GEORGE W. BUSH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

FINAL EDITED TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH KEVIN SULLIVAN

November 1–2, 2012
Charlottesville, Virginia

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Perry: This is the Kevin Sullivan interview for the George W. Bush Presidential Oral History. We have one more administrative thing that we do typically at the beginning of each of these interviews, and that is for the transcriber to be able to put our voices with our names. So we always go around the table and say our names and our titles. I'm Barbara Perry and I'm a senior fellow in the Presidential Oral History Program here at the Miller Center.

McKee: Guian McKee, Associate Professor of Public Policy here at the Miller Center, and at the Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy.

Charnock: I'm Emily Charnock and I'm a doctoral candidate in politics at the University of Virginia.

Sullivan: I'm Kevin Sullivan, former White House Communications Director for President George W. Bush.

Perry: Bush 43, as we call him affectionately. Thank you so much. We thought we would begin today with some biographical information about you. Tell us about where you grew up, and a little bit about your family. Was there any linkage to politics in your family or in your childhood or your youth?

Sullivan: I was born in Evergreen Park, Illinois, on the Chicago southwest side. My mother's family was heavily populated by what would be considered [Richard] Daley machine fans and a lot of city employees. Definitely on my mom's side of the family, outside of the Bishop and the Pope, Mayor Daley was the king. She came from a big family. Many of her aunts and uncles worked for the city. As they got older and began to die, there was always a member of the Daley family who showed up at the wake.

My dad was, I would say, an Independent. He probably voted Republican more than Democrat. We didn't talk about politics a lot at the dinner table—a little bit. We talked about the news a lot. I grew up a news junkie for sure, always voted, was always kind of in the mix but not really politically active. My parents didn't volunteer on campaigns or anything like that. I had a great upbringing. After high school, the family moved to the Boston area for a few years, but I was at college at that point, at Purdue, so I stayed in the Midwest and began my career from there and then went to Dallas.

Perry: And you majored in management at Purdue?

Sullivan: Right.

Perry: Your first job was in Dallas. Was it with the [Dallas] Mavericks?

Sullivan: Correct. During my sophomore year at Purdue, I started volunteering in the sports information office in the athletic department, and really the first day that I was there I knew that that's what I wanted to do. The management degree I always knew was a good idea, but my focus and my emphasis was my job in the sports information office. I knew I wanted to pursue a career in public relations at that point, particularly in sports, but I also felt that the management degree made me more well-rounded and it was just a good thing.

I would have studied journalism had it not been the post-Watergate era; the journalism schools were being flooded. And the notion of the MBA was a hot thing there in the mid-'70s when I graduated from high school, so I ended up going the management route. I took electives in news writing and journalism as much as I could and ended up working three years in the athletic department.

Perry: I have this on the brain because [Bob] Woodward and [Carl] Bernstein are coming tomorrow evening and the Miller Center is cosponsoring a showing for the Virginia Film Festival of *All the President's Men*, and you did mention a time when you were coming of age and looking at news and looking at politics. Did Watergate, or the journalists' impact on Watergate, have an impact on you and your thoughts about politics?

Sullivan: I think so. It raised it so it no longer was something that just your parents were concerned about. It became part of pop culture. It was in the news all the time. I was a senior in high school when the movie came out. I remember where I was when [Richard] Nixon resigned. It was such a pervasive thing.

One other thing about my upbringing is that I have a brother who is 12 years older than I am, and he was a member of the Young Republicans in college and had a "Nixon's the One" poster in his bedroom. So I sort of grew up in a bipartisan environment. I would say, though, I'm an optimistic person. I don't have the skepticism that you need for journalism—Woodward and Bernstein didn't attract me to journalism. I like to write. I was interested in writing. I was more interested at that point in becoming a sportswriter than a serious journalist, but as I got into college I saw there were other ways to—Most people get into sports PR [public relations] because they like sports, not because they're interested in PR. It's just a way to stay involved.

Perry: Right.

Sullivan: But I always kept my horizons open. When I got to NBC [National Broadcasting Corporation], I never wanted to be pigeonholed as the sports guy. I felt I had more to offer than that. I did some things outside of sports at NBC when I had the opportunity. And when I had the opportunity, I shifted to the corporate side at NBC Universal, after the merger.

Perry: Tell us about the beginning of your public relations career. The Mavericks were a new team at the time that you joined them, right? Tell us a little bit about that and about what you learned that you ended up applying in politics, if you did.

Sullivan: Sports is a great training ground for politics. My first day on the job was June 2, 1980, and I worked until 11:00 at night. They were going to have to bodily remove me from this job, because I really felt that this was exactly what I had worked for, what I wanted, and I wasn't going to be outworked. I wasn't going to mess it up. That work ethic came from my parents, but it was also my passion and my enthusiasm. I just loved being a part of a brand-new team starting up before its first season. We had a small team, so everybody pitched in and did a lot. And that is how it is at the White House, too. You do multiple things, whatever it takes, pulling in the same direction.

There are many similarities between sports and politics. You have people jumping on and off the bandwagon; you have fickle fans who show their pleasure or displeasure at the box office, just like they do at the ballot box. You have emotion, and passion for the cause. Jason Kidd was a great player for the Mavericks in the mid-'90s. The Mavericks traded him in his second season. I remember being in public, being accosted by people upset about this trade. My wife said to me, "You must get tired of that." I said, "You want to be involved in things that people are passionate about." The same thing is true in politics. It's personal. They care about it. It means something to them.

That training in sports, and being a part of something that means something to the community, and seeing how passions run hot and cold, definitely prepared me. In sports, everything that happens—Essentially the games are all at night and on the weekend. The players get into trouble at night and on the weekend. There are reporters on deadline. No shortage of crisis issues to manage. All those things are embedded fully in both sports and politics.

A number of people, Ari Fleischer and others, have gone from politics to sports, and I think it works in both directions. I will say the sophistication level of the practice of communications is not as high in sports as it is in politics. The notion of surrogates, third-party effort, a rapid-response operation—sports teams don't have the resources for that. There are too many games, too many practices, too much incoming for the typical communications guy at a team to worry about a long-term communications plan or message calendar—like you would do a policy rollout at the White House following the State of the Union. One of the things that I've tried to do in my consulting work is to bring some of those principles from the world of politics to the world of sports. Ari and others have done that as well, to try to elevate the level of effectiveness of communications in sports.

Perry: You jump up then from Dallas to New York, with NBC, and go into the sports area there with media. What is that like? What proving ground or training ground is that for you?

Sullivan: Well, that was a life changing experience for a couple of reasons: First of all, it was a national job. The Dallas Mavericks occasionally made national news, sometimes not for the right reasons. The NBC job was a big job, but the big thing there was working for Dick Ebersol, the co-creator of *Saturday Night Live*. For those of us old enough to remember a world before MTV [Music Television], he also invented *Friday Night Videos*, which really was the first national show of its kind. He had worked, of course, in news, entertainment, and sports, and he approached his job at NBC as first and foremost a producer. Even though he was an executive and a great leader in many ways, he had the eye of a producer.

I tell this story to students all the time: We had a lot of golf at NBC but we didn't have Tiger Woods except four or five times a year. Tiger, who typically didn't play the Doral Open in Florida, was going to play it one year because he was rehabbing from a knee injury. Ebersol looked at the press release—I had written a lot of press releases at that point. I had been on the job for 20 years in my career—and he said, "If we have Tiger Woods on our air, the first two words of the press release ought to be 'Tiger Woods.' And then what you ought to do is tell a story. Build a narrative about Tiger Woods overcoming this knee injury against a field led by Phil Mickelson and Sergio Garcia, taking on the famed Blue Monster at Doral." Now, even if you don't know golf, the Blue Monster sounds cool. It sounds intimidating. He said, "The reporters never read past the first or second paragraph anyway, so tell a story and get the good stuff up top." When I went to the White House I told that story, and there were many times when I would look at a fact sheet, because the Communications office is responsible for the printed materials, and I would invoke the Tiger Woods rule: "The good stuff is in the fourth bullet. Let's move it up."

Perry: Let's just pause there and say, can you give us an example? We'll jump ahead to the White House, but can you think of a story that came to you and you said, "Why is this down in the fourth bullet?"

Sullivan: It could have been anything. I'll tell you one story that comes to mind that is along these lines, and that was in the summer of 2007 when we had the fight over SCHIP, the State Children's Health Insurance Program. President Bush was in favor of an increase not as big as the one the Democrats were in favor of, and he had said, "If it's bigger than this, I'm going to veto it." We had a two-and-a-half-page fact sheet with all of the reasons supporting his position on what the level of increase should be for SCHIP. A family earning $80,000 a year in New York, for example, was one I remember would qualify. It put a lot of adults on SCHIP. It put a lot of people who had private insurance off private insurance and onto the government rolls. He had lots of good reasons for his position.

Speaker [Nancy] Pelosi was able to go out and say, "President Bush is against health insurance for poor sick kids." At the time, she had a bumper sticker and we had a two-and-a-half-page fact sheet. Then she took the response to the President's weekly address, and had a 12-year-old kid from Maryland whose family had benefited from SCHIP, and made it really, really personal. The thing I learned at NBC, which I used at lot at the White House, was the notion of the eye of a producer: Get the most important stuff up top, make it personal, tell a story, make it concise, get it where people can understand it and where it resonates. It's not always easy to do in a policy battle. I'm sure we'll get to my role at the Department of Education along the timeline.

Perry: Indeed.

Sullivan: Really, the reason that I ended up there was to put that stuff into plain English, and that's what I tried to do at the White House as well.

Perry: Take us then to your next step that you mentioned, with NBC Universal, and going into the corporate area as well.

Sullivan: Right. Following the merger with Universal, the company had doubled in size and there was an opportunity there on the corporate side. They asked if I'd be interested in it and I jumped at the chance. I had been in sports for four and a half years, my whole career really, even though the job at NBC Sports was very much a corporate communications job. My natural curiosity and my appetite for new things and new adventures were at the point where I thought, *Let's do this*.

I remember going with my wife to the world premiere of the movie, *The Interpreter*. I'm in the movie business now, on the corporate side. It was great. Robert De Niro was there because it was part of the Tribeca Film Festival, and Sean Penn and Nicole Kidman were sitting in front of us at this premiere. I looked at my wife Jo [Anne Sullivan] and I said, "Stick with me. This is how it's going to be." And in a matter of weeks and months later, I had left that. I always said I went from 30 Rock to Federal Building Number 6, what's now known as the LBJ [Lyndon B. Johnson] Building. It was an eye-opener. It was a fascinating job to be part of theme parks and the television studio and all the cable networks and Telemundo, and all the things that fell under this now gigantic company. The entertainment business was still part of the GE [General Electric] world, which had its own interesting sublayers to it, in a good way I mean. So that was another great experience.

Bob Wright was the chairman and CEO, a brilliant guy. I learned a lot from him. Both he and Ebersol were very media savvy. Randy Falco was the president of the network at the time, also very media savvy. I learned a lot from those guys, from the way they dealt with the big New York press corps.

Perry: You also got another educational credential about this time. What were your thoughts? It's an MA [Master of Arts degree] from Iona.

Sullivan: The story there is that in the fall of 2002 I taught a class at NYU [New York University], alongside an adjunct. I had to do one semester before I became an official adjunct, under the wing of an adjunct. I hadn't been in the classroom since 1980, but I had this opportunity, and the guy that I taught with was a fellow named John Cirillo, whom I had known from his days at the New York Knicks. It was a Strategic Communications course, mostly upperclassmen, and he asked me to do it with him. Most of the weeks I did it on my own. It was fascinating. The kids were great. There were only 16 in a class. They asked great questions. It was a fantastic experience and I thought, *You know, I may want to do more of this at some point in my career, so I'd better get a master's degree*.

My wife and I were kind of researching—Obviously there are a lot of schools in New York. I wanted to know where I could get through this the quickest and with the least amount of personal and professional disruption. At the time, Iona College had two enormous benefits: it was on the Metro North train line, and they were on trimesters, which meant that I could do this fast. As a bonus, the head of the program was a guy named Jim Eggensperger, now Dr. Eggensperger, who had worked at IBM in communications. A great guy, he had built a really nice program there. So I banged it out in 18 months at night and had a fantastic experience. I went in there thinking, *What can these people possibly teach me about communications?* I was blown away. I learned a lot. It was a great experience.

Perry: That was my next question. This is an MA in Mass Communications. What do you learn there that you're able to layer over all your experience up to that point, and then turns out to be kind of a launching pad into the administration?

Sullivan: The focus was really marketing communications, so it was a nice hybrid of the straight PR things that I had spent most of my career doing, with a little broader perspective, being around the younger kids. I think there was one person older than I was in the program. Being around these 25- to 30-year-olds, and even younger, was great. I've always been pretty good on the technology stuff, but blogging was really coming into its own there. I took a class where I had to write a blog. Getting in the midst of young people who were really at the forefront of digital communications—and all of them had day jobs, too, for the most part—was a great experience. That was the first time people had cameras on their cell phones, and were blogging. All those kinds of things were beginning to happen there, so it was a fantastic experience at Iona.

Perry: Any other questions before we move to the administration?

McKee: Have you done any more teaching since?

Sullivan: Not yet, but I'm a big fan of career day at my kids' schools and I've done a number of guest lectures at schools. At some point, I think I would do it again. It was a great experience. I really loved it.

McKee: My other follow-up is, I understand you worked on the Olympics at NBC. I wonder if you can say a little more about that experience.

Sullivan: That was part of my job as the VP [vice president] of communications for NBC Sports. I worked on three Olympics while I was there. At NBC, the Olympics are a year-round undertaking. Obviously the stakes are high because the network invests a lot of money, so we would each time try to come up with a strategic plan for how we're going to make it bigger and better, and also tell a story.

Some Olympics are different from others. Salt Lake City in 2002 was post-9/11. There was rampant patriotism and the country had this appetite to gather around the television and watch the Olympics together. It was on home soil. There were electric moments, like one of the 9/11 flags being marched into the stadium at the opening ceremony. Other Olympics, like Athens, we had to manage expectations around tape-delayed viewership, security concerns. It was completely different in terms of telling our story to the media. Sydney was extremely difficult in 2000 because of the nature of the tape delay. So it was managing issues. It was a great experience. I love the Olympics. I love the emotion and the nature of it. It's different from anything else. A great moment in the Olympics is like nothing else. You pull for these people you never heard of a week before. That's also part of the magic of NBC and Ebersol and the storytelling: to instill in people a rooting interest in a rower or a field hockey player, whatever it might be. Storytelling has stayed with me from that experience to this day.

Charnock: I don't know if this anticipates something that you might get to a little bit later, but I was interested that you're in the world of Texas sports at a time when George W. Bush is also in the world of Texas sports. Did you have any attraction with the [Texas] Rangers organization? Did you ever meet the then Governor Bush while you were at the Mavericks?

Sullivan: I never met him. He came to some Mavericks games and so I was around when all that was happening. I did know the Rangers people and had a relationship with John Blake, their communications guy, one of the best in baseball. People assumed that I knew President Bush from our Dallas days. We knew a lot of people in common but we had never met. Eventually, when I got to the Department of Education, I met him a couple of times in photo lines and things like that, but I didn't know him. When I sat for my interview, which I know we'll get to, we had never really had a conversation.

Perry: Were you following Presidential politics carefully as an interested citizen in the [Ronald] Reagan years when his Vice President was a Texan?

Sullivan: Absolutely. I was always a news junkie. I always was interested in American history and politics. I would say that I'm not an overly partisan person, but I have my beliefs and my views and they were aligned with President Reagan and [George H. W.] Bush 41. I remember LBJ getting elected in 1964. I remember the yard signs in my neighborhood. I went through a phase when I was a kid where I actually collected political buttons and bumper stickers and that kind of stuff. I think part of it was the competition, the nature of competition. It reminded me of sports. It was a different way to sort of scratch that itch.

I would not say that I was ever a policy wonk. I would sit in meetings at the White House in awe of these young people who knew all this stuff about history. I'd be sitting there scratching my head, trying to remember, *OK, I know the Marshall Plan was the thing after World War II*, and I'd have to try to dust off the cobwebs. I made that comment one day, and someone said, "Don't feel bad. They've been in college more recently than you have." But I was always a student of current events and news and American history and politics, so that fed into my interest in all this.

Perry: And did you cross paths at all with George H. W. Bush, with his Texas ties, while you were there?

Sullivan: No. Just from a distance, I heard him speak and some things like that.

Perry: One person you obviously did cross paths with, who became key to getting into the Department of Education, is [Thomas W., III] Tom Luce. Tell us about that connection.

Sullivan: Tom Luce really changed my life. There's no other way to put it. Tom was an attorney who represented the Perot family, and in May of 1996, Ross Perot Jr. purchased the Dallas Mavericks from its original owner, Donald Carter. I met Tom through the Perot ownership group and we hit it off. Tom is one of the all-time great guys. Tom had run, unsuccessfully unfortunately, for the Republican nomination for Governor, in 1990. Clayton Williams got the nomination that year and lost to Ann Richards after making some ill-timed comments in poor judgment that really kind of derailed his campaign.

Perry: Would you like to share those?

Sullivan: It was one of those things about rape. I don't remember the exact line, but it was one of those things like, "at some point you lie back and enjoy it," or something like that. So I knew Tom from a distance, through his campaign when he was running for the nomination, but met him in 1996. I knew that he was a public education reform advocate. That was his avocation and

he was passionate about it. He headed a Governor's select committee on education reform in Texas. But he was also a great guy, a big sports fan, and that was how I connected with him.

One morning in January of 2005, right after President Bush's second inauguration, I was riding the train from Westchester, where we lived, to my job at NBC Universal. I got an email on my BlackBerry from Tom, asking me if I'd be interested in a senior communications position with the administration in Washington. I smiled and emailed him back saying, "You mean the Wizards?" Referring to the NBA [National Basketball Association] team, for those of you who are listening to this 500 years from now.

I knew two things: I knew that it was probably something to do with education, because of his involvement in Texas, and I knew that if Tom was bringing it up, it was worthwhile and it was something that I should listen to. But I also knew that I really wanted no part of it. I was just getting into the groove in this great new job as Senior VP of Corporate Communications and Media Relations. It was a big opportunity. These guys took a chance on me, reaching over into the sports area to give me this opportunity. I was learning a lot, and I liked it. It was a stressful job. It was not that easy on the family, which has always been important to me. I haven't always done a great job of walking that line, but this was an amazing opportunity and a great job.

The timing just seemed wrong. I had four kids at that time: a daughter, a 16-year-old sophomore in high school. The thought of moving—The whole thing just seemed like, you know, a temporary job. All these things went through my mind. So I really did not want to know any more about this, but I told him that, because it was something he suggested, I would listen to him. He called me on the phone. To make a long story not quite as long, he told me I would hear from a person named Margaret Spellings, whom I had never heard of. He said, "You're going to love her. She's great and she's about to be named the new Secretary of Education. She wants to do things in a whole new way."

One thing I did know—I had a colleague named Mike Doyle at NBC who had worked for Ketchum Public Relations prior to coming to NBC Universal, and we would sit in the office and watch the coverage on MSNBC, of the Armstrong Williams fiasco. Ketchum had gotten the Department of Education into this fracas. Through a contract with Ketchum, allegedly Armstrong Williams, an African American conservative, was paid to write positive columns and say nice things about No Child Left Behind. There were some materials that were printed. We would sit and watch this coverage and I would say to Doyle, "I don't know who thought of this, your old buddies at Ketchum, but this was a bad idea." We kind of laughed about it and just sort of scratched our heads, wondering, why would they do this? How could they ever think that this was a good idea and that they could get away with it?

Perry: So as a PR person, you knew that this was just not done?

Sullivan: It was outrageous, ridiculous. So, Tom told me that she wants to show the world that she's going to do things a different way on her watch. She wants to reach outside the typical talent pool for communications people, who normally come from people who've worked on campaigns and who have been around the administration and worked at a different agency, and she wants to make a statement. It's going to be a Senate-confirmed position. I had images of what that would be like, covering the microphone to talk to my counselor. I just said, "Tom, I

don't know." He said, "Well, let me ask you, have you ever done anything that would keep these people from hiring you?" And I said, "I probably have."

In any event, a few days later, my assistant, a guy named Jaret Posmentier, came into my office and said, "The Secretary of Education is on the phone. What's that all about?" While she was on hold, I Googled her one more time. I didn't know what to call her. I crossed my fingers and went with Madam Secretary. I was honored by the call but I really had no interest. I remember thinking: *I don't have adjectives to describe how little interest I have in this.* Education policy, moving to Washington, family issues—I could imagine what the cut in pay would be. What am I going to say to these guys at NBC?

So we get on the phone and I remember telling her, "Madam Secretary, you've got the wrong guy. I'm flattered that you asked. I will help you in any way. I believe in the President. Any way I can help you, especially with this Armstrong Williams thing." Also, if you recall, at that time one of her first acts as Secretary was to write a letter to PBS [Public Broadcasting Service] protesting the "Buster the Bunny" show [*Postcards from Buster*] that had an episode where there was a same-sex couple. Of course, she was kind of viewed as a moderate and I think the conservative wing of the party wanted to see that she was conservative enough, so she was going to send this shot across the bow to PBS. Originally it was going to be from the Deputy Secretary, but it ended up falling to her and it wasn't received well. I said, "I'll help you out with the 'Buster the Bunny' recovery, but I just don't know about this."

Perry: And you just meant that you would help on the side?

Sullivan: Yes, on the side. I was really thrilled to get the call and she said, "Will you at least have lunch with me?" I said, "Well, no one in the President's Cabinet has ever invited me to lunch, so of course I'll have lunch." That was on a Wednesday and we met that next Saturday. This was the first or second Saturday of February in 2005, really early in his second term. I remember, I drove to LaGuardia [Airport] early on a Saturday morning. It was cold. And I literally said the words to myself out loud as I trudged across the parking lot, "What a waste of time this is going to be." Kind of like I thought I could have stayed in bed.

The first order of business once I got to Washington was to meet with [Edmund C.] Ed Moy, who was the head of Presidential Personnel and later would go on to become the head of the [United States] Mint. Ed is a great guy. Ed said to me, "Before you can meet with the Secretary, we really need to have this pre-meeting," along with a woman named Jan Williams, who was on his staff. They came in and met with me on a Saturday morning. "The first thing you have to know," Ed says, "is if President Bush wakes up tomorrow and decides he doesn't like Chinese people anymore, he can fire me with no other reason. So as you begin considering this opportunity at the Department of Education, you have to know that the expression, 'serve at the pleasure of the President,' really does mean that there's no guarantee, and you can be let go without cause, with no reason." I thought, *OK*—

Perry: This does not bolster your desire to have this job.

Sullivan: Yes. Ed is a great guy and I appreciated his being so straightforward. He asked me a lot of questions and to be honest I really thought that I was phoning it in a little bit. I didn't feel like I gave it my best.

Perry: Had you prepared? Beyond Googling the Secretary?

Sullivan: Not much. To be honest, I had this big job, I was busy, and family stuff—I really didn't have any interest. I had no intention of taking this job. When I left Ed and Jan, I didn't really feel good about the effort that I had put into this, so now I wanted to gear up to really do a good job with the Secretary. I had some time in between before meeting with her. We met at the Majestic Diner in Old Town Alexandria. So I had really given it some thought. I had walked around the block about 20 times and had thought about a specific strategy and tactical things that she could maybe do, and the way she was going to build out her team. I had this master plan for how this was going to go.

Perry: You were thinking of the strategy and tactics as part of your offer to help her on the side? You weren't trying to get the job by doing that, I presume.

Sullivan: My attitude was, this was going to be like a good bank job. I'm going to get in, get out, and nobody gets hurt. I wanted no part of this. I really didn't. I was honored to be asked to help. Just not the right time, not the right guy.

The Secretary arrives, we sit down, and before we even order, she looks at me across the menu and says, kind of banging on the table, "I don't know what you'll do after NBC, but this will be the most important thing you've done so far. I'm putting a team together. It's going to be great. You're going to love the President. It's going to be great for your family. The work is really important. We don't have a lot of time. You'll always be in the room. You really ought to do this. What do you say?"

That was the job interview, and I had this feeling that I was being called to serve. I thought, *What the heck? Life is short.* I'm not going to have this opportunity—They're only going to ask once. It's rare for somebody who didn't work campaigns and toil in the political vineyard to get tapped like this. I asked her a lot of questions. She kept saying, "Yes, whatever you want. If that's how you want to do it, fine."

I left the restaurant, called my wife Jo, and I said, "We've got a little bit of a situation here." Now, I should say that she was all for it from the beginning. She has a great spirit of adventure, and thought it would be great for the family, the whole notion of D.C. as a place to spend some time raising your family. She thought it was great. She loved the President—the whole deal. So I really began to seriously consider this. I knew in my heart at that point that this was the right thing to do, but I couldn't quite mentally and intellectually get there. I kept thinking: *What am I going to say to Bob Wright and Randy Falco and these guys who took a chance on me at NBC Universal?*

The next thing that happened was Secretary Spellings embarked on a wooing campaign, which again was a great honor. Nicolle Wallace called me one day and invited me to come to the White House. I had never been to the White House.

Perry: We should say that at that point she was Nicolle Devenish.

Sullivan: She was Nicolle Devenish at that point, and she was the White House communications director. I thought, obviously, *I'm going to do this, go to the White House*. I thought maybe she was going to ask me some questions, to kind of check me out or whatever. I waited for a while in the White House, in the lobby of the West Wing, just in awe thinking about the history and all that has taken place there and how cool this was that I was there.

I went to her office and she said to me, "What questions could I answer that would help you make this decision? We think it's great that there are people in the private sector who are considering coming in, in the second term, and you're going to love it." And she said, "If you're leading up communications at an agency, the most important thing is to have a connection with the Secretary and you've already got that, so you'll do fine. How can I help you?" There were no questions of me. We talked a little bit, for half an hour, I guess. She was great. I remember her saying, "I can't really give you a tour during working hours but let me just walk you down to the Briefing Room." We did that and I just thought to be a part of this world would be amazing and I've got to figure out how to do this.

Perry: That sealed the deal for you?

Sullivan: That and my wife's continuing to say we should do it and pointing out all the benefits. So I got over my reservations about how to tell the NBC guys. And a funny thing: Bob Wright, early in his career as an up-and-coming GE attorney, stepped away from GE for a while. When the RICO [Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations] Statutes were enacted, he stepped away to work at a federal court in New Jersey, if I remember correctly, prosecuting organized mobsters. When I eventually ran this by Bob, I said, "It's just like what you did with GE." And of course he said, "It's nothing like that at all." Which again, was flattering to me.

Perry: How about your daughter? You talked about her being 16 and in high school.

Sullivan: Amy was not a fan of the idea but eventually came around. A year later she would write her college application essays on how the move was the best thing that ever happened, so it turned out to be a great thing for her. She's now in grad school at George Mason. She went to JMU [James Madison University] for undergrad and had a great experience in Virginia.

Perry: With an interest in government, public policy?

Sullivan: Communications. But the thing that really sealed the deal was there was one final call with Secretary Spellings. I had begun the background-check process, because I knew that I could slow play that a little bit. I started that before I even approached my bosses at NBC, because it was going to take six or eight weeks or whatever. But there came a point when this was going to go public. People were starting to get phone calls from the FBI.

I had one more conversation with the Secretary, repeating all the questions I had already asked her and she basically said, "We've gone over this. I've just got to tell you, if you don't do this, you're kind of being a dumb ass." I said, "The last person I want to be called a dumb ass by is the Secretary of Education, so I'll do it."

I should say, one other person had a big influence: There was an executive at NBC Sports named Ken Schanzer, who had the title of President of NBC Sports and was sort of Ebersol's right-hand man. Ken had been a lobbyist in Washington. He had worked for the NAB [National Association of Broadcasters] and that's how he ended up at NBC. He had been a speechwriter. He had worked on campaigns for John Heinz, back in the day. Schanzer was the one guy that I confided in, because he knew Washington, he knew politics, he knew communications, he understood the media extremely well, and he also knew NBC intimately.

So I went to him. We had a phone conversation late one night while he was with his family in Vail, Colorado, on a ski trip. He said, "Let's go over the pros and cons." I still have the list and it was incredibly accurate. The pros were: This is an issue that the President cares about, meaning—I remember him saying, "It's not like you're going to the Department of Labor." No offense to my former colleagues at the Department of Labor, but this was an issue the President campaigned on. It was important to him, and it was important to Mrs. [Laura] Bush. Obviously, No Child Left Behind was a signature domestic policy issue. Number two was his relationship with Margaret Spellings. She's going to be on the inside. Because of those two things, there is no telling where this will lead.

It never really occurred to me that, *I'm going to use this to get to the White House*. I was loyal to her. In fact, when Nicolle announced she was leaving, I didn't pursue the job. I was committed to Secretary Spellings, and we could talk some more about that if you're interested.

Perry: By the way, if you have documents or letters or even that list, you can always attach that to your transcript if that's something that you would like to be—

Sullivan: I'll do it.

Perry: Part of the reason that I think that's important is that you hear so often now that people don't take these positions for many of the reasons that you're suggesting. Family situations—They don't want to move families, or they have children in high school, or spouses. Or, they don't feel as much a part of the system as they perhaps want to, or they don't want to go through the background check.

Sullivan: Right.

Perry: Or they don't want to take the drop in pay. You overcame all of those.

Sullivan: Right. I feel like we can take those almost one at a time.

Perry: Let's do.

Sullivan: Getting back to the Ken Schanzer pro and con list—Those were some of the real positives: I don't know where this is going to lead, and it will be a great adventure. The only negative really was, he said, "You're going to be tagged. The President is unpopular and you're showing the world now that you not only are Republican, but you're a Bush guy, and that's a tough thing, and there will be certain doors that may get closed, probably not many." His recommendation—He didn't say, "You should do this," but his counsel was, "You're going to get one shot at this." I felt that way.

I think most people's regrets are more the opportunities they pass up. If you make a mistake, most of the time you can fix it. There was some fear of the unknown but after that conversation with Ken, coupled with that final conversation with the Secretary, and my wife's support, I decided to do it.

When I eventually told the NBC guys, they were fine. I worked through all that. In terms of addressing the potential obstacles, so my wife and I sat down at the dining room table one night with a yellow legal pad and took on the financial thing. More than a 50 percent cut in pay. Our kids were at Catholic school in New York, so we said, well, we're going to put them in public school and we're going to find a house like we eventually did in Fairfax County, with great public schools.

My daughter was a competitive gymnast, not super elite but she loved it and competed and was good at it, and we knew that in Virginia, the high schools had gymnastics. So she went from a private club near White Plains, New York, to the team at West Springfield High School, and I'm proud to say she co-captained the team to its first district title in many years. That was a phenomenal experience: less pressure, competitive enough but not crazy. It was the best thing. In all honesty, her experience at West Springfield was probably better than the experience she had at her Catholic school in Westchester.

We sort of took those things on. We found solutions to each of the things that were holding us back. My fear about NBC was really that short-term pain of: What are people going to think? In fact it's funny—We'll get to Senate confirmation, I'm sure. When I went through that process, so many people were asking, "Why would you leave a job like that?" I got a lot of that. A lot of people were scratching their heads. The Department of Education? I would tell people that each of those things is short term and solvable, and in my experience the things you pass up really are the things that you regret. If it hadn't worked out, I would have found another job someplace, and it still would have been an adventure that I had learned something from.

Perry: You spoke about the Alexandria lunch with Secretary Spellings and said that she was appealing to your sense of service. Did that strike a core feeling of patriotism in you? You've mentioned your Catholicism a little bit. Was there also kind of a vocational calling that was speaking to you?

Sullivan: You know what? She did say at one point, "Not to get all faith-based on you, but I think the hand of God is at work here," and that appealed to me. I didn't fully understand what faith-based meant. The President had the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.

It was really two things: Number one, I felt that I was being asked to serve. So much of what I had done in my career in sports was really fun. And at NBC and television, it was really interesting and exhilarating and fun, and completely unimportant most of the time. I thought, *Here's an opportunity to use my abilities and experience, and to do something that might actually be important.* The other thing was, she had a look in her eye. I've always been a team guy. I love being a part of a team and setting a goal and a mission and pursuing it with vigor, and she just had this look in her eye when she said, "I'm putting a team together. It's great people. It's going to be fun and the work is important. We don't have much time. What do you say?"

One other thing that I have to add here is that my father (Timothy J. Sullivan), who passed away in December of 2010, really was the biggest influence on me and was the number-one person I would go to for counsel. He was not an advice-giver, and he certainly wasn't an advice-giver when unsolicited. Well, I called him on my way home from that lunch in Alexandria, going from the airport back home, and I said, "You're not going to believe who I had lunch with today." I told him about the opportunity, and he said to me, "I don't like this. This is a temporary job. You're going to be 50 years old at the end and you're going to be looking for a job just like the one you have now. The politicians—Half of them are crooks. I like the President but you never know about these other guys and I don't know about this." He had a really tough time thinking that, six months into being the Senior Vice President at NBC Universal, I would step away for what he viewed as a temporary job at the Department of Education,.

