a huge best-selling book that sort of changed his life. He’s a very interesting character. After he wrote that book, he wrote a second book about pilots shot down. Flyboys: A True Story of Courage was his second book, after Flags of Our Fathers, also another big bestseller. And he interviewed President Bush for that book because the subject of his second book was about pilots who were shot down off Chichi Jima. It had nothing to do with the fact that that’s where 41 was shot down. It’s because the Japanese Commander of Chichi Jima cannibalized the pilots they captured and killed. He ate their livers. James Bradley became quite fascinated by this.

Riley: I never heard this before.

Becker: He came to interview President Bush about—There was a chapter about President Bush in the book. President Bush was one of only two pilots, maybe three, who survived being shot down off Chichi Jima. The others were all captured and killed.

Riley: And had their livers eaten.

Becker: He ate their livers, and he was tried and hung as a war criminal after the war.
Riley: The President was picked up by a submarine, right? That just happened to be in the area?

Becker: I’ll tell you about it. We met James Bradley, and he did the most extensive interview ever with President Bush about World War II, because President Bush loved *Flags of Our Fathers* and agreed to cooperate with it. I really think it’s that book that got him to thinking about all of this. Well, I know it is, because when we met with James and did that book, he told President Bush that in doing the research for the book—James had been to Chichi Jima a number of times—that he met a Japanese man who saw him being shot down and rescued.

All of that got President Bush thinking and he decided he wanted to go back, that he needed to go back there. And so he’s telling me this on January 2nd, and he says, “I would like to do that this year. Let’s just go ahead and do it. Yes, we need to figure that out. Okay, goodbye.” Off he goes, and I’m thinking, *Okay, you must be joking.* Now, let me tell you something, Russell—

Riley: Your son is just about to become President of the United States.

Becker: To get from the United States of America to Chichi Jima is really hard. It is next to impossible to do. The only way there—There is no airport on the island. It’s an old volcanic island that’s part of the Iwo Jima chain, and a three-day boat ride from Tokyo, Japan is how you get there, to this island. George Bush is not taking a three-day boat ride from Japan, because that’s just not him at all.

In the end, two things saved us. George W. named Howard Baker to be his Ambassador to Japan, and Howard Baker is the one who I ended up calling and saying—we just let it go. We just sort of forgot about it. I said, “Let’s get past the inauguration.”

Riley: *You* forgot about it.

Becker: I said, “Okay, I’ll keep that in mind but let’s talk about this later.” Well, immediately we decided—President Bush’s original idea was for the Navy to take him, if there were boats in the area. We talked to some admiral—I think he was head of the Pacific Fleet, actually. We talked to that admiral. He and I had a really good conversation about it and he said the Navy would love to do this for him, and there’s always a lot of ships in the area and this would be really easy to do. Well, then President Bush decided that was not a good idea, because his son was now President of the United States and it would be like a—

Riley: Special favor.

Becker: A junket, yes. Couldn’t do it. So I called Howard Baker and he was all over this. Do you know who took us? The Japanese Navy. Isn’t that amazing?

Riley: That is—yes.

Becker: It was a stunning trip.

Riley: Did you go?

Becker: I went. I did go with him. And we took Paula Zahn with us.
Riley: So this has been pretty amply recorded.

Becker: It is. You know what? I have the video. CNN did an amazing two-part thing on it. They really did well by us. It’s amazing. Paula did a great job. We got a private plane that took us to Tokyo, and then from Tokyo—Actually, we flew to Iwo Jima. We spent the night on Iwo Jima, at the American base there, and from Iwo Jima, a Japanese Navy helicopter flew us to Chichi Jima.

And we did meet the man who swears he saw President Bush shot down. We took James Bradley with us because James really was invaluable to this. He’d been there a gazillion times. The man’s name was [Nobuaki] Warren Iwatake. He was living in Hawaii at the time of Pearl Harbor, with his family. His family had immigrated to the United States and the minute Pearl Harbor happened they left, because his parents felt they weren’t safe. They were Japanese American. And they were right. Of course we knew they were right. They left immediately and went back to Japan, and he was immediately drafted to serve in the Navy, and because he spoke fluent English, he was stationed on Chichi Jima because there was a big radio tower substation there where they tried to eavesdrop on American military radio traffic.

Riley: Sure.

Becker: That is what President Bush was bombing that day, that radio tower, and Warren and some of his—The bombing of the radio tower began and they of course evacuated, and they were standing on a cliff. They left the building and they were standing, watching, hiding at first and then they saw the plane go down. This is the story Warren told us, that they saw the plane go in the ocean and the Japanese boat set out to pick him up, and President Bush’s squadron mates were firing on the boats to keep them away from their pilot in the water.

The tradition was—Eventually they had to leave him there because they were going to run out of gas. President Bush said you always knew exactly how much time you had. You needed to keep an eye on your gas tank, to make sure you had enough gas to get back to the aircraft carrier. What you did when you were trying to protect a pilot in the water was when you had to leave, you dipped your wings to let him know you had to go. I used to not be able to tell this story without crying. Well, they all had dipped their wings because they had to leave him there, and President Bush says it was the hardest thing. You protected him as long as you could but eventually you had to go.

President Bush said he knew exactly what was going on. They dipped their wings. The Japanese boat had set out a couple of times to come pick him up, but they turned around a couple of times. This time they set out because they knew he was theirs. Lo and behold, the Finback surfaced and he saw the periscope coming out of the water. He said his first thought was, Is it one of ours? Is it one of theirs? There were submarines assigned—that’s what they did. They rescued pilots.

Riley: Oh, is that right?

Becker: I did not know that. There were submarines—that was what they did. If there was a big bombing raid, they would try to have submarines in the area, specifically to pick up pilots who were shot down.
Riley: That’s a good idea.

Becker: So it wasn’t an accident that the Finback was there. It came up out of the water and Warren Iwatake saw it happen and he swears that he turned to his Japanese friends and said, “Our government would never do that. They would never risk—we do not value life the way Americans do.” Years later, in 1980, he was working for the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo. He stayed in Japan, and eventually was hired by the American government because he spoke perfect English. He was in public affairs and was reading the biography of the new Vice President of the United States of America, and he said it was stunning: “I saw this happen.” When James Bradley came through years later, researching his book Flyboys, the American Embassy—

Riley: President Bush had never heard this story?

Becker: We never heard this story and we never knew this man existed. I can’t believe all the times he went to Tokyo as President and Vice President, and he never—I don’t know if Warren didn’t tell anyone, or what the deal was, but he told James Bradley. James Bradley is the one who found him, and James Bradley is the one who brought him to Houston before he went to Chichi Jima, to meet him. Then we saw him again at Chichi Jima.

His name was Warren because he became friends with one of the pilots who was captured. He was the one who had to help translate the interrogation, and he became very close to this pilot named Warren. They became very close and very good friends, and one day they executed him in front of him. He had no idea it was going to happen. They cut his head off. He had no idea it was coming. The pilot’s name was Warren, and from that day forward he changed his name to Warren in memory of his friend, out of respect for his friend.

And we met the only other pilot—I think there were two pilots who didn’t die. President Bush was one, because he never got captured. The other was captured but for whatever reason the Japanese thought he knew stuff and they sent him to Tokyo to be interrogated. We met him. He met us on Chichi Jima. He came and met us and it was just an incredible trip. It was on his bucket list, so we went.

Riley: What else is on the list that we haven’t gotten to yet?

Becker: We’re done. At one point he wanted to go hang gliding and parasailing. The rest of it was stuff like that.

Riley: It was physical activities, not places?

Becker: It was all physical activity.

Riley: Not other places to go.

Becker: No, Chichi Jima was the only place he wanted to go back to.

Riley: Do you remember anything that was just so absolutely—I guess if the guy’s jumped out of an airplane, then it’s hard for—
Becker: It wasn’t that long of a list and he has since gone hang—whatever you do from the back of a boat. He did that up here.

Riley: Parasailing.

Becker: Is that parasailing?

Riley: I think so.

Becker: He never went hang gliding and he sort of lost interest. He decided, “I’d rather just keep parachuting than do that.” I don’t remember anything—I think that was about it.

Riley: Did he read the books that you were talking about, *Flyboys*?

Becker: Yes, he read it.

Riley: Does he do a lot of reading?

Becker: He’s an insatiable reader.

Riley: What does he like to read?

Becker: Everything, which is what’s stunning to me. He will read absolutely everything from Sidney Sheldon to—Right now he’s been reading a book that Henry Kissinger wrote on China. It’s actually downstairs on his desk. He reads it in the afternoon here. He’s loving it. I’ve never seen anyone like it. He’ll read the trashiest of the trash to the heaviest of policy wonkish books.

Riley: And this has been true ever since you’ve known him?

Becker: Ever since I’ve known him. I just always am surprised that he just loves the best sellers to, again, the policy wonk books.

Riley: Does he talk a lot about the stuff he reads?

Becker: Sometimes. If we’re in the car together, he’ll talk about a certain book that he’s reading. I remember one time I was in the car with him—and you’re going to kill me because I do not remember the name of the book. He was reading a book about—It was nonfiction and it looked really heavy and I remember I said, “What are you reading?” I don’t remember what it was. This was years ago. And he said, “Oh, gosh, it’s just fascinating. It’s about—” I don’t remember. He looked and me and he said, “But don’t tell anyone I’m reading it, because I don’t want anyone to think I’m too cerebral.” I don’t remember the name of the book, but that’s his sense of humor. “Don’t tell anyone I’m reading this book, because they’ll think I’m way too cerebral.” He’ll just read anything he can get his hands on.

Riley: Does he keep up with newspapers and magazines, too?

Becker: Yes. He reads the *New York Times* every day, the *Houston Chronicle* in Houston.

Riley: Delivered?
Becker: Delivered.

Riley: He reads hard copies of it.

Becker: Hard copies. We’re still very old-fashioned here. In Houston they get the New York Times and the Houston Chronicle. Here they get the New York Times, the Portland paper and USA Today. And he keeps up.

Riley: Not the Wall Street Journal?

Becker: We don’t get the Wall Street Journal. I’m surprised we don’t. We pull stuff offline all the time for him. In fact, we had to pull something offline yesterday that Secretary Baker emailed and said be sure to read this.

Riley: News magazines or opinion magazines?

Becker: TIME and Newsweek. I think we’re the only ones in America who still get—He does not read them as much any more. Mrs. Bush read them. He counts on me to tab things for him to read. He reads less now and his retention has gotten really bad. He loved spy novels, loved them, and he’s been frustrated in the last couple of years. One of our favorite authors is Daniel Silva. He’s a good friend. He’s Jamie Gangel’s husband. Jamie works for NBC [National Broadcasting Company], the Today Show.

Riley: Okay, sure.

Becker: In Danny’s books—He’s a great writer, but they’re complicated. You know, you’ve read books before where if you set it down for a while, you’ll go back and you’re like, Now wait a minute, who is this?

Riley: Exactly.

Becker: You have to keep track of things. President Bush told me that he was really sad about it. He said, “I’m having a hard time with this book. I cannot keep track of who is who and who did what,” and it made him really sad.

Riley: I can’t read things like that because I don’t want to work hard enough if I’m reading fiction.

Becker: Danny’s books you sort of have to read in a two- or three-day period.

Riley: My wife is like that. She’ll stay focused.

Becker: You’ve got to stay focused. I told him, “I know what you’re saying. I can have issues with it, actually, where you have to go back and say, Now wait a minute, what was that?”

Riley: Opinion magazines, the New Republic? You mentioned that before.

Becker: No.
Riley: The New Yorker?

Becker: No.

Riley: Nothing like that?

Becker: Just daily newspapers.

Riley: Does he watch a lot of television?

Becker: Yes.

Riley: News or just anything?

Becker: News. He’s a news junkie.

Riley: Fox or CNN?

Becker: Everything. MSNBC. All of them. He channel-surfs and jumps around. A year or so ago, he was railing about something on MSNBC. He said, “Did you see Keith Olbermann last night?” And for the 80th time I said, “No, I did not see him. I don’t watch it. No, don’t turn it on.” He’s insatiable, I think less so now. A lot has changed in the last year. He’s a huge Law & Order fan. He probably watches more Law & Order than any—I’ll tell you what they love to watch. Law & Order, the Dateline NBC that does the real life mysteries. They watch a lot of—I don’t ever watch this—the True Crime Network. They’re into crime shows, fictional and the real ones. Paula Zahn is doing some new show for Discovery that is true-life murder mysteries, and she just sent them all of her season one. It’s fabulous. They love it. They watch every movie ever made. They watch more movies than anyone I’ve ever seen.

Riley: Do they have a satellite dish here?

Becker: They have a satellite dish but they’re big Netflix people. President Bush went to Blockbuster almost every day in Houston and when it closed it just killed them, because he loved going to Blockbuster.

Riley: But Netflix is even better, right?

Becker: Netflix is even better. They like old movies; they like new movies; they’re always looking for ideas.

Riley: Do they have the hookup into the TV, or do they have to watch stuff on the computer?

Becker: On the TV. They insert the DVD. But yes, they love movies and they’re always looking for ideas for movies. I went to see The Conspirator this past weekend. It’s about Mary Surratt, who was hanged for Abraham Lincoln.

Riley: Oh yes, of course.
Becker: I’ve wanted to see it. Robert Redford directed it, and I put it on their Netflix list because I think they’ll really like that. They’ll really enjoy that.

Riley: They don’t go to the theater to watch a movie?

Becker: They used to a lot, not any more. They used to go a lot to the movie theater.

Riley: Up here, as well as in Houston?

Becker: Yes. But now they don’t. Now they just wait for it to come on Netflix. They also get a lot of movies that their friends in Hollywood will send them. Jerry Weintraub, who’s a big Hollywood producer.

I remember when HBO [Home Box Office]—they don’t get HBO—was doing *The Pacific* with Tom Hanks. I think Steven Spielberg did it. President Bush was dying to see it, so I reached out to someone in the entertainment industry and I said, “I hate to ask, but is there any way that we can get this on DVD?” Tom Hanks sent it to him. Here comes a letter from Tom Hanks, with the whole series, and then someone from HBO called someone in the office and said, “Even HBO does not have this. We’re giving it to them one segment at a time because piracy is such a huge issue, so he cannot share this with anyone. Here’s the entire miniseries. He’s the only one in America who has this.” Actually, it wasn’t HBO; it was someone from the production company. I didn’t talk to them; my assistant did, and they literally said, “HBO does not have this.” But it came with a very nice note from Tom Hanks, saying, “Mr. President, it’s such a privilege. I hear you wanted to see this.”

Riley: I have to tell you a personal connection with that, which is a little bit odd: The man who wrote the book that that was based on—There were two books. We didn’t see it because we don’t get HBO either, and I’m trying to remember the name of the book. The author lived in Montebello, Alabama, where my wife grew up. My wife’s mother typed the manuscript for that book.

Becker: Oh, you’re kidding.

Riley: The book came out maybe 30 years ago. The book has been out for a very long time. It was odd, then, for me to be walking through airports and virtually every counter in every airport in the country had this book that had been reissued as a result of the movie. I can’t remember.

