GEORGE W. BUSH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

FINAL EDITED TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH ARI FLEISCHER

September 29–30, 2010
Charlottesville, Virginia

Participants

University of Virginia
Russell Riley, chair
Paul Freedman
Barbara Perry

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Riley: This is the Ari Fleischer interview, a part of the George W. Bush Oral History Project. Thanks so much for coming to Charlottesville; we're grateful.

Fleischer: Thank you.

Riley: There are a couple of things that we always do at the outset. One is to repeat the basic ground rule of the conversation and that is this is being conducted under a veil of confidentiality. Nothing you say in the room is to be repeated by anybody out here except for yourself, it's your story. We'll prepare a transcript and that will come to you and you will have an opportunity at that point, if we get into anything that is in anyway delicate from your perspective, to put a hold on that for a longer period of time or even to redact something if you feel later on that you wish you hadn't said something.
The idea is to try to keep you from editing yourself into the tape recorder because the purpose is not to inform the three or four of us around the table but to create an archival record that somebody 10 years from now or 30 years from now or 50 years from now can come back and understand the Presidency as you experienced it and with the bark off, to the extent that we can do that.

So that's the first thing. And I'm pleased to say that—I'll show you the picture around the corner from the Gerald Ford years, but in the entire time that we have been doing this there hasn't been a single breach of confidence.

The other thing is Emily's recording the sequence of intervention for the transcriber, and she may occasionally take down a proper name to help the transcriber, but it will also help the transcriber to be able to identify voices. So, I'm going to ask everybody to say who they are and a couple of words before we get started.

I'm Russell Riley, the chair of the oral history program.

Freedman: I'm Paul Freedman. I'm an associate professor in the department of politics and, although not a historian, I've participated in several interviews for the Reagan, first Bush, and now George W. Bush Presidencies.

Perry: I'm Barbara Perry, a senior fellow here at the Miller Center.

Riley: And you're a female voice. There won't be many of them. [*laughter*]

Fleischer: And I'm Ari Fleischer, recipient of this.

Riley: Our specimen of the day.

Freedman: We like to think of you as the donor.

Riley: Exactly. We were talking on the way over here a little bit about your journey to Republicanism. That's where I want to start, because you touch on this in your book, that you're not a native-born Republican; you became that way. Tell us about your upbringing and your journey into that way of viewing life and politics.

Fleischer: Yes. I just recently crossed the 50 percent threshold, that of having been a Republican longer than a Democrat now. My parents were activist Democrats in New York for the era in which I grew up: very liberal, Jewish, New York, Upper West Side Democrats. My mother was an immigrant to this country and that's how I was raised. I remember distinctly a poster in our house that said, "Turn on, Tune in, Drop out." I probably should not repeat in an academic environment the last part of it. [*laughter*] Nevertheless, it was on the wall as I was growing up.

I got to Middlebury College as a very liberal Democrat and a bit of an activist myself, but I started to change in college. It's ironic, because I went to a very liberal, "crunchy granola" college, but the issues just started to get me to change. It wasn't so much policy—although it ultimately became policy—it was so much more cultural, if I had to think back on it.

A big part of it was this sense of post-Vietnam, post-Watergate, the "malaise" that Jimmy Carter talked about. As I became of age, it struck me, *Nobody feels good about America. Nobody cheers about America.* And I thought, *Why? We don't do bad things around the world. What's wrong? We've helped a lot of people*. And it got to me. Jeane Kirkpatrick later called out the "blame America first" Democrats, but before she articulated that, there was something churning in me that just said, *People are always blaming America*.

Then one of things that encapsulated it for me, and probably tons of other people my age, was that U.S.-Soviet hockey game, when people did something I'd never heard in my life: they cheered for our country, which now you take for granted, because people cheer "U-S-A" all the time. But back then nobody did it, and I remember the impact it had on me and little Middlebury. I thought, *This is great! It feels so good that people cheer for America*.

Probably because of foreign policy and defense, I started to become increasingly conservative and started thinking, *The Soviet Union is trying to take advantage of us*. I thought Jimmy Carter was increasingly weak. There was the hostage crisis, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and Carter's poor reaction to it, in my judgment. All of that, because of military and foreign policy issues, started pushing me to the right. The real issue that did it for me was the nuclear freeze. When the Soviets installed intermediate-range missiles in eastern Europe, my party said, Well, we have enough to blow them up. They have enough to blow us up. Don't respond. Don't do any more. Ignore it. We'll have a nuclear freeze.

Again, my mom was an immigrant; her family was from Hungary. I'd been back to Hungary; I had seen what it was like to live under communism. I had been there a couple of times in the '70s. I remember thinking to myself, *No. If you let the Soviets do that with impunity, they'll just*

do more of it. If you respond to it, it will send them a signal, one that says they'll be met and they'll be matched. I started realizing I was becoming a hawk. Then Ronald Reagan came along, and advocated the counterdeployment of missiles into Western Europe, and successfully so. Those issues really brought me around.

So I got to Middlebury as a liberal Democrat; four years later I graduated as a conservative Democrat, which makes me the only person in the history of the state of Vermont to enter it a liberal and leave it a conservative. [*laughter*] Then I changed parties six months after I graduated. Interesting story there, too, but I don't want to dwell too much on the past.

Riley: It's important for us to know who the people are that come into every administration.

Fleischer: I graduated from college, still a Democrat, in May or June of '82 and had no clue what I was going to do for a living. I had applied to law schools, applied to graduate schools for foreign relations, and I moved home to play baseball. I was just knocking about, enjoying the summer, having a good time.

A friend from Middlebury had a brother who was managing a congressional race in my home county, a race against the incumbent Congressman, Dick Ottinger. My oldest brother used to work for Dick Ottinger. My parents adored Dick Ottinger. But I was thinking, back at that time—I could tell my evolution had moved so far—*You know, Dick Ottinger is way too liberal for me. I just don't like the guy, but I don't know if I can ever work for a Republican*.

I interviewed and got the job as press secretary for a New York State assemblyman, who was a real moderate Republican. I had voted for John Anderson in '80, which was heresy in my family, so I was ideologically comfortable working for [Jon] Fossel. NCPAC [National Conservative Political Action Committee] was around back then and I wasn't comfortable with certain elements, particularly social issues, in the Republican Party, but there was something right enough about Fossel.

Halfway through the campaign, I got a phone call from Murray Dry, a professor of mine, my advisor, at Middlebury. He had worked for Lee Hamilton as a congressional fellow. Murray called me and said that if I wanted, he could get me an entry-level job on Capitol Hill. Lee Hamilton needed an LC, legislative correspondent, and he'd get the job for me. I remember thanking him and saying, "No, thanks," because, one, I was going to finish the race I was in—I wasn't going to leave in the middle—and two, I knew at that moment that I was going to change parties after this race was over and become a Republican. I just could not, ideologically, work for a Democrat. That's when I knew my journey was complete.

Economics and foreign policy, to this day, are still the things that drive me to be a conservative; social issues, not so. But be that as it may, that's—We lost the race. I changed parties. I wanted to finish it the way I started it, as a Democrat, but then I changed parties and moved to Washington.

Riley: Did your mom move in a more conservative direction with Reagan and then the Velvet Revolutions and so forth?

Fleischer: No. My mother moved really in the last couple of years, only recently. It's only because President Bush would always say to me, "Do I have your mother yet?" [*laughter*] He knew how to play the Israel card there, too, because Bush was so strong on Israel and she always appreciated that. But he would constantly say, "Do I have your mother yet?" Finally I said to him one day, "Mr. President, it's not worth it. The day you get her is the day you lose the Deep South. Don't try to trade up."

Then my daughter was born, my first child, in 2004. I'd left the White House. President Bush called into the room and talked to me and talked to my wife. I said to him, "My mother's here." It was 2004. He was up for reelection and he said, "Put her on the phone." [*laughter*] I handed the phone to my mother. All I could hear was her side of the conversation, and she said, "Yes, you do." She would never tell me what he asked her that she said, "Yes, you do," but I think I know.

Freedman: He got her at the right time.

Fleischer: Well, at that point she was in her 70s and had just had her first grandchild; she'd have said yes to anybody.

Riley: You were on Capitol Hill for 20 years? Is that right?

Fleischer: On and off.

Riley: What are the important experiences from that time that we ought to know about? We don't have to follow you from position to position, but maybe you could hit some of the highlights and we'll bore down if anything—

Fleischer: What I learned in the '80s, working for Republicans in the House of Representatives, when the Democrats had massive margins, was that, number one, House Republicans don't count; no one pays attention to them. If you want to get press—and I was a press secretary—you have to be creative, you have to be clever, and you have to do offbeat things that grab the press's attention.

Number two, I started to learn about press bias. Republicans would produce studies and reports, and reporters would say, "Well, that came from the Republican staff. No. I'm just not taking it." "Why? There were some arguments in there, point A, point B," and it was as if you just didn't count. Was it bias? Was it the reporters' realistic judgment that the only people who moved legislation were Democrats, with the majorities they had, so that made it interesting, but no thank you? It was probably a combination of both.

That was my exposure to Washington, in that sense. Then I moved to working for Senator Pete Domenici, the former chairman of the Budget Committee, one of the most—just a deep thinker—that the best press comes from the best substance. That was a real revelation, coming from the minority side of the House, where you had to be glitzy to be famous. Domenici taught me that you have to be substantive. It worked for him because he had a substantive platform and was then the ranking Republican on Budget, the former chairman of Budget; he had credibility. It was a great lesson. That's where I started to learn how the Hill works and to pay attention to

the arcana of the Hill: reconciliation, budget resolution, authorization versus appropriation. All the things that the wonks learn, I started to learn under Domenici, which was great.

You don't learn those things in the House, at least in the '80s you didn't. The Republicans took the majority and I went to Ways and Means. In many ways that was the best job I ever had in Washington, because that's where I learned the most. I learned the most substance. I learned the most policy. Ways and Means is a big jurisdiction. The wonky side of me really enjoyed talking to the smart lawyers and staff and translating their inabilities to speak English into plain English around some big, controversial ideas. I loved my boss, Bill Archer; he was a great chairman to work for. But I also learned how power on Capitol Hill worked, because now I was going to the meetings. I was in Newt [Gingrich]'s inner circle. It was a tremendously exciting time, 40 years out of power and seeing how individuals could be effective or ineffective in reaching agreements among others, pushing people along, getting agreements.

I remember one House-Senate tax conference. It was down to Archer and Bill Roth, the chairman of the Finance Committee, just the two of them, and I was in the room. On a tax bill they decided that the name for what was then called "most-favored-nation status," was a misnomer. They said, "We lose a lot of votes because if you give most-favored-nation status to China, you have a lot of conservatives who think, *China is bad, so why should they be the most-favored nation?*" They said, "What it really is is 'normal trade relations,'" so those two chairmen just said, "Change the name in the tax bill to 'normal trade relations.'" I thought, *Wow, that's how power works.*

A guy named Joe Scarborough discovered on the floor that day that the words had been changed and pitched a fit, "How can you do this? It's an abuse of power; this never went through any committee." But it was buried in the tax bill, so you had to vote down the whole tax bill and the name was down to "normal trade relations." That's just one little example of how my eyes were opened to how laws were made, and I loved it.

I loved my congressional years in so many ways because it was great, inside knowledge, having gone from where you just don't count to working for a committee where you really do.

Perry: Could I ask about reaching the public? You said you were learning so much about how it could be done in a noneffective way with the Republicans in the minority in the House. Can you talk about the role of C-SPAN during this time? I'm thinking particularly of Newt Gingrich's use of that to foment the revolution of '94.

Fleischer: What a great point. People forget, now with Facebook and Twitter, how revolutionary C-SPAN was and how, in the Senate particularly, it was controversial. "What? A camera in the Senate?"

A group of people in the House minority all of a sudden got this idea that if you delivered a one-minute speech, you could create an audience and you could market that speech. You could do things with the speech that the *New York Times* would never cover, that your normal mainstream media would never cover, so it became one of the first, if not the first, ways around the mainstream press corps to reach a targeted constituency. I think Republicans in the House came to it out of desperation and a lack of anywhere else to go, so it was good timing for them. If you

remember, [Thomas P., Jr.] O'Neill ordered the cameras to pan the empty House chamber, showing that these are just speeches, there is nobody here, this is theater, which probably propelled it even more, because then people started paying attention. "Hey, it is theater; I want to see what the theater is about."

It's fascinating. In retrospect, if there is one thing I could change—and this genie is so far out of the bottle I don't think you could, and I think Mike McCurry would agree with this too—I would no longer televise the White House press briefings. I would take C-SPAN off the air. There is a piece of me that is just—"haunted" goes too far, but if you think about the institutions in Washington that are held in the highest regard, with the most respect by the American people, it's the Supreme Court, where their deliberations are entirely in secret, with no transparency, and up until 2008 at least, the Federal Reserve. Their deliberations are entirely secret. There is something about the massive exposure that also can coarsen democracy and that's at work in the House, the Senate, and the White House. The genie is out of the bottle, but it did start with C-SPAN.

Riley: We're going to dig into that question.

Freedman: That question is on my list: Would you, if you had the power, revoke cameras during the briefing? You just answered that, so let me ask the follow-up.

Fleischer: Well, give me an addendum on it, because I gave the facile answer. But after September 11, it reminded me how important it was, too. Frankly, since I left office, especially living in New York, the nicest anybody's ever been to me, about anything I ever did in government, were the widows from 9/11 who came up to me and said that I made them feel calm. I'll take that over anything.

Remove politics from the partisanship for a minute, and there are going to be times, forever, where the White House is the institution that everybody in this country looks to and they look to it on TV. You can't just turn the switch and say, "Yes, the briefing can be live today because it's in the White House's interest," and "No, it can't be on live today because it's not." You're stuck with it. But there are some very important upsides, too.

Freedman: Let's talk a little bit about what you see as the downside. Is it the posturing or the performing of the reporters? Is that the key obstacle?

Fleischer: And the press secretary. It's a TV show. The briefing's not a briefing anymore. It's not a serious sharing of information. It's not like the old days, when reporters with a pad would actually get some very useful information, digest it, call around, get deeper insights into it, and report it three or four hours later.

Now it's flash news. It's on the bottom of the screen instantly. It's the reporters walking out of their chairs and going right to the North Lawn to report live. It's often on live TV, which was the case for so many of my briefings after September 11 and the Iraq war. It was always on my mind that I was talking directly to the people, not just the reporters in the room. Why should I have to answer the literal, specific question a reporter asked if I know I can go right to the public and say something that I want to answer? That's what made it—It's a jockeying room now. It's a TV show.

Freedman: What's replaced it, as far as your relationship with them? Is it one on one? Is it the morning gaggle? What's—

Fleischer: It's constantly having reporters walking into your office and asking you questions one by one by one by one. That's what it is, which also means you spend—I would spend a lot of my day in the Oval Office in meetings. I would come back and there would be a stack of phone calls, reporters wanting to know where I was, why didn't I return their calls, and then when I returned their calls, they wanted to know why I wasn't in the Oval Office. What was I missing? [*laughter*]

But the real work of being a White House reporter is done in the slow, old-fashioned, deliberateness of walking into the press secretary's office, closing the door, and saying, "We have this. We have that. Can you shed any insight? What's going on?" That's when you know you'll have anonymity. You can help to shape a story. They will put you on background if you want to be on background. You can steer things right or wrong. Reporters, even before the briefing was on camera, wouldn't ask questions in the briefing room if it was an exclusive or something major their paper had, because they weren't going to give it up, so it's a tried-and-true art of walking into that office and seeing the press secretary.

When I was there, email was not extensively used by reporters to reach me. I had an almost impossible-to-figure-out email, thanks to the White House administrative people. I look at my BlackBerry now and its huge address book, yet when I look at reporters whose phone numbers I have, back when they covered the White House, I don't have emails for them. It was done by phone. It was done in person. Email existed, of course, and there was a lot of internal, within-the-White-House-staff email, but now I don't know how Robert Gibbs can possibly keep up. One email begets a response, which begets a follow-up question, and meanwhile, you have 50 other type-A reporters doing the same thing with you.

Riley: And there was probably no diminishment in all the other things that you were doing, right? This was on top of communications that you were still getting by telephone or in person, people knocking on the door.

Fleischer: Right.

Riley: Okay, let's go back. We're not wedded firmly to a chronology, but I wanted to ask you a question about your going into the Republican Party, to see whether you ever felt conflicted within the party because of the ideological crosscurrents within Republicanism that would have been prominent during the time you were on the Hill. You had said that it was mostly the economic issues that you had found appealing, yet the social conservatives were, if not ascendant, also a very important voice. How did you manage to navigate that, and was it ever a problem for you?

Fleischer: It was easy. The bosses I worked for were economic-style bosses: Bill Archer, Pete Domenici. The backbenchers I worked for: Joe DioGuardi, Norman Lent—Norman Lent was the ranking Republican on the Energy and Commerce Committee; Joe DioGuardi was a sophomore, just trying to find his way more than—He was a Westchester Republican. I also intellectually knew I was a staffer. They're the ones who ran for office. It's not about me. It's not about my positions.

I would never have applied for a job in Senator Jesse Helms's office, for example, if a job opening had come up there. He wouldn't have been my cup of tea. It was always easy for me, in part because of the people I worked for, and the recognition. Almost every elected official I worked for was pro-life, but that's their point of view—They ran and they won—whether it's mine or not doesn't matter.

Foreign policy, economics, and defense were what drove me. I had a happy home, and still do, in the Republican Party because of those issues.

Riley: Were you involved at all in Republican Presidential politics before 2000? In '96 did you—

Fleischer: In '92 I took a leave from Domenici and was deputy communications director of [George H. W.] Bush-[J. Danforth] Quayle, which was more title than anything else. Although, one of the interesting things was that I got to go to the senior staff meetings. I didn't get to sit at the table; I sat on the wall and I never once spoke. I had all these ideas going through my mind, but I never had the courage to speak. I remembered that in 2000 when I moved to Texas. I was on the campaign and was at the table and it was so easy for me to speak. I made a mental note about the passage of time, the getting older in any industry, and what you learn as you move your way up. That's part of politics, being comfortable enough to start to influence, or hopefully influence, people. Anyway, I worked on Bush-Quayle in '92.

Riley: Who was the director? Who did you report to there?

Fleischer: Will Feltus was the communications director and there were a lot of controversies and problems. Will brought me in. Will was the head of the Republican Conference in the U.S. Senate and that's how I knew him. I was with Domenici, so my relationship was with Will, but Will had a lot of problems inside the organization, so almost all the power decision making was done out of the White House. Of course, it was the President's reelection. And then the press office was different from communications. That's where Torie [Victoria] Clarke was the press spokesperson in '92. Then I left the Ways and Means Committee in '99 to go work for Elizabeth Dole as her communications director on the Presidential campaign. I had those two before I moved to Austin to work for President Bush.

Riley: Was Elizabeth Dole somebody you had followed before then or did this come out of the blue?

Fleischer: I'd gotten a little bored on Capitol Hill: the same cycle, the same fights. President [William J.] Clinton was in office. Republicans were not getting as much done and in December of '98, after Newt resigned, there was an effort to get Bill Archer to become Speaker; he didn't want it. [Robert] Livingston became Speaker; he withdrew.

Riley: For a little while, yes.

Fleischer: And then Denny Hastert became Speaker, so the Hill was just fascinating with all this intrigue. A friend of mine named Kieran Mahoney was chief consultant for Elizabeth Dole's Presidential, and he said they were gearing up and needed a communications director in the number one job, and would I be interested? I didn't know Elizabeth Dole at all. I had never met

her, but I said of course I would; this was a chance to go on a Presidential campaign. Back then, when Elizabeth Dole left the Red Cross, she was beating every Republican, including George W. Bush, so I said yes and started that job in March of '99.

Riley: What can you tell us about your experiences there?

Fleischer: It was rough sledding.

Riley: Rough sledding?

Fleischer: Yes. It was very rough. She wasn't ready to run. It shows how hard it is to run for the Presidency if you've never run for office before, even if you're the spouse of somebody who has been around and seen it. Now all of a sudden it's about you. She was very quickly on a trajectory where her highest point was the day she left the Red Cross, and then everything just really went poorly.

At the same time, George W. Bush was sucking all the oxygen out of everywhere Republican, blowing people out of the water with how much money he raised. At the time, I think it was June of '99, when the FEC [Federal Elections Commission] report came out, he had about $34 million. In that era, people gasped. Reporters literally gasped when he released that number.

And we had no money, couldn't win, and a tough candidate. It wasn't fun. I actually withdrew from the race. I got to the point where—If you don't believe your boss can hold the office, you can't work for the boss, and I got to that point. I didn't think she was qualified to be President.

Riley: You said she wasn't ready. I wonder if you could elaborate on that? Is it that she hadn't thought through the issues thoroughly enough, or that she wasn't committed to putting in the 18-hour days necessary?

Fleischer: Oh, no, she would work. She was a hard worker, but she didn't know enough about where she stood on the issues, because she had never had to articulate positions before. She was there to support her husband's positions. There are myriad complicated issues that you have to understand and articulate when you run for President. If you've never been a Congressman or a Senator or a mayor or a Governor and you haven't gone through that executive or even legislative experience of having to think, *All right, what's my position on agriculture? What's my position on Medicare? What's my position on Zimbabwe?* it's a huge learning curve.

Perry: Was she not a quick study? Was she trying to put in the hours to get up to speed on these—

Fleischer: She was an amazingly quick study, but she needed things in so much dramatic, grand detail and background that—What I think is tremendously important in an elected official is their gut, their principle without a briefing. Who are you? What do you believe in? When you have your driving direction of who you are first, that creates a sense of comfort in people, because that's *you*. Then you lay in the wonks and the experts and the other people to work on the edges and help you with the nuance, "You may have missed this one," or that one. With Elizabeth Dole, it was too much of the latter and not enough of the former.

Riley: Like true north on a compass, right?

Fleischer: One of the things I'll always remember about George Bush was that he had what they called his front-porch strategy in 1999. Contributors and party leaders were going down to see him and everybody would be wowed and talk about what a great guy he was. I didn't know him; I'd never met him at that point.

Ron Fournier, who was a chief political correspondent for AP [Associated Press], went down to see Bush. I was talking to Ron as an Elizabeth Dole person and I said, "What's he like?" and Ron said to me, "I've never met anybody as comfortable in their own skin as George W. Bush." I always remembered that, because it's a great description of who he is. Later, some American people didn't like that skin, but there are a lot of people who do, including myself, and found it a true source of comfort because you knew he was going to make a decision because he thought it was the right decision, not because he could lose the Republican Party over it.

Riley: You talked a little bit about press bias earlier, which is something that you touch on a lot in your book, but with Elizabeth Dole did you have any sense about gender bias in any way?

Fleischer: Yes. Gender bias. I'll go back to another bias issue. Yes, there is no question. Where she was called "controlling," and she was controlling, if she had been a male candidate, the word would have been "disciplined." Yes. I saw that in the word use of how people described her. They're both accurate words, but I do think there is a gender piece of Velcro that attaches to one and doesn't attach to the other.

The other issue was ideological. She went to New Hampshire and gave a speech where she came out with a position on certain gun safety issues, gun control issues, and talked about a ban on "cop killer" bullets, a couple of other things, an assault weapon ban or something like that, in the middle of the New Hampshire primary. I remember reporters swooning: "What a great, smart position. Carve out the moderate vote in New Hampshire and the conservatives will chop themselves up." And I remember thinking to myself at that time, *This is what it's like to do press for a Democrat.* [*laughter*]

The press—I didn't have to spin anybody. I didn't have to call anybody. They just loved what she did because it was—in *our* primary—a left-of-center position. That's telling. I was the beneficiary of it at that moment, but—

Riley: Not so much with the *Union-Leader*.

Riley: Yes. I don't think they cared for it, but they didn't care for her anyway. [*laughter*]

Freedman: How long after that did you leave?

Fleischer: That was in September. This is probably the first time I'm saying this publicly, because—

Freedman: It's not public yet.

Fleischer:—it was a fact that I left, so people knew. I never indicated why. Who was I back then? It was maybe a paragraph in the *New York Times*, but I have to explain and I never explained. Reporters kind of got it. They wrote some nice things and said I was too polite to ever say anything bad about anybody I worked for, and then they went to their own surmise of internal campaign problems.

Then Bush asked me to move to Texas. In fact, before it was even public that I was out, somehow the Bush people heard about it, before the press did. I got a phone call from Mindy Tucker. I used to work with her on Capitol Hill, and she was one of the spokespeople on the campaign. Mindy said that her boss, Karen Hughes, would like to meet with me, because Karen would like me to move to Austin to become spokesman on the campaign.

I said to Mindy, "Wow, I'm really flattered by that, but I can't do that to Elizabeth Dole." She was still in the race and I never would do that. I left thinking, *I'm done*. As much as I didn't think she was ready to be the President, you don't leave somebody and jump ship and work for somebody else. You just don't. Then Karen called me and said, "I want you to think about it. Just take your time. You know, the Governor really loves the way you do your job." *Wow, he could be the nominee.* When Elizabeth Dole dropped out of the race, then I told Karen I would be happy to meet with her and talk with her about it.

There was about a one-month gap between when I left and when Elizabeth Dole dropped out of the race.

Riley: So you went to Texas.

Fleischer: I went to Austin, Texas, to meet Governor Bush. Actually, at that point it was for the second time. I had met him at the August Iowa Straw Poll in '99. He came up to me behind stage—Everybody was waiting to go do their speeches, and I was standing not too far from Elizabeth Dole—He put his arm around me and said, "I really like the way you do your job. You have a really nice way about you." All I could think was, *You know who I am!*

Riley: Your candidate didn't hear that, did she?

Fleischer: No. [*laughter*] But it just showed his personality, how warm he is. He hides this—to this very day he hides this—He's a keen reader of politics and political personalities. He'll tell people, "I'm in a news blackout. I don't pay any attention to that stuff." But he sure does. He read my quotes in the papers. He'd seen my tone, how I said things. He was running against Gary Bauer and Steve Forbes and others back then who were slamming him. It was also partly because I worked for Elizabeth Dole, and my instructions were that she was never going to clash with Bush. Neither was I; that's not my nature. Anyway, he said that. That was the first time I met him.

Then they flew me to Austin and I met with Governor Bush and had this great long talk with him. He had called Bill Archer and had said to Bill Archer, "You really need to put the pressure on Ari; I want Ari to come work for me." And Archer gave me the call. I was getting it from a couple of different sides and it was flattering.

I left Austin to fly to Seattle, where Microsoft was in the final stages of negotiating with me. I went through long hours of final interviews with Microsoft to run its Washington, D.C., communications operation. The last thing they did was talk about compensation. This was '99, the market was just booming, the sixth year of boom, and they said, "At your salary, you'll have this many stock options. How much do you think Microsoft is going to grow on an annual basis?" I said, "Well, 5 percent, 10 percent?" They said, "That's very conservative, but let's just say it's 15 percent. It's been 30, but we'll just cut it in half." They took out a calculator and input salary, stock options, 15 percent, beep, beep, beep—"In 10 years your net worth will be" and handed me this piece of paper. I had been in government work my whole life and my jaw dropped. This was encouraging. [*laughter*]

The third option I had was the firm Quinn Gillespie, which would have become Quinn Gillespie Fleischer. I was going to be a founding partner of Quinn Gillespie because of my relationship with Ed Gillespie.

I had to decide. I loved Bush. I thought, *Wow, he's a great guy; this is really exciting*, but I was done with politics. I had done everything I wanted to do in politics. It was almost, at that point, 18 years that I had been in Washington. I was ready to leave it.

Riley: You were still unmarried at the time.

Fleischer: Still unmarried, which was a big factor. But I liked George Bush so much and the fact that he could win, so I said to myself, *I have one more in me*, packed my bags, and moved to Austin, Texas.

Perry: But when you were in Austin, that wasn't a job interview, because they wanted you. He wanted you. He was really trying to convince you to come with the team.

Fleischer: Right.

Riley: Do you remember anything about the conversation you had with him?

Fleischer: Nothing concrete. I just remember my impression, that I really liked the guy.

Riley: Was he talking, do you remember, baseball with you or was he talking about what he wanted to do as President?

Fleischer: I think it was more the latter. I don't remember any informal stuff. We sure did a lot of that later, but I remember being impressed with his mind, impressed with the seriousness with which he approached the Presidency, just his good all-around nature, demeanor. Plus, I had come from Elizabeth Dole.

Literally, Elizabeth Dole was going to do an interview about the Final Four basketball tournament and was going to go on the radio in some Carolina station. I had to do about a seven-page background memo on the players, their stats, and all this. She went on the air, having memorized the whole memo. It killed me to write the thing. It was so exhausting to write it, because I had a very small staff, and the guys on the broadcast said, "You know more about basketball than we do."

Then I went to Bush, whose style was so different, so much more in tune with my style: "Give me the most important things." "Here's what the press is going to ask you; here's what I recommend you say," bing, bing, bing, and we'd do it orally. I really responded to that environment professionally. It just clicked with my style. I was simpatico with George W. Bush on a personal level, on a professional level, and an aspirational level, because I thought this man—I didn't think he could win the Presidency; I didn't think he could or couldn't. I just remember thinking at that stage in my life, *He could be the nominee*, which is a huge deal when you're coming off of Capitol Hill, that you might work for the nominee. Oh, my God! You don't even *think* about the Presidency.

Freedman: Did he, though? In terms of that point, this early conversation, did he convey a sense of confidence that *he* believed?

Fleischer: Absolutely.

Freedman: The whole thing?

Fleischer: Absolutely.

Freedman: He conveyed this optimism and confidence.

Fleischer: I hope I'm not remembering back and substituting in later things for what that conversation was at the Governor's Mansion, but I think he talked about how he wanted to use the Presidency for big ideas and to do big things for America, that he didn't see the Presidency as a place, a small era. That was a response to President Clinton's school uniforms and small initiatives. He had much bigger visions about what to do.

Perry: Did he talk about his father's Presidency at all with you?

Fleischer: I don't think so, not there. He did later. That's something very important as far as my job, but I don't think he did it there.

Riley: But based on what you said about Elizabeth Dole, this was somebody that you felt was ready to be President.

Fleischer: Oh, absolutely. And that was very comforting, because that ideological piece of it is huge. You cannot work for somebody at the highest level and pour your heart into it and just kill yourself if you don't believe in them. If you believe in them, that's why you can work 24-hour days happily. It's fulfilling. I had friends at the very top level of the [John] McCain campaign, who, after everything that happened with Sarah Palin, didn't vote for John McCain. And it broke my heart to hear that. *My God, you killed yourself. You worked on this race and you didn't vote for your guy?* My feeling of *I'm at home here with George W. Bush* meant the world to me.

That was part of [Barack] Obama's magic in 2008, not to get into that, but that's why young people, and I wasn't young, but that's why people love politics and love working on campaigns.

Freedman: I'm trying to figure out what happened after Redmond [Washington] with Microsoft. Once they handed you the slip of paper, after they had come up with the final number, did somebody call you back? Did Karen Hughes call you back and say, "So?"

Fleischer: I don't remember the mechanism, but I returned to Washington and had a decision to make. It was a three-way decision. I remember talking to my oldest brother about it. My oldest brother is a Harvard MBA [master of business administration] and is one of the smartest people I've ever met. I laid it out for him, and he said to me, "Any time you have a series of choices to make and they're hard to make and they're all good choices, every answer you have will be a good answer." Then he said, "Just go with your heart and go with your gut."

Freedman: I would have thought he'd have said, "Go with a Harvard MBA—"

Fleischer: I couldn't have gotten in there.

Perry: Did you meet with other members of the Bush team when you were in Austin?

Fleischer: I met Karen and—

Perry: What did you think of her?

Fleischer: I was impressed with Karen, because I used to debate her when I was with Dole. That's really how we met. We didn't meet in person; we met on *Crossfire.* I was in my little box; she was in her little box. We got into it with each other, but it was like the Yankees and the Red Sox; we got into it with respect. I enjoyed going up against her. She almost always beat me, so there was a sharpness to her that I was attracted to.

Riley: Why didn't Karen remain the spokesperson?

Fleischer: David Beckwith was the active spokesperson, and got himself in trouble by saying some things about Iowa caucus voters that were derogatory toward Iowa voters, so he was let go from the campaign. Karen was the number one person, the communications director, the right hand to George Bush—

Riley: Oh, so she had too much on her plate to do the daily—

Fleischer: She was going to travel with Governor Bush everywhere he went on the campaign trail. She needed a number one person in Austin to both be the spokesperson and to run the department while she was gone, and she was gone every day.

Riley: Sure.

Fleischer: Presidential campaigns become such big endeavors. I'm sure we'll come back to this, but from those seeds came issues for me at the White House, because if Karen was the number one person, what was the role of the press secretary?

But that was Karen's unique relationship with George Bush.

Riley: Great. We'll come back to that. You ultimately made the decision. Do you remember how long it took you to decide? Was this a matter of days?

Fleischer: I moved to Texas in November. I got back to Washington early in November. I presumably was in Seattle November 1 and 2, something like that. It had to be pretty quick, and they wanted me in Austin right away.

Riley: It was clear that you were going to go to Austin to fulfill your responsibilities?

Fleischer: Oh, yes. The campaign was in Austin—

Riley: Right.

Fleischer: —which was a big deal for me, even though I was single, having to move: move for a year, pack your bags, you can lose—

Riley: There are women in Texas.

Fleischer: Yes, there are. [*laughter*]

Riley: I'm not sure that the tone of voice you used is to going to transfer into the transcript as it should but—

Fleischer: That was Paul's voice that said that. [*laughter*]

Riley: All right, so you went to Texas. What did you find when you got to Texas? What was the lay of the land? Were you overwhelmed? Did it look well organized? Was it chaos?

Fleischer: It was unbelievably well organized. And big. My perspective was Elizabeth Dole's campaign and a part of it was his father's campaign. It was well run, well organized. For the most part, everybody really got along and was congenial. It was easy for me to step into the role; people helped me get to know the Bush team and George Bush was great. He has what he calls a flat management style, where he knows that the most important thing—he learned this from his father, learned from the mistakes his father made—is that his top staff needs access to him. They don't want to go through a Chief of Staff; they don't want to go through filters. The psychic income that keeps you happy and loyal is having access to the boss, and that's what he granted.

Riley: Is that his phrasing or is that yours? "Psychic income"?

Fleischer: "Psychic income" is mine. "Flat management style" is his. That's how he put it. His father's administration had a powerful Chief of Staff who kept people away from George H. W. Bush and, therefore, [Richard] Darman and [Jack] Kemp and other important, powerful people would get frustrated, and leak, "Here's my side of it." The thinking was *If I can't get it to Bush, I'll put it in the* Post*, so I can get it to Bush*.

There was none of that in the George W. Bush world. This is what he did talk to me about, because he told me, especially going into the White House, how he didn't expect leaks. But he created an environment where leaks just didn't naturally occur because he had a good working

environment. Leaks occur when people are frustrated and need to create a new system to go around a system that is not working properly. That was why he used that flat management style.

For me, I had to learn who George W. Bush was. I was speaking for him. I had to learn him. That was my first priority. Then I had to know the rest of the team. Karen was great to me. She took me in and knew how important it was for me to become her person there. Especially on the campaign, Karen was really helpful. I just plunged in. But because at that point in my life I had been doing this for 17 years, it all came easy and natural to me. Clearly, there are things you learn on a Presidential campaign that are new, especially going on TV. I had never done that before. But Capitol Hill was a marvelous proving ground and learning ground for how to talk to reporters and represent a boss.

Riley: Did you have to do any homework before you went down there? Did you order copies of his public statements or was it the case that because you'd been grappling with Bush as an opponent for so long that you—like a defensive back playing against a receiver—knew what the moves would look like?

Fleischer: Yes. I don't remember. In November of '99, he had only given a few important speeches. Knowing how I operate, chances are that I got those speeches and read them so I knew how my boss said what he said, but I don't remember more than that.

Riley: Okay. You went down and started immersing yourself in a very different kind of culture there. You were there in November. Iowa was good, although there was a problem; you said your predecessor had already stumbled over Iowa well before the caucuses, right? This would have been September or October of—

Fleischer: Yes. But it wasn't of electoral consequence. It was just the tip of the iceberg for David, where he spoke a little too loosely with reporters, was a little too jocular with reporters. In this case, he made fun of Iowa voters for being narrow-minded or something like that. It wasn't going to damage George Bush terribly—People look at those as staff gaffes and, unless it's so serious or ethical, it almost never touches the person at the top—but it was part of the Bush campaign operation: things are disciplined, things are buttoned up, speak respectfully. You have to find that sweet spot in talking to reporters, working well with reporters, having good relations with reporters, without going so far that you reflect badly on your boss. That was the Iowa issue for David. Politically, Iowa was always strong, but right away you could start to feel the problems in New Hampshire. Bush was still way up over McCain, but you could feel it. You could just tell.

Riley: Even from Texas. You were in Texas the whole time, right?

Fleischer: I did a couple of trips with the Governor. When Karen didn't want to travel, I would travel. I remember one early trip up there to New Hampshire, but, yes, I could tell from Texas. It doesn't matter where you are; if you are in politics, you'd better have good antenna anywhere. In the middle of a cave, you'd better have good antenna and know what's going on. That was the huge issue, of course. In the Iowa debate, the interesting issue was when Bush was asked about who his favorite philosopher was and he said, "Jesus Christ." That was one of the defining issues for many people about George Bush, the evangelical conservative Christian.

Then there was New Hampshire, where we got our clock cleaned.

Freedman: What was that like for you?

Fleischer: The evangelical issue or the clock cleaning?

Freedman: Both.

Riley: I'm more interested in the former than the latter, but we'll want to get to both. Did that have any effect on you whatsoever?

Fleischer: No, not personally. I'm religious, and my religion means a lot to me. I wouldn't say I'm an observant Jew, in the technical sense of what it means to be an observant Jew, but I observe very regularly. I have enough confidence and comfort in my religion and my faith that I don't care what other people do or say; it's not going to change me.

Perry: Are you Reform?

Fleischer: I was raised Conservative. I'm Reform now. My kids are being raised Reform. My grandfather was Orthodox, but then I hung around a Lubavitch rabbi in Washington for a long time, so I am Reform. That's really the answer to it, but I am pretty well deeply immersed in—

Freedman: —and you knew that the Governor wasn't Jewish? [*laughter*] That didn't come as news?

Fleischer: "George Bushberg" sounds like he's straining. I'll have to explain that to his rabbi. No.

I also knew my job as a staffer, going back to my central point, and *he* was the one running; it was *his* background. What's interesting to me about that was that on a personal level I was always fine with it, that it's his faith, that's what he—Having long been in Republican politics, particularly in the South and the Southwest from Domenici days, I had been surrounded by Christian conservatives. Coming from the Northeast, where I was taught to look at those people with some suspicion, that they are narrow-minded people, my firsthand experience was just the opposite. They are some of the most decent, caring, nice, respectful people I've ever met. And when you say goodbye to them and they say, "I'm praying for you," I was always touched by that. "That's really nice of you to say." Now maybe they were saying, "I'm praying for you to convert," and they didn't say those two words aloud. But it didn't bother me. I took it warmly.

The other side of what he said, though, was that it did narrow-cast him for a large number of moderate independents, college-educated, graduate school–educated people, who are willing to look Republican but are mistrustful of Republicans on the social issues. In my opinion, they're narrow on what it means to be an evangelical and don't open up their minds to what that means.

But it did partially define George Bush, which was something that carried into his Presidency, especially when he started talking about evil and things of that nature that reinforced this view. It was a stereotype and a simple one. He painted the first stroke of it, but then reporters did their jobs, things polarized, and filled out the rest of the brushstrokes in too much overemphasis.

Perry: What were you learning about him in traveling with him, as a person?

Fleischer: He's amazingly disciplined, amazingly fast on his feet. I loved briefing him. I remember New Hampshire; I'd bring him around for a press opportunity and I'd say, "They are going to ask you A, B, C, and D." He'd ask what I thought he should say on A, and I'd give him an answer. You knew you'd better stand on your feet and be fast and to the point and get it, which meant I had to be thinking about every answer before I went to him to prep him and brief him. Again, in terms of persona and fitting, that was my style. That's what I liked about him and it sure held me accountable, because if he saw that I was dawdling, if I was searching for the answer, he'd cut me off, so I had to be on my game.

He was just good-natured, easygoing, affable. He liked people and people liked him. Now, when we lost New Hampshire, I got a very important insight into him. Bush called the top staff into his suite; at two or three in the afternoon, we got the exit polls—

Riley: You were in New Hampshire at this time?

Fleischer: Yes.

Riley: Okay, so you went up there.

Fleischer: Yes. I would go to all the debates. I would go—when Karen didn't want to travel, I traveled, and then I'd go to the debates, the major events, the events that would draw a lot of the media, the election, all the primary elections.

Riley: Okay. On Election Day you would probably be with him or on a primary day—

Fleischer: Correct.

Riley: Okay.

Fleischer: All the primaries—New Hampshire, South Carolina—I was at his side.

Riley: Okay. Forgive me. You were saying—

Fleischer: He called us in, and we knew at that point we were down by 18 or 19. I don't how many points it was; it was way beyond anything any of us thought, just an embarrassing blowout. He was absolutely calm—no temper, no finger pointing—and he said, "We're going to pick ourselves up and go to South Carolina and we're going to win in South Carolina."

In South Carolina, I was at his side when he got the word that he won. His reaction? The same as New Hampshire: no high fives, no jumping up and down, no relief. I remember thinking to myself at that moment, *Boy, if there is ever a crisis, if something goes bad, this is the type of temperament you want in your Commander in Chief.*

I was getting to learn my boss, watch my boss, get an insight into him, which as a spokesperson you have to have, but boy, did it reinforce all the good things I dreamed about when I was thinking, *I wonder if he'll be the President*?

I saw that on 9/11, with his reaction on 9/11.

Perry: Did he talk to you about how to speak to the press after the loss in New Hampshire, or did you just take what you now knew was his even-tempered approach to the press after the loss?

Fleischer: His words to the entire senior staff were what I carried. You reflect your boss. I'm sure if I was asked, "How did he handle it?" I said something like, He's disappointed, but he believes he's going to win in South Carolina and become the nominee.

Perry: Simple. Direct.

Fleischer: Right.

Perry: Even.

Fleischer: Right.

Riley: And what was your reading of New Hampshire? What happened there that caused things to tank?

Fleischer: It was a combination of factors. One was just the excitement of John McCain. John McCain's maverick image fit New Hampshire to a T. And interesting in this era of the Tea Party, George Bush was the establishment and was seen as such. We kept rolling out one endorsement after another: Dan Quayle endorsed him. John Sununu endorsed him. Judd Gregg endorsed him. We just played into McCain's the maverick; he's the man of the people. George Bush is the establishment. And we kept playing into it.

Bush's being from Texas, Christian conservative Texas, was not quite the fit for New Hampshire, either. It was just all of the above. Of course, his father lost New Hampshire to Pat Buchanan. New Hampshire has a history of voting for people who don't win. Hillary Clinton won New Hampshire against Barack Obama.

Freedman: Paul Tsongas.

Fleischer: Yes, Tsongas. Good.

Freedman: So after South Carolina, John McCain was not pleased?

Fleischer: John McCain wasn't pleased before South Carolina, after South Carolina, the day of South Carolina. [*laughter*] He's never pleased.

Freedman: Did you find your job was challenging, specifically, dealing with the sorts of allegations he was making?