Perry: Had he come up and been formed by the Great Depression?

Sullivan: Absolutely. He was born in 1921 and security and stability was everything. Having a pension—That was in his DNA, embedded permanently. Later, I saw him in person at my sister's house in Wellesley, Massachusetts. I had decided to take the job, and I pulled him aside before we got in the car to drive back to New York. We stepped into the dining room and I said, "Dad, I'm going to do this thing at the Department of Education." And he put his hand around my shoulder and said, "Well, then I'm in." And from that moment on—Then of course when I got the opportunity at the White House, he smiled and said, "I knew that wasn't big enough for you."

Perry: Did he get to meet the President?

Sullivan: He did. They came for a holiday event in—I guess it would have been 2006 or '07.

Perry: Both your parents?

Sullivan: Yes. My mom [Rose Rita E. Sullivan] and dad [Timothy J. Sullivan] both came. That was a thrill. So those are things that, when you choose to take a crack at something like this, you really have no way of knowing where it could lead. I tell young people the fear of the unknown can really paralyze us, and it paralyzed me in certain instances in my career. The idea here is to weigh the risk and reward, the pros and the cons, and as long as the risk isn't too steep, or is manageable, we need to seize these opportunities when they come our way, based on my experience.

Perry: Tell us then, about going through the Senate confirmation process, the background checks.

Sullivan: There was a woman named Deborah Price, who had worked for Don Nickles on the Hill, and was going to be my Sherpa. She said, "You might not get a confirmation hearing at all, the way things are going." This was May of 2005. "By the time we get to it, we're going to be up against the summer recess." I said, "I want a hearing. I want the full experience." I was sort of in adventure mode. And she said, "No, you don't." I said, "I really do." And she said, "You really don't. Trust me, you don't."

She began to educate me on how this was going to work. The first stop was a meeting with staffers of the Republican members on the Senate Education Committee, and that was a breeze. They were preparing me for the meeting with the Democratic staff. Beth Buehlmann was the lead person there. She was also from Chicago, from my neighborhood. In fact, we laughed about the fact that you don't find that many Republicans from our old stomping grounds. I really believed that I could say, "I'm the new guy, thank you. I'll make sure that the Secretary is aware. I understand your concerns." And that I could play off on being new in town as a way to get through many of the tough questions. So I get to the meeting with the Democratic members of the Senate committee, their staffers.

Perry: Before you do that, were the Republicans—Were you saying that to the Republican staffers? "I'm sure I can do this just fine. I'll be the new guy."

Sullivan: Right.

Perry: And were they saying, "That's not going to work. They're going to really batter you about Armstrong Williams, No Child Left Behind"?

Sullivan: Yes. In fact, Senator [Frank] Lautenberg in particular was on a jihad about propaganda. We talked a little bit about what was going to be on his mind, and they agreed that the best I could do was not engage—I wasn't at the Department for any of that—and basically let them know that they had been heard and that I would take their concerns back with me, and I would take note of them. I felt that I would have no difficulty talking about how I wouldn't have ever recommended some of the things that were done.

Carmel Martin, who was Senator [Edward] Kennedy's education policy person, led the meeting with Democratic Senate staffers, and it was a fascinating experience. There were probably 10 or 12 staffers in the room, representing three or four Senators. The first question was, "Why would you leave a job at NBC to do this?" Questions two through 10 were, "My husband wanted me to ask you, what was John McEnroe like? And did you get to go to Wimbledon?" I'm thinking to myself, *This is pretty good.* Then all of a sudden there was like a flip of a switch and the heat got turned up, and there was a barrage of questions, not really nasty, but heated, about No Child Left Behind being underfunded. I didn't know what an "unfunded mandate" meant but there was a lot of that.

There was a lawsuit—I'm trying to remember the timing. Senator [Richard] Blumenthal, who was then, of course, the Attorney General of Connecticut, brought a lawsuit against the Secretary. That had not yet happened but was in the works, as I recall.

Perry: So that's percolating.

Sullivan: That was percolating. I stuck to my guns as best I could and said those things: "I'll take it back to the Secretary. I hear your concerns." After about 20 or 25 minutes of tough questioning, it shifted again to: "We're really glad you're doing it." "More people should come from the private sector." "You're going to love living here." "D.C. is crazy; you're going to love it." They really did agree that my career at NBC, corporate and sports and everything, had prepared me for this. "We look forward to working with you." It was very professional, a lot of fun, scary for a few minutes.

Then I was kind of waiting for the hearing. The word was that Senator Lautenberg was going to have me in for a hearing, to have his say on propaganda. Then, as fate would have it, Sandra Day O'Connor announced her retirement, and the calendar got thrown up in the air.

Perry: That was right before July 4th weekend of '05.

Sullivan: Right, and ultimately I did not have a hearing. We all gathered around the television and C-SPAN [Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network] one night, when Senator [William] Frist just read off the names of all the people being confirmed. I still have that moment on DVD. So that was it. That was my first real D.C. political moment. Even though I didn't get to cover the microphone and confer with my counselor, it was still an interesting experience.

Perry: Or say that you didn't want to answer on the grounds that it might incriminate you, on the advice of counsel.

Sullivan: That's right.

Charnock: That could have been a great DVD.

Sullivan: That would have been a great DVD, but it didn't work out that way.

Perry: You mentioned Carmel Martin, the staffer to Senator Kennedy. Was that office supportive of you because Senator Kennedy was supportive of No Child Left Behind, or was he making the case already that it was underfunded?

Sullivan: He loved Secretary Spellings. They were very close. In fact, we traveled together. I had the opportunity to go on a trip with Senator Kennedy.

Perry: Tell us about that.

Sullivan: We went to an event in western Massachusetts. A grant was being given in western Massachusetts. The event was at a school library, as I recall. He spoke, the Secretary spoke; it was great. The interesting thing about it—I sat across the aisle from him on a U.S. Airways commercial flight, in coach, and when he sat down in his seat, he pulled out the morning clips that had been prepared for him and started to go through the clips. I thought this was fascinating, that Senator Kennedy, just like everybody else, reads the clips first thing in the morning. He was very generous with his time and fun to talk to, and obviously great on education policy.

There was an episode we can talk about later, at the White House, with Senator Kennedy and President Bush, where the President said that what he liked about Senator Kennedy was that he was all about getting it done; he was about legislation and trying to find a way. I saw that on that trip. He was great. But at that moment, there was no challenge by Carmel or any of those people, on me personally. It was just, "We want you to know what issues are important to us." There was a little bit of, "I don't know how well we'll be able to work together if you continue to do—" That was when the heat got turned up a little, but overall the tenor of that meeting was very professional, and she was great. I saw her at an event at NBC in September 2012. She ended up going to the Department of Education as the policy chief there, so it was just another great experience.

Perry: Before we get you to your office at Building Number 6, now the Lyndon Johnson Building, are there any other questions before that?

McKee: I think we'll have more once we get there.

Perry: All right, let's get you into office. Tell us what that's like, and about the fact that Secretary Spellings had done some reorganization of ED [Department of Education] offices, particularly in communications, and what that was like as you came into it.

Sullivan: Her view was that any job that had anything to do with message should be under one umbrella. This ended up including the 10 regional offices, not just communications in the press operation but also the grassroots outreach operation and these regional folks. It was around 125, 130 people in total, which was one of the things that appealed to me about the job. The biggest department I had ever managed was probably seven or eight people, so this was a big challenge.

The first thing I set out to do was to get to know who all these people were. Keep in mind that Education is the smallest department in the government, with 2,400 people at the time. Of the 135, I don't know what the number of political appointees was, but it was small. Maybe 20 or 30 out of 135 were political appointees like me, and the rest—I figured many of them probably didn't vote for the President. I never asked anybody, obviously, but it was an odd situation to know that I was temporary and they were permanent. I was sort of the boss but—Deb Price had told me, "You know what they call us, don't you? We're the Christmas help." They were here before us and they're going to be here after us.

I decided—This may have been kind of naïve—that I was going to get to know their worlds, and I felt that the only chance I had was to figure out who, of the career staff, could help us on our mission, and who couldn't. I was going to tap into the people who could, and not worry about the people who couldn't, because there was really nothing that I could do to get them to change. There was no GE-like process for evaluating employees. There was a process, but we were moving too fast and had too short of a window to worry about any of that.

I went to every birthday party and staff meeting throughout the Department that I could. I just sort of buzzed around the building all the time, trying to get to know people and listen to them. One day Secretary Spellings saw me somewhere in the building and she said, "Are you still on that charm offensive of yours?" That was really the first order of business, to try to learn the ropes and learn about education policy. There were two or three crucial people: Kerri Briggs, who now heads up education policy at the Bush Center in Dallas, a scary-smart person, as is Holly Kuzmich, who became at the end the Assistant Secretary for Policy. She was a deputy when I was there. I relied on them. They were both really smart, good-natured, and I would ask them a lot of questions about the policy issues.

My mission was to remove from the lexicon things like "n-size" and "growth model," and some of these jargony education reform terms, and try to speak in plain English, to make it as personal as possible, to make it about the kids, not the policy. When we had good results, we'd trumpet them in a setting with a backdrop that had kids and told a story. This was a tricky undertaking, in part because we were getting it from Republicans and Democrats alike, Democrats mostly

because of the funding. The really conservative wing of the party felt that maybe we didn't even need the Department of Education.

So it was a balancing act. We had support from some Members and not so much from others. We did have Congressman [John] Boehner, who was the head of the committee. And obviously Senator Kennedy carried a huge weight on his side. So it was good, but again, trying to make it about plain language and about the kids was my mission. I was there for 13 months. It was a great experience. I would have stayed to the end if the White House hadn't called. I could look out the window and see the Capitol, which was a daily reminder that I really am in Washington and this is important stuff.

Perry: *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*.

Sullivan: It was a lot like that. I never tried to be "Mr. Washington." When you deal with Hill staffers—In my experience, they speak a different language completely. The Hill is its own world and if you try to fake it and act like you also speak that language, you'll be exposed quickly. So I tried to have an attitude of asking for their help more than telling them what they needed to do to help us. Again, the President wasn't very popular. I was there during Katrina. We can talk about that.

Perry: Let's back up and maybe bore down on the issues related to No Child Left Behind. First of all, I'll ask my colleagues if they have any questions to begin.

Charnock: I just have a quick question that sort of leads into this. In talking about Hill staffers having a different language, and that you were trying to put No Child Left Behind into plainer language and that maybe being an outsider to the policy world was helpful to do, so that you had the big picture. You tried to reframe No Child Left Behind. What was the message that you tried to drive there?

Sullivan: The message that we tried to drive was that the accountability—You started plain language by saying that this is good for children in America. They will learn to read, write, and do math at a higher level than without this. If this didn't exist, no one would be worrying about these kids, particularly the kids with disabilities and the poor kids and the minority kids. Nobody else was worrying about them. In fact, there was an interesting challenge in messaging. We set up a series of lunches for Secretary Spellings to talk about this issue: how to get people to care. We had Donald Graham, Fred Barnes, Mort Kondracke, Thomas Friedman. These four immediately come to mind, these big thinkers in Washington. We asked each one of them—

Before I finish that thought—I had an experience at a luncheon once where I sat next to an official from the Scarsdale, New York, school system. He asked me what my job was and I told him No Child Left Behind communications, Department of Education. He said, "Man, you've got a tough job. We don't really have those issues in Scarsdale." Now, I lived in Valhalla, right near White Plains, and my kids went to Catholic school in Yonkers, on the Scarsdale line. I knew that area, and I said to him, "This doesn't hit Scarsdale? What about all those kids right across the line in Yonkers?" At the time, if I remember correctly, Yonkers was literally going bankrupt. The city of Yonkers had no money, and there were terrible issues in the public schools there. I said, "That doesn't affect Scarsdale?" He kind of danced around it and didn't really address the

issue. As we brought in the Donald Grahams and the Tom Friedmans of the world, it was: How do we get the people in Scarsdale to care about these kids in Yonkers? I saw that as our mission. Each one of them had a different answer, and each in his own way admitted it was unsatisfactory.

As I recall, Friedman said energy independence. Somebody else said terrorism, and somebody else said, "Well, the Secretary ought to just say that you can either run into them owning a small business or with a gun in your back at an ATM machine." I said, "Well, we can't say that." I don't remember who said that but someone said that.

McKee: It sounds like Mort Kondracke.

Sullivan: I don't think it was Mort. Mort was big into the science stuff and competitiveness. But it was a difficult thing to get people to care about kids in somebody else's neighborhood, and that was really the ultimate challenge. The way that we went about it was just to say that, as these kids go, so goes the country. No Child Left Behind puts in a system that helps these kids do better. As I recall, by the time President Bush left, first graders in 44 out of 50 states were doing better in reading and writing and math.

No Child Left Behind certainly wasn't perfect. There were implementation issues, but it was the right idea. Without accountability, nobody pays attention. During my White House days one year on Meet the Teacher night at my daughter's middle school in Fairfax County—Washington Irving Middle School was an awesome school with a great principal—there was a young history teacher, Ms Frasier (since married with a new name I don't know). The kids loved her. She was young and cool and loved history and loved being a teacher. The very last thing she said at the end of her six minute presentation was, "By the way, if you hear anybody talk about 'teaching to the test,' we don't worry about that here. I teach what we need to teach, and I've never had a kid get anything less than an 'outstanding,'" or whatever the metric was on the test.

We used to try to find teachers like her at the department, to stand up next to the Secretary. Some of the most effective events—I remember a teacher in Spokane, Washington, a second grade teacher, who had been teaching for 26 years. She said, "No Child Left Behind makes me a better teacher because it gives me information."

Perry: How did you find them, other than from your kids' own schools?

Sullivan: We had an outreach department that really dug in and followed news coverage all around the country. We had these regional offices that dealt with the different school systems, and those were the people who were our best advocates.

We did an interview with Secretary Spellings and Media General, the company that at that time owned a bunch of TV stations. Now they've sold the newspapers and kept the TV stations. They collected questions from teachers in places where they had stations, and this was also going to appear in print. There was a kindergarten teacher, I believe from St. Petersburg, Florida. Her statement was, "We all know that not all kids are capable of learning the same. Kids from finer homes learn better than other kids." The Secretary almost came out of her chair. There was an element of racism and bigotry that was an undercurrent of people who opposed accountability. The teachers union was an issue that was almost impossible to overcome, in addition to this other

issue of people just not really believing that minority kids, poor kids, or those with disabilities, were ever going to do as well. I used to say, "If I can end up at the White House, these kids can end up anywhere." And I mean that. Expectations that we have for ourselves are such a big part of what we achieve. We tried to put it in those terms.

So, to answer the question, "What was the overarching message?"—we tried to encapsulate all those kinds of things, to say that No Child Left Behind gives every kid a chance to be their best. We tried not to make it so much about accountability and testing, but about the kids and the future of our country.

Secretary Spellings always said the maddest that she ever saw President Bush was when he was Governor, at an event when a teacher made a comment similar to the one I just mentioned from this Media General interview, that not all kids can learn the same. No Child Left Behind was incredibly aspirational. We took a lot of heat for the 100 percent proficiency. The Secretary used to say, "OK, raise your hand if you want your kid to be one of those who can perform below grade level." Is 94 percent the right number? Who's going to offer up the 6 percent of the kids? It was an aspirational goal, but it was worthy.

The teachers union thing was an enormous obstacle. It was really impossible to overcome, honestly, as a communications matter. One example: *Education Week* did a little blurb on me when I was hired. You know, education is local. There's a local head of the union in every community, and the easiest thing, when we would go to—Let me back up one step to finish. There was a blurb about me—that they had hired this guy from NBC and he's going to come and do strategic communications across the whole department. Of course the shot from the union is, "The last thing they need is to worry about is communications; they need to worry about teachers." You could just predict it. You hit a button and it just came out. The guy didn't know me. He had never talked to me. Then, when we get to the White House, that's what I hated about the partisan nature of that. I'll hold that thought.

So, we would go to Spokane and do an event with a teacher. The local reporter had never covered education, in all likelihood, as a national issue. They know the local union person. They'd quote the teacher, they'd quote the Secretary, but there's always that howitzer shot from the local union. The kids didn't have a union. That was another thing we used to say. Who's representing the kids? That would be us. It was imperfect. The law is 1,100 pages long. There were going to be problems with implementation; that's why they have a reauthorization, to work out some of those things. The notion of waivers and the notion that the accountability is sliding back is a little scary, but the union issue was one that was almost insurmountable as a communications matter.

McKee: You didn't see any way that potentially—One of the critiques you get sometimes from thoughtful people on the teacher side is that teachers need to be partners in the reform process. Even going back before your time at ED, in the early stages, maybe even in writing the law, would there have been a way to bring the teachers in as a partner in the process? Or were many of those unions so entrenched in the status quo that they were going to fight any meaningful kind of reform, particularly in the accountability direction?

Sullivan: Not having been there while it was being authored, I can't speculate on that. I do know that Deputy Secretary Ray Simon was a longtime schoolteacher. We always had a schoolteacher in residence. The department did teacher workshops in the summers and empowered those teachers and tried to involve them throughout the year. Involving teachers more and earlier would definitely have been a good idea. We did it a lot. We probably could have done it more, especially knowing that that criticism was going to be there.

The AFT [American Federation of Teachers] was more reform-minded than the NEA [National Education Association], and we had a pretty good relationship with them. We did a town hall style meeting with Secretary Spellings and went to their convention, which was bold. She was all about bold ideas. The first time No Child Left Behind was mentioned, the teachers who were gathered there, probably 800 teachers, hissed. This was hostile territory. We tried to have a very proteacher message and stand alongside teachers as much as we could, but the union forces—We were outnumbered, and the resources that they had financially and in terms of boots on the ground were more than we could compensate for.

McKee: I'm thinking about—I guess the Connecticut suit was the first state.

Sullivan: Right.

McKee: The issue was funding levels, whether it was adequately funded. Do you think that was really what it was about, or was it sort of a stalking horse for these larger issues, concerns about teaching to the test, or the issues that the unions were raising, and that the politicians are responsive to those concerns, and were seizing on to the question of funding?

Sullivan: I think the funding thing was the third most important. The most important thing, by the time we got there, was the political consideration. My observation is that, with some exceptions, politicians want to get elected. Attorney General Blumenthal is now Senator Blumenthal, as Exhibit A. So number one, there was no credit for President Bush. This was a policy area. This was the first policy event that he did after he got elected. It was the first thing he took on. I think the political aspiration tied to needing the support of the teachers union was number one. Number two was: don't have this be a victory for Bush as we move along. And the third thing was that they thought that it really was underfunded. Things had changed and money was going elsewhere by then. I was always skeptical that that was the true reason.

Charnock: Could I just follow up on that? This may have been prior to your time there, but I understand there was another, not necessarily a legal suit, but a big issue with Utah, in terms of implementation, which is the most Republican state in the nation. Do you have any sense of what the dynamics were behind that?

Sullivan: The issue there, if I'm not mistaken, was kids with disabilities. The issue was the "n-size" word: How many kids have to be counted in the sample against your annual yearly progress?

Charnock: The 1 percent to 3 percent gap?

Sullivan: Right. They wanted the rule changed so that they could show they were making—We want to check this on the record, but the issue there was how many kids with disabilities had to

be counted so that it wouldn't keep them from meeting their annual progress goals, so that Utah didn't fall into the category of schools in need of further attention.

Secretary Spellings was a warrior for the kids with disabilities. The whole point of the Education department is to look out for the kids nobody else looks out for, who would fall through the cracks without that federal safety net. I don't remember the outcome of that. That may have been around the time I left. I remember working with reporters on that issue and I remember that she stood her ground on holding them to that requirement.

McKee: What's interesting too—One of the dynamics that was going on, as I understand it at least, was that Secretary Spellings was actually trying to respond to some of the critiques coming from states, and to make some exceptions. I'm curious about how that was in your position a balancing, on the one hand to make the law work, while not letting it slip away in terms of the actual sums.

Sullivan: There were some exceptions granted and some of them were a little bit controversial. Arkansas comes to mind, where Cecil Picard, who has since passed away, was a great state chief and really was a big No Child Left Behind guy. Ray Simon was the deputy secretary, and was from Arkansas. There was one that was sort of controversial with him, maybe because we told him no, and Ray had to go deliver the bad news. But generally, the places that got exceptions were exemplary in other areas and lived up to the bright lines of the policy and the spirit of putting the kids first and looking at holding states accountable for these kids.

McKee: Did the Secretary have support from the White House on making exceptions like that, generally?

Sullivan: Yes. The Secretary had full support of the White House. She was the expert. She was heavily involved in the writing of the law. I don't know if you guys have heard this, but Alexander Russo, who writes a blog called "This Week in Education," is working on a book on the creation of No Child Left Behind. He's a really smart guy and his blog is interesting. He's a talented guy, and I think this book will be very interesting. Secretary Spellings has spent a lot of time with him, and that will be something to keep an eye on.

McKee: Absolutely.

Sullivan: She was the expert, along with some others, but she had the full confidence and authority not only of the President, but the whole domestic policy team. She had led that team at the White House. Some of her people were still there, whom she had brought in.

Perry: And she was one of our very first people in this project to be interviewed, so we're happy of course about that.

Sullivan: She's one of a kind, and another person who changed my life.

Perry: Could I ask about the bipartisan element? We talked a little bit about Senator Kennedy, but in today's world of politics we hear so much the cry for bipartisanship, and it would seem to me that this would be the perfect example, knowing that, as you say, even on the Republican side there were people who had issues that there even existed a Department of Education, not to

mention a new federal law that was going to be opposed from above, and maybe be an unfunded mandate. But I would have thought that this would be the paradigm of what people say that they want from Washington: people like Senator Kennedy working across the aisle with a Republican President.

Sullivan: It was disappointing.

Perry: So it didn't work the way we say it should work or want it to work?

Sullivan: It worked with some Members.

Perry: The legislation was passed.

Sullivan: Right. It was passed in a big way, with a big bipartisan majority, but as it went along and there were complaints from the union, and President Bush became vulnerable, there was a piling-on effect.

I can use an example from my White House days to illustrate: With Hurricane Sandy in recent days—and this was outrageous to the point that I still get angry thinking about it. It was not a hurricane but the tornado that took out the town of Greensburg, Kansas. Kathleen Sebelius at that time was Governor of Kansas. When it happened, the White House staff helped her staff get all the paperwork filed in time. They didn't know how to file the paperwork; they didn't know how to fill out the forms; they didn't understand the deadlines. The federal government can't give the money until the paperwork is filed. It has to be initiated by the Governor. Her people were, for whatever reason, not getting that done, and it was the White House Homeland Security staff that came to their aid and got it done and got the money unleashed and sent to Kansas. The President visited, and did all this stuff.

Well, you saw this week with Governor [Christopher] Christie and President Obama, Governor Christie setting aside partisanship to praise the President, five or six days before the election, for crying out loud. That shows you how strongly he felt about it; to the point where many Republicans thought he was too effusive in his comments.

Governor Sebelius stands before the cameras after all the White House and President Bush had done for her and her state, including, by the way, helping with the National Guard plan where they have other states help neighboring states with equipment—There's a whole protocol for this that's practiced in advance. And she stands up in front of the cameras and says that because of the Iraq War, they don't have the bulldozers locally on the ground in Kansas. She used the tornado in Kansas as an opportunity to take a political shot at the President over the Iraq War. And today, Governor Sebelius is now Secretary Sebelius, and who knows what she'll be next. She's a very talented politician.

But I'm telling you, these people are unable, oftentimes, to set aside their partisan ways in the interest of good policy and good public service. While the timing may not be great for Republicans with Governor Christie, he did it the right way this week, in my view as a citizen and as a communications guy. I think people want to see us coming together.

Perry: And vice versa. President Obama, when he visited, was praising him to the point where—I noticed that Governor Christie was standing behind him, saying, "Thank you, Mr. President," because he was saying, "He's done such a great job and I really enjoyed working with him."

Sullivan: Right.

Perry: But on what was being held up as an example of something that had passed with some bipartisanship, you were not seeing in the implementation of it in ED.

Sullivan: Not really. Secretary Spellings is a great relationship person and she made it a point to build relationships with the Members of Congress, particularly on her committee. We did a lot of events and always included the Members. You would do that, naturally, but when we would go for hearings before the committee with her, it was amazing to watch how each person, even if they were going to ask a tough question, would say, "Madam Secretary, in my district they're still talking about your visit last year. Thanks again for coming. Now—" But even though she was able to take off some of the rough edges through her own spirit and knack at winning people over—I'm Exhibit A on that one—there were times on the education front where it worked OK, but the union thing really was tough—No Democrat could get elected without the support of the unions. What used to drive me particularly nuts is when you would have people who are in ironclad districts, who are not going to lose, no matter what, and they would still do it. I don't want to say it was everybody, but it was unfortunate that that's the way it was, and it's gotten worse since then.

Charnock: As a communications person, is there not an analogous situation to that in the world outside of politics, where you just kind of hit a brick wall with environments that will not take reason into account?

Sullivan: You always have people who oppose your idea or your event or your point of view, but the ability to mobilize that many people that quickly is unique, I think, to the unions in general. Some unions have weakened a little bit with the concessions made through the recession. I think the teachers are stronger than ever, and to President Obama's credit, he has taken on the teachers union in terms of tenure and merit pay and some of those issues linking performance to pay, which happens in every other walk of life.

Another thing we did was link it to competitiveness, which was another way to put it in plain English and to appeal to people who don't necessarily care about the kids in Yonkers, to use my earlier example, but who understand that the country is going to rely on skilled people. The assembly line of today is a chip factory in Albuquerque run by Intel, and you have to be able to read a technical manual. We tried to paint a picture and make the case that you can make $65,000 or $70,000 a year, with a community college education, two or three weeks vacation every year, go out to eat once a week with your family, go on vacation, have a really nice lifestyle without going to four years of college, but you have to be able to read, write, compute.

McKee: Yes, and do some algebra.

Sullivan: Some basic algebra. We heard many executives come in and say, "We can't find the people in Albuquerque to fill these jobs." We made a big run at competitiveness and we broke through a little bit there at times, but it's a tough one.

Perry: Should we move a little bit to that level, perhaps? We can still come back if you have other questions to ask about No Child Left Behind. The Commission on Higher Education—Would you talk a little bit about that and goals for that?

Sullivan: That was an interesting one.

McKee: So we will come back to NCLB then?

Perry: Absolutely.

Sullivan: We were in Southern California for an event one time and I thought, *Let's call the local NBC affiliate to come and interview the Secretary after this event*. He said to me, "You know, it never occurred to me to do a story on education from a national perspective. I never thought of it as a national issue." That was another eye-opening thing as I was learning the ropes, in terms of the communications challenges with that.

McKee: We should get you on the record about that issue. I bet it's a fascinating one, too.

Charnock: As someone who hasn't been to school here, who doesn't have kids in school, it's hard for me to think of education as anything but a national issue, you know what I mean?

Sullivan: Right.

Charnock: It must just be so different when your kids are physically in this place and you're looking at their homework.

Sullivan: Well, it's the direct connection between how good the school is and your property value.

Charnock: Yes.

Sullivan: Your local school cannot be bad, because then that means your house isn't worth as much as it is, so it's always everybody else's school.

McKee: I live in a neighborhood that's traditionally a blue-collar neighborhood. There are some public housing projects, or Section 8 stuff, and it's half gentrified. So we have the whole gamut of the community. I totally hear what you're saying about the accountability of keeping pressure on administrators in places like that. Dealing with some of the other parents, the more educated parents—It's a neighborhood that draws the bohemian, the artists and professor types, and a lot of them are very anti-teaching to the test. I hear you, and I see it too, some of the downside to this, but the reality is that, before NCLB, they could just ignore the school.

Sullivan: That's right.

Charnock: That's such a hard message to counter, because no one likes taking tests.

Sullivan: And there are places where teachers stop everything and say, "OK, for the next three weeks we're going to do the test." That's outrageous too.

Charnock: Well, because the idea is that if you've been teaching the curriculum and learning what you're supposed to be learning, the test is just measuring that.

Sullivan: That's right.

Perry: We were on Commission on Higher Education, I believe.

Sullivan: Here's the deal with why the Secretary wanted to do this, and I'm sure you covered this ground with her much better than I will. I think it occurred to her that if you wanted to plan a vacation, you could go online and find out all kinds of information about the best hotels to stay in and room rates and airfares and cruises, and if you wanted to buy a car, you could go on a website and you could line up a Buick Verano versus a BMW versus a Mercedes and look at all them, an Audi over here, and compare all their features and specifications, yet if you were trying to decide whether to send your child to Texas Tech, SMU [Southern Methodist University] or Collin County Community College, you had no ability to line up the specifications with curriculum and cost. And also, if I'm a single mother of a Hispanic kid who wants to be an engineer at Texas Tech, what happens to Hispanic kids who start as engineers? Do they graduate? Do they transfer? Do they change majors? Do they drop out? All this data is available but it's just not openly available to the public, generally speaking.

Her mission there was that college costs are getting way out of control. She was ahead of her time on that score. That became a winning issue for President [Barack] Obama, and with good reason. Her mission there was to put the spotlight on higher ed in terms of why it costs so much. What do you get for your money, and what happens to the kids who follow different courses, particularly being able to look at the subcategories: male-female, minority, whatever it might be? She put the commission together. Charles Miller, of course, headed it up. It was really a blue-ribbon panel. I don't know what you guys would think. Representation was pretty broad. The higher ed world hated it, I mean, *hated* it.

The higher ed world gets accused of many things, but it was a little bit of that arrogance that, "Who are you to come in here and tell us—?" Interestingly, after I left the White House in 2009, I was at the University of North Dakota for a meeting. I was doing some work for them. The president of the university was there, and basically his cabinet, including the provost. When I mentioned Secretary Spellings, I got the daggers. I said, "Let me guess, the Higher Ed Commission?" Then we all had a laugh over it.

Perry: As I recall, the ultimate report was particularly about accountability issues, funding issues, but especially on accountability, the possibility of some kind of testing at that level to help with accountability about what people were learning and how they were learning that information.

Sullivan: It was kind of: What are we getting for our money, if you're going to charge $50,000 a year?

Perry: And connect those two: accountability and cost.

Sullivan: Yes. So that people know going in, just as you can look up an elementary school by zip code now, to see how the kids do there. That was the idea. She took some heat for doing it.

She knew she was going to rattle cages; that was the idea. As you saw, I'm sure, when she was here, she's not afraid to wade into troubled waters sometimes, and she felt it was worth it. I'm not sure what good came of it, or whether it had any impact. You would know better than I.

Perry: No. It's hard to imagine. Even for people in a department within a college or university, agreeing on anything or coming to consensus is pretty hard. So to think of all of higher ed across the country coming to a consensus—We, and they, are pretty independent-minded.

Sullivan: Right.

Perry: I know, having been in the classroom for a quarter-century. Just the model coming down in the midst of my career, for assessment—You should have seen people go ballistic over assessment. I do my own assessment. I grade my students. *Well, no, we need to know what your goals are before you start a class and then what your goals are in your department for your majors.* That was completely foreign to higher education. I think that now has moved on to be accepted.

McKee: I would say the issues are percolating and if anything they've become more intense, and is there a change that's actually on the ground.

Perry: Particularly, in addition to accountability, what are you getting for your money? And the constant drumbeat, quite correctly, in the press, about why is it that tuition rates go up at double or triple inflation rates every year? And the cost of textbooks. Those kinds of issues—that state legislatures have taken over. I think you can say that it did make an impact, or at least start the conversation.

Sullivan: And that was really her goal, to cast a spotlight on the issue, particularly the lack of transparency of information about the experience that a student has at an institution. It was a good one.

Perry: Well, professors have been compared to medieval guilds, so it will take a while for things to change. How did you deal with media on that particular issue? Did you try to get out in front of the report?

Sullivan: We used Charles Miller and we used one or two—Chuck Vest, maybe? If I remember correctly. He was one of the members of the commission. We made them available for interviews, and tried to get out in front of it. Charles was pretty good with the press. Larry Faulkner was the other guy that we used with the press, and maybe not Chuck. We just tried to make the case that we were trying to cast a spotlight. Again, my view was to make it about the people, to make it consumer friendly. You can get all this information about a car but you can't get it about a college, and you're going to spend how much? Of course, this is at a time when state schools are more and more difficult to get into, so parents are looking for other options. Most kids can't go to the University of Texas anymore, so if he's not going to go to UT, how does SMU or TCU [Texas Christian University] compare to another state school in Texas? What about out of state?

Perry: Did you feel like you made any progress on the community college front?