Becker: I didn’t even know it was based on a book.

Riley: He would have been one of the characters. The author of the book would have been one of the characters.

Becker: In the movie, in the miniseries.

Riley: Exactly.

Becker: Well, here’s a really random story to tell you: President Bush had been sick all week, really sick.
Riley: Recently?

Becker: This was a year ago. It was April of 2010. It was not sick, as much as his Parkinson’s had really—He just couldn’t move his legs that week.

Riley: So it ebbs and flows?

Becker: It ebbs and flows. This particular week—and the doctor said it’s hard to tell what brought it on. He just couldn’t move, and we had to cancel a lot on his schedule. Anyway, at one point that week, he got to feeling well enough and he wanted me to come over to the house and do some work. So I went over to the house and brought this huge folder of stuff we needed to go through. Mrs. Bush was not home. I was going to have lunch with him. I walked in and the TV was so loud. He was watching The Pacific and he said, “Do you mind? I think this one’s almost done. I think there’s 20 more minutes. Do you mind if I finish watching it?” I said, “No, of course not.” Oh, my God, it was just so loud and I was just sitting there, and it was this brutal, brutal battle scene.

Riley: Oh boy.

Becker: Really bloody. I was sitting there not enjoying this at all. Then what happened is they landed on some island. I can’t remember the island. If you said it, I would recognize it, but I don’t remember offhand.

Riley: Saipan?

Becker: It’s not Saipan. Anyway, the Marines have landed and are getting chewed up by the Japanese, and then the planes come in and bomb the hell out of the Japanese, and it pretty well ends the battle, once we start bombing them. There are dead Americans all over the beaches, and one Marine says to another, “Where the hell were the flyboys? Where the hell have they been? Thanks a lot, guys.” That’s how that segment ended.

Well, President Bush was one of those flyboys and he was really upset, I mean, visibly upset by this. He said, “Where the hell were we? I wonder if this is true?” Of course he didn’t know. He said, “The minute we got the order to go, we went. Were we really that late? Do you think this is true?” You know, he’s really upset about it. He said, “We were late but why were we late? What happened? I don’t know what happened. We got there as soon as we could.” Then he said, “Either they invaded too soon, or—Something wasn’t right there. That should have never happened.” Oh gosh, it was quite a moment, watching him watch that and wonder, Is this how it really happened? I said, “We’ll never know what happened.” Is the movie a little off? He said, “It was really hard to watch that.”

He told me one other—This was after coming home from Chichi Jima. He was talking about how—I mean, he was just a rock star there.

Riley: Is that right?
Becker: Oh, my gosh, the whole island turned out to see him and it was like Elvis [Presley] had landed. He talked about what an odd feeling that was, because he had bombed their island. He said, “Here I am, the conquering hero....”

He told me that when he was Vice President, he was the guest at a dinner in the Philippines. It was not in Manila; it was somewhere else. Of course it was a huge deal that the Vice President of the United States was there, and everybody was there and he was toasted and honored and cheered and waved at, and he said the whole time he was there—He had bombed that island during the war. He said he sat there the whole time during this dinner, looking at all these Filipinos, thinking, I wonder if I killed your grandfather? He said it was just surreal to be sitting there being the guest of honor when he knew that he had been there before, in the air. It’s sort of interesting.

Riley: One of the things that I remember about this dinner that I attended with 43 is that when he was talking about his own vision for the library and other things, he talked a little bit about the Institute and what they were trying to do to advance democracy around the world. He made a specific reference to the close relationship that we have with Japan now, and by contrast with the fact that the Japanese had shot his father down in an airplane in the Pacific, as a way of explaining his own sense about what’s possible in the realm of international relations and foreign policy. With the right kind of vision you could take advantage of it.

Becker: Right.

Riley: It was a way of explaining his own thought process about the Middle East and a lot of what happened.

Becker: Because 41 went to Hirohito’s funeral. We talked a lot about that going to Chichi Jima.

Riley: When was this?

Becker: It was right after he became President. I think it was February of ’89, and he had not been President very long. I remember when it happened, even though I was in the East Wing. We talked a lot about it in the context of the Chichi Jima trip. A lot of Americans were really critical of him. Veterans were very critical, to which he said, “I was shot down by Hirohito, and I think it’s appropriate we go. I am making this decision.” It gave him so much credibility. Now wait a minute.

Riley: Exactly. He could do that and others couldn’t.

Becker: Bill Clinton couldn’t have done that, or even Ronald Reagan before him. He said, “I think it’s the right thing to do.” He had met Hirohito a number of times, and he also talks about that as the same thing. “If I can go to Hirohito’s funeral and mourn his death, then there is no such thing as enemies forever.”

Riley: All right. Is there anything else on this bucket list-travel thing that you wanted to talk about?

Becker: No, I think that’s it.
Riley: Let’s talk about his relationships with the other Presidents and former Presidents. You mentioned Reagan, which of course is a special case. Did he have a good relationship with Gerald Ford? I guess Gerald Ford was still alive when you were—

Becker: Right. Very close, a very good relationship. He respected and admired him a lot. He didn’t see him a lot but they would talk on the phone occasionally.

Riley: But there wasn’t a lot of social interaction between the two of them?

Becker: No.

Riley: Was that just an accident of where they were, basically?

Becker: Absolutely, because they were good friends. President Ford, by the time President Bush was out of office, was older already. They saw him every year. I can tell you when they did see him. The Bushes went every year to visit the [Walter H. and Leonore] Annenbergs at Sunnylands, and that’s in the Palm Desert where the Fords lived, and they saw the Fords every single year. Every winter they had a good visit with them. And he went to the reopening of President Ford’s library. President Ford invited all the Presidents to the reopening of his library and he went to that.

Riley: Was that before his reopening or was that after?

Becker: That was way before his reopening.

Riley: When did the relationship with Bill Clinton develop? He campaigned for Bob Dole in 1996.


Riley: Was that hard for him to do?

Becker: No, he really loved—he had a lot of respect for Bob Dole. There was no acrimony there, almost from the beginning. President Clinton invited all the Presidents to the White House for the signing of NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement]. They all went for that because they all had been such big proponents of it. That was very early on. Then there was the unveiling of the portraits at the White House, and the Clintons were very gracious at that. Then they came to the opening of his library and there was just sort of a respect there. And then they went to the opening of his library. President Bush’s speech that day got a lot of attention. It was very funny. I can’t remember any more what he said, but his speech was widely quoted.

Riley: Who helped him with that speech?

Becker: Jim McGrath did. Jim McGrath would have written that speech. His speech was more widely quoted than George W.’s was, who was then the sitting President. But the real beginning was the tsunami. I was in Santa Fe, New Mexico for New Year’s with friends, having a wonderful weekend, and I got this voicemail from Karl Rove that said, “I need to talk to you. I don’t know if you’ve heard about—” That tsunami was on Christmas Day, and we were sort of...
late catching on to how big it was. I’m not sure the White House was, but the general public certainly was.

I remember catching a plane to go to Santa Fe, and seeing the headlines at the airport. I had been out of the news loop because it was the holidays—Seeing the headlines and thinking, I didn’t even hear about this. The headline was, “Tens of Thousands Feared Dead in Asia,” and I’m like, What the hell are they talking about? I went off to Santa Fe, and Karl’s message was, “I need to talk to you about the tsunami and Bill Clinton.” There was another staffer with me in Santa Fe, and I remember I turned to her and I said, “I have a feeling life as we know it is over.” Boy, was I ever right. That was the beginning of our disaster.

On the trip to Asia, which we took in February— I think we went in February. That was the beginning of the odd couple.

Riley: Did you go with them?

Becker: I went with them, I did, and it was an amazing journey and they just got along great. President Clinton was so respectful of President Bush and that he was older. There was one bed on the plane and President Clinton insisted that President Bush sleep in it. I stayed up all night and played cards with him.

Riley: With Clinton?

Becker: With Clinton. I told President Bush, “You owe me, big time.”

Riley: Is this “Oh Hell”?

Becker: “Oh Hell.” Oh yes, we played “Oh Hell” all night long. He’s insatiable on that. But they got along great on that trip, and President Bush tried to keep him on time.

Riley: How did that work?

Becker: President Clinton tried really hard to be on time, out of respect to President Bush. I do remember, we were in Thailand and President Clinton came out of the hotel, probably about 15 minutes late, and President Bush was sitting in the limo that the two Presidents were going to ride in, reading. He of course had come downstairs at the exact moment he was supposed to have gotten in the car. He was very laid back about it, but he was sitting in his car reading. I was actually up on the porch of the hotel with Tom Frechette, who was President Bush’s aide at that time, and the two of us were trying to decide, do we go knock on the door and say, “Hello! We’re ready. We’re late,” and out came President Clinton. He stopped on the porch and he saw President Bush in the car, and he muttered under his breath, “Oh, shit.” He felt horrible that he was late.

I remember there was one other time when it was time for us to leave. We were in Sri Lanka and it was definitely time for us to leave, and I kept telling President Clinton’s chief of staff, Laura [Graham], “Go get him. We’re late. We need to leave and go on to the next venue.” And Laura said, “He won’t listen to me. You go get him.” President Bush said, “Okay, we need to go,” and I said, “I’m going to go try to move President Clinton. His staff is saying they can’t move him.”
President Bush said, “I’ll do it.” He went and got him and said, “Bill, it’s time to go.” And the President looked at him like, “Oh, okay.” So President Bush was our puller on that trip. He was the only one who—But they got along great. Then we did Katrina, which was bigger and more complicated, and then we did Hurricane Ike. Talk about yin and yang. Mrs. Bush is the one who came up with the term “the odd couple.”

Riley: It fits.

Becker: It definitely fits. I keep buried, just because they’re so funny—I don’t know why I hold on to these. There was a whole series of cartoons that came out, and I keep them at the bottom of this tray.

Riley: Maybe you could photocopy those. It would be a great appendix.

Becker: I keep those. They’re just so funny. I can’t remember if those were after the tsunami or Katrina. I think probably after Katrina. President Bush loved those.

Riley: [laughs]

Becker: Which one are you laughing at?

Riley: I’m laughing at the one that’s got the Playboy channel. I guess they don’t get the Playboy channel out here.

Becker: They don’t get the Playboy channel out here. This is about the oil. That’s a different one. I do love it.

Anyway, so they were great friends and they continue to be good friends. President Clinton came to Houston to do something this spring and the two of them went to lunch for three hours. I was dying to be invited. I was not invited. President Clinton will call him every once in a while and check in on him, and President Bush will do likewise if he’s in the hospital. I remember the last time he went into the hospital, which wasn’t that long ago. He had some flare-up of his heart problem or something. It was no big deal in the end.

Riley: This was Clinton?

Becker: This was President Clinton. There was a little health scare. I was in my office and his person, Doug Band, called me and said, “Okay, I don’t want to be too forward but President Clinton—” He was on his way home from the hospital and President Clinton was supposed to go to bed the rest of the day. He was exhausted, and he told Doug, “I don’t want any phone calls unless 41 calls me, and I’ll take his call.” Doug said, “I thought you should know that.” I said, “Oh, thank God you told me that.” I called President Bush, who was actually in the car. This must have been a couple of years ago because he was still traveling. He was in the car on the way somewhere and I said, “You have to call President Clinton right now, because I think he’s assuming you’re going to call.” He said, “Oh, I was going to call him.” They’re good friends.
Riley: We’re still dealing with Clinton.

Becker: They did all these disaster things and they did a lot of joint speeches together. I remember, President Clinton said one time—they were in New Orleans, speaking at the National Automobile Association’s annual meeting. President Bush always spoke first and then President Clinton; that’s protocol. President Bush had some great lines about President Clinton. They just were funny. They had sort of this shtick they did. But President Bush’s lines were funnier. I’ll be honest; they were funnier.

President Clinton got up—I wasn’t there but I saw the video—and he said, “You know, I beat this guy in 1992, and now I’m his straight guy. How did this happen? He gets all the laughs and I’m his straight guy.” And I wanted to call him and say, “It’s your speechwriter.” But also, President Bush just has a very funny sense of humor, and with all due respect to Jim McGrath, it was probably more President Bush than President Clinton. When the Points of Light honored President Bush in March of this year at the Kennedy Center for all he’s done for volunteerism, and all the Presidents came—

Riley: That was your event.

Becker: That was my event. Oh, my gosh, that was a tough event, but a great event, a great evening. It was fabulous. It turned out better but it was a lot of work. Anyway, the Bush family put President Clinton in the Bush family photo. We were doing a photo backstage. We did a photo for which most of the family was there, not all of them. President Clinton and President Carter sort of came to the side and George W. said, “Bill, get in the photo. You’re the brother by a different mother.” That’s what they call him, “a brother by a different mother.” It’s amazing.

Riley: He doesn’t have the same kind of relationship with President Carter?

Becker: He does not. No, they’re not as close. They certainly respect each other and I know President Carter respects President Bush a great deal, but President Carter probably is not as close to any of the Presidents, really. He’s a member of the club but there’s just not the same closeness there.

Riley: Is President Carter easy to get along with?

Becker: No.

Riley: I’m trying to remember whether there were episodes during the Bush years where President Carter was problematic for the President.

Becker: I will tell you, but I’m going to edit it all out, because I don’t want this to come from me. President Carter—and he’s done this to all of them—When President Bush 41 was President, he wrote a letter to all the world leaders, to the UN [United Nations]. He actively campaigned against the UN resolution to go to war in Iraq, to liberate Kuwait, very actively.
Riley: That, I should have remembered.

Becker: President Clinton loves telling this story: President Clinton sent Colin Powell, Sam Nunn, and Jimmy Carter to Haiti, and they came back and he had a meeting with the three of them and they did a joint press conference. After the joint press conference, President Carter called his own press conference and slammed President Clinton’s policy toward Haiti. He was extremely critical of 43. He is the only President who has done that. Bush 41 left office and he told President Clinton in the Oval Office, and they talk about this: “You’re now my President. I’ll stay out of your way.” President Bush feels, for the most part, President Clinton did the same thing with 43.

Certainly with politics, in political years, you do and say—Even when Hillary ran in 2008, President Bush felt President Clinton went out of his way to make it about Hillary, because most of the Democrats ran almost more against 43 than they did against John McCain. And George W. certainly is doing that. You don’t ever hear George W. say anything about Barack Obama. Jimmy Carter is the only former President who doesn’t follow that unwritten rule of thumb, and that is the problem that all the other Presidents have with him.

[BREAK]

Riley: One of the things I was going to ask you about is—You had mentioned that Jon Meacham is doing a sort of authorized biography. Is that right?

Becker: Right.

Riley: How did that come about? Because, for a long time there has not been an authorized biography. There has never been an authorized biography.

Becker: It’s not an authorized biography. Jon has taught me the difference. We’re fully cooperating, but we have not hired him.

Riley: No editorial?

Becker: We have no editorial say, nor are we paying him to do it. We’re fully cooperating but we don’t control him.

Riley: That’s better.

Becker: Yes, it’s really better.