Fleischer: Oh, yes. Oh, my gosh. And that's where the press was so on John's side. I got a phone call from a reporter who was a really great guy, David Bloom, and Bloom was at the event where this woman at a town hall meeting said something to McCain, started crying about she had gotten these robocalls from George Bush attacking John McCain and saying this and saying that

and the woman started crying. And McCain went down and put his arm around her, something like that; it was a powerful moment. Bloom was watching it and called me and filled me in on the whole thing and I knew we'd never convince anybody we weren't behind this. It was too juicy. All the press was going to believe this. And it was a slog.

We, of course, won South Carolina, but the press was cheering for McCain to win. I remember thinking at the time, *They're cheering for him now to beat Bush because it's a great story, the maverick surprise.* Reporters love—They loved Senator [J. Robert] Kerrey of Nebraska, the Democrat who always used to speak badly of Democrats. They loved McCain, the Republican who spoke badly of Republicans. There's not just a bias angle; there is a "juicier story" angle too that the press liked about McCain. I remember thinking, *Oh, if he wins the nomination, they're going to turn on him just as soon as he wins it.* [*laughter*] *It'll be his turn to be in the barrel.*

It was almost impossible to deal with the media in South Carolina and convince them that the things going on there were not George Bush's doings. That's the sordid history of South Carolina politics, but it's just too juicy a story line for it not to become attached to Bush.

Riley: You've touched on something that's a pretty remarkable experience in the history of media relations: the extent to which McCain became this darling of the press. Were there ways that you, as press secretary, could combat this?

Fleischer: There were a couple of things, and the first was Karen Hughes's doing. Karen came up with a slogan that—After we lost New Hampshire, Bush changed slogans: "Reformer with results"—

Freedman: Right.

Fleischer: —making the case that Bush reformed welfare in Texas, and tort liability. And he is a reformer. He has done it, but unlike John McCain is the implicit message, Bush has results. McCain was never able to do anything.

I think McCain said it first and we all picked up on it, that the press was part of John McCain's base, [*laughter*] so it was a little like jujitsu. With conservative primary voters, if the press is your base, they are against you, so we referred to him as "McCain (R-*New York Times*)" and things like that, which reporters—of course, because now you're talking about reporters *to* reporters—would quote, because it was about them. They loved it.

We did those kinds of things you do, but more than anything else, we just kept moving. We won South Carolina and we had the organization everywhere. We knew the bigger story was going to be who won and who lost. As long as you win primaries, you solve the bias problem. We won.

Riley: Were there instances here where you had to fight your instincts to be too clever? Or are there gambits or ploys that you came up with for the press that, especially with respect to McCain—The thing about "(R-*New York Times*)" is that it is very clever, but are there moments where your creative genes just get so far beyond you that you have to reel them in and say, "That's a step too far"?

Fleischer: Probably. I'm sure there were. I remember a couple of them from the White House. I don't remember from '99 or 2000. It's just so long ago. There have been and I'm certain there were.

Riley: Okay.

Fleischer: But I had the advantage—My job was talking to reporters with my elbow out, one at a time. I didn't brief the press. I wasn't standing at a podium.

Riley: Was anybody doing that?

Fleischer: Karen would, on the road. She'd get swallowed up in a giant circle of reporters. But I had a lot more latitude and had good relations with reporters, so if I did say something foolish, perhaps I had a chance to get it back. I don't remember this, but Bill Kristol said that he wrote something negative about Bush and that I called him and threatened him with access, that he'd be denied access to Bush people. I don't remember if I did or didn't. It doesn't sound like me, but if Bill Kristol said it, I'm sure it's true. It's the kind of thing you remember if you're a reporter. He complained that I had done that and I made a note to myself, *If I did that; don't do that.* [*laughter*] Now you're refreshing my bad memories.

Riley: That's my job.

Fleischer: There had to be things like that.

Riley: From this period in particular, and this is something to keep in mind as we go, did you make mistakes with reporters in New Hampshire or South Carolina? Do you remember any instances where you screwed up and how the organization reacted to having a spokesman who stepped in it?

Maybe you were so darn good by then that you just—

Perry: No mistakes.

Fleischer: I don't recall. That's what I meant when I said I talked to reporters with my elbow out. I meant I was on my phone with my elbow out, the phone to my ear, one at a time, working through a stack of papers, which is a very different, more controlled environment—and more forgiving environment—than standing with 20 microphones in front of your face where you may just say something. That was the problem in the briefing room some days. But I'm sure I did. Maybe you'll remind me what comes to mind in '99 or 2000?

Riley: Believe me, it's not a purposeful question. Because we're so early in the project, my own sense about the chronology is not as acute as it will be two years from now. That's one of the advantages you have in going early. [*laughter*]

Fleischer: Don't call me back. I'll take it as a sign that you found something. [*laughter*]

Freedman: Let's take a different version of that question, as you think back to the primary season. Is there anything after South Carolina that stands out that was particularly challenging or troublesome or memorable?

Fleischer: For me personally, the way I did my job? During the recount, when Jim Baker's team came in, they basically took all of Florida, ran Florida, ran the strategy, and there was this weird sense, for those who remained behind in Austin, which included Karl [Rove], Karen, me, of what do we do? What's our role here?

I'd already been tapped to be the press secretary. Bush called me on Election Day to offer me the job, so there was this—the fight was there. We'd been fighting for a year. I wasn't in that fight. What do you do? So there was a question of relevancy.

Riley: But that came after the election. More generally, are there any particular recollections from before the convention that you want to talk about? And during the primary—Was McCain done after South Carolina?

Fleischer: After California. He won Michigan. Michigan, Pennsylvania, and one other state were the same day. We won Pennsylvania. He won Michigan, so he got to fight another day. Super Tuesday was early March of 2000 and there were California, Arizona, a bunch of states and we won. I remember reading the clips from his team about how amazing it was, just collapse and go away, that you wake up and you've been in this fight for so long and you were this darling, you won New Hampshire and were fighting it out, and then he lost so many states on Super Tuesday that he had to withdraw. They had to deal with that whole sense of it, that it collapsed. It was gone. I thought, *Whoa! Those are the stakes. That's what it's all about.*

I guess for my life, going on TV was the big thing I had to—that was new to me and I had to get used to it. I was doing a lot of TV shows at this point, all the endless cable shows, learning how to do that, debating the McCain people and then debating the [Albert, Jr.] Gore people on TV.

Riley: Was it hard for you to learn to do TV? Did you get nervous on camera?

Fleischer: No. I always liked it. It was a natural manifestation of what's next if you are a spokesperson and you're talking to reporters this way or in print or whatever. It just kind of fit and was fun.

Freedman: Did Karen give you pointers?

Fleischer: No. You're just thrown in and you try to figure things out for yourself.

Freedman: The day after Super Tuesday must have been Super Wednesday, so there were high fives *then*?

Fleischer: I remember he did an event—what was that facility? There was a sense of exhilaration. But at that point, too, I wasn't always at his side; Karen was. I did have that issue of being number two. I wasn't watching him internally at all these events every day. Sometimes Karen would tell me what he did, what he said. My job was then to push that out, so there was

that bit of separation that can take place. That was my accepted position and that's the way it went.

At the White House that became a terribly important issue and I'll come back to that.

Freedman: Yes.

Fleischer: But the campaign clicked. It clicked on so many levels. The staff got along so well. Things were so fun.

I'll tell you something that came up afterward. I only learned about it later. Karl Rove was the person who wanted David Beckwith in the job. When the Iowa problems happened, Karen went to the Governor and said, "David's got to go." Karl said, "David's got to stay." They clashed a lot, but it was always a clash that stayed inside, which was the way it should be. Karen brought me in and Karl and I never got along. We got off on the wrong foot because I replaced his guy and I was Karen's person and Karl didn't like that. He wanted his. That's typical and that's the way it goes.

But we never really hit it off. Karl, during the transition, said to me that I leaked information about who Bush was considering to be the Vice Presidential running mate, which I never did, and it created this bad will between Karl and me. It made Karl think I could not be trusted, with me saying, "Karl, you're making this up; I didn't have anything to do with that. Why are you looking at me?"

That led to a bit of wrangling, particularly toward the end of the campaign, where Karl would not want me to be in certain meetings. Karl, in fact, didn't want me to be hired as press secretary, so there was always that dynamic going on, but George Bush overruled Karl. Karen and Karl clashed about who should be press secretary. George Bush hired me. It was never overt during the campaign and Karl didn't tell me about that leak allegation until the transition, but Karl would deliberately withhold a lot of polling data and other things of that nature from me, which made it a little hard for me to do my job. But campaigns have these elements to them and I had mine with Karl.

Freedman: Why do you think he thought that? Did somebody set you up?

Fleischer: I have no idea. And I've often thought about—

Perry: Had some other person leaked?

Fleischer: You know, when Karl said it to me, it brought back this reminder. I guess somebody, somewhere, floated the name that John Danforth was going to be the nominee, but there were so many names being floated in the media, it didn't grab me, but it was important to Karl. I don't know. Karl's a fascinating person and I hope he'll cooperate with you. You'll really enjoy talking to him. He can be very amusing and witty, but there was that element that made me think, *I have to work around Karl to get information and do the things I need to do to do my job.*

Freedman: And that persisted?

Fleischer: Oh, yes, all the way through the White House.

Riley: And Karen's role in this was as a counterbalance? She was the one who was often—From your perspective, how did the President balance what he was hearing from those two?

Fleischer: He loved it.

Riley: He liked the tension?

Fleischer: Yes. First of all, they kept it at a very civil level, unlike people in his father's administration.

Riley: Sure.

Fleischer: You never read about it in the papers. You would see occasional Texas writers or others say there was a triumvirate—Joe Allbaugh was part of that, too—and they'd try to stir a little bit and Karen and Karl would clash. But to Karen and Karl's credit, neither of them ever went public with anything about this. They were both team players working for a great team leader. He helped create that environment.

But they would clash. Karen would say, Mr. President I think you should do X or Y. Karl would say, You can't do X or Y; you have to do A or B. And then Karen would say why A and B wouldn't work. Karl would say why X and Y wouldn't work. If you're the President, that's great. You want to hear all sides aired out.

One of the criticisms people made of President Bush was that his staff was so loyal that people wouldn't tell him things that he didn't want to hear, and it was complete nonsense. He's the easiest guy in the world to tell something critical to, to tell him, "I wouldn't do what you just did; I would do it this way." I used to do that regularly and sit in and watch Karen and Karl go at it, or anybody else go at it. The going-at-its were very civil.

I'll tell you an interesting story. Nicolle Devenish was McCain's communications director, Bush's communications director in 2004. She said she was talking to Mark Penn—She does some work with Mark Penn now—and talking about what the Hillary [Clinton] campaign was like, and he said, "Aw, man, we just fought with each other all the time. We were swearing at each other, just yelling at each other, 'That is bullshit!'" And he said, "You guys were like that, too, right?" And she said, "No. Nobody ever swore at each other. Nobody ever shouted like that." He said, "Come on, you're full of it. You're lying, Nicolle." And Nicolle felt it was impossible to convince him that it's just a given that that's how people work. I remember smiling at Nicolle, thinking, *Yes, we never did that.*

I like that kind of work atmosphere. Even when you weren't in front of the President and you were clashing with your coworkers, there was never that animosity or—Anyway, that was a long explanation, but the President would always benefit from his staff taking different points of view.

Perry: Are we up to the Vice Presidential pick yet? I don't want to jump ahead.

Riley: No, I don't think so. I was just trying to make sure we had cleared the decks of anything related to the nomination. This is very helpful, because I had made a note, "Rove," here, because that was a name that had not come up as an important figure and you helped us on that.

Let's get you to the convention.

Perry: Yes.

Fleischer: One of the trips I made with the Governor right before the convention—Karen didn't want to go, I guess—was to the Kentucky Derby.

Perry: She did not want to go?

Fleischer: Yes, it was a weekend trip and she wanted to be with her family, so I got to go. I got to go to Millionaire's Row. I don't know why people complain about traffic at the Derby; there was none. It was really easy. [*laughter*]

I was on the plane with the Governor and everybody was buzzing about who the VP [Vice President] pick would be. "It's such an important selection," blah, blah, blah. I knew I shouldn't ask him overtly who it was going to be, because he wasn't going to tell me, but we were talking in general, just to be ready for it, whether there was going to be controversy. Was there anything for which I needed to start getting prepped? And he said to me, "Don't worry about it. This person, don't worry about it. There is going to be no controversy about it. I have this figured out."

It was one of my early warnings about President Bush's certitude, that it would sometimes be off. And, of course, when [Richard] Cheney was named, the Democrats had opposition research that the Bushies never had—He voted against some honor for Nelson Mandela; I think he voted against the Martin Luther King [Jr.] holiday—things that instantly put us on the defensive with the press corps. Dan Bartlett, Mindy, Karen, me—we were all slow in responding, because we didn't know how to defend him.

It's one of the downsides of too much secrecy and having too tight a circle, but nevertheless that was what happened.

Perry: And Governor Bush thought there wouldn't be controversy because this person was so experienced and well known?

Fleischer: Secretary of Defense. Everybody knew him. He was a Congressman. He'd been around forever.

Perry: And that would balance out his lack of experience in D.C.? He thought that would be all to the good?

Fleischer: His decision to make him the Veep was—On the vetting side of it, Bush misjudged and thought he'd been around so long there wasn't going to be anything, that we'd have heard about it by then, so nobody had done an internal opposition research project on Dick Cheney.

Perry: Oh.

Fleischer: On the experience side of it—This was interesting, because there was one moment when I was at the Governor's Mansion with the Governor, upstairs, and it was just the two of us watching *Larry King Live*. I think it was when he picked Cheney and Cheney was downstairs in the mansion doing the interview live with Larry King, who flew to Austin. The show went to a commercial and Bush said to me, "Just watch, when something goes wrong in my administration, and it will, he is exactly the type of guy you want to have at your side."

The point Bush was making to me was that he picked Dick Cheney because he thought he was a graybeard, good advisor, internal wise man to have in the White House who would give him judgment. That was Bush's decision, which also—Another lesson to that was that it wasn't a political decision to pick up Wyoming's three electoral votes or white men. [*laughter*] Sometimes, that's how you pick your Veep. You need the region, you need the religion, you need this or that.

Bush made the point to me that nobody votes for the Vice President. He said, "It's all about who the President is." And he said, "People are focusing on this now, but nobody's going to vote for him or against him on Election Day. It's either going to be for me or against me." And he's dead-on right about that. That's almost always the case with Vice Presidential elections, unless it's Sarah Palin.

Riley: Did you have a favorite candidate going into—Had you given thought to this and thought, *I hope he selects A or B*?

Fleischer: No. I hadn't. The Governor did ask me, on one of the other trips I traveled with him—He came over to my room and asked me lots of questions about Elizabeth Dole. It was the first time I ever spoke frankly about Elizabeth Dole, and I gave him my unvarnished opinion.

Riley: Which was?

Fleischer: Well, he did not pick her. [*laughter*]

Riley: She wasn't ready to be Vice President, either?

Fleischer: She wasn't ready to be Vice President.

Riley: Okay.

Fleischer: Did he come see you after [Joseph] Lieberman was selected on the opposition? Did you talk about Lieberman at all?

Fleischer: Not that I remember.

Riley: Okay.

Fleischer: I remember personally being very touched by Lieberman's selection.

Riley: Yes?

Fleischer: Sure. Very proud. Lieberman flew to Tennessee. Do you remember Lieberman's little speech at the side of Gore? He said, "I revel before the Lord. I dance before the Lord." And he thanked the Lord for his nomination. It's a Hebrew prayer; it's the prodigals translated into English. It occurred to me, watching that, how proud I was as a Jew to watch that, but then thinking, *So then why, when a Christian conservative says thanks to the Lord do people get scared, but when Joe Lieberman does it, nobody gets scared? That's not fair.* Here I was, a very proud Jew to watch a Jew receive the nomination, thinking, *It's not fair to Christians.* [*laughter*]

Riley: Right. There was one question about the primary season that I meant to ask you, and this incident might have occurred before you came on board. Governor Bush was ambushed by a reporter and quizzed about leaders of foreign countries. I think this happened in November of—

Fleischer: It was a Boston radio reporter—

Riley: Is that right? But this was before you—

Fleischer: —before I came on.

Riley: Okay. Then that's immaterial. Do you have any memories of the convention?

Fleischer: No sleep.

Riley: You went?

Fleischer: I went. It's funny. The first thing I think of is that I saw my friends from Washington again for the first time in eight months or whatever it was that I'd been down there.

Nothing in particular jumps out at me other than I was doing tons of TV, tons of media, and for me this was an odd step up in my career. I remember going to other conventions and seeing people doing these things. I had a car, and a person assigned to me. Just on that personal level, I thought, *How did I get these? Why did I get that?*

Riley: Because you gave up Microsoft. [*laughter*]

Fleischer: I couldn't afford to get my own driver, so they gave me one.

It was a neat moment in that personal sense for me because of the space I was able to occupy and the number of interviews I was doing on behalf of the candidate. But I wasn't part of the speechwriting team or the speech prep team, so I took it in and watched it unfold in that sense. But it went swimmingly; it was a convention where all things clicked, where most reporters said they were really impressed with how well Bush delivered the speech.

It became the first of several incidents where Bush would make fun of the press, saying, "Well, this is going to be the biggest speech of his life. Dan?" Every time he had to do a big speech, he would pretend to be a reporter and do one of those. It showed me Bush's comfort, his being at ease, good-natured in the middle of pressure. But I can't say anything other than that particularly

jumped out. Then we immediately hopped aboard a train and did a train trip through the Midwest, and I was on that trip. I guess I dropped off that trip after two days or something and went back to Austin.

Riley: All right. Is there anything else related to the convention?

Perry: Could I come back to the choice of Vice President Cheney? Was he Governor Bush's first choice all along? Was he hoping that that was how it would come out, or did they know that that was what would come out of the selection committee that Cheney headed?

Fleischer: No. Bush said that this just evolved, that he put Cheney in charge of the committee and as he watched Cheney work and heard Cheney's thinking about each of the potential candidates, Bush increasingly, in his own mind, said, *The right person is the person asking all these questions and filling me in.* It was one of those switcheroos.

Riley: Were there concerns about his health?

Fleischer: Oh, yes.

Riley: Yes?

Fleischer: Afterward. He had a heart attack in the middle of the transition. Or recount?

Perry: Yes, it was in November, right around Thanksgiving.

Fleischer: He had what turned out to be a heart attack. Our early information was that it was not a heart attack, and Karen or I said that to the press, and we were hammered by the press for saying something that later turned out to be wrong.

Freedman: When did you meet him? Did you meet him that summer?

Fleischer: Yes. Dan Bartlett and I went to get him when he flew to Philadelphia. He flew in and Dan and I rode in the car with him to prep him on stuff. One of the things we had to prep him on was questions about his daughter being gay.

Freedman: Oh, interesting.

Fleischer: Dan kids me because we talked about who was going to raise the issue with him. I don't remember it, but Dan says I sat there silently and Dan all of a sudden had to do it. [*laughter*]

Perry: He volunteered.

Freedman: But surely he wasn't surprised by that?

Fleischer: Cheney's not surprised by anything. If he is, he doesn't show it. Cheney is stoic. You don't know what you've penetrated.

Freedman: Did it come up?

Fleischer: The gay issue?

Freedman: Did anybody in the media bring it up?

Fleischer: I don't remember. It probably did, biographically: "Father of a gay daughter," that kind of thing, but I don't—

Freedman: There was nothing that you needed to grapple with.

Fleischer: You're refreshing my memory. She was going to work on the campaign. She was going to have a paid position on the Vice Presidential nominee's staff and we may have caught some flak from conservatives about having an overtly gay staffer, something like that. That may have been the context of why it was something Dan and I had to raise with him, beyond being biographical.

But I never got to know Cheney well during the campaign. He was on the road all the time. My issues, being in Austin, were integrating the Vice President's staff with the President's staff, helping a new team of people get up to speed, assigning people from Bushland to the Vice President's campaign, and then all the integration that goes on as you're forwarding now two messages on the road instead of one.

We also had the incident where the two of them were campaigning together somewhere. I had it on live at the headquarters and heard Bush say to Cheney over an open microphone—They were talking about Adam Clymer of the *New York Times*—

Freedman: —oh, right. "Major league—"

Fleischer: "Major league asshole." And Cheney said, "Big time." Nobody in the traveling party knew about it, because of the open mic. I was the first. I called Karen; I brought it to Karen's attention.

Perry: What did she say?

Fleischer: I don't remember what she said. I just remember saying, "I guess you're going to have to handle this, Karen." [*laughter*] "You'd better tell the Governor." I don't even remember what I advised or if I advised anything other than to pass it along and fill it in. The interesting thing about that one, what spared us, was that a lot of the reporters agreed with the assessment.

Riley: I was going to say, "The truth is a defense."

Fleischer: Yes. It softened it. It made it a 24-hour story instead of a 72-hour story.

Riley: All right. We have you a nominee, we have you a team, you've been on the train trip, you've gone to Texas. Is there anything—The debates are the things that we often will focus on, but I don't know if there was anything else during the course of the general election campaign that was memorable? Paul, maybe you have things?

Freedman: I want to hear what you have to say.

Fleischer: Well, there was the DWI [driving while intoxicated]—

Freedman: Yes.

Fleischer: —which was the Friday before the election.

Riley: Yes, that comes much later.

Fleischer: That was after the debates.

Riley: Let me pose the question this way. When you went in, it is at least possible that somebody in your position might say, "Look, I'm eager to do this. Are there, not skeletons in the closet, but is there anything I need to know before I take this position?" Or were you just thinking, *This is likely to be my party's nominee. I'm going to do it*?

Fleischer: It's a part of the latter, but it was more that I believed in him. I liked him.

Riley: Right. Okay.

Fleischer: And to the—I'm not going to go back and work on anybody's campaign, but even if I were, and with the advantage now of having been a press secretary, having been out there before on a Presidential campaign, I would never say to somebody, "Is there anything in your background that I need to know before I take this job?"

Riley: Okay. You'd have to have that clear in your own mind that you're devoted enough to this person—

Fleischer: That's right.

Riley: Okay. Fair enough.

Fleischer: If anything comes out that is so unethical that you have to intellectually, morally, ask yourself, *Can I still work for this person in good conscience?* you'd go through that exercise, but certainly having a DWI doesn't rise to that level.

The other stuff that came up before the debates was Gore's convention. Gore kisses Tipper [Mary Elizabeth Gore], doesn't stop kissing her, and Gore takes the lead.

Riley: So your recommendation to Governor Bush was?

Fleischer: Kiss Tipper. [*laughter*]

Riley: You're very quick.

Fleischer: I was based in Austin. I wasn't on the road. You could just feel the wind being sucked out of us. Gore took the lead for the first time. Since we'd beaten McCain, we'd always been in the lead over Gore. Part of the dynamic of a campaign is riding the ups and the downs and then staying stable through them, just staying steady and doing your job and not getting affected by

the ups or downs to the point where it hinders your job. It was tough, because all of a sudden people were saying, Whoa, we might lose. Gore's winning.

The thing that turned it around was George Bush going on *Oprah* [Winfrey].

Riley: No kidding?

Fleischer: Yes. Bush went on *Oprah* and had a great interview and it started bringing women back. We really lost women after the Democratic Convention. I had nothing to do with it, but it was the sense of watching a campaign work and what loses voters and what gets voters. It's fascinating to think in the world of Medicare and Social Security and what are you going to do about this and that, a kiss put us behind and going on *Oprah* brought us back.

Freedman: Was it controversial? Did anybody resist going on *Oprah*?

Fleischer: No.

One that did become controversial, where I partially kick myself, because I should have been able to red-flag this and warn people not to do it, was that we had an internal debate about debates. There was thinking that we were going to defy convention, not do the three standard debates that the Presidential Debate Commission has always set up, and instead have three debates of our own choosing, and for one of which the surprise was going to be to go on *Meet the Press* with Tim Russert, to show that Bush would go into any environment, no matter how tough it was. And there were two others.

Governor Bush or our campaign manager, somebody, announced that that was what we intended to do, and the press came down on us. Even though I had not been—The '92 campaign deputy communications director didn't rise high enough—I had gone to the Vice Presidential debate in part just to set up the communications apparatus, and had no policy role, no Dan Quayle—but I should have realized what an institution the debates were and how reporters eagerly looked forward to setting up in the giant halls and the opining that goes on days before and the significance of it and the opining afterward and the momentum story as you go from one to the next.

I didn't wave Karen off or Bush off or Karl off or anybody else and say, "Wait a minute guys, my customers, the press corps, is never going to go for what you're thinking about." In retrospect, I kick myself for that, because that's part of my job, being the *Washington* person they brought in with all the *Washington* press experience, with a campaign run by Texans. I should have seen that Washington angle.

That turned out to be very bad for us. It looked like a debate over debates, and that Bush wouldn't debate Gore. The press was killing us and we just retreated. We, eventually, after I don't even know how many days of this, agreed to the Presidential Commission debates, just as they were always planned. People probably forget about that, but it was an embarrassing, tough moment.

Freedman: But within the campaign, nobody blamed you? Or did you get some flak?

Fleischer: Oh, no. Nobody blamed me. It wasn't my decision. I wasn't part of the decision-making group that decided to do that. But when Karen came to me and said, "This is what we're going to do," that's when I, in retrospect, think I should have seen it coming.

Riley: Forgive me; I should remember this, but I do not. You did or did not do public campaign financing in 2000?

Fleischer: Oh, yes, we did. We didn't do it for the primary. We did it for the general. Everybody's done it for the general until 2008.

Perry: Could I go back to appealing to the women's vote, which often, typically, has gone Democratic. Did Oprah come to you with an invitation or was Karen involved in saying, "Let's reach out to women. Let's go on *Oprah*."

Fleischer: I don't remember.

Perry: Aside from *Oprah*, was Karen talking in terms of a strategy to get women to come back?

Fleischer: There's nothing I recall, but I'll bet you it was Karen's idea to go on *Oprah.* I don't know that; that's just Karen. That's how Karen thinks. I don't remember if there was anything more about a women's—I think it was coincidental. I don't know that it was a sense of, We have to get women back. We had invitations. He was the Republican nominee; every show in America would take the nominees, so it may have just been Karen thinking we needed to go on *Oprah* as an isolated hit. I don't know if there was a broader strategy.

Freedman: Gore did it just a couple of weeks later, is my recollection. Or shortly thereafter.

Fleischer: I don't recall.

Perry: Me either.

Riley: I was living abroad during this campaign. We've talked about this before, so that is part of the reason for my question—I just don't remember.

Fleischer: You didn't vote in Florida, did you? [*laughter*] Because Al Gore probably threw your ballot out.

Riley: Probably. Let's take a break here.

[BREAK]

Riley: Okay, we're back on. There may be a few residual questions about the campaign, but you were working the debates. You've already said that there was some internal discussion about whether to opt out. Was it because you thought Gore was that superior? Was there a lack of confidence that President Bush could—

Fleischer: No. It was just Bush's reflection that he didn't want to do what had always been done. He didn't want to do the establishment thing. He wanted to have a new and different way to have debates. He thought there was something lacking in the format. He always was willing to do it. He wanted to do three, just of a different nature.

Riley: Okay. And what were the—*Oprah*'s one. No, not *Oprah*.

Perry: *Meet the Press.*

Riley: *Meet the Press*, sorry.

Fleischer: *Meet the Press*, where Tim would moderate it, and I don't remember the other two. It was whatever they were, but we ended up tucking our tail between our legs, retreating from it, and going to the debates.

Riley: Okay.

Fleischer: The first debate was in Boston. What most people remember is Gore sighing and how that appeared on the air, but the thing I'll always remember about it was that, in that debate, Gore said he went down to the fires in Texas with Jamie Lee Witt, the head of FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency], to make sure everything was okay and show the federal resources. We had already been starting to label him as a serial exaggerator, because he "invented the Internet" and there was something about his mother's dog's prescription drugs. A couple of those things started to be strung together, which created a very powerful narrative to use against your opponent.

Somewhere in the middle of the night, one of our smart researchers in Austin called me—I was sharing a room with Ed Gillespie at a hotel in Boston, where the debate was—and said to me, "We just got it; it's official. Gore did not go to Texas with Jamie Lee Witt."

I got up at like five or six that morning and did a TV show or something where I started to make that case, that Gore had exaggerated again. Then, as I was going back to Austin, and the Governor and the traveling party were getting ready to leave Boston, I climbed onto each of the three press buses, which were waiting to leave in the motorcade to take Bush to the airport. I stood in the front of each bus and said to the reporters, "We've verified, Al Gore did not go to Texas with Jamie Lee Witt. Once again, here's serial exaggeration." And that next day's news cycle was dominated by Gore's exaggerations.

The sighs were the other thing, all of which helped propel—Bush did surprisingly better. Bush actually beat Gore, and that was a huge boost in terms of winning that first debate at a time when the race—I think by then we were up a little bit, or it was neck-and-neck.

I distinctly remember that as an interesting example of working the press the way a news cycle did work back then, where you could start the day and—Even something like that today would work for a news cycle.

Riley: And when you went on the buses, this was your only message? It was the one thing?

Fleischer: The only message: Gore the exaggerator. He did not go to Texas.

Riley: In a situation like that, is there a temptation to go with five things and you have to make a judgment that you have one shot?

Fleischer: No. If you can isolate on a problem, isolate on a problem. And I mean isolate.

Freedman: That was some good research. Do you remember who the person was? How do you—It's a negative, right? To be able to say, We confirmed that this *didn't* happen—

Fleischer: It was just one of our oppo [opposition research] guys. I don't know how he did it, what he did.

Freedman: But you were confident? By the time it got to you, everybody was—

Fleischer: Oh, yes.

Freedman: And with something like that, it's obvious that this would become the number one item on the day's agenda, but was that something that Karen Hughes signed off on? That the candidate, the nominee—

Fleischer: It's a great question. I just talked to Ed Gillespie about it. I don't remember going to Karen, but it would be weird not to tell people that we had this bullet, to just fire it yourself and hope it ricochets around. But I don't remember. I don't remember telling Karen or telling the Governor or telling anybody else. I just remember Eddie—

Riley: You were sharing a room with him. You were frugal. It's noticeable.

Fleischer: I remember that as a great tactical experience in a close campaign, big states, and doing my job as a spokesman, getting a message out.

Riley: I'm thinking if you're reading Teddy White's books, a press guy back in that era was probably staying up until three in the morning drinking in the bar with them. Was that a part of your job, too?

Fleischer: If it was, I didn't do it. I'm sure at a big debate like that, reporters—who work very hard and might still be filing copy and doing what they do until midnight—there are still a bunch of old-timers who would go out and hit the bar. That's part of life on the road for the press corps. I don't remember hanging out at bars and schmoozing with them. Not that I wouldn't have wanted to, but mostly because I was in Austin, I suppose, where I would go out to dinner with people as they came through Austin, but it's too tiring. You're whipped.

Riley: But it's a striking change, right? In the way that we've conceived—

Fleischer: I guess so, but I wasn't part of that earlier era. I've read the books, but—

Riley: I'm not misstating this, am I? The idea is that if you are working the press, you have to go where they are.

Freedman: I don't know if that's true for the press secretary side of it or the communications side of the campaign, but—

Riley: —maybe not. But you weren't doing a lot of hanging with the guys?

Fleischer: No.

Riley: And they would have been guys at an earlier—

Fleischer: Yes, you'd hang out with them during your business day, which begins real early and goes real late. But the other interesting thing—You made the point about going where the press is. I remember the tension of trying to hustle out to get to those buses before those buses left, because I realized if the buses were gone, I was going to miss this chance.

Freedman: Because there was no Twitter.

Fleischer: That's right, yes. It would have been so much harder to reach everybody. But I also wanted the pack mentality of it. I wanted to get to and address them all. There is some drama to taking the bus and making an announcement. And if I had been five minutes later—I don't even know how many minutes later—and the buses had pulled out, I may never have gotten that chance back. I had to get my flight to go back to Austin, whatever it was. To start calling reporter after reporter after reporter wouldn't be as effective. I was able to drive the day's narrative by the good work the researchers did, but also by the happenstance of being able to jump on those buses in time.

Perry: And you used the term "narrative," which we hear so much of today, and people who read this literature talk about 'framing issues.' Did you talk about that yourself? Did you say, "We can really frame the narrative if we jump on this theme"?

Fleischer: That's why Eddie and I—As soon as I got the report from the oppo guys that Gore didn't go, Eddie and I instantly knew. We didn't have to think about it. We knew this fed the narrative and would grow the narrative, the narrative being that Gore exaggerates. It was just a ball on a tee. So, yes, we were keenly aware of what the bigger narratives were that sometimes come, sometimes go, and that more than anything determines success. Narratives are based, in large part, on reality. The narratives can turn. They can get worse or they can go on and a new narrative can become established. When you have the other guy in a bad narrative, keep him there.

Riley: Ari, were you involved in debate prep?

Fleischer: No.

Riley: Not even to the extent of providing materials for them?

Fleischer: No.

Riley: Did you have occasion to talk to your candidate before or after the debate to get a sense about his state of mind going into it or how he felt he did afterward?

Fleischer: I'm sure I did, but it would have been in passing.

But the interesting thing at this point of the campaign was that the road crew was driving everything. The campaign was on the road and that was Karen, Karen at the Governor's side. Scott McClellan, who was one of the press people working for me in Austin, was brought out onto the road so that when Karen was with the Governor in his suite, giving him advice, doing whatever she needed to do, if Karen was writing—Karen did a lot of writing on the road—Scott would be available to talk to reporters on the road.

My job was still to be the one working the phones in Austin, managing the staff down in Austin. So much did swing out onto the campaign trail, and at that point—It's interesting for me because I had developed my relationship with Governor Bush, had gotten to know him pretty well throughout the campaign and everything, but at this stage, clearly, there was a filter between me and Bush and that was Karen. That was the way the campaign worked.

Riley: You had two more debates, right? We've talked about the first one. Do you have any specific recollections from the other two?

Fleischer: The second one was the foreign policy one, at Wake Forest. I don't remember anything about my role. What was striking in that debate was that Bush really held his own and impressed people with his knowledge of foreign policy. He always used to joke that when the bar of expectations is set so low, it's easy to hop over it.

I was down at a Bush event in Dallas a couple of months ago and our former ambassador to East Timor was there. I didn't know this guy, but I said to him, "You're the reason George Bush won the Presidency." And he said, "What do you mean?" I hadn't even thought about this, except for that debate.

Bush got a question about the use of international peacekeepers, America's involvement around the world, and what role America should play. He cited Australia's involvement in the conflict in East Timor as a good example of how regional powers should be the peacekeepers instead of Americans going abroad. You could almost hear a gasp from the crowd that Bush was talking about East Timor and Australia after he didn't even know the name of the Prime Minister of Pakistan and all that business. So it was really fun to meet this guy—the ambassador from East Timor.

Freedman: The other thing that was going on during the campaign, the other part of the television campaign, was the advertising. It sounds as though those decisions were being made by other people in the campaign.

Fleischer: Correct.

Freedman: Okay.

Fleischer: Right. I wasn't part of—I would have to deal with the announcements of the ads, if there was a problem in an ad, if an ad was pulled off the air, that kind of thing.

Freedman: Is there anything that stands out in your memory?

Fleischer: There had to be something that went wrong, but I don't remember anything specific. There were times when ads would get on the air that Karen hadn't seen or approved and she really threw down about that. Then we changed procedures, and the Governor said nothing would go on the air without Karen. That created some internal—

Riley: Who was driving the creative?

Fleischer: Karl.

Riley: Okay.

Fleischer: Karl and Mark McKinnon. Mark McKinnon was really the guy doing it, along with Russ Schriefer, Matt Dowd, and then Karl, deeply involved in all that.

Freedman: As the campaign was moving along toward Election Day, do you recall thinking, *This is neck-and-neck* or *This is going to be close*, or *We're going to win this thing*?

Fleischer: I really thought we were going to win by four or five points. All the real early polls had us up. The whole spate of two-weeks- to one-week-out polls had us up by about that margin. There were internal pools going around the office, and four or five was about what I put in it, so Election Day was a complete and total shock. To this day, George Bush will attribute it to the revelation of his DWI the Friday before. He thinks it kept a bunch of Christian conservatives home, who were morally disappointed in his behavior and could not go out and vote for him.

Riley: That must have been something you had to have had a piece of. How did it come to you and what was your reaction to it?

Fleischer: Dan Bartlett. You just reminded me of something else I should mention for the record, because it's a fascinating example of how communications has changed over time. Dan Bartlett's job was to be in charge of rapid response, so he was always working the reporters who were with Al Gore. Gore would say something and Dan would instantly call the Gore reporters and try to jump into the Gore stories. I was like a safety. I would handle whatever the controversial issues were and would float wherever I needed to float, offense or defense. One day I was talking to Dan about whether he got some story out and he said, "Yes, but the only people we could get to cover it were with Fox."

In 2000, if Fox covered it, the reaction was, All right, who's Fox? Now, of course, Fox is pretty big, especially in Republican circles. The same thing happened on election night. Fox was the first to call—After Florida was called for Gore, then called for nobody, Florida was the first to call it back for Bush—and our reaction was, Wait a minute, it's just Fox.

Freedman: And one of the people on that team at Fox was a Bush cousin—

Fleischer: John Ellis.

Freedman: John Ellis, right.

Fleischer: Yes. I don't know if that was here or there.

Freedman: Well, it became part of the story.

Fleischer: Yes, but given the fact that Fox turned out to be right, I don't know—

Freedman: Oh, no, I was at ABC [American Broadcasting Company]. I always say there is no way you could have orchestrated a conspiracy; it was way too chaotic. But let's go back to the DWI.

Riley: Yes, how did that present itself?

Freedman: And what was that day like?

Fleischer: Dan got the phone call from somebody in Gore's world, a reporter with Gore. Dan got the phone call saying that an allegation had been made—I guess the story came out first in Maine or in Boston. I don't remember who broke it first. I remember it came from a guy in Maine, who was a Democratic activist, and there was the role of a judge—I don't remember exactly how it all played out, but we got the word it was about to break, and I knew nothing about it. I don't think Dan knew about the DWI, either. I don't remember.

I later learned that the discussion was held when Bush was deciding whether or not to run, whether he should reveal that he had a DWI. I think his staff—Karl, Karen, and Joe Allbaugh—had recommended to him that he should reveal it, that the only way to handle these things is to preempt them, but he decided not to. The reason he gave was that he wanted to be consistent with his daughters, that he was trying to teach his daughters at the time not to drink and drive, and he would have felt hypocritical saying, "But I did it," so he deliberately decided to try to keep it quiet.

People are free to evaluate whether that's so or not; that's what I think Karen wrote in her book. I don't remember where I learned of it. Maybe I just asked people later and pieced it together.

Riley: It shows up. It's been published that way.

Fleischer: I'll be curious to see if the President refers to that in his book. But anyway, I don't remember where the President was; I just remember the backdrop. He was back at his hotel. It was nighttime and Karen brought him out with just a brick wall behind him. He acknowledged it, said it was true and it consumed the weekend going into the race, this last-minute shock. I remember some people were really disappointed, because some people did ask him, during the front-porch campaign, "Is there anything in your background that's going to hurt you?"

The questions then were about cocaine use. There was that buzz in '99 about whether Bush did coke, so people were asking Bush that question. Then when the DWI came out, some conservatives said, "We're very disappointed in him. We asked him about this and if there was anything in his background." Anyway, that was a blow to the stomach going into that weekend. Events just turned and it was Election Day, and then it was "election six-week day."

Freedman: Yes, but during that day and during the Saturday and the Sunday, you must have been on the phone constantly—

Fleischer: Constantly.

Freedman: And what did you say?

Fleischer: There was nothing you could do or say that changed it or advanced it that the Governor said. In a situation like that, I just reiterated what the Governor said and suffered through phone call after phone call after phone call. I don't remember the specifics, but I'm sure reporters were saying to me, "Do you think this is going to change the dynamic of the campaign? Do you think now you're going to lose? Are you seeing your poll numbers turn around?" And I'm sure I said to them, "It doesn't change our confidence that the Governor is going to win the race." I don't think we did anything to discredit the source.

I don't remember trying to turn it around and say, "This is a Democratic leak and dirty last-minute politics." The standard operating procedure, especially for the spokespeople, was that if Bush says it, you echo it. You don't go beyond. You don't create new news or advance the story; you just try to reinforce what he is saying. I would just work through my stack of papers reinforcing what he was saying. There is a kind of simplicity to it.

Freedman: Yes.

Fleischer: But it's the love and care and feeding of the press that you're doing one by one by one by one.

Riley: I thought one of the brilliant lines out of the campaign was the—I'm throwing this out for your reflection and also to see if you remember who came up with it—"When I was young and irresponsible, I was young and irresponsible." And the news may not have had the impact it would have had otherwise, because in some respects you had already copped to there being issues in his past without really getting to the specifics.

Fleischer: In many respects, people knew Bush drank too much. He always acknowledged that, said that. That radiator was half bled, but to have been arrested for DWI was different.

Riley: Yes.

Fleischer: And he had not admitted to that, so there was shock news value.

Freedman: And at this point, in the weeks leading up, you had mentioned earlier that Karl Rove had concerns and you weren't looking at polling regularly, but did you see—Was there some kind of briefing room memo every day, here's what our numbers look like?

Fleischer: Not that I saw. There were polling numbers that were out every day, but they were normally the battleground-state polling numbers.

Freedman: Right. Sure.

Riley: Were your efforts dictated by the battleground states? Were you sifting through a three-inch stack of messages to find the ones that were coming from—

Fleischer: Most of my calls were coming from national reporters, but that might be tainted a little bit by my memories of being press secretary. That was all national reporters, and other people handled regional. Maybe there were regional. I don't know. We had a regional group, though, who would handle that, I think. I don't remember. I know it was national, maybe regional.

Riley: Okay. We're getting you to Election Day. But before Election Day, tell us about Bush's feelings about the press, how he felt about reporters, whether there was a comfort level at all with the reporters or whether he felt as though all of them were out to get him.

Fleischer: Good question. He had great personal relationships with almost everybody on the campaign plane. They liked him. He would go back there, especially during the primaries, and really yuk it up with them, talk box scores with them, ask them about their families. He had the same thing I always saw in him, that good-natured camaraderie, and he enjoyed mixing it up with reporters. Nancy Pelosi's daughter was the one who had that camera and did that movie, and Bush was a ham for that movie. The interesting thing about reporters, for all the issues about bias, is that what reporters really are is, one, conflict oriented and two, jocular. They like irreverence. They like to mix it up with you. They like to know you're not taking everything so seriously. That's how you get yourself in trouble as a press secretary, if you get a little too irreverent, but Bush fit that perfectly.

I think reporters liked George W. Bush a lot more, personally, than they liked Al Gore. I heard complaints about how the Gore press advance staff would keep the press back, was bad to the press, had a nasty attitude. They loved our advance people, and it's all a reflection of the person at the top. Bush liked them and enjoyed them. We liked them—"we" being the campaign people—and enjoyed them.

That's the personal level and the professional level. Then comes the ideological level. With good reason George W. Bush thought, like a lot of Republicans think, that if the press is watching two people clash and one is an R [Republican] and one is a D [Democrat], it's a lot easier to be the D in the clash than the R, even if they like you personally.

Perry: And even if they don't like the D, as you stated here?

Fleischer: Correct. It just kind of oozes into print that he's probably better for America than the R, from my experience with reporters, who will tell you absolutely they're impartial and trained to be impartial, but it's not that simple.

Riley: But the personal level compensates partly for some of this?

Fleischer: No.

Riley: It does not. Okay.