Sullivan: On the community college front, I do feel we made progress. We used to say that's the one piece of the education puzzle that works pretty well, the linkage with business. We always use the example in North Carolina. When the textile mills went away, health care rose up there, and the community colleges adapted their curriculums to be able to make sure that there were skilled people who could work in health tech, because that's what jobs required there locally. We did a lot of community college events. She did commencements at community colleges. We really tried to treat the community college just like a four-year school or any component of the education puzzle.

Perry: Did you write her speeches or did she have a speechwriting shop?

Sullivan: We had a team. I was heavily involved. On the occasion when she would do a political speech, which wasn't very often, but a couple times, the staff couldn't do that, so I did those. Those were mostly closed fund-raisers at various places that she would do on the weekend. We had a great team: Jonathan Horn, who later rejoined me at the White House; a woman named Elizabeth Pitts, who now writes at the Pew Foundation; a guy named John Herr, who worked in the White House for Bush 41 as a young communications hand; and DJ Nordquist was there for a period of time and did some writing while she was there. It was a great team.

She was pretty good at connecting with people. She had not given a lot of speeches before she became Secretary, so we worked through that a little bit, but she was pretty good at it. Her passion came through and that was the most important thing.

Perry: What would be the process for putting together a commencement speech, let's say?

Sullivan: She did Texas Tech while I was there, and Montgomery Community College in Maryland, as I recall. Commencement—You would get started real early. We had a speech meeting every week, where we looked at the calendar about what was coming up. She would say what themes she would like. I would work with the speech team on making sure that we were getting the framework right and that the themes were being executed. Always big on stories, I would try to pull stories out of her. She does not like anything phony. She's a lot like the President in a lot of ways, with this kind of stuff. If something didn't feel authentic, she wouldn't go for it.

I'll give you an example: There was a Teacher of the Year speech—I'll get back to the process. "So who was your favorite teacher?" She said, "Oh, come on. Every Teacher of the Year speech, whoever it is, always says who their favorite teacher was." She hated anything that was clichéd. I would say, "I'm not leaving until you tell me the name. It does work." "All right, it was Miss Brown." But she didn't like things that were—

Perry: That was authentic, but clichéd, in her mind.

Sullivan: Exactly. She didn't like anything like that. Remind me, when we get to the White House stuff, to talk about the *American Idol* story with the President and her and the notion of authenticity.

Anyway, the process would be a weekly meeting and you would go through the calendar of what's coming up. We would bandy about ideas about different ways to attack—What should we

say while we're doing this grant award in Springfield, Massachusetts? Or whatever. I would get the first draft, go back and forth a little bit until we had one that we could put in front of her, and we would make sure that we got it back in front of her before the next speech meeting, so she could give her comments.

I want to talk for a minute about Elizabeth Pitts. She had worked in the White House Correspondence Office, so she was in the bowels of the EEOB, the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, cranking out hundredth-birthday letters and various forms of *pro forma* correspondence, but specific, so there was a little knack of getting the President's voice. They did go through the staff secretary process and it was all approved. She was known as an excellent correspondence person at the White House, and she taught at night at a remedial English program at Georgetown, for kids who get in and don't have the English chops.

It was one of my first weeks on the job at Education, and DJ Nordquist headed up speechwriting. DJ said, "By the way, I'm interviewing this woman, Elizabeth Pitts. Here's her résumé. I would love for you, if you have 20 minutes, to interview her. We've got to get this job filled." I looked at her résumé and she had never written a speech. I said, "DJ, I'm new here I know, but this is kind of on me and we cannot hire someone to write for the Secretary who has never written a speech." She said, "Well, OK, but I want you to interview her anyway."

Elizabeth comes in and sits down and I say to her, "Why should we hire you? You've never written a speech," to see how she would respond. She looked at me and she said, "I'm going to pick it up quickly, and I know, from my time in correspondence, that the most important thing is to get the principal's voice. It won't happen overnight, but I'm going to get it, and I'm telling you right here that I can do this. I want to be a part of this team and I want to write for the Secretary and I believe in the cause." I was completely blown away by her, loved her attitude, and knew she was going to be great.

Well, the first speech that she writes—We have the process, as I indicated. It gets put in front of the Secretary and the Secretary takes a pen across about four paragraphs and says, "Elizabeth, this right here is a whole bunch of blah-blah-blah," and puts it back at her. I'm thinking to myself, how is she going to—You have to have a thick skin to be in the speechwriting racket, as you know. Elizabeth was undeterred and not thrown off course one bit, and went back and rewrote the speech and did a great job. Really, one of the things that I regret is that we didn't get her back to the White House in one form or another. She was really talented and great.

Perry: How long did it take her to get the voice of the Secretary?

Sullivan: Not long. The Secretary was good about getting some time with Elizabeth. Ultimately, she actually leapfrogged a couple of people to become kind of the principal writer for the Secretary quite quickly, along with this other fellow, Jonathan Horn, who did end up at the White House, who I work with today, which is a great joy. He's a young, scary-smart guy who was 25 or whatever at the time and was just so talented. And then John Herr, whose nickname was "The Herricane," was also excellent and was the one who ended up writing the brochure that we did on competitiveness. We had a lot of talent there in the communications shop. Susan Aspey—I can't leave her out—was the press secretary, as good as any in Washington, loyal, smart, devoted and really did a great job there.

Perry: What about other writing? The timeline has instances where the Secretary would have an editorial in *USA Today*. Did you do that? Did the speechwriters do that? Did you collaborate?

Sullivan: It was a collaboration. That's one where we would have taken one of the speechwriters and put them on that, and I would have weighed in, of course.

Perry: Did you make the call on when those needed to be done?

Sullivan: Yes. That was one of the things—Richard Whitmire, at the time, was the person on the editorial board of *USA Today* who handled the education issues, and we worked with Richard. He was very receptive to it, but it's got to move the needle; it's got to advance the position somehow. It wasn't just a policy memo. We tried to be bold in those things.

Perry: Did you have metrics for yourself in terms of moving the needle? Obviously, you could look at something in a text and say, this is not just a policy report, but did you have a way of looking at polls?

Sullivan: Really, the only needle that mattered to us was the NAEP [National Assessment of Educational Progress] report that came out. That really showed the student progress. We built the communications plan around that all year long, hoping that there would be good numbers. We would decide where we were going to go, and always tried to announce it someplace—One year we did a big event in Denver. We would look for education conferences and things that were on the calendar that we could tap into to take advantage of the fact there was a preexisting audience and hopefully some media there.

Perry: In the department, did you have free rein over that, other than what the Secretary wanted? Did you ever get word from the White House about: "Could you do this event?" "Could you write an editorial on this?" "Be sure to be at this conference." Or did you get to make all those choices?

Sullivan: Occasionally, we did. We had a call once a week with the White House. The agencies were subdivided into similar groups. Treasury and Commerce and Labor were together. This is how we did it when I was at the White House. We would have a call once a week; in fact, Dana Perino was the press office person who had education in her portfolio, so we worked together when I was at Education. But typically, with Iraq and economic issues and other things—We were well in sync because of the relationship between the President and the Secretary, and we knew things were moving along the way the White House wanted. It happened occasionally but not frequently. Sometimes the President would like the Secretary to accompany him at an event.

Of course, after I got to Education in May of '05, Katrina was in August of '05, so at that moment, everything we did with the White House was Katrina-related in terms of education. We made many, many trips across the gulf region to do library events and school events and recovery events.

Perry: Let's talk some more about that because that's a huge event, not just a weather event, but a huge event that has a major impact on education throughout the gulf region, not just in the areas that were hit but well over into Texas, for example. Can you just talk us through what happens immediately upon the hurricane's hit and then the days and weeks after?

Sullivan: The immediate thing was getting the federal money released to the region. The school system was basically wiped out. There was an event at the White House. We were on the road someplace, in Chicago as I recall, so the Deputy Secretary, Ray Simon, went to the White House for this event. Every Cabinet Secretary pledged help in whatever area was needed.

We heard, throughout the years, that education was one of the things that got turned around first. The charter school movement popped up. That had a big influence, but the Secretary's office requirements were waived for No Child Left Behind. There was a definite connection made immediately that the resources were there. How can we help? And we made several trips to help in any way we could.

McKee: On that issue, obviously the evacuees all around the country, but certainly the Gulf states and Texas, in particular—I'm curious about what kind of efforts went into supporting the receiving school districts in states.

Sullivan: We did Katrina kids-focused events—one in Mississippi comes to mind—to thank the communities that took them in, not only in the classroom but in terms of helping their parents get jobs, a place to live, clothes, the whole thing. I think there was an accommodation made with No Child Left Behind compliance as well, depending on how many kids had been taken in. There was definitely an acknowledgment made that that was a phenomenon that was happening around the country, not just in the Southeast. There were kids all over the place.

Perry: I have down: Louisiana, Texas, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, so the relaxation of the standards—Was that time sensitive in the sense that for so many months or years they would have this relaxation of the NCLB standards?

Sullivan: I don't remember what the shelf life was on those. I remember that the accommodation was made. It was just such an unprecedented set of circumstances, and there were a lot of good stories that came out of it. There were a lot of stories of communities rallying around these kids. Again, we tried to shine a spotlight on those stories. Education ended up being—I hope that when historians look back at that period, the record will show that the support of the Education Department was one of the things in the government that worked really well in the aftermath.

Perry: Did you feel pressure from the White House? Because the President was getting criticism for a slow response because of FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency], did you feel pressure from the White House to get out in front of the education issues?

Sullivan: No. I think it was just a call to arms. Everybody was on deck after Katrina, to help with the federal response, and we had a big piece of it and we wanted to make sure it went well, but mainly just to help the people who had been affected all along the gulf.

Perry: What about some of the policy issues that tended to be controversial before Katrina? I'm thinking of vouchers, for example, and their use for private schools. I think that was one of the policies that came out of the post-Katrina atmosphere and with DOE [Department of Education]. Did you feel that controversy either subside or get greater?

Sullivan: We definitely were aware that, because so many schools were opening as charter schools first, this was going to potentially reignite that whole debate. So many people said, "If

you ever had a blank slate, what would you do for a school system?" Well, here it was. It was charter schools that were popping up first and coming back on line first. Was this some sort of a test case? Could you do a whole school system in this fashion? The Secretary's attitude on that was always that it was not a solution for Newark, New Jersey, or somewhere else that was undergoing really tough issues in public education, because ultimately in those places the voucher ideas and the charter school ideas end up covering 10 percent of the kids, a really small number. I am all for parents being empowered, but we always looked at it as—It just isn't the total solution, because it doesn't address enough kids.

McKee: That's really interesting. Providing choice, but there is still a focus that the traditional local public school has to get better. We're not going to do it by just starting over, even in a Newark, New Jersey.

Sullivan: Right. We went to so many schools in tough urban areas, where the school was a beacon. The parents had signed contracts and the kids are going to school six, seven days a week and year-round, and they're wearing uniforms, and they're doing these incredible things. Minority kids, really poor kids, and they have a robotics lab, you know? You see that there are no behavior issues in the school. You can daydream a little bit and you can say, "Well, why can't it be like this everywhere?" Maybe one day it could be, but I don't think that replaces a public education system.

It wasn't my opinion—I mean, the Secretary's belief and the belief of the administration was that as an education policy matter we needed to do something that made sure that the other 90 percent of kids who weren't in a charter school got the best education possible too. We wanted to put a spotlight on what happened when parents were empowered, but it was never viewed as the whole solution.

Perry: Even in this emergency situation, was there feedback negatively from the unions?

Sullivan: I don't remember that. I don't know how you could criticize anything in that situation, where the people who had come back online were helping the kids. The kids now had someplace to go. There may have been. I don't recall that being a big issue that we had to deal with.

McKee: A lot of those states would have been nonunion states.

Perry: That's true.

McKee: I'm not actually sure about Louisiana, but certainly Mississippi is not going to have teachers' unions.

Perry: Other questions related to policy?

McKee: Again on Katrina: So there really was a conscious sense that obviously we've got to figure out what to do for the kids, but also a sense that this is really an opportunity for some policy experimentation too?

Sullivan: I'd have to go back and look at the record, but I remember being up late, preparing to travel with the Secretary, watching the coverage of Katrina hitting. We went on this trip. It might

have been Chicago. I remember waking up the next morning in the hotel, turning on the *Today Show,* and there's Brian Williams wading through the water. It was just like, *Holy moly!* Overnight, the levee had breached, and we saw that this was a whole different thing. The Secretary was on the phone multiple times during the day with the White House, dispatching Ray Simon, Deputy Secretary, to represent her at this meeting at the White House. From that moment on, we were all Katrina, all the time, for an extended period.

Charnock: Actually, I was going to ask about that, in terms of your strategic planning process. You had just come into this job. You'd been there for a month, started to get your plans in place and then this huge event happened and obviously dominated news coverage for a long time. Did it become all consuming for a time? Did it knock you off other priorities? How did you manage it all?

Sullivan: The priorities changed completely. No Child Left Behind was still clicking along in all the other places outside of the region, but Katrina was something we worked on every single day. It was a big priority, really the biggest priority. We had to keep the NCLB stuff going. And you know what? It *was* Chicago. I remember where we were because it was an event at an elementary school with Mayor Daley. Senator [Dick] Durbin was there, and Senator [Michael] Enzi was there. Secretary [Arne] Duncan was at that time the Chicago Public Schools chief, and he was there.

Congressman Bobby Rush was there, who represented the district that I grew up in. the Secretary was announcing increase flexibility for Chicago to implement the supplemental education services provision of NCLB. After the formal event, we made the Secretary available on the front of the stage in this school auditorium, to take questions about Katrina, and the press corps who showed up from Chicago really were only interested in the Katrina part.

We had sort of cooked this up, that we were going to do the event as scheduled, but then make her available to answer questions about how we're going to support. This was late morning, early afternoon, and by that time it was already—We were working in Katrina policy angles on the fly. Things happen. More communications plans get blown up by outside events than don't, probably.

Remind me, on the White House, to tell you the Anna Nicole Smith—the DNA [deoxyribonucleic acid] story.

Perry: We'll get that down for sure. I'm thinking of two things now: One is the report about Armstrong Williams and the situation that had developed before you arrived, but the fact that the organizational structure of communications had changed when Secretary Spellings came along, in response to what had gone on prior to her arrival and your arrival. What is that like when the report comes out, that is somewhat damaging to the administration, about having hired Armstrong Williams to do what people on the other side called propaganda?

Sullivan: Do you show in your records what date the report came out? Because I remember this.

Charnock: Is it in March 2005? That's the first mention of it and I know that's the reorganization.

Perry: Yes, that's the reorganization and response to it. But during your time, I think, the report came out that said that the Bush administration had been, how should we say—?

Sullivan: Right, I was there. I remember this. I remember saying at the time that the department did a really bad thing and did a bad job of doing that bad thing. In other words, they really didn't get what they paid for. As I recall, he didn't live up to the columns and the stuff that he was going to do. I think there was a poster or something—

Perry: But it was something like $200,000, I believe, that had been paid.

Sullivan: It was a lot of money. If I recall correctly, the Secretary issued a statement.

Charnock: Two hundred and forty thousand?

Sullivan: Right. I don't know what Ketchum—

Perry: Here it is. It's September of '05 so it's right after Katrina—the GAO report, Government Accounting Office report, on Armstrong Williams, saying that the Bush administration had actually been in violation of the law in this payment to Williams.

Sullivan: I remember that the Secretary condemned it. Press secretary Susan Aspey called it, "Stupid, wrong and ill-advised" and highlighted new rules in place to prevent such a misstep. We condemned it and said we'd taken steps to assure it would never happen again. We tried to limit it to that sort of response.

Charnock: But you mentioned that it was Ketchum, the company, that had actually made this contract with him?

Sullivan: Right.

Charnock: So from a communications standpoint, did you consider emphasizing that angle?

Sullivan: Did we blame Ketchum?

Charnock: Right.

Sullivan: No, we didn't do that. We took responsibility, while reminding people this happened before Secretary Spelling took office. What it did mean, though, is we were not going to hire an agency to do anything. We didn't use outside agencies at all.

Charnock: So it had an impact on the fact that Secretary Spellings wanted to build that into it all.

Sullivan: It had that kind of an impact, right. I think what happened was someone at the agency thought, *Well, here's a creative idea, to enlist a third party*. He's African American, which helps because so much of this deals with minority kids. But there's a cost associated with getting him on board and here's what it would be. I'm sure it started out as a well-intentioned thing, and then the money came into it, and somewhere along the line, the checks and balances failed. This

should not have happened, but it did. What set out to be paying Ketchum for doing No Child Left Behind communications work, ended up being a payment to a journalist.

Somebody took their eye off the ball, and that's really where they went wrong. I remember the Secretary spoke out against it and pointed to the steps that she had taken to ensure it would never happen again. One way to ensure it would never happen again was to have one person—me—be in charge of everything related to message and communications. There were still a lot of people and you didn't know what everybody was doing, but we did have accountability. It was on me. That's one of the reasons why I went to all those birthday parties and staff meetings and everything, to try to make sure I knew what everybody was up to and that there was a structure at staff meetings that kind of floated up, so I knew what was going on.

The other thing was we weren't going to ever do is spend that kind of money on anything. There were some materials we printed, things like that, but I can't imagine spending $240,000 on an outside agency.

Perry: Did the Secretary ever ask you for your thoughts, after you were on board for some months, about how this new organizational structure was working, and if you had any tweaks or outright changes that you would recommend?

Sullivan: She let me do it. We met all the time and she'd ask how it was going. She was satisfied that things were going in the right direction and she was getting what she needed. We did some creative things. Andy Rotherham, who has the Eduwonk blog—In a way, we broke a little ground. We would do these things where periodically we would bring in the education beat media from the national outlets in Washington to have a little roundtable with her. I went to her before one session and said we should invite Andy Rotherham. He had been a staffer at the department, I think under President [William J.] Clinton, and now was a policy wonk. He had this very influential blog, the number-one blog in terms of unique visitors on the topic of education—one or two; it's right up there. She was all for it, so we had this roundtable and there's the *Washington Post* and the AP [Associated Press] and the *New York Times*, and here's this blogger. There was a little heartburn at first, on the part of—*What's he doing here?* I knew it was the right thing—

Perry: Heartburn on the part of the traditional media?

Sullivan: The traditional media, right. He loved it. We joke about it to this day. Later, we tried to reach out to bloggers. This was still the early days for influential blogs, so she was great about that.

Scheduling a Cabinet Secretary is tricky. She has a lot to do and there's a lot of travel and she was a mom who was really involved in her two school-age kids. She had a lot happening and yet she always made time for a certain amount of media access, and I had the ability to go in there and say—I had time on her calendar, with these regular blank intervals that drove the schedulers crazy. I could go in and say, "Tomorrow, with that slot we have at 3:00, let's talk to some guy who's got a newsletter." Or it could have been the *New York Times*, but just to keep her talking to reporters and other influential people.

She was our best salesperson, there's no question about it. The reporters really liked her. She was funny and she was pretty candid. She did not need to be scripted and prepped a whole lot. She knew the stuff, and she was smart about how to tell the stories. I would always flag the key issues for her. "You might want to think about saying it this way." "Remember not to say n-size," or some of the jargon things that she liked. Once she got going, she could get into policy speak a little bit, not much. She was pretty plain spoken and straightforward. People knew that she talked to the President a lot. She had a direct pipeline, so she could speak with authority on a lot of things and that made my job pretty easy, that she was so good and so accessible.

Perry: You didn't have to do a lot of briefing of her, to get her briefed up for these media meetings or interviews.

Sullivan: We did some, but it would be short. It would be: "Here's what's most important to this person. Remember, this is the guy who the last time wrote this. He didn't like what you said in a speech." Or "He's in a town that had this issue." I would remind her, flag things for her, but there was not a lot of—

Perry: Did you produce a written document for her briefs?

Sullivan: Sometimes. [*laughs*]

Perry: Why are you laughing? She didn't want them all the time?

Sullivan: She didn't need them. If we gave her a long big thing, she wouldn't use it, so it was very short. I'd give her a little outline usually.

Perry: A classic talking-points kind of document?

Sullivan: More Q&A [questions and answers]. "These three or four questions might be a little bit tricky," or "Just to remind you, this is important to this reporter," but nothing really complicated. That wasn't her style really. She was more comfortable with our sitting around the table before the reporter came in, and I would just say, "How are you going to handle the question about why Arkansas got special treatment?" Or whatever. We bandied back and forth a little bit, but that was it. It was much more formal at the White House and more formal at NBC and other places that I've worked.

Perry: We're getting close to that move, but before we do, are there other—Guian, you had mentioned some other issues related to No Child Left Behind, or other policies.

McKee: I wanted to ask about some of the other groups on the outside of government that are involved in education—I'm thinking about organizations like Teach For America—that are very involved in reform, are thinking about things in a different way, and have their own organizational interests and incentives. Did you work much with groups like that?

Sullivan: All the time. We called it "the blob." That was this loose connection of groups. Cindi Williams, who is super talented and had worked at the White House in the first term, was the head of outreach. She built relationships, everything from La Raza on the Hispanic side, African American groups, teachers groups, various kinds of trade associations. Teach For America is a

perfect example, and we tried to do events with them as much as we could, because they had a built-in infrastructure. We tried to get their support for things.

La Raza is an example. Janet Murguia was the head at that point. It didn't mean that she wouldn't occasionally say something about funding, but she was very much in support of No Child Left Behind, and it was important for us to be able to show teachers, and to show others, that the Secretary is standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the leader of the National Council of La Raza. Getting the groups was important and we worked hard at that, and usually it worked out pretty well.

McKee: How did the Secretary feel about Teach For America, in particular?

Sullivan: A big fan. Wendy Kopp was in her regular rotation of people that she talked to, and we did events with them occasionally. Secretary Spellings was very much in favor of alternate paths to teachers getting in the classroom. We used this a lot in interviews and occasionally in speeches: There was a point in time when IBM had done a buyout, and you've got these bright computer and engineering people and now they're going to retire at age 56 or whatever. I believe there was a program in Connecticut schools that allowed these people to—It was sort of a path to certification for people with nontraditional backgrounds. The Secretary was very supportive of that idea. Here's somebody with a lot to offer, current experience, especially in the tech and science fields. Why not get them in the classroom if there's nobody else at that school to teach science? This was the whole highly qualified teacher debate.

Perry: Right.

Sullivan: How do you define a highly qualified teacher? One definition was you have a Master's degree, not that you have a Master's degree in any subject but that you have a Master's degree in the subject you are teaching. I don't know if it's still this way—at one time you were labeled highly qualified. So we took that issue on from time to time, and Teach For America was always sort of a beacon. I know there were some issues about retention—Do they stay in? And other issues. But anything that got smart young qualified people into the classroom as teachers, we believed was a good thing and we were very supportive of their efforts, and did events with them from time to time.

McKee: Just one sort of large-scale question, and I don't know whether you—I guess my question is: Did you wrestle with this? Thinking in historical terms, NCLB is a big departure.

Sullivan: Right.

McKee: The role of the federal government in education, which has traditionally been a state and local issue, obviously less in the '60s—Of course traditionally that's been a conservative position, that it should remain a state and local responsibility. Was that something that by the time you got there was off the table, or were you still wrestling with that?

Sullivan: That was still in the water supply. The notion that this wasn't the federal role was one of the reasons why we took heat from our own people sometimes. The Secretary spoke eloquently frequently about how if we don't look out for these kids, nobody will, speaking of poor kids, minority kids, kids with disabilities. We used mothers of kids with disabilities as

advocates to say, "Until No Child Left Behind came along, nobody cared if my kid could read or not, and since No Child Left Behind, they now have to make sure that he's being treated the same way as other kids."

Well, that kind of fuels your tank for a couple weeks of going to the office. That was one of the good things about working there. I said earlier, the work that I had done before often didn't feel all that important. Well, this was the kind of stuff that felt important. President Bush had staked out this territory as a compassionate conservative years before, that you can be conservative on things like national defense and fiscal policy but also care about people and lean in a different direction on things like education and some other areas that were addressed through the faith-based initiative, for example.

PEPFAR—the President's AIDS [Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome] relief program in Africa—is another example. We could talk about putting the red ribbon on the front of the White House, which was an enormous, huge story behind that one. You would not have thought that a Republican would have been the one doing that, or that George W. Bush, if you didn't know him, would have been the one to take that step. We looked at it as part of what the President believed in, and we were there to try to tell that story and push those policies in support of him as best we could.

McKee: One of the things on NCLB—We talked about opposition from unions and how to some extent partisan divisions had emerged. Within the department, particularly thinking about political appointees versus the career people, I'm assuming the political appointees are all on board and enthusiastic supporters, or they wouldn't be there.

Sullivan: Right.

McKee: Were the career people committed, or were they to some extent fighting actions against NCLB and the whole accountability issue itself?

Sullivan: There were some career people who were enormously committed, passionate, talented. I don't know what the percentage would be; I want to think about that a minute. John McGrath was a tremendous example of what a public servant should be. He had been there for many years. He just recently retired. He was a career employee and one of my right-hand guys and was incredibly devoted.

In terms of a rear guard action, there was an occasional leak to a newspaper reporter about something, and I always felt like that was somebody who was opposed to the President for one reason or another and wanted to stir up a little mischief and knew they could get away with it. There was really nothing that could be done.

We had a receptionist whose job was to answer the phone. She had been in the government for many years and in education for a period of time, and she would not answer the phone; it was too stressful for her. She preferred to just listen to the voicemail messages every 20 minutes. This was the press office phone, not the phone for the whole department. There were many attempts at getting her to actually do her job, but none ever succeeded. There were offers to have her detailed other places, but you lose the headcount and you keep the salary on your budget.

So there was a little bit of nuttiness like that, kind of the worst possible stereotype of government. That was definitely the exception. We had a lot of good people. Some were motivated; some were not. After a certain number of years of service, every so many weeks you earned another personal day off. I don't know if it was every two weeks or every six weeks, you earned another day. We had these people who had been there 10, 15, 20 years, and they essentially could work a four-day week much of the year, because they had stockpiled all these days. We would try to make the appeal, "Please don't use them all on Friday and Monday." And there would be times when the Secretary would call and want to have a town hall meeting with employees, and we would have to say, "Madam Secretary, we can't do that on a Monday because we don't have as many people here and we want everybody to get this message." It drove her up the wall. So you had to manage around some of that kind of stuff.

I mentioned earlier the struggle of work-life balance. Well, you were not allowed to give a career employee a BlackBerry, for example, because that would imply that they were expected to be available when they weren't in the building. I rode the Metro into work and I would see some of our people and they're not carrying anything, and they shouldn't have to. I'm not saying they should, but it was a 9:00 to 5:00 kind of situation for most of the career staff, which meant that the political staff carried the bulk of the load on certain things, like a Katrina issue. Obviously, we had support from the career staff, but that was a 24/7 kind of a situation. So this person may be good and talented, but if we know they're not going to be available after 5:00, it's tough to count on them. There were some overtime situations and you had to get permission and different things.

Managing the career staff was something that had to be carefully considered. It was a factor. I knew that some of them were not really on board and my attitude was, if I determined that this person could be helpful and had something to offer, we empowered them, we spoke freely in front of them, they were on the team. But if there was somebody who I knew wasn't going to contribute or had nothing to offer, we just didn't really deal with them that much.

McKee: So you just go around, sort of a management go-around.

Sullivan: You go around.

Perry: That's where you would go to the birthday parties and chat with people and get a sense of whether they were reacting positively to you or being somewhat standoffish. That's how you drew the line.

Sullivan: The vast majority of them were very good, in terms of the general conversation. In terms of how many supported the President, or how many were really passionate, it was probably 50/50, somewhere like that.

Charnock: Which might be a segue to talking about the next step on your career trajectory. I'm fascinated by how you learned to deal with Washington. Every previous step in your career—You had come from sports into NBC Sports, then you had the NBC connection, so you had some level of introduction to that world. And then suddenly you're in policy. How did you get up to speed?

Perry: With all of your skepticism to begin with, about even taking it. After, let's say, a year or so, how were you feeling about Washington and politics and your job?

Sullivan: There's a woman named Anna Perez, who had been Barbara Bush's press secretary, and had been a communications person for Secretary—when Condi [Condoleezza] Rice was the National Security Advisor and Anna was her communications person, and she was my boss at NBC Universal on the communications side. Anna told me that there are more politics at NBC than there are at the White House or in Washington, and that was probably true.

In terms of how I found Washington, I tried to use my relationship-building skills, my attitude of teamwork, sense of adventure, not take things too personally, dive in and just give it my best shot with no regrets—not hold anything back and let's sort of see what happens. I felt at times like a stranger in a strange land, particularly when I was anywhere near the Hill. But there were good nice people, really smart people, people who can write. At NBC we had interns and you struggled to find somebody who could write a press release. We had these young people in Washington, both at Education and at the White House, who were just so talented. Where do these people come from? They were people who had studied, who were interested in policy and politics from a young age. Many of them went to great schools. I was exhilarated by it. I sort of attacked it with the sense of adventure that I knew would make it the most enjoyable and that helped me learn the most the fastest.

Perry: Let's say we're up to 2006 or so, and you know that at the most you have a couple more years if you stay with DOE. You said you weren't seeking out the White House position, that it ultimately came to you, but were you thinking, *I guess I will go ahead and stay with DOE for the duration,* and/or were you also thinking about what you would be doing whenever you left DOE, about what would be your next step in this world of communications or beyond?

Sullivan: I got there in May of '05. Let's say in May of '06, before I got the first email from Dan Bartlett, I would have stayed until the end. I felt committed to the Secretary. I liked it. My family liked it. I don't think I imagined myself staying in D.C. forever, but I would have stayed until the end. Because there were still two years left, I didn't give a whole lot of thought beyond that, to what I would do after the Education Department.

Perry: And the Secretary was fully committed to stay, obviously at the President's pleasure, but if his pleasure was to have her stay for the rest of the second term, would she do so?

Sullivan: I felt that she was in it until the end, especially given the age of her daughters and their academic calendar of life, it made sense for her to stay until the end. We all operated as though she would stay until the end. I just felt that we had plenty of challenges in front of us. Reauthorization had become, post-Katrina, the next thing. In fact, really early on in the job, we had this offsite meeting on a Saturday. Certain career employees were invited, and we all got up and made presentations, and somebody asked me, "What is your goal?" I said, "Well, we have to reauthorize the law."

I didn't fully know what that meant at that point, but to me the goal was—That was a big part of the undercurrent—We want this to live on beyond President Bush, if possible. Whether they changed the name of it, or whatever, we wanted to reauthorize this law. That was what was on

my mind at that point. OK, reauthorization is going to be up. How can we tell the story in a way that, even with the obstacles—the union opposition and other problems, funding— how can we put this in a position to get reauthorized?

Perry: I don't think that we have a lot about that in the briefing book. Could you say a little bit about your work with the Hill? Because you've more than hinted that that's a different world, but that's where the reauthorization has to happen. How did you work with them? Did you work with them on that?

Sullivan: I did. The first thing I would say is my first week on the job—Well, before I even started I met with the communications folks attached to Republican leadership. I saw Kevin Madden, who is in the news all the time now with Governor [Mitt] Romney, and was [John] Boehner's guy at that point. Don Stewart was [Addison Mitchell] McConnell's guy, still is. Ron Bonjean was Speaker [Dennis] Hastert's guy. I went and met with these guys, forged those relationships. They were all good.

After I started the job, I went to speak to the assembled—I believe it was both the House and the Senate communications directors and press secretaries, all Republicans. I got up and introduced myself. I was as self-deprecating as I could be. I talked about how I needed their help, how the President needed their help, more importantly, and kind of did my thing. It was a tough crowd. These are all Republicans. They're all communications people. I openly admitted that I was not from their world and I needed their help. It wasn't that there was a chill in the room but it wasn't the warmest embrace I had ever felt. It was a little bit of an introduction for me that—At that time, Iraq was not going well. The President was unpopular, and they were worried about the President dragging down their guy, I'm sure.

Perry: That's because the '06 midterms are now approaching.

Sullivan: The '06 midterms are coming up, and we can talk about that too when we get to that, because there was some interesting stuff there. I was always aware that that was a different kind of place. There were leaks occasionally. We would invite them over to the White House. We had the President come in and speak to them. We had regular conference calls with Republican leadership. We had occasional conference calls that were bigger than that.

I really tried to involve them. We could have involved them more, I guess, but they were just not that interested at a certain point in being connected to George W. Bush. Not Don Stewart, McConnell's guy, who was loyal to the last day. When the [John] McCain campaign asked the President to stay inside and not leave the White House Residence, Don Stewart, with McConnell, was really a loyal guy, and there were a few others. It was tough, and I came to understand their position, but for me, not being a D.C. guy and not being a longtime political operative, it was a different world for me, no question about it. They spoke their own language. I worked hard to try to learn the procedures of the House, which is a whole career in itself.