Riley: How did that come about? Did he approach you about it?
**Becker:** Oh, yes, he approached us, and it’s sort of shocking that I talked President Bush into this. It’s probably the decision I made that has been the most controversial the entire time I’ve been chief of staff, because of his association with *Newsweek*. George W., in particular, thought I had totally lost it. We got to know Jon—One of his best friends is Michael Beschloss. Jon and Michael came up here together years ago and Michael interviewed President Bush for an article in *Newsweek* when *A World Transformed* was published. Our relationship with *Newsweek* was not great, but Jon Meacham called—I’d never heard of him or met him—and he said, “Michael Beschloss is a historian and he’s going to do this for us. He’s read the book and he’ll do the interview and do the review.” They came up here together and it just went really well. President Bush loved his first book about Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt. I can’t remember what he called it. [*The Conquerors: Roosevelt, Truman and the Destruction of Hitler’s Germany, 1941–1945*] President Bush loved that book.

Mrs. Bush does all these celebrations of reading to raise money for her literacy foundation. She invites best-selling authors to come read. We do four: one in Houston, one in Dallas, one in Florida for Jeb’s literacy program, and one in Maryland for their daughter Doro’s. Jon did all four. I always say there should be a reward for the authors who do all four. James Bradley has now done all four. So we got to know him really well because he came and did all these events for us. At some point in the middle of all this, he approached me and said, “I think George Bush is the most underrated President of the 20th century and I want to be the one to tell that story.” So I talked President Bush into it, and boy—I gave him the diaries. I didn’t sleep for days after that, as you can imagine.

**Riley:** Surely you did that with his permission?

**Becker:** Oh, absolutely.

**Riley:** How hard was that?

**Becker:** Absolutely, with his permission. I would never have done it without his permission, but it was a real leap of faith. And God bless Jon. It was a secret for a long time. As long as 43 was President—and Jon was editor of *Newsweek*—it was all very confidential. About the time it became public or we started telling people, 43 in particular thought I had totally lost it. Even Marlin Fitzwater was just saying, “What are you doing?” And then Jon, God bless him, won the Pulitzer Prize for his biography of Andrew Jackson, and that Pulitzer—Both President Bush and I thought, *Fabulous*, because now we could say, “The Pulitzer Prize–winning historian, Jon Meacham.”

**Riley:** And the work is due to come out?

**Becker:** Well, there is no deadline. Jon thinks it’s going to take him ten years. He’s never written about anyone who’s alive and once he started, he just is overwhelmed. He wants to take his time. A year ago he told me he thought it could be as long as ten years. President Bush is thrilled. He would love for it to come out after he’s dead. The diaries, he cannot publish until after he dies. It’s going to be two books.

**Riley:** So he’s going to do an authored work and then an edited book?
**Becker:** And then an edited book; in fact, I’m looking at one right now. A Bush School professor did his China diaries. Jon said, “Why did you do that?” We said, “We have to have several books. There have to be multiple books.” Good God, Jimmy Carter writes ten books a year. Jeff Engel, a Bush School professor, did the China diaries, and did a great job. Those are all at the library. Jon’s going to do something very similar with the White House diaries.

**Riley:** This raises another issue: The relations with the Bush School have been good?

**Becker:** Oh, fabulous. I would say that the Bush School is his favorite thing in life right now. It’s always been one of his favorite things. We sort of touched on this, but all Presidents have to figure out what they want to do in their post-Presidency. President Bush made a conscious decision—and a lot of this was going on right as I became chief of staff, and he really began to think about his post-Presidency. He did not want to do the Carter Center thing, and I think part of that was age. I remember President Bush telling me, “I don’t want to reinvent the wheel. I don’t feel like I have to establish a new anything, because there are so many great organizations and institutes out there doing good work.” He saw his role as a supporting player. Those are my words, not his, but he very consciously made the decision, “I don’t feel the need—there are already a lot of people and things doing good work. Let’s figure out how we can just be part of what’s already going on.”

The exception would be the Bush School. He felt very passionate about his library having connected with it a school of public service, and that has just been the joy of his life. The Bush School students—I hope they know how lucky they are. I think they do. He never taught a class. He used to lecture more. Now he just can’t, because he has memory issues, but he sits in on a lot of classes. They have these great capstone projects where they do a yearlong project. He goes to a lot of the capstone presentations and he always tells me, “Be sure to tell the professor I’m just going to sit in the back of the room and not say a word.” Well, he always says a lot. He has a lot of interaction with the Bush School students.

They wanted to do a photo-op right before we left to come up here. They’re putting out a new brochure for the school and they wanted to do a photo-op with the President. It was an incredibly busy day and the timing was not great and I was sort of irritated. I said, “Why didn’t you all think of this in February? But okay.” It literally was our third last day in Houston and I said, “You have 15 minutes.” So they brought 15 students and a couple of professors. Well, he spent about two hours with them. I kept going in there and saying, “What are you doing?” You know what? It’s wonderful. I love it. That’s the joy of his life.

Now we’re very mad at President Obama because he’s stealing our dean, Ryan Crocker.

**Riley:** Oh yes, of course.

**Becker:** Yes. I’m still not over the fact that George W. took Bob Gates away from us, who was President of A&M [Texas A & M University]. I’m still recovering from that, Russell. Talk about a fox in the henhouse.

**Riley:** It’s like Harvard South there, isn’t it? You’re the best and people come in if you’re the best.
Becker: Well, I did tell President Bush—And Ryan Crocker, who has been a rock star at the school, is taking a leave of absence. He swears he’s coming back in two years. We just started this huge $80 million fundraising campaign to hopefully endow the school forever, and Ryan—We sort of knew this was coming a year ago. This is all General [Stanley A.] McChrystal’s fault. When General McChrystal gave that interview to *Rolling Stone* magazine and got fired, and [David] Petraeus was sent to Afghanistan—this is really inside baseball—I know that Petraeus told Obama and Bob Gates, “I will go do this but I want to take Ryan Crocker with me,” because they were the architects of 43’s Iraq plan.

Bob Gates called me last summer after the whole McChrystal thing and he said, “I have something to tell you and I know you’re going to totally overreact, but you just have to—” He basically was telling me to stay out of the way. Well, it didn’t happen, for a variety of reasons, and Ryan kept telling me, “This is never going to happen.” With all due respect to Bob Gates, he doesn’t decide who Ambassadors are. Well, lo and behold, it came about and I just hate it. And Ryan doesn’t want to go. Talk about the consummate public servant.

Now here’s the good news: I think we have our interim dean all lined up. I had to laugh when the Bush School faculty members emailed me. President Bush is very hands-on with the school, but we try to be really careful, because it’s an A&M school. The decisions are theirs.

Riley: This is what I really wanted to ask you about, because I was not around when the Bush School was formed. I have some inkling that there were some tensions or issues early on with regard to exactly the point that you’re raising, about lines of authority and academic independence, that kind of thing.

Becker: It has total academic independence. You’re going to question who the interim dean is, now that I’ve said that. I’ll tell you in a minute who it is, as long as A&M approves.

Riley: By this time this comes out it will be—

Becker: Right. It has 100 percent academic independence. President Bush wants it to be totally nonpartisan. He doesn’t want it to be a political school at all, but it’s also his baby. It would be phony-baloney to pretend he’s not really—We don’t do any hiring or firing or any of that, but he’s been very interested in who all the deans are. Were we instrumental in making Bob Gates one of the early deans? Yes, that was our idea, but A&M had to approve it.

Riley: Sure.

Becker: And then he did such an amazing job that he went on to become President of A&M. It was really controversial when he was brought in, though, because he’s former CIA.

Riley: Well, the President happened to have that same history.

Becker: Exactly. So all that went away. President Bush thinks you have to have a mix of academia and outside world, and his personal opinion is that the dean would be a good position to have someone from outside academia. Anyway, Dick Chilcoat, who was a general in the Army, came in after Bob Gates, and then Dick died, and then Ryan Crocker was definitely President Bush’s idea, because we knew he was retiring from the Foreign Service. Again, Ryan
had to go through the process. A&M had a search committee, a nationwide search, and we put him in the process, but he had to pass muster, which he did, and he’s been a rock star.

The faculty is really upset. He’s been there a year and a half. They also know he got off to a great start in the fundraising campaign. [Charles] Chuck Hermann, who is head of the international program, emailed me a couple weeks ago and he said, I know you’re going to pretend you know nothing, but we’re all waiting for the white smoke from Walker’s Point on who the new dean is going to be. It’s acting dean, because Ryan’s just taking a leave of absence. Well, it’s going to be Andy Card.

Riley: Oh, no kidding.

Becker: And we’re beyond thrilled.

Riley: That just creates headaches for me, though, because I need Andy for other things.

Becker: Well, you know what? The whole world’s not going to be happy. Andy told me this week. Andy is thrilled. I called him and I said, “I’m just going to ask you this. I don’t want you to say a word, I just want you to think about it.” And he immediately—but it’s so Andy. He thought of five people who would be better, two in particular. He was pushing Andrew Natsios and Roger Porter. We came up with a list. I got ideas from everyone. I got ideas from 43; I got ideas from Secretary Baker; Bob Gates emailed me and said, “I have the perfect person at Defense.” Of course, he was feeling guilty for being part of taking Ryan away from me. And of course A&M is doing their whole thing over here, which we totally respect, but the provost had said to Ryan Crocker, “I will be interested in knowing what President Bush is thinking. I know how this works. Just let me know what he’s thinking.”

Riley: Sure.

Becker: Well, they’re thrilled. We were very nervous about it. You know Andy. He’s great.

Riley: I’ve never met him, but I know him by reputation.

Becker: Oh, he’s wonderful. There is going to be some pushback because he was 43’s Chief of Staff, and there’s going to be some controversy. I’m convinced and President Bush is convinced, that it will take one meeting with the faculty, for the faculty to say, “Oh, okay.” The provost went as far as to tell Andy—this conversation just took place on Tuesday—there are 40 Bush school faculty, and she said there are 11 who are going to have an issue with this and the other 29 are going to be thrilled.

The early controversy with the Bush School was that it was part of the College of Liberal Arts. It was part of that school and we were not real happy with that because we didn’t have our own identity, and so we really fought. President Bush wanted it to be its own school, and that was hard because it was so small. We were then, and my guess is we still are, the smallest school on campus, but Don Powell, who was then the chairman of the Board of Regents, went to bat for us, so it is its own school. It’s doing really well. That is his passion right now, the Bush School. He just feels so passionately about—this is quoting a line that he uses in all his speeches: “Service is
a noble calling.” It frustrates him that so many people now think it’s not; that if you run for office, you have a big ego or you’re power hungry.

One of our things we are trying to raise money for—we have a great fellowship record. We would like to do even more. We’d like to have 100 percent fellowship because we don’t want these kids to come out of this masters degree program with a big debt. We want them to feel like they can afford to go to the Foreign Service, or the CIA, or be the mayor of—you know? One of our grads just became mayor of some town in Texas. We’re very excited. So that’s his passion now and we’re so excited about Andy Card, we can hardly stand it, because he’ll do a great job.

Riley: When will the news on that be made public?

Becker: A couple more weeks. He goes to College Station, the week after next, to meet with the faculty. Again, we’re just so respectful. This is A&M’s decision.

Riley: So the final decision has not been made.

Becker: It has not been made, but the provost called them.

[one page has been redacted]

Riley: Part of the reason I raised the question about how smooth the entry was into A&M—

Becker: It was difficult.

Riley: I’m sort of watching this at SMU now.

Becker: Of course that’s a little different.

Riley: Yes, I think it is.

Becker: Because the institute—Is it part of SMU or is it totally independent?

Riley: The institute is not, but there was—

Becker: I think Jim Cicconi—and George W. was there in the beginning. George W. was very hands-on with his dad’s school and library being at A&M.

Riley: Oh, is that right?

Becker: Yes.

Riley: Maybe he learned it there.

Becker: I think he learned a few things.
Riley: I will say that they have been immensely attentive to good relations with SMU. Even when Mark Langdale and Karl Rove came to see us about doing an oral history, probably the number-one anxiety they had was, “How do we justify doing this with the University of Virginia, when we’re trying to cultivate a good relationship with SMU?”

Becker: That’s interesting.

Riley: Ultimately, it wasn’t an issue, because SMU didn’t have the capacity to do this. But it’s a testament to the sensitivities they have to what’s going on at SMU.

Becker: Yes, that’s very interesting.

Riley: There was still a lot of grumbling when the decision was taken up at the library there.

Becker: Really?

Riley: Well, among the faculty.

Becker: Oh God, it was horrible!

Riley: We don’t want anything to do with this.

Becker: Oh, the press was horrible. I tell you, 41 was just heartsick, because our experience at A&M really has been great. The issues have all been what I would call technical ones. President Bush—Those students love him. He is a rock star there and it killed him, the SMU stuff. He said, “I want George to have the experience that I did.” If we would let him, President Bush would move to College Station. If Mrs. Bush dies first, he swears he’s selling the house in Houston and moving to College Station. She said she would divorce him; that she’s not moving to College Station. I told him, “You also would lose your chief of staff.” But I think he will, if she dies first, because he just loves it up there and he loves interacting. He goes to all the sporting events, everything from softball games and baseball games, and he’s part of the culture up there, and they love him.

Riley: The Texas A&M culture is different from the SMU culture, right?

Becker: Totally. That’s the thing.

Riley: You’re giving me an exaggerated nod like, Yes, this is different.

Becker: Totally. SMU is just a little more liberal. The Aggies is such a conservative school. They’re probably more conservative than President Bush is. He gave Ted Kennedy the George Bush award for distinguished public service and the students wanted to protest it. I still remember when he came out to introduce Senator Kennedy; it was really funny. Almost the entire Kennedy family came with him: Caroline [Kennedy Schlossberg], Ethel [Kennedy Skakel], all his sisters—there were about 12 of them. We were like, Good grief.

Riley: And you thought the Bushes were the big family.
Becker: I thought the Bushes were the big family. President Bush came out to introduce Senator Kennedy, and there was a lot of controversy about the selection. President Bush came out to introduce him and he said it was his choice to give it to Ted Kennedy.

Riley: Sure.

Becker: We always tell everyone that we do this huge nationwide search and have this nationwide search committee. Well, the selection committee is one person: George Herbert Walker Bush, on the George Bush award. He says, “You all can have a search committee when I die.” But he came out and he talked about Senator Kennedy, and he talked about how you can agree or disagree with him, but he is the consummate public servant, and about everything he’s done for Massachusetts and the country. It was just your standard, but very warm, introduction. And then at the end of it he held up his finger and he said, “If I hear one ‘boo’ when Senator Kennedy comes out here, I will never forgive you.” I was sitting in the audience going, Oh my gosh, I can’t believe he just did that. He held up his finger. And he got a huge standing ovation. I think he would have anyway, but he basically said, “Behave yourself.” It was funny.

Riley: The politics of these relationships is something that’s a little bit of a mystery for me outside. There’s forever a tension between academia and the real world, under any circumstances, but particularly for political figures and particularly for Republicans, it’s just harder. It’s probably easier at A&M than it is at 95 percent of other universities. It’s hard trying to figure out how to bridge the differences when the cultures are so different.

I want to make sure we leave enough time. Let’s go ahead and talk about his son. His son becomes President.