Fleischer: It helps you to get through the day easier and nicer. It's just better to get along with people than to not get along with people, but you can still wake up the next morning and read the paper and think, *What the . . . ?* A perfect example of it was Rick Burke's story in the *New York*

Times about that ad that had the word "rat" in it, that somebody slowed down the ad to frame-by-frame and the word "bureaucrat" came up on the screen.

Freedman: But "rat" stayed up longer. [*laughter*]

Fleischer: For like 3/1000ths of a milliframe or whatever the measurement was. You would never know it if you didn't have a microscope, but it became a front-page story and knocked us off message for probably three or four days because it became the tactic story and the horse race story, which reporters just love. And the word "rat," in a headline, just dominated.

Maybe you can get to the bottom of that here. Everything I was ever able to piece together afterward—Understand that part of my job was to be the inside reporter. On the one hand, I was the spokesperson; my job was to visibly be up there defending what we did. The other job was to dig into it and make sure that there wasn't something that somebody, somewhere, did wrong that we were vulnerable on that was eventually going to come out or that was immediately going to come out, leaving me caught with my pants down saying no when the answer was yes. You always, as press secretary, have to work both angles, by representing your team, but you'd better cover yourself. I tried as hard as I could to run that stupid rat story down; maybe because of the way you do this, somebody will confess and say, "Yes, we left it up there for three extra—" [*laughter*]

Freedman: I think it was an Alex [Alejandro] Castellanos ad.

Fleischer: Yes, it was.

Perry: Could I ask a popular culture question? Were you ever concerned about that in terms of the press, writ large, and popular culture and *Saturday Night Live*? Talk about creating narratives of the Governor being somewhat of a bumbler and not very good with the English language, and for Gore being pompous and exaggerating—

Fleischer: Right.

Perry: Did you all think about that? Worry about that?

Fleischer: Oh, yes. We had a guy named Scott Sforza, who was an Emmy award–winning producer at ABC, and Scott did all the stage management and built the sets that the Governor, later the President, would use. But Scott also set up this great technology on our TV screens in Austin where you could watch four shows at one time. In 1999 that was remarkable, one screen split four ways so you could watch four channels. Scott could also play, on demand, interesting stuff, so every Sunday morning we could go in and watch *Saturday Night Live*. It became a huge thing, because when *Saturday Night Live* spoofed Gore on the sighing, it had ramifications.

Perry: And the lockbox.

Fleischer: The lockbox, yes. Right. We all just laughed our heads off about it, but also realized this was damaging Al Gore. The thing about Bush—one of the reasons some people think Bush wasn't smart—was that Bush was so comfortable in his own skin that he turned it around and we made a joke about "strategery"—we had meetings called "strategery"—and Bush would often

talk about how people would "misunderestimate" him. Bush was comfortable with it. He made fun of it, which made it harder for people to really say—People would say he was "dumb like a fox," but no question, *Saturday Night Live*, [Jay] Leno—Remember, Bush went on Leno, then [David] Letterman—all of those things became an important part of campaign messaging. You bet. So long as people don't read or watch the mainstream media, you go to where they are. Bill Clinton started that with Arsenio Hall.

Riley: Were there reporters during the campaign with whom Bush did feel comfortable and from whom you felt like you were getting a fair shake?

Fleischer: Yes, there were. And then there were others from whom I really thought we weren't. So—

Riley: Any particular names that you want to—

Fleischer: Adam Clymer. There was no question Adam was—

Riley: —on the adverse side.

Fleischer: Frank Bruni, who was a food critic for the *New York Times* and became the political reporter on the campaign. He and Karen clashed pretty often.

I had pretty good relations with most all of them. I had the benefit, again, of being in Austin, being on the phone and having come from Washington, having known many of them. The atmosphere was totally different on the campaign plane, especially at the end. When you're circled, that pack mentality changes your dynamic; it changes your relationship. It was the same thing in the briefing room in the White House later. Your relationship one on one with a reporter is totally different from your relationship at the podium, with everybody in front of you. My relationship with them was totally different from Karen's, circled by reporters banging away.

Riley: You're sort of in a foxhole together in that situation, right?

Fleischer: Well—

Riley: Maybe that's not the right metaphor.

Fleischer: I guess Karen was in the foxhole and they were shooting down at her. [*laughter*]

Riley: Right metaphor. Wrong image.

Fleischer: The press wasn't in there with us.

Riley: But is there not a camaraderie, then, that develops on the plane? The familiarity breeds contempt rather than affection?

Fleischer: You'd have to ask Karen that—

Riley: Okay.

Fleischer: —because I wasn't on the plane as often.

Riley: Okay.

Fleischer: But I'm sure she had her people.

Riley: You can see that I'm trying to get a picture of what the day-to-day relations were like with these people. It's an odd pairing. These are people who, by nature, have to be adversarial, yet they are thrown in on top of one another with one adversary responsible for the care and feeding of the other.

Fleischer: You're only sort of thrown in on top of each other. Karen would travel with the Governor. Scott would be with the press. Karen would be behind the curtain with the Governor before he'd come out. Scott would either be on the press risers with the press or he'd go back and forth and then Karen would come out and brief the press when she needed to, which was how I did it too when I became press secretary.

You're physically not with them as much as you might think, at least at Karen's level. Scott was more so; the press advance people even more so. The press advance people, who aren't spokespeople, are the ones who are the living illustration of that. They are responsible for the movement of the press, the care and feeding of the press, and they would probably get along with some reporters great, have drinks with them, know everything about their history, know who was cheating on whom. They lived that life. There is a separation.

Riley: Okay, thanks. On Election Day, you were in Austin thinking it was going to be over by six o'clock eastern time, right?

Fleischer: Pretty much.

Riley: It didn't quite work out that way, did it?

Fleischer: I woke up and got a massage, which I hadn't done in a long, long time. Election Day is the slowest day of the year. There is nothing to do.

Freedman: Yes, what are you going to do?

Fleischer: Bush was on the road. I think he hit New Jersey and California. He did something that traveled from New Jersey to the west, so I don't think he was in Austin. I got to the office midmorning, which was late, just twiddling my thumbs with nothing going on. The highlight for me was that he called me and offered me the job as press secretary. Of course, I instantly accepted it. I had started about a week earlier to read Mike McCurry's press briefings, because I had a sense that I was going to be asked to be the press secretary, so I thought, *I might as well start to see how Mike did it. How does this work?*

Then things started to tighten; things weren't going right. And I threw the briefings out. I thought, *I'm jinxing this.*

Freedman: Bad luck. Yes.

Fleischer: And I never looked at them during the transition or the recount, not until the Court ruled.

Riley: Who's more superstitious, political people or ballplayers?

Fleischer: I'll you a story about election night, the night you're talking about, about superstition. Remember, I'm both.

Riley: All right.

Fleischer: Bush offered me the job. He anticipated a big win that night and said, "I'll see you at the victory party." You know, it turned into election six-week day. But that night it was ten of seven central time and Karl Rove came flying in my office door, saying, "You need to call the networks. They just called—" And I saw they had called Florida for Gore, and he said, "The polls are still open in the Panhandle. How can they be calling Florida for Gore? We have ten minutes left for our people in the Panhandle to vote."

I just remember thinking, *Oh, my God!* as the polls were coming in, and *Holy cow, we could lose,* so it was hard to move a little bit. I didn't have that kick in my step the way I should have. I remember thinking, *ten minutes? If I call the networks and scream at them, they're not going to change anything. It's ten minutes*, so I didn't call anybody. I had this weird sense, *Is this thing slipping away?*

Then there was that weird spot where they all called it for Gore, then went back to nobody, but at one point in the night I remember I went into—Everybody was in Matt Dowd's office. Karl was in there. Matt was in there. Karen and the Governor were up at the mansion. There was this crew of us at the headquarters and I was sitting on the front edge of Matt's desk, one leg on the desk. All of a sudden, our reports from Florida start showing that the numbers were moving more and more our way, so as we were getting all of these internal calls from our political people watching all the polling sites, I decided I wasn't moving.

I stayed on that spot on Matt's desk for about two hours and would not physically move. I was sitting there when Fox called it for Bush and then I don't remember who it was, Matt or Karl, who said, "That's just Fox," and then five or ten minutes later the other networks called it for Bush and then pandemonium. Everybody was jumping up and down, hugging each other.

Then we all left the headquarters and marched down Congress Street, probably it was one in the morning now, two in the morning, on a cold, 45-degree, rainy, miserable night, waiting for Bush to come out. The staff was in the senior staff area, toward the front of the crowd waiting by the podium. I started looking around and I noticed Karl was gone, and things were taking too long. Where was Bush? Where was Bush?

I don't remember if I called somebody or somebody—Russ Schriefer—said to me, "They withdrew the call of Florida for Bush," and I thought, *I need to get back to headquarters*, so I slipped out. Instead of walking straight down Congress Street, where I could be passed by people and reporters, I looped around the block, because I didn't want anybody to see me. I didn't want to take any questions. I didn't know what was going on. I went into the headquarters and found out that they withdrew the call; Gore had called Bush and had withdrawn his concession call.

What the hell was going on? Everybody was in a terrible mood. I couldn't reach Karen. I didn't talk to Bush that night, and I went to sleep, I think, at four or five in the morning, Texas time, in my chair. Before I went to bed, I was told the *Today* show needed a guest that morning. I called Karen. Karen was in a hotel downtown instead of going to her house. I woke her up. She was real pissed and said, "I'm not going on tomorrow," so I went and did the show on one hour's sleep. I just slept at the headquarters. I remember saying to Matt Lauer, "This has gone to extra innings and I'm confident Governor Bush will win in the bottom of the 10th." It went 16 innings. [*laughter*]

Riley: Or longer.

Fleischer: The recount was just brutal, absolutely brutal. It's funny now to talk about it, because after September 11 and everything else I went through and the country went through, people forget about the recount. But it was—My gosh, when did that last happen? That never happens in modern electoral history, that you have an undecided outcome. All of our teams flew down to Florida and we started to feel that we were at the mercy of other events. Who knew how this was going to turn out?

Riley: You spent the whole time in Austin?

Fleischer: Yes.

Riley: Okay. And were you showing up at the office every day?

Riley: Yes, I showed up at the office every day. I'd do my best to answer reporters' calls: What's Bush doing? What's your reaction to this? That?

We went on the offensive about Gore throwing out ballots that were largely the overseas ballots, because many of those ballots were coming from Israel and from the military. The military ballots were the ones we knew he wanted to throw out, Duval County and those areas. I think the ones that were coming in to Miami and Palm Beach Gore wanted to come in, based on just guessing at the demographics of how people vote. And we made a lot of hay on Gore throwing out the military votes.

It was remarkable, because it was one of the only instances where Republicans "out grass-rooted" Democrats. Democrats seemed to me to be so good at the ground game, but we put together a pretty good ground game of our own in Florida.

Freedman: Were you in conversations with Baker's people at that point? Getting daily—

Fleischer: Originally. Originally, I was. And—I don't remember what the issue was, but there was something they wanted to do that I piped up on a phone call and recommended they not do. There was a little debate about it. It went my way. Bush was on that call. Then they shrunk the circle. Baker's people were terribly worried about leaks, and even though the Bush campaign was an extraordinarily unleaky campaign, that became a circle I wasn't part of, and I would just get my info from Karen and then talk to the Governor.

But the Baker people—Even the decision to go to the Supreme Court, to take it out of Florida and go to the Supreme Court, Karen didn't know about. And she was furious. It was one of the few times Governor Bush made a decision without bringing Karen into the circle. So interesting new things started to happen as the Baker team was there and it started to become a little glimpse of what White House life could be like.

Campaigns—and Obama is finding this—have a marvelous collegiality, camaraderie, the foxhole factor: we're all working together and doing the same things. Then when you go to the White House, things start to expand and all kinds of new people become involved, with their own power centers and power bases, and every one of them is terribly important. You find that what you could control on the campaign, you can no longer control. A little bit of that started to happen in Florida.

Freedman: Interesting. What was Bush's state of mind during this period? When you saw him, was he optimistic?

Riley: The same steady hand?

Fleischer: You got it, which became a controversy with the press, because Al Gore was working the phones. Al Gore was calling county chairmen in Florida, doing whatever it was he could do, nervous energy, whatever he could do to influence the outcome of it. Reporters knew Gore was doing this, and what was Bush doing? He was at the ranch, chopping wood. They didn't even have cable TV at the ranch back then, which really offended cable TV reporters. This was also the seed of the "Who's in charge?" questions, the assumption that Cheney and Baker were in charge, that Bush Jr. was disengaged and these other people were running the show. The reality of it was that Bush is so comfortable being in charge that he can delegate important things to important, good people and let them do their jobs.

Riley: Sure.

Fleischer: That's a lesson in governing for any organization. But if you're a reporter, that's not as good a story, so he took a lot of heat for being at the ranch but, going back to Fournier, he's so comfortable in his own skin he didn't care.

Riley: Were there any decisions made in Florida, or any developments down there, that created any special problems for you with press relations? Information—

Fleischer: Marc Racicot started to do a lot of news conferences from Austin. He was our campaign chairman and I'd help prep Mark for his news conferences and events. Nothing comes to mind.

Here's a great example of how reporters gather news: A couple of days after the election, several states that were perilously close—not as perilously close as Florida, but—Iowa, New Mexico, and I think Wisconsin and one other state, all of which were within a one to two percentage range—could have gone to recount. The loser in those states has the right to ask for a recount under the various state laws, so we had to make a decision, whether to say it wasn't just Florida that was causing a recount, but now we were asking for recounts in four other places, too. Racicot was holding a news conference to announce what the Bush campaign was going to do.

Dan Bartlett and I were walking past an elevator. The elevator door opened up and Dave Gregory, of NBC [National Broadcasting Company], popped out of the elevator and saw the two of us. Of course, he wanted the scoop. He saw us and instantly it came out of Gregory, "Iowa, yes or no?" Talk about going right to the lead! Dan and I looked at him and kind of rolled our eyes. "Why should we tell you? There's a news conference and we're going to tell everybody in ten minutes." I've always been struck by that, because it's a perfect example of how the Sam Donaldson era, the screaming at sources to get information, really doesn't work, especially with the Bush people.

But the polite—which was always Ron Fournier—interestingly, quietly, politely, sweetly, trick information out of you method, really does work. Anyway, we didn't, of course, recount any of those other places. I was always proud of what they later called the "khaki rebellion," if you remember that, when the Republicans showed up.

Riley: Proud of it?

Fleischer: Yes.

Riley: How so?

Fleischer: My team was fighting. Typically, Republicans don't resort to public street protests; they're more buttoned down—that's a great Democratic tactic—and it felt so good. Part of what happened during the recount, after one news conference where I think Marc Racicot said something really tough about Gore or Gore's people, everybody pumped their fists and cheered in the headquarters. Every time Craig Waters, the spokesman for the Florida Supreme Court, came out and stood in front of the doors of the court, on top of those steps, you just got ready for a gut punch. The roller coaster was brutal. You had to be steady, but riding those emotional highs and emotional lows of something that was totally uncharted was just wild.

Riley: Were there particular moments where you were sure it was gone?

Fleischer: Every time Craig Waters stepped out, we'd get a bad ruling, that the count could proceed in three counties that were overwhelmingly Democratic counties, but there would be no recount in Republican counties. It just seemed like the deck was stacked by the Florida Supreme Court.

Freedman: And, of course, in academia, in addition to watching it with fascination, there were people saying, "This is a constitutional crisis; it's going to be the unraveling of our whole shooting match." Did you ever feel any of that?

Fleischer: No. When you work with the media long enough, you recognize their first bias is a bias in favor of conflict. What better bias is there than to say "constitutional crisis"? What it really showed was how well our system and our Constitution do work, and how, in this country, even as divided as it is or was, nobody shot anybody, nobody took to the streets to try to get their way. It was resolved through argument, on TV, with microphones. That's a pretty good system.

Freedman: But you never were worried? There was no concern, *Boy, here we go*?

Fleischer: No. After September 11, there was some concern about some other things that could have gotten ugly for our Constitution.

Freedman: We'll talk about that.

Fleischer: But no, never in the recount, because there was such a deep faith that we're a nation of laws, and those laws were being tested to the limits, but that those laws were not going to snap. Look, the Supreme Court ruled. That was it. We obedient Americans, regardless of party, said, "It's over." That's remarkable. That is the sign of a country that works. It doesn't have to be that way. Some President said after the Supreme Court decision, "They've made their decision, now let them enforce it."

Perry: [Andrew] Jackson.

Fleischer: Jackson. Was it the bank issue?

Perry: John Marshall and the Cherokee Indians.

Fleischer: Okay. Now it's, "They made their decision; we abide by it."

The other interesting thing, too, of course, was that every media organization that went to do its own recount, with this scenario and that scenario, all showed that Bush won, but still there was a sense that Bush was illegitimate in some people's eyes, which after January 20 started to dog us in a lot of places. It made for a tougher first year.

Freedman: How did that play out? How did you encounter that sense? Did press questions bring that up?

Fleischer: One of the first meetings George Bush had was with the Congressional Black Caucus, which was a really remarkable thing, a Republican President meeting with probably the most ideologically fervent opponents of him. It was his first week in the job and a couple of Congressmen in the room called him illegitimate.

It just poisoned the atmosphere for a President who said, "I'm a uniter, not a divider," who, in everything he did in Austin, was genuinely a person who governed in a way that brought Democrats and Republicans together. A famous Lieutenant Governor of Texas, a powerful Democrat, endorsed Bush, loved Bush. Bush really wanted to create that again in Washington. I think he would tell you it's his biggest disappointment about his time in Washington. The recount got everything off on a sour note. It was so hard to ever convince people who maybe could have been convincible, that Bush did actually care about them and wanted to be a uniter.

Riley: I want to ask you about two things in this period, and we can take them in whichever order you want. One relates to this legitimacy question. Even in the absence of the controversy over Florida, if everybody had consented that it was close but decisive in favor of Bush, there was still this historically rare situation of a President with a minority of the popular vote being elected by our Constitution, which conceivably could have implications for governing. Was any cognizance being taken of this during the course of the transition? Was there talk about altering your approach to governing based on this reality or—Was there talk about trimming your sails?

Conversely, was it just the case that the electoral college is what exists in our Constitution, we have full constitutional authority, and we are proceeding as though we won by a Reagan-type landslide? That's one topic.

The other is about the business of transition planning. You normally have 11 weeks. In every project that we've talked about, on Carter and Reagan, [George H. W.] Bush 41, and Clinton, everybody was wringing their hands about the short period of time that they had to get ready and the hazards of that transitional period. It was cut in half, practically. I'd like to hear from you on both of those subjects.

Fleischer: On the trimming the sails question, that was discussed and was very quickly dismissed, because the way you grow your support—from what turned out to be much narrower support than we had thought; we lost the popular vote—is by absolutely standing by what it is you stand for, who you are, what you believe in. That's how you grow it. We decided consciously not to trim the sails.

Riley: The President-elect himself was in these discussions?

Fleischer: Yes. A previous election was cited, some close election where the President did not trim sails, did what he thought was the right thing to do, and what I said worked; that President grew his support.

I'm trying to remember which race that might have been. Was it [Harry] Truman? Although Truman—

Riley: You'd think among the four of us we could figure it out.

Fleischer: [John] Kennedy. [Lyndon] Johnson. [Richard] Nixon. There was some precedent that Cheney talked about and Bush cited of—

Perry: In the 20th century?

Fleischer: Yes, I think so. About why you will grow your support by actually firmly advocating principled stands and—

Riley: In some respects, Reagan fits, although the electoral college tilted that.

Perry: Kennedy, too in '60.

Riley: Yes, the Reagan race was fairly tight—because you had the John Anderson factor in it—so an argument could be made for that, but that must not be the right one.

Perry: [Abraham] Lincoln. Lincoln, who didn't get—

Riley: Well, that's true. But in any event, the fact that a historical precedent was cited is interesting, and that it was discussed, because I hadn't known whether it had been discussed.

Fleischer: It also so fits George Bush's nature, which I later saw in the lead-up to the war in Iraq and September 11. I remember one discussion Bush had with Silvio Berlusconi of Italy, where Berlusconi was talking about hedging on Iraq and difficulties in European opinion, and Bush said to him, "If you lead, people will follow." That's Bush's style. The early evidence of it was coming out of a race where we lost the popular vote, and illegitimacy was never something he thought about. He talked about trimming the sails, but it was never something he was going to do.

Riley: Were there people within advocating the other side strongly?

Fleischer: I don't think so. If there were, I didn't hear it. It may have been more stylistic. The first week the President invited a group of former top Democratic officials to a meeting at the White House. He had the Congressional Black Caucus in. Stylistically, there was a lot of reaching out to Democrats, which earned him a number of nice points in Washington as to how he began his tenure in Washington on a nice note, particularly given the "closely divided nation" and all that business, but substantively nothing changed.

Riley: And there was a decision to lead with education, which was more of a consensus—

Fleischer: Tax cuts came before education. The two were closely sequenced, but the push at the beginning was tax cuts. In fact, Bush decided to travel around the country to vulnerable Democratic districts having tax rallies, and he took some criticism for that. Citing the recount, a close election, came the question, How can you call yourself a unifier when you're going to these Democrat districts? But Bush's point was, You win support by winning, so I'll go and people will see huge numbers of people rallying for tax cuts in their red state that I carried, and they'll vote for the tax cut. At that point, when I get my policies through and they vote for the tax cut, political capital builds political capital. That's always been Bush's mantra.

It's kind of direct. Take it to the Democrats on policy; welcome the Democrats in on those other meetings. And then education was bipartisan with Teddy [Edward M.] Kennedy. Tax cuts were signed into law in May of 2001 and education was, I think, July of 2001.

Riley: Okay. That answers that question. My guess is that the press was probably also pushing you to trim your sails at this time.

Fleischer: Yes.

Riley: So?

Fleischer: And if we had trimmed our sails, the press would have said, "Why did you abandon the positions you used to hold?"

Riley: Really? [*laughter*]

Fleischer: I don't think the press was saying trim your sails out of anything other than the conflict side of things. They had a little wind at their back because of the recount and because some of the Democrats were saying trim your sails, but I took that as just being what the press does.

Riley: All right. There were transition problems, or the pressure of transitioning in this environment.

Fleischer: That's why I moved back to Washington early. Bush designated Cheney to be the transition leader, even before anybody knew who won, and because I had been tapped to be the press secretary, I left Texas in early December and moved back to Washington with Cheney. I flew back on Cheney's plane with him and we set up a temporary transition office in McLean, Virginia.

I still love driving by that building because it's so—We asked for government housing, but the government wouldn't do it, so we had to privately raise money to have this entity built. The press got a room downstairs in it. I'd go down and start briefing the press. There really wasn't a lot to say, not speculating on policy or personnel. The purpose was to start going through the huge numbers of résumés, the personnel decisions that needed to be made, policy decisions that started to shape up, the apparatus of government, even though it was phony government because it was—We just said, "This is the transition. The Supreme Court ruled. Bush won."

When I got back to D.C.—Keep in mind I had lived in Washington some 17 or 18 years; I moved back and I couldn't move into my house, because I had it rented—I'd drive by the White House and I'd refuse to look at the White House, just superstition again. I could not let myself look at the building for fear that I would jinx my chance to go inside the building. Only after the court ruled, then I'll never forget standing there looking at it from the other side of the gate, thinking, *Wow! I'll get to go inside it.* It was pretty heady.

Perry: We should remind everyone, of course, that there were two decisions that the Court handed down. The first *per curiam* decision that came down put it back in the hands of the Florida Supreme Court with guidance from the U.S. Supreme Court, but where were you the night the second and final decision came down?

Fleischer: I was in McLean. I think I was at our temporary headquarters. I don't remember who I was watching it with. I remember I was watching NBC because it was Pete Williams on the steps who found the punch line first, that it was over, the Court had ruled that, in effect, George Bush had won.

Everybody was hooting and hollering. We flew charter back to Austin in time for Bush to address—I don't know if it was the same night or the next night—the nation in a speech to the Texas legislature. Our charter got there, so Karl, me—I don't remember if Cheney was on that charter—we all arrived just minutes before Bush walked out to give the speech. That's how close we cut it, getting back down there in time.

Then I had to close up my Austin place and get ready to move back to Washington. But that night the Secret Service around Bush gigantically magnified, grew. One of the thrills of a congressional staffer is you get to see the Presidents every now and then, and you see the Secret Service. You see the entourage. You see the motorcade. You can't get anywhere close to it.

He became the nominee and there was the Secret Service, a little mini-motorcade, a nice Secret Service bubble. All of a sudden, it became this army, an absolute army, for President-elect Bush. His name changed. People never called him "George," but "Mr. President-elect." It's a mouthful,

but that's what you called him. The trappings of the office, the trappings of power, the authority, and the excitement that come with it are really palpable. It comes back to that psychic income side of the job. You have a serious job to do, a pretty important job to do, but there is an awe that touches you when all of a sudden, this person who was a candidate, who used to schlep around with the Texas Rangers, is now enveloped by this army of Secret Service. The street outside the mansion was closed, but I could walk through it anytime I wanted. I had a little pin on my lapel. I could go wherever I wanted to go and it's—It's the *Presidency*.

Riley: I would guess that any candidate at that moment must feel the same thing, but in this particular instance, because he was the son of a President, who had been around the White House, that maybe more than most he wouldn't have been fazed by this moment of transition. Is that an accurate reading or not?

Fleischer: I think that's fair. I remember many times reporters asked me what he used to call "goo-goo questions," about how he had changed. "How has this changed you?" He used to regularly slap those questions away; he hated them. He would say to me, "You are who you are. You're either cut out to handle these things or you're not and you don't change. You're either up to the challenge or you're not." That was part of what I loved about Bush, just being steady and how he saw things. On the South Carolina primary night—It was over, he'd won—I remember Bush saying to me that he was very cognizant of how he sat on a stage, stood on a stage, because he knew then that the camera was on him all the time, whether he was speaking or not. He said, "I'm just aware of it. I stand up straighter."

He followed along those incremental things that happen to you as you elevate in public life, but he did have that sense of awareness from being around his father. It gave him a pretty good insight.

Riley: Did you notice any difference in him after he was invested with the title of President-elect?

Fleischer: There was a lot less access to the press. Where before he would come back—

Riley: For him.

Fleischer: For him. Where he'd come back on the plane and laugh it up with the press, he started doing less of that when he became the nominee, and then once he was the President-elect, a whole lot less. Everything had so much more power and import. What you say as a candidate isn't as important as what you say as the nominee, which isn't as important as what you say as the President-elect, which isn't as important as what you say as President. He was always disciplined and became even more so, but it was time allocation. Who was he spending his time with? Much less with the press.

Perry: Was there ever the corollary of that, that by his father having been President, he also knew what he was giving up? His privacy—

Fleischer: Oh, yes.

Perry: —and all the things that go with it.

Fleischer: It also made him understand what his daughters were going through a whole lot easier.

Freedman: Is that something that came up in your conversations with him? Relations either with the girls—

Fleischer: I saw it. I was there when—We were in California in some national park and he got the phone call saying his daughter had been arrested at a Chuy's in Austin. His reaction really was empathy for her; there wasn't any anger: My daughter got arrested for underage drinking. How could she do that?! It was total empathy that this was absolutely unfair to her, and that the only reason it happened was because she was the President's daughter. It would not happen to any other college student.

Freedman: During the course of the campaign, or during this transition period, was George H. W. Bush around at all?

Fleischer: No. Well, I shouldn't say no. He wouldn't come to the campaign headquarters. He'd go to the Governor's Mansion. He was at the Governor's Mansion election night. Jeb [John Ellis Bush] was there, but he wasn't where I would see him. It would be father-son at the son's house, which was the Governor's Mansion.

Freedman: Had you met him when you were working for Bush-Quayle?

Fleischer: No. No and I really can't say I had anything, or much, to do with him during the campaign. He would pop into my office as press secretary in the White House and give me an attaboy, that kind of thing.

Freedman: Oh, nice.

Fleischer: I can't say I ever got to know him well, but what a decent fellow. That's the Bushes, that dropping by to say, "I'm really proud of you; you're doing a great job for my son."

Freedman: And that happened—

Fleischer: —about two or three times.

Freedman: Do you remember those occasions?

Fleischer: Yes. Just like he plays golf fast, he popped into my office fast, and he'd just say—

Freedman: He'd parachute in.

Fleischer: —"I'm so proud of you for the job you're doing on behalf of my son."

Riley: That's nice to hear. Very early on, you said something about there being one instance or episode or one lesson that he had learned from his father, maybe you've already touched on it, but I made a note of it and wanted it to come back to it.

Fleischer: It was the leaking issue. In George W. Bush's mind, the way to prevent leaks is in your hiring decisions. That's again why he had that flat management structure. He never wanted to hire a Darman or a Sununu. He never wanted to hire somebody who would keep people out of his office. Andy Card never did that. The President would never let Andy do it. Andy wouldn't have wanted to. He had Andy and Josh Bolten create the structure where the top staff regularly had access to him to debate things. That's how you stop leaks.

I saw some great clashes in front of him and I was always so proud of the fact that they never made it into the *Washington Post.* I would say that to reporters, and reporters just hated it. One of my issues with the press was—I took a lot of the heat on this from reporters; as press secretary, I was the symbol of it—the Bush White House was tight-lipped and secretive.

With Bush's father's White House, there were lots of stories; the press loved the leaks: "White House in disarray." We never got stories saying we were "in array." [*laughter*] We were "tight-lipped and secretive." I wore it as a badge of honor. That tells you—More important than a badge of honor and things with reporters, I just saw it and know it and I hope—Barack Obama is doing a very good job of this, and his people are, too.

The best thing for our nation is when you can freely go into that Oval Office and fight it out in front of the President. He benefits from hearing two sides of an issue, a takedown of the other guy's position. It helps them war-game it and think it through. It regularly happened with Bush, but because we didn't talk about it and we didn't turn on each other, the press would say that people were afraid to do it with Bush or that Bush didn't hear the other side of the issue. I would say, "You're wrong; he does," and they would say, "Well, give us an example." I wouldn't give them an example, so it was a catch-22. But it's one of the things I feel the most strongly about, the most proud about, and I hope any well-run organization does it that way.

Riley: Can you give us an example? You mentioned on the campaign before, but since we're on the subject and you can hold on to this if you'd like, were there instances where these things were fought out? The reason I probe is—you're exactly right—the conventional wisdom on the White House is that you had such a consistent viewpoint on key issues that there was a presumption that everybody was supportive of A, B, or C rather than there being these disputes, because they didn't get out of chambers.

Fleischer: Right. Which again goes back to his hiring decisions.

Riley: Of course.

Fleischer: If your position wasn't accepted, you felt grateful for the opportunity to take it to the President. You knew he listened to you and then—he's the boss—he made the decision. That's why the system worked. There were exceptions. Scott McClellan will tell you the opposite—not the *opposite*—Scott knows the debates took place, but there was dissension that did turn into bad leaks: Scott. Secretary [Paul] O'Neill. Are you going to talk to those guys? You should.

Riley: We've invited Secretary O'Neill, who has politely declined.

Fleischer: That's interesting.

Riley: He said what he has to say in his book.

Fleischer: Okay.

Riley: Sometimes that's the case. We'll want to talk to Scott, even some of your predecessors have said we shouldn't, and then held their noses and said actually we should. I suspect we'll talk with him. Anyway, do you have an example?

Fleischer: The one that comes to my mind the most was after 9/11, when we had to redo airports and buy all this equipment to search all luggage. Congress passed a law, every piece of luggage going on an airplane had to be searched, not just what you carry on, everything in the belly. The equipment to do that is fabulously expensive and weighs a couple of tons, so a lot of airports, physically, couldn't put it on their floors unless they bolstered their floors or put them in the basements, and then how do you get the baggage down to the basement? It wasn't a straightforward issue.

The issue could not be settled at the staff level, whether the government should or should not do all this. The Deputy Secretary of Transportation, Michael Jackson, was arguing for it. Mitch Daniels, the head of OMB [Office of Management and Budget] was advocating against it. And I remember meeting in the Roosevelt Room, where this issue was brought to the President. What should the government do?

Typically, I don't think an issue like this rises to his level, but it was after September 11 and it was passenger safety, a big issue. Mitch made the case that there are false positives from these readings, they cost so much, and airports can't handle it. Michael Jackson made the point about safety, that passengers were scared, and Congress was requiring it. Mitch proceeded to take apart Michael's answers with a little bit of vehemence. Michael did the same thing right back at Mitch. The rest of the staff was sitting there, thinking, *This is great*. [*laughter*] There was no name-calling and no swearing, none of that, but good, substantive arguments about why the false positives were such a small percentage that it was ridiculous to even discuss that; any piece of equipment was going to have those small false positives. Good rebuttal.

At the end of it, you could feel a little tension. The President looked at both of them and said, "Mitch, Michael, thank you for both your points of view. You've served your country well. I'll make a decision and let you know." And everybody got up and left—no leaks. Mitch felt great. Michael felt great. To me, that's how it's supposed to work.

Probably the most harrowing briefing I ever sat through, and this wasn't the fight as much as it was anguished advice, was that—After September 11, everybody feared there was going to be a second wave. We were all told there would be a second wave. It was not a question of *if*, it was a question of *when*. The second wave we feared most was a biological attack, and the biological attack we feared most was smallpox, so I went to some of the briefings where the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] presented—Cheney was running this group. They talked about how smallpox inoculations worked and the health experts, the CIA experts, people familiar with smallpox talked about it in horribly, horribly graphic terms. I won't get into that, but I sat through it, I listened to it, and it was just horrendous.

About a week later, the issue came up to the President: do you inoculate the American people for smallpox? If there is a smallpox attack, you'd never know it. It has an incubation period, so people won't start to die until a couple of weeks later and then millions are just going to drop dead. But if you inoculate, there is always going to be a slim percentage of people who will die from the effect of the inoculation itself because it has a harmful impact on a sliver of the population. Then pictures were passed around of what smallpox looks like on people and it was frightening.

This was the stuff of TV shows, and the President was hearing the sides of the briefings. Cheney was the most fearful: There could be a smallpox attack on this country and we cannot let the country be vulnerable to it. Then there was the side that argued: Hold yourself back; if we inoculate 300 million people or 200 million adults, whatever it was, X hundred thousand will die. Ultimately, the decision was made to inoculate first responders, and even that may have been on a voluntary basis, but we encouraged them to do it, so it kept the pool small and pulled tighter.

What a harrowing, harrowing, briefing to be in. But the thoroughness of it, the fullness of it, and the eyes-wide-open presenting to the President both sides of it, was regular. That's how the White House operated and nothing leaked.

Riley: But that was closely held. It didn't get out.

Freedman: Why were you at that scary briefing?

Fleischer: The first one?

Freedman: No, the smallpox one.

Fleischer: But the one in the Oval or the one that Cheney—

Freedman: —the Cheney one.

Fleischer: When Tom Ridge became head of Homeland Security, Ridge had me in everything.

Freedman: He wanted you to know what to do?

Riley: You had indicated in your book that on war council meetings—and we're getting a little bit further ahead of ourselves—you were excluded.

Fleischer: NSC [National Security Council] meetings I did not go to. HSC, Homeland Security, I did.

Riley: Were you told early on that you wouldn't be included in NSC meetings? What was the rationale for that?

Fleischer: I might be wrong about the history of it, but I don't know that press secretaries ever go to NSC meetings.

Riley: I should know the answer to that question, and I don't.

Fleischer: I think on occasion they go, depending upon the topic—

Riley: You're probably right.

Fleischer: —which is something I would do when the President said, "You need to be here for this one," but as a matter of routine, the answer was no. Press secretaries didn't go.

Riley: It's better that you not know certain things in your reporting. Is that right, or am I wrong?

Fleischer: I would make the argument that it's better for me to be in everything and have the judgment about what not to talk about.

Riley: Did you make that case when you were appointed?

Fleischer: No. I didn't. I accepted the way Bush wanted to do it. The other things I didn't go to were the CIA briefings, which were the PDB [President's Daily Brief], but there is no need for a press secretary to go to that. NSC. And there was a strategy meeting that was held that usually lasted five or ten minutes with Karl, Karen, the President, and Andy Card, and I didn't go to that. That was just the war-gaming of whatever was hot that day.

Everything else I went to, and that included virtually every summit meeting the President had, all his congressional meetings, the Cabinet meetings. I guess all the congressional meetings, too, except when he had the Speaker and the majority leader down for breakfast and Cheney was in on it, and I guess the head of Congressional Affairs sat in, so it was five people. But everything else, all the policy debates, I went to. In your prep material, you reminded me of something that I was happy to forget.

Riley: Emily. [*laughter*]

Fleischer: Emily. You had to read the *New York Times*, didn't you? Bush gave that interview to David Sanger and Dick Stevenson at the ranch during the transition in which he said there would be certain things I'd be in and other things I wouldn't be in, which damaged me. I wish he hadn't said it. It's eternally true; it will eternally be true. That's what Presidents do with press secretaries, but him stating it sent a signal to reporters. Especially given the fact that he had the Texas loyalists and I wasn't a Texan, it created the questions: Does the press secretary have access? Is the press secretary in the loop?

I just had to work my way through it and prove it, which took time. I wish he had never said it, but the fact of the matter was, my relationship, and everything I did, substantially changed on going to the White House. My closest person and my best source on everything was George W. Bush, who put me in everything, other than National Security Council briefings and CIA briefings, and that's all I needed to do the job. During the campaign that wasn't the case, because Karen was on the road; Karen was doing it. Once the logistics changed and we were all in the same building, I had a fantastic boss who put me where I needed to be, which is the only way to do the job.

[BREAK]

Riley: Let's go back to during the transitional period. Did you have the freedom to set up your shop as you wanted to set it up? How did you go about doing that? Were you consulting with your predecessors to figure out how you were going to do your—

Fleischer: Bush asked me to leave Texas early and go back with Cheney, so I went up there and was structurally setting things up, getting in the rhythms of what it might be like. We won, and all of a sudden, we got the keys to a government building, which was interesting because—Remember I said we wanted the keys to a government building originally? And GSA [Government Services Administration], the people who run the buildings, wouldn't give them to us? The Supreme Court ruled and the head of the GSA called Dick Cheney to say, "We'd like to do an event, a ceremony, to hand you the keys." Cheney said, "It's not going to happen." Cheney sent an intern to the head of the GSA. [*laughter*] We got into the government building, two blocks from the White House, and that's when I started working on my staff.

I had brought a couple of people on my staff at the transition. I ran my deputies past Karen. She wanted to interview them just to—The only one who turned out to be different was that I wanted to hire Dan Bartlett and I thought she'd hire Scott because Scott had been on the road with her. She wanted them flipped. She said she wanted Dan, and I said, "Okay, I'll take Scott." That's how Scott became my deputy and Dan worked for Karen and succeeded her.

I hired my staff, wading through tons of résumés, which was kind of fun. Then I started to brief the press right away, off camera, and then after January 1, I went on camera. I looked at it as spring training, just getting ready for January 21, the real room. They were interesting briefings, because my instructions were to say nothing. President Clinton was the President and so if something international were to happen, President Bush wasn't going to say anything. President Clinton; we only have one President at a time. I wasn't going to speculate about any personnel jobs because, until the position was announced, I wasn't going to say who was in or out. In many ways it was the most boring, noncommunicative job you could hold, which is what transitions are. The President makes the news when he hires people.

Probably the most interesting aspect of the transition came with [Donald] Rumsfeld, who I'd never met before, but the two of us really hit it off. I got a phone call from James Warren of the *Chicago Tribune* and Warren, I guess, is the nation's premier listener to the Nixon tapes. He has expertise in all things Nixon, orally, on the tapes, and said he had a tape of a young Don Rumsfeld, when Rumsfeld was in a meeting with Nixon. Nixon was talking disparagingly about Blacks and making all these other statements, and Rumsfeld never stood up to the President, never said, "You shouldn't talk like that," or corrected him and he wanted to know what Rumsfeld's recollections of this were.

I was thinking, *Wow, this could be a problem*, and asked Warren to send me the tape. I said, "When are you writing?" and his deadline, fortunately, was in several days, so I had time. I said, "Send me the tape; I want to listen to it." At the same time, I called the Nixon Library to get the

tape from the Nixon Library, because I wanted to make sure that what Warren sent me—Was there anything missing? What was the full context?

I had the two tapes sent and my thinking was the story was going to be Rumsfeld the racist. Why didn't Rumsfeld stand up to Nixon? What did this mean? And that we were going to get involved, like every transition sometimes does—Clinton did with Attorneys General—in one central, big personnel fight and this one was going to be about race. That's an easy-made formula: Republicans are bad, accusers are good, and all of a sudden Rumsfeld was going to be gone. You just don't win those fights.

When I got the tape, I listened to it. Rumsfeld didn't say anything one way or another, and Nixon was just rambling and doing what he did. After I was familiar with it, I took it to Rumsfeld. I sat in his office and played it for him. I was watching him, and it was fascinating to me because it was the first time Rumsfeld had ever heard the Nixon tapes. There he was at 32, or however young he was, involved in it. I said to him, "Do you have any recollection of this? Does this jog your memory about anything?"

He said, "No. Obviously this is the tape, but I have no recollection of this, no thought about this one way or another." I think I said, "Why didn't you say anything to the President? Why didn't you correct what he was saying?" And Rumsfeld said, "He was the *President*." Then he said to me, "When I was a Congressman, I was one of the few Republicans to vote for the '64 Civil Rights Act," and gave me some other things about himself, so I called Warren back and said, "The Secretary has no recollection of it. It didn't jog any memories," and Warren said, "Okay, thanks." When the story came out, the story was just about Nixon; Rumsfeld was just a touchpoint that he used to make the illustration about Nixon's behavior; there was no controversy, no nothing, and I just heaved a sigh of relief.

Riley: The reporter handled it responsibly.

Fleischer: Yes, he did. But it easily could have been the other story and then we'd have had groups rising up and saying we needed to withdraw the nomination and then we'd have had a fight.

Riley: Of course.

Fleischer: It was one of the first big tests that took place in the transition. Another one was when Linda Chavez was going to be appointed Labor Secretary. I don't remember why she had to withdraw, but she had to withdraw.

Riley: I think there was an immigration problem.

Fleischer: That was the kind of stuff we dealt with during the transition.

The other fascinating note of the transition was that we had a meeting in the Blair House on January 15 or 16 and talked about what to do if there was ever a military operation. Cheney was there. Bush was there. Karen, Dan, me—I don't remember who else. It was a small meeting. The point was made that in the event that anything military happened, the Pentagon was the spokesperson for it. The White House is not set up to know about all the military maneuvers,

what happens. The White House Commander in Chief authorizes military action, but the people who can speak to what's happening, the successes or the failures on the field, are the people at the Pentagon. That's how it was during the Gulf War in '91, in case anything military came up. Then there were other things of a classified nature, different things at the White House, but it's interesting when I look back at that, because that's what we did, ultimately, twice.

It was very tough on the press corps, because the press corps wants the White House; because they're White House reporters, they're the pinnacle. Who wants their 90 seconds on the air to be given to the Pentagon guy? And that regularly happened. White House reporters didn't like it, but it was part of the design of the White House to do it that way.

Riley: You didn't feel like you were having a piece of your portfolio carved off initially?

Fleischer: It made sense.

Riley: Okay.

Fleischer: It's impossible for a White House press secretary to get the proper briefings. During the Iraq war, I was regularly briefed by Steve Hadley about what was going on. Steve didn't know it all. The military doesn't know it all. You have to have so many people who can tell you about this military operation in Fallujah, that military operation in Basra. This is what's happening with the transport, with Kuwait. It's a huge avalanche of information. My job was to speak for the President about how it was going. That's what I did. That's what the White House does. The White House should not be operational about military details.