Perry: Byzantine.

Sullivan: Yes, right. So the legislative stuff was not my favorite part of it, mostly because of the partisanship. That's where it was really borne out.

Perry: But even intrapartisan, it sounds like, because of the approaching ’06 elections and the problems the President was facing with Iraq.

Sullivan: Right. We’ll talk about immigration reform. We took a lot of incoming from our own people on that, and we’ll get into that.

Perry: Before we get you to the White House, you just mentioned briefly that you were bringing people from the Hill to the White House, to meet with the President. Staffers or Members, or both?

Sullivan: Staffers. No, that was when I was at the White House, not when I was at Education. When I was at Education, I had some dealings with the communications people of the Republican leadership, but the Legislative Affairs shop was led by Terrell Halaska, who was tremendous. She did most of that. I tagged along with her sometimes.

Charnock: Especially in terms of the partisanship, did you link up with Senator Kennedy’s communications people or did you have outreach to the Democratic communications people? How did that work?

Sullivan: When I was at Education?

Charnock: Yes, when you were at Education.

Sullivan: Not really. When we would travel together, when there was an event we were going to do with the Senator like that one in Massachusetts I mentioned, then we did, to go through the details of who’s going to say what first, and that sort of thing. But day in and day out, week in and week out, I did not really engage with the communications people on the Democratic side regularly at all.

Charnock: So there was no time, particularly at the beginning process, which I guess was before you, that Senator Kennedy was a real advocate?

Sullivan: I’m sure early on there was more of that, but by the time I got there, it was the lawsuit and other things—the funding—And the politics had changed since the initial authorization.

McKee: Really quickly on the reauthorization: Obviously, it’s 2012 and we’re still waiting on NCLB reauthorization. Do you have any sense about why that process has gotten so difficult, even though in some ways there are actually large areas of consensus in education policy?

Sullivan: I think that other issues—health care, the economy, and national security have just always taken priority. Sadly, it’s become a less urgent issue in the national discourse. It’s funny, in my consulting work now, I do some work for NBC News, on the *Education Nation* summit that they do every September. One of the reasons that they did that was because the candidates and our elected officials are not talking about education anymore. This year at *Education Nation*, Governor Romney came in person and gave a talk on education, and the President did a video, an interview with Savannah Guthrie, on education. I think those were the only two events or interviews devoted to education in the current campaign and this campaign cycle has been going on for two years.

McKee: It really does.

Sullivan: So the reauthorization—The waiver was the Band-Aid. We know the law needs to be reauthorized; in the meantime, the administration is saying we're going to let you off the hook for a while, so everybody who wants a waiver can have one. Even some states that didn't ask for one were FedExed one. It just sadly has slipped on the priority scale. There are always other urgent things.

President Bush has said when he was running for President, the word Al-Qaeda never came up. They had however many debates in that cycle, a bunch, and not once in an interview on the campaign trail—Terrorism was barely mentioned and Al-Qaeda was never mentioned. And that of course came to define his Presidency. He thought he was going to be the education President. We'll never know what would have been, had it not been for 9/11, in terms of the domestic policy issues that he teed up, like faith-based and education and immigration reform and some other things.

Perry: This was good news, I should think, when you heard this. This was in the fall of '05. We talked about the case coming through Connecticut, through the courts, this *Pontiac v. Spellings*.

Sullivan: Right, I forgot about that.

Perry: Yes, you got really good news in a decision from the U.S. District Court in the Eastern District of Michigan, that the federal government can require states to use their funds to meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind. I looked up to see if I could find what happened to that case, and it apparently went up another step, to the 6th Circuit. The 6th Circuit is so partisan itself and so ideologically divided that it apparently didn't come out with a decision and then I think it has just dropped. When you got good news like that, especially from the third branch that's involved, when you're having trouble on the Hill to some extent, did you really make hay while the sun shined with that?

Sullivan: I don't remember the specifics. I hadn't thought about that in a long time. What we would have done would be to get the Secretary on the phone with Ben Feller, AP White House correspondent, who was then the national education beat. By the way, the AP went about two years without even having a national education reporter, until about a year ago. It was kind of piecemealed up among a few different desks, so that tells you also where it ranks. We would have gotten her on the phone with some reporters and tried to jump on the news, knowing that it could be reversed one day and knowing that it's going to have a short shelf life.

Perry: Were they interested in that?

Sullivan: Yes.

Perry: And the very fact that the Secretary's name is in the title of the case is good news. It's thumbs up for her and for the policy and for the President's policy.

Sullivan: Right.

Perry: Guian, anything else before we leave the Department of Education?

Sullivan: I had mentioned this to Guian during the break, and you asked me to say this on the record. There was one time when the Secretary was in Los Angeles or in Southern California for an event, and I had invited the local NBC station to—I gave them the opportunity to interview the Secretary. They said yes, and a reporter interviewed her at the hotel the day before the event. As he was setting up to do the interview he said to me, "Until you called, I never thought of education as a national issue. I never would have thought to interview the Secretary of Education. I always looked at education as a local issue." When he said that—and I forget where this was on my timeline of my 13 months there—that was a little bit of an aha moment about just how local an issue it is, in terms of the media. Everybody knows a teacher. It just seems like everybody's sister-in-law or next-door neighbor is a teacher. Everybody went to school, many people have kids in school, there's a school in your neighborhood, there's the union guy in the mix.

Perry: You serve on the school board, as in Guian's case.

Sullivan: There's a school board member, there's a PTA [Parent Teacher Association] president in the neighborhood, so it's so easy to write about something like No Child Left Behind, and it should be written from the local perspective. But they don't think of the opportunity to also write about it with a bigger lens. We tried to take that on and sometimes had more success than others. The Secretary was willing to be available in those local markets, "regional media," as they call them in Washington, and do events and interviews to try to propel the story.

McKee: And that's really the challenge in some ways that you're wrestling with in the larger picture, that each of those regional markets is different in terms of its educational situation, its needs, its traditions.

Sullivan: Right.

Perry: Are we ready to move to the White House? I think we are. I understand you had run into Dan Bartlett a few times when you were with Secretary Spellings for events at the White House.

Sullivan: That's right.

Perry: And he had said, "We need to talk."

Sullivan: "We ought to get together some time." He was from Rockwell, Texas, which is a suburb of Dallas, and I had lived in Dallas for almost 20 years. He was a big sports fan and liked the Mavericks and everything. He had said this a couple of times. I didn't know him really at all.

Perry: And at this point he was Director of Communications?

Sullivan: He was the Counselor to the President.

Perry: He's moved up to Counselor.

Sullivan: He's already moved up to Counselor to the President. Nicolle is the Communications Director. I knew that Nicolle was leaving. I was in a meeting in the Secretary's conference room. There had been a No Child Left Behind taskforce. An independent commission had been formed.

Former Governors and former elected officials who had been active in education reform were on this, and some corporate people. This was the first meeting of this commission. I was in the meeting, sitting at the table, and I checked my BlackBerry under the table and there was a message from Amanda Burdick [now Bevis], who was Bartlett's assistant, I came to learn. This was about 11:00 in the morning and the email was, "Can you be here at the White House at 3:00?" I said sure. I remember thinking, *This cannot be about Nicolle's job. Bartlett must have some time.* As it turns out, the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] Summit was about to begin, the President was in the air for a long flight to Europe and Bartlett probably had some downtime. He didn't go on the trip; Nicolle went on the trip. I told my wife, "It's not about that; there's no way. He just wants to chitchat." So I go over there. I had been to the White House for a couple of things but mostly in the EEOB. I had been in the West Wing for that one meeting with Nicolle. It was still kind of a mind-blowing experience.

Perry: So now you're back in the lobby of the West Wing, waiting.

Sullivan: Yes, and I'm watching things happen and wondering what would it be like to actually—This sounds kind of hokey, but I was a big fan of the TV show *The West Wing* when I worked at NBC. I never missed an episode.

Perry: And you look like Oliver Platt.

Sullivan: I look like Oliver Platt, that's what I've been told.

Perry: So it is said. And let the record show that you do, a tad.

Sullivan: I get called up to Dan's office and he spends 15 minutes talking about NBC and the difference between the private sector and working in the administration in the Mavericks, the Cowboys, and whatever else. It was chitchat. There was a part of me that was relieved and maybe a part of me that was a little disappointed, but I figured this is really just to chitchat. Then out of the blue he says, "All right, I'm going to stop beating around the bush. I want to talk to you about Nicolle's job." I made a joke. I said something like, "This is the part where the camera crew bursts into the room." The show *Punk'd* was on the air at the time. I think that I'm being punked, right? I just looked at him and said, "I'm in. Tell me what I have to do." This wasn't one of these things where you've got to go think about it or talk to your wife. "I'm in. What do I have to do?"

He asked me a bunch of general questions about my approach on things and he said, "It's not mandatory, there's no deadline, but if you want to think about things like the fifth anniversary of 9/11 and the one-year anniversary of Katrina." At that time the economy was going gangbusters and the President was getting very little credit for it, so how we would talk about the economy in a way that might reflect more on the President. "Immigration reform is going to be something we take on, so any thoughts on that." I say, "OK." I leave there thinking, *I cannot believe this is happening*.

I went home that night to our townhouse in Springfield, Virginia, and I sat down in the basement, cross-legged on the floor with my laptop, and I started to write a communications plan for all of these things that he mentioned. I actually sort of giggled to myself, you know, like *These guys*

can't figure this out, so they're asking me. What do I know about any of this stuff? It was very humbling. It was exhilarating. I wrote a bunch of stuff.

Perry: What did you write? What was the plan?

Sullivan: It's funny, I'm sure it doesn't exist anywhere. Well, it might be in Bartlett's email somewhere, in the warehouse in Lewisville, Texas. I don't remember that much about it. I know that I tried to use this storytelling and third-party stuff. With 9/11, the human story there is just so powerful. But also, the President has kept us safe; we haven't been attacked, so maybe make it about that.

Perry: Did you break it up along these issue lines and anniversary lines that Dan Bartlett had said to you?

Sullivan: Yes, a few paragraphs on each of these things. I knew almost nothing about immigration reform. I really just tried to use my instincts, with what would resonate with me as a civilian, as a consumer, as a person living in Virginia. So a process was begun. I think as I counted it up I had nine different interviews—Josh Bolten twice.

Perry: And now he's Chief of Staff, having replaced the previous, Andy Card.

Sullivan: Right. And he had hired Tony Snow in March. This is now late June of '06. Tony Snow came in March, with a whole new set of eyes, and I kind of fit into that category, not having been a campaign guy. There were several interviews. I don't remember the order, but Josh was one of the first big ones. I had made myself a promise that I am going to let it rip. I have to be honest and open. So he said, "What do you think we could do better?" I had thought about this and anticipated this question and I gave him some suggestions.

Perry: And they were?

Sullivan: A few days before the interview, the Supreme Court had ruled on the *Hamdan* case.

Perry: This was applying the Geneva Conventions to the Gitmo [Guantanamo Bay] prisoners.

Sullivan: Right. The Court ruled that the administration should not have assigned Hamdan to a military commission trial.

Perry: Hamdan was the driver for Osama bin Laden.

Sullivan: Right, Hamdan was the driver. The media was characterizing the ruling as a setback. They were using the word "overreach." There was another event that was going on at the White House—a joint press conference with President Bush and Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi. The President got one question about Hamdan and addressed it quickly. Then Senators Lindsey Graham and Jon Kyl flooded the media in effect saying Congress would fix this and make sure Hamdan faced justice. My observation was that they got more credit for finding a solution than the President, or the solution attached more to them than to the President. It just seemed to me as an outsider that the White House could have been more aggressive and more part of that narrative. Of course, I could have been wrong.

There were two or three other things. I'm not even saying that I was right, but I had a suggestion for Josh on some other things, too. We had this back-and-forth and I thought it went well, and then I had all these other interviews. Tony Snow was one of them. I told him, "I think I know what I don't know." He said, "You have no idea what you don't know," and he was right. Tony was just a tremendous person and somebody who really encouraged me as a new guy. He kind of related to me, and he had been at the White House before. We'll get to that story.

In terms of the interview process, the second interview with Josh Bolten, and there were two funny things that happened: Number one, he asked me almost exactly the same questions he asked me in the first interview. That was a signal to me about what life is like when you work there. You are hit with so much information every single day that it is impossible to retain everything. When you sent me the briefing book, I read through these interviews, and I have no recollection of some of what's in there.

Perry: That's why we do the briefings.

Sullivan: I tell people I worked there two and a half years. That's like seven years in real people time. The other funny thing that happened was: The White House is an eat-lunch-at-your-desk kind of place. Josh was munching on fortune cookies that had been left over from some other meal. He had a whole box of them. He had offered me one, I had declined, and so he's eating these fortune cookies and he reads a fortune and he says, "You may want to hold on to this one." It said, "Your talents will soon be rewarded." I thought, *Well, this might be an omen*.

Perry: Did you save it?

Sullivan: I did save it. I don't know where it is at this moment. I have to find it. I know I have it. I have a box of White House stuff. The interviews were all very similar. One thing I can say seriously is that there was completely an appetite for a new set of eyes, new viewpoints. They liked the idea of hiring somebody who was not a longtime Bush guy or a campaign operative.

So we have all these interviews and now comes the fateful day that I have an interview with the President of the United States in the Oval Office. I think it was July 5th. It was the day after the public event on the South Lawn, with the fireworks and the whole thing. I went to that and the whole time I'm sitting on the South Lawn, I'm thinking about this interview.

I had known Mark McKinnon from Dallas days, not well, but his firm was hired by Ross Perot Jr. to do some polling about the Mavericks in 1996. When I got to the Department of Education, I think I reconnected with McKinnon, but I'm not a hundred percent sure about that. I reconnected with him on the interview process for sure, knowing that he might have some guidance. We had a conversation and a few emails, and so when the interview got set up, I sent him an email saying, "OK, I'm going to meet with the President on July 5th, in the morning." He was a guest of the President's birthday party that was going on during the Fourth of July event, so he emailed me, while I'm on the South Lawn with my family for the fireworks, and I'm nervous, thinking about this interview. His email read, "I mentioned it to the President. Don't screw it up," in so many words.

So the next day arrives.

Perry: Did you sleep well the night before?

Sullivan: No, I was on pins and needles. Bartlett had told me that the interview would be personal in nature. "He's not going to ask you about what you think we should do for the first anniversary of Katrina. He wants to get a feel for you personally and he will ask you questions along those lines." I took some comfort in that and I knew that my sports background would be a good way to connect. But I didn't want to come across as some guy who was a White Sox fan, played in nine fantasy leagues (I don't play in any) and read the box scores and that was all I had to offer. I was sort of wrestling with how to use sports to make this connection without coming across as somehow unprofessional, not the right tone.

I get to the White House an hour early because Bush time is legendary. You never know—You have to always be ready, because when he's ready is when things start. So I was there really early. President Shalikashvili of Georgia was visiting the White House that day and was running late, so the schedule had been thrown out of whack. As a result, I had to wait an extra 45 minutes, so now I'm apoplectic because I just can't take any more waiting. But in that extra time, I thought of the way that I could introduce the notion that we had sports in common. It came into my head that the fact that I'm from Chicago would get me to the White Sox, and he was close with White Sox owner, Jerry Reinsdorf, and we'd kind of go from there. That was the idea.

David Sherzer, one of his assistants, with whom I would come to work very closely, popped into the lobby and said, "Sir?" He was calling me "sir," which surprised me. The young people who work at the White House are extremely polite and formal. So he said, "It's your time. Let me show you into the Oval Office." As I walked in, the door flung open, and there's the President. I felt like I was walking onto a movie set, it was so bright. I said, "It's an honor to be here, sir." He immediately said, "Yes, it is. It's an honor for me to be here, too. Isn't this great? Look at this, the Oval Office."

He immediately put me at ease, which is what he does with people, and sometimes he's criticized for it, which he doesn't care about at all, because he'll make that joke or that self-deprecating point or whatever. "Isn't this great, the Oval Office? Come on in." He had a briefing paper that I noticed sitting on the end table. He's sitting in a chair. I'm on the couch. Bartlett is there. He was quiet, an observer, but not between me and the President. I could see this briefing paper with my name on the top, and I was thinking, *Man, this is wild.* He says, "I know that you are working here with Margaret. I know you were in Dallas for a long time, and I know you were at NBC, but where are you from?" I heard myself say, "Chicago, sir. White Sox, not Cubs." And he looked at Bartlett and said, "We've got a baseball fan." We talked about Reinsdorf was instrumental in bringing into baseball with the Texas Rangers, and I just got completely relaxed.

He asked about my family and I remember him saying, "This is going to be a two-and-a-half-year sprint. Does Mama know what you might be getting into?" I said, "Sir, she's on board." He asked me about my kids. We have a son we adopted from Russia when he was three, and there's adoption in the Bush family, so we talked about that a little bit. He said, "Thanks for doing that," which I thought was kind of interesting. The funny thing is, my son Frank, who is now 13, kind of became the President's favorite, and that all started in that moment.

He asked me some other general questions. If you remember, in July of '05 you had the Middle East crisis with missiles being lobbed back and forth. The President says, "I've got to get back to this Middle East thing. I really enjoyed talking with you." He says, "If this was a test, you passed." I thought, *I might be getting this job*. We got up to leave and he looked at Bartlett and said, "I'm comfortable, Dan, I'm comfortable." I just thought, *This is unbelievable*. Of course, I had to wait another week, not sleeping, before I actually got the word.

Perry: What did you feel like, just walking away from the interview?

Sullivan: I felt the hand of God. I felt like I couldn't believe that I was placed in this moment. I thought back to Ken Schanzer telling me, "You never know where this is going to lead." I thought about Tom Luce and Margaret Spellings. I still didn't have the job, but I thought about all those people who had gone to bat for me at various points in my life, my parents. I just thought, *How can this possibly be happening?*

Interestingly, when I went to lunch with George Stephanopoulos a few weeks after I started, he said to me—and he said it with affection—when you read this in black and white, it sounds kind of harsh—He said, "I can't believe you got this job," because my background was so nontraditional. It was just incredibly humbling and I never got used to it. I would give people tours and they would say, "This is old hat for you," and I would always say, "No, it's not. You never get used to coming to work here." Every morning when I walked in through that basement entrance off of West Exec, I said a little prayer to not screw it up that day. When you're working for the Dallas Mavericks or NBC and you say the wrong thing or you give the wrong advice, you can only inflict so much damage, you know? I felt that way at the department, too, because I felt that I was representing the President there, as well, so the stakes were high in that job, too. It was incredibly humbling and I was just sort of pinching myself.

When Dan called me, I was in the car, driving in Florida, coming back from—My wife's aunt had passed away and we had gone down for the funeral. I was in the car driving and I literally pulled the car over. My son who was old enough, the older son not the little one, drove for a while, because I just had to soak it all in. It was a week later, driving back to Virginia from Florida. My wife stayed back with her family and my son and I drove. Dan said to me, "You'd better pull over because I'm about to tell you that you're going to be the President's next White House Communications Director." So there you go. If it can happen to me—It really is the stuff of a screenplay, I think sometimes.

Charnock: I guess with Secretary Spellings and the President being so close and you're interviewing for this job—Was she aware that there was a possibility that you were going to move into the White House?

Sullivan: I told her right away. We were on a trip to Minneapolis for an event with Governor [Tim] Pawlenty and we were on the plane. We got on a commercial U.S. Airways flight and I said, "I've got to tell you something: I got sent for." She was happy for me. She punched me in the arm. It was funny because later that day while we were together in the van, going back to the airport, Bartlett called her, and she said, "He's sitting right here. I really can't say too much." All of us had a laugh over that. But she went to bat for me with Dan and with the President, and it all worked out.

Perry: How much time elapsed from your leaving ED to go over to the White House?

Sullivan: It was two weeks to the day. I worked two more weeks, and during that time I was learning things and having some meetings, then I went up on the Hill and made some introductions there. Talk about being distracted. But I wanted to finish as strongly as I could with her. Interestingly, we had just hired a new press secretary, Katherine McLane, who did a great job there. On her first day on the job I told her, "I'm leaving in two weeks." I tried to get things in place as best I could before making the big move.

Perry: And then did you begin to try to get up to speed as best you could on what you would need to do to hit the ground running on Day One at the White House?

Sullivan: I did. I was given a policy binder, a big binder broken down by policy subject, put together by Cathie [Catherine] Martin, who was going to be my deputy on the policy communications front, an awesome person, a great communications person—She put together a binder that had some briefing materials on each of the key policy areas. I went to the public library and got every book I could find that had been written by people who had worked for President Bush. I found that interesting. I did some speed-reading; I didn't read all nine books in two weeks, but got through the important ones.

Perry: Looking back, can you remember which ones you thought were confirmed by what you came to know about the President?

Sullivan: Definitely Karen Hughes' book, *Ten Minutes from Normal*. I enjoyed Ari Fleischer's book, *Taking Heat*. He had an anecdote in there about taking a day off to go to a [New York] Yankees game with his father. The first foreign affairs dispute of the Bush administration was the Hainan Island Incident, in which the crew of a U.S. Navy intelligence plane was detained and interrogated in China. Instead of being at the White House that day, Ari was at the Yankees' opening day game with his father, with the full support of the President. Ari took some heat for that from some in the Press Corps, but the support of the President when it came to family was something we all saw regularly.

One thing I should say that I didn't mention, from the interview with the President: He talked about the atmosphere that he and Mrs. Bush try to create for the staff. He said, "We don't have backbiting; we don't allow it." He talked about how, in his father's White House, there were different factions that caused all kinds of upheaval and was not a good environment at times. "We don't have that here."

It was really true. They created an atmosphere where Mrs. Bush was inviting the kids to movies in the family theater, sending cards to the kids at Valentine's Day and Halloween, inviting the families for dinner, movies, White House tee ball on the South Lawn—any kind of invitation. We had the high privilege of being invited to Camp David St. Patrick's Day weekend in 2007. They created an atmosphere. They were aware of how hard everybody worked, the sacrifices people made to be away from their families, financially too, and they created an atmosphere that was incredible. They wanted you to be with your families at the big moments. That was an interesting thing I took from Ari's book. I read the Ron Kessler book, *A Matter of Character:*

Inside the White House of George W. Bush, which was interesting, comparing the atmosphere in the Bush 43 White House to the Clinton administration.

I also should say that Secretary Spellings—On the last trip that we made together before I left the White House, on the way home, once the event was finished and the work of the day was done, I sat with her and she gave me some White House lessons. I wonder if I still have that document somewhere.

Perry: If so, we'll look at it. What did she offer?

Sullivan: The number-one thing was don't try to BS [bullshit] the President. The thing that was easy on this was she is exactly the same way. If you don't have the goods, you cannot try to stammer around and act like you do. The answer is, "I don't know but I will find out." He can tell if you really don't know. That was the main thing. If you don't know, don't guess. The two of them are very much alike. In fact, she had installed at the Department of Education the same forms for the schedule process, for the speech process. We really were run like the White House in terms of the day-in and day-out logistics and operations, so all that was pretty familiar to me.

Perry: So how did you get up to speed on your position? We know you had your binder with the issues and the policies, but we were chatting this morning about—Obviously, the face of communications for the White House is the press secretary.

Sullivan: Right.

Perry: And I think not that many people, including political scientists, know that much about the Director of Communications. So how did you get up to speed on what that office is and what it does?

Sullivan: The Director of Communications position is not up front like the press secretary. The two roles are equal in the position on senior staff, and worked together very closely. Our situation was a little bit more complicated in that there was Karen Hughes and later Dan Bartlett and Ed Gillespie—the role of Counselor to the President. So the Communications Director job becomes a little bit altered in history from the way other Presidents may have done it.

The first Communications Director was with President Nixon. I got to meet him before he passed away, Herb Klein. I got to meet him at the White House, a really cool guy. He had come from a background in sports. We had a laugh about that. He was the sports editor of the school paper at USC [University of Southern California], and a really nice man that we got some time with. Dana Perino knew him from her time in San Diego, so she had a really good relationship with him.

For us it was a little different because I did work through Dan and Gillespie on a lot of things. My role changed a little bit when Dan left and Ed came, but generally speaking, my role was event-driven: the look of events, the messaging, the production of the events, working closely with Scott Sforza and then Adam Belmar on the production of events and Presidential interviews. But really, you can think of it more as longer term and strategic, as opposed to news of the day and the public spokesman role. When I spoke for the President it was more on the speeches: Why are we in Toledo? What's he going to say in his speech tomorrow? A lot around

the State of the Union. Immigration reform was a policy area that—I did a lot on the record around that. But mostly my role was to drive that working through Ed, and before him, Dan Bartlett, message and events, and then of course all of the printed materials, the fact sheets, the rapid-response operation, the website, regional media.

We had the great Jeanie Mamo, one of the handful of staffers who—You could do an entire symposium just on Jeanie here at the Miller Center. Jeanie was one of the handful of staffers who were there all eight years. At the end there were 23 or 24, maybe a little more than that, but a bunch of them worked for the Vice President. There were not that many who worked for the President all eight years. Jeanie did. She was a force of nature, a great communications person, extremely passionate. We all worked for Jeanie, really, is how we looked at it. Jeanie ran media affairs, which included the regional operation, so when you were in Toledo, she would build a press corps of the Toledo media to join in with the White House traveling media, as well as the website and a bunch of other things.

I had three deputies: policy communications, media affairs, and production. Policy and communications was Cathie Martin first and then Terri Teuber Moore. Jeanie was there the whole time with media affairs. Scott Sforza and Adam Belmar ran the production of events at the 18 acres of the White House, and then the Presidential interviews. It's a lot of stuff, not as out front but crazy in its own way. As a member of the senior staff, you travel with the President. Either Dan or I would go, or Ed or I would go. One of the two of us always went on the road. It was an incredible privilege and a great honor is all I can say.

Perry: We have a lot to talk about. I thought we might finish up a little bit early today because I know you've had a very long day, starting with a very early morning. So we'll unpack a number of those things perhaps tomorrow morning.

Sullivan: Sure.

Perry: Before we do that, before we take a break for this afternoon, tell us about coming in knowing that you've been hired because you're not a Bush person in terms of having worked a long time with the campaign or in the administration, and you're there to be the new set of eyes and ears. First of all, do you have any discussions with the President himself about where he wants to go—as he described it to you in your interview—in that last two-and-a-half-year sprint?

Sullivan: First of all, I was accepted even as an outsider who came in. I was accepted, without exception, by all the senior staff. The members of the Cabinet—I worked with some more than others, obviously—I felt embraced by all of them from Day One, certainly by the President and Mrs. Bush. I had met Mrs. Bush. I had traveled with Mrs. Bush on a Katrina event once, so I was acquainted with her. But I was immediately welcomed in without any exception or any hesitancy by anybody.

In terms of the first order of business for me—This is how it is there: You get an ethics briefing. Other than that, you are thrown into the deep end of the pool and you've got to figure it out on your own. There's not an HR [Human Resources] department. There is Presidential Personnel, but there's nobody holding your hand telling you how to do things. You figure it out. I'm sure that goes back to George Washington, with his staff. You just figure it out.

Perry: You said you did see George Stephanopoulos early on.

Sullivan: I began to meet with people, ask a lot of questions, listen, and take notes. At night I had my own crash course. I had to learn a lot of stuff I didn't need to know when I was at Education. I looked at the calendar in terms of building out a message calendar. At that time, in July of '06, Iraq was front and center and not going well. The economy was still creating jobs and that was important. I looked at what I needed to know next. The first events that were going to take place with me as the Communications Director had to do with trade and energy and immigration reform, so that's where I dove in first, because that's what the calendar meant.

Perry: And what were those events coming up?

Sullivan: The trade event was an event at the Harley Davidson plant in York, Pennsylvania. They had been selling Harley Davidsons successfully in Vietnam. We identified a reporter from *USA Today* who would go on the trip and get a little special access. That was one of the first events that I had a chance to put my imprint on a little bit. Interestingly, when that event happened, I had a preplanned vacation with my family. I took a few days off, so I didn't actually go on the event.

Perry: These were events the President would be at and speak?

Sullivan: Right. How will we talk about trade? So I had to learn about trade. My routine—This is where my wife, as a great advisor and smart person, helped me. I would be in the office most of the time at 6:45 A.M., in that range. The President got into the Oval between 6:50 and 7:05, right in that area. It wasn't so much that I dealt with him that often early in the morning like that, but that's when he was in and that's when stuff started happening, so I wanted to be there. And I needed time to prepare for the 7:30 A.M. senior staff meeting. I'd get up at 5:15, leave the house by 6:00 and be in there at 6:40. I picked up sluggers in order to drive in the HOV [High Occupancy Vehicle] lane, for people who know what that is in D.C., to get in as quickly as I could. I would leave around 7:00 or 7:30 P.M., get home around 8:00, and from 8:00 to 9:00 was family time. From 9:00 to 10:00—I used to say this is like the second shift—I would read the stuff I needed to know for the next day.

My wife observed one day, "You know, you're reading all this stuff like you're cramming for a final every single day. What if you had people come during the day and talk to you about these issues? Maybe you would absorb the information." That is how I absorb information best. So I started doing that. When I knew we had an alternative energy event, I would ask somebody at Domestic Policy, "Who's the best smart young policy person who can come and let me ask my civilian questions?" That's what I started doing.

I remember doing that with ethanol, for example. "How do you make ethanol?" And I knew there was an issue with corn prices. "OK, tell me again, how does this work? Who's for it and against it?" "We're going to Dow Chemical for this event. What do they have to do with it?" I'd ask the outreach team, "Why did we pick them?" I would get up to speed. I was in those meetings, but until then I would ask those kinds of questions. I'd take notes and I would internalize them, and I would learn. I would always say, "What do I need to know to advise the President for his interview?" I didn't need to know the history of corn in order to help the

President successfully deliver the message about why we're in favor of ethanol or alternative biofuels, or whatever the issue was. I had never heard of switchgrass. Now I have to know: What is that? How do you make it? Where does it come from? Why is he talking about it? That was what I did on every area.

Now I'll tell you a story: I started on that Monday, July 24th, 2006. The following Monday was an event in Miami. We traveled on Sunday for a series of events in Miami. This was part of an effort that was started right before I got there, but with Dan Bartlett I took hold of this and we tried to repeat it a couple times. The idea was to go to a city and do a deep dive, spend the whole day there, not just pop in and out and do one event. So we were going to go to Miami and do a combination of immigration and trade at the port, do a whole series of events.

He did four interviews that day. The first was with Radio Mambi at a restaurant in Little Havana. He did an interview with this very popular Cuban American radio team—Ninoska Pérez Castellón and Armando Pérez Roura. We were going to do that interview first, heard in Cuba and in Miami. Obviously they're pro-U.S., pro-immigration reform, fans of the President. Next up was a TV interview with Michael Putney from the local ABC [American Broadcasting Company] affiliate—again the local reach—an interview with a reporter from Telemundo, and finally, an interview with Neil Cavuto of Fox News Channel. The last three interviews were going to take place at the port, as I recall.

So we're at breakfast. There's a roundtable with business and community leaders, with media availability at the end of that. I'm waiting for the opportunity to brief the President about this radio interview that he's going to do when this breakfast finishes. I'm ready to go. I talked to the radio crew, I know what's important to them, I have a feel for what they're going to ask, I know the policy, I know what the President said before and I know the point we're trying to make. Well, as I'm waiting for the green light, the aforementioned Jeanie Mamo emails me with a clip from a story that was in the *Miami Herald* that very morning, about [Fidel] Castro, who became ill right after this. Castro is still fully in power. He's considering tightening the visa process for U.S. special interest groups that get to go to Cuba right now on these special visas. He's going to take another look at that and maybe tighten the policy.

I'm waiting and waiting. The President is sitting at this table. Governor [John Ellis "Jeb"] Bush is next to him. I had met the Governor once or twice with Secretary Spellings. I've been on the job—This is I guess my eighth day on the job, and I'm going to brief the President for the first time before an interview. I get the signal, go over there, and I say, "Mr. President, remember Ninoska and Armando. You interviewed with them last year. This is how they feel about this. They're going to ask you about 'wet-foot, dry-foot.' This interview is also, I'm told, heard in Cuba." "Got it, got it, got it."

I'm feeling great. I am briefing the President of the United States. This is incredible. I got this. I can do this. I had this confidence now, so I'm going to bring up this thing that Jeanie just emailed me. "By the way, sir, because it was in the paper here today, you could be asked about Castro considering taking another look, tightening the rules on these visas for these special interests." He says, "What special interests?" I said, "I think it refers to philanthropic missions, maybe academics." I look at the Governor like: *You're the Governor. I'm the new guy. How about a little help for the new guy, Governor, please?*

The President says, "What are you talking about?" There's slight irritation, impatience, in his voice. I thought, *Man, I have blown it. He will never have confidence in me. I don't know what I'm talking about*. I said, remembering the words of Secretary Spellings, "Sir, that's all I've got for you on this." He said, "You know what? It's OK. I read your stuff. I'm ready. Let's go do it." He does the interview. Of course they don't ask him about the Castro policy, but I was really irritated at myself, because I know better than to go farther than I know. I felt, *This is my first time out of the box. He's never going to trust me*. But I had the benefit of having three more cracks at him on that very day: one for the interview with Putney from WPLG-TV, another with Telemundo, and finally, Cavuto. I really made sure that I was in position and ready to go, and all three went very well.