Becker: Let me say one more thing about the former President—and President Bush would kill me for telling you this, because he doesn’t believe this, but he is the unofficial dean of the former Presidents. If he agrees to do something, they all agree to do something. Everyone else does. It’s been like that for years. Everybody emails or calls me and says, “What are you all doing with this? You’re doing it? Okay, we’ll do it.” I really don’t know why.

Riley: Now I know who to come to if I need a big event.

Becker: You know what? You’re right. If he’ll do it, the rest of them will do it. If President Bush doesn’t do it, the rest of them will say, “No, we’re not doing it.” A couple of years ago, just to give one example, Major League Baseball for the All-Star Game was going to honor volunteerism, and they wanted all the Presidents to tape—President Obama was going to the game in St. Louis, but they wanted President Carter, President Clinton, 41 and 43, to tape something to be shown in the pre-game ceremonies, about volunteerism, and then to talk about an outstanding volunteer in their hometown. Well, this was a given for us, because it’s one of our big causes, Points of Light. I said, “Of course we’ll do it.”

So Major League Baseball comes up here to do 41’s tape, and we actually did 43’s, because he just happened to be here, so they had a two-for. The woman from Major League Baseball said to me, “You do know that the minute they all found out 41 was doing this, they all did it. Do you know that that’s how it works?” I said, “I sort of do.” She said it was just amazing. The Clinton office said, “Well, I don’t know.” And 43’s office said, “I don’t know, we’ll think about it.” And
Carter’s office, “Well, maybe. We’ll get back to you.” She said, “Then, you all said yes, so I emailed all the other Chiefs of Staff and said, ‘41 is doing it,’ and they said, ‘Oh, okay, well then, we’ll do it.’” I think it’s just respect for him.

**Riley:** At what point—I’m trying to move into the discussion about 43, and I guess I’m curious about the point at which you began to detect that there is a swell of movement for him to think about running for President in 2000.

**Becker:** I would say right after the ’96 election, and certainly by the time he was reelected in ’98 in an absolute overwhelming landslide. It had reached tsunami proportions.

**Riley:** One of the things I should ask in advance of that is: You’re a resident in the state where the man’s son is Governor. Is there anything that you want to talk about in regard to that? We’ve talked about him as a political candidate, as a political figure, but were there things going on in Austin that you had any particular attention to?

**Becker:** Not really. He was a very popular Governor. I really don’t remember anything under his Governorship. No, not really.

**Riley:** And was there any change in pattern in terms of—Are they spending less time at Kennebunkport in the summer?

**Becker:** No.

**Riley:** So that’s always sacred.

**Becker:** None of that changed.

**Riley:** He gets elected again in ’98, and one of the things that we pick up is that there is a sort of semipublic front porch campaign that’s going on. There are a lot of people interested in national politics who are beginning to make the trek to Austin to talk with 43. Are you following that?

**Becker:** Yes. We’re pretty well following that. I would say we were pretty well in the loop on what was going on. Karl would come to Houston, and certainly 43 would talk to his parents, but Karl would come visit every once in a while and brief them.

**Riley:** How long had you known Karl?

**Becker:** President Bush 41 has known Karl since the ’70s. He was one of the first people hired. I got to know Karl, probably while he was Governor. It feels like forever but it’s not. Probably during his first Governor’s race is when I got to know Karl.

**Riley:** So you said Karl would come to—?

**Becker:** Karl would come visit us and brief us on what was going on. And 43 talked a lot to his parents about all this, too. I couldn’t tell you exactly when he made the decision to run.

**Riley:** Is this parental advice or is this political advice that he’s seeking from his dad?
**Becker:** Parental. And 41 always wanted him to run.

**Riley:** No kidding?

**Becker:** Without a doubt. He would love for Jeb to run this year. He may be the only—Well, he’s not the only American. There’s a huge swell. I think he’s the only member of the family. I think Neil is in favor of him running. Neil and 41 are the only two people of the Bush family who think he should run, and that would include Jeb.

**Riley:** That was obviously my next question, to find out whether Jeb had any enthusiasm for it.

**Becker:** None. Actually, I think 43 would love for Jeb to run. Bush 43 is a little more pragmatic about it. He thinks Jeb would be a great President. He knows the mountain is probably too tall. Jeb never has wanted to run. He says, “I’m not running,” and then the whole world totally ignores him, including his father. “Well, he says he’s not running, today.”

**Riley:** But your parents know things. They see body language.

**Becker:** Jeb’s not going to run.

**Riley:** You’re telling us that 41 was enthusiastic about him running.

**Becker:** From Day One.

**Riley:** Day One, before the ’96 election?

**Becker:** I’m not sure. The time frame is fuzzy in my head, to tell you the truth, but I do remember President Bush saying that when you’re Governor of Texas you automatically become a potential player, just because Texas is the second largest state. It’s so big that when you’re the Governor of a major state, you’re automatically in play.

**Riley:** You said that you were getting reports back from Karl and that they were talking a lot. Do you have any specific recollections about conversations or events or anything? It’s just too fuzzy?

**Becker:** It’s too fuzzy. I really don’t.

**Riley:** He must have announced some time in— It must have been known by late ’99 that he was going to be running.

**Becker:** Oh, absolutely. He announced in the summer of ’99, yes. I would say that by the end of ’98 everyone knew he was running, and then he announced.

**Riley:** And they were thrilled with it.

**Becker:** Thrilled.

**Riley:** This includes mom?
**Becker:** Yes.

**Riley:** Mom was skeptical about Ann Richards.

**Becker:** She was skeptical just because she—Well, that was because she didn’t think Ann Richards could be beaten. This was more about knowing what a tough road it was. *Here we go again.* I mean ’92 was horrible. Bush 41 has forgotten all of that. He’s way over ’92. But Mrs. Bush hasn’t, and she knows it’s a tough road, so she was a little more hesitant. Bush 41—absolutely not. He was all in from Day One. Then of course Mrs. Bush was too.

**Riley:** Once the decision was made.

**Becker:** Once the decision was made.

**Riley:** Were there subsequent discussions—What I’m trying to get at is the decision-making process for how involved 41 ought to be in the campaign.

**Becker:** Karl and I talked about it a lot. It was really complicated, for the obvious reason. George W. had to establish his own identity from his father. It’s even more complicated when you have the same name. I think it was complicated for 43, and the person who understood it the most was 41, probably. He really got it, that George W. had to be his own person and there had to be—For example, they didn’t campaign together at all. They probably appeared first together at the Republican Convention in 2000, and we even talked a lot about the role then.

The former Presidents always gave speeches at the conventions and President 41 is the one who said—He went and spoke in 1996, and boy, he really didn’t want to at all. Was it 2000, or was it four years later? I think it was 2000, when President Bush told Karl and everyone at the convention, “Why don’t we break the tradition of the former Presidents speaking. There are too many of us and it’s more complicated this year.” Then there was concern, “Well, we don’t want to hurt Gerry Ford’s feelings.” So I was tasked to call President Ford’s chief of staff, Penny Circle, and she said, “Oh, my God, President Ford will be thrilled.” President Bush said, “Of course, I knew that. None of us like doing it. Maybe some people do, but you don’t want to do it. It’s ‘trot out the old guy night.’” I think that was exactly what he said. That was all part of the context of trying to figure out what to do with 41, because he’s a former President and he’s the candidate’s father, but George W. had to be his own person.

Mainly what the Bushes did that campaign year was raise money, once again black-belt fundraisers. During the convention, both in 2000 and 2004, they had impossible schedules. They did tons of interviews, tons and tons and tons of media interviews, but there was always a carefulness about it.

**Riley:** It seems from the outside that it would probably put President Bush 41 in a very bad position, because he’s somebody who wants to do things for his family, right?

**Becker:** That’s right.

**Riley:** I mean his natural impulse is to get out and do.
Becker: To get out and do.

Riley: But the political instincts are telling him, *I can’t be out in public doing.*

Becker: Right. He had to take a back seat.

Riley: You said Karl understood this very well, too.

Becker: Karl definitely understood it, yes.

Riley: And when he was coming to see you, you’re trying to navigate—

Becker: We’re trying to navigate these waters about the best way to use him in the campaign, what he should or shouldn’t be doing. It was decided early on, the big campaign rallies, they weren’t his thing anyway. Raising money. He did a ton of exhaustive fundraisers.

Riley: Is he speaking at the fundraising events or is he just showing up?

Becker: He’s definitely speaking. In the fall, Mrs. Bush did a ton of rallies, 41 less so. I’m not sure he did any. I’d have to think really hard. Mrs. Bush they definitely put out there because she was wildly popular. But again, 41 understood it. The press likes to make up stuff, but it was very complicated.

Riley: Was he also providing political advice?

Becker: No, he really wasn’t.

Riley: And personnel and things of that nature?

Becker: No.

Riley: Was it considered a disqualifier for 43 if you had 41 experience? In other words, was there a tendency to try to establish distance?

Becker: No. Andy Card would be an example of—The answer to that is no. I was amazed, and 41 was appalled—this would be after the election. During the election, 43 really had his own team. There were hardly any 41 people, and there were definitely some 41 people who thought they would be heavily involved and they were angry that they weren’t. Once again, 41 really got that. It could not be the old 41 team. There are a couple of people in particular who were just livid that they weren’t tapped to help and it was really Karl Rove who ran that. It was sort of a triumvirate: Karl Rove, Karen Hughes, and Joe Allbaugh. But it was more Karl than the other two. They all had their own niche, but when it came to the political— [*knock on door*] Hello?

Female Speaker: President Bush just called me and he’s calling off the boat trip.

Riley: I see the fog coming in.

Female Speaker: He said it’s too cold and now the weather doesn’t look good, so he’s just going to take a little nap.
Becker: I didn’t know the fog was rolling in.

Riley: I’ve been watching it.

Becker: I knew the sun had faded. Russell, I’m sorry. You almost had your moment with destiny.

Female Speaker: Maybe it’s a moment of fate.

Riley: All right, too bad.

Becker: I know, I’m sorry. That would have been very fun.

Riley: As I said, I’ve been watching the surf behind you and then about ten minutes ago, the fog showed up and I thought, If this doesn’t blow off—

Becker: It just did not bode well. I should have kept notes and I didn’t. I’m glad I didn’t keep notes.

Riley: Nobody keeps notes any more.

Becker: Good. But it was a complicated time period made easier only by the fact that George Bush got it. Al Gore became famous during the campaign. In one of the debates he said something about putting something in a lockbox. Do you remember that?

Riley: Sure, Social Security.

Becker: Social Security in a lockbox, and everyone sort of made fun of him. Actually, during George W.’s entire Presidency, I used to tell President 41, and tell others, that President 41 had to put his identity in a lockbox during 43’s Presidency. He really did, but it’s what he wanted to do. No one made him do it. It’s just the way it had to be. It just had to be that way.

Riley: One of the press accounts that I read here said that Rove talked with you just about every day during the course of the campaign.


Riley: All right.

Becker: We talked a lot. I would say once a week.

Riley: And you’re mostly getting briefings from him about how it’s going?

Becker: Well, sort of a combination of things. At this point, I’ve worked for this family for so long that I have become—One of my friends says I’m the consigliere, which is not—Sometimes that could be true.

Riley: This boat coming in behind us—Is that the guys who were out waiting for the President?
Becker: That’s the Secret Service.

Riley: So they’ll come in now because he’s canceled the trip?

Becker: Obviously they have not gotten the word that he’s not going.

Riley: Are those frogmen getting off the boat?

Becker: They’re going to turn around and go back any minute now. That’s Secret Service agents.

Riley: All right.

Becker: Karl and I would talk about all sorts of things. Part of it would be keeping me in the loop, and part of it would be him saying, “Okay, here are these people. Do you know this person? What’s the relationship with the family? We’ve gotten a call that this guy is a longtime friend. Who the hell is he?” Sometimes, I would have to call family members or some people and say, “Okay, please don’t do that. Please don’t say that.” There was one family member who wanted to run for office. I’m not going to mention names. I think this was actually later. George W. was President by this time and there was a first cousin who wanted to run for state office, and I was the one who had to call and say, “This isn’t a great idea.” That’s where the consigliere part comes in. So we would just talk about stuff.

Riley: Whatever was coming up. Was there anybody else in the campaign that you would talk with on a weekly basis?

Becker: Joe Allbaugh, and Karen somewhat, too, but Karl more than the other two.

Riley: You said you had known Karl but not in any particular special way.

Becker: Right. I would say we became very close in 2000.

Riley: The President did give a speech at the convention in 2000.

Becker: Did he?

Riley: I think so.

Becker: When was the “no Presidents speaking”? Was that 2004? I can’t remember. Are you sure he spoke in 2000?

Riley: I’m not sure.

Becker: I’m getting my conventions confused. I can pull the schedule.

Riley: No, there’s no need to. The follow-on question from that would just be about any particular events or activities in 2000, leading up to the election, where the President had a major role, or is it all pretty much behind the scenes?
Becker: They did a big press conference here on the lawn at Walker’s Point the summer of '99, and that was a big deal. That was the kickoff of his campaign and they decided to do it here, which was a big thing that we went around and around about. Otherwise, he just was the tireless, consummate fundraiser, traveling all over the country doing fundraisers.

Riley: And those all went well?

Becker: Yes.

Riley: There were no problems?

Becker: No. None whatsoever.

Riley: Any observations about what he was experiencing? You said that he understood himself well enough to know that he could accept this kind of behind-the-scenes role.

Becker: He definitely got that. It was very difficult. George W. lost New Hampshire, which shocked everyone. John McCain beat him there. President Bush took all these losses really personally. But the worst was the fall. It was just awful because it was neck-and-neck with Al Gore, and President Bush took every press report—everything—personally, and I hated it. I remember I decided I was going to quit before 2004. I was not going to go through another campaign, because I don’t even like politics all that much, which may be sort of a lie, but it just was so traumatic for him, the ups and downs.

Election night, the 41s were at the Governor’s Mansion with George and Laura, and I was at the hotel headquarters in Austin with Karl and Joe Allbaugh and 43’s whole team. I was with them at the Marriott in Austin. It was such a chaotic night and no one knew what the hell was going on. I think Vice President Gore literally changed his mind about conceding the election. He was about ready to walk out on stage and an aide stopped him and said, “Not so fast.” He had already called 43, I think. Hadn’t he?

Riley: Concession and then an un-concession.

Becker: He took it back, basically.

Riley: You were in the suite when all of this was going on?

Becker: I was in the suite when all of this was going on, but the 43s and the 41s were not there. They were at the Governor’s Mansion and Jeb was over there with them. Marvin and Doro were with us, and Karl was on the phone keeping 43 informed. One of the things that 41 did that night, or before that night, which he failed to tell me, was he had given out my cell phone number to a lot of different people who wanted to be in touch with him that night about what was going on. He said, “Call Jean Becker’s cell.” I got phone calls from the following people, not knowing that President Bush had—Prince Bandar of Saudi Arabia, John Major, Brian Mulroney, and Drayton McLane, who owns the Houston Astros, were four of the people who called my cell phone that night. “Jean, this is Prince Bandar. How are you? 41 said you could give me election results.” I’m like, “Okay.” It would have been nice for him to have told me, quite frankly, that he had done that.
Well, the whole thing falls apart, and we were actually—I was waiting for George W. to come out and give his acceptance speech, and then we all went back to the hotel and everyone was trying to figure out what the heck is going on, and all of his friends keep calling me, like Bandar and John Major.