Riley: There was a change in the organizational structure of the press secretary's office, based on some of the stuff that I've read, where one of your shops—and I can't remember the title, media, new media, or something like that—was moved out from under the press secretary and maybe put under the broader communications shop, so that you ended up with something like half as many employees in the press secretary's office as had been the case with Clinton. Do you remember the circumstances that led up to this?

Fleischer: No, that's news to me that that was even under the press secretary in Bill Clinton's office. We had four elements of communications: The communications office—Karen. Speechwriters—[Michael] Gerson. The Office of Media Affairs—

Riley: Maybe this is the one I'm thinking of?

Fleischer: —and the regional press people.

Riley: Yes. That's the one.

Fleischer: If the *Des Moines Register* calls, then that's who takes the call.

Riley: Yes.

Fleischer: And the Internet, which at that time was a newish notion, came under that office, too, which was perfectly fine with me. I looked at it that my constituency was the people in that room.

Riley: Right.

Fleischer: My job was to be in the Oval Office for a third or half of the day, listening to what was going on in there and then briefing the press. My definition of the press was the people I could see with my eyeballs in those 48 seats. Anything else, to me, was a distraction.

I'd be surprised—If they were titularly under the press secretary in the previous administration, it's news to me.

Riley: Okay.

Perry: I don't recall the name, but one of the things in the briefing book said that you had fewer people in your shop than in previous Presidencies.

Riley: I think this was in Martha [Kumar]'s account.

Perry: By half, I think it was.

Riley: I'll try to find it tonight and come back to it.

Fleischer: Was it by Martha Kumar? Did Martha come up with that?

Freedman: Yes.

Fleischer: Well, if she did, I'm sure it's right.

Perry: It's this chart.

Riley: I think so.

Fleischer: With the regional press people, as a practical matter, their way of knowing what to say was through what I said.

Riley: Sure.

Fleischer: It all just flowed. I would say what Bush said, and then they would say what I said, and then it was the parameters of how far do you go or not go? They would take it from my briefings and what I would say or they would call me to ask.

But the other thing about the Bush White House was, for the most part, the camaraderie was so good and the interactions—and you can throw in there the First Lady's press office and the Vice President's press office. We all operated as almost one and there was so little of the jockeying around for position or power. Andy Card really stressed that to people and also—I don't want to be Pollyannaish about it, because there were people who had conflicts, some that I know about, but—among the communicators, the press people, it just didn't feel that way. We were all in that

same foxhole and we didn't have turf wars with each other. I was happy to have fewer press calls.

Perry: Did you meet with those others? Did you meet with the First Lady's communicator? And you met with the Vice President's? Did you do that on a regular basis? Weekly?

Fleischer: Daily. I'd get in around seven, meet with my staff, go to senior staff at 7:30. After senior staff, I'd go back to my office, and waiting for me would be spokespeople for all the entities in the White House, which would have included those for the Vice President and First Lady and all my staff: Jean Mamo; Tucker Eskew, who ran regional; and then Jeanie. Speechwriters weren't there. After my meeting there would be a meeting up in Karen's office, where Karen then had a lot of the same people and Mike Gerson would be at that one, not all the speechwriters.

My meeting dealt with these things: Here's what we're saying today. Here are the controversies the White House has today. Here's how we'll handle it. What's going on in your world? What controversies are you picking up?

We'd go to Karen's office and Karen's meeting would be the look over the horizon: Here's what we're working on for next week. Here's the initiative we want to work on a month from now. You're going to do the talking points. You're going to do that.

I almost never wrote anything. There were other people who wrote, so when a policy initiative came out, the communications office, Brian Besanceney, would write the fact sheet or the handout the press would get. It's amazing how specialized the White House can get. When I was on Capitol Hill, I wrote my boss's speeches, I wrote talking points, I spoke. Now all I did was use my mouth. Somebody else wrote speeches. Somebody else wrote talking points. Specialization.

Freedman: The people who were in the room then, your constituency, the 48 people in those seats, how many of them, after inauguration and everything was up and running, were familiar to you from the campaign? How many were new faces?

Fleischer: Great question. I'd say a third of them were familiar from the campaign and two-thirds were new. You know, John Roberts was the previous White House reporter. Bill Plante has been there since the building was built—[*laughter*]

Freedman: —which Helen Thomas supervised. [*laughter*]

Fleischer: I'd say, one-third, two-thirds.

Freedman: Okay. Was that helpful? Did you find that you could pick up where you left off with them, that you had some rapport?

Fleischer: It was helpful, because I had those reporters I had the relationships with from the campaign, and then there were the institutional reporters, which was a pretty important thing. Remember, one of the first things I did was invite Helen into my office to pay her the honor of talking to her one-on-one and to get to know her. And I did that with a couple of others,

including Steve Holland of Reuters. I did not know him from the campaign; I don't think he covered the campaign. Steve was a *gem* of a man, of whom I would regularly ask procedural questions: "How do you handle this in the briefing room?" Or if I needed to move the gaggle time, I'd say, "Am I going to be able to do it? I need to change it from this to that."

The tradition of the White House is that the press secretary—Do you know this? The press secretary is not allowed to leave the briefing room until the senior wire reporter says, "Thank you." You cannot end the briefing yourself as press secretary. You're not supposed to, as protocol. When the senior wire reporter says, "Thank you," then you can get the hell out of there, so every once in a while, the schedule just wouldn't work and I'd need to be in the Oval for a meeting, and instead of having 45 minutes for the briefing, maybe I'd have 25, so I'd tell Steve ahead of time. I'd say, "Steve, can you make it work so I can get out of there in time?" He would do it.

What's fascinating to me is, for all the fighting and the intensity of the briefing room, there are many unwritten rules of getting along and making it work.

Freedman: Collegiality. At some point you must have picked up the McCurry briefings again?

Fleischer: Yes.

Freedman: Did you sit down with him at any point?

Fleischer: I did. Right. I got off that track. Bush sent me to Washington early and told me he wanted me to meet with Marlin Fitzwater and talk to Marlin about how to do the job, so I sat down with Marlin, and it was great. It was in Old Town Alexandria on King Street at this little place and Marlin wrote up ten tips on how to handle the job, which were fantastic tips and—

Riley: I don't know if you kept a copy of any of that stuff, but it'd be great to put in as an appendix to your—

Fleischer: I think I have it. And I remember Marlin said to me—He wrote it in a way that if it ever leaked it wouldn't look terrible. And I remember thinking to myself, *Marlin, you don't know me. This ain't never going to leak.*

Because my background was all domestic issues, I said, "How on earth do you keep on top of everything?" Because I was reading McCurry's briefing, with him citing UN [United Nations] Council Resolution 6391. "How do you know all this? How do you remember all these details?" And Marlin said, "You'll be amazed, just through osmosis, how much sticks to you." And he was totally right. You're in the Oval Office, you're listening to it, and you're hearing it. Unlike college, where if you don't pay attention, you don't pay attention, [*laughter*] if I didn't pay attention, the people giving me quizzes were on live TV. I'd better pay attention. Marlin was 100 percent right about that; you just retain it.

Then I met McCurry. What I always liked about Mike was his sense of humor. When I was reading his briefings, I always noticed that no matter how bad things got, Mike always found a way to find the funny side in it, and it's a great relief valve in that room. Again, with the irreverent nature of reporters, it works, because that's the way they are. They like that in a press

secretary, one who doesn't take everything so seriously. Those are the two I met with, although I think I called every preceding press secretary to give them a heads-up, a courtesy call, that I had gotten the job.

Freedman: Oh, nice.

Fleischer: I know I did that with several of them. I don't know if I went back all the way, but then later I threw a lunch for all the living press secretaries. Everybody came by—

Freedman: There is a picture in the book, yes.

Fleischer: Yes, there is. And Bush dropped by.

Riley: We're thinking about getting everybody back together for a roundtable symposium at some point. We'll rely on you for that, to do the same kind of thing in a group setting.

Freedman: If there is anything that McCurry told you that sticks out, let us know.

Fleischer: It was the sense of humor that I remember with Mike. One thing both Marlin and Mike told me was "Verify your information." Marlin made the point to me that even if you get it from the President, verify it. Because if you only get it from the President and you go to the podium and say it and it turns out to be wrong and somebody then says to you, "How can you be wrong?" you can't throw the President under the bus. So, especially there, verify. And boy is that true. This is where the press secretary has to be the inside reporter. Sometimes it was tough. This is, again, where Karl and I would clash, because I had enough confidence and would challenge Karl, "How can you say that? I'm hearing just the opposite from the press." Not a lot of people would do that with Karl.

Reporters are a great resource. I looked at my job partly as an intelligence operative. I would keep my mouth shut and my ears open and see what the press picked up. I wouldn't confirm it or deny it to the press until I knew more but, boy, were they a great early warning sign.

One example was in the controversy about Trent Lott, when Lott made that joke about Strom Thurmond. It was a slow-motion burn that all of a sudden picked up, turning into "Lott's got to go." The word got out somehow that Karl was trying to undermine Lott, working to get rid of Lott, because Karl wanted [William H., Sr.] Frist was what people said. I went to Karl on it. Karl assured me he had absolutely nothing to do with it and I tried to tell that to reporters, but reporters just insisted on it. Part of it was that it was a juicy story—anything about Karl was inside-the-palace intrigue—and reporters wanted to believe it. So, because sometimes Karl can—You have to ask the question in such a precise way to Karl that you don't know if you've done it properly.

Riley: I'll remember that.

Fleischer: Yes. One of my standards was that if a staffer says it to me in front of the President, I'll take it, so at one point, I went to the President and said, "Mr. President, you need to know I can't shake the Karl thing. Reporters are telling me that Karl's involved." The President picked up the phone, called Karl, and said, "Ari's in here and Ari's telling me reporters say you're

involved in Lott. You'd better not be involved in Lott. Are you involved in this in any way?" The President hung up the phone and said, "Karl says he's not involved."

You have to do your due diligence. It's another reason why you have to be in the Oval Office for the briefings. You have to hear what people tell the President. You can detect if there is a difference of opinion as opposed to a factual difference. You have to walk your way through differences of opinion when you talk to the press, but if it's a matter of fact, that's what you have to run to ground. McCurry stressed that to me and Marlin stressed that to me: verify your information.

Riley: We're going to have some bad days ahead to talk about, but surely one of the great days was Inauguration Day. Tell us your experience from that.

Fleischer: It was cold. A rainy, cold, miserable Inauguration Day.

Perry: Icy.

Fleischer: Yes. But it was also a day off. We were told not to go to the White House on January 20. Andy didn't want anybody in there. They were redoing the floors and pulling out carpets. Of course, if you're the keepers of the White House, there is never a day off. The White House is open seven days a week, so the rare chance you get is in that interregnum. They had something they wanted to do, so they asked us to stay away.

It was really my last day of hoopla and I went to a couple of inaugural celebrations. My parents were in town, and then the next day was the day I was sworn in. All the families were invited, so my parents were there for that; my brothers were there for that. You're in the East Room and you raise your hand to defend the Constitution of the United States, with your parents watching. Again, my mother's an immigrant to this country. She fled the Nazis; she got out in August of '39. There was that sense of pride that my liberal Democrat mother, who didn't vote for George Bush, was watching this. [*laughter*] And then I started my job.

I like to get hung up on the majesty of the government, because it is a rare perspective you have from being on the inside there. When you leave, you leave. You're gone. You can't get through that gate so easily. But when you're there and you can walk all around the White House, go anywhere you want—Secret Service, and especially for me, in my job, I had such a great relation with those guys, they gave me a lot of latitude—it's heady stuff. I had been in the White House maybe once or twice before with Congressmen I'd worked for, but I'd sit in the West Wing Lobby and they'd go inside to meetings, so I'd never penetrated the White House. Now I was walking everywhere. I made it a point early on, too, on Sundays, to go the OEOB [Old Executive Office Building] and walk the entire thing and try to go into the historical rooms of greater import, to take in all of that.

One of Marlin's other things he said to me was "Always stop and smell the roses," and I always tried to remember that. Marlin would walk the grounds with a cigarette in his mouth dripping ashes on the roses. [*laughter*]

Riley: Another change in behavior over time.

Fleischer: That's true.

Freedman: Speaking of renovations and redoing floors and the majesty of the place, could you shed a little bit of light on that? What was the story with the Ws and the keyboards? Was that for real?

Fleischer: Oh, absolutely. Yes. There are a couple of great lessons in it. Nothing was wrong in my office and very little was wrong in the West Wing, just a couple of minor things in the West Wing in some places. Most of it was in the OEOB, where presumably younger Clinton staffers did take the Ws off. They did some damage to doorknobs and other things. There were many instances—in fact, this happened to Josh Bolten—where pornographic pictures were buried into the copy paper they left behind, so after five days or so, you'd copy something and it would come out on this pornographic paper.

Freedman: I never heard that one. Interesting.

Fleischer: These guys were good. [*laughter*]

Mary Matalin talked to somebody and put the word out that this had happened, which wasn't supposed to happen. There was no coordinated plan to get the word out that this petty vandalism had taken place or not. But remember how Clinton left office, with the scandals over pardons, just the whole bad aura of Clinton: Did he take stuff with him he wasn't supposed to take? And then this broke and it was catnip to the press. George W. Bush doesn't like these catnip stories and his instructions to me always were, "Never look backward. Don't blame anything that took place"—and remember, we were sliding into recession—"on your predecessor."

At this point, too, things really changed for me and made my job so much easier, because I'd get my instructions from the President; it wasn't going through Karen to me. Once Mary got the word out, it just spread like wildfire. With my instructions from the President, I had to dance and do my best to pooh-pooh it. It *was* happening. I couldn't lie about it, but I didn't want to make any big deal of it. Reporters asked me, "What's going on with that?" I had asked somebody what we were doing and they said, "We're cataloging it," and I used that word, "We're cataloging it," which was the wrong word to use because it made it sound like we were literally keeping a list.

Riley: Sure.

Fleischer: And that started the story. It lasted for a week or something like that, and then, because I wasn't articulating what took place, Congressman [Anthony] Weiner from New York and other Democrats were saying, "This is really unfair. They said it took place. They're giving it on background to reporters, but the White House isn't telling anybody what happened. They're acting like it's not happening. I don't think it happened. They're making this up to make Bill Clinton look bad."

Then there was whiplash. My instructions were not to talk about it, but now it was about the honesty of the White House, a young White House, about whether we were we making it up. I talked to Karen about it and said, "We have no choice now." I didn't talk to Bush about it. I talked to Karen about it, and took Mike Allen, who was then with the *Washington Post*, around

to OEOB with the head of administration, who physically showed Mike what we saw and what happened and all of that.

It ended up with a GAO [Government Accounting Office] investigation into it, and what GAO found was about $11,000 or $17,000 worth of damage had been done. It backed up what we were saying, but it was a catnip Washington story. It's a good lesson in how, even if for the right reasons, you try to suppress news and not make the other guys look bad, in Washington that doesn't always hold up and your hand can get forced.

Riley: I want to ask a question about your own record-keeping practices. It's a constant source of interest for those of us who use materials. What were your own record-keeping practices and were you under instructions from anybody, say the counsel's office? Did you get briefings about Presidential records and things of that nature?

Fleischer: We did. Al [Alberto] Gonzales did a briefing and went place by place by place and then Andy Card also called a meeting of all the senior staff in OEOB—Actually, it was more than senior staff; I think it was all commissioned officers—to review ethics. What I remember Al saying was "It's a public record if the President has seen it. Your own notes are your own notes." When I left the White House, I double-checked with the counsel's office, because I had pages of my own notes and I asked, "Am I allowed to take these with me?" They said, "Did the President see them?" And I said no. They said, "They're yours."

I took them with me. I have great notes. Verbatims about what the President did. In fact, I'm kicking myself because I thought of it on the plane ride down here: I have the only verbatims of what the President said on September 11. I have the original copy, which I'll tell you a story about later, if you want, but—I have extensive verbatim notes. I would use them because I would be in the President's meetings and then I would come back and brief my deputies on what took place in those meetings so they could tell the press.

It was a huge help to me when the press was calling, asking about this one or that one. I could be in the Oval as much as I was, not at my desk, not returning calls, because I knew Scott and Claire [Buchan] and Shaun [McCormack] were returning the calls and disseminating the information. I've always believed that if you have a good staff, tell them what happened, tell them what they can't talk about, fill them in as to the context, and trust them. That's how I operated.

Perry: You have those now? Where will those go, ultimately, do you think?

Fleischer: All my originals are sitting in a bank vault. The September 11 notes I have a special thing in the bank vault and the September 11 notes I'll give to the Bush Library; the archivists know that. I already sent them a copy of them, and it's pretty remarkable. My notes started at when we boarded Air Force One and went through the entire day. I have the verbatims of the President saying, "We're at war. When we find out who did this, someone's not going to like me as President. We're going to kick their ass." I have notes on conversations he had with [Rudolph] Giuliani and [George] Pataki, everything he said during the day.

My notes were subpoenaed by the September 11 Commission [National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States], as they did all their investigations, so I was questioned. I was called in before the staff lawyers and they asked me things. I looked and they

had a copy of my notes, of course. As I looked at the top of my notes, there was this big red stamp: "Top Secret." How on earth did my notes all of a sudden become top secret? I asked the lawyers after it was over, "Why are my notes top secret?" And they said, "We subpoenaed so much information from the counsel's office that they didn't have time to go through classification worth line by line." They didn't have time to do that, so they just stamped the document itself instead of line by line so they could comply with the demands to turn it over in time.

I can tell you the generic stuff. I wrote down where they took Mrs. [Laura] Bush; where they took the daughters, the specific location; and it's publicly known that the communications aboard Air Force One were very bad. The phones down to the bunker cut out several times and I wrote down a little more specifically about why that took place. I got home from the 9/11 Commission and thought, *I have a problem. I have a top secret document in my house. I can't do that.* [*laughter*]

I called the NSC and they instantly sent over their lawyer. The lawyer showed up with a pair of scissors, asked for a copy of my notes, and said, "Do you have any copies of the original?" I said yes. He said, "Give me those, too." He took the scissors and cut four little holes in it. He took out where the Bush daughters went, took out where Mrs. Bush went, took out the little bit of specifics about communications. He handed me my originals back with four nice little rectangles cut into it, so when these notes go on display at the Bush Library, the public is going to see the original notes with four little holes in them.

Riley: But that's the only thing they removed, and that was the NSC reviewer who was responsible for doing that? Is that right?

Fleischer: The chief White House counsel is probably the one who would do it. The location of the daughters would be because of Secret Service concern, where our safe houses are located. Nobody needs to know that.

Riley: Understood.

Fleischer: Although I did notice that Mrs. Bush included it in her book, which pissed me off, because then I would have only had three holes in my notes. [*laughter*] They declassified it for *her*; they wouldn't declassify it for *me*.

Riley: It's fascinating to hear you say this, because your counsel's advice is not the counsel's advice that was given to preceding administrations. The operating definition of "Presidential records," at least in the Clinton White House, was much more thoroughgoing and certainly didn't involve the President's eyes having looked at something. That doesn't mean that everybody complied. My recollection is—I'm not violating any confidence here, because I'm pretty sure that this was in some contemporaneous press accounts—that Harold Ickes [Jr.] was a thoroughgoing note keeper and just defiantly packed up everything in his boxes and took them all off, and there was nobody who was going to enforce the Presidential Records Act against him.

I have wondered whether the practices weren't different in this White House because of the [Irve Lewis] Scooter Libby trial, because Libby got in trouble from many of his own notes, where he

was admitting that he'd had conversations about stuff that he had said under oath that he had not. That raised my interest at the time, because I wondered if it was a sign of a more widespread practice, and evidently it was. Do you think most everybody in this White House treated the requirement the same way?

Fleischer: I wouldn't know.

Riley: We'll have to find out.

Fleischer: Karen left first. Karen left in '02. I left in '03. Karen was a great notetaker and I presume—She wrote a book—that she relied on her notes to write her book. But I don't see why counsel would have said it to me and not to Karen.

Riley: No. I would guess not. Were you in any way reluctant or hesitant to put certain things on paper or in emails?

Fleischer: Oh, sure.

Riley: Okay.

Fleischer: Yes. I took very good notes, but—particularly when I sat in on foreign summit meetings, for example—there was just a commonsense notion of what you don't write. Also, early on in the administration, when there was a controversy about [John] Ashcroft—There were a lot of Democrats who said they wanted to block Ashcroft from getting through—I was in a meeting with Bush and [Thomas] Daschle, and Daschle assured Bush—Daschle was the minority leader at the time—that Bush's nominees were going to get through, that the Democrats weren't going to block Ashcroft. The press asked me about the meeting—This is again about how the press will play whatever side they can get—so I gave a straight answer and said, "Leader Daschle assured President Bush that the nominees will get through, including Attorney General Ashcroft."

All of a sudden, that created a huge problem for Daschle back on Capitol Hill, where Democrats were saying, "How can you give up that? How can you concede that? Why are you doing that?" And I realized I shouldn't be talking for Daschle; that's not my job. I saw in the *New York Times* the next morning my quote and I instantly knew I stepped in it. I turned myself in; I went to the President and said, "I did that," and he said, "You need to remember you talk for *me*, you don't speak for anybody else that comes into this office," and I called Daschle and apologized. But the press loved it. The press loved the fact that I gave them such a good, juicy, straight factual nugget. The press thought that I was secretive and tight-lipped, and then they loved the fact that I was in trouble for doing it. Welcome to the White House.

Riley: But in terms of keeping written—

Fleischer: It sent me a signal. I remembered, especially when other people said things, to be very judicious about writing what other people said. But there is also topic content, spicy things that people would say. There were things I knew better than to write down.

Riley: Sure. And you didn't keep a diary. Or did you?

Fleischer: No. My notes are business notes so my staff could do its job and so I could do a better job. I never had time for anything introspective or fun; that's not my nature anyway.

Riley: Well, you're doing a pretty good job today. The only things, then, that would be in your files at the library that were treated as Presidential records would be things that the President himself saw, then, is that right?

Fleischer: Right. And that is probably not a lot, because I did almost everything orally with the President. I left behind some subject-area notes and they were just in my desk. I don't know what was done with those.

One of the things the archivist has that I didn't know, because I thought I had lost it, which amazes me, was that on September 11, when Andy Card whispered in the President's right ear, "America's under attack; second tower's hit," I was 15 feet over the President's left ear. I had gotten the page moments before Andy came in, saying, "Second tower's hit." Like everyone, I knew it was terrorism. The plan was for Bush, in that little schoolroom, because he knew about the first tower going in, to address the press pool in the back of the room and say that the resources of the federal government were going to be available to the people of New York, never thinking it was terrorism, but knowing the World Trade Center was on fire. That was the plan after he finished reading with the kids.

I received the page. Andy whispered in his ear. I took my legal pad, where I take my notes, and I wrote on the back of it, "Don't say anything yet," in big letters and maneuvered over, putting my back to the press and held it up. And Bush gave me a nod. I didn't want him to say anything until he had had a proper briefing. The last thing you want is the President speaking without facts or more knowledge, especially now that it was terrorism. Somehow they have that. I don't know how the archivists have it, so maybe I left some other stuff behind that I don't remember, but I was so happy to hear that.

Riley: How did you find out that they had it?

Fleischer: Because when I was there in July—Bush put on an event for senior staff and had the archivist present and had the museum designers present what they were doing and how they were doing it—I met the chief archivist and was talking to him.

Riley: From the vantage point of the communities we represent, we're thrilled to hear that the notes have been taken.

Freedman: Yes, but we also need to have these stories to go with them.

Riley: Absolutely, and we're going to keep talking and we hope that all of your records find a home, even the ones beyond 9/11, at some point. Whether they go to Middlebury—

Fleischer: I've never thought about that.

Riley: —or the Library of Congress or, preferably, the Bush Library. Or you can bring them and put them in my office, and I'll be happy to put them to use there.

Perry: The Miller Center is always willing. You can deposit them there.

Fleischer: You'll fall asleep and lose your eyesight.

Riley: I don't think so. Why don't we stop here?

Fleischer: Okay.

[BREAK]

September 30, 2010

Riley: It's common, after you've had a session and we've had questions for you, for you to think over the night, *Oh, gosh, I wish I had thought to say this or that*. Did anything come to mind yesterday, a story or something like that?

Fleischer: No. I went to bed.

Riley: You've been busy. All right. When we had wrapped up yesterday, you talked a little bit about President Bush's initial efforts in office, including the legitimacy question, but I wanted to reframe the issue a little bit and throw this out for you to deal with, the question of his being a uniter rather than a divider and the effort to be inclusive while pursuing his agenda. We were talking on the way in about the Democrats' and Republicans' differences over the budget and so forth, but I'd like to get you to reflect a little bit about bipartisanship, which had been a key feature of President Bush's operating style in Texas; his efforts to bring that to Washington; and his relative success or failure, from your perspective, particularly in the early stages, and then we'll deal with the later stuff as we go through the day.

Fleischer: In making assessments like that, the first thing I would do is—You have to put a straight black line in the middle of the early years of the Bush Presidency, between politics before the ramp-up to the war in Iraq and politics afterward, because Iraq and the aftermath, the failure to find WMD [weapons of mass destruction], and just how badly things turned out in Iraq, so badly damaged and affected everything Bush that anything that was bipartisan is tainted and not believed.

Riley: Sure.

Fleischer: So separate it before the lead-up to the war. Bipartisanship can be measured in two ways. One way is to determine if there a feeling that Washington's changed, that people are actually working together and getting things done. The other is just vote tallies. I don't think the first changed and that's a reflection of how hard it is to change Washington, of how, even though Bush did it in Austin, he was unable to do it in D.C.

But the other side of it, which is terribly important, is that almost all of his major initiatives passed with large numbers of Democratic votes. The tax cut, if I remember, had 12 Democrats in the Senate vote for it. That's about 25 percent of the Democratic caucus. I don't remember how many House Democrats voted for the tax cut in 2001, but a significant number. Education reform was clearly an overwhelmingly bipartisan vote and that actually was a pattern going beyond Iraq. The [USA] PATRIOT [Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism] Act was overwhelmingly bipartisan. The authorization to use force in Iraq was overwhelmingly bipartisan. Even when things started to go bad in Iraq, the authorization of the use of military commissions was bipartisan.

FISA [Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act], the authorization for warrantless wiretaps, was overwhelmingly bipartisan. Not that today's politics enters into the Bush years, but when you talk about bipartisanship, Bush was able to get the opposing party to support his initiatives—nobody will believe it, but—because a lot of his proposals were centrist enough to attract significant Democratic support.

President Obama's proposals—The only thing he's created in a bipartisan way are Democrats voting with Republicans against his initiatives. Bush will never get credit for it, and I think that's the taint of Iraq, but in my book, he actually brought people together when it counted more, which was the vote tallies, than people will recognize.

Riley: Can you talk a little bit about his commitment to that when he came in? I'm trying to reflect back on the senior people in the administration. You probably had more Capitol Hill experience than just about anybody outside the Congressional Affairs office.

Fleischer: Yes, Nick Calio was in charge of Congressional Affairs.

Riley: There couldn't have been very many people who had that kind of Hill experience. Were you—? "Comfortable" is not the right word. Did you think it was a realistic approach to try to go in and work with Democrats?

Fleischer: Oh, absolutely. And I thought there was no alternative. That's what you do. It was Bush's style and I was really taken by what he was able to do in Austin. With me coming from Washington, I thought, *Wow! State capitols work differently from Washington. Can it be imported?*

Remember, we had a 50-50 Senate, so Cheney stuck around and then Jim Jeffords changed parties. When Jim Jeffords changed parties, it was amazing. It was right in the middle of the signing of the tax bill, I think two days before the signing of the tax bill, so what we thought was going to be the heralding of the tax cuts, a signature campaign initiative, instead switched to the drama of Jeffords's change. And Bush took a pummeling. So much of the narrative was, "What's wrong with Bush? What does it mean when Jim Jeffords, a moderate, can't find a home in the Republican Party?" It reinforced the press's notion of the Republicans being conservative, narrow-minded, with little room for dissent in the tent, and you just couldn't convince anybody Bush was moderate or bipartisan in style.

Jeffords proved otherwise. Otherwise, why would he change parties? The press has an interest, too, in a conflict story in the clash between the partisan President and the Congress. One of my

observations of the press, I said it yesterday, but their second bias is that when the Ds and the Rs are fighting, it's a lot easier to be a D than an R when the Ds and the Rs are fighting.

Riley: Any other follow-ups on this?

Perry: Yes. Could you talk about his work on the education bill, particularly with Senator Kennedy?

Fleischer: Yes. Bush understood how to use the trappings of power, and he had little rewards for people. One of them was the ride in the limo. I remember going to a school in northeast Washington, D.C., and he brought George Miller, the ranking Democrat on the House Education committee, and Ted Kennedy in the limo with him to go to the school. We brought them to the White House and they rode together. Most Members of Congress never get inside that limo. It still is a rare thing, even if you've been in Washington 30 years, to go to Camp David, to go in the limo, to go to the Residence, little things like that.

Bush publicly brought them in, and heralded it. Our instructions were—Margaret [Spellings] probably told you a lot about this—to listen to Miller, to listen to Kennedy. What I thought was interesting, at the end of the day, was that after the bill was all put together and the sausage making was complete, the press lost interest in the story of education, because there was no fighting about it. There was a big bipartisan vote for No Child Left Behind and the reforms it included. What they were most interested in was the personal—the Bush-Kennedy—relationship, in how unusual it was, these two younger people of—

Perry: Strange bedfellows.

Fleischer: —America's famous political families. Strange bedfellows. The personal story is what led the network news the day the education bill was signed. I think we went to Boston with Kennedy to do an event.

Perry: Was there a special chemistry between them? I should think, given the dynasty element, that Ted Kennedy had probably ridden in the Presidential limousine before and he had certainly spent lots of time in the White House, so he wouldn't have needed that to bring him on board. Did they just get along?

Fleischer: It's that signal, that welcoming signal from a President of the opposite party that you're important to me and I'm going to show it to everybody. That pays big dividends with politicians, even if they've been in the limo before. What it really was, was two very savvy political players, both of whom had a pretty important substantive side to them.

When Ted Kennedy decided that he was going to work with you on something, there was no better legislative ally to have than Ted Kennedy. When he decided to fight you, there was no more bitter, partisan, screaming Senator. I was involved in other things at Ways and Means, where Bill Archer worked with Kennedy behind the scenes, and it really was remarkable. When Teddy Kennedy said, "I'm going to help you get something done," that man could put his shoulder to a big rock and move it. That's what he and Bush did, and Kennedy helped deliver a lot of Democrats for it, convinced them it was right thing to do.

Part of it was controversial in the Democrat caucus—this aggregating of data so you could test Blacks, Hispanics, and whites, and see their test scores. That could frighten some people: What happens if we look worse? I'm not going to let a Republican President get armed with that data. Who knows what he'll do with it? Ted Kennedy convinced people that Bush was serious about wanting to help disadvantaged and poor students so they could do better, so teachers would be held liable for those kids if they weren't doing as well as white kids. There was a lot of controversy in that. Kennedy helped get it across the finish line.

Riley: But Bush had to convince Kennedy first that he was serious about this.

Fleischer: Correct.

Riley: Part of Barbara's question was how did this President convince Kennedy?

Fleischer: Oh, I see.

Riley: You watched him work a room, and presumably you watched him work Members occasionally.

Fleischer: He did it through genuine, heartfelt conversation about how important it was. And Bush could speak to it very substantively as a Governor who had done it. He put in education reforms in Texas. He spoke the language of education fluently. One of the things people didn't give Bush credit for was—They didn't think he was smart. They didn't think he was substantive. He was very much both. Kennedy saw it. I think Teddy Kennedy really warmed to it when he saw what George Bush knew about education and what George Bush wanted to accomplish. And Kennedy said, "I'll throw my lot in with you."

Riley: That's interesting. It sounds a little bit like what we've heard from Reagan-era people with Tip O'Neill.

Fleischer: Yes.

Riley: Maybe you saw that. Again, I'm fuzzy on your particular dates on the Hill—

Fleischer: I was there '83 to '99, essentially.

Riley: I know they locked horns sometimes, but there was also, based on the testimony of the Congressional Affairs people, some kind of chemistry between those two Irish-Americans that—

Fleischer: But on education, as much as there was personal chemistry between the two, it was much more substantive than personal. There was the personal, but I think both of them were driven by what you're supposed to be driven by if you go into public policy, and that's changing the laws to improve the lives of people. Kennedy and Bush just made common cause to do that on education, and that's what drove it.

Freedman: How did that start? Who made the initial foray? Do you remember? How did this chemistry evolve?

Fleischer: I suspect it started during the campaign, when Bush would regularly talk about the need to improve education as President, which was unusual talk for Republicans back then.

Freedman: Right.

Fleischer: Remember, that was after the House Republicans wanted to eliminate the Department of Education. We went from "Eliminate the Department of Education" to a Presidential candidate who was always speaking about the federal role in education.

Kennedy would have been aware that Bush was saying it as a candidate. I don't underestimate that even if they never personally talked about it during the campaign, you're always measuring people in politics and thinking, *If they get in, what can we do?* And then I think it was the outreach, Bush's taking Kennedy to the school. There were many meetings at the White House to talk policy. There were Bush's instructions to his staff, principally Margaret, to work closely with Kennedy to get this done.

I remember one meeting that former Treasury Secretary [Robert] Rubin had with Bill Archer. Archer was chairman of Ways and Means. It was '97, so Clinton had just been reelected. We went through the debacle in '95: they shut down the government, nothing got accomplished, vetoes, and Newt [Gingrich] fighting with Clinton. Rubin came up and they were in H208, Ways and Means's beautiful ceremonial room right off the floor. Archer, Rubin, and I were at the table, our chief of staff was at the table, and Rubin had one guy at the table. Rubin said to Archer, "Bill Clinton sent me up here. He wants to get things done. He knows there are going to be things that you want that he doesn't want and there are going to be things that we want that you don't want. My instructions are to figure it out and get it done."

Right from that moment, you knew from that quiet conversation, which never leaked, a mature decision had been made to work together and figure things out. I'll bring it back to Obama. I wish Obama had done what Clinton did; I think there would have been a lot more compromises. It's a different conversation.

Riley: We'll bring you back for the next project. [*laughter*]

Fleischer: But Bush's instructions to staff sent all the right signals to Kennedy and to Kennedy's staff that Bush wanted to get this done. It's like circling people in a ring. If you're circling and you can tell the other guy is looking to draw on you, you're going to stay guarded. If you are circling and you get the signal the other guy is safe, you start to approach each other. All those signals were being sent both by Bush personally to Kennedy in meetings and by staff-to-staff, staff-to-Kennedy communications. That's where they said, "Yes, I think we can get this done together," and started drafting the law.

Freedman: You observed this chemistry, this apparently mutual respect. Do you recall any conversation specifically about Kennedy with the President?

Fleischer: No. I could check my notes on that one, but there were a couple with Daschle that I remember, one good, one bad. When Daschle was minority leader, so I think it was March of '01, Bush took his first trip out of the country and Daschle launched some type of speech on the Senate floor criticizing Bush for something. I don't remember if it was foreign policy or

domestic. Karen Hughes and I put our heads together and we said, "I thought partisanship stopped at the water's edge." Here's Bush out of the country and he's being attacked, so we attacked Daschle for attacking Bush while Bush was out of the country. I remember Daschle saying, "What I said was right, just the timing was wrong," so Daschle granted that you don't criticize the President when he's out of the country. Boy, is that a quaint notion now. Bush was attacked no matter where he was, and the same is true of Obama today. That was one.

There's another one, though, with Daschle. Daschle became majority leader, September 11 happened, and Congress or somebody said they needed $20 billion for the rebuilding of New York and infrastructure. Daschle said we need $40 billion and Bush's instructions to Nick—I was in the Oval—were, "If Tom Daschle wants it, it's important. Let Tom Daschle have it." I think Bush was trying to recapture the Austin way: If it's important to him, we're going to do it.

And 9/11 put everybody in that mindset, but if Bush had had his druthers, he would have loved to have been governing like that from Day One. It's what he did.

Perry: Did he ever worry about the base? You've mentioned the Republican base wanting to abolish the Department of Education, so were there worries both about the politics of that issue and the outreach to people like Ted Kennedy, the *bête noire* of the base of the Republican Party?

Fleischer: Sure. Yes. A big part of Karl Rove's job was being in touch with the base constantly, talking to the base, schmoozing the base. That way they would never—Karl's biggest fear was that Bush would have a primary, a la Pat Buchanan against Bush's father, so Karl always was working at the base with Bush's input, keeping them close, so important, powerful conservatives always knew they were getting their phone calls returned at the highest level. That goes far. But it was ultimately the President's judgment about how to find the right balance between appealing to centrists and moderates, stylistically especially, and having the ability to bring Democrats in, to give them enough of what they wanted, and keep his base.

That's the art of politics. The greatest leaders are the ones who are ideologically strong—you know who they are; you know what they stand for—but they can make their ideology attractive to the center. They expand their base and make the center their supporters. That's the art of what Presidencies should be about, and Bush was always cognizant of how far to go. That's another reason why he did not trim his sails when he was elected President. He didn't come out and say, "All right, it was a closer election than I thought. Instead of seeking a $1.6 trillion tax cut, let's make it $800 billion," an outreach to the Democrats. He wouldn't do that because we probably would have lost the base and not picked up anybody as a result. The opposition would have just pocketed the compromise and said, "Okay, now let's start negotiating from $800 billion."

Bush's instructions on the tax cut were always, to all the staff, that he ran on $1.6, he meant $1.6, and nobody but nobody should ever indicate it would be a penny less than $1.6. He always knew in his mind it would be less, but only when he was ready and had watched enough of the process move forward that he knew when to pull the trigger on the final compromise, the only compromise, the "get it done, get it over the line" compromise. Then the tax cut became, thanks to John Breaux, $1.3, and that's what he signed into law. It was also the art of knowing you're ultimately going to do something as an outreach to the other party, but when do you let the

process exhaust itself so you do it at the final moment to push everybody over the finish line. He would talk about that. That's literally how he instructed the staff.

Riley: The phrase you often see is "Let's not negotiate with ourselves."

Fleischer: Exactly. Yes. Right.

Riley: He was letting you guys know that this was the approach.

Fleischer: Correct.

Riley: It's remarkable that that didn't leak, though. We go back to your comments yesterday about the absence of leaking. You can have these conversations *in camera* and—

Fleischer: I can't tell you how proud all of us were that we could do that and not have it leak. To this day, I say that's how you serve the President.

But it made my job hard because—and I loved it, I accepted it, it was only the right way to do it—I'd be standing at the podium with reporters saying, "These moderate Democrats are saying that they'll go along with the President if he'll drop it down to $1 trillion. Is that acceptable to the administration?" On record, at the podium, I had to say, "The President ran on $1.6; he believes $1.6 is right." I would never say, "No, he won't compromise." I would never go that far, but I had to reassert the same old, same old, and the press was saying, "You never tell us anything. You never give us any clue, any signals, about what the future is going to be, whether it's acceptable or not. We're just trying to get the lay of the land." I'd have been a fool to say, "Yes, I think $1.2 might—" [*laughter*] So it started to create the tension that every press secretary should live under, where the press is banging at you to get more and your job is to just not to give it.

Riley: It must be excellent preparation for being a parent. [*laughter*] Message discipline: Eight o'clock, you go to bed. Eight o'clock, you go to bed.

Freedman: I wanted to follow up on Barbara's question, to get a sense of the internal dynamics. I wonder whether one possible interpretation is that you had a President who very much wanted to expand the center and live there, but you had the inevitable concerns about maintaining your base. I'm wondering what Rove's position or his role was. Was he a constraint on that? Did he pull the President away from what his inclinations otherwise would have been?

Fleischer: I don't think so. He reinforced the President's inclinations. Another one of the myths of Bush is that the staff could push him, direct him. Some other Texan wrote a book about Bush, saying he was Karl's puppet or something along those lines—

Riley: Karl was "Bush's brain."

Fleischer: Yes. "Bush's brain," that's what it was. And Bush was always the one. It was a very directive Presidency. You knew he was telling you what he wanted. At the same time, it was easy to tell him, "I don't think that'll work," or "Maybe you should do it a little bit differently." That was the fun of the job, too. But the two of them worked together for so long that Karl knew

how Bush liked to govern. Bush welcomed Karl's input into what would be more effective and it was also tempered by—There were Andy and Karen, too; it wasn't just Karl influencing Bush.

Riley: I would like to get you to reflect on the inner circle and what each person brought to the table when you were having these roundtable-type discussions. We have a picture that there were various types, but help flesh out the picture. If there was a crucial meeting to decide on something, who was likely to be at the table? It may be an overcaricature, but give us your reflections on what you could expect from the people who were there: Karl, Karen, and yourself.

Fleischer: There's a great one that you should ask questions about that nobody has focused on, because it came and it went. It was significant when it happened, but academically it's the perfect illustration of what you're driving at. It was Bush's decision in '01 to impose quotas on steel, which was a significant decision for a conservative Republican, to intervene in the markets to put quotas on steel.

Boy, were there fights in the administration about it. [Paul] O'Neill was vehemently opposed to it. I remember meetings about it in the Roosevelt Room, where people would present their cases about it and—What's also interesting about how power works is that Cheney never spoke. Karl didn't speak. They both knew that in the meeting with the 12 people, this was the time for the other eight or nine to say what they wanted to say. They were going to get Bush in private and tell Bush what they thought he should do. I never knew what Cheney said. I always suspected Karl was the one driving for steel quotas: "That way we can win Pennsylvania." I think it was that, pure and simple.

Karen didn't, on that one, get all that involved. Karen was just ready to shape the communications side of it. Karen's skill, though—On almost all issues, she brought what I thought was a mom-at-home, wonderful, middle-America sensibility to all things. If somebody was arguing about the politics and somebody was arguing about the economics, Karen would say, "Wait a minute. You'll never be able to sell it. Nobody's going to believe you. You can't say that." That was Karen's great strength. The stem cell speech—I guess Gerson had a hand in it, but Karen largely wrote the August 2001 stem cell speech. You got Karen's touch of how to speak in plain English and weigh two sides of an issue and articulate it.

But Karl would tackle almost anything. There was no issue Karl did not want to get in the middle of, particularly if it was important. Closing a Navy base at Vieques, Karl got into the middle of it and antagonized a bunch of people at the Pentagon. They thought, *Why on earth is he even involved in this?* Karl wrote about some of that in his book, where he thought [Colin] Powell called him "a political" or something like that and Karl wrote, "Powell dismissed me as just being political." Karl is also extraordinarily substantive. For somebody who was political, he really worked hard to master the substance of what he was talking about and was pretty good at it.

Andy Card was, from everything I witnessed, the classic arbiter of the power centers. He tried to be sure the President got balanced information, and Josh Bolten similarly. Josh set up the policy shop so the President got good, crisp briefings with the pros and the cons.

But typically what would happen was you would get the usual top White House cast of characters: Andy, Karl, Josh, Karen, and then typically attending would be Nick and me. That would be the standard crew for all big issues. And typically Nick and I would be there more to listen and to know what was going on. Sometimes I would weigh in, especially if I thought, *The press will kill you; don't do it that way; don't say it that way.*

But then others would rotate in. On steel, they were the chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, the chairman of the Domestic Policy Council, of course the Treasury Secretary, because it was his issue. I don't remember if the Trade Representative was there. And there would be others like that, so if your issue came up, a new series of issue experts would come in to that regular team of Andy, Karl, Karen, Josh, Nick, and me. I'm probably missing somebody in that, maybe Margaret, because she was Domestic Policy Advisor, and then people would state their cases.

Riley: This would take place without the President being present?