Perry: In the interim, then, you got up to speed on the Castro story?

Sullivan: I did, and I did tell him what it was as part of my follow-up. To me it was the end of the world, and he didn't even remember it by the next briefing. We'll talk about this tomorrow more at length, but anybody who tells you that he was not naturally or intellectually curious or inquisitive, or asks questions, has never been in a room with him. I was on the receiving end many times. He had a sharp ability to pick the most vulnerable point of whatever the idea was, or the policy or the event, and there are some funny stories about that.

That was my indoctrination into briefing the President. It was an amazing experience. I was kind of pinching myself that I was in this position, but the skills do translate. My job was not to be an expert on the policy; it was to help him remember, especially on a day where you're talking about three or four different things, like that Miami day—OK, in this interview, the point we want to drive on immigration—a complicated, super-complex policy issue like immigration reform, to boil it down for him into one—not giving him a talking point but sort of reminding him that the point we're trying to make today with this radio interview is that reform can be accomplished, it can be bipartisan, and we're going to begin that work next week with this meeting with Senator McCain and Senator Kennedy, or whatever it was at the time. That's the number-one point we want to make today. He knew the policy stuff. He was great. If it was a policy area that he was immersed in and invested in, he knew it. The other interviews went well. I knew, for example, what the hot buttons were with the ABC guy, the local guy, and he asked all the questions.

However people feel about his strengths as a communicator as President, he always valued the communications people. We always had a voice. We were in every meeting from the deputy level on up. At the earliest stages of a policy process, the communications people were empowered to speak up.

After the election in 2008, President-elect Obama was making his plans, the transition was going on. We were doing a few executive orders here and there and getting a couple of last-minute policy things out the door, so there were still some policy meetings taking place. There was some announcement that was going to be made, and a young communications person, when told what the timing was going to be for this announcement, raised her hand in this meeting and said, "We shouldn't do it on that day, because that's the day when President-elect Obama is going to introduce his new national security team." Somebody in the room is said to have said, "I'm glad

we've got her in the meeting, because that would have been a big mistake, to start planning for that day."

So we were always empowered and always had a voice. He did want to know—He did want to be challenged on how to answer questions. Between Bartlett and Gillespie and me, and I'm sure those before me, and Tony Snow and Dana. And then the policy people: Joel Kaplan was a brilliant Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy, and others on the various subject matters, and they all stood up and said their piece. We were encouraged. That atmosphere was created.

I've worked for bosses who would say, "I want input," and then when somebody gives it they say, "You're wrong and let me tell you why." I've worked for guys who, when somebody would make a comment in a meeting, would embarrass them. Well, that person is never going to raise their hand again. It was not that way in the George W. Bush White House. We were encouraged to speak up. You know what? When you're sitting there with Karl Rove and these scary-smart, long-standing political gurus, it takes a little backbone for a young person to say, "What about this?" And they do.

The other thing about the way he ran meetings, and maybe this is another topic for tomorrow: People say that they always started on time, but that wasn't the reason the meetings were so good. He would want to know, "What's the purpose of this meeting?" If it wasn't clear to him when he sat down—and he always sat at the middle of the table so he could see more people, not at the head of the table. If he didn't understand why we were meeting, the very first thing was always, "Purpose of the meeting?" What he meant by that was: Are we doing this today because there's a deadline of some kind? Is this going through Congress? Is it in the news media? Why are we doing this today? Are you looking for a recommendation from me? What's the purpose of the meeting? There was more than one time where, if 45 minutes was set for a meeting, that was because the judgment of the Chief of Staff and the President was that's how much time was needed to make your case, have a robust discussion, and either come to a resolution, or the President would say, "I've got what I need. I'll get back to you with an answer." If you couldn't get it done in the allotted time, you were not prepared. There was great expectation that you were going to come prepared.

There were times when a policy person would come with a PowerPoint deck. We didn't show them on the wall; they were just sort of used as a device to follow along. There was a presentation deck that was passed around, and there were many times when the President would say, "We can start on page 8," because he didn't need the preamble. It's not that he was impatient. When you're the President, you've got a lot of stuff to do and he didn't need the warm-up act.

Perry: Was there ever a time in any of those meetings when you thought the discussion was truncated too early? Obviously, everybody is aware that the President has lots on his plate and is a busy man, but did you ever think, *I think we should have gone five minutes more,* to press on the subject, or did you always feel that when he said, "I've got it," there was no need to go on?

Sullivan: I always felt that when he said, "I've got it," or sometimes he would say, "I'm going to hear from Emily, and then the Vice President, and then we're going to wrap this up." If he ever got to that, it was because everybody else—Sometimes with the Vice President, if he hadn't

spoken up, he would say, "Dick [Cheney], I want to hear from you on this." The VP often gave his counsel one-on-one. He didn't say a lot in front of the big group at times. When he did, it was always interesting. He never held back when he did.

One of the things we can talk about tomorrow—You probably got into this with Gillespie—is the President's daily briefing, the meeting in the morning that is with the VP and the National Security Advisor. It's a really small meeting and I was the backup briefer on that. I probably did it a dozen times, and that's a fascinating meeting.

Perry: We definitely want to talk about that. My colleagues are making a note of that so we won't forget. Maybe our last point for today is an overview that we can come to and then bear down on the details tomorrow when we start again. Did you have an overarching strategy as you began, as you came into the position? You obviously had to hit the ground running on these events that were coming up—the Miami event and the upcoming anniversary of Katrina and then the upcoming anniversary of 9/11—but did you begin to think about, and were you given direction to think about: What is the overarching communications strategy that you want to have, and that the President wants to have as he begins, as he said, that sprint for the last couple of years?

Sullivan: Absolutely. Secretary Spellings used to say that we can walk and chew gum at the same time. There's always too much happening to have one singular communications strategy. Until we got toward the legacy stuff, which we can talk about tomorrow, generally speaking, Iraq was at the forefront, 9/11 was still fresh, and so the overarching message, the most important message to me was that we've been kept safe, that Iraq was worth the cost because—We haven't been kept safe by accident. In fact, one of the things for the tomorrow list is Tony Snow's effort to get the military to stop classifying everything that happened over there as a default, because we would try to use these things in speeches and interviews, and we couldn't use them because they were classified, and there was no reason some of these things were classified.

That the President was keeping us safe was a big overarching message, but meanwhile we had a record 58 consecutive months of job creation, we had some success with No Child Left Behind, we were trying to do immigration reform, we were trying to move the needle. He had an energy bill that we were trying to expand. The Medicare Part D prescription drug benefit policy was still hopping. You know, if you're doing corporate communications for McDonald's, you can say, "Our overarching communication strategy for this year is to talk about how we're improving the in-store experience. We're going to talk about service, and our menu and nutrition. We're showing how many calories—Everything we're going to do is going to funnel toward the customer in-store experience." You can't do that when you're the President, when you have to have national security and foreign affairs issues, and at the same time you're talking about health care and energy and job creation and small business.

The way we would do the calendar, we'll talk about tomorrow. You could do a symposium on the meeting, Josh's Anonymous, which used to be Andy's Anonymous, when Andy Card was the Chief of Staff. The process to get something on the President's calendar, and the notion of how to build the message calendar—We can do a deep dive on that. At 30,000 feet, you look at the monthly calendar—every week in those days—We're going to do one thing on Iraq; we're going to do one thing on the economy; OK, here's some foreign travel; this is a holiday or

whatever—You have the things that you know are baked in. OK, now what do we do? We haven't done anything on health care in two months. Where are we going to put health care? I got it. Let's go to Kansas City. We haven't talked about community health centers. The President has created 2,100 of them and we haven't talked about that. Let's do that. All right.

Perry: How did you pick which city to go to?

Sullivan: That's complicated.

Charnock: I'm very interested in that as well.

Sullivan: There's a community health center in Kansas City that has done this, this, and this for single moms, or for pregnant teens. There's a story to tell there that supports the President's agenda, a real story that supports the use of the taxpayer dollars to do this, so let's go to Kansas City and do this. By the way, that event is the day—We got back on Air Force One, and the President came back to the conference room after that event and said, "So, how is it playing out there?" And I had to tell him, "Sir, what's playing out there today is the DNA came back on Anna Nicole Smith's baby and that's all anybody is talking about." He said, "So you mean we could have stayed home?" I said, "Well, sir, there are lots of people in St. Louis, in Kansas City, in Wichita, who covered that event today and they read the paper too, and they're going to get—"

Perry: Regional media.

Sullivan: Regional. It was always an easy default for the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* to say, "Look around, nobody showed up at this event." Or as the campaign heated up in '07 and the press corps following the President diminished in number, we spent some time saying that the regional media matters, which it does. You can't just have the attitude that New York and L.A. and D.C. are all that matter. Is it an event? Is it a town hall? If it's a town hall, how do we build the audience? All those things are what went into that process.

Then we would have a meeting that was called the daily double, for reasons I will explain tomorrow. In that meeting, we put before the President the things that we were going to recommend to go on the calendar, that now he was being asked to go to Kansas City. Sometimes that means with a certain Member of Congress or a certain Cabinet Secretary. We would try to build out the whole thing, and in that meeting you had better bring your A game. There's a funny story—Emily, you seem to be the notetaker.

Charnock: I'm making the list.

Sullivan: The sport fishing story for that event is a good one.

Perry: Sport fishing?

Sullivan: Sport fishing was an interesting story.

Charnock: For Kansas City?

Sullivan: No, this was in Maryland. I was told by Josh Bolten, "You'd better get your sport fishing facts by tomorrow morning's meeting with the President." I didn't know enough about it to sell him on the event. It was an event we agreed we would do. Anyway, we're getting ahead of ourselves.

Perry: A question that I want to ask and I'm sure you have it on the tip of your tongue, but if you want to think about it overnight as well, on these events: I'm always fascinated by the Michael Deaver oral history that we did for Reagan, where he talks about the visual.

Sullivan: Oh, absolutely.

Perry: Whenever anybody on the staff came to Michael Deaver and said, "We want to do this topic in this place with these people," supposedly he would say, in the newspaper days, "What's the photo? What's the headline? What's the first sentence of the story on that topic?" I've always been fascinated by that. If you could talk about that, how you pictured that, or did you do almost like a storyboard for it? Then, we can also ask you to jump ahead into the new media.

Sullivan: Right, absolutely.

Perry: Because obviously we're beyond just what the newspaper headline is going to be or what the photo is going to be.

Sullivan: I appreciate your including the materials that I sent to Katrina (Kuhn) on that topic, because President Bush doesn't really get the acknowledgment or the credit for the digital media things that he did, given some limitations by the Secret Service and the times. He did the first straight-to-Internet interview. We'll talk about it tomorrow, but there are some things that we did there.

Perry: So we've got that, and of course the briefing books become part of this whole process, so they will be on the website for the Miller Center, and if the library wants them as well. If there's anything that you want to add to that, about how you chose which new media to go with and how you got up to speed on new media as well. Anything before we break for this afternoon?

Charnock: I don't think so, no. I was very interested to learn about BarneyCam from the new media.

Perry: I do remember BarneyCam, and I especially remember that being rerun on David Letterman.

Sullivan: It was run on David Letterman. BarneyCam was one of those things that the cynical, inside-the-Beltway media tired of after the first or second year, but was still very popular elsewhere. Jimmy Orr and Jeanie Mamo were the original creators of that. We can get into all that tomorrow. It will be great.

Perry: We know you've had a really long day already up to this point, and we appreciate your taking some time.

Sullivan: This is so much fun. This is really great of you to invite me to be a part of this.

Perry: It's our pleasure and our honor to have you here.

Sullivan: Thanks. Hopefully some of it is interesting.

Charnock: It's absolutely fascinating. I will compile my list of topics to cover tomorrow, as well.

November 2, 2012

McKee: I was reading an article about how, in New York City and Lower Manhattan, people are now suddenly relying on payphones again.

Perry: Do they exist?

McKee: They actually do.

Charnock: When people don't have Google Maps or something—I don't have a smartphone, which makes me extremely retrograde. I feel like I'm relying on my wits out in the world. People have stopped doing that.

McKee: There was an old *Saturday Night Live* episode and the setup was the local newscast. The teleprompters went down and by the end of five minutes it was kind of a *Lord of the Flies* situation.

Perry: They brought the conch shells out.

McKee: Pretty much.

Perry: All right, we are in day two of our Kevin Sullivan interview for the Bush 43 Oral History Project. Thanks to Emily, particularly, who was such a great notetaker and sent us an email of all the topics that we wanted to cover today.

Charnock: Stories.

Perry: I'll rely on her to keep us on point for that. I thought maybe we could open up this morning's conversations, since it is morning here, with what your mornings would be like at the White House, with the senior staff meetings, the communication strategy meetings and then the times that you briefed President Bush.

Sullivan: Sure. A typical day would be to arrive at the West Wing by 6:45, sometimes a little earlier or a little later. Senior staff was at 7:30 in the Roosevelt Room, but you had to be ready for senior staff, so you really couldn't walk in at 7:25, although there were days that that

happened, too. That early part of the morning was preparing for what was going to be the final preparation for what was going to happen during the day.

One other thing I'll say: The President was usually in the Oval Office, unscheduled between 7:00 and 7:30. If you needed something, you could go down there and sort of lurk outside and you'd oftentimes get the signal to come in if you needed a decision on something and a quick answer, or an update on some information about an event that day, to pass along. Personally, I only needed to do that a handful of times in my two and a half years. That was the time where Ed Gillespie or Dan Bartlett could always count on a word with the President during that 6:45 to 7:30 window.

Perry: Would they be the gatekeepers? So if you went down and gave the word that you needed to see the President just very quickly?

Sullivan: President Bush was not big on a heavy gatekeeper. He liked a flat structure where there was a lot of access to him. He used to say to Josh Bolten, when Josh came in as Chief of Staff, "I don't need a prime minister." He wanted people to have access to him, and Josh was great about that. During that time, he also would sign correspondence and autograph pictures and those kinds of things that would be stacked up on his desk overnight.

Then of course at 7:30 there was the senior staff meeting in the Roosevelt Room, run by Josh Bolten. The first order of business was always the press secretary, to talk about what we're going to be dealing with today, and the point of that wasn't simply a news update for everyone in the room; it was for either Tony or Dana to make sure that they had whatever information they needed to answer the questions that were going to come that day. Josh was fantastic about managing the meeting so that if there was an issue—Let's say Dana would say, "What are we going to say about this issue? What's happening in the Middle East?" Before we'd convene, Josh would make sure that whatever policy person was the one responsible for getting her the information that she needed in order to prepare for the gaggle that came first, that person knew that they were on the hook to provide her that information by a certain deadline. He was masterful at managing that meeting. He did it with good cheer. He has a great sense of humor but also the proper amount of pacing, because everyone's time is valuable.

So the first thing was the press secretary update/request for information. Then typically, the Legislative Affairs person would go next. Candi [Candida] Wolff was in that role first and Dan Meyer after her. Then it would be what's going on, on the Hill, and sort of the same thing: What do we need to do to respond to, or to provide information for, or to get it in the mix here to influence outcomes? Then it just went around the room from there. Everybody gave a very quick update. I tell people all the time that working there was more fun than you might imagine, given the gravity of some of the issues that we all were faced with, particularly the President. There were times when people would bring in—Karl Rove would bring in Norwegian pastries or other delights on occasion. There was an incredible *esprit de corps*.

The thing that I tell people in my consulting work in the corporate world is that every single day, we were on offense from 7:30 in the morning. We had a game plan. We knew what the goals and the priorities were for that day. That meeting did a great job of effectively setting the priorities—reviewing the calendar, but also asking, what's most important today? It was an incredible way

to start the day, very effective. From there, we would convene as a communications team. From the senior staff meeting, for communications it would have been the press secretary, me, and the counselor to the President.

Then we would meet at 8:00 in the Counselor's office, either Gillespie or before him, Bartlett, and that would include most of the team, so you had Policy Communications, the OMB [Office of Management and Budget], press secretary and the First Lady's press secretary, and just a broader swath of communicators gathered. There again, that meeting was: What do we need today? Does the thing that we're going to be managing, this announcement that the President is going to make—Do we need a fact sheet? Do we need a statement? How should we handle this? Are we comfortable with the way this event is planned? That meeting would oftentimes be 20 minutes.

We had a lot of meetings, but we had short meetings. I've had people in my consulting say, "How do you have short meetings? What's the secret to a short meeting?" People think that the secret is having an agenda, which really has almost nothing to do with it, because you can have an agenda and meander off course. The key is that these meetings always had a purpose. There was a point. Everybody was busy and so everybody was driven to get to the point and then leave knowing who was responsible for what. Then there was a feeling of shared accountability. *I've got to do this to help my colleague*. Again, the camaraderie was unbelievable and really one team pulling in one direction.

I had the occasion in the final days to meet Mike McCurry, an outstanding press secretary for President Clinton years before. After we met, he sent me a really nice email. I forget how many days there were left in the administration, but fewer than 90, let's say, and Mike said in his email, "Take a look around and enjoy this, because you'll never again be in a professional environment where not only are you surrounded by rock stars but you're all pulling in the same direction." That was really how it was, and how President Bush set it up. You hear people talk about this blind loyalty that so-called "Bushies" have, and it wasn't like that at all; it was a two-way street. He treated us with respect and we were included in things.

There was a fantastic environment to work in that was created by the President and Mrs. Bush. When somebody had a personal loss, or whatever it was, the President and Mrs. Bush were there to offer their help, their sympathies, whatever it might be, day in and day out. Scott Stanzel, one of my colleagues, a deputy press secretary, completed an Ironman Triathlon. There was a policy meeting in the Roosevelt Room and Stanzel was in the meeting, and before the meeting started the President said, "Before we get started, Scott, stand up and tell us all about the Ironman." That's how it was, so when people talk about the loyalty that all of us had for the President and the fact that there were virtually no leaks and no individual agendas and some of the things that have plagued other Presidencies, that was part of it, that we were loyal to him. That loyalty was cultivated, it was nurtured, and it was definitely a two-way street.

Perry: So even though there had been turnover, as we talked about yesterday, and you were part of that, coming in at rather a late stage of the Presidency, would that be your view of how the President built that loyalty even for people like yourself who, as we said, had not worked in the campaigns, had not been tied to the Bush family before you came to the White House, except for the DOE segment?

Sullivan: Based on my experience, it was one team, and everybody who was on the team was treated really well. I always felt included. I felt trusted, and it was just a great environment to work in. Obviously the work was important, but it was also fun and a great place to go to work every day.

The day would go from that 8:00 meeting with all the communications staffers together, to everybody's calendar, but you went about your day knowing what the priorities were and knowing the goals, what outcomes were desired. You really had the game plan in place to execute.

Charnock: How did the process differ when you were on the road?

Sullivan: On the road, somebody would stand in for whoever was missing in the senior staff meeting. I could send—I had three deputies. Typically either Jeanie Mamo or Cathie Martin/Terri Teuber Moore would go if I couldn't be there. On the road, there was frequent email back and forth and following up on any loose ends that there might be for the morning. Typically when you're on the road, the game plan was that whatever we were doing on the road was the priority. If you were where the President was, that was where your focus was.

Charnock: It was a little more streamlined.

Sullivan: Right, so it was a little bit more streamlined in terms of what the focus was.

McKee: This is a little bit of a tangent from a typical day but it relates to the on-the-road question. Presidential travels actually have been something I'm interested in, the way it's a form of political strategy. I'm curious about the process, given the value of the President's time, and everyone else's time, to make the decision that we're going to make a trip to location X for duration Y. How do you make those decisions—that it's worth it to make the investment of time, energy, thought, to go on the road, versus remaining in Washington and keeping that typical day?

Sullivan: I'll handle that in two categories: number one, the basic calendar, and then the second one is the disaster scenario. Of course we had a lot of that. Every President does. We see it unfolding with Hurricane Sandy.

McKee: Sure.

Sullivan: For the basic calendar, we would look at the grid as a team—Karl Rove and myself and others—that would come together preliminarily, before we met in Josh's Anonymous meeting. After Karl was Barry Jackson and David Sherzer. There was a small group of us and we would look at the calendar grid. We would operate about six weeks out, typically, sometimes longer. There were certain things that were on the calendar: major foreign trips, the NATO Summit and those kind of things, state visits to the White House by other world leaders, other forms of formal travel that the President had—It was all sort of baked in first.

The President had a goal in the second term of one press conference a month. That slowed down a little bit once the '08 campaign really got heated up. I think, honestly, that was in part at the request of the McCain campaign. While we would have liked to continue to keep the President out there, he wanted to respect the wishes of the McCain campaign. He wanted to be able to

know that he had done whatever he could to help Senator McCain, so there was one press conference a month. We would look each week and say: We need an Iraq event, or some sort of a military event each week. We need an economic event basically each week, and then whatever the other policy issues were in that particular window. It may have been immigration, health care, or whatever the President was working on.

The idea would be to make sure we could look at that calendar and know that we were driving a few different things over the course of the month, with a purpose. There would be a surrogate operation that supported the President so he wasn't alone, and there were other things that accompanied and supported whatever he was doing. The decision is: is this something that can be done in Washington, from the White House? There were certain things that had bigger impact coming from the White House. What room you do it in—The White House has its own impact—That's a whole other conversation, about how you choose the Map Room versus the library. We always used to joke that President [Jimmy] Carter sort of ruined the library, because of the famous "Malaise" speech. Scott Sforza, the super-talented production director, the first one for President Bush, had done a history—This document is out there if you don't have it—of what sort of events had taken place in each room in the White House, what kind of Presidential communication events.

In terms of travel, we were aware that we needed to get the President out of Washington a certain number of times a month. He's everybody's President. There's a certain cynicism that sets in, in Washington after a certain period of time, with the inside-the-Beltway crowd, and sometimes telling the stories of those policies is best done on the ground in communities where the policies are working. That was the calibration that took place. Certain things have more impact from the White House, and certain things have more impact when you're out among the people.

McKee: In terms of that impact, is it about the people in the audience at the travel event? Is it about the local media coverage? Or is it about shifting the narrative being told by the national media?

Sullivan: It's really all the above. You want to tell the narrative, to tell your story in a way that it's not going to be told inside the Beltway. You want to show the President with the people that he is governing, out there in Grand Rapids, Michigan, or wherever you might be, but it has to be authentic; it's got to be real. He was a big stickler on that. Why are we going there? What's the purpose of going there? We tried some new things. In '06, we took the radio address, the weekly address, on the road a couple of times. We visited a coffee shop in Englewood, Colorado. There he was on a Saturday morning, open collar, in a coffee shop with some small-business people in Colorado who had a meeting with him, and then when he went to do the radio address, he was able to say, "I'm here today in Colorado with some small business owners here at Mile High Coffee."

I remember pulling up in front of the store and the guy came out and he was wearing shorts and a T-shirt. The President said, "Is that the guy who owns the place?" I said yes, and he said, "Great." It was fun for him to be with the regular people in their natural environment, as opposed to some guy putting on a coat and tie and flying to Washington for some photo op.

McKee: Right.

Sullivan: He liked the authentic nature of things that way and I think those images from the road were helpful.

Charnock: In terms of the exact places or larger states that you went to—Do locations request visits from the President?

Sullivan: Yes.

Charnock: Is there a process for weighing that up and did the politics of the particular place play into where you go?

Sullivan: Absolutely. It's a calculation. There are companies that would send information into the outreach office. "We have a small business that I think is right up the President's alley." Those things would all be vetted and evaluated. Our people did a phenomenal job with this. No system is perfect, but the idea is: I'm going to put the President next to this coffee shop owner in Colorado. We've got to make sure that this guy doesn't have any background-check issues. When you invite someone in, when you put someone next to the President when you go to a town, you've got to make sure that you're not putting the President in harm's way of something that could be used against him politically, or something that would just not be prudent.

Perry: How do you study that? I'm sure the Secret Service does a security check on people, but how do you do a background check that's beyond security, on issues of diplomacy or issues of what this person's background is politically?

Sullivan: That wasn't part of my job, to do the actual vetting. We had a team that did that, and I saw the reports. Essentially, you could just check media records, public records that are available, things that this person had said publicly or things that had been said about him or her, and you kind of go from there. It occasionally would require an interview to further probe on some issues, but it was something that had to be done carefully. Usually it turned out fine. We didn't have too many issues with that, but occasionally there was one here or there.

Perry: Could you talk about the story that you tell—It's in our briefing book—about one of the first meetings that you had with the President, in which he discussed Muslim extremism with you? You were very impressed with his grasp of that subject and talked to Dan Bartlett about how impressed you were, and was there a way to get that image of the President out to the general public?

Sullivan: This was the code that never fully got cracked with President Bush. I believe it was the State of the Union in 2007. Typically on the morning of the State of the Union we would invite in the news anchors to talk to the President. One year we included the morning show hosts. It was sort of a background conversation. They could report on the meeting but without directly quoting him. There were some ground rules associated with it.

I was sitting next to Katie Couric, who at that time was at CBS [Columbia Broadcasting System] News. I was acquainted with Katie from my NBC [National Broadcasting Company] days. I didn't know her super well, but had worked with her on the Olympics and a few other things. We were sitting next to each other and the President was doing this international foreign-policy tour

where he was breaking down the issues in the world for this group. Katie whispered to me at one point, "Man, if the public could see this, his approval number would be inverted."

We left the meeting and I went to Dan's office and I said, "What do we have to do for the rest of the world to see this?" I will tell you that that scenario with Katie was repeated a number of other times, either with reporters or with civilians who were meeting with him for one thing or another. I asked guys like Dan, who had been with the President since before he was Governor—I don't know the answer. He was extraordinary in small groups. He had a way of connecting with people. He put people at ease.

My one theory—I'll use this example. There was a foreign trip, I believe it was one of the Africa trips. When the President arrives in a foreign country there's always a cultural event, frequently involving music, usually right upon arrival in the country. He gets off the plane and there's a cultural event of some kind. The President is keenly aware at that moment how important this is to these people, that the American President—not George W. Bush, but the American President—is on our soil, visiting us, respecting us with a visit. He's come all this way to see us.

In this particular case, there was a musical element to the cultural event and there was a musician playing some kind of a drum: a bongo or a conga drum or something. The President jumped up on the stage and played the instrument. And you have to understand that when the President does that, he has a calculation in his mind. He knows that Jimmy Fallon, or this might have been before Jimmy Fallon, that Conan O'Brien and Jay Leno and David Letterman, Craig Ferguson, and *Saturday Night Live,* and *The Daily Show* are going to make fun of him for doing this. But he knows the value for these people, as a point of American diplomacy, what this means not only to this musician on the stage, and everybody gathered here, but to this country who will watch this, to see the American President joining in on this customary song that they play that's so important to them and such a part of their culture. He doesn't care if Jon Stewart makes fun of him. He knows the meaning and the value that it has for our relationship with a country, with the nation that he's visiting in Africa.

We would talk about this. I remember after that trip Josh Bolten saying, "Should we take a look at the situations we put him in like this?" And the answer, as we discussed it—Had he been in the room, I'm confident he would have said no, because it's more important to those people. This is what people miss about President Bush. Every decision that I saw him make in my two and a half years, he made based on principles that he brought to Washington, and in a way that he thought was best for the country, not what was best for his short-term political needs, for his overall popularity, for his legacy. He didn't care about that stuff at all.

Perry: Could I probe a little bit on how he appeared to the American people, particularly through the medium of television? I frequently tell the story that I was with him in a small setting, with Senator [Addison Mitchell] McConnell, in Louisville in March of 2007. The Senator had brought him in and he met with 40 undergraduate students at the McConnell Center at the University of Louisville, and as a fellow there, I got to be part of a handful of faculty who met with him. I had never seen him in person before and I found him to be completely different from how he appeared on television.

My question always to those of you who worked with him, and particularly those who worked with him in communications, is do you think that something about the medium of television did not translate this personality that you speak of and that I know was authentic because I saw it with my own eyes? He was so relaxed, he was so personal and personable with these students, a great sense of humor, great wit, articulate. They all asked questions and then he said he would have pictures with them. We just thought he would take a group picture but he had an individual photo with each student.

I always point out that this was March of '07. He wasn't running for anything ever again, so he didn't have to worry about that. But as each student approached him, he remembered the question that student had asked, and he would comment to that student about whatever it was, to have another personal moment with that student. It helped me to understand how successful he had been.

Was it something about the medium of television that somehow did not translate that really authentic part of his personality, or did he change somehow in front of the cameras, or do you think it was a combination of both?

Sullivan: Dan Bartlett, Karen Hughes, Karl, the people who were around him from the beginning would have a better answer than I do. My hunch is that he was very successful—Message discipline helped him get elected Governor twice, President twice. The only thing I can think of is that when he was in those moments where the cameras were rolling, that focus on message discipline somehow lessened his abilities to connect, because he naturally was very gifted at connecting with people.

When he did a longer-form interview with a print reporter—We got to a certain point where, as the Internet and digital media really started to explode, news outlets wanted to be able to put—They would bring their tape recorder, which traditionally had been used just to verify quotes and for accurate note-taking. At a certain point there was a request to post the audio of the entire interview on the website to accompany the printed story, and we didn't allow that. The reason was that it made the conversation with that print reporter like a television interview or a radio interview. I would tell him, "You're going to have a much better interview. You're going to have a real conversation. You're going to get more insight if you will have a conversation."

There were some reporters who got it and there were some who didn't. I give Steve Scully at C-SPAN a lot of credit. He never really cared about having the questions that he asked the President be subject to review by his counterparts in the media and criticized for not being tough enough. He had tough questions, but he asked short, open-ended questions and the kind of questions that maybe hadn't been asked by other reporters, and he ended up getting a conversation. That was good television.

President Bush did very well if he felt a connection. Bartlett used to say, "He's a feel player and if he has a good feeling with the reporter, the interview is going to go really well. If there's tension, if there's some history, if there's any issue or some unfair treatment in the past, he's going to be on edge and it's not going to go as well." I think that's some of what you saw in some of those interviews that may not have gone quite as well.

The only suggestion I can offer is that he set aside his natural tendency to really drill down on the message of the day, and it didn't always serve him well. Certain things, like the "Heck of a job, Brownie" criticism is totally unfair. It takes too long to explain to ever effectively change anybody's mind. It wasn't New Orleans; it was either Alabama or Mississippi. [Ed. note: It was Alabama] He's walking from the helicopter with Governor [Robert] Riley of Alabama and Riley says, "Your guy Michael Brown has done a great job for us." Literally seconds before the President goes to the microphone, the Governor is praising Michael Brown and the job he did in their state. He steps up to the microphone and as part of his thing, he turns around and says, "Heck of a job, Brownie," and it ends up being used against him to mean that he thought the response in New Orleans was praiseworthy. They weren't even in New Orleans. But again, the old thing in Washington is, if you're explaining you're losing, so there was just nothing that could be done. That ship had sailed. In so many ways, on a personal level he was incredibly gifted as a communicator and it just didn't always come across. Sometimes it did, but not always.

Charnock: I'm just wondering—You, in a strategic communications role, are trying to promote a certain narrative about President Bush but in a sense a sort of media narrative about President Bush had been established. Was that part of what you found yourself coming up against? Were you trying to counteract that?

Sullivan: In my time there I did. That was like the conversation with Bartlett: What else can we do? Is there anything we can do differently to help put him in a position to be more like he is when he's not on camera? You'll have, hopefully, the opportunity to put this question to Dan. His response was, we've tried a lot of things, but the truth of the matter was it just wasn't that important to President Bush. He was more concerned with the substance than with the style.

He used to joke around—We would have these meetings about, OK, is he going to be standing? Sitting? What room? Is it behind the desk? He would laugh at us about it. "I know you think I'm better on my feet." Dan used to say that he's an athletic guy and when he's on his feet he's more comfortable, he's breathing, he's moving a little bit. Let's try to put him in those more natural situations for him, rather than behind the desk. But when you're President, sometimes it's best to be in the Oval Office, behind the desk. I think we did him a disservice on a few of those addresses to the nation where he was in an empty room at a podium, staring into a camera. That's a difficult environment for anybody.

Charnock: Right.