My cell phone rang and it was 41. He’s at the Governor’s Mansion and he said, “I don’t have any idea what’s going on. I think George went to bed. I can’t find anybody. What’s going on?” I found out later, George and Laura had gone to bed because Karl had told them, “This is not going to be resolved tonight.” I don’t know how 41 missed that, but the poor thing is in the Governor’s Mansion and he said, “I can’t find anybody. I can’t find Bar.” I just said, “Well, do you want me to come over? You just need to go to bed. I think everyone’s gone to bed, sir.” I wanted to say, Where have you been? How did you miss this? By that time Jeb was at the Marriott with us, working the phones in Florida, trying to figure out what the hell had happened. Anyway, so poor President Bush.…

The next morning, it was absolutely pouring down rain, torrential rains. We had a plane that was supposed to take us back to Houston and we couldn’t fly because the weather was too bad, so we had to drive. I was really not happy to spend three hours in torrential rains. I was going to ride in the Secret Service car and President Bush wanted me to ride with them. It was a surreal ride. Mrs. Bush sat all the way in the back. She wanted to sit back there and put her feet up. She was needlepointing the whole way, chattering about the fact that she thought the Governor’s Mansion needed new towels. I’ll never forget that. That was how she cope with things. She’s like, “You know what? I just said to Laura, you’re going to have to get all new towels for this Governor’s Mansion.” I’m sitting there thinking, What? You must be joking.

I was sitting in the middle seat with President Bush, and Jeb called. Jeb had just gotten home in Florida; he had just landed in Florida. He was Governor still and he called and said, “I just hung up with George W.” Jeb was watching—I remember he told his dad, “The Democrats are way ahead of us. A plane full of Democratic lawyers just landed in Tallahassee. I’m literally sitting here on the tarmac watching a 737 full of lawyers from D.C. getting off the plane.” And they were way ahead of us, the Vice President’s campaign. Jeb said, “What are you all doing?” The sight of this plane just shocked him, that they already had people on the ground, and 43’s campaign did not. It was on that car ride that it was decided that James Baker would head up the chad—

Riley: Decided by whom?

Becker: Let’s see. I should have taken notes. I think Secretary Baker was 43’s idea, and he called his dad. There were a lot of conversations. I was working—President Bush was on his cell phone, and I was on my cell phone, and Karl called, and Margaret Tutwiler even called, because they had called Margaret and we were just trying to mobilize. And 41’s on the phone with 43 while I’m on the phone with Karl, and they wanted to know 41’s opinion about Jim Baker. President Bush said, “If he’ll do it, yes, but it’s a huge thing you’re asking him to do.” Well, Secretary Baker was all over this. So that’s what we did on the car ride home and it was surreal and it just was so shocking.

Riley: So you get back to…You were in—?
Becker: Houston.

Riley: You were heading to Houston. Did you come back to Kennebunkport at that point?

Becker: We were in Houston then, because it’s November.

Riley: That’s right.

Becker: We’re living in Houston at that time. President Bush got a new hip a week or two later. It had already been scheduled, and he was really grumpy about it.

Riley: I bet, based on my own personal experience with him and doctors.

Becker: Yes. Plus, he was obsessive about this. He went to get a new hip—He went to the Rochester, Minnesota Mayo Clinic, and he called me from the recovery room to see if there was any news, and he fell asleep on the phone. I was in the middle of telling him, “Well, the Florida Supreme Court said this.” And then I realized he was snoring, which was very funny. But it was tough; it was really tough.

The night of the Supreme Court decision, we were all home. I was in my house; they were in their house. I should have gone over there. I don’t know why I didn’t go over to the Bushes’ house. George W. was in Crawford, I think. Did they have Crawford then?

Riley: Yes.

Becker: I’m pretty sure they were at Crawford. We were waiting for the Supreme Court ruling to come down and I was watching NBC. I actually just talked to Pete Williams about this recently. Pete Williams and the other legal reporter for NBC—I’m not sure he’s still there but he was really good. I’m watching NBC—I don’t know who or what you were watching that night, if you were watching anything, but Pete Williams and the other lawyer were literally standing on the steps of the Supreme Court.

Riley: Reading it and trying to figure out what it said.

Becker: Yes. It was an amazing thing to watch. Pete Williams was like, “Let’s see, let’s see, let’s see—Uh, I’m reading here—” And Tom Brokaw was sort of like, “Okay, come on, come on.” And he said, “I think George W. Bush just became President of the United States. I’m reading here that they—” It was a complicated decision, but Pete Williams said, “I think George W. Bush just got elected President of the United States.”

So I call over to 41’s house and they are watching ABC [American Broadcasting Company], and Brit Hume had just declared that the decision favored Al Gore and that these votes would be—that probably Al Gore was going to eventually be President of the United States. I call over there and President Bush is just devastated. I said, “What are you watching?” He said, “ABC.” I said, “Sir, I think 43 just won the election.” He said, “Well, not on ABC.” I said, “On NBC he did.” So I called Karl and they’re the same way. They’re all watching TV. Isn’t that weird how that works?
Riley: It is strange, yes.

Becker: We’re all trying to figure out from the media, because they’re the ones reading the—

Riley: And not only that, but in real time.

Becker: They had lawyers going through it too, their own lawyers, but everyone’s watching TV.

Riley: It’s funny, because I just don’t remember the decision being that oblique.

Becker: There were some really interesting stories written after it was over, and Pete Williams got a lot of credit for figuring it out. Pete Williams is the one who figured it out first. It was a very complicated decision. Now I can’t remember what was so complicated about it, but it wasn’t black and white. Pete Williams figured out that whatever it is the Supreme Court decided—They basically decided to either overturn a Florida Supreme Court decision or not to overturn it.

Riley: They did overturn the Florida Supreme Court. I’m pretty sure that’s how it happened.

Becker: So that’s how it happened. That was the deal. They basically made a decision based on the Florida Supreme Court, and then the big question was, do those votes get counted or not?

Riley: Right. Well, what you would have thought, though, is that the lawyers, as well as the people who had been following the case, would have been queued to look for decisions based on X, Y or Z, and it was sort of surprising that they were not.

Becker: They were not.

Riley: Eventually, somebody gets it right.

Becker: Somebody gets it right and George Bush called Al Gore that night. George H. W. Bush called Al Gore.

Riley: And told him what?

Becker: I just couldn’t believe he did that, to tell him, “I’ve been where you are.” That same conversation—and he called him right after Vice President Gore conceded that night. There was an immediate press conference and he conceded and President Bush called me and he said, “This may be a really dumb idea, but I would like to call Al Gore.” I wasn’t sure. I just wasn’t sure how the Vice President would feel about hearing from anyone named Bush, quite frankly. I was doubtful and President Bush said, “I’m going to call him. I know how he’s feeling.”

He did call, and I’m convinced I saw this phone call on television. He said, “Well, how do I get hold of him?” I said, “Through the White House operator.” I had to give him the number. I said, “Call the White House operator,” because I wasn’t there. I should have gone over to their house that night. I said, “Call the White House operator, tell them who you are, and tell them you want to talk to the Vice President. They’ll hook you up.” He said okay. I remember watching the Vice President get in his car—they were showing this. He gave his concession at the Old Executive
Office Building. He was in his office—Anyway, I see him get on the phone and I’m thinking, *Oh, my God, he’s talking to 41*. I think it was.

**Riley:** No kidding?

**Becker:** I think it was, because President Bush called me right after that and said, “I just talked to Al and I think he’s glad I called, and he was very nice. I just said, ‘Al, I know how you’re feeling. I may be the last person you want to hear from, but I just want you to know, I’ve been where you’ve been and there is life after defeat.’”

**Riley:** I’m trying to remember if it was immediately, when Gore gave the speech, which was basically—

**Becker:** It was immediately. It was that night.

**Riley:** That’s what I was thinking. Because there was all of this pressure from among the Democrats, for them to keep fighting this. I don’t know on what grounds, but there was a sense that the contest could continue. And Gore said, “No, this is final.”

**Becker:** This is it. What was so complicated was trying to figure out from the decision of the U.S. Supreme Court, did that end it or did it just close another door? I’m pretty sure Gore conceded that night.

**Riley:** I think you’re right. I didn’t ask you about the [Richard] Cheney nomination for Vice President.

**Becker:** President Bush thought it was a great idea.

**Riley:** It was kind of unorthodox.

**Becker:** Very unorthodox.

**Riley:** He was the vetter.

**Becker:** The head of the search committee, right. He was the vetter, right, and it was very unorthodox.

**Riley:** From your knowledge, that was a decision that George W. Bush himself made?

**Becker:** Absolutely, yes.

**Riley:** Who was the originator of the designation 41 and 43? How was it decided that was going to be a way to refer to them?

**Becker:** It was in a speech given at the Alfalfa Club, which would have been as soon as the swearing in was over. It was given by a Congressman. At one time I knew who the Congressman was, but I don’t remember anymore. I know it originated from a speech given at the annual Alfalfa Club Dinner, which would have been the last Saturday in January. President 41 was there and 43 was there, and this Congressman gets up and says, “Okay, how does this work? President
Bush and President Bush, Mr. President and Mr. President. How are we going to do this?” And he said, “I’ve come up with 41 and 43,” and then he had some little funny addition to it, saying, “And then if you want to call both George Bushes, you say 84.” That is where it started.

Riley: Did I see some reference to 84 downstairs on something?

Becker: It wouldn’t be that. There’s 41 and 43 everywhere. I even have house slippers someone sent me that have 41 and 43 on them. But it just caught on like wildfire. It is definitely how we talked through the entire Presidency. You always talked about 41 and 43, and we still do. I remember, in the beginning of our relationship with Bill Clinton, I inadvertently, not to his face but to his chief of staff, or in a meeting with members of his team one day, I called him 42 and they loved it. Laura Graham emailed me and said, “I told President Clinton that you called him 42, and he just thinks that’s the coolest thing.” So it just became a habit.

Riley: It’s used by everybody in the network.

Becker: It’s used by everybody now.

Riley: We use it as our own shorthand internally, because we pick it up from everybody. Well, there was Old Man Eloquent for Quincy.

Becker: John Quincy Adams, yes.

Riley: That didn’t last very long.

Becker: Not very long, no.

Riley: The White House, or the inauguration—Do you have stories about the inauguration in 2001?

Becker: Not really. It was joyful. Here’s a stupid family story: President Bush—One of his hundreds of first cousins called me and was irritated because she felt that 43’s Inaugural Committee was not treating her right. She said, “In 1989, my family and I had tickets to everything and my kids—We had seats in this section. This time we’re invited, but do you think they know who I am? Can you call and tell them who I am?” I remember saying to her, “Shelley [Cole], here’s the deal: In 1989 you were the first cousin of the incoming President of the United States of America. In 2001, you are—” Everybody does this differently. In my language, she would be the second cousin once removed or something. I said, “You have moved one whole relationship wrung lower. George W.’s first cousins are [William H.T. Bush] Bucky’s kids and [Jonathan James Bush] Jonathan’s kids and [Nancy Bush Ellis] Aunt Ellis’ kids, and then all his Pierce first cousins. You need to think about how many layers. You’re a whole layer below, and your children….,” She said, “Oh.” There was a lot of that going on, because his family is so big.

Riley: Of course, yes.

Becker: That even went on at the convention a little bit. All the Bush grandkids wanted to go up on stage after George W.’s speech, and in the end they did. Boy, I was definitely on Karl Rove’s side on this, that it should be George and Laura and the twins. And everyone said, “But in
1988—” It’s not your grandfather running for President, it’s your uncle. In the end, George W. did have the whole family come up, which I thought was interesting, honestly.

The whole family thing was complicated. In addition, I remember saying to Shelley, “They also have been breeding like rabbits in the last eight years.” Anyway, I don’t remember anything else from the inauguration, just that it was a happy, happy time.

**Riley:** During the transition in personnel and so forth, is the President paying attention to it as an outside observer, or is he—Are they talking on a daily basis?

**Becker:** Definitely not on a daily basis. Definitely in the beginning, and for all eight years, everybody thought the way to the Oval Office was through us.

**Riley:** Oh, is that right?

**Becker:** Definitely. It was, in the beginning, people who wanted jobs. We did come up with a brilliant system for the White House personnel. President Bush 41 was appalled by how many of his team assumed they would get a job, and my job was to tell them, “This isn’t your time.” Some of them got jobs because they were really good and still in their prime. Some of them—What were they thinking? I was the one who—This is where the consigliere comes in. It fell to me a lot to say, “This is not your time. You had your time and this isn’t your time.”

We came up with this system, A, B, C, and D. I would send all these résumés to the White House personnel or Presidential personnel, and there was an A list, B list, C list, D list. There was a handful of people, two or three, that 41 personally championed, and they both got jobs. There were really three. One was low level. One was Andy von Eschenbach, who was an important doctor at MD Anderson, who wanted to head up the National Cancer Institute, and he did, and eventually went on to be head of the FDA [Food and Drug Administration] for W. And Don Powell, who was chairman of the Board of Regents at A&M, was very interested in going to D.C., and George W. made him head of the FDIC [Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation]. Believe it or not, those were the only two people he recommended. Of course he was thrilled about Andy Card, but that was 43’s idea.

**Riley:** So there wasn’t a routine circulation of 41 into what was going on?

**Becker:** No. I do think 43 called his dad. I know he did. For the eight years that 43 was President, when the two of them talked, I got up and left the room. Sometimes President Bush 41 would say, “No, stay.” I didn’t, because it was easier for me. I didn’t think it was appropriate for me to be in the room, number one. And number two, the press grilled me about what they talked about. Ignorance was bliss. Ignorance was easier. I wanted to be able to say, “I have no idea. I am not privy to their conversations.” So I don’t know what they talked about. I really don’t.

**Riley:** How often did the President see his son during this time?

**Becker:** Probably the same amount of time he would have if he weren’t President. It was sort of the normal relationship—Holidays.

**Riley:** Did they come up here still?
Becker: Oh yes, they came up here every summer. Now they come for two to three weeks; then he came for maybe five days. They spent Christmas at Camp David, and the Bushes would go to Crawford for Thanksgiving. And every time we went to D.C., he stayed at the White House, which was wonderful for him. So they would see each other quite a bit. We were in and out of D.C. on a fairly regular basis. Well, not really. Sporadic, I would say.

Riley: What was your story on 9/11? Where were you?

Becker: Have you heard this story?

Riley: If I did, I don’t remember it.

Becker: Nine-eleven is very funny. Well, not funny—let me qualify that. We were at the White House all day on September 10th. One of President Bush’s big post-Presidency causes has been cancer, and a lot of that has been through MD Anderson in Houston. He was chairman of the board, and I think we’ve raised $100 million for them. In addition to that, the Bushes were the founding chairmen of this national cancer group called C-Change. We were in D.C. meeting with the C-Change folks on September 10th. Of course the Bushes stayed at the White House the night of September 10th, and then they were wheels-up from Reagan Airport at 8:30 on 9/11. They had speeches in Minneapolis-St. Paul. I stayed in Washington, because I’m on the board of C-Change. The day before had been a big public meeting, and then the board of directors was meeting the next day. So I was in D.C. and they were in the air.