Fleischer: No. No. With him there. There was a whole other apparatus that I seldom participated in that met in Andy Card's office to try to hash out policies on their way to the President. I just never had time to go to those. I was always on the list and I never went. I would catch up with it when it went to the President. I'd go into the Oval and hear the briefings and figure out what I needed to know.

Riley: Okay.

Fleischer: I don't even remember what we called that, but that was a pretty significant group of people involved with Congressional Affairs and policy making.

Freedman: These meetings would be organized around what? They wouldn't be general discussions with the President, but rather a specific action-based meeting?

Fleischer: Correct. It would go like this: Mr. President, the issue of steel quotas is coming up. A decision needs to be made by such-and-so a date. Staff has been meeting regularly to flesh out the issues and the time has come now to present the pros and cons to you. Before that meeting, there would have been a tremendous amount of staff work involved in getting it ready. "Leave that one out," "Make sure you include that one," hashing it out, two sides competing with each other. Then Josh would put together the process for "policy time"; that's what we called it. Kristen Silverberg was another one who was a regular in there. Andy had Kristen, and Joel Kaplan became Deputy Chief of Staff.

Riley: Not at Josh's level?

Fleischer: No. Maybe they were Josh's deputies? No, they were Andy's. These guys, the wonks and the congressional people, would hash things out behind the scenes for probably weeks and get them ready for policy time. Policy time would come and would always be focused on a specific issue: steel quotas, Medicare Part D, Patients' Bill of Rights, things like that that would come up.

This was a pattern repeated on many issues. Cheney wouldn't speak, Karl sometimes wouldn't speak, and then they would catch him whenever they wanted to catch him and say, I really think you have to do X or you have to do Y. And Karen would do that, too. And the President then would make his decision.

Perry: Would he have been given an overview before he came in to policy time?

Fleischer: Yes.

Perry: He wouldn't be cold to the facts and the options?

Fleischer: He was surprisingly, to outsiders, pretty well aware of most of these things before they even happened. It's not as if most of these issues were out of the blue sky and he'd never heard of them. He would know that there had been a debate about the reauthorization of the Patients' Bill of Rights—how to handle it, what are you going to do, and here are the two sides—but then it would get crystallized in front of him in a sharper fashion.

Perry: Did he prefer that approach, an oral debate, rather than giving him a written report?

Fleischer: Oh, I'm sorry. No, he also had a briefing book, and the briefing book would typically have the various sides of the policy debate, too. I got a copy of that regularly, so my job was to—Before I went home at night, I read the same briefing book that he read, with the exception of some national security stuff that was in his that wasn't in mine.

Riley: But the policy time was, presumably, consistent with his preferences to hear oral argument on something—

Fleischer: Yes, but it's not in substitute for, it's in addition to, basically getting that oral presentation condensed by Josh's staff—This was when Josh was Deputy Chief of Staff—into a memo about the Patients' Bill of Rights: Tomorrow at three o'clock, the staff will meet with you, during policy time, to discuss the Patients' Bill of Rights. Side A. Side B. And leave it at that.

Perry: Did he typically ask many questions during this time?

Fleischer: Always.

Riley: The advantage of this, to him, was that he was able to interrogate the sources in a way that he couldn't if he just had a paper in front of him.

Fleischer: Right.

Freedman: It was like oral argument in that sense. That was the logic of it, so that he could engage the key players and probe more specifically.

Fleischer: And he could read you and see how fervently you believed it, if he could push you and see that all of a sudden, in response to two or three follow-ups, you started to get a little shakier on it. One of Bush's mantras was that 70/30 issues never got to him; staff should handle those.

When you had the 50/50 issues, that made it to the Oval—and this became the case with Iraq—once you've made your decision, you've made it, push it through, because as soon as you make it, all of a sudden you think, *Well, there were 49 good reasons not to do it that way. Yes, I went with 51, but I'm sure hoping those 49 don't become true.* He said if you do that, nobody will ever follow you. One of the things people criticize Bush for was his certitude and his cocksureness about how he proceeded, but he viewed that as a leadership style—consciously. No one will follow you if you show doubts. It's a good arguable point, because one of Clinton's strengths was Clinton would give a lot of stem cell speeches with "On the one hand" and "On the other hand." That's always Clinton. It was seldom Bush.

Riley: But consciously so, right?

Fleischer: Consciously.

Riley: To what extent was this styled as the anti-Clinton way of doing things?

Fleischer: It predated Clinton. I don't think that was the case. I've seen people write, and Bush has talked about it, that when he got to Harvard Business School, he wore a flight jacket and he loved to be the Texan pushing back against the northeastern culture and all that. He would just do it with a "this is who I am" attitude. I'm not into psychology, so take that for what it's worth. Part of it is that Texas strut. And some of that was, to him, a rational decision: this is how you lead. We can get into that about 9/11, but I had one very vivid exchange with Bush about something like that. That was just Bush's style.

Freedman: Before we move off policy time, would this be once a week? Once a month?

Fleischer: Several times a week.

Freedman: Okay.

Fleischer: It was always different issues. You should definitely go into this at length with Josh. Kristen Silverberg is somebody else you should talk to, and Joel Kaplan.

Freedman: So policy time took place several times a week. Would it vary or would it be a very disciplined one hour or two hours? What was the duration?

Fleischer: Usually they were about 30 or 40 minutes, and they always began on time and ended on time. It was uncanny. At one point Condi [Condoleezza] Rice said to him, because sometimes things would end early, "If you keep going at this pace, your first term's going to be up in three years." [*laughter*]

Freedman: Was the pattern always that after 45 minutes he'd thank everybody and then a decision would be made later, or were there occasions on which he made a decision on the spot?

Fleischer: Typically it was later. It's hard for me to remember specifics without my notes. Sometimes it would be, "Okay, we'll do X," or, "We'll do Y."

Freedman: Yes. I was thinking again about the style of decision making and leadership.

Fleischer: What he would often do after policy time was caucus with Andy. What do you think? Karl would give him what he thought. Karen would do it, too, and Cheney, and it all just melded.

Riley: I want to press you on that—

Fleischer: It was formal and informal; there was a formal policy time, with briefing books, and an informal time.

Riley: Was there frustration or aggravation among the group because there were a few privileged people who would gain access to the President's ear *after* the formal presentation in ways that might subvert the process? There is history on this in other administrations. With Clinton, the worry was always that whoever got to him last was the one who was ultimately successful. There were concerns about these back-channel communications.

Fleischer: You have to remember my perspective on it is that I wasn't Texas inner circle, but thanks to George Bush I was inner circle enough. I probably spent more time with him than almost anybody, because I would come in for *all* the meetings. Karl never went to summit meetings, neither did Karen; I sat in on almost all of them. I was in for all the domestic policy stuff and the other meetings I told you about. I was constantly in there. Even though I wasn't a policy advisor, I had this great front-row seat, so for me, the system was pretty good. That's my perspective. And my perspective, having come from the campaign, where I cut my teeth and got to know the Karens and the Karls and we all forged our way of working together, was that we were one team. This worked.

Clearly, there had to be people outside that circle who didn't like it. Few of them were in the White House, because—Again, the top staff at the White House—If Larry Lindsey wanted to walk in and tell the President something, Larry could do it. I don't think Larry did that often. There was an interesting dynamic, too, about who felt easy and comfortable just walking in when they wanted to. They were, probably, the few of us from the campaign who, as Governor, could do it easily to the Governor. There were people who then came into the White House who weren't on the campaign, and for them it was really "Mr. President." It was probably a little bit harder for them just to show up at the Oval, even if they had the right to just show up at the Oval.

I suspect Cabinet Secretaries were the ones who did not like it: Paul O'Neill, Colin Powell—Rummy [Donald Rumsfeld] was such a good inside fighter, I don't think Rummy cared. He could get what he wanted and knew how to do it. Once I got a phone call from Powell's spokesman, when I would do the President's schedule, and I had said, "The President is meeting with the Secretary of Defense." They said to me, "How come you never announce the Secretary of State's meetings with the President? Would you mind starting to announce those?" I said, "Sure, I'll be happy to." That was a clear indication that Powell had his nose out of joint because Rumsfeld was getting publicity. My bet is those two, principally, and then you would have others, Christine Todd Whitman, the head of EPA [Environmental Protection Agency]. There were a bunch of nasty controversies in early 2001 involving the environment and Bush's purported lack of caring for it. And she was a moderate.

A lot of the anger, too, would have been directed at Karl, and probably some at Andy, because, being the Chief of Staff, you catch those arrows. I'm sure you're on to something. It just wouldn't have crossed my desk, because people don't make those fights in front of the President.

Riley: Right.

Fleischer: When they're angry, they pick up the phone and chew out the Chief of Staff.

Riley: Or you could conceivably see grousing in the press from somebody.

Fleischer: I don't remember much of that. Maybe it was there.

Riley: Probably not, based on what you've said thus far.

Perry: And presumably that would have been because of these people knowing how the President viewed those things, that they'd only make the matter worse by saying, "I can't get in to see the President."

Fleischer: Oh, absolutely. Yes. That would have been a great way to never see him. But there really is an important Presidential dynamic about the relationship between the important and well-respected senior outsiders, who are not part of a campaign, who come in, and the people who are part of the campaign music. Before the Secret Service ever showed up, we all fought together and we all knew how to make music together.

There is a sense of trepidation from many of those new people to come in and cross swords with Karen, cross swords with Karl, because if you do, boy, do they have the President's ear. But man, Karl's pissing me off today! How do you handle that? That's a constant issue. You'll see it in the Obama administration now as people start to leave, and the new team starts to come in; it just changes the dynamics. You'll have enough of the people who danced with Obama before anybody knew who Obama was—[Robert] Gibbs, et cetera, will still stick around—but the newcomers will come in and will start to change that dynamic.

Riley: You're describing what is actually, historically, an unusual dynamic. When we teach Presidential behavior, all of us, there are two traditional models of staff organization. One is the strong Chief of Staff where, presumably, everybody goes through the Chief of Staff to get access to the President. That's the model we all say is the successful one, because it seems to work. Then there is the spokes-of-the-wheel model, which allows access from a variety of perspectives. The conventional wisdom in our textbooks is that that doesn't work, but you seem to be describing a situation in which it *does* work.

Fleischer: With Bush it wasn't a spokes-of-the-wheel model, it was, in Bush's words, a "flat management structure." If President Bush sits here, [*gesturing*] there were probably eight, nine, ten of us who could just always walk in and get him, and would; we would use that privilege.

Riley: The chart that you're drawing here, just for purposes of this discussion, looks like more of a corporate organizational chart, where you have a head with maybe five or six boxes connected from just below. There are multiple points of access, but it's different than—

Perry: —than a wheel.

Fleischer: Correct.

Riley: Okay.

Fleischer: Because a wheel is much more free flowing. It's bigger. This is more "corporate," good word to use, especially with Bush. But what made this work for the Bush administration, as opposed to the powerful Chief of Staff model—Bush deliberately talked about not going to the powerful Chief of Staff model. He was very familiar with it and didn't want it—was Bush's discipline, and what I always viewed as good staff work. Because of policy time, because Bush actually was a good reader of the briefing book, and because he did listen in the policy time, there was a disciplined, good structure around that allowed it to have a formality. The formality was serious and was crucial to policy making, but there was enough of the informal that he had those two ways of making decisions.

A good, well-run White House with a disciplined President will do well to have both structures. If it's only the formal, if it's only the policy time, it can be a little stilted. People in those policy times might pull their punches a little bit. When you're more informal with a President, you'll say, "Look, what you just heard from Cheney, don't do it. It will kill you." Nobody's going to say that in front of Cheney in the meeting. But if Karen wanted to say that, she had her opportunity to. That was the structure that Bush very much wanted.

I would push against your models and say there is actually a third style, and maybe that was the Bush style.

Riley: There is a great journal article in this if we could only—

Perry: Someday.

Fleischer: But you'll hear this from everybody. I won't be the only one with this perspective, because all of us liked it. It's like a grad school education; you sit there and, especially for me as the observer in most of these meetings, hear all the sides presented.

Freedman: We're marching toward September, but in this period that you describe in your book as the calm before the storm, the calm was only relative, because you had all the things that we've already discussed, and one of the issues that at the time was controversial was faith-based initiatives. I'm wondering if there is anything that we should know about that is particularly in the context of these staff relationships and policy time and your role in presenting this. It seems like an interesting issue.

Fleischer: That and stem cell. Stem cell was the other one. And stem cell did *not* follow the pattern I just described. Stem cell was a totally different decision-making structure that—

Freedman: How'd that work?

Fleischer: Stem cell was secretive. Stem cell was led by Karl and Jay Lefkowitz. If you're not talking to Jay, you definitely should include Jay. I'll see him. He teaches at Columbia now. He is an attorney in New York, but he teaches at Columbia.

Jay led the review, and without this White House structure of people sitting in, Jay would bring in leading ethicists, health experts, to private meetings with the President, with Karl. I don't know who else was there, probably Andy, and I suspect Karen—I never went to any of these—and they'd hash it out in front of the President. Is an embryo alive? Can lives be saved through stem cell research? Are there alternatives? Is it just human embryos or can umbilical cords also create life, lead to cures? It was a remarkable, private series of listening sessions for Bush, with some really serious thinkers in a pretty arcane area that helped him flesh out what ultimately became a compromise. That was one situation that didn't follow the structure.

You also reminded me, when you started talking about structures at the White House, that there was probably a tremendous amount of infighting below my level that I never saw. People really do clean up their act, especially in front of the press secretary. People would not want to let whatever internal feuds were going on—But faith-based was an area where, I learned a little later, there were lots of policy clashes and problems and fighting with Karl. I don't know much about it.

Perry: Was that John DiIulio who first was the head of faith-based initiatives? And then Jim Towey followed him?

Fleischer: Yes, Jim was next. And there was somebody who worked for John who regularly leaked to the press. We later found out who it was, and it was pretty tough stuff. There the issue was Karl trying to steer faith-based in a direction that clearly was helping conservative allies versus some of the nonpolitical purists in faith-based, who really saw it as something neutral. It didn't rise up high on my radar screen because it wasn't something the press followed. I'm not probably a good source on that one, but that's where you will start to find a lot of infighting at the White House.

Perry: Is that because it came back to the base again? That those two issues were really important to the base?

Fleischer: Probably.

Perry: And therefore to Karl?

Fleischer: Probably. That'd be my guess.

This is one of the interesting things. It was so heartfelt to Bush, and particularly for the children of prisoners. How do you help them, make sure they're not punished for the deeds of their parents? I never saw Bush approach it from the "How do we get conservative support out of this?" angle. I suspect that if Karl was pushing it in the conservative direction and John DiIulio and his staff weren't, that's where the tension would have emerged. But I went where the press was pushing me. That's where I would learn to spend my time, dig into it, and they weren't pushing me on faith-based, so I wouldn't dig into it to see what was going on.

Riley: Yes, much of the controversy on that happened after John left office. I suppose there were internal tensions, but the publicizing of it became known after—

Fleischer: Well, John did do something. He left and he blasted Bush or he blasted the White House for something, and then I went to the podium and said, "John needs to apologize," and he did.

Riley: Right. That was the "Mayberry Machiavellis" comment.

Fleischer: That's right.

Riley: Was it in *Esquire* magazine? He wrote about it later.

Fleischer: And then he did issue a full-throated apology. Was "Mayberry Machiavellis" about Karl?

Riley: Yes.

Fleischer: And that whole conservative—

Riley: Yes. [*laughter*]

Fleischer: I've been overt about my relationship with Karl. I put that on the table for you. One of the things you have to understand about Karl is—We were flying back from Europe once and were playing Risk in a conference room, a bunch of people on the President's staff. We were all playing one of these games that takes forever to play, so it was a great way to spend the time. The neat thing about it was one of the people who was playing was a military aide who carries the nuclear "football." It was interesting, because he could win this game at any time. [*laughter*] A bunch of us were playing. Karl wasn't playing, but Karl was going around to everybody who was playing and giving them advice on how to beat the other guy.

That's Karl. Karl could not help but get involved in everything, see a way for everybody to do what everybody was working on, and you never knew whose side he was on. That was Karl.

Riley: But the chemistry with the President was different with Karl than with anybody else?

Fleischer: It was, because George Bush had a wonderful read on how to get the most out of Karl. He knew what Karl's weaknesses were, but he knew what Karl's strengths were. He also knew he had Karen and Dan and Andy and other people who would help balance it. One of the worst things Andy ever did was give that quote to some magazine, where he said that part of his job, after Karen left, was to balance Karl, whatever it was. You can say it here, to the Miller Center, later. You shouldn't say it in the middle of your duties at the White House. But that was accurate.

Riley: That was my next question. It takes us out of sequence a little bit, but what happens if you have this carefully balanced mechanism, with Karen being one of the key linchpins, and then she's pulled out?

Fleischer: Right.

Riley: Did it tilt everything in a bad direction?

Fleischer: Interesting question.

Riley: Not a bad direction, but did it throw the balance off?

Fleischer: Yes. Probably. Karen and Karl would agree on issues, disagree on issues. They always did it civilly; they did it without leaking. They just figured out how to work together, having sometimes opposing points of view. And the President was the beneficiary of that. When Karen left, I do think Karl probably gained a few steps.

Riley: His portfolio was thicker?

Fleischer: Yes. Now, Dan would clash with Karl. I would clash with Karl. After I left, I heard many stories about other people clashing with Karl over big things and little things. When Karl left, he actually tried to control who got his office. He didn't want somebody in communications to get his office. That's Karl.

The President would still look for others to give him their opinions. It was just that Karen and Karl were the colossals. When Karen left, Dan became extraordinarily influential and had Bush's ear, and he would clash with Karl when he needed to, but he just didn't have Karen's reputation.

Riley: Or her history with the President.

Fleischer: Well, not Karen's history, but he had a good history with the President. He started with the President. He actually started working for Karl. But there was a circle of us who would regularly clash if we had to with Karl. That's just what we did.

Riley: Sure.

Fleischer: And we weren't afraid to. That goes back to the campaign and to people's confidence.

Karen was extraordinary, but I also think people would tell you that when Karen came back and worked on the campaign plane in '04, it actually made things pretty tough, because all of a sudden you had somebody who wasn't part of the campaign who came in. The relationship was really just the two of them; it broke the regular order. If we were working to get this message to Bush and all of a sudden Karen came in and said it *that* way—It wasn't quite Dick Morris style in '96, but it was a change of procedure.

Riley: This would be an example of a case where people then become concerned about there being an out-of-the-ordinary channel to the President?

Fleischer: Yes.

Riley: You said before that there wasn't, in your experience during the first year or two, a lot of aggravation over this but that—

Fleischer: Remember, I left in July of '03, so what I was just saying about Karen coming back and being an unusual route to the President was part of the campaign—

Riley: Right.

Fleischer: —but Bush was also not the type that whoever whispered last in his ear was in the strongest position. Bush was a good balancer.

Freedman: This is exactly the sort of thing I was hoping to hear about these kinds of relationships.

Riley: Absolutely. To the extent that you were privy to discussions on foreign policy—and we'll isolate this to 9/11; we're going to get to 9/11 here in just a minute—did the process work pretty much the same way?

Fleischer: Well, no. Policy time did not exist for foreign policy, and that wasn't under Josh. Those would be National Security Council meetings under Condi, which I did not attend.

Riley: Okay.

Fleischer: The process there was that the deputies—It is an equivalent process; it just goes through different channels.

Riley: Right.

Fleischer: Steve Hadley, who is the Deputy National Security Advisor, would convene a group of the deputies. That would be [Richard] Armitage, [Paul] Wolfowitz, depending on who else was a deputy and who'd be in that realm, but typically it would be Steve at the Pentagon, himself; and the senior director of the area of the NSC involved and they'd start hashing out policies. What they couldn't resolve would go up to the National Security Council. The National Security Council would be the principals, the Secretaries, Condi, and whenever the NSC needed to present to the President, they would. So that meeting that I don't remember what it was called, that Andy would have in his office with the congressional guys and the policy people, that's the equivalent of the Deputies [Committee meetings] or the Principals [Committee meetings]. They'd meet and then—

There are interesting things you should know on NSC. Early on, there was a bit of a tangle about who would chair NSC meetings. Dick Cheney wanted to chair them. Condi said, "It's my job to chair them," and the President sided with Condi.

Riley: Were you privy to those discussions?

Fleischer: I was privy to the decision.

Riley: The decision, but not the back-and-forth?

Fleischer: No. I don't really know how Cheney weighed in. It would definitely have been Cheney directly to Bush. I'm sure nobody was in that room. Maybe Andy was, I don't know.

Riley: But your description of Cheney in the meetings that you were in is that he typically was silent?

Fleischer: Yes.

Riley: Listening.

Fleischer: Yes. He knew he'd have his chance with Bush and he'd say, "Here's what I think you should do." Sometimes Cheney would ask questions, but he would never indicate where he was going.

Riley: Did Cheney have a press person, too?

Fleischer: Oh, yes.

Riley: And part of your job was to coordinate with Cheney's press person?

Fleischer: Absolutely.

Riley: Was his orbit in any way problematic for you? Particularly in the first year? Again, let's distinguish between—

Fleischer: Not problematic. No. I worked for George W. Bush. I didn't work for Dick Cheney, and that really became clear to me. You just don't have time. I have a client and that client sucks up 24 hours a day. I viewed my job as helping Cheney's people so they'd stay on Bush's message, because Bush was the boss.

Riley: Right.

Fleischer: That's plain and simple how I looked at it.

Riley: Okay.

Freedman: Was there ever a challenge in doing that? A particular challenge?

Fleischer: No because Cheney, as much as he might say to Bush, "I don't you think you should do X or Y," if Bush said, "I'm doing X," Cheney would do that. He had his chance in private and that was the way it worked.

Later, after I left, actually, I publicly clashed with Cheney on the shooting in Texas. I did it because I wanted to and I thought it was right, but I also did it because I talked to Dan Bartlett and Scott McClellan, and those poor guys couldn't say what they wanted to say, so I said it for them publicly. Cheney mishandled it. An editor of some wonky trade press, one of those inside newspaper things, called Marlin Fitzwater and called me and both of us said Cheney made a mistake in not telling the Washington press corps about it. He shouldn't have only told that reporter in Texas. You need to go public. Boom! Marlin's and my criticism of Cheney dominated and led the news for a cycle or two. I remember waking up and it was the lead story

on *CBS Morning News*. I'm sure Cheney didn't appreciate it, but I know the White House did. Again, my customer was the White House. My customer was George Bush.

Riley: Okay. In your book, you deal a lot with your relationship with the press corps, so we don't have to revisit that. The last thing I can think of that we need to do before we get into the 9/11 period and thereafter is how you developed a feel for the job. How were you training yourself up? In your book, you indicate that you started relying on a binder early to educate yourself and that you gradually trained yourself away from that. Do you have some general reflections about that? Did you have a honeymoon with the press?

Fleischer: [*Laughs*] I suppose so. I guess I did. I say that for two reasons. One is I begged the press's apologies for not knowing anything about foreign policy when I started. I had a deputy I deliberately kept on who was the Clinton spokesman for the National Security Council.

Riley: Who was that?

Fleischer: Mary Ellen Countryman. It turned out she had terrible relations with the press, but that's fairly standard. I wanted somebody who could just give *me* the foreign policy press perspective that I needed. What I did, and this was a blast, was I started going to foreign policy school. I would go around the NSC, hot spot by hot spot, or they'd come to my office. It would be the senior directors with their top deputy, and they would brief me on the pros, cons, ins, outs of their region of the world and what was controversial, hot, how it would affect the Bush administration. That's how I started learning foreign policy, having spent almost 18 years on Capitol Hill, never doing foreign policy. Foreign policy was not a big issue in the '90s. It wasn't a big part of the 2000 campaign.

Riley: No. The end of history.

Fleischer: East Timor was the foreign policy, wow. There was a little civil war in Macedonia, which was the biggest issue of 2001 until 9/11, or until a United States submarine surfaced and hit a Japanese trawler and the P-3 [Lockheed Martin P-3 Orion] incident. Those were the foreign policy things. It was back burner, so I didn't answer any questions about foreign policy. I'd get the questions, I'd punt to Mary Ellen, Mary Ellen would answer them, and the press was—They let me go along with that.

Mike McCurry is the one who showed me how to do that. He did that at the beginning when he was State Department spokesman. He had no knowledge of State Department issues when he was made State Department spokesman.

Freedman: She would actually be there at each briefing?

Fleischer: That would be at the gaggle. She'd be standing at my side and I would say, "Ask Mary Ellen," or "Mary Ellen, would you answer that?" At the briefings, on camera, I'd say, "Let me take the question," or "You may want pose it to Mary Ellen after the briefing," and I never got pushback from the press, "You're not answering." They let me do that, and it took me maybe a month or two until I got comfortable and conversant enough.

I was sitting in the summit meetings the President was having, so I was listening to Marlin's theories. I was absorbing everything, plus those briefings are just great. It's the wonky side of me again. I was a sponge for new stuff. I remember I met with the Asian guys and they were talking about Taiwan, so I was learning all about the One China policy and what that meant when Nixon went. Then they gave me this list of dos and don'ts for the press secretary, which I thought was kind of neat. "That's really considerate of you," and then I looked at them. You can say, "the government *on* Taiwan"; you cannot say, "the government *of* Taiwan," because in our relations with China, it was all right to refer physically to the fact that they're on that island but they're not *of* that island because that island is of China. You learn these ridiculous nuances, but if you, as press secretary, get a nuance wrong, oh, you have this international something started.

Freedman: One letter.

Riley: When I was in Salzburg, the Taiwan-China thing was the most—You would think that Middle East politics was hot, but this was unbelievably complicated trying to figure out. I remember at one point I was introducing a group of people. Forgive me; I shouldn't be telling my stories, but—We would begin by saying that of the 50 fellows that were attending, they represented 34 countries. I had the guy from China come up to me later and ask me how I calculated the number of countries that were there.

Fleischer: Did you make Taiwan a country?

Riley: I can't remember. [*laughter*] I think I had said something like "more than 30."

Fleischer: You should have said, "Ask Mary Ellen." [*laughter*]

Riley: There was nothing more nuanced than China-Taiwan.

Fleischer: The most volatile region of the world and the things that I, to this day, remember were the location of the line of control between India and Pakistan and anything Middle Eastern relating to Jerusalem. I often thought that on my last day on the job I was going to figure out one sentence that would get everybody in the State Department in big trouble. I was going to say, "Well, I was talking with officials at our Embassy in Taiwan about where to place the line of control between India and Pakistan and they said they had to check with the American Embassy in Jerusalem." [*laughter*] I could take that building down in one sentence.

Freedman: You just said, clearly, firmly, "I have one client, one customer," but at the same time, you described yourself during this period as serving two masters.

Fleischer: Yes.

Freedman: That's really interesting. I'm wondering how that played out. Of course, you have your boss, but to what extent—You've said they were driving what you were focusing on. Could you talk a little bit about what that was like?

Fleischer: The issue there was that my second master didn't pay me. You do serve two masters, but one comes first. Let me back up, because I said there was second aspect of the honeymoon.

Freedman: Oh, yes.

Fleischer: The first was the leeway the press gave me on foreign policy. The second was, because of Monica [Lewinsky], the Clinton people got really good at selectively leaking and punishing news outlets. If the *Wall Street Journal* wrote a Monica story or an impeachment story that really aggravated the Clinton people, they were really good at, the next day, if they had a policy nugget to give out, giving it to the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* and screwing the *Wall Street Journal.* Then, to keep going, if the *New York Times* wrote something they didn't like, they'd give it to the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*. As frequently as the Clinton administration did it, reporters would be awakened at midnight by editors saying, "The *Washington Post* is out with this story. We don't have it. You need to match it."

A reporter awakened at midnight would have to call sources between midnight and one A.M., on a ridiculous deadline, so they could match the story and not get beaten. Reporters hated it. It made them weary. The Clinton administration left, and the Bush administration came in. This was something the President and I talked about, that Karen and I talked about, and it was part of our policy: treat everybody the same, treat everybody fairly, and the President makes the news. Don't leak.

When we had a policy initiative to announce—If the President was going to announce something tomorrow, Karen and I, the staff, would not today go out and give to reporters, "Tomorrow President Bush will announce," and therefore get "Bush is expected today to announce," have Bush announce it, and get a two-day run out on the story, which was standard with the Clinton administration. We held it for the President to announce. Initially, the press liked that, and this was the second honeymoon. They really liked not being awakened at midnight. They liked the fact that we treated everybody fairly, but that started to dissipate after just a couple of months, when then reporters started saying, "Can't you just give me something? I need the advance. I need the nugget. You guys are holding everything so tight. Why, when Bush does this, can't you tell us a day ahead of time?"

Karen and I would talk about it, but the President wanted to be the one who made the news, so that's the way it went, which led to more of the "secretive, tight-lipped White House." The press secretary wasn't helpful to them, so it was a honeymoon that turned, but it was a honeymoon for a little while. It's another lesson in how the press sometimes will never be happy. They enjoy sleeping, but then they want to stop sleeping; they want to make their colleagues be awakened at midnight and start the cycle again.

Now, on the two masters. I suspect the adage of the two masters was much more operative in the pre-TV days of the briefing and more old-fashioned days when newspapers were in their heyday and you really could talk substantively about behind-the-scenes things, steer reporters straight, because the news cycle wasn't so hot and didn't flash the way it does today. If you gave [R. W., Jr.] Johnny Apple guidance on something and then it was in the *New York Times* somewhere, it would drive news, drive events, but typically, unless it was something really spectacular that you gave Johnny Apple, it didn't get everybody in Washington breathless, "Did you see the latest?" with everybody going live and the guests on the cable shows, et cetera.

The news cycle has become so hot that if you make the press your master and start giving them things out of line with what the White House needs, it will consume you and you won't survive. If, for example, I said, "Yes, there was a good debate in the Oval Office between Karen and Karl." Whoo! Front page of the paper: "Bush sides with Rove. Hughes out." Why would I ever want to do that to my coworkers? Why create that tension? I wasn't going to do that. It didn't serve the President. It didn't serve my coworkers.

But my masters in the press corps would *love* that juicy insider stuff. I didn't think it was my job to give it to them. Then, after 9/11, it became even tougher to serve those masters, because then things became military. On September 16, a Sunday, Bush had come back from Camp David from the first war council and summoned Karen and me to the Residence. He was up there with Condi and said, "We're very soon going to start moving the military. There will be deployments. There are things that we're going to start to do that may become visible, that people will start to talk about. You are not to talk about them; it's *my* job to talk about them. I will inform the American people about my plans, what we're going to do with the military. Lives are at stake and I expect no leaks and I expect the White House, everybody, to do it this way."

Those were my instructions, and Karen's instructions. I'll never forget it. The press, of course, wants to know all, so it led to situations where there were things going on that I knew about that I just could not and would not talk to them about. Probably the most vivid example I can see where the press really wanted to know something that they used to be able to get that I would not give them was when, somewhere along the line, something leaked about one of the terrorists that we captured, I think his name was [Abu Faraj] al-Libbi. Word somehow got out into the media that al-Libbi had been caught.

I think it was John Roberts, with CBS [Columbia Broadcasting System] at the time, who came up to me and said, "We're working on this al-Libbi story. Can you confirm that you caught him?" And I said, "Sorry, John, but there is nothing on the topic I'll talk to you about." He said, "Look, I'm not asking you to break news. It's been reported. All I'm asking you to do is steer me straight. Did we or didn't we capture the guy, so people can just know the truth?" I said, "John, there is nothing on this topic I can help you with or talk about." He got pretty exasperated with me.

What I couldn't tell him then—I can say this now—is that anytime we caught a bad guy, we didn't want people to know. It would be great bragging success, to show the world we were winning, but more important was letting the bad guy's satellite phone ring, having the bad guy get another email on his laptop so we could trace where the email came from and go wrap up more bad guys. But if the word was out on the AP wire that al-Libbi had been captured, everything would go cold. It wasn't hard for me to say the side I'm on is the side of secrecy so we can capture more bad guys. If I helped the press, the way the press had typically been helped, to steer a story straight or wrong, I would be hurting a bigger cause. It led to a lot of tension. It led to me not helping the press, but it was the right way to do the job.

I couldn't give that story to John Roberts, because even telling him that would make it sound as if we had captured him. In the context of "Did you or didn't you capture al-Libbi? It's on the wire right now," if I said, "Here's how we operate," it would probably be enough of a clue that we got the guy. Very few press secretaries—probably no press secretary before 9/11—ever had

to deal with the realities of terrorism and how we were fighting the War on Terrorism one bad guy at a time around much of the world and the instant speed of communication, where my briefings were on Al Jazeera, for example. I was asked after September 11, live in a briefing, if we had moved F-15s to Pakistan. *USA Today* had a front-page story about Special Forces on the ground in Afghanistan *before* October 6, before we went in, and I was asked to confirm it on live TV.

I was thinking to myself, *Yes, this is great. Al Jazeera's covering this; I think I'll answer.* I said at one point, "Under our system, you have the right to ask anything you want. I have the responsibility not to answer." That was how I chose to do my job. That was how my boss wanted me to do my job. It was not how the press wanted me to do my job.

Freedman: So you had to deal with many angry correspondents.

Fleischer: Sure.

Freedman: Who was the angriest?

Fleischer: I don't know. David Gregory had a great temper. On the other hand, David Gregory and I got along superbly. It's another reason why what happens in that briefing room is a TV show. He would clash, I would clash, and then it was over. For 99 percent of it, I never took it personally. I like reporters. I like their job. I understood what they were doing and why they had to do it the way they did it. I just had my job to do.

Riley: Did you have occasion before 9/11 to have terrorism on your radar in the press office?

Fleischer: Not really.

Riley: You've already touched on the fact that you were in Florida with the President when this happened. I don't think we have to completely recount that story, but it would be interesting to have you tell again what was happening during the day, and there may be some things you can talk about in this context that you couldn't at the time when you were writing the book and the President was still serving.

Fleischer: I don't think I've left out any secrets about 9/11. Enough time has passed and I've talked about it. Obviously, it's such a big thing and there will be times when—about once a year, when I'm speaking around September 11—I will literally read from my notes.

But here's my story. We were getting out of the motorcade at the end of Booker Elementary School in Sarasota and I received a page—Back then there were no BlackBerrys, just an old-fashioned pager. I thought, *These are really sophisticated pagers*. You could respond by saying, "Yes, no, maybe, five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes," and it had these preprogrammed messages. It was like two-way communication. I thought it was really high tech. The page said, "World Trade Center has been hit by an airplane." Like everybody, my first reaction was that it must have been some terrible accident; there was no indication of the size of the plane. We got to the school and the President was shaking hands with people, the superintendent, the principal, along the inside wall of the school. He got to the end of shaking hands and Karl was the first one

to get to the President and whispered in the President's ear, "The World Trade Center has been hit by an airplane."

Everywhere Presidents go, a hold is set up, and inside the hold are two secure phones. In my eight or nine months, I had never seen the President use the hold. But if he came here, for ten minutes in this room, you would have a room down the hall, guarded by a Secret Service agent, that would be the hold, where the military would have set up phone lines. He went into the hold that day and Condi was waiting for him on the phone. She didn't really have any information and he directed her just to monitor it, keep him apprised, and let him know what's going on.

We talked informally—I guess somebody had wheeled in a TV at that point, so we could see the fire. Maybe it was later that you could see the fire—but he knew enough to know that the building was on fire and New York City had to fight this. He was going to say in that briefing room, as I indicated yesterday, that the federal government would make resources available to New York to help deal with the plane hitting the World Trade Center. Then he went into the schoolroom and was reading to the kids. I received a second page telling me the second tower had been hit, and I instantly knew it was terrorism.

Interestingly for me—I had not seen this until three weeks ago—I was watching one of the specials about 9/11 and it showed me getting that second page on TV and I saw my reaction. I had never seen that until nine years later. I saw when I got the page. I looked at my pager and I just went like this. [*Grimaces*] You just knew what it was.

Riley: Yes.

Fleischer: Moments later, Andy walked in and did what I said yesterday, whispered in his right ear. I wrote on the pad and then the press started to ask questions of the President. My instructions to my press advance staff were to get the press out of there as quickly as they could. The President motioned to the press that he would talk with them later. He then went into the hold. We were just working the phones—he was working the phones, Andy was working the phones—all trying to get information.

I started to write what I thought President Bush should say, because he was going to go to the gymnasium, where he had been scheduled to give a big speech to everybody outside the classroom; the bigger group was waiting for him and all the press was in there. He was going to go there, explain something about what happened to the World Trade Center, and then get to Air Force One. But I had a hard time writing it; nothing was coming to me. The President started to write, Dan started to write, and it was just cobbled together. It's one of my regrets; I wish I could have done more that morning to have written something. Part of it, I guess, was that I was out of practice, maybe part of it was just the magnitude of the day.

But the President went to the gym and was talking basically off the cuff. He called them "those folks," and his remarks, in many people's eyes—I think deservedly so—weren't terribly strong. That "those folks" line raised eyebrows about why he was so informal about it, and then he also said, "This will not stand," which is what his father had said. At a time when people were still questioning whether Cheney was in charge and whether Bush was smart, for him to say what his

father had said created more doubts in the minds of cynics, *Can our President stand on his own two feet?*

We went in the motorcade—The President heard about the third plane hitting the Pentagon in the motorcade—and went aboard Air Force One. Instead of going to my usual seat on Air Force One, I spent almost the entire day in the President's cabin, taking all those notes down. The first word we got about the fourth plane was that it went down near Camp David. Karl actually corrected that and said it was south of Pittsburgh. We got reports about the Mall being on fire, a car bomb at the State Department, watching TV—On Air Force One back then, you didn't have satellite TV, so as we flew above major media markets, the TV would come in and go out. Over rural areas, it was totally out. It was remarkable how poor Air Force One's communications turned out to be.

Riley: There aren't many major media markets between where you were in Florida and where you were headed.

Fleischer: Well, we were *headed* back to Washington.

Riley: Oh, you were headed back to Washington at that point? Okay. Forgive me. Go ahead.

Fleischer: Bush was working the phones, talking to Cheney in the bunker underneath.

Riley: Right.

Fleischer: The phone was cutting out on occasion—again, bad communications. He was talking to Rumsfeld. He said, "We're at war, boys"—I gave you this quote yesterday. I think he said that to the military aide, with Andy, Karl, and me standing there—"that's what we get paid for," and "They're not going to like me as President." I was at his side when he gave the order to go to DEFCON 3, which was the first time we had been at that level of readiness since the Yom Kippur War. The only time before that was the Cuban Missile Crisis, when we actually went to DEFCON 2, so it was extraordinarily rare.

Freedman: Did the military aide say, "You need to consider this?"

Fleischer: Bush gave the instruction to Cheney in the bunker is how I think it was conveyed, or to Andy. I don't remember.

Freedman: So the Vice President probably said, "Mr. President, we have to—"

Fleischer: I didn't hear Cheney's side of the conversation. I could only hear Bush. I only heard—I wish I had brought my verbatim notes—"You're authorized to go to DEFCON 3" is how I remember it. Then Cheney would have had to convey that directly to the Secretary of Defense because—you might want to ask Andy this, but—it has to go directly from Commander in Chief to the Secretary of Defense. Bush spoke to Rumsfeld, but in my notes, he said it to Cheney in the bunker.

Freedman: So the communication problems weren't bunker-based, they were Air Force One based?

Fleischer: Correct. The other thing I heard was Bush give the authorization to shoot down commercial airliners, which was so—And Bush also said, "We're at war." For me, to be next to the Commander in Chief, hearing, "We're at DEFCON 3," "Shoot down commercial airliners," "We're at war," just sent a chill down my spine. My whole background having been domestic, I recognized it was a new day and a military operation was beginning.

Riley: Ari, there was a dispute at one point, and I think this came up in the 9/11 Commission Report, about whether the Vice President had jumped the gun at some point and issued instructions to shoot down commercial aircraft before the President had authorized him to do so. Do you have any light to shed on that question?

Fleischer: My notes are unclear on it, because I have a time code on the left where I just wrote things down but I would write "10:25" and then write down a bunch of notes and then "10:35," and keep writing my notes. It is unclear from my notes about when Bush said, "Give the authority," whether it was before or after Cheney did.

Riley: The commission had your notes, so presumably they would have been the most authoritative record they had at the time?

Fleischer: I think that's right.

Riley: Were those telephone conversations from Air Force One to the bunker recorded?

Fleischer: I have no reason to believe so.

Riley: Okay. I suspect that they were not, but I've also asked this question about the video conferences that occurred later on between the President and field commanders, whether those were recorded, and we've talked about Presidential recordings.

Fleischer: Yes. Good questions. I don't know.

Riley: Okay. Don't let me get you away from the narrative. Go ahead and pick up. You were taking notes when you went to DEFCON 3.

Fleischer: Right.

Perry: And at that point you were headed back to Washington.

Fleischer: That's correct. We were definitely headed back to Washington.

Freedman: At this point, had you winnowed down the press corps or was it the full—

Fleischer: No.

Freedman: Everybody was—

Fleischer: We're flying from Sarasota to D.C. At 10:32, Bush was on the phone with the Vice President and said to the mil aide [military aide] standing there, which, by the way, is unusual.

The mil aide is never in the President's office, but he was lingering. He'll probably talk to you. You can probably talk to him.

Riley: Do you remember what his name is?

Fleischer: I think I have it in my book, and I know Karl has it in his book.

Riley: Okay.

Freedman: So who else was in the office?

Fleischer: The Air Force mil aide.

Freedman: It was the three of you and—

Fleischer: The President, mil aide, Andy, and me. Karl and Dan would come in and out, so they could have been there for part of this.

Riley: Okay.

Fleischer: At 10:32, he turned to the mil aide, who said they had just received a report saying, "Angel is next." "Angel" is the code name, at least it was back then, for Air Force One. The Secret Service has code names for everything. The report came to Bush, "Angel is next."

The other piece I haven't told you yet is that when we got aboard Air Force One, the word was that there were six unidentified aircraft that hadn't responded to the order to land. The Secret Service believed there were still six missiles in the sky at a time when we were hearing there was a car bomb at the State Department, the Mall was on fire, a plane went down south of Pittsburgh, and six missiles—six airplanes—hadn't responded. "Angel is next." This was the environment in which we were operating. Much of it later turned out to be wrong, but when you're in that moment and this was what you're—I am a firsthand witness to what the President of the United States was hearing; this is what he was hearing.

The "Angel is next" report ended up being that somebody said to somebody in the Situation Room that they had some type of report about Air Force One was next or could be next. I don't remember exactly what it was; the 9/11 Report has this. Somebody in the Sit Room then passed it up to the bunker and when the person in the Sit Room passed it to the bunker underneath the White House in the PEOC [Presidential Emergency Operations Center], they changed the phrase "Air Force One" to "Angel," speaking code speak.

The report that originally came in did not use the word "Angel," but in using the word "Angel," it made people fear it could now be an inside job, so the Air Force actually posted security police—The Air Force has its own armed people aboard Air Force One. They are in uniform standing at the base of the steps when the President comes down. The Air Force posted its own guy at the bottom of the stairs who wasn't going to let anybody up to the cockpit in case there was an inside job on Air Force One.

The report turned out to be wrong. It turned out to be one of the things the press jumped on the Bush White House for, for exaggerating, but what goes wrong on a day like that is that bureaucracies are trained to filter information so only the most important and verified information gets to the top. Except on a day of reckoning. Except on a day of horrible crisis. In this case, people's instincts change and you pass it up to the top because, after seeing these attacks, everything becomes credible. The filters vanish and your job then is to let your boss know what you just picked up, because, God forbid, it could be true. That's why people call it the "fog of war." That's why a lot of information that would typically be filtered and would never reach the Sit Room, the bunker, the Commander in Chief, went straight up.