Sullivan: The State of the Union, he used to say, is the greatest venue there is in the world to give a speech: an electric audience, bright lights, the crowd is right on top of you, you've prepared, the whole nation is watching. It's an incredible environment. The Rose Garden is the greatest home field advantage in the history of communications. The President naturally projects his voice since it's outside. You have the backdrop of the Oval Office, the trees. Even saying that, during a press conference there, he once had bird droppings land on his jacket. I would encourage you to go back and watch the videotape. He doesn't miss a beat. He kind of brushes it away. Then as we all gathered in the Oval Office afterward, the first thing he said was, "How about that?"

McKee: Did the media catch that?

Sullivan: Oh, yes. In fact, Ann Compton of ABC, I think, was the first one.

Charnock: I remember seeing the clip.

Sullivan: Right. One other point about that is we would recommend the venues. The President always chose, but we would recommend venues for these various events. It was a collaboration between me and Ed or Dan and the press secretary, and Adam Belmar or Scott Sforza as the production chief. I was never as big a fan of the President doing press conferences in the White House Press Briefing Room. Your choices were East Room, Rose Garden, or Press Briefing Room, for a press conference. Those were the three primary venues. Obviously, at certain times of the year the Rose Garden didn't make a lot of sense, so then you were down to East Room versus the Press Room.

The President is a competitive guy. He loved going to the Press Briefing Room because he knew it was on their turf. They control that room. That room belongs to the White House press corps, even though it's steps from the Oval Office. We all felt that that room is a little less—It's very Presidential and the seal is there and people see it and they think White House, so I don't mean that it's not Presidential, but it's their turf. The East Room to me was sort of his turf. We struck a balance and he did a fair amount in both places. I think if you studied—Probably a media scholar somewhere, one day will do this.

Perry: Let's make a note to do that.

Sullivan: If you studied his demeanor in the East Room and in the Rose Garden and in the Press Briefing Room, I think you would find that he was a little different in the Press Briefing Room. There was maybe a little bit more joking, a little less formal, a little bit more back-and-forth, joking with the reporters, a little bit more familiarity, a little less serious maybe. And there were times where I'm sure that was perfectly appropriate. All of this stuff went into this calculation, and he kind of chuckled at all of it because he was really concerned with the substance, not so much the style and the trappings and all that.

McKee: I wanted to circle back around your comments about the "Heck of a job, Brownie" incident, because it strikes me that that's kind of the communications guy's nightmare, a situation like that, and it's something that's bedeviled every recent President or even Presidential candidate. We've certainly seen that Obama has had a couple of those incidents, Romney has had his share, and [Albert, Jr.] Gore, with the "I invented the Internet" thing. There's always a backstory, but it's that throwaway line that gets into the narrative, as you said, and potentially can define the President or the candidate in a negative way. As a communications person, is there any way that you can coach the President or the candidate to avoid those kinds of incidents, to always think about how the next sentence that you say might be used against you? Or is that just something that is going to be too artificial and constrain them too much and interfere with their capacity to be themselves?

Sullivan: I think you could do some limited coaching, if that's the right word, before a press conference, when you kind of have the feel—Dana could always predict, almost without exception, what the questions were going to be. She had an incredible ability to do that. The

President was often kind of—He often commented that there were no questions that surprised them, that they asked the questions that they felt they were expected by other journalists to ask. There were very few open-ended, interesting, different, offbeat kinds of questions. Obviously, you're in a news pressure cooker.

In terms of the coaching thing: on the fly, it's tough to do. When somebody works the hours that a President works, any President, the number of events, the number of times he speaks over the course of a day, much less a week, month, year, term, you are going to have a few fumbles. It's just inevitable, human nature. The two things that he gets hits with most along these lines are the "Mission Accomplished" banner, the looking out the window over the Katrina damage, and the "Heck of a job, Brownie." Karl Rove in his book wrote about how much he regretted the picture out the window. In that moment you're making decisions on the fly, there's a lot of turmoil, and not every decision—You make a lot of decisions every single day and there are going to be a couple of hiccups. When the President makes a hiccup, it is magnified by an order of magnitude that doesn't happen anywhere else in public life. It's just a different deal.

The Speaker of the House or the majority leader of the Senate or a CEO or a Cabinet official can say something and there will be a limited reaction. The President says the same thing and the reaction is swift and international and has an impact on our allies, our enemies—you name it—unlike the same comment being said by anyone else. That's where the spotlight comes in.

Perry: Could we go back to the symbolism of the rooms, particularly the Oval Office? I've had several of the West Wing tours. The first one I had was toward the end of President Bush's administration. I was just overwhelmed to look in the door of the Oval Office and see this most historic room. I was stuck by the fact that—I've seen this in the Obama administration as well—compared to other Presidents who had a working desk, with their memorabilia and historical items—I'm thinking of [John F.] Kennedy's coconut from saving his crew in World War II—neither Obama nor President Bush seemed to have anything on the desk. I've wondered about that. Since you've obviously been there and been part of the process of thinking what the backdrops look like and what the rooms look like—I can also understand why, as West Wing tours are coming through, you can't have classified documents on the President's desk, but it seems that in both of these most recent administrations, there hasn't been anything on the desk in the Oval Office. I just wondered what the reason for that was.

Sullivan: It was definitely a working desk and during the day he would have papers there. Certain kinds of meetings he would run from behind the desk. Speechwriter meetings were that way, for example. He would frequently sit at the desk and have papers laid out in front of him, but his desk was cleaned up at the end of the day.

Perry: So did it seem more ceremonial to you, and perhaps to him?

Sullivan: No. Interestingly, there is a private study, as you know, off the Oval Office, and he had memorabilia in there, including the handgun that had been taken from Saddam Hussein when he was captured, that the soldiers presented to the President later. He had that on the wall there. He had some other personal artifacts in there, but he didn't use that room really at all, in my experience. He used it for an occasional sidebar conversation. There's also the private dining room off the Oval Office and he would have lunch in there with people. He worked out of the

Oval Office, and he had papers, but I think the Treaty Room in the Residence was more like what you're talking about, where he had some personal stuff. He had his iPod docking station and a TV, and he had sort of normal stuff. In the Oval Office he had family photos and things like that on a credenza behind the desk.

Perry: Has anyone ever thought about making the desk look more worked on and more personalized?

Sullivan: No. I think if you saw it during working hours, you wouldn't think it was ceremonial, but when you go through on the tour, everything has been cleaned away and all you have are the family photos. For the addresses to the nation, for the camera view, you would have to arrange the stuff behind the President so as to be visible or not distracting. You have to arrange it for television a little bit.

Perry: Right. Could we go back to your first coming on board with the President, in the summer of '06? I don't think we got to talk about the midterm elections and campaigning yesterday afternoon when we were finishing up. In some ways piggybacking on Guian's question about choosing places to go, what is that like in a midterm campaign mode for the President? Could you talk about that campaign and the aftermath of that election?

Sullivan: I traveled with the President through the majority of those campaign stops and the thing that I remember most—There are a couple of things. We all knew that a lot of these candidates were going to lose, and some of them ended up losing by double digits, and yet he really believed that he needed to do everything that he could to give these guys the best chance they had to win. The pace of that schedule was incredible, I mean, multiple stops a day all over the place. If you go back and look at the schedule, we went to California and Montana and Iowa and everywhere in between. It was really just extraordinary. Even though a lot of these candidates had the decks stacked against them, he wanted to do everything he could to help them. That is probably the first thing I remember.

Perry: And we're talking about the '06 midterms. These candidates were asking him to come and be there and campaign for them.

Sullivan: That's right. Interestingly, in 2006, [Charles Joseph, Jr.] Crist was running for Governor of Florida and had invited the President to Florida for a campaign rally. We accepted, and it had been announced. We're now going all over the place on this campaign trip. We're in the support staff van, and Karl gets a call from a staffer of candidate Crist, undoing the invitation. The reason I bring this up is that the President's popularity was certainly in question at that point. These were candidates who had asked for his help. Because they asked—He loved to campaign and was a great campaigner. He was incredibly knowledgeable about the local issues. Karl is an encyclopedia of Congressional campaign history, and they would have some fascinating discussions about these different campaigns and what the key issues were. Well, when this effort came to uninvite the President, of course Karl was unhappy about it. Crist had a lead at the time. He would obviously go on to win the election handily.

So those issues were all being managed. Where should he go? Where could he go? Can he be helpful? I remember a couple of things: one in Colorado and one in Iowa. Let me talk about the

Iowa event. It was in the Le Mars High School gym—a classic slice of American political life, the President walking into a gym, a raucous crowd, overflow, fire-marshal-on-standby kind of a crowd.

I was backstage and as the President walked out, he said something like, "I've got a couple of new chestnuts for them tonight." The enthusiasm that I saw with him in this environment—Obviously, not everywhere he went—and the team had to choose the places where he could go, because of his popularity and because of the issues with Iraq and everything, but this was seeing him in a vintage campaign moment that you would have seen in 2000 or in 2004. He had said to me, "You should have been here in 2004. It was like this all the time." And I always used to say, "I got here as fast as I could." It was really fun to see him in that environment—the warm embrace of this town in Iowa, in the high school gym, kids in their football uniforms, football jerseys in the crowd. [We can go back and see who that candidate was and what that town was and fill in the record.]

Perry: Right.

Sullivan: He loved it. He loved campaigning and he was great at it. He always used to say, "The guy who gets elected President wants it the most. You've got to really want it." I think we saw in 2008, the Rudy [Rudolph] Giulianis and the Fred Thompsons, and these guys who had some decent support, but clearly, early on in the campaign cycle, didn't want it as badly as some of the other candidates, and they quickly fell by the wayside. Not every candidate falls by the wayside for that reason, but that was an interesting insight.

The other thing in '06 that I think we have to talk about, that is the most important element of the impending Republican—What did the President say? The word will come to me that he used when he did a press conference in the East Room the day after Election Day. That's when he announced the [Donald H.] Rumsfeld—

Charnock: Was it the "shellacking"?

Perry: That was Obama.

Sullivan: President Obama said shellacking. The President said it was a "thumping." But leading up to that, there were Members of Congress who saw what was coming. There was a tide going the other way, and the President had Members of Congress, including—I'm not going to name names, because I wasn't in these meetings—some Members of leadership who came to him in that late summer, early fall time period saying, "Mr. President, we've got to move some troops. We've got to do something. We've got to show some progress in Iraq or we're going to get run out of office." The President, figuratively speaking, threw them out of the Oval Office, because he had made this promise to the military and to military families that we will never play politics with the troops and with troop movements.

He always listened to the counsel of the generals on the ground and the thought that he would consider doing something with the military for a political gain was just not in his DNA or in anything he would consider. That was the other undercurrent to me, that even in those dark days, he stood by his principles and made decisions that he thought were best for the country, particularly on the national security front.

Perry: Did he talk to you on these trips, about the prospect of losing the Congress? I'm thinking of that in contrast to the Iowa scene that you set for us, that tableau where clearly he was nostalgic for 2004 and maybe even 2000. Did he get back on Air Force One and say, "This may not end well so we need to be prepared for this"?

Sullivan: He may have had private conversations along those lines, but what I heard him say when he came into the conference room on Air Force One after these events was—He would comment about the event: "That was great," or whatever the situation was at the event. He was always optimistic. He always wanted to do what he could to help. He was realistic. He knew we were going to lose a lot of seats. If I remember correctly, the question was, could we hold on to the Senate? Ultimately, we didn't. That was a close call. The game plan was: We're going to lose a lot of seats. Where can we minimize the damage?

Perry: Right. And it came down to this one Senate seat in Virginia, as you recall.

Sullivan: Right.

Charnock: From a communications standpoint—You've just come on board; you've been sort of thrown into campaigning mode for '06. Were you aware that it's probably going to be bad in terms of the results and you're not sure quite how it's going to play? Do you have different levels of a communications plan for dealing with the aftermath? What was your approach to that?

Sullivan: On these political events, the idea is that the President goes in and helps by being there, to deliver a message for that candidate and why he or she is the right choice. There wasn't a ton of follow-up afterward. We would go in and do the best we could. In terms of the communications strategy, we continued to try to tell the story of what was happening; again, the idea being that the country had been protected. We had been kept safe by the actions that the President had taken.

This was a point I mentioned yesterday that Tony Snow was big on, that there were some small victories in Iraq and there were some stories that we tried to tell, and we couldn't tell them because the information was classified. Eventually, some of those things got unclassified, but we couldn't use them in '06. I don't know how much it would have helped, but one of Tony's initial things when he came on board was there's a better story than we're able to tell on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan. We worked with the military and made that appeal, and we had limited success, but it took some time.

Perry: Before we leave the '06 elections, you mentioned almost as an aside, about the President going onto that stage in Iowa and being fired up and saying, "I have several more chestnuts to give to them." Had you talked about what those chestnuts were?

Sullivan: No. At that point he's in the zone. He knows what he is going to do. He was completely in his element and he delivered a great speech that night and fired them up.

Perry: Did you think to yourself *Oh, we hadn't talked about that. That's a good one. Let's use that at the next stop.*

Sullivan: It's interesting. When you travel with the President in this mode, you hear the same speech over and over and over again. Joe Hagin, the great Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations—There was a speech the President gave all the time about [Junichiro] Koizumi in Japan, how President Bush's father had been shot down by the Japanese. "And now here Koizumi and I are meeting." They went to Graceland, famously, because Koizumi was an Elvis [Presley] fan. "Here we're meeting about how to keep the peace." Joe Hagin and I got to a point where we could almost lip-sync the speech in the back of the room, those remarks. It was a great story. They hadn't heard it in whatever town we were in, so it was perfectly fine for the President to illustrate a key point. It was great for him to use that over and over again, but there was a sense of sameness in those stump speeches.

Perry: Déjà vu.

Sullivan: Déjà vu. Many of us would be in the back of the room on our BlackBerrys, keeping up with what was going on at the White House and in the world, and always with one eye—You would always listen when he was wrapping up, because that meant you'd better get to the motorcade. I used to tell people when I worked in sports, "The team bus doesn't wait for the PR guy." And the motorcade doesn't wait for the Communications Director, so you would always listen. *OK, time to get to the motorcade*. And you always knew where that—Oftentimes, we were led into these rooms through back kitchens and things and you'd have to leave bread crumbs. The advance team always did a great job with the signs, "Motorcade" with an arrow, so you could find your way back, because you did not want to be left behind.

Charnock: Could I ask about the repetition part of it? Bush is giving the same stump speech, but it's in different towns, so from a local media standpoint they're getting a new story each time. Did you find—and this sort of applies to what we talked about yesterday in terms of message discipline—that you're trying to be very consistent about the points that you're putting forward? Did you find pushback from the national media? Did you start to get stories in the national media? They've heard this before. How do you handle that?

Sullivan: The national media goes to these things with an eye on: Did he say anything different? Some of them would have been closed press, first of all. In the ones that were open press—Did he say anything different? They would also look for a reaction to something else that's happened in the world, unrelated to the campaign. That had to be managed, and the press office did that more than I did. They were always looking for something new. They're obviously a competitive bunch, but they would tune out when they heard the same speech.

I'll give you one more, when the President would make acknowledgments. This wasn't just in '06 on the campaign trail. He always had one line he used over and over again when he would be recognizing the local dignitaries who had turned out. He would always do the mayor last and he would always say, "And Mr. Mayor, fill the potholes." It got a huge laugh every single time, every single time without fail, because they hadn't heard it in Chattanooga or Dayton or Grand Rapids or Helena before. This is the point we were talking about earlier, about his connecting with people. Everybody wants the potholes filled and here's the President of the United States asking our mayor to fill our potholes. How great is that? I'm sure that the White House press corps, who had heard this over and over and over again, rolled their eyes, but they didn't get it.

You get the point that it worked for those people in that room at that moment, and that's what was important to him, connecting with those people.

McKee: This is going in a little bit of a different direction. One of the things that happens during the Bush administration, and it gets entrenched even by the first term, is the way the cable news changes. Obviously, CNN [Cable News Network] has been around for a long time at this point, but you have the rise—I'm not sure of the exact timing—of Fox and MSNBC, really partisan networks. MSNBC figures out that there's a niche on the left, countering Fox. I'm curious about how you think that's changed the nature of communications around the Presidency and to what extent a 24/7 cable news presence was a heavy consideration for your job.

Sullivan: Well, the calculation was, could the President get a fair shake on whatever network it was? We always felt we could get a fair shake—not always easy interviews—on Fox. In fact, in the two and a half years that I was there, I believe the only non–White House correspondent who interviewed the President three times was Neil Cavuto. Again, we wanted to talk about the economy, both when it was still booming and into '07 and '08, when things headed toward a recession. If I were going to make a list of the toughest interviewers, Neil Cavuto would be on that short list.

When you do one of these interviews, there's always a bargain that takes place. "OK, we'd like to give you an opportunity to interview the President on the economy. We understand you're going to ask some other questions." I would try to do it, on the ones that I negotiated, not by telling them what to do, or what they could or couldn't ask, but more: "What's important to you? If we give you 20 minutes, or 15 minutes, how much of that time are you going to devote to various topics? What are your priorities?"

Frequently they would say 70 percent economy and 30 percent Iraq or whatever. We would use that information when we pitched the President on the idea of sitting down with Neil Cavuto. We might want to talk about trade on a given day, and Cavuto would say, "Of course I'll ask a few questions about trade because that's what the event is and trade is in the news and I understand, but I'm also going to ask this, this and this." I would often say to the President, "It's going to be 70/30," and the President would do the interview, get out of the chair and say, "I think it was 50/50," or "I think it was 60/40." We would go back and forth about what the percentage really was.

We felt like we could get a more fair shake from Fox News Channel, that's true, but they also asked some difficult questions. Bill O'Reilly came to the White House in '06. It was a good interview, but he asked tough questions, some questions that had an edge to them. Of course, we never doubted that. That's what they should do. That was part of the deal. Of course the President did a lot of interviews with NBC News. I said a few minutes ago that he was a feel player. He had a pretty good connection with Matt Lauer through the years.

He had a great connection with Tom Brokaw. When Brokaw left, there was a little bit of an opportunity there for who was going to be the NBC person that the President felt a connection with. It ended up being Matt Lauer. He did interviews with Brian Williams and others there, but it ended up being Matt Lauer who did the big interview on the fifth anniversary of 9/11. He asked one of the best questions I heard the President asked in my two and a half years there,

which was, “”If I knew what you knew from those intelligence briefings you get every morning—I live in New York City; I have a family—would I sleep better or worse at night?” The President said, “You’re one of those guys who has to get up early in the morning. I don’t know if you’d sleep better or not, but you would know that there are people out there who want to do harm to you and your family.” I thought it was a great question, and a great answer.

So it’s not like because of the NBC/MSNBC thing—We didn’t turn our back on NBC. Richard Engel did an interview with the President. Ed Gillespie wrote a letter—You probably talked to him about this when he was here. He wrote a letter to NBC, and there was some creative editing that was done, we felt, to make the President look bad, in that piece by Richard Engel. So we would make a judgment call, not on MSNBC as a whole, or NBC as a whole, but in this setting, with this interviewer. With this journalist, can the President get a fair shake? That’s really how it was done, not so much by the whole entity.

I remember Suzanne Malveaux, who was great, at CNN, suggesting that CNN do a panel interview where a variety of CNN journalists would come in, three or four at once, and interview the President as a panel. When I heard it I thought, *We’re never going to do this*.

McKee: It sounds like a CNN idea.

Sullivan: And we would try to—Is there another way that we could touch CNN? I’m sure we did something else. I know that Josh Bolten went on with Wolf Blitzer when he was still doing the Sunday morning show. There were other ways that we took care of MSNBC to the extent we did.

The calculation was made based on the individual, the request, the story. One that comes to mind was toward the end when we were in the legacy interview, the exit interview stretch, and Dana Perino had gotten a request from Cynthia McFadden at ABC News, one of the *Nightline* anchors. Cynthia had been a religion reporter in her career and she was interested in doing a piece on the President’s faith-based initiative and the impact that it had. Ed and Dana and I were in the Oval Office pitching these legacy interviews to the President and the President said words to the effect of, “She doesn’t want to talk about faith-based initiatives; she wants to talk about Iraq.”

We all had talked about this and Ed summed it up elegantly. He said, “Mr. President, the price of admission for getting to talk about your faith-based initiative and the impact that it had, to a great audience like ABC’s *Nightline*, which has a bigger audience, by the way, than Letterman or Leno—The price of admission to talk about the faith-based initiative is a few questions on Iraq and some other stuff. We recommend that you accept the interview. You’ll be prepared for the other questions, but it’s an opportunity to talk about something that nobody else is going to ask you about.” He did the interview and it went as advertised and it was a good one to do. That’s sort of how that calculation was made.

McKee: What about the cases, like MSNBC, where you know that from your perspective you’re not going to get a fair shake from a guy like Keith Olbermann, who is basically making his living from tearing into the President? It’s obviously specific, but I think this is now a partisan environment with partisan cable networks that any President for the foreseeable future faces. How do you deal with that problem? Can you engage that individual, or are you better off just

freezing them out, knowing you're not going to get the treatment—You're going to basically lose whatever audience share he has? Can you play them in some way?

Sullivan: With someone like Keith, there was no—It would have been foolish to put the President of the United States on with Keith. It would never happen. It would have been bad. Keith's a really smart guy and he's very talented, but he was going to go after the President in ways that would be designed specifically not to get information or to illuminate or add light, but to add heat and to make the President look bad and to mock him and to have fun at his expense. It would be unpredictable. As a communications person, you want to put the President in situations in which the outcome is as predictable as you can make it. It's never fully predictable, but you don't want to put him in a position where something can really go haywire. It's not good for multiple reasons.

For a news outlet that just has an agenda, the press secretary really has to manage that relationship, and there are things that can be done with the White House correspondent from that news outlet, differently from somebody who's on an opinion show like Olbermann's. During my time at the White House, if you were named the worst person in the world on Keith's show, it was a badge of honor. There were multiple people who got it and it was not something that was viewed as a bad thing. Keith had an agenda.

MSNBC made a business decision years ago that turned out to be a smart one: to counterprogram Fox News Channel. It's kind of sad that the CNN model of straight news is in third place right now, but that's the way it is, and I think you have to manage those relationships. I am a believer that you've got to keep the door open, the lines of communication open. I don't believe in not returning that person's calls, and we were never told at the White House to cut people off, and that sort of thing. You would always try to manage the relationship as best you can, but you're not going to do an interview that would clearly be imprudent.

McKee: Think big picture here. In your views of the larger issues at play, are we better off as a democracy, as a country, with this new model of partisan media? There is a very long history, going back into the early days of the republic, of very partisan newspapers, for example. Arguably, there was an exception period there in the mid to late 20th century, of at least the attempt at straight news and journalism. I'm curious about what your views on that are. Is this a positive development or a natural development, or are we really worse off for having Fox and MSNBC out there?

Sullivan: We could do a whole symposium just on that topic. These media companies, many of them, have shareholders. They are there to make a profit. Dick Ebersol used to tell me at NBC, "Never apologize for the fact that we're trying to make money here." Sometimes that influences program decisions even in sports, whether you walk away from one deal or you take another deal, or whether you can't preempt the *Today* show for the Monday overrun of a golf championship. Because the *Today* show makes so much money per hour, we're going to tee-off at 10:00. The writers are grumbling because it means that they have to catch later flights. We're here to make money. The commerce has always driven in the media.

The AP, while we were all at the White House, came out with that little bit of a shift in their philosophy, to include some commentary. Tom Raum is an AP reporter who really attacked

President Bush. The AP stories would come out by Tom Raum, *Associated Press*, and there's a little kicker up at the top that said "analysis." It didn't say opinion; it didn't say commentary; it said analysis. Well, it was his opinion. It was an opinion piece.

The thing that is not good is that opinion has encroached into what should be the front page of media. It's fine to say—I think this is an accurate way to look at it. The Fox News Channel during the day is fairly straightforward. Shepard Smith, on his show at 7:00, and Bret Baier, on his show at 6:00, are right down the middle. What happens at night is like the editorial page and so it's no different from the *New York Times*. Now you could make a case that the *New York Times* shows its editorial page views elsewhere in the paper, but I think there is a room for commentary and there is a room for straight coverage, and it's not a good development today that the commentary and opinion has seeped into what should be straight news reporting. MSNBC, in a certain way, is the editorial page of NBC News.

The Fox guys at night will bring on Brent Bozell to show examples of NBC News showing liberal bias in its coverage; Bernie Goldberg the same thing. I'm not a conspiracy theory guy. I don't think the media all gets together and says we're going to do this. This morning I watched *Morning Joe* [Scarborough], and Lawrence O'Donnell, a very liberal guy, was on his show, also a smart guy and a talented guy. They were talking about how Staten Island was abandoned by the federal response to Hurricane Sandy, and there was not one mention of President Obama's leadership or FEMA or anything. There is no question that, if there were a Republican President, as we saw with Katrina, they would have been assailed on that show this morning.

The consumer has to be smart enough to know that this guy has a point of view; Lawrence O'Donnell has a point of view. He believes in big government. They do a promotional spot for his show that says, "The government got us out of the Great Depression and the government needs to get us out of this." You need to know, when you're watching Lawrence O'Donnell, that he has a point of view. He's allowed to have a point of view. The show is more interesting and compelling, which is good for business, if he has a point of view, but when he's on *Morning Joe* giving that opinion, somebody on that panel—There were four or five people there—should have said, "What about the President?"

Perry: And Joe wasn't there this morning because he was taking care of his mother.

Sullivan: Joe wasn't there.

Perry: He might have been the one to make that case.

Sullivan: He might have been the one to do it. We are leaving it up to the consumer to make this calculation and figure out where the opinion is, and I think that's a little dangerous at times.

Perry: How about, to add to this conversation, the component of talk radio, and particularly conservative talk radio, and the invitation—it's a little bit later on in the chronology—where you have the conservative talk radio hosts, the ones with the most listenership, come to the Oval Office and talk to President Bush?

Sullivan: We did a few different things. Even in '06—I believe this was in '06 before midterms—we actually did a radio day at the White House. Jeanie Mamo, the head of Media

Affairs, ran this. Tents were set up on the North Lawn and the conservative radio hosts came in from all over the country. We would bring through Cabinet Secretaries and the Chief of Staff and other White House officials, to come in and talk about the issues of the day. The President, as I recall, did one interview. I forget how we executed it but the President did one interview that they all kind of shared.

Then we invited them, not on the air live like that case, but on multiple occasions, to come to the Oval Office. That effort was an acknowledgment that that's where the President's support was; that's where he could get a fair shake. Not that we couldn't get a fair shake in some other quarters, but we couldn't get them everywhere else and this was a place we could.

Having said that, he had criticism from some of those people on immigration and some other topics, so it wasn't like it was a hundred to zero, but particularly on the issue of the military and the antiterrorism stuff, the global War on Terror, you could bring in a Mark Levin, who had a big audience, or Neal Boortz, or Lars Larson and some of these guys who have more regional followings. Scott Hennen. Hugh Hewitt. Mike Gallagher. Michael Medved. Janet Parshall. There were others. It was a way for the President to really, off the record, give them some interesting background on what he was thinking and what went into certain decisions. They had huge reach. [Rush] Limbaugh and [Sean] Hannity would get some one-on-one treatment. Limbaugh got the one-on-one treatment once or twice. It's an acknowledgment of their huge audiences, and it was just smart to do.

It's interesting, I hear all the criticism of President Obama's going on *The View* and going on *The Tonight Show*. We would have loved to go on *The View* and *The Tonight Show*, and the White House is smart to do that. Just as a communications person, I wish that President Obama would do both, like do a press conference at some point or do some sort of availability with the White House press corps, *and* do *Rolling Stone*. I think it's interesting that he got embarrassed in the *Rolling Stone* interview by using a not-suitable-for-family-consumption word about Governor Romney. He later said, on CNN, that it was a casual moment, almost as if he thought the interview was over. So even when your friends come in, they're going to act like journalists and like media people. That reporter didn't think that was off the record and he used it, even though it made the President look bad.

I want to acknowledge that when you go on these things that you think are softer or friendlier interviews, and some of them are, the rule is journalists are still going to act like journalists if they hear something new or different or a little bit edgy, as we saw in the *Rolling Stone* interview. It's smart to go wherever there's an audience where you can get a fair shake and it's great if they don't ask tough questions. We would have loved to find a few of those guys. And I would just do both. There are ways to take care of the White House press corps without doing a formal press conference.

I'll tell you a little funny White House Press story. Dana Perino and I had some fun with this. There are great pictures in the press secretary's office, in the hallway, of Presidents interacting with White House reporters from years gone by. There's one of President [Harry] Truman, at his desk, surrounded by reporters. As we were talking about press conference venues one day, the President said, "Why can't we do one in the Oval Office like they used to, like that picture outside Dana's office?" And we actually had Adam Belmar, the production chief, come into the

White House on a Saturday morning when we knew we would have the run of the place for the day, with the engineers. He really did a site visit, as a network producer would call it, to check out the specs in the Oval Office. Could you put lights in here? How many seats could you get in here if you took out most of the furniture? The electrical capabilities—could you do it in here? Ultimately, the answer was no, so we told the President, "You really can't." But we collectively came up with one thought: *Why couldn't you, just like in President Truman's day, bring in the pool of 12 or 14 White House reporters, and just have them gather around the desk and ask you questions for 10 minutes?*

Perry: Not on television?

Sullivan: The cameras would be in there. It would not be live, but cameras would be in there. You could do just a short exchange, but it's access to the President. Dana could have cut it off whenever she wanted. You would do it on a day when there was something you wanted to talk about. "Before I take your questions, first I want to make a point that—" You know, this or that had happened, and here's how we feel about it. "Now while you're here, I'll take a few of your questions," like he would make a statement after an event, and sometimes he would take questions, sometimes he wouldn't.

I guess with my sports background—Dana was not a sports fan, but even non–sports fans use sports metaphors a lot, and "rope-a-dope" was one she used one time. So we called it "throwback jersey" day, and we did it a couple times. "Maybe we can have a throwback jersey day where we act like they acted in 1948."

Perry: Before television?

Sullivan: The Obama team certainly isn't looking for my help or suggestions, but just as they're going to do *Rolling Stone* and *People Magazine* and *The View* and some of these other things, they could have done a throwback jersey day, kind of a play, or take a few questions after a statement. The White House press corps is your bread and butter, and if you asked them, I think President Bush would get fairly high marks in terms of his access, and when the access was not as much as they would have liked, it probably had more to do with trying to help the McCain campaign than anything else.

Charnock: Just quickly, I remember watching *The View* one time when Jenna Bush was on, and the hosts dared her, almost, to call her dad from *The View*. I'm sitting there, my heart is going *What?* She did, and he picked up the phone, and I thought it was such an effective moment because I felt like it wasn't pre-planned in any way, and he didn't seem annoyed that she had called him from national television. You mentioned that President Bush himself maybe couldn't go on those shows sometimes, particularly at times when the Iraq War was particularly controversial, but were there ways in which you coordinated with the First Lady's staff, or even Jenna and Barbara [Bush]? How did they play into the communications?

Sullivan: First of all, any time Mrs. Bush was involved, the President was always in a better place. There were interviews we had them do together on certain topics. Mrs. Bush did interviews, and she had her own slate of issues. Anita McBride, her chief of staff, did a conference at American University not that long ago, about first ladies, and Mrs. Bush had a

fairly substantive set of accomplishments, not just the classic—because she had been a school librarian, let's do education. She made a big impact on women's heart health and Afghan women's issues, and some of the democracy issues that took place in Burma with Aung San Suu Kyi.

She could do some very substantive things that supported the President at times, and she did. She was always a great—I don't know what the word is. It really isn't "surrogate," because she's the First Lady, but she always was great to go out and do things in support of the President. We used third parties from time to time, but some of those settings were a little tougher territory.

Perry: Speaking of the President's family—You mentioned his mentioning his father and his war experience—did the President talk very much to you about his father? Did Bush 41 come to the White House while you were there, and/or did you go to Crawford with the President and the First Lady as kind of a second element of seeing the family?

Sullivan: I went to Crawford a couple of times, but not really to see the family. I met President Bush 41 in Beijing when we were there for the Olympics, briefly, and then again when he came with the other Presidents at the very end, after President-elect Obama had asked President Bush to invite the gang of ex-Presidents back together again. I certainly wouldn't say that I know President Bush 41. Then, at the portrait unveiling this year, I had the opportunity, the privilege of just saying hello. I wasn't in that orbit very often. The President spoke about him occasionally. He talked about the unconditional love that he felt from his father. He talked about how the criticism that he received was tougher on his father than it was on him. When he was asked about his father, those were usually the kinds of things he would say.

They did one interview together when Bush 41 was back with the other Presidents, with Brit [Alexander Britton] Hume. It was the only time they were interviewed together, I believe, both as Presidents, after 43 was in office. They had been photographed together, and they had done some events together. I don't know that they sat for an interview together. If it wasn't the only one, it was the first since the very beginning, but I think that was the only one. He was a lot of fun to be around there.