It’s a cancer group, so a number of doctors—The chairman of the board is a wonderful man, Dr. LaSalle Leffall, who’s a faculty member at Howard University. He immediately got up and said, “I’ve got to go to work. I’ve got to get to the hospital.” No one knew what the hell was going on. The rest of us—We were at the Renaissance Hotel, and D.C., starting immediately, came under martial law. Where were you?

Riley: In Charlottesville.

Becker: I actually tried to leave the hotel later that day, and I immediately was stopped by a National Guardsman. Unless you were medical personnel or trying to get to a small child, they were asking everyone to stay put. I had gone up to my hotel room and called—We were based out of here then, and I called the Secret Service command post, that building right there, to find out where the hell the Bushes were, because they would have been in the air. The agent I talked to said, “I cannot tell you where they are. It’s classified. They’ve been taken to a secure, undisclosed location. I can assure you they’re fine, but on an open line, I can’t tell you where they are. Thank God you called, because he is worried to death about you. He thought you were still at the White House.” I said, “No, I’m at the Renaissance Hotel and I’m fine. Tell him I’m fine.”

Cell service was horrible in D.C. that day, horrible. No one could call in and out. Forty-three has come back to the White House and he’s going to address the nation, and the Renaissance Hotel brought in a bunch of TVs. They had this big open bar area in the atrium, and everyone at the hotel was invited to come down into the atrium to watch the President, and they brought in all these TV sets. We’re all down there with our little cancer group, and my cell phone rings, and the whole bar was like—You know? It’s like you and I did just now: Whose cell phone is that?
I have no idea how the call got through but it was President Bush. It was 41. I was shocked. I was first of all shocked that my cell phone rang, and then when I answered it, it was him. He said, “Jean, where the hell are you? Bar and I are worried to death.” I said, “Well, I’m in the bar at the Renaissance Hotel in D.C. I’ve been here all day. I know you can’t tell me where you are. I talked to John McClellan this morning.” President Bush said, “I know.” I said, “He told me you’ve been taken to a secure, undisclosed location.” I really thought they were in West Virginia at that place under the Greenbrier, wherever the hell it is. I said, “I know you can’t tell me.” He said, “I’m at the Hampton Inn in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.” [laughter] “You’re where?” He said, “What secure, undisclosed location? I’m at the Hampton Inn, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. But you know, Bar and I feel pretty safe here because if the terrorists are after us, I don’t think they’re going to be looking at the Hampton Inn in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.”

Of course I asked the agents later, “What was that all about?” Well, they were trying to keep their location secret, all the Presidents. No one knew what the hell was going on. John said, “We were not talking about where they were.” I knew the head of the Secret Service, Chicago Field Office, and that’s a huge office. Tom [Kascha] told me that they sent almost the entire office to Milwaukee to protect them. He said, “Jean, it was like Fort Knox. That poor Hampton Inn—Trust me, nobody could have gotten in.” But the Bushes were unaware of all that, that all that had gone on. Is that not the funniest thing?

Riley: That’s wonderful. Had their flight been diverted, or were they expected to go there?

Becker: They were on a private plane and they got grounded like everybody else, and Milwaukee was their closest airport. The next day he called me and he said, “Are you going to come back today?” I said, “Well, I’ve got to figure out how to get out of here. We’re looking into renting cars.” They were home. I said, “How the hell did you get home?” Well, he had called the President of the United States and said, “Could you let our plane fly, George?” So they got to fly home.

Riley: They were the one plane in the air.

Becker: I’m convinced they were the only plane in the air that weren’t F-8 teams. President Clinton was overseas and they brought him home.

Riley: He was in Australia.

Becker: He was in Australia and I know they flew him home.

Riley: Was it that quickly?

Becker: Like a day or so later.

Riley: The impression I get is that there were a couple of days—

Becker: Yes. The U.S. government brought him home, but it was a couple of days. I don’t know where Carter was, or Ford.

Riley: When did you get out?
Becker: That day.

Riley: By automobile?

Becker: By automobile. I had an Avis car. They were doing a great job, the Avis Rent A Car place downtown. We were all trying to get out, and the C-Change secretary was working the phones and she said, “Avis says just come. There are no cars at any of the airports. They’re gone. Avis still has cars but we need to get down there. They won’t take reservations by phone. You have to come stand in line.”

So we all go racing to the Avis downtown and what they were doing, which was really smart, was trying to fill the cars up. I was with a bunch of American Cancer Society folks from Atlanta, and so they would say, “We have a car going to Atlanta, Georgia, and they have room for one person. Anyone going that way?” And maybe somebody way back in the line would say, “Yes, I’m going to Charlotte, North Carolina.” I took two people to Philadelphia.

Riley: You were headed this way?

Becker: I drove back to Kennebunkport, which is a nine-hour drive. I dropped two people off in Philadelphia and then I was by myself the rest of the way. It was traumatic.

Riley: So you got back up here.

Becker: I got back on the 13th. This is such a stupid story but I’ll tell it to you if you want to hear it.

Riley: Yes, sure.

Becker: I was actually on the phone with Don Powell, whom we’ve talked about a couple of times. He was then head of the FDIC, and he had called me to see where the 41s were. I don’t know if you’ve ever—Well, you haven’t driven up here. There are two ways through New York City. You can go around the city on the Garden State Parkway, which is how I like to go, or you can go—

Riley: You can go across the bridge.

Becker: In across the Tappan Zee, exactly.

Riley: Yes, I used to do that.

Becker: Or you can go right through, across the George Washington Bridge. When I got on the highway that day, there were all these huge highway signs saying, “Bridges and tunnels into New York City are closed.”

Riley: Right.

Becker: I’m really close to the city and I did see a sign that the bridges and tunnels had just reopened. The one right on Wall Street was still closed. Is that the Lincoln? I think it’s the
Lincoln Tunnel. It was still closed. Either the Holland or the Lincoln—One of them was still closed but everything else was open. I was going to take the Garden State Parkway around, because I had no interest in going through the city, and I missed my exit. It’s because I was on the phone with Don Powell. I missed my exit and I didn’t know I had missed my exit, and I’m just driving and driving and driving, and I see this huge plume of smoke and I’m thinking, I wonder what that is? Then in a couple of minutes I’m like, Oh, my God. I was looking right at Ground Zero. I didn’t realize where I was, so I said to Don Powell, “I’ve got to hang up.” It was awful. I felt bad. I should not have been there. You know what I mean? And cute, sweet Don Powell—he’s a wonderful man. He called me back and read me a Bible verse, which was so sweet, because I told him what was going on. I said, “Oh, my God, I see the—I’m here.” It was very traumatic.

I crossed the river. It was probably about 8:00 at night, and I had another four hours at least, four to five, and I just thought, I can’t do this. The Bushes—Some of their best friends live in Greenwich, Connecticut, Betsy and [Willard] Spike Heminway. I called them and I said, “Can I come spend the night?” So I did. Then I continued the next day. By that time they knew that Mohamed Atta, who was the lead [hijacker], had flown out of the Portland Airport.

Riley: I had forgotten.

Becker: He flew from Portland to Boston. And all those pictures you see of him looking back at the security camera are from Portland. I don’t think that was public knowledge yet, but the cops knew it. My car was in Portland because I had left—I had flown to D.C.

Riley: At the airport?

Becker: At the airport. I got to the Portland Airport and I was going to drop off my Avis car and pick up my car, and every car at the Portland Airport had been towed, every single car. My car was still there because I had flown out of the private aviation terminal with the Bushes. The first thing you see is huge vacant lots everywhere—the garage, the surface lots. My car was immediately surrounded by state police when I showed up. I rolled down my window and they were saying, “What are you doing here? What do you want?” I was like, Whoa! I explained, and I had a business card with me, and I said, “I work for President Bush 41.” No one knew then what was going on. Anyway, that’s my 9/11 story.

Riley: And the Bushes had come home?

Becker: They had come home the day before.

Riley: Home being—?

Becker: Here. We were here.

Riley: That’s why you were headed here rather than to Houston.

Becker: Right, I came back here.

Riley: Then President Bush goes to Washington.
Becker: For the prayer service.

Riley: Did you accompany him to that?

Becker: I did not go. I wasn’t invited. I could have gone, but I would not have gotten a seat at the Cathedral. They went down for that, and the morning he left—you know that the Presidents always sit in protocol order.

Riley: Right.

Becker: President Clinton and Hillary would have sat next to the 43s, then the 41s, then—I think Nancy Reagan didn’t come. I can’t remember. And then the Carters. President Bush said to me as he was leaving, “I don’t want to cause problems, but I would love to sit next to George and Laura.” I said, “Okay, let me make a phone call.” This was before he and President Clinton were friends but he said, “I think Bill would understand. I would really like to sit next to the President.”

So he did. Actually, he sat next to Laura. They switched the 42s and the 41s. And the White House person I dealt with said, “I’ll just talk to President Clinton about it.” He said that President Clinton—he just said, “41 has asked to sit next to his son.” There’s this great picture of him—I love that picture. It’s hanging in the Houston office—of when he just reached out his hand to touch 43’s hand, after he spoke. It’s a great photo.

Riley: What was President Bush 41’s state of mind when you finally caught up to him in the interim?

Becker: I got back on September 13th. It’s a great question, Russell, because he felt like everybody else in the country, except with the added weight that he knew what had just happened to his son. I don’t know this, because I didn’t see 43, but it would be interesting to know—and we’ll never know this—if 41 understood it even before 43. Probably not. I’m sure 43 got it right away too. But boy, 41 did. And what I remember is that, like everyone in the country, he was just in shock and devastated, but he knew that everything had changed for 43. Everything had changed. By that time, there was some criticism of what 43 had done that day, and 41 was really angry about that because we knew the truth: 43 wanted to go back to the White House immediately and it was the Secret Service who said, “Mr. President, we cannot take you back there.” And they were right. The White House had been evacuated. It was weighing very heavily on 41.

Riley: His mother?

Becker: I remember him more than her. I don’t remember. I’m sure it did, but I don’t remember.

Riley: Just terrific burdens then.

Becker: Terrific burdens.

Riley: Was there any way that he could help with the burdens at that time?
Becker: No. I know he talked to George W. every single day, just to be a dad.

Riley: Sure.

Becker: To be a dad. Not to be an advisor but to be a dad, basically. He was frustrated because Carter had done an interview, and President Clinton had done an interview, and the media was hounding us for him to do an interview and he really didn’t think he should. The White House really didn’t think he should, either. It was sort of like, *Everybody stay in their lane.* The media was just hounding us because they were desperate. They’re on the air 24-7 and they’re looking for anybody and everybody. Part of President Bush’s issue was that the CIA was getting hammered already, immediately, that they did not see this coming, and he was really angry about that and he wanted to defend the CIA, but we needed a forum in which to do it.

A couple of weeks after 9/11—I don’t know how long it was—the commercial aircrafts were flying again but they were empty. No one was flying. President Bush had to go back to Houston for something and we had a private plane that was going to take him down there. Someone had given him a plane. We had an idea that maybe what he could do, in a tiny little way, was to fly commercially to Houston, Texas. I called Karen Hughes and she said, “That is a great idea. We’re desperate. The airlines are hurting, and we want people to shop.” I remember 43 during this, when his mom said, “What can I do to help?” He said, “Mom, go shopping.” No one’s shopping. No one’s flying. The country needs to get going again.

I called Karen Hughes and I said, “President Bush is going to Houston in three or four days. How about if he flies Continental?” Karen said, “Oh, my God, that would be fabulous,” and she said, “Will you do an interview?” I said yes. We talked about who to give the interview to, and Tom Brokaw called me every single day. We had an interview request in from just about every anchor and everybody. Tom Brokaw called every single day, almost like clockwork, at the same time. It was always around this time. “Is President Bush doing any interviews yet?” “No, he’s not.” “Well, I’m just going to keep calling you, Jean, until you say yes.” So I said to Karen, “I would love to do Tom Brokaw,” and President Bush said “fabulous.”

I called Tom Brokaw and I said, “Here’s the deal. You have to meet us at Logan Airport. He’s going to fly to Houston and he wants to make a statement that commercial travel is safe.” They loved the idea because it was different from all the other hundreds of stories. Continental Airlines has loved us ever since. I was crushed when they merged with United, because it has been such a special connection. I called Continental Airlines and those people immediately became my best friend. I said, “I have something to tell you.” They said, “Oh, my God.” NBC put a camera on the plane and he did a sit-down interview with Tom Brokaw at Logan, and then a camera flew with him and there was another big press conference in Houston. That was a statement he could make.

Riley: Sure. Were you getting any sense about 43’s state of mind, or how he was dealing with the pressures during this period of time, too?

Becker: No. What I would tell you would be secondhand. What I would tell you is what I’ve heard Andy Card talk about, but it’s secondhand. But I think really well. He was very focused. Knowing 43, that does not surprise me.
Riley: A sense of purpose.

Becker: A sense of purpose.

Riley: We could carry on for another eight or ten hours. Physically, we probably couldn’t do it. I don’t know whether there are high points and low points during the course of the administration that you ought to deal with.

Becker: No, not really. Nine-eleven was just such a defining moment, obviously, and the uncertainty of what it was all about. Barbara Bush had totally given up her Secret Service protection. She was the only First Lady to have done so and her son forced her to go back under the Secret Service wing. There was a lot of concern about—The Bushes’ protection went way up, and that was a little unsettling. They were used to pretty laid-back protection by that point, and suddenly we had snipers in the bushes. But the rest of the administration—not really.

We talked about how, during the campaign, and it carried a little bit into the beginning of George W.’s Presidency, he had to establish his own identity from his dad. I think 9/11 ended that issue. I know that it did, sadly. There was no longer any question that—that all went away. In the first term, there was still a little carefulness about keeping the two George Bushes separate. In the second term, it definitely went away, because he started having meetings here. [Vladimir] Putin came here, and [Nicolas] Sarkozy came here, and all of those concerns went away.

Riley: One of the things that obviously is important in the 43rd Presidency, that historians are going to pore over, is the Iraq War. There was an op-ed that Brent Scowcroft had written at one point, that was viewed as a kind of caution flag, if you will, at the point when the administration—

Becker: That’s a good way of putting it, a caution flag.

Riley: The question is always raised about the extent to which President Bush 41 may have known about this in advance, or whether there had been consultations between them.

Becker: There had not been consultations. He did not ask Brent to write it. He knew it was going to be published. He knew about it in advance because Brent told him out of courtesy, and he didn’t really ask President Bush’s permission. They’re very good friends. They’re very close. And this is where President Bush—again, I’m in awe of him. He was able to keep all that separate. He told Brent, “You have a right to express your opinion. You’re one of the opinion shapers in D.C. and you have a right to say what you want. Absolutely, you have my full support.” None of that interfered with their friendship, whatsoever.