Then the Secret Service said it wasn't safe to return to Washington. Bush wanted to return to Washington. There was a bit of an argument going on about whether it was safe enough or not. Andy Card, the mil aide, and the Secret Service agent would leave the President's office to go into the President's bedroom, adjoining, and hash out these things. Sometimes I'd wander into the bedroom, but more typically I just stayed with the President. They all agreed he couldn't go back to Washington. He just couldn't. One of the President's quotes was, "I don't want some tin-horned terrorist keeping me out of Washington. The American people want to know where their dang President is." But he also got it; it was not safe to come back. I saw Condi on one of the shows talking about what she had said to the President. She hung up on the President. "You can't come back. You can't." And she hung up on him.

We only had sufficient fuel to come back to Washington and not a whole lot farther than Washington. With this, we needed to top off and get Air Force One totally full of fuel because we didn't know how long we'd be up in the air or where to go, so Air Force One went up to 45,000 feet and started to fly around in a zigzag pattern in the sky, which I later learned was part of the old Cold War doctrine of what the mil aides actually do drill for, how to evacuate the United States government.

There was a time when we actively drilled these things in case of a Soviet attack. And if the Soviets launched something—which was a new word that I didn't know, but I learned on September 11—called a "decapitation," we have plans to survive a decapitation. One of them is that you get the President airborne and he flies around in zigzag pattern in the sky at extraordinarily high altitude for a 747, and that plan was partially implemented.

Are you all familiar with decapitation? Decapitation would be if the Soviets launched a sufficient number of nuclear missiles to take out the President, the Vice President, and the entire Congress, the Supreme Court, all the Cabinet, to decapitate the government. One of the things our Air Force had—I don't know if you know this. It isn't classified, obviously. The Interstate Highway System was also sold as a defense project. There are many stretches of the interstate system that are absolutely flat, with no signs or anything else to interfere with them, so if we have to disperse the Air Force, there are plenty of places on the highway for our planes to land. In a decapitation, they go after all our military bases. They go after our Air Force. We're built to survive it and the military drills it. On September 11, they partially implemented it.

So we were flying zigzag, the decision was made then to go to Barksdale Air Force base—

Riley: Can they refuel? Airborne refuel?

Fleischer: It had never been done. And they were loath to do it because it's a little more risky than just flying the plane, which is why you want to get on the ground and do a fuel up.

Perry: So they didn't refuel in the air?

Fleischer: Nor could they assemble a fighter pack that was fast enough and I don't really know the reasons why. They may have been waiting for the AWACS [Airborne Warning and Control System] to deploy, but as I remember it, we did not get picked up by fighter aircraft until we were turning from Offutt [Air Force Base] back to Washington, D.C., which was substantially many hours later in the day.

Perry: That seems odd, and the communications gaps seem odd, given the Cold War, when you think of the fact that the Internet came about because of the need to have stable communications in case of decapitation.

Fleischer: Right. But the system was overwhelmed because of cell phones and other modern technology that our military systems just didn't keep up with.

Freedman: You'll get back to the chronology, but—You're one of the few people on the planet who can shed light on what George W. Bush seemed like at this point.

Fleischer: Yes. He seemed like he was in New Hampshire and South Carolina. Just steady. No emotions.

Freedman: He wasn't scared? He wasn't swearing? He wasn't—

Fleischer: Nope. It was a remarkably office-like calm. There was only one person who really acted emotionally, and she was very quickly removed from the President's presence. He never wanted to see her again. Everybody from the mil aide was absolutely straight. Everybody. Karl. Dan. Me. Andy. It's amazing. You kick in to do your job. And it was done all level-headed, all rational. There was no "Oh, my God!" None of my notes show anything like that. I just don't recall that.

Riley: But you had not had any previous training in evacuations or anything like this?

Fleischer: No.

Riley: I didn't think so, but I didn't—

Fleischer: What I learned about myself—and it probably manifested itself before September 11 in different ways—when things enter a crisis, when the press, particularly, is jumping up and down and screaming, I just get calmer. I don't know why. But that's my nature and was probably reinforced because everybody around me was like that, so that became the way to be.

Riley: Sure.

Fleischer: But it was one of the interesting insider things on September 11. I didn't even think about my safety until we were at Barksdale. There actually was some down time at Barksdale

while the President was waiting to be able to address the nation. I called home just to tell my mother that I was okay. It didn't even occur to me that my safety could be an issue. I knew I was with the Secret Service. Why should I worry about it?

Riley: You called your mother on a cell phone? Okay, so you weren't warned against using cell phones in the President's party?

Fleischer: Well, I was told to go back to tell the press they couldn't bring their cell phones to Barksdale, they couldn't tell anybody that we were landing in Barksdale, not to use their cell phones, which was part of the whole question of whether Air Force One was a target.

Riley: Sure.

Fleischer: But as we were landing in Barksdale, the TV showed us landing in Barksdale. [*laughter*] The local media was tipped off. "Here comes Air Force One!"

Riley: Okay.

Fleischer: So they were there to watch it.

Riley: All right. The cat was out of the bag.

Fleischer: It's another example of where the press would say, "Why is he telling us this? This is ridiculous treatment of the press." I told them that because I was told to tell them that. I think Andy was the one who told me to tell them that. We just went into this operative mode: It's an evacuation; protect the secrecy of it. But the world doesn't cooperate.

Riley: Right. Okay.

Perry: You said yesterday that from your notes had been taken out—literally cut out—the safe places for the First Lady and the two Bush daughters, but was the President speaking back to Washington about them, particularly given the fact that the First Lady was at the Capitol building with Senator Kennedy?

Fleischer: The first thing he said when he got on board was to Eddie [Lorenzo], the lead Secret Service agent, "Are my wife and kids safe?" or "Did you get my wife and kids safe?" That was *the* first thing he said when we boarded Air Force One.

Perry: And so Mrs. Bush was taken from the Capitol then to a safe place?

Fleischer: Correct.

Freedman: Wait, the four cutouts were the First Lady, the two girls, and—

Fleischer: Communications. Just a little more granularity on why communications were bad.

Riley: Okay. Why don't we take a break?

Fleischer: Okay.

[BREAK]

Riley: All right. So we have you in Louisiana.

Fleischer: The President addressed the nation and, again, there were mediocre reviews of it.

Riley: Who was the author of that statement? Did you have a hand in that?

Fleischer: I don't remember. I don't remember if at that stage Karen, from Washington, was able to get him something. That's a great question. I don't know.

Riley: By the time you got there, was there buzz on the plane about who was responsible for this?

Fleischer: Yes. Andy Card said, "This sounds like Osama bin Laden to me," but that was the extent of it.

Freedman: He said that to the President or to you in an aside?

Fleischer: It was to my notes.

Perry: Why were they saying that? From the famous August briefing that—

Fleischer: Just that it was al-Qaeda's M.O. [modus operandi]: spectacular, large, well-timed, coordinated attacks.

Freedman: But did anybody say—

Fleischer: We had no evidence.

Freedman: Nobody harked back to that briefing?

Fleischer: Oh, no. No. That briefing, which later became one of the most huge controversies, gave rise to the 9/11 Truth Movement, was a reiteration of a PDB that Bill Clinton received—this is from the 9/11 Commission—that "Al-Qaeda wants to attack in the United States." That's it. There was nothing about hijacking airplanes that would crash into buildings, nothing about timing, nothing about wheres or whens.

Perry: Did people raise the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center?

Fleischer: Not in my presence.

The other thing about Barksdale that was notable to me was, and this led to the decision to tell reporters they could leave—Keep in mind that wherever the President goes, an army goes in ahead of him, and the Secret Service goes in, in huge numbers, to secure the facility. The dogs go

in to sniff for bombs; they post people around the facility so it's a secure zone, inviolate; military communications are set up. Everything is in order, and Air Force One lands. Air Force One doesn't have a lot of people on it. There are 70 to 80 of us, including the Air Force personnel. There are 13 reporters typically, including cameramen and technicians. The Secret Service detail is the immediate detail around him, which is 10 to 12 agents. The armored vehicle and all of those things are flown in ahead of time. Now we were just Air Force One.

We landed at Barksdale, and there was no infrastructure, no motorcade, no Secret Service. One of the reasons Barksdale was chosen was that the base was on lockdown; they were actually having some type of B-52 exercise. We went in; everyone got off the airplane—typically you get off and the car with the President in it is waiting for everybody to board up in the motorcade and then takes off. That was a day when there was no waiting. He got in and they moved. He actually joked later that day that the biggest danger he faced on September 11 was that the driver of the up-armored Humvee that he was put in was driving so fast he had to say, "Slow down, you're going to kill us."

But Andy Card made the decision that we needed to shrink the number of people on Air Force One, because we just couldn't afford these makeshift motorcades, who knew how long we were going to be out of Washington, and these people were not essential. There were Members of Congress from Florida aboard Air Force One, who typically flew down to Florida to do a political event, and we'd fly them back to Washington; we threw off Members of Congress. White House staffers who were deemed to be nonessential, we threw them off. Then Andy came to me and said, "You need to shrink the press pool down to three." I convinced him we needed to make it five for technical reasons—To have a meaningful pool, you have to have a cameraman, a photographer, and three reporters. Andy said, "Fine, just do it."

I gave instructions to one of my assistants, Gordon Johndroe, as to who would stay on and who would go, which was almost as dramatic as who do you pick for a life raft. This was *the* most newsworthy day of anybody's career and here I was saying to eight of them, "You, news reporters, you may not be here any longer." Nevertheless, I had to do it. One reporter, Steve Holland, one of the kindest, most gentle people I've ever met, as we were reboarding Air Force One—he was stranded on the tarmac—said, "Ari, what about us?" Another reporter, Jay Carney, then of *Time* magazine, now he's Vice President Biden's communications director, started screaming at the top of his lungs, "Who's in charge, the military or the civilians?" Jay wasn't happy.

Freedman: Did you say, "That's why I kicked you off the plane?" [*laughter*]

Fleischer: The ones I chose to stay were the ones who represented the biggest media outlets in the country. I tried to have a principle for who could stay, actually. Even though they were pool, so anything they would file would go to everybody, I had Sonia Ross and Doug Mills of the Associated Press stay, and Ann Compton, who was both radio and TV for ABC. I had wire, TV/radio, print, then a cameraman and a still photographer, so that was the crew of five.

Perry: You needed their seats?

Fleischer: No. We just weren't going to take time for 70 people to get off an airplane to board a makeshift motorcade. Andy wanted to shrink it so it was only essential people, so when we could get off the plane, we'd be gone.

Riley: And you were not going back to Washington at that point?

Fleischer: We didn't know what we were doing or how long we would be out of Washington, so the fewer hangers-on, the more efficiently we could operate the movements of the President.

Riley: And I guess your fuel, you'd get more—

Fleischer: I don't think fuel was a consideration, but I don't know that. I think it was much more just that Andy said only essential people need to be on board, we didn't need other people, strip it down to the bare minimum. There was the sheer logistics issue of not even having our advance people to get people into their cars and tell them, "You're in this car. You're in that car." There would be no waiting around.

That was a pretty rough thing to do to the press. We left and the President wanted to go back to Washington. There was another discussion about it. It was "too unsteady still" was what the Secret Service said to him. We flew out to Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska. Offutt was chosen because it had—it's kind of like the movie *WarGames*—incredible communications facilities where the President could convene a secure video teleconference with anybody around the world, many different places all at one time, and was an ultrasecure facility. We landed at Offutt and Air Force One taxied up—I'll never forget this—As we pulled up, right next to us was the "Doomsday Plane."

The Doomsday Plane was again part of the old Cold War apparatus. The Doomsday Plane is designed to fly for extraordinarily long periods of time. It can be refueled aerially, but what is more important, it can launch nuclear missiles from the sky. Like the mil aide that carries the "football," that plane can do it, too. In a Soviet attack, if almost everything on the ground is destroyed and the President authorizes a counterattack, as part of our redundancies of operation, that plane can get it done. The plane was on the ground, but here we were parking next to the Doomsday Plane as we arrived at Offutt.

We walked off the plane and I brought my overnight bag with me, thinking we might spend the night here. Who knew? There was this little brick outhouse, kind of, not very big, 10 feet by 10 feet with a door, and that's what we went into. Down. Down. Down. Down. Down. Deep into the earth. That's how we entered the bunker. Way under the ground, from this totally nondescript little outhouse.

And then—whoosh. We were in something like a *WarGames* movie set and the President went into one side of it to convene a meeting of the National Security Council. Only Andy went in with him. Karl, Dan, and I stayed out. I was able to watch TV at that time. I saw Karen do her news conference that day. I don't even remember how long we were down there. An hour? I don't remember.

Freedman: Was the press with you?

Fleischer: The press was somewhere else. No, they didn't go down there with us. I think they were taken somewhere else and held. The President came out and said, "We're going home. We're going back to Washington." On the flight back is when I remember the fighter escorts were off our wings. The cameraman asked for permission to film them, and I gave him permission. We landed at Andrews Air Force Base. At that point, we knew there were no more aircraft in the sky.

Oh, there's one other thing from Offutt. While the President was in there getting his briefings, he was told two intercontinental flights were approaching the United States, neither of which had responded to the order to land. We were thinking two more missiles had been newly launched from abroad. One was coming in, I think, from Tokyo and the other was somewhere in Europe. While we were there, both those reports resolved themselves. But again, six aircraft hadn't responded. Two more were coming. That was what the Commander in Chief was hearing about.

Perry: Can I ask, before you get back to Washington—From your book you said that you and Dan Bartlett and Karl Rove were in a room while the President was being briefed elsewhere at Offutt. What were the three of you talking about?

Fleischer: I don't remember.

Perry: Did you have notes? Did you keep notes on that discussion?

Fleischer: No. My notes really were what the President said. I didn't take notes about what Karl would have said or what Dan would have said. I remember watching Karen. But we may have just been watching TV.

Perry: And when was it that you knew, or did you know, that the White House had been evacuated in the chronology of that day?

Fleischer: I don't think I knew until the next day. I'm not sure. Good question.

We flew back, landed at Andrews, got in Marine One, were flying back, and took the best, most majestic, beautiful route back to the White House, going over the Capitol, right over the Mall; the Washington Monument was right in front of us. The helicopter banked right to land on the South Lawn and the Pentagon came clearly into view. The President was in the front left of the helicopter. I was on a bench right across from him. Just then the President said out loud, "The mightiest building in the world is on fire. That's the face of war in the 21st century."

We landed and went straight to the private dining room off the Oval Office. Karen, Al Gonzales, I don't remember who else, were waiting there. I went in with Andy, the President, I think Karl, and Karen handed him the speech for that night. At one point earlier in the day, the President was on the phone with Karen, giving her instructions for what he wanted to say that night to the nation. The President went to the Residence, and I went to my office.

What I don't remember about September 11 is what I said to the press. I know I went back to the press several times on Air Force One to give them briefings and I would suspect transcripts exist of it, but I don't remember what I said to them. I did an interview with an Indianapolis radio station this September 11, and they had Ann Compton on ahead of me. Ann said that I went back

and told the press that the President was being evacuated, but I don't remember what I told the press or how often I briefed the press.

Then the President addressed the nation and I walked with him to the PEOC, but I didn't go into the meeting at the PEOC. That was now the National Security team, but what I do remember, I still can't believe this, but I remember there was a—The Secret Service agents are armed with their regular guns, but there are places throughout the White House where they have long rifles set up; if they need them, they grab them. And leaning against the wall was a long rifle. It was just there, in the safest spot, the bunker underneath the White House, the Secret Service was so trigger ready, in case. In case of who knew what? The next day they doubled the Secret Service presence inside the West Wing. It was remarkable. At that point security kicks in and does what it does, prepares for the worst, and from that day forward I remember what I always called a "hard-headedness" of what it was like inside the White House.

It was a sense of no one knowing what to expect. We were all told that there would be a second wave and you saw the people whose job it was to protect the President doubled at all their posts. You saw weapons out when you had never before seen weapons out. You saw the perimeter of the White House pushed back to the other side of Lafayette Park. E Street on the south side of the White House was closed. It remains closed. Physically, things changed. Emotionally, things changed. Everything changed.

Riley: You came back in the White House on the 12th. When did you eventually get home on the 11th?

Fleischer: I walked the President to the PEOC and I don't remember if I went back to my office—

Riley: The PEOC is the—

Fleischer: —Presidential Emergency Operating Center. That's the bunker underneath the White House.

Riley: Okay, the bunker. All right. So you walked him there, and then you left and went home?

Fleischer: Yes.

Riley: And came back the next day?

Fleischer: I came back the next morning.

Riley: Okay. Did press passes at this stage get the press back in the White House or not?

Fleischer: Oh, yes. September 12 was normal.

Riley: It was a normal 12th?

Fleischer: The perimeter was pushed out. I imagine the vigilance of everyone looking at bags was much higher. Keep in mind, on September 9 or 10 the leader of the Northern Alliance was

killed in Afghanistan by somebody pretending to be a reporter who had a bomb in his camera. The Secret Service is always pretty stringent, but you reminded me of it. That's why I say that I don't think it changed things for the Secret Service, because it's not as if they were lax or needed to be reminded that this was how it could happen.

Riley: Sure.

Fleischer: But you may want to ask reporters whether it was harder for them to get in. I have no idea. In so many ways, I'm fortunate. I was still in this little, rare bubble where I could go wherever I wanted, and that never changed for me. The Secret Service would see me and my little 1994 Saab convertible and I could just get in.

Riley: All right. How did your job change in this new environment?

Fleischer: It changed dramatically.

Riley: What's the before and after?

Fleischer: Number one, everything became military, and therefore, per the President's instructions, it all became things that the Pentagon was going to talk about and handle. Two, the White House press corps wanted more and I was in a position to give them less, which wasn't enjoyable. Three, all my briefings now were covered live on the networks. That was different. Back on the emotional side, the job was just fundamentally different. Our country was at war. We were attacked and people were scared and that became the environment in which I was working.

Riley: There was a general sense in the country of a kind of unifying purpose. It didn't last forever, but in the immediate aftermath, it did happen. Was that in any way manifested in the press corps? Or was there a sense in the press corps that their job was to keep your feet to the fire?

Fleischer: What a great, complicated question, and there are many dimensions to it. One, the press's first job is to cover what's going on. And they did. It was a huge, huge dramatic story, of course, and they were covering it. There were some things—The networks were going 24 hours a day, so their threshold of what was news dramatically grew. When Osama bin Laden released a videotape after the attack, it was news. They played the whole thing in its entirety.

The next day, George Tenet at the CIA thought there could be a coded message in there to sleeper cells. We were all thinking, *The second wave is coming; stop the second wave*—Remind me about the constitutional issue, which I want to talk about, about the second wave—Tenet got the idea that if there were coded messages to sleeper cells, this could be a problem. Al-Qaeda had already shown an ability to take our technology, our airplanes, and use it against us. He could take our openness and our communications as his way of communicating from his cave, wherever it was he was hiding, and use it against us. So Condi and I met to talk about it and we decided—I told Condi, "I'll set up a phone call with you and all the network news heads and we should ask them not to play these videos, at least not in their entirety."

The other thing—the Secret Service put this in my ear, or maybe it was Andy—was to ask the press not to show any scenes of the top of the White House. There are different things that go on for security on the top of the White House and they're visible to cameras. There are certain cameras that were put up on top of a hotel on 16th Street that has this magnificent view of the front of the White House, but they can get the roof very clearly.

I set up the phone call, Condi asked, and I made the point about not showing the roof. They all went along, part of their understanding about secrecy and security for the President. The other change was that I stopped announcing the President's schedule more than 24 hours in advance, and I asked the media, "If you became aware of what the President is doing more than 24 hours in advance, please don't report it." Again, the thinking was that there could be an attack on the President as part of the second wave. They went along with it.

It didn't take too long, though, for it to start to turn. Criticism of Bush—Brian Williams and Peter Jennings both criticized Bush on September 11 for not returning to Washington: "Where is the President?" "What does this suggest about his behavior?"

That's why I had a conversation with Dick Cheney about whether we should release the information about "Angel is next" to push back on the "Where was the President?" notion. That was a conversation with Cheney, Karen, and me. He said, "Yes, you should get that out," and Karen agreed, so I called Brian Williams right before my September 12 briefing and pushed back on him. I said, "I thought you were unfair to the President yesterday with 'Where's the President?' You don't know how unsafe it was. Air Force One went down at a known location and the Secret Service didn't want to do it." I said to him, "And we had a report that said, 'Angel is next.'" He said, "You're kidding me. You had a threat to Air Force One?" And I said, "We did." He said, "Can I report that?" And I said sure.

So on the bottom of the TV screen—All those news things that started, I think, on September 12, the constant news stream on the bottom of the TV—NBC broke the story about Air Force One having been threatened. I went in to brief the press and they were furious at me, "Why did you give an exclusive to NBC about the threat to Air Force One?" Remember what I said about, "Give us the nugget, we want the nugget. How dare you give someone a nugget"? But then I had to get into that fact about Air Force One having been threatened.

Later I had to take those words back when CBS broke the story that it had been a mistake. I didn't learn that from inside the White House; I learned it from CBS, five weeks, four weeks later. I remember walking with the President to an event and telling him CBS had just reported this. I don't remember what he said. I don't remember if he told me to go check with Andy or whatever. It was a case, too, of whoever inside the White House had figured out that it was a mistake hadn't brought it to my attention, which I wasn't happy about, because I was hanging out there as the one who said it.

The other thing that became controversial and showed the turn of events with the press was Bush's 90 percent—The public was really turning and watching Bush live on TV now. I had never seen him so eloquent: "The bloodlust of the American people is rightly at a boil. We're going to be deliberate, we're going to be calm, but we will bring justice." He had some things

that were spontaneous that I thought were so well said. Because everything he was doing was now live on the networks, too, people saw the George Bush that I always saw in private.

For all the criticism that Bush wasn't a good public speaker, couldn't use a TelePrompTer well, when people saw him in his emotional moment, when he announced he was going to New York—He was asked a question by a reporter on September 13, when he was in the Oval; he had just finished a call to [Rudolph] Giuliani and [George] Pataki and announced he was going to New York the next day, and a reporter said to him, "How do *you* feel?" He started to well up and said, "I'm a caring kind of guy, but this isn't about how *I* feel. This is about how the American people feel and what I can do to make"—whatever his quote was. It was so articulate, so moving; it captured America's feelings, including the fact that he shed a tear as he said it. It was a quote of resolve from a man who was crying, which summed up America. We were crying, but we wanted resolve. We wanted to go after those who did it. He had 90 percent job approval. The country was just flocking to him.

After a few weeks of this, it started to not sit well with certain reporters. It started with Maureen Dowd and other liberal columnists. That's when Bill Maher made that statement about it showing bravery to sit in the cockpit and fly a plane into a building as opposed to, I'm paraphrasing, it being cowardly to sit in an airplane and drop bombs from 20,000 feet.

I was asked in the briefing about what he said and the timing of this. I can't remember if we had already started the counterattack in Afghanistan. Whatever the timing was, sufficient time had passed from September 11 that the mood of some of the press corps was changing. I said that I hadn't heard what Maher said, and "They're reminders to all Americans that they need to watch what they say, watch what they do. This is not a time for remarks like that; there never is." And that led to one of the greatest urban myths, that in some places still exists today, about me saying, "Watch what you do and watch what you say," which is a *total* distortion of what I said.

Before the Maher question, I had been asked a question about a Congressman from Louisiana named [John] Cooksey, who said that if he saw anybody with a towel wrapped around their head, he'd run them out of the state. I talked about what a terrible thing that was to say, and I talked about the need for the American people, especially now, to be tolerant, keeping in mind my President, my boss, was the one leading the charge for people to be tolerant. He went to a mosque right after 9/11. I heard in private meetings about a backlash, that we could not let a backlash develop against Arab Americans. I was reflecting my boss, and it's also my nature. Then I was asked about Maher and I said that what Maher said was unfortunate and a terrible thing to say and then I said, "Earlier I was asked a question about a Congressman; these are reminders that people need to watch what they do and watch what they say."

My remarks about Maher were, literally, "It's unfortunate and a terrible thing to say." Then I broadened the topic and brought back the Louisiana Congressman; what I was talking about was the need for tolerance, and that people needed to watch what they did and watch what they said so we were tolerant and *didn't* send a signal that created a backlash against Arabs.

The Maureen Dowds of the world were just waiting for the worm to turn. They didn't like Bush at 90 percent, didn't like Bush, didn't even like the use of the military in Afghanistan—Remember MoveOn.org at this point, on September 12, put out a statement urging the United

States government to use forces of international justice and not the military to respond to this. There was this peace wing in America that didn't even like the use of force after 9/11. So Dowd and some others seized on what I said and it became the moment where the White House was dictating patriotism. The White House was heavy-handed, ordering people what to do and what to say, quashing dissent. That unleashed, then, the sentiment on the left, anti-Bush, anti-military, anti-use of force. "The White House is preaching, quashing dissent." And it became a boomlet.

Bush was still riding so high, there were bigger fish to fry, we had troops at war, Maher lost his job, most people were happy Maher lost his job. And when I say "people"—what he said didn't sit right with most Americans, but it put the seeds in there for where the left started to feel enraged about Bush's behavior. And I caught—It was my statement that encapsulated that.

Riley: Sure. Let me bore down on this just a little bit. I'd like to try to get your assessment of what it was within the press corps that was motivating them to leave this unifying purpose?

Fleischer: To leave it?

Riley: Yes. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, there was a sense among the press, a rally-around-the-flag effect, even within the press corps, that I think generally was true, and you're agreeing with that.

Fleischer: Generally. There were things like David Westin not answering the question about whether the Pentagon was a legitimate target on September 11, which infuriated me. To this day, it infuriates me. So, yes—yes, but—

Riley: There are some outliers, but generally the pack of your press constituency was consistent with the American people's feelings, following and sensing that this is a problem, we are Americans—

Fleischer: Certainly in the room in which I was operating.

Riley: Okay. I'm trying to get a better feel for the pace of the deterioration in that feeling and, to the extent that you can help decipher, what the factors were at play in that. You've identified one of them, which is that there was a leftist tradition represented in the press corps that was just looking for an occasion to depart from the pack. But my sense is that there was probably more nuance than that, more generally.

Fleischer: I agree.

Riley: Tell us.

Fleischer: The principal driver was the passage of time.

Riley: Okay.

Fleischer: The press was looking for the next story. The story about Bush's unifying response, American rallying, Bush at 90 percent, became old news. Now they were looking for new news. It wasn't out of anything notorious; that's the psyche of reporters.

Riley: Okay.

Fleischer: The passage of time was number one. Two, events were seemingly going well in Afghanistan, so what was there to cover? It was going well, although, keep in mind, October 6 was when we started. I think it took about ten days for Johnny Apple to write a front-page story in the *New York Times* about a "quagmire in Afghanistan."

Riley: But the movement into Afghanistan, from your memory, was not contested by this left-leaning, or D-leaning, press corps. That that was, in the original stages, viewed as a just act.

Fleischer: Correct.

Riley: And the normal skepticism of the press corps had been suspended for that interval.

Fleischer: Correct.

Riley: Okay. So then you get to Apple and—

Fleischer: Yes, and then quagmire stories started to set in, at a certain level, which again infuriated everybody.

Riley: Sure.

Fleischer: It was just the Vietnam mindset, particularly with a Johnny Apple–aged reporter, that knee-jerk reflex to put everything back into the memories of Vietnam, even if that had no merit. I think it was the day he wrote that story that Mazar-i-Sharif fell in northern Afghanistan and then just days later the Northern Alliance took Kabul. Johnny Apple was sitting there with egg on his face, which Bush was particularly gleeful about, even though my instructions were not to talk about his glee.

Riley: I want to ask you about Bush, too, but go ahead on this strain.

Fleischer: The anthrax attack also took place, which was something else for the press to sink its teeth into, which in so many ways contributed to more of that hard-headedness, because originally we thought anthrax was a biological counterattack or second wave. That was the lowest I ever saw George Bush. I wrote about this in my book. He did an event at the State Department and he teared up in the middle of what, at that point, had become a routine speech about how everybody had a role to play in fighting terrorism. Whether you freeze assets at the Treasury Department or you conduct diplomacy and bring in additional allies in the fight against terrorism, your diplomacy is just as important as the military, just as important as intelligence, just as important as CIA. But he started to cry.

I thought, *This is odd. He's given this speech before. He's sentimental sometimes, okay*. We were walking back to the White House through the Rose Garden and the President said, "Come here." I went into the Oval and he told me of somebody in Florida who that morning had come down with anthrax. He thought this could be the beginning of a second wave, and I instantly knew this could be the beginning of the second wave. He's normally such an upbeat, chipper, no-matter-

what-we're-going-to-do-it kind of guy. That was the lowest point I ever saw him in the Presidency.

Riley: In between, do you ever remember him breaking, or getting close to the point of breaking?

Fleischer: No. His crying was out of sentiment. It was when he was asked that question about himself.

Riley: Right. What about other colleagues in the White House?

Fleischer: Breaking?

Riley: Yes.

Fleischer: Never.

Riley: These are just naturally strong people?

Fleischer: You have a job to do. If you break, you'd better break in private. I guess my moment came—Rosh Hashanah was one week after September 11, and Yom Kippur was ten days after that. I went home around Yom Kippur, and I called a cousin of mine to talk to her over the holidays. She told me her 9/11 story, that she saw one of the planes hit the tower, and that's when I first cried. I guess I just kept it in. I did my job. I never really put myself back as a New Yorker. That's when I had my moment. That probably happened to pretty much everybody. You do your job. You're a professional. You handle it. I would suspect pretty much everybody at one point had something with their family that brought something home.

Riley: Was there ever a—"therapist" is not the right word here, but one might imagine that in an environment like this, an Andy Card might arrange to have somebody come in and sit down with everybody and say—

Fleischer: That's a good point. Yes. Correct.

Perry: If a tragedy occurs at a school, they bring in professionals—

Fleischer: Yes. September 12.

Riley: On September 12?

Fleischer: Yes, you reminded me of it. I had forgotten about this. Yes, Andy announced counseling would be available for any staffers who wanted or needed counseling. It was then that I learned—My girlfriend at the time, Becky [Rebecca Davis], who worked at the White House, told me about the evacuation of the White House, where staff was assembled in the White House Mess and then told they'd have to evacuate the White House. Then Hector Irastorza, who ran White House administration, said to them, "Walk out orderly, walk out calmly."

All of a sudden, a Secret Service agent came running in and said, "Get the hell out of here. Run! Run now. Women take off your shoes. Take off your heels. Run!" Because the Secret Service had word that a plane was coming. They had just evacuated Cheney. The plane that hit the Pentagon, Cheney said, circled around, so the White House staff, OEOB staff—There are scenes on TV of the staff *running* through the gates of the White House.

I started to become aware of this, but on the 12th Andy said counseling would be available. I don't even know who they had as counselors or if anybody took it up, but I remember gathering with my staff, a lot of 20-, 21-year-olds and kids who had dropped out of college to work the campaign in Texas who didn't want to go back to college; they wanted to get a job in the White House.

I gathered with them and said to them—I'll never forget this—"The only reason any of us have our jobs here today is because the people who worked in this very spot before us saved this country so we could be here. Now it's our turn. Something has happened on *our* watch. Now it's our job to do everything you've always done for the President and someday, somebody who works here after you is going to say, 'The only reason I can work in this spot today is because of the people who came before me.'" I also said, "It's perfectly fine to be scared," then I told them about the counseling that was available, and then I told them, "Be proud of what you're doing and honor that American tradition."

I wanted to lift people up and give them a sense of how important they were and how safe they were. I talked about how you're never in a safer spot than with the Secret Service.

Riley: Ari, in my questioning, I'm afraid I got you to jump track, because the issue was this question about the reversion to normal of the press corps.

Fleischer: Okay, yes.

Freedman: Before we revert to normal, on another personal note, you were talking about how you spoke to your mother, I guess late in the day?

Fleischer: Midmorning on the 11th, from Barksdale.

Freedman: Okay. But meanwhile, your girlfriend was in the White House. Were you talking to her?

Fleischer: I'd better call her and ask her. I don't remember if I called Becky that day. I might not have.

Freedman: Well, you ended up getting married, so you didn't blow it too badly. [*laughter*] You didn't know, until the next day, about the evacuation?

Fleischer: Right.

Freedman: You saw her that night or you were—

Fleischer: I think I saw her that night. I don't remember. Yes.

Perry: Did you watch the President's address to the nation from the White House or had you already—

Fleischer: From the White House.

Perry: You were still there.

Fleischer: Yes, because then I walked him to the PEOC afterward.

Riley: You were happier with that message?

Fleischer: Oh, gosh, yes. That was the beginning of the strength and resolve part.

The other thing about the evacuations that you reminded me about was on September 12 or 13, just as I was about to go out and brief, I got a report that the OEOB had been evacuated. The last thing you want is—You finish up your briefing with the staff and you think you're ready for everything they bring you, you're ready with the questions, you've anticipated everything, and something intervenes after you give the two-minute warning. Either you're late for the briefing, which I never wanted to be—I veered to the right instead of going to the left to the briefing room and went to the Deputy Chief of Staff—Secret Service reports to him; he's the operational guy—Joe Hagin, and I said, "Joe, I just got a report that OEOB was evacuated. Is that true?" He said, "No, I don't know anything about that." I said, "Okay, thanks."

I went into the briefing room and got a question from a reporter about whether it was true that the OEOB was being evacuated and I said, "No, I just checked with the Deputy Chief of Staff; there's no truth to that rumor." I was thinking about the rumors of a car bomb on the Mall, the State Department on fire, now OEOB evacuated. "It's not true," I said on live camera.

Becky, who was one of the people evacuated—I guess TVs were on as people were being evacuated—knew that I said people were *not* being evacuated, and she said to me later, "Where on earth did you get that?" which was a classic example, too, that information sometimes doesn't get to the top fast enough. It was literally in that two-minute span; I'm sure it did get to Joe probably minutes after I walked out of his office, but I gave the press wrong information. It looked bad. That's just how news works sometimes in a fast environment.

Riley: All right. Back to the reversion to normal of the press. You were making the point about the anthrax.

Fleischer: There was anthrax, and then Tommy Thompson joined me at my briefing. John Roberts, who used to be a medical reporter, said to Tommy Thompson, "Is it possible that he contracted this anthrax from natural causes?" We had known that this person in Florida had previously been camping, had been out by a stream, and Tommy said to him, "We don't have all the information. We don't have all the facts." I was trying not to answer the question, but John persisted and Tommy Thompson said, "Well, we do know he did go out camping and he was by a stream, but we don't know if that means anything one way or another."

Later, when we did learn it was anthrax being mailed around, that that was what got him, the press turned on Tommy Thompson for his suggestion that it could have been caused by natural

causes. “How could you even suggest it could have been caused by natural causes when it was mailed? It was an attack. Why didn’t you know that?”

They still have this instinct—Even if you faithfully report something and you give it in the context of “Well, we do know he did go to a stream, we don’t know what that means”—to reply, “You indicated it was natural causes.” They turned on Thompson in that instance. It was always a lesson to me, too, having stood there and watched that, about why you can’t speculate in front of the press, why you sometimes have to be tight-lipped and secretive, because if you’re not, the press will use it against you.

Riley: But your general point, then, is that the reversion back to normalcy in the press happened pretty rapidly?

Fleischer: It started happening pretty quickly. The other big event was that Terry Moran of ABC walked into my office, I think it was December ’01, and said, “You know, they’re waiting to get you.” I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “The press. Bush has had it too good, for too long, and they’re just waiting for something to happen. They’re waiting to get him.” I said, “Wow, thanks, Terry.” [*laughter*]

January came. Enron collapsed. Enron’s chairman, Ken Lay, was one of Bush’s biggest donors when Bush ran for Governor of Texas. Bush-Lay. Did Bush know? Why didn’t Bush know? Why didn’t Bush, because of his relationship with Ken Lay, stop it from happening? Why didn’t he protect the workers at Enron? When was the last time Bush talked to Ken Lay? Did anybody at the White House have any conversations with Ken Lay? The press *turned*. Networks started assigning all kinds of reporters to the Enron scandal beat. They were back in scandal mode.

I would measure it from September 11, somewhat of a decline through November-December with the cynicism about how Afghanistan was going, and then a *huge*, dramatic turn. Democrats started piling on and they were right back into normal, domestic scandal mode, as if September 11 never happened.

Riley: Do you attribute some of that to the sense that the worst had passed and maybe a second wave was not imminent?

Fleischer: Partially. I attribute it more to reporters, with the passage of time, reverting back to their first bias, which is a bias in favor of conflict. They muted that bias in the rallying that took place early, but it just went on a slow glide path. I suspect that if I looked back at the questions I was asked at briefings in October and November, and that Rumsfeld and Bush were asked, you would start to see a pretty normal skepticism by the press of all things military, military operations: “What went wrong?” “Why is it taking so long?” In this modern world, one of the press’s tendencies about anything military is to ask, “Why didn’t you win it in a day? Why is it taking weeks? These people don’t have the weapons America has. They don’t have the strength we have.”

They quickly turned on civilian casualties. In October, one of the first days of Afghanistan, there was a front-page headline in the *New York Times* about a bombing mission. I got to the White House at about seven, and went straight to the Oval Office. I went in to see Bush and I said, “What do you want me to say about the civilian casualties?” He got pretty indignant with me. He

said to refer it to the Pentagon and then he said, "Are you telling me that the press is writing now about the civilian casualties in a *war*?" He was indignant at the fact that this had become the lead, big story in the *New York Times*.

I often have thought to myself that if today's press corps covered D-day, I don't know that we'd have won World War II. If the D-day headlines were about civilian casualties, paratroopers landing in the wrong place, innocent French lives being lost, friendly fire on the beaches—If *that* had been what dominated the news coverage, I don't know that the American people would have had the stomach to continue World War II. That's the modern press and how they cover things military today.

Riley: You had flagged for Barbara, a few moments ago, something about the constitutional issue in the second wave.

Fleischer: I did a media-sponsored event at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia with Andy Card; Doug Feith; Tim Flanagan, who was the White House deputy counsel at the time of 9/11; and Michael Chertoff.

Perry: What was the timing on this?

Fleischer: February 2008, a recent event, so there was still a lot of controversy about the Bush technique and tactics in fighting terrorism, warrantless wiretaps, indefinite detention, all the things that people felt violated the Constitution, which, of course, Barack Obama is continuing. There were pretty hostile questioners and one reporter raised her hand—This was a big public forum—and asked a very tough-toned question about Bush violating the Constitution. Tim Flanagan gave the response and said, "The *only* thing that we ever feared that would lead to a violation of the Constitution was if a second attack ever took place. Then the American people would have demanded that we violate the Constitution to prevent any further attacks." He made the point that *we* were always stringent about how to obey the Constitution and be tough within the laws, but be tough to stop a second attack.

He made a very accurate read of the American people, that if suicide bombings started to take place in this country the way they do in Israel, I don't think it would be any amount of time before the American people would say, "Violate people's civil liberties and stop these attacks." The Constitution, in that sense, has never been a tested document for a domestic insurrection of that nature. I guess you could argue Lincoln did in the Civil War.

Riley: The Japanese internment in the Second World War, too.

Fleischer: Japanese internment, yes. That was on the minds of our staff, not to have a situation where the public would demand internment of Muslim Americans. I always come back to that. There is so much of a school of thought that is, obviously, wrong, that Bush's people—John Yoo, the Justice Department, Al Gonzales—violated the Constitution. It was telling that there was thinking that the Constitution could be violated, but for a totally different set of reasons.

Riley: The President's time after 9/11 became 100 percent immersed in foreign policy and homeland security issues, is that correct?

Fleischer: Yes, virtually 100 percent. It did change eventually. By 2002, things had, essentially, substantially, settled down, calmed down.

Riley: Did that have an effect on your access to the President?

Fleischer: Yes. Because I did not attend National Security Council meetings and policy time became—They called it "domestic consequences." All of the things that we were doing in policy time became about the domestic consequences of 9/11 and what we needed to do about that. Those meetings were still regular but became less frequent, and I did not go to the NSC meetings, so it was harder for me to get information about the most important issues. I would get my info from the President and from sitting in on the summit meetings.

What also took place, which was the reverse of that, and helped me to do my job, was that there was an uptick in the number of foreign leaders who wanted to come to America to pay their respects to the United States and to stand at our side, so I would see Bush's thinking in what was coming out of NSC meetings as he would talk to foreign leaders. That's how I stayed informed about the nuances and what the President wanted conveyed or didn't want to convey. It became harder for me, because I wasn't firsthand witness to the military discussions. I would have loved to be in the NSC meetings, but that was just the way it was structured.

Riley: Sure. You were or were not in on the domestic consequences?

Fleischer: Oh, I was. And Ridge brought me into all the newly created Homeland Security meetings, so I was part of that, but throughout it all, Bush was my source. If I had problems, if I needed something, I would go in and talk to him about it. That's how I did my job and that made up for not being in NSC.

Karen wasn't in NSC. Karl wasn't in NSC. It was Condi, Hadley, Andy, Scooter, the NSC senior director, if and when their issue came up, unless it was a principals meeting, then they weren't there, and I would have to work hard through NSC sources to figure out what was going on that was relevant to me. I would make up for it and Hadley would brief me regularly, so I had other means, but I had to work harder through those other means.

Riley: Sure. You were getting signals directly from the President himself about what your line of the day was?

Fleischer: I got signals, but it wasn't as simple as line of the day. In the summit meetings, I would hear what he was saying to foreign leaders about his intentions, about what we were going to do. Given my guidance about not talking about the military, my job was still to speak for the President, so I found the tone or the things I thought needed to be said. One of the other myths about White House life is that there really is almost never a time when there is a meeting with, "Here's the line of the day. Here's what you should say." It moves too fast.

There is just too much going on in an interactive conversation in the briefing room for a simple line of the day to endure. That gets forgotten right after you say it, and then you're on to the meat and the back-and-forth, so it's so much deeper and more nuanced. It's so much more complicated. It's where you really do have to always read the President, know what the President

expects, wants. The summits allowed me to get that read from the President. Without that, I'd have been—

Freedman: But it's interesting that you were trying to discern directly from him, as opposed to you having described an M.O. in which you and Karen were coordinating, or she was guiding or trying to recalibrate.

Fleischer: Those were those communication meetings that I mentioned that took place at 8:30 in her office, and we set up an international global communications effort that Tucker Eskew ran; we had this newly created room. We had a spokesperson in Pakistan and—But all that existed around me. If we had a communications apparatus in Pakistan trying to get our message out, that was great, but it didn't affect what I did or said. I spoke for the President and very often the spokespeople at the Embassy still got their message about what they should say by reading or watching my briefings.

Karen would maybe plan something: On Wednesday of next week Bush is going to go visit the Red Cross as a sign of how important it is still around the world to have humanitarian efforts and blah, blah, blah. I knew, *Okay, Bush is going to go, we'll give that speech, and we have this humanitarian thing planned for next week*. It didn't change that reporters today were banging on me about the *New York Times* story about whether or not we were bogged down in Mazar-i-Sharif. There was an apparatus that tried to get out a proactive message, but I when I took the podium, I could try to be proactive for about 30 seconds and then I was playing defense for about 45 minutes.

Riley: President Bush didn't have a lot of foreign policy experience before he became President, and you became witness to meetings he was having with individual leaders. Could you characterize his comfort level in these meetings, his fluency in what he was dealing with, and the chemistry that existed between him and the leaders as you were witnessing them?