I'll tell you one funny thing I remember: There had been a negotiation that took place with the other ex-Presidents about how many group photos they were going to sign. These are the kind of things that—I don't know how much of this is of interest. You're Presidential scholars.

Perry: It's all of interest.

Sullivan: The resolution was that there would be 250 pictures total. Everyone would keep 50 of the 250, so they each signed 250 pictures, and each guy walked away with 50 pictures signed by the others, and they could use them for archival purposes. I don't know what the ground rules were and what they could be used for, but that was the deal.

There was a little prep session before this interview with Brit Hume. Dana and Ed Gillespie were there, too. Makeup was being applied. There were final thoughts before going out and President Bush 41 said, "What was decided about the autographed pictures?" I told him, and I said the photographer said they were going to rush print these so they could be back by 1:00 P.M. After lunch all the Presidents were going to sign the 250 and then go about their schedule. President

Bush 41 said, "One o'clock, huh? I'll have mine on eBay by four." [*laughter*] It was just a great little moment. What a remarkable man. It was a privilege and an honor just to be around him for that little slice. And you could tell how much President Bush cared about him and loved him. Their relationship—it was just great to see them together like that.

Perry: Before we leave the topic of the past Presidents coming back, we'll just jump ahead to the end and we'll circle back to other topics. That is quite a photograph in the Oval Office, of all of the living Presidents at that moment. The thing I remember is President Carter standing apart from the others. They are all shoulder-to-shoulder and President Carter is about half a body's width away from the President standing closest to him. Was there any thought about how they would get together or how they would look, or was there any comment about that at the time?

Sullivan: The comment was that the money shot was of them all in the Oval Office, in front of the *Resolute* desk. That was an obvious recommendation to make. It's not the sort of thing—I don't know that the photographer could have said, "Mr. President, how about a little bit to the right."

Charnock: "Get closer. Look like you're enjoying it."

Sullivan: And I don't remember, after the fact, a whole lot of discussion about that, about his posture or body language in the photo.

Perry: I want to circle back then, to the aftermath of the '06 election. We got through the campaign and a little bit about the fact that the Republican Party did lose both Houses of the Congress. If you can remember the day after the election, what's the morning briefing like? What's the senior staff meeting like? What is the communication strategy session like?

Sullivan: I do. It was interesting. That day, the senior staff meeting was held, not in the Roosevelt Room in the West Wing, which was being prepped for an interview or maybe another event, so we headed over to the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, in the conference room that at one time was [Richard] Nixon's hideaway.

Perry: Scott Jennings—Did he have that office at that point?

Sullivan: No. This was a conference room. It was [Hubert] Humphrey's office, I think, at one time. The real hideaway may have been the office that Scott was in. But anyway, we were in that room, and the first thing was that Josh Bolten singled out Karl Rove and thanked him for his efforts and reaffirmed that everything that could have been done was done to support the candidates, and that now the President was counting on us to stay focused and be at our best. There was no licking of wounds.

President Bush's White House, our crew that was there working for him, was not a place where you found hand-wringing. The President said that a few times. "We don't need a lot of hand-wringing." It was a place where you moved on. You learned what you could and you moved on. Josh acknowledged Karl's work and thanked him, and there was a round of applause in leading the political effort around that. Then it was, all right, now we're going to sprint to the finish here. Obviously, there was still a lot of time left. Josh was great in those moments where there had been some disappointment.

Perry: What was the communication strategy reading like, after that?

Sullivan: Remember, that was also the day there was a press conference and the Rumsfeld announcement was made.

Perry: Correct.

Sullivan: So the news of the day became, why did he wait until now? If he hadn't waited until now, would there have been a different outcome in the election? Some candidates who lost felt that there would have been. There was some sniping inside the party. He didn't care about any of that. He was not going to play politics with something like the Secretary of Defense. It was not going to happen. It was just not even something that was considered. So the communications strategy was managing that issue, making sure the press conference came off as well as it possibly could. The President—There was no questioning. He acknowledged the "thumping."

The other news was who was going to succeed—

Perry: Secretary Rumsfeld.

Sullivan: [Robert] Gates was introduced that morning. In fact, I remember being in the West Wing in my office on Election Night, working on the Bob Gates fact sheet. So we really had shifted attention, even as of Election Day, now that this is coming back to me, to rolling out Robert Gates as the nominee to be confirmed as the Secretary of Defense, and dealing with the issue. Really, the issue about not using that announcement for political gain was a good point to push. That was a virtue of President Bush's, and the military community got that and appreciated it. The political swirl around D.C. was just not the most important thing at that moment, but we quickly pivoted to try to get Secretary Gates confirmed and to move through the process.

Perry: You had mentioned that through that fall, up to the '06 elections, of course there had been so much pressure from media, and even from Republicans running for reelection, pressure on the President to perhaps draw down on the troops in Iraq, to try to bring people home to let the American people know that if it was going badly, we were paying attention and we were going to bring people out of harm's way. Instead, in this period after the election, the surge process starts and is announced by the President, I think in January of '07. In that intervening period between the '06 elections, the aftermath of that, the leaving of Secretary Rumsfeld and bringing on of Secretary Gates, and then gearing up for the surge, are you all working on strategic communications about that?

Sullivan: Absolutely. And this gets back to Guian's point about getting a fair shake with the media. The President announced the surge, and again it was one of those looking-into-the-camera-in-an-empty-room kind of moments. It was delivered from the Library.

On the heels of the speech, we did have a plan. The first move in the plan was a one-hour interview on Fox News Channel with not only General [David] Petraeus but also Ambassador [Ryan C.] Crocker. Brit Hume moderated the hour, as I recall, and if you go back and look at the interview, he asked one or two open-ended questions at the outset and they basically spent 15 to 20 minutes talking, without being interrupted, about the surge and how it was going to work, both militarily and diplomatically, and why it was the right call. That's an instance where the

venue, where you have an opportunity like that to have that long-form conversation about something the President has just done, with the two people who are absolutely the subject matter experts, who are not going to be interrupted, who are not going to be dragged into political and other issues more interesting, perhaps, to some people inside the Beltway.

There was a plan that was built around General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker. It involved visits to the Hill. It was a comprehensive plan; it wasn't just media and communications. They did a fantastic job. Their credibility was above question, and they really were spectacular in support of the President. The President essentially took their recommendation to do the surge. It worked, and it really changed the course of history. The President, one day, with people like you who do take the long view, will get more credit for it than would have been possible in that window of time in D.C. The communications strategy there was to use General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker, to put them in a position to make their case as much as we could, both with influencers in Washington, Members of Congress, and the media.

Perry: We have spoken to Ambassador Crocker, as well, so obviously we'll have all of his material on record, too. Any other questions on the surge or Iraq at this point, before we move on?

Charnock: Not so much on the military. I have some domestic policy questions.

Perry: That's a perfect link. That was the next area I was thinking about. I'm going to ask about immigration. You mentioned that fleetingly, but let's talk about that. Let's switch gears then, to legislative affairs policy related to immigration reform and your strategic communications planning on that.

Sullivan: Well, Barry Jackson and I convened what was called a multidisciplinary red team—some policy people, all aspects of communications represented—and we came up with a plan. Secretary [Carlos] Gutierrez from Commerce was our champion, in addition to the President and others. He was really the lead spokesperson in many cases on that. We had to, at the same time, emphasize strengthening the border and border control, do events at the border, do everything we could to show support for the agents on the border, and not take our eye off that ball, while also talking about why it was important for our business community to provide the verification, the things that they really weren't equipped to do on their own. Of course the President had a line, a great little sound bite he used frequently: "We're going to do this without amnesty, and also without animosity." That was the approach.

Perry: Did you develop that line?

Sullivan: No. I don't know if it was in his speech, or if one of the speechwriters did. The President certainly could have come up with that on his own. He used that a few times. It's a great line, and that was part of his compassionate conservative principles, that there are too many people to ignore them. We're going to give them a path. We're going to do it the right way, but we're going to take care of the border first. The truth of the matter, when the story is told, is that there was a better opportunity to do that then than at any other time in our recent history, because you had Senator McCain and Senator Kennedy in lockstep. The House was a trickier matter.

Losing the Senate in the midterms in ’06 turned out to be the game-changer, because Senator [Harry] Reid ultimately didn’t let it come to a vote, and he did that for political reasons, in my view. He derailed it because, among other things, even though President Bush wasn’t going to run for election again, he didn’t want this to be a Republican victory or a George W. Bush victory. It could have happened then.

I’ll tell you another interesting thing: This was Memorial weekend 2007. As I recall, Senator [Clarence Saxby, Jr.] Chambliss had helped draft sections of the legislation. He went home to Georgia over Memorial weekend, if memory serves, and there were a lot of phone calls coming into his office, against immigration reform. Again, the partisan nature of this—Even though you would think he’s a pretty safe candidate there, he was worried about the heat from his constituents and he ultimately chose to not support this bill as it moved through the process that he initially had co-authored, because he got nervous about the reaction back home. That happened to other Members of Congress as well. It’s a lightning-hot issue, but I really believe that it could have been accomplished then. The President had the right game plan. Joel Kaplan, the President’s Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy, was really leading this on the Hill for the White House.

An interesting thing, by the way, is that the Obama administration’s default position is to hand these things off to Congress; whereas we always stayed more involved, between our Legislative Affairs people and Joel Kaplan, Josh Bolten at times, really trying to shepherd these things carefully through the process. Secretary Gutierrez did a fantastic job. We had daily calls early in the morning with him. We had a communications plan every day. I did a lot of conservative talk radio, trying to emphasize the border. We went to the border multiple times with the President, to reinforce that we’re doing this at the border first.

There was one moment—I think it was in Georgia—where the President used the words, “Others don’t have the political courage,” and that was a little bit of a flashpoint for the media in the debate. I remember telling Norah O’Donnell in an interview on MSNBC about the State of the Union that President Bush had the political courage to do this and he really thought it was the best thing. It was an issue that was really personal to him. From his upbringing in Midland and being Governor of Texas, he understood this issue intimately. He had seen so many success stories of people who had come here, particularly from Mexico, in Texas.

Texas, if I’m not mistaken, has 1,200 miles of border. California has a sliver of that. So it was an issue in many ways unique to Texas. He knew this issue. Maybe the policy that we were pushing could have been tweaked a little bit but it really did cover the border, the employee verification answer for the business community, and ways to deal with the three million, or whatever the number is, who are already here, “without amnesty but also without animosity.” I really think the political forces derailed it and it’s unfortunate. Here we sit in 2012, five years later, and we’re nowhere closer. You saw President Obama promise to deal with it when he campaigned for office. He hasn’t touched it really.

Charnock: Through Executive order.

Sullivan: Through the Executive order thing, which is sort of odd. But other than that, he hasn’t really addressed it. You could say he did that for political, pre-campaign reasons. I don’t know. I

think the time was right then. The economy was still good. We didn't have the unemployment issue at that time. It's difficult to do it now when job creation in the U.S. has to take the front and center. That was the time when the President had an all-time record 58 consecutive months of job creation, and that was the point in time when it could have happened. It got derailed, I think for political reasons, sadly and unfortunately.

Perry: And yet, like No Child Left Behind, it had started with a bipartisan spirit, as you're pointing out, with Senators McCain and Kennedy working toward this. Did you ever just feel frankly frustrated that in our system, where even sometimes things begin in a bipartisan way that everyone calls for, but for either partisan reasons or local reasons, in terms of people running for reelection in the Senate or every two years in the House, these local issues stymie what needs to be done at the national level and on a national basis?

Sullivan: No question, it was very frustrating. We tried to do what we could to go around those things, but like what we talked about with the teachers unions and the local roots that they're able to put down, it was the same thing. When that Congressman or Congresswoman goes home and there's an uproar, he or she has a decision to make. Am I going to do what I think is best for the country and ultimately for my constituents, or am I going to react to a hundred phone calls?

We were talking about talk radio. The old adage is, 1 percent of the people who listen will ever call in, and most of the people who call in will complain, will be negative, because that's the nature of the beast. When there's an effort ginned up by one special interest group to do a bunch of phone calls or a bunch of emails into an office, it's sad that somebody, especially somebody who is going to not have much of a contest in reelection, is impacted by a small percentage of his constituents perhaps ginning up a lot of noise and clatter. But that's how it works, and when people talk about the system being broken, that's a view into one of the ways that it is manifested. The gridlock happens when those political forces take hold, unfortunately.

One little vignette that I was privileged—I had these sort of pinch-me moments four or five times a week and I never took for granted the privilege of being able to work there and see these things. We had an anniversary event for No Child Left Behind. The anniversary was January 7th or 8th, and every year there was usually an event at a school. Well, in 2007, to mark the fifth anniversary, we did a small meeting in the Oval Office. Senator Kennedy was there. We had a little photo op with Senators Kennedy and Enzi and Congressmen George Miller and Buck McKeon. The Congressional committee chairs and ranking Members were there. Secretary Spellings was there. It was a short event. They had a little meeting, a press pool came in, they made a couple of comments about No Child Left Behind, and that was it, not a big deal. It didn't register, really. I was there just sort of back-benching.

After the press pool was ushered out, Senator Kennedy was still there and he asked the President if he could have a private moment. They stepped into the dining room or the study off the Oval and had a few moments, not long. We were all still there when they came out. Senator Kennedy left, and the President said to us—That's one of the things about Senator Kennedy that's so impressive: he wanted to ask—I don't know if it was health care or what the policy issue was, but he wanted to know from the President, "Where's the line? How far can I go, to a point where you can't go any further? I want to get this done." It was what I would imagine those old Reagan–Tip [Thomas P.] O'Neill conversations were like. He was asking the President, "How

can we get this done?" Senator Kennedy was obviously different ideologically and philosophically from President Bush, but it was all about getting it done. He wanted to know, "Can we get this done together?" That seems to be, for the moment anyway, kind of long gone, and it's too bad.

Charnock: Can I ask about something along those lines in terms of immigration? In many ways, President Bush has been regarded as a partisan President, very much identified with the Republican Party, but obviously that was an issue, as Barbara mentioned, that was bipartisan. How did you deal with the idea in that issue, and with the Social Security issue in the first term as well, although you weren't a part of that? Bush had a position that was not really mainstream in the Republican Party, and a lot of the pushback that you were receiving was from Republicans.

Sullivan: One thing that's important—I mentioned this "red team" that was put together to push immigration. There was a young woman named Kerrie Rushton, who worked in the Office of Strategic Initiatives, which was Karl Rove's and then Barry's in-house think tank of really smart people. We had this idea that with the conservative blogs—At that time, *National Review* Online and *RedState* and others were really coming into their own as a digital force. Kerrie and I cooked up this operation within our red team, that we were going to respond in the name of the White House not just on conservative sites—It ended up being probably the majority of those sites, but we did some neutral and occasionally some of what you might consider left-leaning sites as well. There was so much confusion and misunderstanding. It's such a complex issue, and the policy was so comprehensive in nature, that we decided—and this had never happened before—that we were going to post on blogs, comments from the White House.

We cooked it up that Kerrie would write the first draft of the response. She would comb these websites, with some others in OSI [Office of Strategic Initiatives], for things that were factually wrong or misleading about the President's position on immigration reform. They would draft a response. The White House approval process could be lengthy, but because it wasn't really directly from the President, we forged an agreement that all it took was either Barry or me to approve the response that they had drafted, so we could respond quickly on these websites, because we were taking incoming from conservatives as well as from the left on certain pieces of this. Really, the criticism was more from within our own party than it was from the left. There was always some criticism.

We did this, and the reaction from the blogs was fascinating. I think it was *RedState.org* that created a little box on their front page, saying, this is where we're going to put the White House responses. They loved it, the fact that we were noticing and paying attention and engaging. NRO, *National Review* Online, gave an open invitation to do this, and I remember at the end, Rich Lowry's saying, "I don't know if you've changed anybody's mind or moved the needle, but the fact that you did it definitely got people's attention and showed how strongly the President felt about this, and it did help add some clarity."

I think we had some small victories that ultimately didn't really amount to much, because we didn't get the policy through. It was the same thing with the conservative talk show hosts. Laura Ingraham was a big anti-immigration voice—She was someone we included in those meetings. We had to manage that and it was a balancing act that we had to navigate all the time.

Charnock: You mentioned yesterday that with children's health insurance there's this bumper sticker opposition, and with immigration there's the bumper sticker saying that you're rewarding law-breaking, essentially.

Sullivan: Right.

Charnock: Did you feel that it was difficult to counter that? Did you try to come up with sort of a bumper sticker opposition? Have you thought of one subsequently that you wished you had used?

Sullivan: "Without amnesty and without animosity" was the bumper sticker. I think that spoke to the conservative passion piece. Nine-eleven changed things in terms of how people felt about our personal security. Enough people live in areas—I have a friend in Phoenix who says, "If you lived here, you would see why the people here are so in favor of the current law in Arizona and so opposed to immigration reform." I don't understand that. I think the President had cooked up a pretty good formula for addressing the issue. It's got to be addressed. We are a nation of immigrants, and that would occur to me once in a while. My grandfather was cleaning stables in Ireland and one generation later his grandson is working at the White House. It's amazing when you really think about it. But it didn't happen and it was unfortunate.

Perry: Why don't we take a quick break and we'll come back and finish our final hour?

[BREAK]

Perry: To lead into the financial crisis—Before we get there, we wanted to talk about the good news, which was the good economy, and I think Emily had a question about that.

Charnock: You had just mentioned earlier that the economy was going really well for a period there, particularly in 2006 and '07, and that Bush was not really getting a lot of credit for that. Normally we think about Presidents getting both credit and blame for whatever the economic situation is.

Sullivan: Right.

Charnock: Would you talk a little bit about that and what you think was going on?

Sullivan: The feeling was that the economy had been completely taken for granted. There had been the post-9/11 dot-com bubble combination where there was a tough economy early in his Presidency, and his policies led to this resurgence and this creation of small business. All these jobs had been created, an all-time record 58 consecutive months of job creation. It quickly went from—A lot of this was from before I got there in '06, but it went from a really tough post-9/11 economy to booming times, as if it just sort of happened organically. He did a lot of small business events. I would say that small business roundtables were among his most favorite

events to do. He loved hearing the entrepreneurial stories, and he asked deep questions about how these people ran their businesses. He loved it.

So when I came on board, one of the things that I was tasked with, along with the first anniversary of Katrina and the fifth anniversary of 9/11, in terms of a communications game plan, was how can we talk about the economy any differently? We made a regional effort to go out into the towns and cities all across the country where there had been success stories and just highlight the tax cuts. Creating the environment for business to succeed was the way the President liked to talk about it. We can't run your businesses for you. We can't make you successful. But we can create conditions for you to prosper. That was the approach. It wasn't all that long after that that we got into the fall of 2007, where things went south.

Perry: Now we want to talk about that. Tell us what that was like. You were on the inside again, with the morning senior staff meetings and the communications discussions and strategies. Tell us how that happened.

Sullivan: The one thing, looking back on it—The White House made a decision to put the communications effort in the hands of Secretary [Henry] Paulson and the Treasury Department. Jim Wilkinson, who was the chief of staff at the time, had been a White House communications person, a supertalented guy, had worked at the State Department—When you read the postmortem of all this, there are some references to the initial document with the first proposed, what became known as TARP [Troubled Assets Recovery Program], which was like a page and a half of notes that Secretary Paulson and his staff had put together. Essentially that's what went to Congress; there wasn't a lot of meat on the bones. I really think that in so many ways, we got off on the wrong foot with that effort.

Tony Fratto at the White House did a fantastic job doing the hand-to-hand combat with the media every single day. Tony has a Master's degree in economics, or it might be an MBA, from Penn [University of Pennsylvania]. He's a really smart guy who understands this stuff. He was the one who was able to explain swap derivatives and all that stuff that the media really didn't grasp fully, most of them. The White House media certainly didn't understand what had happened. It was a difficult thing and, again, within our own party there was a lot of criticism about TARP.

The President made a decision, and we tried to communicate two things. He was being advised by both Paulson and [Timothy F.] Geithner, who at the time was the Federal Reserve guy, and [Ben Shalom] Bernanke, chairman of the Fed. They were recommending that if the President didn't do this, we could be looking at another Great Depression. So the decision was, we've got to do something. It was so close by this time to the end of President Bush's term in office that he did enough to basically get it to his successor, whoever that would be, so that he wasn't charting the course for the next President but he was doing enough to stave off a depression. We tried to communicate that. Every day there was another story of heartache. We did a lot with housing.

One of my favorite memories from this period was on a Sunday very late in the President's term—December 21, 2008—when we did a setting-the-record-straight document aimed at the *New York Times* for a story inaccurately and criticizing the President's approach on housing. Sheryl Stolberg, with whom I got along great, a terrific reporter, tough, called me and she said,

"You're putting out a setting-the-record-straight on this? You've got five weeks left." It was almost like, why do you still care? We took great pride in the fact that Josh Bolten and the President had told us that we were going to hit the tape with a strong finish. We're going to sprint to the finish. We're not shutting it down with 20 meters to go, just because: *So what? Who cares? We're almost done anyway*. We fought that battle to the end.

That's one of those things that—There may have been some things we could have done a little better early on. From a communications standpoint, maybe we could have. I'd have to think about it to know what those things were. But I always felt as if we got off to a rocky start and never fully regained our footing on that.

Perry: That is, during the financial collapse?

Sullivan: Right. I'm not talking about Fratto and what he did out of the press office, and Dana from the podium and everything; I just mean the bigger strategy. We did events. We did speeches. We took the President to groups of various stakeholders. He got a little bit of a bad rap on the housing issue when his critics accused him of encouraging everybody to own a home. If you go back and look at his remarks, especially to the minority community, about home ownership, on almost every occasion he also talked about the responsibility of home ownership. He was very mindful that there could be a consequence.

I'll tell you something interesting: The President had a series of regular—every six weeks or so—economic briefings in the Oval Office. It was a *pro forma* kind of thing where Eddie Lazear and Keith Hennessey and Secretary Paulson, the economic team, would go to the Oval, and it was just a snapshot of: here's housing starts and here's durable goods. It was very much driven by metrics and it was meant to deliver for the President a look at how the economy was doing. What's going up? What's coming down? It was a routine kind of meeting that happened all the time.

It just so happened that on one of those days when that meeting was scheduled, was the initial story in the *Wall Street Journal* about Countrywide Mortgage and subprime lending. Of course there was nothing in the presentation materials in the agenda for that day on that topic, and the President said, "Tell me about the story I read today about Countrywide and subprime lending." He was on that, and I remember Secretary Paulson telling him, "Mr. President, the subprime lending is a small piece of the mortgage industry and the mortgage industry is a relatively small piece of our overall economy." Kind of like, don't worry about it. The President said, "Well, next time we have this meeting, I want you to get me up to speed on subprime lending."

So the next time we met there was a section on subprime lending. I don't remember every detail, but the takeaway for me was the same one, that subprime isn't that big a part of the lending world and the lending world isn't that big a part of the overall economy, so it will be OK. And of course that really was this thread that got pulled and in many ways played such a big part in the whole cascade that followed.

Perry: Can I stop you there? I'm thinking of this because at the break there was, from our media person here at the Miller Center, the *Kansas City Star* wants to ask a question about Presidents with business experience. We had a rash of these media questions coming to us back during the

primaries, obviously for Governor Romney and his background. President Bush 43 is the first President to have an MBA.

Sullivan: Right.

Perry: Did you see that background come out in these discussions, particularly about the financial collapse, where he did have an understanding based on the fact that he had been in business and had a Harvard MBA.

Sullivan: He had a firm understanding of how the markets worked, currency movements and all those kinds of things. His professional experience of business was more along the entrepreneurial lines than the Wall Street sector, but he had a good handle on those kinds of things; not what Hank Paulson had, who had run Goldman Sachs, because so much of this was focused on Wall Street.

Perry: You say that in retrospect you wish you had done some things differently about perhaps having a handle on the message. We all lived through it and it was a scary time, that fall of 2008, with the stock market collapsing and this feeling that we were on the precipice and at any moment we could fall off. In looking back, what do you wish that you had done differently?

Sullivan: I don't have a good answer for that. I didn't think about it a whole lot until you asked the question. I haven't thought about this piece in a while. I'm not criticizing the Treasury Department and the efforts that they did. I think we outsourced it a little bit. Maybe I could have done more or our team could have done more. Tony Fratto did a remarkable job with the day-to-day hand-to-hand combat, but looking back on it, it was just sort of the next thing in those really consequential times that the President dealt with.

The communications office—I wonder, could there have been a few other things that we might have tried? But it really was sort of moving out of Treasury. I was on the calls. It was rough because we were getting criticized from all sides. There was a lot of information out there. We did a lot of documents. If you go back and look at the record, there are a lot of setting-the-record-straight and myth-fact documents. Congressman Barney Frank had opposed President Bush's efforts years before, when he tried to take a look at Fannie [Mae] and Freddie [Mac]. Other Democrats on the Hill had amnesia about all of that. We fought back. Maybe we could have fought back a little harder.

The same thing with the housing: He was accused of fostering this culture of everybody ought to own a house. He had given a speech at an African American convention of some kind, before an audience of African Americans, where he talked about home ownership. He did mention there the responsibilities of home ownership, as I recall.

But he was criticized for not regulating Wall Street enough, and those sorts of things. A lot of it was unfair, but it was on his watch and he took responsibility and that was the thing. In Karl Rove's book, he wrote that his big regret was that he didn't fight back more on certain things, or he didn't lead our team to fight back more on setting the record straight on certain things. The President really was not that interested or that concerned about—He was more concerned with the conduct in the White House befitting the office, and not getting in mudslinging fights. He thought that was more important.

I thought his leadership in that time period was extraordinary. He did what he thought was right for the country even though his own party opposed some of it. He knew what it would do legacy-wise; he knew what it would do in terms of his popularity, potentially, but he did the first part of the auto rescue and of course the first chunk of TARP, because he felt it was what was needed to stave off a calamity, literally another Great Depression.

Perry: In the briefing book, if I remember correctly, is an interview that you did with Cavuto as negotiations were going on with Congress over the first installment of what became TARP. Did you find that you had to run to get up to speed on these very complex matters? In that interview, you also mentioned the fact that in a way this wasn't just money that would be spent by the government and that it would never see it again; that there was a concept of investment in it and that it would actually get some of this back.

Sullivan: We didn't push that point overly hard. We see it now with General Motors. The General Motors IPO [initial public offering], if I'm not mistaken, was $33. The calculation at the time was that the price would need to be $53 for the taxpayers to be paid back. GM today is at $25 or $26, and of course we don't have the crystal ball today to know at what point the government will sell its stake in GM, but it's a hard reach to think that the price will get to $53 any time soon. The notion there was that there was an element of TARP that included the markets doing their job. If we could keep this company afloat and save so many U.S. manufacturing jobs, and of course you have the vendors and the supply chain that flows from a company as big as General Motors and Chrysler—The idea was if we save all of that, maybe one day the stock will be sold and we actually could break even or make a little money, or lose so little that it's certainly worth having saved all those jobs.

Time will tell. If Governor Romney wins the election, that stock will be sold sooner than if President Obama is reelected, and if President Obama is reelected and the Treasury keeps the stock, who knows when it may be sold? I know that GM is making the best cars and trucks it's made in a long time. In full disclosure, I do some work with them so I know a little bit about what's going on there. The company has made a pretty impressive turnaround. This week they reported the tenth or eleventh consecutive profitable quarter. Their balance sheet is now strong, they've streamlined management; they've done a lot of good things there. That was the point I was trying to make that day to Cavuto, who took a fiscal conservative look at this, that you're doing the job of the markets. This isn't how this is supposed to work. Companies are supposed to fail when they don't do what they're supposed to do. The whole notion of "too big to fail" became the moniker over those rescue bailout operations.

McKee: Do you think there's a link now as a result of all this, between Bush and Obama, that they're now coupled in a sense in history because of the way that Obama, out of necessity and agreement, embraced TARP and the auto bailouts? There's a sense that Bush's long-term, how ever we want to put it, marginalization, from elements of the Republican Party, as well as the initial surge of anger against Obama, came from in many ways these same sources.

Sullivan: I think it's the political scenario that we've been talking about throughout that gets in the way. Governor Romney, who is in line with President Bush on most of his policies, I would say, has an ad running right now saying that GM is sending jobs to China. That's completely false. It's everything that's wrong about American politics today, the notion that we'll say

whatever it takes to make the most dramatic ad. Thank God, we now have a more robust public fact-checking operation for both sides of the aisle, but the fact of the matter is that President Bush started it and President Obama finished it, and they both did it because they thought it was the right thing for the country. Whether you like it or not, there should be bipartisan ownership of that time period. Even at the time, I don't think President Bush got much credit for not doing the bailout in TARP beyond the time that—He did enough to do the handoff. I don't recall that getting a whole lot of attention at the time, that he had that sensitivity.

As you've seen following his Presidency, he has stayed off the stage. He was very mindful that the guy in the job ought to be able to call the shots, and the person who is not in the job doesn't know enough to call the shots or to comment. You mentioned President Carter standing apart from those other guys. He's the one guy who, over time, has not adhered to that gentleman's agreement, and to make matters sometimes worse, he's done it on matters of foreign policy and on foreign soil, which is doubly damaging. I don't know if that's why he stood apart or not, but President Bush has been ultra-hypersensitive to those concerns and I think the Obama team has appreciated it. But that's why he did it that way, for sure.

Charnock: But he's gotten some criticism, a little bit, for not going to the Republican Convention, for example. I saw some reports that had an expectation that he needed to do more, especially with Clinton being out there, being so prominent.

Sullivan: I don't know. I didn't see that. First of all, I think he has very little interest in being in the spotlight anymore. He feels he's had his time. We've talked about this in the times I've had the privilege of visiting with him since leaving the White House. He enjoys his life in Dallas. He's not looking to travel. He does some speaking with President Clinton, these Q&A sessions, which he enjoys doing.

Perry: And on Haiti they worked together.

Sullivan: They did Haiti together. He'll continue to do those kinds of things, but beyond that—I don't know if he'll do another book. We always knew he would not do a contemplative, reflective kind of memoir. "I was born in a small—" whatever.

Perry: —log cabin in Greenwich, Connecticut.

Sullivan: That's not him. I think you saw in *Decision Points*, which was a very—People ask me what it was like to work there, and I say, "Read his book." That comes through in the book, I think.

Perry: You mentioned not being at this year's convention in 2012. How about the decision for him not to appear at 2008?

Sullivan: That was an awkward deal. He was going to go, and then Hurricane Gustav hit New Orleans, so the schedule got compressed. I don't know that the McCain people wanted him there. I'm trying to reconstruct the order of events. Ultimately he gave remarks from the White House, from the East Room, as I recall, brief remarks. So he was a part of it from a distance as sort of an accommodation, to help accommodate the schedule.

Perry: Did you advise him on that decision?

Sullivan: We talked about it. That would have been something that Ed Gillespie would have done more prominently than I would have done. Ed would have been right in the middle of that, both as a political expert and as the Counselor to the President. I was there when he did the speech and was certainly involved in the process, but the decision was made in consultation with Ed.

Perry: Back to the 2008 Presidential campaign: Were you in the mix when Obama and Senator McCain came to the White House for the discussion about the economic collapse?

Sullivan: I wasn't in the room, but I was there, of course, that day and was involved.

Perry: What was that like, to prepare for that and then do something after?

Sullivan: I just remember being so disappointed that—It was an interesting calculation to suspend the campaign, but my takeaway from that as a communications person was that he didn't seem to take much advantage of it once he got there.

Perry: Senator McCain?

Sullivan: Senator McCain. I think he asked some questions. I don't remember him playing any kind of a starring role in that meeting or in the aftermath. I think history looks back on that as kind of a ho-hum, kind of a dud move. He didn't get much credit for suspending his campaign, and then once he suspended it, he didn't make much out of the opportunity to ask the President to convene that meeting.

Perry: And the narrative that came out was that he didn't say very much at the meeting, and then there was also the issue about whether he would appear at the next debate, which he ended up doing after there was talk that maybe he wouldn't. I think Emily had a question. We talked at the break about the McCain-[Sarah] Palin campaign calling on the President or not, is the case.

Charnock: You mentioned a couple of times that the McCain campaign had requested that Bush stay a little bit behind the scenes, and you mentioned that he deferred to that request. Do you know how he felt about it? How did the staff feel about it? Did you feel that Bush could have been helpful? Were there other things you wished you could have done?

Sullivan: Speaking strictly personally, I felt it was disrespectful a little bit. He's the President of the United States, and you're kind of asking him not to do a press conference. After the original shaking hands at the White House, and there was a Rose Garden event—I don't think they did anything together the rest of the campaign. I understand. We all were fully aware, obviously, of the President's popularity and what was happening in Iraq.