Again, talk about complicated, because there was all this speculation that not only did 41 know about it, but some people said he wrote it, or that he and Brent—that this was his way of sending a message to the White House through the back door. That’s ridiculous, but we had to put up with that stuff forever.

I’ll never forget, there was some New York Times reporter who wrote a book—There were multiple books, and many of them had many wrong things in them. I think his name was—No, it wasn’t Peter Baker’s book. Anyway, it said that 43 once got so frustrated at his dad that he
slammed the phone down and hung up. Well, I always tease the Bush family—They’re the worst phone people in the world. They don’t ever say goodbye. They hang up. I don’t know where they learned this. Jeb is the most famous for doing it, but 41 does it and 43 does it. When the conversation is over, they’re just gone.

Riley: They don’t say “bye”?

Becker: They don’t say goodbye. It’s the funniest thing. I’ll be on the phone with President Bush and—I don’t know—it’s the funniest habit I’ve ever seen, and it is family-wide, among the men at least. So some reporter says, “I understand 43 hung up on his dad,” and I said, “They hang up on each other all the time. They never say goodbye to each other.” There seems to be this internal sense of, This conversation’s over, but how do you explain that to somebody?

Riley: The way you just explained it.

Becker: Yes, but the press always wanted to read more stuff into it.

Riley: Let me ask you this then. Were there instances where tempers flared, that you recall, during the course of the Presidency?

Becker: No, I do not.

Riley: Do you remember any time when they were—

Becker: I know there were times that 41 disagreed with 43, and I’m not going to tell you what they were. I know there were things he disagreed with, but it was always private. I’m not even sure how much of it he told 43. I think he told him sometimes; sometimes he probably didn’t. Forty-one definitely felt he needed to stay out of his son’s Presidency, just as he felt he should stay out of—he treated him the way he did Bill Clinton. They were father and son. Do I think they talked about things? Absolutely. I know they did. But I was never privy to any of those conversations. And 41 can still be the consummate director of the CIA. He’s a very good secret keeper. He’s the champion of the poker face.

Riley: But you weren’t picking up signals at any point, where there were aggravations or frustrations.

Becker: Definitely not. Forty-three would get frustrated with Brent. I know he was frustrated with some of the stuff Brent was writing, but that didn’t have anything to do with his dad, and he knew that.

Riley: Were there other people who were in the networks? You’ve already said that there were differences between the 41 and the 43 networks.

Becker: There were.

Riley: Were there frictions between the two networks?
Becker: Sometimes, yes. Sometimes there were. I know that a lot of 41 people had the sense that 43 did not treat his father well, that he was held at arm’s length, like he didn’t exist. This was more during the 2000 campaign. But 41 got it; they didn’t get it. I tried to help them get it. No one got it better than 41, and he helped me get it, because sometimes I would feel that way. It’s like he didn’t exist. It’s like he had a mother but not a father. But because 41 got it, then I started to get it. Forty-three was in a very difficult position, but a lot of the 41 people felt there was that natural tension there between the haves and the have-nots. The person who I bet could speak unbelievably eloquently on this would be Andy Card, just because he was a member of both camps.

Riley: Yes. Well, we certainly hope to get Andy on the 43 project. He interviewed for 41 but he must have done it before—

Becker: Before he became Chief of Staff?

Riley: Yes, I mean, before the 2000 election, as I recall. The project started in ’99.

Becker: Well, you’d have to get him for 43’s for sure.

Riley: It would need to be done. You know the networks fairly well. Where would the motives come from? That’s not exactly the right word. If the aggravation is not originating from the family, what are people in the 41 network seeing or detecting that might lead them to believe that there is disrespectful behavior on 43’s part?

Becker: I think there was a misconception that 41 should be at the White House more than he was, and in photo-ops more than he was. Again, I did get this just because I’m here. Starting in 2009, through the end of 2012, is the 20-year anniversary of President Bush’s Presidency. We have—“we” being mainly the Bush Library Advisory Council—have made a concerted effort to use these 20-year anniversaries to highlight accomplishments of his Presidency, and we’ve been fairly successful. I had a wonderful Desert Storm 20th anniversary event.

Riley: Right, I heard about this.

Becker: The fall of the Berlin Wall—PBS did a wonderful documentary, and there was a big event in Berlin. Points of Light—President Obama came to D.C. The only reason I bring this up is to say that during all the 10-year anniversaries, starting at least in 2001, George W. was either running for President or was President. We didn’t do anything for the 10-year anniversaries, nothing. I think there were a few interviews for Desert Storm because the media bugged us, but we were not proactive on any 10-year anniversary stuff. We did some little things.

Some members of the Bush Library Advisory Council were saying, “Oh, my God, this is the anniversary of the ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990], and the Clean Air Act, and the fall of the Berlin Wall.” There were some wonderful things he accomplished and some wonderful things that happened while he was President. And the timing was all wrong. That would be a great example of where I was getting some pushback about, “You cannot let the White House, or you cannot let 43’s campaign, tell you what to do and what not to do.” Well, I wasn’t. Certainly, in 2000—What would have been going on in 1990, of President Bush’s? Desert Storm was ’90.
Riley: Desert Storm, yes.

Becker: It was at the beginning of ’91. We can’t be out there trying to get press attention. The invasion would have been August of ’90, and then Desert Storm itself would have been January of ’91. All of that was right smack in the middle of the campaign, or right at the beginning of his Presidency. The timing was all wrong for us to be beating 41’s drum, so legacy issues took a back seat and there was frustration in the 41 camp over that.

Riley: I’m just checking the anniversary calendar to see if anything…

Becker: It would have been—The war was fought in 1991.

Riley: But all of it is a piece of the same problem.

Becker: George W. was either running for President or was President during all the 10-year anniversaries.

Riley: Exactly.

Becker: Actually, I never really thought about this, but I would love to go back to a lot of those people and say, “See? It all turned out okay,” because after George W. left office, I definitely decided, okay, now all bets are off. I mean, everything we did for the eight years George W. was President was through the prism of his being President. It had to be that way. But when he left the Presidency, not anymore.

Riley: Well, it’s the same way with the interview process.

Becker: Now we’re going to go back to tooting his horn.

Riley: We encountered problems and it slowed down, it created complications, and then we sort of—You know, we hadn’t exactly put a bow around it but it was pretty much done until it’s over with—Okay, we can go back and it may not be perfect, but it’s better than it was before, to go back and get some of this stuff done. That certainly resonates with me.

Becker: Everything was just put on hold for eight years.

Riley: President Bush had an extraordinary network of global friends or contacts, people that he had dealt with on international issues. Did any of that benefit 43 as he was President?

Becker: Yes, I do think so.

Riley: Were there introductions that could be made, or preexisting relationships that he could—

Becker: Well, it’s a complicated question. I’m just telling you my opinion here. Because 41 was so respected in China and the Middle East, I think that there was a trust, therefore, immediately, of his son in China and in the Middle East, as well. By the time he became President, President Bush’s peers in Europe—the John Majors, Brian Mulroney in Canada—were all long gone. Mikhail Gorbachev, long gone, so less so there. But in China and the Middle East—
Riley: They’re still there.

Becker: Particularly in the Middle East—still there. China—Deng Xiaoping had died and Jiang Zemin, who President Bush knew very well. I do think the name helped there.

Riley: Right.

Becker: “Introduction” would be too strong of a word, probably, but President Bush 41 traveled a lot all over the world, and he would come home and have conversations with his son.

Riley: And this would be on anything from—

Becker: I wasn’t there.

Riley: You don’t know. You weren’t there.

Becker: I wasn’t there. Ignorance is bliss. I wasn’t there. But yes, he would come home from Saudi Arabia, and because President Bush was so determined to stay out of his son’s hair—He wanted them to be father and son. He felt that 43 needed him as a dad, so he would call Condi [Condoleezza Rice] or Colin Powell. Usually he would call Condi.

Riley: To give them reports on what was going on.

Becker: Condi was at the NSC [National Security Council]. President Bush knows how it works. He would call Condi and say, “Condi, I just got home from Saudi Arabia, and here’s what the King is thinking.” He wouldn’t call his son, and I love that. Some people might think that’s silly, but that’s how he wanted it to be. When he called George W. he wanted to just talk about, “How are you? How are the girls? How was your day?” He didn’t have to say, “Now write this down.” It’s not the relationship he wanted and I don’t think it’s what 43 wanted either.

Riley: And it also preserves the integrity of the staff structure, too, right?

Becker: That’s right, exactly.

Riley: I mean Condi doesn’t think that there’s anything wrong.

Becker: Exactly. No one respects process more than 41, so if he had information that he thought could be helpful or needed to pass along, he called Condi.

Riley: Are you okay to keep going for a little while longer?

Becker: I’m okay, yes. I’m good.

Riley: The reelection campaign—They got a role in the reelection campaign in ’04?

Becker: It was sort of the same thing as before: raising money, quietly campaigning behind the scenes, more of that kind of thing.

Riley: Does his health become problematic for him in doing some of this activity?
Becker: Certainly there was a difference between the 2004 convention and the 2000 convention, just older. He turned 80 in 2004. He’s noticeably slowing down a little bit. The energy level is a little less than it was, but that’s about it.

Riley: You said that you’d given thought to this before, and maybe there are some things that you have in mind that you want to talk about. I don’t want to get all the way through this without—

Becker: We’ve covered a lot of it. I wanted to talk about the Bush School, just because it’s such a big part of our life. I think we’ve done that. We’ve talked a little bit about cancer, definitely one of his big—Cancer would be a great example of where he did not want to reinvent the wheel. He chose MD Anderson as his vehicle to get involved in the cancer world, and then this other cancer organization. Cancer and volunteerism and public service have been the cornerstones of what he wanted to focus on. And Points of Light, of course, where he’s still honorary chair and still very involved with the Points of Light Foundation. We’ve done most of it: the disaster relief with President Clinton, and philanthropy work, and parachute jumping. We’ve done almost all of it. The naming of the aircraft carrier was just huge for him.

Riley: Oh, yes.

Becker: We tease him—There have been so many things named for him, and we keep a complete record in Houston. It’s everything from sandwiches—In Houston, there’s the George Bush Barbeque Plate at Otto’s, although Otto’s just closed. And there’s George Bush Pizza.

Riley: Otto’s just closed?

Becker: Otto’s closed. It was huge, devastating. They sold it.

Riley: That’s barbeque, right?

Becker: Barbeque, his favorite barbeque place.

Riley: Oh, no.

Becker: Now there’s going to be a Chase Bank there. I can’t believe it. But you know, there are highways and sandwiches and awards—all sort of things. The three things that have meant the most to him, and I think they came in this chronological order: the George Bush Airport in Houston—That was a huge thrill for him. He absolutely loved it that the city of Houston renamed their airport in his honor. Bush Airport, he definitely loves it. Once in a while, like once a year, our office will get a call about lost luggage, and we’ll say, “This is not Bush Airport.”

Riley: Is that on your résumé?

Becker: Number two, and this would be in chronological order but ascending order of importance: the George Bush Center for Intelligence, the CIA Headquarters, are named for him.

Riley: Oh, yes.
Becker: That was huge for him. That took an Act of Congress.

Riley: Did you go to the event with them?

Becker: I did not go to the event. Why did I not go to that? I can’t believe I didn’t. Everyone said it was unbelievable. I’ve overused this term today, but I don’t use it lightly—He’s a rock star at the CIA. They love him and they want to come brief him constantly. I keep waiting for them to come brief him about Osama bin Laden, but no one’s called yet.

Riley: Oh, no kidding?

Becker: Yes, no one’s called. I’m dying for him to get a briefing, because they love to give him special briefings. General Petraeus is coming to see him in a couple weeks. They all come to see him.

Riley: He was still being given an intelligence brief?

Becker: He can still get daily briefings, absolutely. They can get a daily briefing. They get it by secure fax. He has stopped reading his, but if we wanted to call CIA and say, “President Bush would love a special briefing on Osama bin Laden,” they would fly in a team. He just wouldn’t ask.

Riley: You couldn’t do that? You couldn’t be there for that, could you?

Becker: Yes, I have clearance.

Riley: Oh, do you have clearance?

Becker: I definitely could. Yes, I do.

Riley: Well, how about that?

Becker: I do, and yes, I would definitely sit in on that. It’s probably better I not.

Riley: Ignorance is bliss, as you say.

Becker: Ignorance is bliss, it really is. After 9/11, I was reading all his daily briefings. For the most part, honestly, they’re really boring, but after 9/11, I started reading them. After about two weeks I decided, I don’t need to know all this. A lot of it was just background noise anyway.

Riley: Depending on your personality type. If you’re a worrier—

Becker: Yes, and I’m really not.

Riley: So that’s not the fact.

Becker: I’m actually not a worrier, but I don’t need to know that they think every shopping mall in the country is going to blow up at any minute.
Riley: Exactly.

Becker: But the aircraft carrier, the USS George H. W. Bush, is a huge deal in his life, and it deployed.

Riley: You went on that trip? Tell us about that.

Becker: They went out one night. He’s been on the ship a couple of times and I’ve only been once. It deployed two weeks ago. It finally deployed. It took forever. The captain emails me almost every day with photos and a full report. The day they deployed—They left Norfolk at 5:00 a.m., and the captain played over the loudspeaker system an audiotape that President Bush had done.

Riley: Oh, yes?

Becker: He just dictated to me yesterday—I haven’t sent it to the captain yet—a message. He feels so personally involved with that ship, and it’s mutual. There’s a statue of him on the ship—No, there are two: One is for the pilots only. It’s down on the bay where the planes are kept, and it’s already a tradition that before you get on your plane, you have to rub his leg. It’s a full-size statue of him as a Naval Aviator, and you have to rub his leg or something.

Riley: Well, you want to have that kind of—

Becker: You want the luck, exactly—that kind of karma on your side. But it’s a very close relationship. It’s been a huge thing. He was dying for the ship to come up here as they were being deployed. I emailed the captain and he said, “Email this admiral. I’m all for it, but it’s not my decision.” So I emailed the admiral, who’s a woman, and I actually have met her, and they couldn’t do it for a variety of reasons.

I remember that she said, “Please don’t email Secretary Gates.” I said, “I’m not, I promise.” Because the USS George H. W. Bush was six months behind schedule—I probably shouldn’t tell you this but I do love this story—it was not going to be done, and then a year later it’s commissioned, where basically Northrop Grumman gives it to the Navy. It’s done.

President Bush wanted it to be commissioned when George W. was President of the United States, because the President almost always comes, and he wanted George W. to do it. Well, it was not going to be done, and I got the word from either the captain or Northrop Grumman that it’s going to be June of 2009. That was not good news here. President Bush was really disappointed. So I did email Bob Gates and I said, “We have a situation.” And Bob actually called me and he said, “That’s ridiculous. Not every bolt has to be in place. I’ll tell them to speed it up. We’re going to commission that ship.”