Fleischer: In Bush's first summit meetings, he would regularly go around to the leaders of the world saying, "What do you think of [Mohammad] Khatami in Iran? Do you think he's cut from the same cloth as President [Akbar Hashemi] Rafsanjani?" And he would say, "What do you think of the President of Iran? Is he cut from the same cloth as the Ayatollah, or is he really a reformer?" He would ask these world leaders like [Anthony] Blair and [Jacques] Chirac and [Gerhard] Schroeder, people who had been there before him, so Bush was in receive mode in many of these summits. He was also using it to measure people. He probably had his own inclination, knew what he thought the answer was.

Riley: That was his icebreaker question for everybody?

Fleischer: No, it was just one of the things at summit meetings he would regularly say. It wasn't an icebreaker, certainly not.

Riley: Okay.

Fleischer: But as they were talking about the world and exchanging views on world affairs, Bush wouldn't just *tell* what he thought; he'd *ask*. What I noticed after September 11 was that Bush was no longer asking; Bush was telling. He was very comfortable, very conversant, and

very driven to lead others. He knew, as he said on September 11, that we were at war. He knew that his job was to lead a coalition to go to war and to destroy terrorism and to destroy al-Qaeda, anywhere around the world. He knew that was his calling, and he said that publicly.

What changed in the meetings was that it wasn't so much Bush absorbing; it was Bush infusing others with America's mission and getting them on board with the mission. That's what I was talking about earlier; Bush always felt that if you lead, people will follow.

Riley: Yes, you indicated at one point that you had had a conversation with him, a vivid exchange with him, on the nature of Presidential leadership. Maybe we ought to go ahead and—

Fleischer: It was about a week after September 11 and he went to the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] and posted a list of the 20 most wanted terrorists around the world. He gave his first speech in which he said this was a struggle between good and bad, right and wrong, black and white; there were no nuances, it was good versus evil. Boom. Of course, it had a little Biblical overtone to it. As we were riding back to the White House in the limo, I said to him, "Mr. President, I think it's more subtle than that. I think there are some shades of gray in this War on Terror."

He looked at me like my hair was on fire and said, "If this isn't good versus evil, what is?" And then he said, "When Ronald Reagan went to Berlin, Ronald Reagan gave a speech and he said, 'Mr. [Mikhail] Gorbachev, tear down that wall.'" Bush, just talking to me, said, "He didn't say, 'Mr. Gorbachev, put a gate in it,' or 'Mr. Gorbachev, remove some bricks.' He said, 'Tear it down.'" The point Bush was making was that he believes that leaders speak in morally declarative ways—there is no room for nuance. Morally declarative—and that's how, especially in the moment of trying times, people will follow you. They will be inspired by you. I got the message: That's how my boss speaks.

Initially a lot of people warmed to that. But then, as things faded a little, and things got more complicated—we didn't get bin Laden; things were good, but they weren't great—all of a sudden, nuance, subtlety, the problematic nature of it all became more prevalent, and those became more realistic questions to ask the President. But he stayed with the absolute certainty. In fact, one of the best meetings I was ever in was when Lord [George] Robertson came in to see him, the head of NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization], a Scottish fellow. Bush loved Lord Robertson. He was one of the few European leaders Bush really liked and would really listen to. [*laughter*]

Riley: Why?

Fleischer: Oh, they were kindred spirits, straight shooters, and spoke directly. Lord Robertson was for a tough military. Bush looked at some of the European leaders as piggybackers. They weren't really contributing to the fight against terrorism and the mission in Afghanistan in any real serious way; they were moral relativists: "Well, if only—" and Chirac, "You shouldn't use the word 'war.'" He had no patience with those types of leaders, but really liked Lord Robertson.

But Robertson said to him, "If only you spoke differently. If only you spoke with more nuance and if only you didn't wear those military flight jackets you wear when you go to military bases, you would be so much more effective in Europe." I think this was in '02, maybe even in '03, a

significant amount of time later. It really got to Bush and in a way that I have almost never seen Bush get introspective, saying to himself, *Do I need to make a change? Am I doing something I need to stop doing?*

The next morning, Bush said to me, "I just can't change. This is who I am. And I'm going to continue to wear those flight jackets." He was comfortable in his own skin, not willing to change tactics when maybe he should change tactics. It will forever be an arguable issue about the Bush Presidency and about his character, but that's who he is.

Riley: You said Bush spoke in simple, declarative, moral ways. He thought that way, too? Did Bush think in nuance more than we believe he thought in nuance?

Fleischer: Oh, yes. That's why I really hope you can dig into policy time and dig into some of those things. There is no question about it. The things he pushed on and probed on and the information that came to him was everything you would hope for and want from an independent-minded point of view. It was, I think, Bush—part being Texan and part learning the lesson of Reagan—believing that once you get it, speak it in that morally declarative—If it's a 51-49 situation, just focus on the 51s.

Riley: Right.

Fleischer: He used to deride handwringers. He said, "I can't stand these handwringers who, after a tough decision is made, wring their hands. 'Oh, woe is me. Woe is me.'" And he mocked people, "Woe is me. Woe is me." He said, "Nobody is going to follow them."

Riley: All right. We're at a place where we're going to take a break.

[BREAK]

Riley: The question Paul has asked is whether there is anything else we need to deal with, with respect to 9/11.

Fleischer: The only other 9/11 issue you might want to get into is whether or not there was any discussion about Bush attacking Iraq, using it to get rid of Saddam [Hussein]. From everything I can tell, that issue was settled on September 15 at Camp David, when I think it was Wolfowitz who brought it up. I was not at the meeting, but Wolfowitz brought up whether or not Saddam should be included in the planning and Bush made it clear the answer was no.

Something else that recently came out—I guess it was Dick Clarke's book that had the President on September 12 saying, "You look into Saddam. I want to see if Saddam had anything to do with this. You'd better drill deep, find out about Saddam." Clarke used that as an example of how Bush was focused on Saddam, which to me would have been a pretty logical thing for any President, to instruct his staff to see if it was or wasn't. The answer came back that it wasn't.

One of the things people regularly accuse the Bush administration of is tying Saddam to 9/11. My instructions from Bush were never to make the tie; there was no tie. Bush regularly made the point, and I made the point, that we were attacked once and we didn't want to be attacked again, which made people say, "Wait a minute. You're tying Saddam to 9/11," which we weren't. We were making the case that we were hit by one surprise attack, by al-Qaeda, that we would never let America get hit again, and that was why Saddam was a threat. That became an important piece of the later controversies of the administration.

Freedman: In discussions between the two of you, he specifically said not to make this connection or imply that this connection existed?

Fleischer: He didn't say it to me in that sense, but what I knew was driving him was, as he approached the issue of Iraq, his feeling that we were hit once; we're not going to get hit twice.

Freedman: Did you have the sense, contemporaneously, that people were accusing you of trying to make this linkage, or did that come later?

Fleischer: It came later. I remember I would repeatedly say from the podium, "Saddam had nothing to do with 9/11." The guys with the drumbeats were going up to the Iraq war.

Riley: And nobody called you out on that?

Fleischer: That Saddam had nothing to do with it?

Riley: Yes. Were you getting pushback from Defense or other places?

Fleisher: No, not in the least.

Riley: But you also said that you weren't in the war council meetings or the national security meetings, where this might have been discussed.

Fleischer: Correct.

Riley: The decision was made on high that there was no link, at least at that stage, and that there wouldn't be anything other than defensive measures taken to make sure that we didn't get hit the second time?

Fleischer: From everything I could piece together, that's correct. It didn't really start to be talked about until—the best I could tell it would have been early '02, when Bush started talking about putting the inspectors back into Iraq—

Riley: Right.

Fleisher: —then it started to really bubble up more to August of '02.

Riley: Were you circulated on major speech drafts like the State of the Union message in '03?

Fleischer: I was, but I would typically get mine 24 to 48 hours in advance, because I didn't comment for the purposes of editing the speech. I didn't have time and it wasn't my inclination. I would get it typically 24 to 48 hours ahead of time.

Riley: So you would have a heads-up to know to be preparing your talking points?

Fleischer: Right.

Riley: The '02 speech was the "axis of evil" speech, is that correct?

Perry: That's right.

Riley: Did you look at that and think, *This is going to*—?

Fleisher: I remember looking at it, and it kind of jolted me: *That's going to be newsy.* But I liked it; it appealed to my hawkish side. I thought it was right.

The day after he gave the State of the Union speech, we were on the road, in a hotel somewhere. How could that be? We must have done a trip the next day and then went into the hotel somewhere within the first 24 hours after the speech. Bush called me and a couple of others into his suite; the story had started to catch a lot of criticism for "axis of evil." He said, "There will be no backing down. I don't want to hear anybody in my administration anywhere trying to undo or rewind those words." He was already starting to catch it. He may have been catching it from State, from Powell. I'm not sure, but that's my recollection, that that was where it started to come from.

Riley: So then there was Iraq in 2002. Did that come about gradually or precipitously?

Fleischer: Gradually. I just remember Bush saying something about the inspectors ought to return to Iraq. That was in early 2002. That later became significant, because in August of 2002 Cheney gave a speech in which he publicly said inspectors should not return. It caused all kinds of hoopla. It was a Cheney-Powell fight that was going on.

One of the interesting things that happened—This is Colin Powell. Powell would, on pretty regular occasions, walk out of NSC meetings, particularly in the fall of 2002, and come up to my office and do a little unloading and tell me why Cheney was wrong about this or Rumsfeld was wrong about that. Nobody in the administration did that. I think Powell did it, one, because he was a smart guy and wanted to create a paper trail of where he was on these issues; and he may have been thinking I might say these things to the press and he had an interest in my saying them to the press, which I never, ever, would say to the press.

This was great. I had Powell coming in to share some of these things with me. One of the things he came up and said was about enforcement of the no-fly zone. He said the joke going around Iraq was that if you ever wanted to get a swimming pool put in your back yard, put some aluminum foil up on a stick. Sure enough, a day, two, three days later the allies would come by and bomb it, thinking it's a radar site and you'll get your hole dug for your pool. He was always the skeptic about how serious the threat of Saddam was. Anyway, that's neither here nor there.

Riley: Was that your only source of information about what was going on?

Fleischer: No.

Riley: Who else were you hearing from, then, as 2002—

Fleisher: Bush. I would just go to Bush: I'm going to get this question; I'm going to get that question; here's what's percolating. In August of 2002, we were all down in Crawford. I had dinner with Condi, just the two of us alone in this restaurant in Waco, and I asked her what the topic of the President's speech was going to be for the UNGA, the United Nations General Assembly, in September 2002. She said she thought it was going to be about Middle East peace.

I told her I thought they needed to make it about Iraq, because it was building up to such a point in the press: "Are we going to go to war with Iraq?" "What's Saddam doing that's objectionable?" The drumbeats started in August. I told Condi that the best way for the President to deal with this was to take it head-on. I would never pretend that I—I'm certain there were other people who were weighing in on what the top speech topic should be, and it did become Iraq, but it was interesting, because in August it was going to be the Mideast. That speech to the UN really is what kicked off a major focus on Iraq that never went away.

Riley: At what point did you feel that things were beginning to snowball toward military intervention?

Fleischer: I'll answer that, but given what we've not talked about here—The big things we missed chronologically were the Second Intifada and the June 2002 speech, in which Bush said we'd never talk to Yasser Arafat again—There were some other significant things that took place in all of that.

Riley: Right.

Fleischer: My sense of it was that the President, from the beginning, wanted to turn the ends of the vise so that Saddam was squeezed. Part of that vise was use of the military, and Bush knew he was going to deploy them starting in the fall of 2002. Whether or not he knew he would actually authorize the use of force—I still think that up to about February of 2002 he could have been convinced not to use force. He was prepared and ready to use force. I don't think it was really until February or March that he decided there was no getting out of it now.

He began the process, where the number of options increasingly diminished as we sent more and more over there. They couldn't just sit there forever. You didn't want the summer to come, with the heat, so in some ways he created an artificial deadline, where he couldn't let it go through the summer. But I still think if Saddam had left the country, if there had been a coup, Bush would have wanted to use the military to go in to find the WMD and to clear out his sons and other people, but he still would have looked for the path that could have avoided going to war. I'll be curious to see what you dig up from others as people's memories get freer and they talk about it, but that's what I saw on the inside at the time and that's what I still believe to this day. Maybe Bush will address it forthrightly in his book.

Riley: Okay.

Freedman: As somebody with this inside vantage point, knowing what you knew, and in particular having to go and deal with the press on this, were you getting nervous? Was it making you anxious, the prospect, or had the steadiness—

Fleisher: No, this is where I, ideologically, comfortably, a hawk, thought Saddam Hussein was a terrible threat to world peace. I believed he had biological and chemical weapons. I had no reason to think he did not. I thought this was the right move. The most profound meeting I ever sat in on was when Bush met with Elie Wiesel in January '03. It was in Condi's office and was just Bush, Condi, Wiesel, and me. Bush said to Wiesel, "What do you think I should do? Should we remove Saddam?" and Wiesel told him yes.

Then he told Bush that if only the world had listened to Winston Churchill in 1938, the Holocaust and World War II would have been averted. I will always remember that. I lost almost my entire family on my mother's side. To hear Elie Wiesel say the Holocaust could have been averted? My God! World War II could have been averted? The fact is, in the mid-1930s people looked at Churchill as if he was a unilateralistic cowboy, a militarist, the same things they said about Bush.

Riley: Did that meeting have a big effect on Bush?

Fleischer: Yes, a big effect on Bush, because it reinforced his moral sense about why the war was right.

Perry: Could you speak about Iran and what was percolating about Iran? You had said earlier that the President often would ask foreign leaders their views on the Iranian leaders. Now we have the "axis of evil" context.

Fleischer: Privately in the Oval one day, right before we went to war with Iraq, Bush predicted to me that if we went to war, the Shiites in Iran would see what was going on in a democratic, free Iraq and would want it. He said the axis of evil would be down to one.

He really thought that Iraq would go so well, so smoothly, that the aftermath would be peaceful and so promising that it would peacefully spread to the young people of Iran. In many ways, that became the worst miscalculation of the impact of the Iran war. The most fundamental thing we did wrong was the misunderstanding on WMD, but Bush had false hope, or high hopes, however you want to put it, unrealistic hopes, that something else would spread.

Maybe history is going to prove him right over time and it eventually will spread. Who knows what is going on in Iran with all those young people? There certainly have been attempts in the last year for reform. Were they partially inspired by Iraq? Maybe. It's not out of the question, but it certainly didn't happen on George Bush's watch. What took place in Iraq became so bloody and messy that it was not what Bush expected.

Riley: Who was President Bush listening to, if you know, most carefully on these issues? What or who were his principal sources of information?

Fleischer: By "issues," you mean the military plans and how to conduct a war, or post-Iraq?

Riley: I'm less interested in that than his sense of how this would unfold. You just said that he had this vision of a dynamic in the region, that a liberated Iraq would create—

Fleisher: I see.

Riley: Maybe he created the vision for himself, but my suspicion is, because that's a fairly complicated and arcane place in the world that most of us don't have a natural knowledge about, that he would have had to have come by this knowledge from somebody else, and I don't know who this somebody else was.

Fleischer: I think it was the usual suspects. There was a little literature involved. He was reading Natan Sharansky; it's probably a good question as to who else he was reading. People, Karl especially, gave him books that they recommended he read. I have no reason to believe it was not the regular circle of Condi, Hadley, Rumsfeld, and Powell. Interestingly, one conversation I overheard in the Oval was Bush asking Powell if Powell had seen the military plan for Iraq. This would have been in late 2002. He asked Powell what he thought of it. Again, in these informal conversations, Bush was setting up an external mechanism to get the Secretary of State's thoughts about the Department of Defense's military planning, which you don't normally do. Of course, Powell is a former Joint Chief. I remember Powell said it needed work and it had this problem and that problem.

Riley: Powell had indeed seen them?

Fleischer: He must have, because Bush asked him the question and Powell gave him the answer.

Riley: I don't know if it is a routine matter of course that the Secretary of State—

Fleisher: That's what I'd have thought. It could have come up in some of the smallish NSC meetings.

Riley: Condi's role in this process was as what we like to politely term an "honest broker." Was she there to make sure everybody's views were being heard or was she putting her thumb on the scale?

Fleischer: Again, with me not being in the NSC meetings, I can't give you firsthand how she behaved, but from what I could see, it was as an honest broker, trying to keep people informed, wrestling with Rumsfeld, who was such a good bureaucratic infighter and who wanted to just deal directly with the President on a lot of things. Condi, I think, reinforced a lot of Bush's thinking. From what I saw, which would be typically after a summit meeting—We'd be standing at the desk of the Oval, just chatting away, and Condi would be sharing her thoughts about what Berlusconi had just said to Bush or something like that—Condi would reinforce Bush's hawkish side.

That's what I typically saw, with two big exceptions. She would reinforce Bush's hawkish objectives, but there are two dynamics that you should dig into that still fascinate me about Bush and decision making. He almost always came down with Cheney and Rumsfeld on the objective, but he went along with Powell on how to get there.

Bush wanted to get rid of Saddam. He thought Saddam was a threat and he wanted to get rid of Saddam. How do you do it? Do you put the weapons inspectors back in there or not? Powell, yes; Condi, yes; Rumsfeld, no; Cheney, unequivocally no. Who did Bush side with? Powell and Condi. Do you go to the United Nations for a resolution to authorize force? Cheney, absolutely not; Rumsfeld, no, you don't need it; Condi and Powell, absolutely, if you don't have it, you can't have a coalition.

What about the second resolution authorizing the use of force? Cheney: We couldn't get the first one, why should we even do a second one; Rumsfeld: It's a waste of time. Tony Blair thought it was something we should do; it was important to Tony Blair. Bush went to the United Nations. It was important. Powell thought we needed to do it. On the tactics of it, Bush would side with Powell; on the objectives of it, he came down with Cheney and Rumsfeld.

You asked if Bush was nuanced. I think that's a very good illustration of how he really was—hawkish, tough, objective—but he wanted to do it the Powell way to get there.

Riley: Anything else?

Perry: I noticed in reading your briefings you used the term, at this time, the "disarmament mission."

Fleischer: Correct.

Perry: Was that a term you came up with? Was that something suggested in a meeting? Did that just naturally flow out of the concept of going in to get the WMD?

Fleischer: I think it's the latter. I think everything we were talking about: Saddam has WMD; we can't let him have WMD; we have to disarm him from WMD. I still shy away—I guess maybe I don't do it anymore, but I wouldn't call it that we "invaded" Iraq; I'd say we "liberated" Iraq.

But "disarmament" probably was just a natural—We had our own little group that handled all communications leading up to the war. We'd meet in the Sit Room and it would be Condi, Hadley, Bartlett, me, and I think Karl was there, plus Andy, which actually was my suggestion. I went to Andy and said, in the lead-up to the war, especially because none of the communications people were in NSC meetings, that he had to get his arms around and coordinate all the communications that went into this if we were going to convince the country that war was the right thing to do.

We called it the White House Information Group. A lot of liberals heard about it and thought this was some secret, sinister, plan-the-war group. That was where the Cincinnati speech was planned, when Bush went to Cincinnati and we started talking about the evidence, that if we were saying there was evidence of WMD, we needed to make the case and declassify certain things, that we had to get it out there. That probably would have been a natural outgrowth of that type of meeting.

Freedman: How often did that group meet?

Fleischer: Once or twice a week.

Riley: And it was message- and outreach-driven?

Fleischer: The advantage for the communications staff was—I say "communications" because Dan was there, and I think Mike Gerson might have been there too—that we had Hadley and Condi and Andy at the table, who were privy to things we weren't privy to, so when we talked about the Cincinnati speech and what should be declassified, they talked it through, with some of the evidence we had. All of a sudden, I was getting the nitty-gritty: Saddam has this. Saddam has that. He behaved in this way. They moved these trucks from here to there.

Then the communications people would say, "That's the one we need to talk about; we need to say that." That partly informed the Cincinnati speech. I think that's where Condi came up with the line about not wanting to take the chance of it turning into a mushroom cloud.

Riley: You had mentioned as an aside that the broader Middle East questions were bubbling in early '02, and you encouraged us not to forget that this was happening at the point where Iraq was moving from the back burner to the front burner. Let me come back to you and ask you about the importance of these broader questions, of what was going on. Bush was losing faith in—maybe he never had faith in—Arafat?

Fleisher: Never had faith.

Riley: Okay, and his relations during this time with Israel, so far as you know, were good?

Fleischer: It's interesting, because for Bush, who became such a great friend of Israel, it didn't start out as good. Ariel Sharon gave a speech in which he referred to Bush as Neville Chamberlain or made some reference to Czechoslovakia. I got my instructions from Bush to go to the podium, and—I don't remember what I said, but, basically—take a whack at Sharon. Boy, did Israel tuck its tail between its legs. This was very unusual, to go to the podium and say something critical of Israel, especially me, not that it mattered who I was. People forget that the great relationship was actually born out of something that was pretty traumatic.

Here's an interesting little sidenote on that. Sharon said it, and it really inflamed Bush and other people, but it wasn't that newsy, so I was wondering if I'd even get a question at the podium about it. I did not want to go out and make it a part of my opening statement. I thought that would be too hard, so I prompted a reporter to ask me a question about Bush's reaction to it, which is another way, sometimes, that that relationship actually does work. The reporter knew he'd make news if he asked it, and I gave him the news.

Perry: Did you do that very often?

Fleischer: Seldom, but I did it on that one. Then the tanks were rolling, suicide bombings, which I later called "homicide bombings," were happening at just an unbelievable frequency, and there was mass destruction throughout Israel. Then Sharon rolled the tanks throughout the West Bank. Bush wanted to give Israel as much leeway as possible to do what it needed to do to defend itself, up to the point where we started to worry that the kingdom of Jordan might fall—That

marvelous American ally in Jordan could lose his kingdom over it—so it was terribly, terribly tense.

There was one meeting where Sharon was in the Oval Office with Bush and in the middle I got a page; a suicide bombing had taken place in the middle of the meeting. Before I let the press into the Oval, I turned to my counterpart, Arnon Perlman, and showed him the page. There's a picture, I think it's in my book, of me whispering in Bush's ear and Arnon whispering in Sharon's ear. What we were whispering was that, during this meeting, another suicide bombing had just taken place, knowing the press would know about it when they came in.

That was a huge part of 2002 and it culminated in Bush's June speech, where he said the United States would no longer talk with, recognize, or deal with Yasser Arafat.

Riley: To what extent was this issue viewed within the administration as crucial to all of the other peripheral things? One of the things we hear, not from interviews but in the press accounts—I remember hearing somebody close to the administration once say that the road to Jerusalem leads through Baghdad, meaning you need to get to Baghdad first to get to Jerusalem. Was that the logic or was there a sense that—

Fleisher: I don't think so. If you asked George Bush, Dick Cheney, Condi Rice, maybe not Powell, "If you could wave a magic wand and solve the Arab-Israeli dispute today, would the threat of terrorism to the United States go away? Would the threat of Saddam go away?" the answer would have been an unequivocally emphatic no. Al-Qaeda never cared about the U.S.-Israel relationship. It was never part of their reasons for attacks. They wanted to restore the caliphate, pretty big thinking. The Arab-Israeli dispute became, what I think Bush people would tell you, a convenient whipping boy for some of the Arab nations to beat up on the United States and beat up on Israel, but they didn't really care about the Palestinian people. If peace were made, it wouldn't change those governments' views toward the United States.

Riley: Was there also a disinterest in continuing negotiations without some concrete purpose in mind for them?

Fleischer: Bush's view, if you recognize the pendulum theory, is that Bill Clinton did everything possible to bring peace; Arafat didn't want peace, despite all the negotiations and everything that went into it. Bush's view was that third parties, the United States, couldn't impose or create peace; the two parties have to want it bad enough. One of the results of the Clinton negotiations and then the Second Intifada of October 2000 was that the Israeli people in January 2001 elected Ariel Sharon. The Israelis, in a democracy, voted for security, not peace negotiations, so the pendulum moved in a different direction: Stop the suicide bombings, stop the Second Intifada; security first, not peace negotiations. Peace negotiations had just been tried, and had failed spectacularly.

Riley: Sure.

Fleischer: People said Bush was disengaged, not involved, didn't care about the Middle East peace, but Bush's position always was that the two parties had to be the ones who pushed for it, created it. Then there were episodic attempts—I sat in several meetings with Sharon and Mahmoud Abbas. Interestingly, in Aqaba, Jordan, Abbas walked in to King Abdullah [Abdullah

II bin al-Hussein]'s palace—Sharon and Bush were already at the table—and Sharon stood up and hugged Mahmoud Abbas. There was still hope. Abbas was not Arafat; you could work with him, get things done. I think Obama's witnessing now that the Israelis and the Palestinians really want peace.

Riley: So the pendulum hadn't come back to where—

Fleisher: The pendulum came back to the point where they could formally sit down the way they're sitting down now, [Benjamin] Netanyahu and Abbas, but it hadn't gone beyond the stage of all right, they're talking.

Riley: There is probably more we can dig into this, but you were still in your position when the Iraq war began. Can you start us out a few weeks in advance—

Freedman: Before we get to March, in January, with the State of the Union—You just mentioned the Cincinnati speech—When did the famous sentence become so controversial in early 2003?

Riley: Oh, this is the "16 words." ["The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa."]

Freedman: At some point, when Tenet backed off and ultimately said, "It was my fault," there was a question about whether what the CIA had said about the 16 words applied to the claim in the State of the Union or the Cincinnati speech, so I want you to help clarify—

Fleischer: I'm not going to be a good source on that, because that all was aired and figured out after I left.

Freedman: Okay.

Fleischer: Nobody challenged Cincinnati; nobody challenged the State of the Union. There started to be some things about the State of the Union months afterward. I can talk about that. What I remember, just from reading the papers that day and then some conversations I had later, after I left, was that Hadley was told not to include some of this information. You really have to get exactly what he was told not to include for the Cincinnati speech—

Freedman: Right.

Fleischer: —because I think it differed in some way with what ultimately did get into the State of the Union. It was about a similar—I think it was about Saddam seeking uranium, but the sentences were sufficiently different that it could not—it may have been, shouldn't have been, in Cincinnati, but because of the reference to the British, it did work for the State of the Union. But then I think Hadley, in the summer of 2003, said, "I should have made sure it wasn't in the State of the Union, either, remembering what they told me about Cincinnati, and I missed it."

Freedman: The day after the State of the Union, it wasn't an issue; everybody assumed as fact that he was trying to do this?

Fleischer: Right.

Freedman: And the [Joseph] Wilson stuff didn't come until later.

Fleischer: What did come out was that some type of forged document was in the hands of the Italians relating to Saddam seeking uranium from Niger. The *New York Times* had something like, One of the things Bush talked about in the State of the Union was based on this Italian intelligence, and this Italian intelligence was now known to be a forgery, so did it undermine what Bush said in the State of the Union?

It didn't get a whole lot of attention because we were going to war with Iraq; there were so many other, bigger things, that nobody was doing the fact finding on the State of the Union. But I remember asking about it and being told, "No, the rationale for the State of the Union sentence about seeking uranium in Niger was not based on the Italian documents; it was based on other intelligence, so it is not an issue, stand by it." I do remember periodically being asked about it, and I said, "No, it was based on other intelligence; the Italian thing had nothing to do with it."

Riley: Sure. Were you having to do a lot of digging at this time as the case for war was being publicly made? I'm thinking about Secretary Powell's appearance at the UN and the President's comments. Were you getting questions from the press about the case in general and/or were you starting to get pointed questions from the press at this stage about particular pieces of the case?

Fleischer: I was getting general ones, with the press saying, "What proof do you have that Saddam has WMD?" I would say, "I'm not going to discuss sources and methods, but we've all been told." The CIA assured us, Bill Clinton knows it, and Bill Clinton said it. They said, "What's new? Do you have any *new* intelligence?" I would regularly say, "When you have a mountain of intelligence, why do you need anything higher on the mountain? We have a mountain of intelligence already." There was generalized skepticism from the press corps about whether he really had them. There was also the desire of the press corps to see the intelligence, "Prove it to us. We don't just take it from you because you say it; *prove* it."

Riley: Let me refine this, because it wasn't universally true that the press was skeptical. You had people like Judith Miller at the *New York Times*, for example, who—

Fleisher: I meant my customers in the briefing room were the ones who were saying to me, "What new intelligence do you have? Show me the intelligence."

Freedman: Let me follow up on the 16 words quickly. When it all came out, was the President misled by anybody? How do we make sense of it? How did they get in there?

Fleischer: To this day—I wasn't in there. After I left, I had breakfast with Steve Hadley, six months to a year ago, and I had a chance to go through this with him in great depth. There is to this day a huge split in the CIA. You could ask half the people there and they would tell you it's totally wrong: Saddam did not seek uranium in Niger. Another half would tell you unequivocally, absolutely, he did. There came to be this little civil war inside the CIA.

The only thing that I can do to parse it together is in Ambassador Wilson's own report; he said that Saddam sent a delegation to Niger, a trade delegation, and the Prime Minister of Niger interpreted it as an overture to seek uranium. Now, Niger has two exports: uranium and goats.

Frankly, I'm on the side that says the worst thing we did—and I was the one who was told to equivocate our way to doing it—was to no longer stand by the 16 words. We should have stood by those 16 words, but half of the CIA was putting so much pressure on Tenet—that Bush was deceiving people, that the State of the Union was wrong, why did we do it—that the pressure came onto Condi that we needed to start hedging and equivocating on whether those words were accurate or not. That's what started it.

On my second-to-last briefing before I left the job—We were about to go on a foreign trip—the day Wilson's op-ed came out in the *New York Times*, I was told by Sean McCormack, my NSC deputy, "If you are asked if we are still standing by the 16 words, you can't repeat it anymore. We're not backing off of it, but we're having enough second doubts now that you can't repeat it."

I said, "Great." That's the worst spot for a press secretary to be. I was just hoping I wasn't asked. Sure enough, David Sanger of the *New York Times* asked about it. I gave some mealymouthed, straddle-both-sides sentence in reply. I got on the plane, flew over to Africa for Bush's trip, and the decision was made back in Washington that we were going to retract the words, that it was wrong. At that point, it became a statement by the press secretary, or these print documents. NSC wrote it up, I approved it, it went out, and we took the words back. What we tried to say was not that it wasn't wrong, but that it didn't rise to the level of a Presidential speech. It may be right, but there was just enough doubt about it that it shouldn't have risen to the level of a Presidential speech, although it still may be right. That nuance was totally obliterated, lost.

From that point on, from whatever that date was, July 8, 2003, until January 20, 2009, everything the press had been feeling about not challenging Bush, not being too under the thumb of the Bush administration, that we squelched dissent, that a bunch of reporters who weren't independent toed Bush's line came out. It unleashed a torrent of "Bush deceived us," "Bush misled us." After all, we hadn't found any weapons of mass destruction. Where were the weapons of mass destruction? The first instance of us backing off of something that was in that State of the Union was inconsequential. We always said he had biological, he had chemical weapons. That was why we were going to war. The nuclear threat was always—except for once, when Dick Cheney misspoke—that he might, in the future, acquire it. We said we'd never let that happen.

That wasn't the *casus belli*. If he didn't have biological, if he didn't have chemical, and we just had intelligence he was trying to get nuclear, I don't think Bush would have gone to war. But the press then magnified those 16 words as one of the *central* reasons we went to war. The hammering lasted and hasn't stopped for years.

Riley: The preliminary to this, of course, was the question about intelligence failures before 9/11, and a fair amount of internal finger pointing, if we believe the press accounts—and maybe we shouldn't—between the CIA and the White House about whether the alarm bells were wrong—

Fleischer: —about 9/11?

Riley: Yes, about 9/11. I'm trying to set the predicate for the question of cooperativeness between the CIA and the White House in this run-up period. You suggested that there was a civil war going on within CIA. Were the ones who were creating problems for the White House a group of people who felt they were being singled out for failures before 9/11?

Fleisher: I don't know, because I don't know the inside of CIA well enough. That's probably a great Hadley question or Condi question, or if you get Tenet. Many people in my administration, especially conservatives, Feith really, made the case that there was an element in the CIA that was just anti-Bush and wanted to get Bush. I have a hard time seeing it that way; it's not my experience with the CIA. There was a general sense of aggrievement about who was to blame for the 16 words, wherein the CIA was pushing back, but I don't remember that.

You know the Bush White House wasn't making the case that there was an intelligence failure that led to 9/11. We never viewed it as an intelligence failure that led to 9/11. I don't remember anything about that.

Riley: What about the development within Defense—this was, I guess, mostly Rumsfeld, but there may have been a Cheney component of it as well—that there were alternative intelligence units being created to make a case that CIA wouldn't—

Fleischer: I have no firsthand knowledge about it, but Feith wrote about it in his book as something that had been done throughout DoD's [Department of Defense] history, especially in wartime, and he made it sound totally innocuous. Feith's book is full of slams at Tenet. Tenet's book is full of slams at Feith. You've got me.

Riley: Maybe that's where the conflict was. It wasn't so much a White House conflict as it was a CIA-Defense conflict.

Fleischer: That could be.

Riley: If that's the case, then—

Fleisher: The deputies had terrible relations with each other.

Riley: The deputies did?

Fleischer: Wolfowitz versus Armitage, Feith; there was a lot of disorder among the deputies. We're reading in the [Bob] Woodward book now about the lack of unity about the Afghanistan recommendations for Clinton, for Obama, and it reminded me of what I was hearing from Hadley about the problems with the deputies. I remember Steve one day saying to me out of frustration, "This is really debilitating; this just saps your energy." It was mostly Armitage versus Wolfowitz.

Riley: This would have been pre-9/11?

Fleischer: Yes.

Riley: So pre-9/11, the frustrations were there over disputes between the two?

Fleisher: Yes.

Riley: Can we take you then to March 2003?

Fleischer: That's where it began. From almost September '02 to March '03, Bush traveled a whole lot less, especially from January to March. My job was to brief the press when Bush was in the building. When he traveled, I would go to the back of Air Force One and brief the press, a pool of about 13 reporters. There were no cameras; I would not be wearing my suit jacket. It was like a day off. When you go to brief, it is a very different kind of day.

All of a sudden, I was briefing four days a week, five days a week, especially after Election Day of 2002. Nothing changed. "Are we going to war?" "How much more time does Saddam have?" From when Bush threw down the gauntlet about Saddam needing to disarm, which is what he said at the United Nations speech, the briefings started to wear me out. I couldn't advance the ball; there was nothing more to say. No decisions had been made. All the questions were the same, valid questions, and I was on five days a week in some cases.

After the election, even in December 2002, I was thinking to myself, *I'll be here through Election Day and I'll probably leave after the 2004 election.* Starting in February or so, I turned to my then wife and I said to Becky [Davis Fleischer], "I'm starting to think maybe my time has come. I'm starting to feel like I'm burning out." I never shared it with anybody else, never talked about it publicly, but I could tell something else was going on inside of me.

I'd pick up the newspaper and get increasingly frustrated with press coverage, thinking it was biased, anti-Bush, blah, blah, which I knew also was a bad sign; you can't do that. The briefings for me just—especially January, February, and March—became painful. There was no new news, no new anything. The drums of war were beating louder. It was just the same as yesterday and tomorrow won't be any different. The hostility started to grow, because the President wasn't giving any good answers. That's what was going on for me personally.

Riley: Okay.

Perry: You say you didn't share it with anyone except your wife, but could you go to anyone in the administration to say, "Is there anything else that we can do? I know I can't say anything operationally." Was there anybody there who could help you with that frustration?

Fleisher: I don't think so.

Perry: There wasn't any way to get out of it or around it?

Fleischer: The world was waiting for one answer: Was the United States going to war or not? At this time, too, the stock market was plunging. On the day I went to the podium and announced, "Saddam has 24 hours to get out," the stock market surged, because the market wanted certainty: War? Okay. No war? Okay. Now we know.

My point is there was only one answer that could have dealt with the issue and my job was to stay strong at that podium until that answer was made known to me by my boss. I don't think, in retrospect, anything—

Perry: I don't remember what the approval ratings were doing at that time. Were they staying fairly steady or was there a decline in this post-9/11 period and before—

Fleischer: There had been a decline, but it was still very high; I think it was in the 60s or so. Once he said we were going to war, then he shot back up, probably in the 80s or something like that, again the rally-around-the-flag effect.

Perry: There wasn't a political reason to say, "Ari, you really need to get out and say the following," because things were actually okay in terms of the approval rating, so the status quo was okay.

Fleischer: Bush was a popular President and led the nation to war against Iraq. The war against Iraq was initially quite popular.

Riley: Right. And the knowledge that we now have about the case was not present then. There were a few people nibbling around the edges about how airtight the case was, but when you had Colin Powell going before the United Nations and affirming—This is the guy who was leading the meetings and coming to tell you how frustrated he was. Well, if he's willing to put his reputation on the line—

Fleischer: Exactly.

Riley: —in favor of something for which he is not a natural constituent, then the case has been made. I don't recall anything but favorable responses.

Fleischer: Look at the debate on the House and Senate floor in the fall of 2002 on the authorization to use force. Hillary said he has WMD, [John] Kerry said he had WMD. Everybody said he had WMD. Now, you can exaggerate, you can cherry-pick, you can manipulate.

Perry: That does bring me to something in your book. You have a whole chapter that you devote to Helen Thomas, because she certainly must have been one of the ones getting under your skin so badly in these briefings. What do you think about when you look back at that and her questions and her probing?

Fleischer: Helen, to her credit, had no reasons to think she was right, but she turned out to be right. She did challenge whether Bush was accurate about WMD. She did it from a blind point of view, her ideological point of view, opposing war.

But in terms of Helen—Look, I liked Helen, got along famously with Helen, enjoyed fighting with Helen. I always thought Helen was so out there that she made Bush look reasonable. She would refer to Hezbollah as "freedom fighters." I would say, "My briefing's over." Let her take that stand publicly. She publicly called Bush the worst President in the history of the country at a time when he was very popular.

She was in her 80s, and showed up for work every day. I always enjoyed my clashes and my relationship with her until something happened several months ago, and then in good conscience I thought she should lose her job, and I'm proud of what I did to speak out. But it's very much what I wrote in my book. I had a lot of fondness for her even though she was one of Bush's worst, toughest critics. I've lost all that fondness now.

Riley: Now we can get you to March. What was your job at the time the invasion occurred?

Fleisher: I knew when the war was going to begin. I think a week out or something like that, I knew the date it was going to begin. I knew that everything was scheduled to happen unless Saddam left the country and certain things happened. We had made a last-minute trip to the Azores. Coming back from the Azores, Bush gave me my instructions to go to the podium and say, "Saddam has 24 hours to leave." Man, people shot out of their chairs and ran to the lawn to go live. It was a classic movie scene as people hit the wires.

If I remember, the war was going to begin on a Friday night, shock and awe. I think on a Wednesday, all of a sudden, there was all of this activity in the West Wing that was very unusual. There was a secure phone set up in the Roosevelt Room. There were phone lines strung in places I'd never seen a phone line strung anywhere in the White House.

There was all this military in the Oval. I walked by and saw it. Andy Card called me into his office and said, "The war is going to begin tonight." They had intelligence that Saddam was in such-and-such a place. "We think we can get Saddam." I had previously drafted a one-sentence statement—I still have the original at home—to say when I took the podium to announce that the war had begun. I had Rumsfeld clear it.

Then I was in Condi's office. That's where Condi and I—I don't remember who else was in there—were watching the coverage of the bombing trying to get Saddam that was visible on TV. I called Rumsfeld just to make sure again that the statement was fine. He changed one word in it, and then told me to wait. They didn't want me to go down and deliver it. The plan had been that as soon as it was visible on TV I was to go and say, "The President will address the nation tonight." I don't remember my exact words. I patterned it largely after what Marlin did in '91: "The disarmament of Iraq has begun. The President will address the nation later tonight." It was something like that.

Then I was put on hold because DoD didn't want me to say anything until the planes had gotten out of Iraqi air space, the stealth fighters that delivered the first blows, so I was waiting and waiting. It was interminable. I thought I had been given the two-minute warning and yet I was waiting and waiting. Finally, I went down there, and that was the one time I was nervous. I wasn't taking any questions or doing anything else, but I did feel the gravity of going out to that podium and saying that war had begun.

The President addressed the nation that night and that's how it started. I saw a lot less of George Bush in the days after that—Everything was so military, so focused on how it was going—even Steve and Condi. There were a lot of military details, and it was too much. We were getting the highlights and the headlines, but it was all operational. Everything had shifted to the Pentagon, to the great infuriation of the White House press corps. The embedded reporters were the ones who

really got the coverage. Bush actually publicly said to the White House press corps at one point, "You're embedded with the wrong unit."

Freedman: First, do you remember what word Rumsfeld changed?

Fleischer: Yes, I don't remember off the top of my head. I have it. There was a word scratched out and another word put in there.

Freedman: Were you part of any of the discussions, or do you remember any of the conversations, about the embedded reporting program?

Fleischer: I don't. I think Torie Clarke said that I opposed it—I thought, *How can you do this, give reporters all this access?*—which may or may not have been true; I don't remember, but that probably would have been Dan. Again, the communications people were really the ones working strategy. I played a very little strategic role; I just dealt with the briefings: how to get through the day, and how to give those answers. I would weigh in on things when I felt like it, but I don't remember being a significant part of anything about embedding, pro or con.

Riley: Were you a party to any discussions about postwar planning or governance in Iraq? Were there working groups set up, maybe with communications professionals to help them deal with whatever would transpire?

Fleischer: I would pick up a couple of things in the summit meetings. One was a meeting Bush had with a very unusual group of Iraqis who were living in the United States. He talked to them and asked them what they thought the future of Iraq would be like. He asked them if the Iraqis had hostility toward Israel. I put the verbatims in my book.

Bush was talking about whether or not it would be better—I don't remember who he was talking with. Maybe it was in the summit meetings, maybe it was a conversation with Powell and Condi, in which I was in the Oval Office, around the desk when people were talking—The question was whether the Iraqis would be better off if we brought somebody in from the outside who was living in exile or if they would be better off having somebody from the inside who suffered under Saddam, who could identify with the suffering. I don't know if a decision was ever made. Maybe it was just one of those things that nobody could wrestle to the ground; there was no right answer, so the decision wasn't made by the time we went to war.

My sense was that Bush believed the Iraqis had to find their own and it would naturally grow, that someone would just emerge from Iraq who would step forward and become a leader. If we Americans tried to pick an exile to bring in and say, "Here's your new President, meet him, he's been living happily in London the last 20 years," that person would be rejected and it wouldn't work. That's a great thing for you to get into with Condi and Steve.

After I left, I'd come back periodically and meet with Bush and just chat him up. About a year or two later, I was talking to Bush about what went wrong. If I remember, he rejected out of hand that the issue was about how many troops to send and said, "If we had 200,000 more troops there, it wouldn't have changed anything about the violence that took place afterward. You can't quash that kind of violence."

Then, as for the issue of bringing somebody in or a homegrown Iraqi, he was disappointed. He underestimated how subjugated the Iraqi people were by Saddam. There was no independent, powerful spirit, thought, leadership. People were just used to being crushed. If they spoke, they knew they could die or their children would be tortured or whatever the case was, so there was no farm team to grow anybody to come up and become a good Iraqi leader.

That's going to be a very fruitful thing for you to get into with the other people, because it is one of the things the Bush administration really owes to next generations. What went wrong in the planning? Why did it take so long and go so bad for so long?

Riley: The Defense Department did bring a group of exiles in, right?

Fleischer: Yes.

Riley: Did they do that without White House sanction?