From a communications standpoint, I totally understand why the Senator would not have wanted to be palling around with the unpopular incumbent President while the candidate on the Democratic side was using the President's track record of policies as his rallying cry, that we need "hope and change" from that. I fully understand. I think the people internally fully

understood, but there was a little bit of a feeling that it was disappointing or unfortunate, the way it was handled.

I never heard the President complain about it. He fully knew the politics of it and why it was happening, and I don't think we overly deferred; I mean, when there were things we needed to do, we didn't ask for permission from the McCain campaign to go do them. We did them. The reality was, the optics were not good for Senator McCain to be seen with the President. We understood that and went about our business.

Charnock: Did he do closed events for McCain, like fund-raisers and so forth?

Sullivan: Yes. I think the event where he said the famous quote, "Wall Street got drunk and we all got a hangover," which was a closed event in Florida—I was there for that one. That would have been a McCain fund-raiser. He raised a ton of money for Senator McCain, and that was where there was a little bit of disappointment. *OK, I don't want to be seen with you in public, sir, but go and raise millions of dollars for me.*

Charnock: Right.

Sullivan: President Bush was a prolific fund-raiser for candidates throughout his time. That was something he was good at and knew how to do, and he did it for McCain, even though Senator McCain, for sound reasons I understand, didn't want to be seen in public with him. That's a little awkward, right? *Go raise money for me, but I can't have my picture taken with you.* But it's the political reality and everyone understood that.

McKee: That last 6 to 12 months, did you find that morale lagged at all within the White House? Or did people stay, as you said, for—

Sullivan: One of the most electric moments of my time—There was a Cabinet meeting, and I was just back-benching, of course. It was two days after the 2008 election. The way the Cabinet meetings worked was the President made a very brief statement to the Cabinet, not prepared remarks—about a minute—to tee up the meeting. Then there would be an agenda, and not every Cabinet member contributed to the agenda each time. There was always a prayer. One Cabinet member read the prayer to start out and then it went around.

Well, the President teed up this meeting—now knowing the President-elect was Barack Obama—and he looked around the room and he said, "We're going to hit the tape at a full sprint. Are there any questions?" There was no question, from both the President and Josh Bolten, that we were going to the last day, that we owed it to the American people, and we owed it to President-elect Obama and his team. The President and his Cabinet then went out together to the South Lawn to publicly make a promise to the American people that this would be the smoothest transition ever.

There was sort of this mythology that there had been a memo sent around that if you were going to leave, leave in September, because we wanted everybody to stay. I don't remember a formal declaration saying if you don't leave by this day you can't leave, but for the most part people who were there as of a certain point did stay until the end. We really believed that between the economy and the national security issues, the transition had to be the best, most complete, most

cooperative that had ever been done. We lived up to that, like that example of the setting-the-record-straight document about a housing story in the *New York Times*. We wanted to go to the last day.

Perry: Could you tell us about the transition and working with people from the incoming Obama administration?

Sullivan: First of all, at a high level, we were told far in advance what the procedures were going to be and that we were expected to do it full tilt, best transition ever, the stakes are too high, the American people deserve it. That came from Josh, with the blessing of the President. The way it worked was: My successor was a woman named Ellen Moran. There came a point when the incoming people who had been named were cleared to be a part of the transition, so there was a little bit of a delay. I emailed her right away and said, "Welcome. When the time is right, I'm anxious to meet with you." She was cleared and put on the list.

As I recall, there was a transition team that coordinated the meetings. At the very first meeting, Dan Pfeiffer, who is the current Communications Director, accompanied her. He was going to be her assistant. I didn't want to meet him at the White House; I wanted to meet him off campus. Going into the meeting, I felt like I was going on an arranged date, like my mother had set me up to go on a date with this girl who was the daughter of her friend or whatever, and the reason I say that is my suspicion was or my expectation was that they could have cared less what I thought. This was a few months out, obviously, several months maybe. There were still people working and I didn't really want to walk through the West Wing with these people who were going to come in here and replace us. Maybe that was petty.

Perry: Because you didn't feel that they were respectful?

Sullivan: I wanted to meet these people before I brought them inside the West Wing, while people were still working. We met at the Off the Record bar at the Hay-Adams, in the cliché Washington media hangout. It was raining, I hustled over there, Dan and Ellen came in, and they could not have been nicer. They asked a lot of questions. Once I felt a comfort factor with them—Their main questions were about how we were organized and how things worked, a very logistical, operational kind of focus. I helped them as much as I could. I had brought an org chart with me and I didn't pull it out, because I wanted to really get a feel for what their intentions were. When I was comfortable with them I said, "Well, I don't know if you have any interest in this but I brought this org chart," and I pulled it out of my inside jacket pocket. They were like, "Oh, we were hoping you would have that!" I walked them through the org chart and I gave them some suggestions on how I, having been there for just two and a half years—I gave them some observations of my own. They were great.

Then we had some email contact after that, and one day an email came from Ellen saying, "Can we meet again, and this time can we meet in the West Wing?" Of course at that point I was very comfortable doing that. A number of my colleagues began to have similar meetings in the West Wing. I said, "Why don't we do it after 6:00 so I can give you a tour?" The interesting thing about the tour—I bumped into Marc Thiessen, the head speechwriting guy, who was giving a tour to Jon Favreau, who had come in as President Obama's chief speechwriter. The camaraderie was good and it was this really nice moment in the way that we do things in America, where

there is this orderly and peaceful transition. It was interesting that, as I was giving the tour—and I would do the same thing, so I'm not being critical—Ellen was very mindful of: "Who sits here?"

Perry: Who had which office?

Sullivan: This was kind of the advance team coming in to see. Every administration comes in and divides things up a little differently from the group before, for their needs. It was great. They were terrific. And Ellen didn't stay all that long in the job. I felt really good about our whole staff, everybody in the transition. It was a fun thing and an important thing to be part of.

Your question, Guian, about morale: It never flagged. The strong finish was our mantra. That moment when the President gave that final—We can talk about the legacy stuff, but we were very busy. At that point we were committed to—There were a couple of executive orders and a few matters of business to finish, but the main thing was we wanted to leave things in good order, and we were fully devoted to doing that.

On the communications front, I wanted to make sure that the White House website would be archived and frozen in time. Over the years, I've directed a few reporters to that frozen-in-time, last-day White House website, and many of them said to me, "I didn't even know this was there." I wish we had done a better job of announcing to the world, if you want anything, here it is. It's searchable and you can find every speech and every document and every setting-the-record-straight document we put out, and we did a series of videos at the end that featured some of the President's accomplishments, along with all kinds of documents, some of which I've brought to show you today.

Perry: Right, and if you will, tell us a little bit about your binder that you brought.

Sullivan: The binder is a series of accomplishments, by policy, and these are designed in a message format. These were shared administration-wide, broken down by various categories. The Bush record was divided into "Kept America safe and promoted liberty abroad," the notion of the Freedom Agenda as a component of helping to keep America safe. "Lowered taxes and reformed government, promoted a culture of life, appointed judges committed to ruling by the letter of the law, expanded trade." We've seen some of those trade agreements, some of the ones that didn't get done recently. "Showed leadership on entitlement reform." That was code for *not everything got done*. "Showed leadership on immigration reform." It didn't get done, but he teed it up. And then, "Chartered an ambitious course for energy policy." So even the areas that were left a little bit unfinished were forces beyond our control. You can see, this document—

Perry: This document you did as you were leaving, to post on the website?

Sullivan: And for use as talking points administration-wide, during the legacy period, where people were doing a lot of interviews, reflecting back.

Perry: And some of these, for example, "Kept America safe," were ones that you told us about sitting in your basement, I think you said, jotting down a communication strategy before you went for your interview, when you were first approached about it.

Sullivan: What I jotted down on my laptop in the basement bears no resemblance to—

Perry: But I do remember one of them, because I said, "Do you remember some that you had?" And one of them was "Keeping America safe."

Sullivan: Right.

Perry: Obviously, in the aftermath of 9/11. In other words, you had this thread that was running from the moment you found out you were being considered for this job.

Sullivan: Well, that had occurred to me, but I don't want to make it sound like the notion of keeping America safe was my idea.

Perry: But it was your communications strategy.

Sullivan: I don't know the moment we started using that phrase, but the thing that I tried to do that night in the basement was connect it to people, and the fact that we hadn't been attacked was a coincidence. I didn't even know all the things I would come to learn about the intelligence and what plots had been foiled and all those things, but the thing is that you can see—This is less than two pages, and it really was a way, in shorthand form, to provide—

Perry: Could you attach that to your transcript when you're ready?

Sullivan: I can, yes.

Perry: Any and all of this would be very helpful.

Sullivan: You bet. Each of those areas was broken down in a little more detail, so here's a little deeper dive on Kept America safe, a little bit more on that. Then we had a collection of the setting-the-record-straight documents that we used to fight back against inaccuracies criticizing his record.

Charnock: These are on the website?

Sullivan: Yes.

Perry: You said this was part of the legacy period, so when did that begin for you?

Sullivan: It would have begun probably in the winter of '08, February, March, somewhere in there.

Perry: You said before, that the President was not focused on that.

Sullivan: He had very little interest in any of this, to be honest with you. I'll show you the book we did that he was more interested in. He wanted to know that these things were being laid down for history, but this was not something that he was super hands-on with. This went through the full vetting process of the staff secretary operation. You can see, there was just a series of fact sheets here on different policy issues.

Perry: So when he would go out and speak in this—we'll call it the legacy period, from that winter of '08 until the end, in January of '09—would he talk about these things?

Sullivan: Yes. If you go back and look at his speeches, he did three or four, and this was our team: Gillespie, Dana, myself. Ultimately what we recommended and the President agreed to, was three or four set-piece speeches, one on each big topic, and then a series of long-form interviews that would give him a chance to put on the record the things that were most important to him regarding his accomplishments. That was the strategy.

The one thing that we told him—This was a major point, as I recall. I remember speaking up about this, because the surge speech—In any of those set speeches where you're by yourself in an empty room with a camera, staring into the lens, reading from a teleprompter—not his best venue, no one's best venue—it's always going to be a little bit stiff. So the thing that we had suggested was for his farewell speech, which for a period of time he didn't even know if he wanted to do. He had to be shown what the value was and what it could mean. We had said all along, "We've got to do it in front of an audience, and an audience of people who have been a part of your Presidency, people who have worked for you, people who have fought battles for you. Let's get them into the East Room. Let's do this right and do it big, and put you in a position to talk about this consequential period of time that you were privileged to be President."

Ultimately, he agreed to it. We worked on this for a long time. It was a great speech. His family was in the audience. In fact, he asked to have his family not in his direct line of sight, because he knew that it would be super emotional. The whole thing was emotional, but it would be super emotional to be looking at his family while he was saying some of these things. Personally, when the speech ended I started to get emails from people who claimed that there was video evidence that I was crying on television. I'm denying it to this day.

Perry: But we want you to know it's OK if you did.

Sullivan: It was very emotional. He did a phenomenal job with the speech and it was the right way for him to finish. As people who had gotten to know him a little bit and worked for him, we wanted to leave these things there for people like you here at the Miller Center. And again, everything in here was actually vetted. It just goes through the different policy areas and what was accomplished. This was sort of a placeholder that could be used until the very end, and then we have a timeline in the back of everything that happened, in order. This was in his words. I remember throwing out this idea that we also have to tell the story in his words, not just in the facts.

As you can imagine, at the end of our term, President-elect Obama, huge excitement—The media had completely shifted its attention, understandably. It was difficult outside of those exit interviews that the President did, to break through with a lot of this stuff, so much of it was really done for the record, which is why I wanted to bring this here today. We also did—There was one other piece.

Perry: While you're looking for that, Kevin, Guian had a question that we were discussing at the break, about the legacy and compassionate conservatism.

McKee: Are we finished with this theme now?

Perry: I think it connects. It's a good link.

Sullivan: Here we go. This wasn't available until the last weeks of the administration. As I recall, this was passed out at the farewell speech, and you can see that it's a lot of the same information that's in the binder. There are pictures and quotes and different things.

Charnock: Do you know if this is something that previous administrations have done?

Sullivan: I had the one that was done for President Reagan. I think every President has produced some kind of a leave-behind.

Charnock: Their own interpretation of their Presidency.

Sullivan: Their own interpretation, right. Our team worked on this. It was reviewed in *Time* magazine, which cracked me up. They gave it a fairly favorable review. You can still get it. It's in the public domain.

Charnock: Oh, is it a GPO [U.S. Government Printing Office] publication?

Sullivan: Yes, it was.

Charnock: So it should be on their site maybe?

Sullivan: It should be. You can get it on Amazon. I can leave this for you.

Charnock: Can I take a look?

Sullivan: I don't mind leaving this binder either, with you.

Charnock: Oh, wonderful.

Sullivan: Just one last thing on those final—The legacy was really built around leaving behind some of these documents, but primarily the President's three or four set piece speeches, each on a different policy area. The one on Africa was an unusual one in that it actually included a slideshow. I forget whose idea that was. It was a great idea. The White House photographers, as you know, are extraordinarily gifted, and they compiled the most powerful images of the President's work in Africa, and that got a great response. We tried to do those things, and then the interviews that he did, the dozens of interviews that were done for television, print, really across the spectrum.

Perry: Has he or the library foundation—Do they consult with you now on how to present this in what will be the George W. Bush Library, at SMU?

Sullivan: There is a team of people working on that. I know that Karen Hughes is involved in that. We do need to make sure that the videos that are on the website, that whoever ends up curating the library knows that those are available, because they were well done and pretty powerful, the images.

Charnock: This binder obviously has sort of a summary on every issue area or policy area. Were there a small number of themes that maybe the President himself wanted up front in terms of his legacy?

Sullivan: Kept America safe was number one. He became the 9/11 President, even though that's not what we expected, and so Kept America safe was number one. Then, the notion of having lowered the taxes in a way that drove so much economic growth for that big chunk of his Presidency until the end was also in there, but that was a little tougher sell at that point, so I think Kept America safe was clearly the headline.

The point that we tried to make, the overarching point in addition to Kept America safe, was that he was here in an incredibly consequential time. You can read this quote here on the inside. This was really the summary: "I've been witness to the character of the people of America, who have shown calm in times of danger, compassion for one another and toughness for the long haul. All of us have been partners in a great enterprise." That was the way he summed it up, and we tried to make those points, that he was President in an extremely consequential time, made decisions based on principles he brought to Washington, principles that he thought were in the best interest of the country and no other agenda, political or otherwise.

McKee: What I wanted to ask about was that idea of becoming the 9/11 President in a way he never could have anticipated, certainly. I guess the concept of compassionate conservatism. Did that idea, or even that specific language, play a part in the way you worked to shape the legacy? Or had that dropped out of the narrative?

Sullivan: No, I think you see in here that we want to remind people that he led on immigration reform even though he didn't get it done, and that was clearly a part of compassionate conservatism. Faith-based was obviously part of that and we pushed that a lot.

There's a great photograph in this book of the AIDS ribbon on the front of the White House. We had a young staffer named Steven Levine, who worked in the production group, who had this idea. When he came to me with the idea, I thought first of all, *This is brilliant*, *and what a way to show the world how important this issue is to the President.* You literally put on a gigantic red ribbon. Then it was, well, where do you get one and will they let us attach it to the front of the White House? You know what? To the President's credit, he didn't think about it. He said yes almost immediately, and we did a small event. It's funny, the Secret Service hates events on the North Lawn because, unlike the South Lawn, there are some tall buildings near there. They're not real keen on the idea of doing events with the President on the North Lawn. We did one that day where he walked out with Ambassador Mark Dybul, the guy who led that initiative for the President and did such great work, and talked about what had been accomplished.

On World AIDS Day in 2007, the President did an event in Mount Airy, Md. to discuss the progress being made through PEPFAR, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. A woman from Africa known as "Auntie Bridget" was in the meeting. She got up and said, "I'm HIV-positive." She was a nurse. She said words to this effect, "If it weren't for the generosity of the American people, and for you, President Bush, I would not be standing here alive and well today." You know, the hair on the back of your neck stands up. This is what President Bush did. As he used to say on the malaria portion of his work over there, you had babies dying from

mosquito bites and a mosquito net costs $10, so how can we stand by and let this happen? This is the compassionate conservatism, and those were the areas.

He got some credit on the Africa work. Bono and others who would have probably opposed him on other policy areas became fast friends with the President on this issue. What he did was remarkable. It changed the world for the better in so many ways, and so we tried to tell those stories at the end. It's funny, we knew that after the red ribbon thing, others would then come forward and ask for—you know?

Perry: Pink for breast cancer.

Sullivan: Pink, the blue puzzle piece for autism. They did but we couldn't—This was something that was personal to the President. It's funny, until I started thinking about this, I never thought about whether President Obama continued to put the red ribbon out in front of the White House. I don't know if that continued or not, but we did it the last two years in 2007 and 2008.

Perry: Back to compassionate conservative. You've talked a little bit about Karl Rove and his encyclopedic mind when it comes to politics, and we know that he's, if you will, a kingmaker in terms of wanting that agenda to be at the forefront, along with presumably immigration issues and outreach to Hispanic voters, but we haven't really talked about his overlap with you for a portion of your time in the White House.

Sullivan: Right, sure.

Perry: And then the fact that he did leave in '07, and some of the controversy around that, as related to the Valerie Plame issue. Then, I'll just add one other layer of some controversy as well: the first part of your time, in the first part of '07, with the firing of the U.S. Attorneys, and how you deal with these strategies involving controversial issues that are passing through the White House, either because the issues themselves or the people themselves become controversial.

Sullivan: Karl was a great colleague. He took me under his wing. I was a political neophyte and he was this political rock star. He's a really generous, nice person. He is misunderstood. I always would tell people who are not supportive of President Bush—A lot of times it was the Vice President and Karl Rove who got a lot of the heat, and I would always tell them, "He's nothing like you think he is." Obviously, he has a shrewd political mind and all that, but he's just a terrific human being. I learned a lot from him about communications and about politics. He is very skilled at message and those things.

You'll get a kick out of, maybe as historians—Upon his departure in August 2007, Rove presented his colleagues on senior staff with a unique memento: a paperweight cast from the doorknobs of the EEOB's Cordell Hull Suite, the room where our "Strategery" meetings took place. The base was made from a Dutch Elm that was planted on the White House grounds when Teddy Roosevelt was President. Pretty amazing.

Charnock: Wow.

Sullivan: A very thoughtful guy. You wanted to get into the U.S. Attorneys? Or on Karl, what was the question?

Perry: The controversy of the firing of the U.S. Attorneys. This came to the forefront and came into the public consciousness in the early part of ’07, which would have been still within your first few months of joining the White House.

Sullivan: The funny thing about that was that the original plan—I think to do that, which was within the bounds of—The President can change U.S. Attorneys whenever he wants, but I think the framework, that idea was hatched before midterms in 2006. It’s almost like when we lost the Senate, they forgot to change the plan to reflect that there was a different level of oversight or whatever. Again, it was the President’s right to do it, but it didn’t reflect the political reality that we were in, so it became a difficult thing to maneuver.

Perry: Then Attorney General [Alberto] Gonzales left in ’07 as well, so did you have to deal with any aftermath of that controversy?

Sullivan: Sure. This is the funny thing: Everything reflects on the President. When Judge Gonzales—Before he had decided to step aside, I remember a late-night conference call with the communications person over at Justice. The idea was that Judge Gonzales would make a few comments to the press over there at Justice, informally: kind of walk up to the group, make a few comments, and leave. I remember saying, “Are we sure about this?” But we went ahead with it and it was not a good moment for him. He walked out into a big room at Justice by himself, ended up at one point looking up to the ceiling like he was searching for answers, and things started to unravel at that point. He’s a remarkable man who accomplished some really important things at Justice and the President stood by him for a long time during that stretch.

It’s one of those things that really, in the overall eight years, was a blip, and even in my two and a half years, it’s not one of the things that comes—When people ask me about good days or bad days, I don’t go back to the U.S. Attorneys. I will say it was something the communications people kind of flagged: Cathie Martin, Jeanie Mamo, and some others, early on. We made the case that the President was in his rights to do it, and that was about as far as we could go. David Iglesias, who had been in the military, was a very compelling figure and a smart guy, and he sort of became the—He was a very compelling representative of the other side.

The plan was hatched before I was there. Scott Jennings was involved in that. You mentioned Scott earlier. He ended up departing. I think it was one of those things that when things were going great, it was an idea that had some merit and was certainly within the bounds, but as the political winds shifted—I say this as the guy who was not the political expert—the plan probably needed to shift. It didn’t, and there was some blowback, and the blowback ended up costing a few people. For the most part, it was kept away from the President and was managed as best we could, given the facts at hand.

Perry:. Is there anything that we haven’t asked you?

Sullivan: What’s on the list from yesterday, Emily? There were a few stories, and I promise I’ll be concise.

Charnock: I think we've gotten through most of the stories that you wanted to mention. The couple about authenticity, and the *American Idol* White House story, and sport fishing in Maryland, you had mentioned.

Sullivan: These are blip things. These are really blips.

Perry: But this is good color that we don't want to lose.

Sullivan: This is good color and this speaks to the President's value of authenticity and how much it means to him. On the schedule before I arrived was the *American Idol* visit. You know, how every year the top 10 or 12 go on tour?

Charnock: Yes.

Sullivan: The 10 or 12 finalists were going to perform at the Verizon Center, and so they were in D.C. As a sidenote, Susan Whitson, who at that time was Mrs. Bush's press secretary, had taught Taylor Hicks, the 2006 winner, in high school back in Birmingham, Alabama. So we had a little bit of a personal connection. This was on the schedule. The President, who had never watched the show once, and I'm sure to this day has never watched the show, really thought that this was just a phony deal. Why are we doing this?

Meanwhile, the backdrop here is that missiles are flying in the Middle East, so from a communications standpoint you always consider the split screen, like what is going to happen—He's meeting with the *American Idol* winners. What else is happening that could be used against him by his political enemies?

Charnock: The gravitas has to match.

Sullivan: Right. It was a hard call. It was talked about pulling the plug on the *American Idol* visit, in part because of the strife in the Middle East. Someone had the idea that Secretary Spellings was a huge *American Idol* fan and was obviously close to the President, and she was the one to explain to him why this got put on the schedule and why it was worth doing and those sorts of things. So Secretary Spellings came over to the White House. I was really brand-new at this point. She came over to the White House and the two of us went in. I had never watched *American Idol* until that year, and I really only watched it because she watched it all the time and I was working for her in '05 and '06.

Secretary Spellings explained to the President that *American Idol* is one of the few shows left that families watch together and that the hometowns of these contestants, these communities, fully embrace this group of young people. Kellie Pickler was one of the contestants that year—her hometown of Albemarle, N.C., had really rallied around her. Secretary Spellings made the case that this is really a slice of Americana, and this is a red, white, and blue deal. I remember her saying, "By the way, more people voted for Taylor Hicks than voted for you."

Charnock: That's sort of humbling.

Sullivan: He says, "All right, I'll do it." So they show up and they're brought to the Oval Office. Of course in all these situations, as I mentioned earlier, as a communications person, you want to

try to manage the risk. Predictability is good. Here we have these young people coming in and you figure that most of them didn't vote for the President. You don't know, but you think not all of them did, for sure. They come in and they are in absolute awe. They cannot believe they're in the Oval Office with the President of the United States. The President did his tour of the Oval Office, which I think we also captured on video at the end, which is out there somewhere. He loved doing it. He had magnificent stories that accompanied each artifact in the Oval, and he did that with the *American Idol* contestants. They loved it. They asked questions. They were respectful. It really was a really nice moment.

So then they go out to the sticks, the stakeout outside the White House, to meet with the White House press pool out there. I'm trying to remember which one it was, if it was Ace Young—As I recall, one of the guys said that he had taken a poll of the 12 of them before they went in and said, "How many of you voted for President Bush?" I think he said 10 of the 12 did not vote for him. But he said, "Every one of us would vote for him if the election were held tomorrow." It ended up really being a very nice moment. Now obviously, it's not consequential and it's one of those things, the President does 10 events a day and this was one of those events.

There was some heartburn about the fact that the split screen, with bombs in the Middle East and the President meeting—One thing about that is the President always took a lot of heat— every President does, for how many vacation days they spend at whatever their enclave is, right? Mark Knoller, the great Mark Knoller of CBS News, is the keeper of these Presidential factoids. I remember the President needling Knoller one day: "If you sleep at the ranch in Crawford, that's counted as a vacation day." So in theory, the President works all day at the White House, could do the most intense meetings possible, and public events, flies to Crawford, goes to sleep, wakes up the next morning, gets a security briefing and then welcomes the President of France for a full day of conversation and getting to know you, and that counts as two vacation days. So I would make the appeal to you as scholars: When you see those statistics, know that that's sort of the backstory.

Perry: Emily has written on and probably will continue to—

Charnock: I don't count them as vacation days.

Perry: So there you go.

Charnock: If he does some kind of public event, then that doesn't count.

Sullivan: Thank you. Any day that begins with a national security briefing is not a vacation day.

Charnock: Right, and that's in the record. Even when he's at Crawford, it shows that the President received a security briefing and then he met with dignitaries. I know that he often did events in Waco or at local schools in Crawford, while he was at the ranch.

Perry: So again, we're coming full circle from our luncheon yesterday, where we began with the fascinating question: How does oral history done by academics differ from journalism? We have come full circle in that the journalists would note that that's a vacation day, as you described it, and Emily, our scholar on Presidential travel, is saying, "I don't count that as a vacation day and in fact it's substantive work the President is doing."

Sullivan: Thank you. And then the other one, the other—

Charnock: The sport fishing story.

Sullivan: I wanted to talk about the daily double.

Charnock: Oh, yes, I have that on here.

Sullivan: Right. The President's daily brief, Dan Bartlett or Ed Gillespie did that. I had the privilege of doing it probably a dozen times in the two and a half years, when they were unavailable. That's the President, Vice President, National Security Advisor, and frequently, Joel Kaplan, Josh Bolten, and Karl Rove would have been in there, but it's really small. That's it. And it's: What's in the news today? What's on the agenda today? What's happening out there that the President needs to know about? I would cram, I would prepare, because you always wanted to know that you were at your most prepared so that you can answer potential follow-up questions. Sometimes it was a matter of teeing up discussion for that group, but that was another part of the day that if it wasn't me it would have been Gillespie or Bartlett who fit in there each day. I guess that would have been the 8:000 to 8:30 window.

Then the other point about the sport fishing story was the daily double. On certain days, after the Presidential daily briefing, a few more people were brought in and that was to recommend to the President events that are going to go on his schedule. It was called the "daily double" because Josh decided at a certain point that we needed to do this in person with the President, not just on paper. So we're going to make our case for which events—Why are we going to Kansas City? Why health care? Or whatever it might be.

I guess this would have been toward the end. The President has a terrific record on conservation that he will never get credit for. The EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] was always against him, but he did a lot of good things so we wanted to do this sport fishing event in Maryland. I know nothing about sport fishing. There was an order to protect red drum. I forget what it was, but we all agreed, in Josh's anonymous meeting—and I know we're jumping around here. Josh's anonymous was every other week—It may have been weekly at certain points—where we sort of gamed out the calendar and we batted things around, arrived at a recommendation, and that's what we would present to the President in the daily double. I guess it was weekly, but it didn't always happen weekly because of travel and different things.

So in this Josh's anonymous meeting, we arrived at the conclusion that we were going to recommend this sport fishing event to highlight the President's record on conservation. I'm up at the board directing traffic and Josh says to me, "We're going to do this event and we're going to put it in front of the President tomorrow, and you clearly don't know enough about this subject in order to convince the President, to show him the merits of doing this." It wasn't just directed singularly at me. "I would suggest that you guys get your act together on this one by tomorrow morning for the daily double."

I looked at Barry Jackson and he said, "Hey, I've got a dinner to go to." Then I looked at Jeanie, and she had something else, and I really was left alone. Barry got this guy, Matt Shilling, a young staffer over there in the outreach office who dealt with the conservation groups, and Barry said, "Matt Shilling is going to get you real smart on this." He came over to my office and we

spent a few hours learning about red drum, and we worked on the best way to make this pitch to the President.

These are the funny moments of working at the White House. On the one hand you have the surge to do strategy around, and on the other hand you've got red drum and sport fishing. Thank God there was a really smart guy like Matt, and Matt ended up, believe it or not, getting hired by the—ESPN [Entertainment and Sports Programming Network] at that time had a show that's now on National Geographic, where this guy goes all around the world doing all this stuff, and the President went fishing with him. There were several layers to this event. That guy ended up hiring Matt Shilling to work for him. Interestingly, his name is Fischer, Chris Fischer. You can look it up. Anyway, just a little slice of West Wing life.

Perry: Anything else on our list?

Charnock: I think that's everything on the list.

Perry: As my colleague Russell Riley always says, we probably don't exhaust all of our topics, but we succeed in exhausting our interviewees, and we apologize for that, but you've been such a good sport and you've given us so much information and we really appreciate it.

Sullivan: You're welcome. I'm trying to think if there's anything else communications-wise, that would be worth putting on the record. Let me just flip through this quickly. This will jog my memory on anything. If I can ever help in any way with any follow-up—

Perry: Well, we certainly appreciate that. We'll hope that you'll be able to join us when we do our public rollout, as an important alum.

Sullivan: When will that be?

Perry: We have, I would say, at least two more years to go.

Sullivan: I'm busy that day.

Perry: And so we'll continue to be vague about when that will be, but we do hope you'll be able to be here.

Sullivan: I would love it.

Perry: And the other is, after you get your transcript, if there are items that you think about and you want to even type up some thoughts, you can always add them that way.

Sullivan: One thing I did want to mention that's again, just a little slice of life: You often see pictures of the President at these events, at small businesses or different things. One year, we went to a CVS pharmacy in D.C. to do a prescription drug benefit, a little event, and as we talked about it—The advance team went over there. We had remarkable advance guys, Jason Recher and others. Do you know how many things there are in a drugstore that you can't put the President of the United States in front of? You were asking yesterday about the backdrops.

Perry: Yes, the symbolic Presidency, as we call it.

Sullivan: Right. So the next time you're in a drug store—It's a long list of things.

Charnock: What aisle did you go in?

Sullivan: We found some sort of neutral background. The one rule that we were told was that the President really shouldn't go behind the counter because there are controlled substances back there and there are rules about who can go behind the counter, so tell the President not to go behind the counter. We mentioned it to him in the briefing beforehand, but the problem was that the people we were visiting were all behind the counter. There was a pharmacist and a couple of techs and they were really happy to see him. So he just went back there and put his arms around them.

Perry: So the President was in violation of the law momentarily.

Sullivan: That's right.

Perry: Of the controlled substances laws.

Charnock: He could pardon himself though.

Sullivan: That's right, he could have pardoned himself, right.

Perry: Before he left office. That would have been his last pardon. Now that you mention it, that does raise an issue about last-minute pardons as Presidents are departing. Did you have to deal with anything related to that, requests that were coming in, or how to present that to media?

Sullivan: The pardon process was very formal. It was a limited group of people. I was not in on that. He handled it quickly and everything was done according to the—It really didn't play out over a long period of time. The media's interest was in whether he would pardon Scooter [Irv Lewis] Libby.

Perry: We do have in our timeline, I believe, the commutation of the sentence.

Sullivan: Right.

Perry: Was that anything that you had to think about how to present, because of the controversy?

Sullivan: That was all part of the way that that story unfolded. I don't remember anything special that was done. That was mostly handled by the press office. Those breaking news things were really more the domain of the press secretary. One thing for people who study this kind of stuff: I thought it was interesting that President Obama put the Communications Director's office inside, right next door to the press secretary. That was a good idea, the best alignment you could possibly get. You take a look in the back here: 100 things you may not know about the Bush administration record. This was an Ed Gillespie idea and this was a fun thing to work on. I would just say it was an incredible privilege and an honor. I know I've said that a few times and it

sounds like a cliché. I never took it for granted, mainly because we had such great people. I was part of an amazing team. As Mike McCurry said, being surrounded by rock stars all pulling in the same direction is a rare thing to find in professional life. Those two things—You can get one or the other sometimes. It was amazing.

Perry: Well, it's been our privilege and honor to have you here at the Miller Center, and to have you share all of this knowledge and background and information with us, because we know that it will help us in the work that we do. Obviously, it will be an important part of this entire project, to re-create by oral history the Bush 43 Presidency. Then, as we've been saying, for scholars, journalists, members of the public, students of all ages for years to come, once this is made public, we know that that contribution will not equal your public service, but we consider it an important part of it and we thank you for your service to our country.

Sullivan: Thank you for having me. This was a lot of fun and interesting and it's brought back a lot of great memories. Any follow-up, anything I can do at any time down the road, to help with anything, I'd be honored to do that.

Perry: We appreciate it so much.

Charnock: Thank you so much.

Sullivan: Thank you. All the best in your work.