We commissioned it January 10, 2009, ten days before W. left office. As it turns out, this was before Bob Gates knew he was going to stay on. He said, “This is important to me too, damn it. Jean, we’re going to commission this ship.” He and I set the date, January 10th. He said, “I’ll let the Navy know, and Northrop Grumman.” So that email exchange became famous in the Navy and after that they were always paranoid, “Are you going to email Secretary Gates?” I’d say,
“No, I am not going to email him.” With the issue of the aircraft carrier coming up here, I said, “Trust me, I’m not going to bother the Secretary of Defense with, ‘Can the ship come up and play?’” We just felt it could come on the way across the Atlantic, but it didn’t work out.

Riley: Did President Bush 41 make any trips to the Middle East in the war theaters during the Presidency?

Becker: During 43’s Presidency? No. Was he in Kuwait? Well, really Kuwait wasn’t—

Riley: But he never went to Iraq?

Becker: He’s not been to Iraq. He would love to go to Iraq, but it’s highly recommended he not go, for security reasons, and that’s all I’ll say.

Riley: Sure.

Becker: We went to Pakistan, which is not a war theater. He was the United Nations Envoy for Pakistan earthquake relief in 2006. I did go with him to Pakistan. His aide at that time was a young man named Tom Frechette, and Tommy and I have talked about this so many times, based on the timeline. We went to Islamabad to visit Pakistani refugees. Ryan Crocker was actually our Ambassador to Pakistan then.

Riley: He talks about how important this was at the time, for those Pakistani relations now.

Becker: Yes. It was a huge trip. The Secret Service—to say they were opposed to President Bush going to Pakistan would be the understatement of the century. They were totally opposed to this. The problem was, as a former President, to get the resources needed to protect him. We should not have gone. Now I know that without a doubt. The hotel where we met with all of the NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] blew up a couple years ago. I’ll never forget hearing on the news that it was the Marriott in Islamabad.

Riley: This is after you had been there.

Becker: This is after we had been there. We were there in 2006 and probably two or three years ago, a huge bomb went off at the Marriott. Oh, my God. When we were flying in that day on the helicopter—we flew from the airport into the U.S. Embassy compound there, on helicopters, with men with machine guns hanging out the doors. You literally could see people on roofs of houses holding guns. I’m not sure they were directed at us. It’s just different over there.

Now we know that Osama bin Laden was living there. He was in that compound in that house. It’s funny because, while we were there, I had a dream that President Bush was at a refugee camp working the crowd, and that I saw Osama bin Laden in the crowd. This was a dream I had. I went to the Secret Service and said, “I think bin Laden’s here.” And they said, “Jean, you’re crazy. Osama bin Laden is not here.” I said, “Yes, he is. He’s over there.” I have thought of that dream a lot in the last couple of weeks. Maybe he was there, I don’t know. That’s where he was living at the time.
Riley: I guess so. How has President Bush’s relationship with the current President been?

Becker: Excellent, absolutely excellent. President Obama has gone out of his way to be courteous to President Bush. He came to A&M to give a speech in the fall of 2009. We were shocked, and it came about inadvertently from an email I sent to Valerie Jarrett at the White House, just sort of thinking out loud. I hadn’t asked President Bush. I just threw up a trial balloon. I didn’t tell President Bush I was doing it. She emailed me back three days later and said, “The President is thrilled that he can come.” I thought, Oh yes, oh my God. I still have the email. I kept it because it was so stunning.

I wrote the email on a Friday night. Valerie was our point of contact. They had wanted President Bush to come to the White House for the 20th anniversary of the ADA bill, and he didn’t go. And what Valerie had said to me was, “President Obama is looking for an opportunity to do something with President Bush,” when we couldn’t do the ADA. She said, “Would you sort of keep that in mind?” Which was sort of odd. I said okay.

Riley: I don’t think that is—I mean, I understand from your perspective why it might be odd, but it’s difficult when you’re in the envelope, to get a—

Becker: I thought it was odd. He really reaches out to 41. Anyway, I said okay. I kept thinking about it because it seemed to be such a genuine offer, and I told President Bush and he said, “She just said that to be nice.” Blah-blah-blah. Well, I sent her an email because we were doing this big Points of Light event and I said, “I have an idea I would just like to run by you.” Well, they accepted, and Valerie’s email back to me said, “President Obama is delighted to accept President Bush’s invitation to come to his library.” Well, President Bush hadn’t invited him. I thought
Valerie and I were just—Anyway, it was really funny. I have the whole email exchange in the file.

**Riley:** But it didn’t blow up?

**Becker:** I was really nervous about telling 41. No, it didn’t blow up, but I had to go to 41 and say, “I have something to tell you.” [laughter]

**Riley:** Is that your version of, “I have an idea”?

**Becker:** For once it was my version of, “I have an idea.” Exactly. I was so flabbergasted that they accepted a noninvitation. I showed them the email. “Here’s what I wrote, and I’m just thinking out loud, and here’s Valerie’s answer.” President Bush was like, “Oh, my God, President Obama’s coming to the library.” It was sort of a funny moment. It was fun, because then we had to call. At first he was unsure about it, and then he said, “Well, I’m going to call the President at Texas A&M and tell him.”

**Riley:** A sitting President of the United States, although you may have a little bit of the Ted Kennedy problem that you had before.

**Becker:** It was a huge deal. It was wonderful. Then of course President Obama gave him the Medal of Freedom. Valerie has emailed or called me a couple times and said, “Whenever President Bush is in town, President Obama would like for you to tell me, because he would like for him to come over.” We did that once and they had coffee. Then, at the end of last summer, Valerie started bugging me, saying, “Could President Bush come to D.C. and visit with the President?” I said, “No, he’s not coming. He’s really not traveling.” Well, it started with, “the next time in town.” “Okay, I will let you know.” Then a couple of weeks later, “Are you coming any time soon?” “No.” And then a couple weeks later, “Well, could you come?” “No.” It’s interesting. And then he gave him the Medal of Freedom.

**Riley:** Would there be any reason for them to think that you guys were aggravated?

**Becker:** No, because I told Valerie, “He just doesn’t travel anymore.” I told her the truth.

**Riley:** You never know.

**Becker:** I said, “He just isn’t traveling, and he’s very touched by this.” But it’s interesting. Valerie said, “Well, whenever he’s in town, please let us know, because he really likes 41 and enjoys their time together, and would like to have a cup of coffee with him.”

So when he came to the library, President Bush went to the airport to greet him upon arrival. But in the middle of the event he told me, “I’m not going back to the airport with the President.” There was this whole huge auditorium full of people who had been there for hours, and President Bush said, “After the President leaves, I’m just going to stay here and talk to people.” The President sort of whisks in and whisks out. President Bush said, “I think I should stay behind and visit with some of these—” There were lot of corporate CEOs there, and students, and he said, “I need to work the crowd.” I said okay. So we told the the head of the White House advance or something, “President Bush isn’t going back to the airport.” There was a disconnect somewhere,
because the President left and President and Mrs. Bush went out on stage to make an impromptu—Everyone had to stay in their seat for about 15 minutes.

President Bush and Mrs. Bush go out on the stage and the crowd was going wild. He was just going out there to say, “Gosh, what an incredible day, and thank you all so much for coming.” When here comes a White House person running back in saying, “Where’s President Bush?” I said, “He’s out on stage,” and he said, “He’s supposed to be in the motorcade,” and I said, “No, he’s not going back to the airport.” He said, “Oh, I didn’t know that,” so off he ran. Well, here he comes back and says, “President Obama isn’t leaving without him. He really wants him to come to the airport with him.” I said, “Did you tell him he’s on stage?” I mean you can’t make this stuff up. And he said, “Yes, you’re going to have to go get him.” So I sent poor Jim Appleby, who—there’s Jim downstairs. Jim goes out there and President Bush said, “I’m so sorry, but apparently President Obama’s waiting for me to drive him to the airport,” which everybody took a little too literally. It was just a funny moment. So off he goes.

Riley: This is sort of a *Three Stooges* operation now.

Becker: Yes, there was a disconnect.

Riley: I guess it’s still relatively—

Becker: It was new in the administration, yes, very new in the administration. But anyway, let me look at my notes. I think we covered everything.

Riley: I always say there’s no way to completely cover everything in the universe, but I think we’ve done a pretty good job.

Becker: I think we’ve done a pretty good job. Of course, I’m not objective. President Bush’s record for philanthropy is just unbelievable. Rather than do what President Clinton did, the Clinton Global Initiative, President Bush’s MO [modus operandi] has been to support existing organizations. For his 80th birthday he let us—There was a group of us that went to him and said, “Can we use your 80th birthday to raise money for some charitable groups that you’re involved in?” We sort of had to talk him into it. We raised $56 million for his 80th birthday. Points of Light got a little bit of it; MD Anderson got about $25 million, and the Bush School library got $25 million. And then the Points of Light just raised $30 million for the big event in D.C. So we’ve sort of used and abused him over the years.

Riley: The big event in D.C. was a big deal for you.

Becker: It was a big deal for me, just because it was a lot of work.

Riley: Do you have any tales from putting that together?

Becker: No, not really. It was a lot of work because there were a lot of different entities involved: the Points of Light, the Kennedy Center. That was another thing where we didn’t expect the Presidents to come. The Points of Light really insisted that we invite them, and the Presidents don’t like to ask each other to do things.
Riley: I didn’t know that.

Becker: They don’t. You sort of go do your own thing, and I told Points of Light that. The problem is, if President Bush asks them to come, then he’s scared to death they’re going to ask him to do something.

Riley: You’ve got enough to keep yourself occupied.

Becker: We have enough to keep ourselves occupied. They said, “Well, we’re going to invite them.” I said, “That’s fine, but President Bush isn’t going to sign this letter to ‘Come honor me.’” That was the other issue. It was a night in honor of him, and he can’t say, “Would you please come and honor me?” They all came, which really touched him a lot, and so it was a great night, but it was a complicated night.

Riley: But you survived it. Was the entertainment your responsibility, for lining all that up?

Becker: No. We hired George Stevens, who does all the Kennedy Center Honors. We hired him in the 11th hour and he did an amazing job. He and his son Michael [Stevens] did an absolutely amazing job. It was a great night. It was complicated to put together because nobody involved with it got along with each other. I don’t know why, but the Kennedy Center people didn’t like the Points of Light people, that kind of thing.

Riley: All these do-gooders.

Becker: Right, that’s exactly right. But it was a great, great night.

Riley: What kind of entertainment does he like for live entertainment? We talked about books and television. Country music?

Becker: He is the biggest fan—The Bushes go to the theater all the time, musical theater, both in Houston and here.

Riley: Where do they go from here?

Becker: There’s a wonderful summer stock playhouse in Ogunquit, which is two towns down the coast—Ogunquit Playhouse, wonderful. Are you a baseball fan at all?

Riley: Oh yes, of course.

Becker: In Houston it would be the same way. In the minor league system, there’s triple-A, regional theater, and there’s double-A and there’s single-A. Algonquin would definitely be a triple-A franchise.

Riley: Oh, okay, that’s nice.

Becker: They do great work. Most of the actors come out of New York. Houston also has a wonderful theater-under-the-stars. That also, I would say, is triple-A. It may not be Broadway
but it’s the next best thing. He loves show tunes. He loves that kind of music, and he loves country.

Riley: So you get most of your country music fix when you’re in Houston, rather than Kennebunkport?

Becker: Yes, but he has tons of CDs [compact discs]. Reba [McEntire] is still his favorite, the Oak Ridge Boys, The Usual Suspects, and he just loves show tunes: *The Sound of Music, South Pacific, My Fair Lady*—He loves all that stuff. They do a lot of musical theater.

Riley: And baseball, you mentioned baseball. Do they go see the Sea Dogs when they’re up here?

Becker: He does. I’m not sure he’ll go this year but he usually goes to a couple of Sea Dog games. He has the Major League Baseball Network, so you see all the Astros games.

Riley: Ah, there you go.

Becker: As long as we’re in Houston, he goes to every home game, but he subscribes to MLB so he can get all the Astros games. He’s a big Aggie football fan and a big Houston Texans football fan.

Riley: Now that piece, I didn’t know about. Does he always sit behind home plate?

Becker: He always sits behind home plate. The Astros just got sold, and we’re very concerned. Drayton McLane, who sold the Astros—At our last home game, Mrs. Bush said, “You have to make it part of the sale agreement that George and I get our seats.” Yes, he’s a big football fan too.

One of the Houston sports columnists wrote a great column a couple of years ago about how President Bush is the number-one sports fan in Houston, and how people in Houston just love—“There he is.” He doesn’t do a lot of basketball. He did do the Final Four. The Final Four was in Houston.

Riley: It was in Houston. Yes, I remember. I was down there to see Jim Baker, on the visit that didn’t match up because of your thing.

Becker: Oh, that didn’t work for us that day.

Riley: So I saw Jim Baker, and I don’t follow basketball either. I was at the airport and saw a Final Four tee-shirt and I thought my son would love this. It was just before it happened.

Becker: Anyway, so a huge sports fan, huge. He’s a big golf fan, and he’s friends with a lot of the professional golfers. In fact, Phil Mickelson comes every summer. They just called yesterday for their dates, signing up for their annual visit up here.

Riley: Is he able to still golf?
Becker: No. He hasn’t golfed in probably five years.

Riley: I didn’t think so. Well, we never completely exhaust all the topics.

Becker: We’ve done a pretty good job.

Riley: I have a feeling that I have used an entire day of yours.

Becker: I didn’t think it would take this long. I hope I didn’t go on and on. I sort of went off on tangents a couple of times.

Riley: That’s the beauty of oral history. We never come in with a strict regimen of questions that we have to follow, because the most interesting things are usually stuff I don’t even know to ask about.

Becker: Like the bucket list.

Riley: Exactly.

Becker: You would have no idea that he came in one day and said, “I have made my life to-do list.”

Riley: Absolutely. These are the kinds of things that folks, particularly biographers, who want to understand this man, will come to and find a lot of interesting nuggets, as well as a reflection of your own genuine affection for the man that you work with. That’s just golden, so no, it hasn’t been wandering or digressive at all.

Becker: Good.

Riley: It’s in the best of our tradition.

Becker: We have covered it all pretty well, the essence of where his heart is, and family, and the Bush School, and service in general.

Riley: Good.

Becker: He has a hard time saying no. He’s better now than he used to be.

Riley: Well, he’s probably got a lot of help. That’s probably part of your job. I want to report, for the record also, that the interview arose because you volunteered to do it, which was terrific.

Becker: Yes. I was questioning the wisdom of that, but it’s really been fun. I appreciate your coming all the way here to do this, because I know this is a little out of the way. At least you got clam chowder and you had half a day of good views, until the fog rolled in.

Riley: I had half a day of good views.

Becker: Although this is a classic Maine day. You now have seen everything.
Riley: Everything.

Becker: This is classic.

Riley: This morning after I had breakfast, I took a 15-minute walk around Kennebunkport, and the sky was just as clear and blue as you could imagine. Now you can barely see the boat that was—

Becker: I would offer to take you to dinner tonight but I have houseguests arriving. I’m not being very hospitable, but I have guests coming.

Riley: Believe me, you’ve had me in your office all day and I will go back to my room and relax a little bit and get ready for reentry. You’ve done us a huge favor. Thanks so much.

Becker: Thank you, Russell. I’ll walk you down the stairs.