Fleisher: Yes. I think I read that in some book, that [Ahmed] Chalabi and those guys came in on a DoD flight and DoD just did it. But they weren't brought in to take over and run the country. We did want exiles to go back. For heaven's sake, one of the great signs of a country that is in recovery, post-Saddam, is that exiles are willing to give up their comfortable life to go back to their motherland because they think their future is going to be good, so you want the exiles to return. The issue for Bush was whether to pick a new President out of the exiles.

Riley: What was your role then? If the locus of attention in Washington had shifted to the Pentagon, which had operational responsibility and you had embedded press in Iraq, what was happening with you?

Fleischer: My role was still the core that it always had been: I spoke for the President. Is the President satisfied about how the war is going? Is the President worried about the number of Americans who are dying? Is the President still confident we'll find weapons of mass destruction? My role in that sense didn't change: speak for the President. But the news was the operational details and that's what people were watching on TV: they were watching tanks roll; they were watching planes bomb; they were watching that. The President was kind of a second story in the news; the tanks were first.

Riley: We know what your public statements were at the time, or we can find them. How long were you there after March?

Fleischer: Until July.

Riley: Was there frustration building at the time over how events were going? Was there a stay-the-course attitude—Okay, we understand that in the fog of war things aren't going to be perfectly clear, but we have to keep plowing ahead? What was the President's mentality at this stage?

Fleisher: The President was very pleased with how things were going because as it turned out—The war began on March 15; the statue of Saddam fell on April 9. That was one of the fastest, most successful military incursions in history.

Riley: With very few casualties.

Fleischer: The questions I was getting were about the Fedayeen, the Iraqis who shed their uniforms and blended in. They started shooting at our soldiers and we started having supply line problems. Did we underestimate the Fedayeen? Was this an intelligence failure? Other vexing questions I got were Cheney had said on one of the Sunday shows, when he was asked how long he thought the war would last, he said "weeks," not "months," so at the end of March reporters started saying it has already been weeks, why isn't it over? Did you underestimate how tough this would be?

Again I was reminded of the briefings on Afghanistan with the Johnny Apple story. As soon as it was two weeks, the press had license to say Cheney was wrong. They kept saying, "He said weeks not months; well, it's been weeks." There were these silly semantic classes with the press. I remember those things happening until the statue fell.

The President of Slovenia was meeting with Bush and I was in the meeting. As I was walking into the meeting, I had seen on my TV what was going on in Baghdad. We had taken Baghdad, and people were surrounding that statue, so I said to Bush, "You need to watch what is going on on TV here." Bush came out—there's no TV in the Oval—to the outer Oval, and you could see scenes of street life in Baghdad and something about that statue, and Iraqis were throwing their shoes at it. After the meeting was over, Bush came out again, and we were standing watching the TV. An American tank hauler had a cable attached to the statue and the tank hauler pulled the statue down.

Bush said to me, "It's interesting how small the crowd is." It wasn't a big crowd. You'd have thought—Who knows? I don't know what the population of that street corner was, but that was his observation. From that moment when the statue came down, the questions I started getting at my briefings were about when the President would declare an end to the war. "Why isn't he declaring it over yet? Is the President extending the war because it is giving him a political advantage over the Democrats?"

The press shifted from "Why is it taking so long?" to "Why won't he give a speech and declare it over?" My job then was to remind reporters—regularly saying how dangerous Iraq is—that there was still a lot of fighting in the Sunni triangle and that this war was not over, which led to the questions of why won't Bush declare it over. Then May 2 he went out to the [USS] *Abraham Lincoln* and gave that speech.

Riley: Right.

Fleischer: I don't know if you know the backstory on that, and it is very important you get this. I hope that Gerson walked you through this. The banner read "Mission Accomplished." In the speech Bush gave, Bush said there were many parts of Iraq that were dangerous. Major combat operations were over, but it was going to take time and there was a lot of danger ahead. He gave a perfectly nuanced, qualified speech to end major combat operations, which were exactly chosen words for just that reason, because we knew there was still fighting in the Sunni triangle and especially in Fallujah.

The banner. The ship was steaming back from duty in and around the Gulf and was the longest-deployed ship in the history of the United States Navy. Our advance people met the crew of the *Abraham Lincoln*. I think they flew to Hawaii and then boarded the ship as the ship was steaming back toward San Diego and the crew was totally excited: the Commander in Chief is coming out. He's going to declare combat is over from here. They asked if they could hang a sign in honor of them being the longest-deployed ship. They successfully, in their view, had completed their mission, which they did, and they wanted to have a sign that read "Mission Accomplished."

Our guys thought, *Great idea. It's a fitting tribute to you.* Certainly it fit into the theme of what we were talking about. On May 2, it assuredly felt as if the mission had been accomplished: Saddam was out of power, Baghdad fell, hardly any lives had been lost. At that time, too, you could go to downtown Baghdad and eat at outdoor cafés. It was one of the safest places on earth, with no crime, no violence. People forget that we *were* greeted with flowers. That was the reality of May.

The banner was hung because our advance team thought it was a good idea, a tribute to the sailors and Marines aboard the ship. Bush landed in his flight suit, producing just tumultuous, fabulous pictures, but we started to hear a little "Is it over the top?" pushback from some people on TV.

Freedman: That day?

Fleischer: That day, from some of the cable commentators, Chris Matthews and others.

Riley: The pictures didn't have the nuance the speech had.

Fleisher: Correct.

Freedman: You didn't say, or nobody said, "Hmm, does this look like too much?"

Fleischer: I thought it was fabulous. It was great.

Perry: Who would have made all those decisions: to land in the flat fighter, in the flight suit?

Fleischer: It was Bush. Bush wanted to. You guys reminded me of it. I read the material you prepared and I had forgotten the controversy about whether the ship was too close or not close enough. It wasn't close enough, so they needed to take an aircraft to land on it. You don't want to fly a helicopter over water that great a distance even if it could have reached, and I was told it was out of reach.

Riley: Okay.

Fleischer: It steamed closer than anybody thought, but Bush still wanted to land in the fighter. He was a former fighter pilot; he wanted to do it. But now there was controversy growing about whether this was an over-the-top moment: "Did he have to do it?" "You told us that the ship would be far enough, but it was close enough, so why'd he do it?" Because he wanted to, and it was so far we didn't have an option.

Perry: Does this go back to what you talked about with the European leaders, telling him that if he would stow the flight jacket, that would help?

Fleischer: I'm sure.

Perry: But this is just who he is. What about the politics of knowing Kerry would be the opponent in '04?

Fleischer: We didn't know that.

Perry: The chance that he would be?

Fleischer: No, not in May of '03.

Perry: The issue of his own war record, nothing like that, was entering in? It was really the President saying, "I just want to do this"?

Fleischer: No, there was nothing—Nobody knew Kerry would be the nominee.

Riley: And it wouldn't have much mattered when his approval rating was at 80 percent or so.

Fleischer: That was pure Bush; he wanted to wear a flight suit. I'll tell you one little interesting sidenote about it. The plane in which he landed, a Viking, is a four-passenger plane, so you had the Navy pilot piloting it, a second pilot, Bush, and one more seat. Who was going to get that last seat? Well, talk about internal fights! The Secret Service agent: "My job is to protect the President's life anywhere he goes." The military aide with the nuclear football: "I can never be separated from the President. If something happens and you need to land, I have to be there." It went Secret Service, military, Secret Service, military. Ultimately the decision was made. Who do you think got it?

Riley: Secret Service?

Fleisher: The Secret Service.

Riley: It is unimaginable that you could send the President anywhere without the Secret Service.

Fleischer: The water underneath the whole route was lined with frogmen. [*laughter*] If that plane had gone down, they'd have been ready. That's true when the President travels many different places.

Anyway, that was that moment. Bush was immensely popular, but the briefing room was a controversial place as a result of it. There were more times when I was thinking, *These are silly, petty fights; it is meaningless whether the aircraft carrier was or wasn't close.* It was more part of my burning out.

Riley: Sure.

Fleischer: I told Bush I was leaving a week later or something like that. I knew at that point I was going to go. I had talked to Becky, told Becky that. I think a week later I went in and told him.

Freedman: Was there something about that event that in any way—

Fleischer: No.

Freedman: Closure?

Fleischer: Culmination. If there was any one thing I had on my mind that really did it for me, it was that I didn't have it in me to stick around for a reelection campaign. I knew how grueling that would be and I knew if I were going to leave, I would have to leave early enough. If I was there in the fall of '03, I would be there through the fall of '04, so I thought, *My exit ramps are going away. I need to take one of them, because pretty soon they're going to pass me by.*

Freedman: Did it seem, though, that you'd come to a place where it was a resting point?

Fleischer: No, it was the culmination of being worn down and worn out by the day-to-day briefings. There was nothing new to say, and I was just beat down, whipped, tired, doing it five days a week. Also, frankly, it was being married. I got married in November. I was 42. I wanted to start a family. I didn't have kids at the time. For the first time in my life, I was doing my job with a wife. It's one thing when you're single and you can kick it and pour yourself into it and get home at 11. Who cares? Well, my world started to change. I wanted to be home, to be with my wife, so there was that element, too.

Freedman: Is that what you said to the President?

Fleischer: I walked in and I did something I never did. I walked in there ten times a day. I would see him whenever I needed anything; he was used to it. I walked in and I closed the door behind me. I never did that, so he knew something was up. I said to him, "Mr. President, I think my time has come to go." He just looked at me and said, "Burn out?" He knew; he got the joke.

Riley: But you were there—the aircraft carrier event occurred in—

Perry: May.

Riley: —through July.

Freedman: Another couple of months.

Riley: Of course. Were you beginning to be peppered with questions about the aftermath before you left?

Fleisher: The aftermath of Iraq?

Riley: Yes.

Fleischer: Yes. The violence started ticking up a little bit, particularly toward the end, to the point—At one point the President was asked in the Roosevelt Room about the increase in killings of American servicemen. He said, "My message to those who are attacking the United States, attacking our servicemen, is 'Bring it on.'"

I remember walking back with him to the Oval and saying, "Mr. President, think how that sounds to the mother of a serviceman in Iraq, 'Bring it on.'" He said, "All I'm trying to say is I have so much confidence in our military, that anybody who wants to take on our military—Bring it on, because you will never defeat us." I said, "That's not how it came out." Again, that's why I loved the job and I loved my boss, because it was so easy to tell him, "I don't think you should do what you just did." That's the psychic income, again, of being able to talk to the President.

Perry: How would he react to that? Would he say, "I see your point"?

Fleischer: On something like that, he'd defend it; he'd put his back up and defend it for why he did it that way, but I was also sure he was never going to say it again.

Perry: He wouldn't concede the point?

Fleischer: No, he didn't concede the point. Sometimes he wouldn't overtly concede the point, but I knew I got through. I don't remember all the things, but sometimes he said, "Yes, good point," and we'd move right on. It was routine. I guess that's the point I'm making. I remember that one particularly. It was a routine part—If you're at the level I was and you're not perfectly comfortable doing that to the President, you have no business being at that level.

Freedman: You told him first and you told Karen Hughes right afterward?

Fleischer: I had an elaborate plan. I told the President. He told me to tell Andy, so I told Andy. I did all this on a Friday, knowing that then I would spend the weekend calling other staffers, calling the Vice President, and then I would announce it publicly at the senior staff meeting on Monday and tell it to the press on Monday. I did it that way because I thought it would minimize the chances of it leaking over the weekend.

I told Bush and told Andy Friday, and on Saturday made the call-around. I called Cheney, called all these different people, probably 15 people. I couldn't get Scott McClellan on the phone. I was paging Scott, calling Scott; Scott wasn't answering. Finally, Scott called me back Sunday night and I had to tell Scott I was leaving. That put Scott into "Oh, my God! Let it be me." Then I announced it to senior staff Monday. The word got out to senior staff and when I called the gaggle, a reporter said, "I hear you're leaving."

I gave the reasons for why I was leaving. The press—that day or my final day, July 14—broke out in applause, which I think is a White House tradition. It wasn't aimed at *me*; it's what they do, which again is that camaraderie behind the scenes. But from the moment I told the President, my world changed. I just felt, *Ahhh*; things felt so much better. I also knew I'd better buckle down, because it was still the White House and every day is a day that you have to be really careful and serious and do your job well.

Riley: Sure.

Fleischer: I wanted to go on the two foreign trips. Bush had a trip to Europe, which included a trip to Auschwitz, and then the Africa trip. I'd never been to Africa, so I wanted to do the Africa trip. That's why I set July 14 as my last day.

Freedman: At what point was it clear that McClellan was going to succeed you?

Fleischer: One of the big mistakes I made was that I recommended Scott to the President when I told the President in the initial conversation.

Riley: Did he ask you for a recommendation?

Fleischer: Yes. It took a while. I don't think they made that decision for a month or so because there was a thought—This is Bush. When somebody leaves and there's a vacancy, the thinking is, Who's the best? Who can we get? Don't just think inside, think outside; exhaust all opportunities. I wasn't part of the personnel process about who was going to replace me. Dan is probably your best source on what they talked about, who else may have been in the running, or I guess Andy. I'd be curious to see if they talk about that.

When it came to personnel, I think to the White House's credit, we never talked about who didn't get a job; we just talked about who got it. Now, after this passage of time, especially with Scott, you might get something interesting.

Freedman: You said it was a mistake. At what point was that clear to you, prior to the book?

Fleischer: Yes. Watching Scott brief. My polite way of saying it was Scott's briefings looked really good on paper. If you read his briefing, he's articulate, with crisp sentences that end with periods. He answers questions. But watching him on TV, I thought, *There's no fight. He's not giving it back to the press; he's absorbing all the blows.* You have to fight. You have to put the press on the defensive. That was lacking.

Riley: Sure.

Freedman: We may want to hear about the Europe trip and the Africa trip in detail, but one of the things that I wanted to hear about is this. In your last week, Scooter Libby called you and said, "Let's have lunch."

Fleisher: Yes.

Freedman: I'm curious as to what you made of it at the time and what you think about it now.

Fleischer: This opened up a whole nightmare. The interesting thing was—Scooter said he wanted us to get together. I was leaving. I said that's really nice, that's great. Scooter had never been a source of information for me. Periodically I'd asked, especially early on, people in NSC meetings, trying to get a little information. Scooter's answer always was "Go check with Condi." He was so disciplined, never spilled the beans about anything, so he was off my list of potential sources on anything.

The controversy was already in the press about—I guess Wilson's op-ed said that Cheney had them go to Niger. Wilson was making the allegation that Cheney was the one who had sent him to Niger to investigate the report that, according to Wilson, turned out to be bogus. I was told in my morning meeting, by Cheney's press staff, that it wasn't true; Cheney didn't send anybody to Niger.

Scooter then brought it up during the lunch. I'm paraphrasing now, but he said something along these lines: Cheney didn't send Wilson to Niger; his wife did. She works there. *Hmm, okay; I didn't think anybody would care about it*. The press wasn't going to care if his wife sent him. That, of course, then became part of the perjury trial against Scooter, which was terrible for me, in that I always liked Scooter. I thought Scooter was a really good guy, but I think Scooter committed perjury. I think Scooter forgot way too much about telling way too many people, me included.

Freedman: But why did he do it?

Perry: What was his motivation for meeting with you and telling you that?

Fleischer: Because the Vice President was being accused of sending Wilson to Niger. I think what Scooter said to me was a perfectly natural thing you say—He didn't do it; here is who did—without Scooter knowing that she was a spy. I don't think Scooter knew that. I have no reason to believe he knew that. The whole thing about that controversy—the notion that the White House would ever knowingly out a CIA agent is absolutely impossible. I know that when *I* told the press about it, *I* had no idea she was covert. She was just like many people I know at the CIA, she worked there.

Riley: George Tenet worked there. Everybody knows *that*.

Perry: But he thought you would be asked and he wanted you to have this—

Fleischer: Yes, that's what occurred to me later. Why on earth was Scooter all of a sudden talking shop with me? Scooter wanted me to get it out. So maybe it was partially that he wanted to have lunch with me, to say goodbye, and maybe it was also happenstance that it was the day that op-ed came out and he may have thought, *Ari is one of those people who talks to reporters; I'll just lay it out there*.

Riley: Sure.

Fleischer: The motive in saying she sent him was absolutely a pure motive to say why it wasn't *this* person, it was *that* person. It was not malicious toward her.

Riley: You had to protect yourself after this? You had to hire lawyers?

Fleisher: Sure. Then I was at home. What a weekend. I was at my parents' house in September of '03. Becky and I were still living in Washington. I'd taken the whole rest of July and August off. I started going on a speaker's circuit. Financially my life had changed. Becky and I were having the times of our lives. Maybe it was Rosh Hashanah or I was just home for a weekend, and on Saturday night I told my parents that their names were about to become "Grandma" and

”Grandpa,” that Becky was pregnant. That was going to be their first grandchild. They were in their 70s, so this was a big deal.

The next morning, or that morning, I saw in the *New York Times* a little piece about a big *Washington Post* story about a criminal investigation into whether or not White House officials had outed Valerie Plame. My heart sank. I thought, *Oh, my God. I remember telling reporters about her. Oh, my God! Could I be subject to a criminal investigation?* That night my oldest brother told my parents that he was going to Baghdad as part of the CPA [Coalition Provisional Authority], so what a weekend. The part about Plame, I couldn't talk to anybody about.

It just so happened I was meeting with my lawyer, Bob Barnett, who was my book agent, my speech agent, my everything agent, in New York because we were negotiating the book deal, so after a meeting with one of the book people, I told Bob, “Bob, there's a story in the paper. I'm one of the people who told the press. Do you think I have a problem here?” He said, “You need to come in and tell us what happened,” so that started that whole debacle for me.

Riley: Did that create tensions within the networks? Not the television networks, but within the Bush networks later?

Fleischer: My friends at the White House told me. They were in a terrible predicament. When there's a criminal investigation of the White House, you can't talk to people to compare stories, compare notes. If you do that, it's a crime. The White House was now under assault for outing a CIA agent. They couldn't do what you would normally do, which is to get your message together, because you can't coordinate when there's a criminal investigation.

Riley: I'm assuming that also meant that you couldn't talk to people who were friends of yours about anything at this time, because it would be—

Fleischer: At that point, knowing that I had spoken to the press, passed on what Scooter told me, I was thinking, *Oh, my God. I'm one of those leakers, I guess*, knowing that I never knew she was covert, knowing I never did it out of malice, but that it didn't matter.

I was going to have this great role going into the ’04 election, going on TV. I didn't have to do any work but defend Bush, be part of the campaign apparatus loosely. I was going to work on the campaign, but I was going to have all the joys of being able to do it and defend my boss and help him win an election. I thought, *I need to make myself real small.* I didn't want reporters to ask me, “Do you know about this investigation? Did you have any role in it?” Also, if it ever came out that I talked to a reporter, I didn't want them to say to Scott, “When was the last time you talked to Ari?” All of a sudden, I started to reject the President and staff, and just walked away, which was a very difficult thing for me to do, because it was my team, my people.

Riley: Sure.

Fleisher: But that's what I did.

Riley: Any follow-ups? Why don't we take a two-minute break?

[BREAK]

Riley: There may have been things you had intended, things about which you thought, *I want to deal with that.* What are we missing? There are probably hundreds of detailed topics that we won't get into, but that's just the nature of the business; you can't cover everything.

Fleischer: If you're focusing on the Presidency and, from my perspective, the press, one of the interesting things was Bush's unwillingness to do big news conferences very often. He said it publicly. He thought that those big East Room news conferences, especially in prime time, were really designed for reporters to strut their peacock feathers and to show that they could ask a more erudite question than the next guy. He didn't think they were good civic uses of time.

His style, instead, was to let the press pool in three or four times a week to fire questions at him, three, four, five questions at a time. He was criticized for not holding news conferences, but he was also one of the most accessible Presidents, measured in terms of how often press did that. President Obama's style is to do many interviews, but he almost never takes questions from the press pool. Different styles for different officials.

One of the other interesting things that people thought—because of some of the East Room news conferences that he did do—Somehow the criticism got around that Bush knew the questions ahead of time, that somehow the reporters gave us questions. I don't know if you remember that controversy.

Riley: No, I don't.

Fleischer: It's because I gave Bush a seating chart of who to call on. He had an order in which he was going to call on people as opposed to "Mr. President, Mr. President," everybody yelling and screaming. He wanted things orderly and sequenced. Reporters didn't know who was going to be called on, but it was the mainstream media and the biggest organizations. There was a sense of what category you belonged to as to whether you were going to be called on.

Riley: You made the determination about who was going to be called on?

Fleisher: Yes.

Perry: On your own or in consultation with—was Karen Hughes still there?

Fleischer: It was Karen, Dan, and me, standing around the Oval Office desk. I had my staff draw up the chart. I think I put together something like, I recommend you start with AP, then go to Reuters, then do the networks, then do the big newspapers, and so forth. It was very straightforward, no big deal, but it did unleash one of those little mini—Bush said, I have a script of who I'm supposed to call on, or something. He used the word "script," and it led to one of these controversies: "Reporters are in his pocket. The White House has the questions and therefore he has a script for his answers." It's part of the urban myth about how things went.

Perry: We were calling for last thoughts and last questions, and this is one of my last. I had an opportunity to see the President for an hour-and-a-quarter session in 2007, at the McConnell Center at the University of Louisville. He came down to do a fundraiser for Senator [Addison Mitchell] McConnell. There were 40 undergraduate students who had McConnell Scholarships and then about five staff members. It was in a room not much bigger than this in a hotel in downtown Louisville. He spoke to the students and then took questions for an hour and 15 minutes.

Then they said there would be pictures afterward. I thought we'd all gather around and it would be a group picture. He took an individual picture with each one. He remembered each person's question and would say a little word to them about it. That was my one and only opportunity to see him in person, in a small-group setting like that, and I was completely bowled over, first of all by him, but I was also taken aback by how different he appeared in person, in a small-group setting like that, as opposed to, particularly, in a formal news conference. I've always had this question, so now is my opportunity to ask: Did something about cameras change him, going through the camera process itself, or did he change in front of the camera, or is it a combination of both?

Fleischer: What a fabulous question. I don't know. There's something about giving a set speech, which had an air of formality, that made him appear to be less than the articulate person that he is. Part of it was that his lexicon had a lot of "ums" and "ahs" in it as he gave those set speeches. Part of it is that it is hard to capture that easygoing, affable charm and wit that you have to see.

Many times we would prefer that the speeches he gave be in front of live audiences as opposed to off of a TelePrompTer because the live audience brought something out of George Bush that made it closer to what you just talked about. I can't tell you how many people I've heard that from. That's why, again, the staff looks at these things and wonders, *Why would anybody think he's not smart?* The press would roll along with that line of attack. Then they'd look at us on the inside and say, "You guys are just loyalists, defending him" as opposed to our saying, "No, that's what he is. This is how the guy is."

When Ehud Olmert became Prime Minister of Israel, his wife came. I wasn't there at the time, but I was told this later. She was a real left-wing Israeli politician, a "Peace Now" type of person. She saw Bush in this meeting in the Oval Office and his thinking and his views of the global situation, involving the Middle East and Iran and this and the whole world, how it fit together. She walked out of there, went to New York, and started telling all the leaders in the Jewish community in New York how smart George Bush was, and they didn't want to hear it. "Don't tell me he's smart." But we saw it.

Perry: We didn't talk about the trip to New York right after 9/11 and his standing at the World Trade Center, which will be long remembered. That, to me, seems to be the genuine George Bush, standing with his arm around the firefighter and saying what he did, which was purely off the cuff, I presume. I hadn't heard him say that line.

Fleischer: Oh, yes.

Perry: It came straight from the heart, the very core of him.

Fleisher: The fireman, Bob Beckwith, started to get down off the fire truck when the President went up, saying, "I shouldn't be here." Bush said, "No, no, no, you stay right here."

Riley: The President also has a problem that I have, which is that sometimes the English language doesn't trip off our tongues. I'm just throwing that out as an observation. I don't know how you deal with that in an environment where your communication is so important.

Fleischer: Karen used to say that she thought the issue with Bush was that his brain worked faster than his mouth.

Riley: I'd like to think that's my problem.

Fleischer: I didn't spend my time worrying about things I couldn't fix. People used to say to me, "Why didn't you tell him how to pronounce the word 'nuclear'?" In retrospect, yes, I could have gone to Bush and said, "It's 'NEW-clee-ar.'" In the moment, those things don't count. Those aren't the important things.

Riley: The feeling being that he was the one elected President of the United States; who are you to start correcting his pronunciation?

Fleisher: There's also an element in the media training I do now, the work I'll do with a CEO or sports guy: You cannot make somebody what they're not. It goes back to the Lord Robertson story and the Fournier story. The most important thing to be if you're a good public speaker is to be confident in your message, confident in who you are, in your abilities. If you start to get people a little too far outside their zone—"You have to work on this"—you might upset something that is working in the rest of their zone, because they start to focus in the wrong place.

Bush would make it a joke about himself. We talked about that. "People misunderestimate me." It just rolled off his back. To him it was, *Let people underestimate me, that's great. Set that bar lower.* That was part of his confidence again. [Richard] Nixon and Carter had to prove to people they were the smartest person in the room in the questions they would ask the staff, the things they would do. It was just ingrained in them. If they didn't prove they were the smartest, they didn't do their job. Bush just is not made up of that stuff. He is a much more normal, regular guy.

Riley: Did he take coaching on speaking?

Fleischer: Not formally. Before big speeches, before the State of the Union, he'd practice; he'd go to the theater and work the speeches. That's again when he'd start making those jokes; that it was the biggest speech of his life. For the big ones he'd be disciplined; he built it into the schedule a sufficient number of days out, so it was never a last-minute cram or jam to practice it, to work it, to get it just right so he was perfectly comfortable with it.

Riley: Were you in the sessions where he was doing this?

Fleischer: No, I was not in the practice.

Riley: Who would be there?

Fleisher: Gerson, Karen, Karl, and Andy or Dan.

Riley: But they would not bring in an outside media consultant or a speech coach or anything like that?

Fleischer: Not that I ever heard about.

Riley: With Clinton, there would be somebody, particularly for debates, I can't remember the name of the person they brought in. But I've often reached the same conclusion that you have about this, particularly for a debate, that it is almost like trying to coach a Little Leaguer on a swing. If I go out to the field and I hear the coach saying, "Watch your elbow. Keep the elbow up, and your chin in," and all this stuff, I think, *If the kid is thinking about all this stuff, there's no way he's going to be able to hit the next pitch.*

With a speech coach, it must be the same way. If you're trying to tell the President to breathe this way and stand this way and so forth, after a while there's no way he can be comfortable at the podium with all of the things that he would have to remember. I guess Bush recognized this about himself and maybe he didn't want to be coached.

Fleischer: Remember, in 2004, at the convention he said, "There are many people who disagree with me, but you'll always know where I stand." That was a warts-and-all kind of statement. That was fine with him. That's why he was and is a comfortable person.

Riley: We talked a couple of times about his dad. Were there instances or episodes during the course of his Presidency where either you could see the experience of his dad's Presidency written on him in a readily recognizable way or where he would reflect back on his father's experience and say, "Look, I think this works or this doesn't work because—"?

Fleisher: There were lots of times, just the way any son is influenced by his parents if they're close. So much of my makeup is because my mother is a Jewish Hungarian immigrant to this country. Even if you don't have an overt conversation with your parent about it, the lessons that that person went through become things that you keep in mind. It's not the only thing; you're shaped by many different influences.

I think the President would call his father, or if his father would call him, he would ask him, similarly when he was doing that, What do you think of this Iranian or that one? I think Bush would do the same thing with his father. I don't know it, because whenever he talked with his father on the phone, I would leave the room. On 9/11, he called his dad. I left the cabin. There were things I knew I was never going to talk to the press about and it didn't seem right that I should be in there when he was talking to his father, his wife, or—

I have reason to believe that he would ask his father his impression about the strength of this leader, the character of a leader, because his father knew these people. The CIA would give him a briefing about the person's background. Who better to ask than your father, the former President, who had negotiated or worked with these people? I think he would do a lot of that. I don't think he would ask his father, Should I or shouldn't I go to war in Iraq? What should I do after 9/11? I have a feeling that didn't happen; I don't know.

I think it was much more on the level that I said, that there were an awful lot of "I'm proud of yous," like a father to a son, as opposed to a President to another President. There was a lot of that.

Riley: His mother?

Fleischer: I don't know. I know less about that. She probably said, "I'm not proud of you. You need to pronounce things better."

Perry: Just like Rose Kennedy.

Fleischer: She's tough, tough, amusing. He was very close to her.

Riley: What about his wife, the First Lady?

Fleischer: She was more influential than people know. She helped make him come across as more thoughtful. She was one of the first to see that he might be coming across as too much of a cowboy.

Riley: The "dead or alive"?

Fleisher: Yes, the "dead or alive," on which I disagreed with her. I thought what Bush said about "dead or alive" absolutely fit the mood of the country when he said it, that it was absolutely the right thing to do, and I still want to get bin Laden, dead or alive, but she thought differently.

The times I would usually see the two of them talk would be on the helicopter. I don't think I witnessed a whole lot more policy talk, but I have good reason to believe it regularly took place.

Perry: Since we're on the distaff side, could I ask about his friendship with Karen Hughes and with Condi Rice? The reason I'm asking is that there have been no Presidents prior to Bush who have had women in those high levels with whom they're such good friends and seem to have such a comfort level. We know there was Eleanor Roosevelt, Madeleine Albright in Clinton's administration, or Mrs. Clinton, so First Ladies have played this role and the occasional woman in the Cabinet, but I can't think of examples of Presidents having these very close women friends as strong policy advisors.

What do you think it is or was in his personality, or his upbringing, that makes him so comfortable with women?

Fleischer: His mother. There was an event early on. He went to the Senate Democratic retreat in January or February '01. I don't remember which Democrat it was who stood up and said something about how wonderful his father is, "Your father is a man of integrity, a man of honor, an honest man. If you have any of your father in you, and I know you do, we're going to get along; we're going to have a great relationship." Bush looked at him, smiled, and said, "Don't forget, I have half of me that's my mother too."

His mother was the salty, tough, good—I won't say "fighter," because that's not the right way to describe her, but spunky one, and Bush has that side too. He just had that. He raised twin

daughters. He had a strong-willed wife. People don't know it—she is so polite and sweet in public, and polite and sweet in private—but she's strong-willed. She told him what she thought. He was surrounded by it.

Karen was great with advice, a sharp, able advisor, and the same with Condi. Maybe it is because of how I was raised and when I was raised and who my mother is, but to me it was never a significant development; it was just the natural course of what a good leader should do, find good people to surround yourself with. Two of those good people happened to be women, Condi and Karen.

Riley: Particularly with Condi, his relationship was very personal. We're reading that they worked out together and so forth.

Fleischer: Yes.

Perry: Sharing the love of football, sports.

Fleisher: She was a regular visitor at Camp David. Condi and Andy were probably the two most frequent.

Riley: Because she didn't have family, I guess, and Karen did; that's what took her back to Texas, correct?

Fleischer: Correct.

Riley: When she went back to Texas, the public story was that she was going to continue to have a presence in the administration, as I recall. Did that happen or not happen?

Fleischer: Yes.

Riley: Happened?

Fleisher: Oh, yes. She would pick up the phone and call the President regularly. When I told the President I was leaving, he said to call Karen, to tell Karen.

Riley: She was still providing advice and—

Fleischer: Yes, and everybody knew she'd come back for the campaign in '04.

Riley: Right.

Fleischer: Of course, she ultimately came back and went to the State Department after Robert [Hughes]—her son's name was Robert—went to college.

Riley: In Condi's case, because there were no other family things that keep you tied, there was a greater investment, I guess, in her career at the time.

Perry: Didn't she often spend holidays with them?

Fleisher: I think so. She would stay at the ranch. The rest of us would stay either in double-wides right outside the ranch—I opted to stay at the Waco Hilton, where I could get room service—but Condi would stay in the President's old house on the ranch. Yes, there was definitely the personal closeness with Condi, but I'd have to say with Andy, too. Andy was always at Camp David. Andy was always at the President's side, Andy and his wife.

I don't know that he was more friendly with Condi than friendly with Andy. That's getting into psychology—

Riley: Of course.

Fleischer: —but it's true for both.

Riley: Had he known Andy that well in the 41 administration, or had this been something that flowered later?

Fleischer: I think it flowered later. He knew him, of course; Andy ran the convention. I suspect it blossomed in the transition, recount, recount transition, and then the Presidency. The seed had been planted previously, but I don't think he knew him that well.

Riley: You mentioned earlier that Karl Rove and others would give the President some books—the caricature during his Presidency was that he wasn't a reader. Was he a reader?

Fleisher: Huge.

Riley: A huge reader?

Fleischer: Do you know who Pete Wehner is?

Riley: Yes.

Fleischer: Pete has a blog, a commentary I guess, where he writes about things regularly. Pete was one of Karl's deputies. Pete is also one of the smartest good thinkers I've ever met. Pete blogged, after President Obama bought that book in Martha's Vineyard, about Bush's reading habits. What Pete wrote was that Bush not only read a ton of books, but he read an ideologically diverse group of books to always shape his mind, move his mind in different directions, in contrast to Obama, who is always reading left-of-center books. Bush won't get credit for it—nobody will ever think of Bush as an interested intellect who is curious about different things—but it's the truth about Bush.

I would never talk to Bush about the books he was reading and that kind of thing. I guess at one point Karl—I think Karl wrote this in his book—Karl and Bush got into a contest to see who could read the most books in some period of time or something like that.

Riley: Which sounded, from the outside, as though it was a put-up thing. We'll help the President's image in this regard by creating a contest between—I'm not saying it's true.

Fleisher: I don't buy that, because nobody knew it was a contest at the time. Karl wrote it in the book—

Riley: After the fact.

Perry: Interestingly, that was one of the first things the President said to this group of students. I remember the figure and it was over 200. He said, "I've read over 200 books," but he didn't give a time frame for it, so I don't know whether—By 2006, that would have been six years into the Presidency. I couldn't tell whether he meant over his Presidency or over the last ten years, but I thought it was interesting that he chose to share that with them.

Riley: And his reading habits were mostly Presidential biography and history?

Fleischer: I don't know. I didn't wade into it with him. But the reason Bush would never talk publicly about reading all these books, doing all this stuff, was that he didn't care. He didn't care if people thought he wasn't an intellectual or that Cheney was in charge, because he couldn't be. It just rolled off his back as part of his "let them underestimate me" attitude.

I'd go in every once in a while and ask him these questions—I think I said this yesterday, that reporters had asked him if he had changed. "Did 9/11 change you?" He hated those questions and would call them "goo-goo questions"—I could never get an answer out of him on any goo-goo questions. That's why he would never make it a talking point, I just read this book and Such-and-So says—He didn't think he needed to make the point.

Riley: His dad is also like that. His dad would complain about people who were trying to stretch him out on the couch and analyze him, so he has that very much in common with his dad.

Did you talk religion much with President Bush?

Fleischer: Not much, really. He knew that I was a religious Jew. He always knew I took off for the High Holy Days. No, I can't say we did. There was certainly nothing that he did that was of a religious nature, no prayer meetings in the Oval Office or any of that stuff.

We talked more about Israel, the question of "Do I have your mother yet?" but he didn't talk religion from a theological point of view or anything else.

Riley: Was he somebody from whom you would see overt manifestations of religion?

Fleischer: No.

Riley: Not meaning going before a prayer breakfast or something like that, but would you catch him reading the Bible at odd moments in the Oval Office or engaged in prayer or something like that?

Fleischer: Sometimes you'd see him before a speech, like that—

Riley: Bow his head.

Fleischer: Yes, then pop up, give a speech. To him it was a genuine, private thing.

Riley: Sure.

Fleischer: The President of Macedonia came, and the President of Macedonia was some type of ordained minister himself. He knew Bush was religious and let it be known that he really wanted to pray with President Bush. President Bush let it get back through—Some of these things get negotiated, about what you do at these meetings—He let it be known that he didn't want to. The President of Macedonia really, really wanted to, so at the end of this meeting the President of Macedonia asked if he could pray with Bush—Bush was not happy about it—so we all left. I think they actually went out of the Oval and into either the private dining room or the private study. I think Bush kept a Bible in the private study. I think that's where he would go and read it, not in the Oval Office. He would go into the private study. I think that's where he took the President of Macedonia to pray.

Riley: Interesting.

Perry: This raises the question again about public symbolism, since you just mentioned the Oval Office, and maybe that's part of the symbolism as well—

Fleischer: Sorry, on September 11, I don't remember if he said it publicly or he said it just to me or on Air Force One, but he said, "If an airplane is ever coming at the White House and I'm in it, all I can do is hope I read my Bible that day." I remember that line.

Riley: Yes, that's in your book.

Fleischer: Okay.

Perry: —the fact, for example, that he may have deliberately kept the Bible not in the Oval Office, perhaps viewing that as a public space. I'm just speculating, but I took one of those West Wing tours of the White House in '07, I believe it was. I had never been there before and was completely overwhelmed to peek inside the Oval Office. I think it was on a Sunday evening and the President's desk was completely cleared. I'm noticing that that's the case with Obama as well.

I think back to historical pictures of so many other Presidents in that space, with personal memorabilia and pictures of family and notebooks and folders and phones, that made it look like it was a real working desk. Was that just done over the weekend, knowing the public was coming through, so they take everything off, or was it always clear like that? Why would that be and why would more-recent Presidents not want it to look like they're really working there?

Fleischer: The practical way it works is that if you have a document you need to read or sign, the staff secretary brings it to you. It's in a special folder for you and you sign it and she takes it away from you. People hover and then take it so they can do what they need to do with it.

He has two assistants whose job is to make sure nothing piles up on his desk, I guess. The real answer to that would be, What was his desk like in Austin, Texas? and I don't know. I don't know what it looked like when he was Governor.

Perry: But when you would go in for your meetings with him, would he sit at the chair behind the desk or would he sit at the couch, in that conversation area.

Fleischer: He sat at the couch—

Perry: In the conversation area in front of the fireplace?

Fleischer: The day I went in to tell him I was leaving, he was at the desk. There were times he was at the desk and would be chomping on a cigar or he'd be—He had papers on his desk then, often in folders, so I guess they would be put there and would be cleaned up and taken away. The secure phone is in a drawer. That surprised me. He has a phone on his desk, but the secure one is in there. That's interesting.

Riley: He would spend most of his time working in this private office? Is that where most of the paperwork would pile up?

Fleischer: No, most of the time he was in the Oval.

Riley: Did he often work in the Residence or not?

Fleischer: Sure.

Riley: Take work home at night?

Fleischer: He'd get in at seven every morning, leave at six every night and take his briefing book with him to the Residence, have dinner, and watch *SportsCenter* and flip through his briefing book for the next day's events and memos, watching *SportsCenter*.

Riley: He didn't care much for formal state dinners and things like that.

Fleischer: Correct. There weren't very many of those.

Riley: What's the story behind that?

Fleischer: There were very few state dinners, which are very long affairs, formal, picture with everybody, not much fun if you're the President. It's fun for everybody else. He would regularly have—and I would go to almost all of these too—working lunches and working dinners with foreign leaders. I have this fabulous collection of the menus from those things. The dining room in my house is outrageous; it's full of the most colorful menus.

Perry: Framed?

Fleischer: Yes, framed. That was his style, much more working than the dancing and formalities, which he just wasn't into. Those were typically five or six Americans on one side of a table and five or six French on the other side of the table. This, again, when you were talking about my access and my issues, was a combination of my being in those summit meetings and then going to these lunches and dinners, which is another world from my world, the foreign policy. But it was his style; he didn't care for those big frou-frou affairs.

Riley: We're almost out of time. There were a fair number of occasions, particularly in the second term, where people would be critical of President Bush and he would say, "They're still writing about George Washington. History is going to have to decide this." What is your sense of how history is going to remember your President?

Fleischer: A significant amount of it will depend on what happens in Iraq. If Iraq really does plant roots, where a stable Arab democracy starts to grow, and if that spreads to other regions in the Middle East, that will be a game changer for people's recollections of Bush.

Riley: Sure.

Fleischer: If things continue to go badly for Barack Obama and the Republicans take the White House, people will just—it's human nature—they'll look back more fondly, with better memories of George Bush.

The first real test of it, though, is going to come November 9, when his book comes out. For the first time in six years, he'll have done something that comes out into a positive narrative, a positive envelope. I've made the case that the election in '04 was the last good, positive thing that happened. He tried to reform Social Security; it went nowhere. He tried to have immigration reform; it went nowhere. Lost the House; lost the Senate. Iraq was terrible; Obama won—

Perry: Katrina.

Fleischer: Yes, Katrina; Scooter's conviction. The second term was just—He left office with such a low approval rating. Even the things that went well, nobody would give him credit for, because of the taint of Iraq and all the rest. If Republicans have huge wins in the House, huge wins in the Senate, on November 2, a Republican resurgence, what will it mean? "Obama on the defensive," will be the tenor of the press coverage and a week later Bush's book will come out.

If his book is a book that grabs people and makes them say, "You know, I see why he made the decisions he made"—That's how his book is written, presenting the facts as he got them, and then basically saying to the reader, What would you have done? If his interviews go well, he can create an atmosphere where people will give Bush a second look. The second look has already begun because of the gracious way he has acted since he left office. Just by being invisible he's raised his approval among a significant number of the American people, so many of the short-term things have already started, but I'll still say Iraq will be the biggest thing.

No matter what, we cannot erase the fact that we went to war for a reason that turned out to be wrong. That, to me, is the ultimate, biggest tragedy of the Bush administration. We led the country to war for a reason that turned out to be wrong. Because I'm a hawk, I'm glad Saddam is gone. We're better off, safer, that he's gone, but we went to war for reasons that turned out to be wrong.

Riley: The President doesn't like handwringers. Does he give reflection on this issue? Does he ask himself where it went wrong and whether it could have been done—

Fleischer: Yes, he asks himself that. I've talked to him about it. I'll be curious to see what's in the book about it.

Riley: You haven't read it?

Fleischer: No, I'm supposed to get it before it comes out. In fact, as I'm sitting here I got an email from NBC News, getting ready for their first interview with Bush about it. They want to talk to me on background about the book. Dana Perino is handling a lot of the book rollout.

Riley: I see.

Fleischer: I think he owes it to the country to get into that in his book. It will be good to see what he says went wrong and went right. Karl wrote in his book that if Bush hadn't been told about chemical and biological weapons, Bush would not have gone to war. I don't think Karl would have written that if Bush hadn't said that to him.

Riley: He had it on pretty good authority.

Fleischer: That's my view of Bush. As much as he wanted to get rid of Saddam, if the CIA had said, "We don't know if he does. We can't give you certitude"—

Riley: That issue is a much closer decision, because the history there was that he did have them and he used them. That truly is one of those 51/49 situations. It's understandable why you couldn't blanket 100 percent of the country to know. The harder thing to know is the nuclear, the yellowcake, and all those things—

Fleischer: —which was never the *casus belli*, though.

Riley: Yes.

Fleischer: If in 2003 somebody had said to you, "We know Saddam Hussein had biological and chemical weapons. We know he used chemical weapons on his own people. We know he threw the UN inspectors out, and after he threw them out, he got rid of the biological and chemical weapons—"

Riley: —you would not have believed it.

Fleischer: —the CIA would have thought you were a plant, that there wasn't a chance in the world. We still don't know. We don't know where they are or if they just didn't have them anymore, if he used his last one. It still is a mystery.

Riley: We're going to be reflecting on this for a long time and you have done us an enormous favor by sitting down with us for this interview. There will be much for us to chew on. I always tell people at this stage that we never exhaust all the possible topics, but we do a pretty good job of exhausting the person, so thanks for allowing us to do this.