



**GEORGE W. BUSH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**FINAL EDITED TRANSCRIPT**

**INTERVIEW WITH JAMES TOWEY**

October 8, 2015  
Ave Maria, Florida

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## FINAL EDITED TRANSCRIPT

### INTERVIEW WITH JAMES TOWEY

October 8, 2015

**Perry:** We have the recorders on and this is the James Towey interview for the George W. Bush Presidential Oral History Project. We wanted to start with where our questions begin in our briefing book just to get you into the administration. But you have a long history with the Bush family, particularly with the President's brother, Jeb [John Ellis Bush]. We'd like you to just talk about how you met the Bushes to begin with and then lead on to how you met President George W. Bush.

**Towey:** I was living in Miami during hurricane Andrew, as was Jeb, and I was running Florida's Health and Human Services district down there in Dade County. The storm hit. Everybody knew who Jeb Bush was, obviously.

**Perry:** Because this was 1992.

**Towey:** August 1992, and I was working for Lawton Chiles. I had worked for him in the Senate in the '80s; in fact my first job on Capitol Hill was working for Lawton Chiles. It started in November of 1981. Then he ran for Governor and was elected in November of '90. I was living in one of Mother Teresa's homes for people with AIDS [acquired immune deficiency syndrome]. I was in touch with him and he said, "Why don't you come be my eyes and ears for the poor?" So that's how I worked with Lawton Chiles. He then a year later made me the head of Dade County's Health and Human Services.

Everyone knew Jeb was going to run against Lawton for reelection, so I knew who he was, but he was in Miami.

**Perry:** His dad, [George H. W.] Bush 41, would still have been President.

**Towey:** Bush 41 was still President, and in fact as soon as Andrew hit, two things happened. One was, Bush 41, whom you both have written about, mobilized Andy Card to lead the on-the-ground recovery for Andrew because Florida was a swing state and he was up in '92. This is three months before the election. You can imagine the stakes that were involved here.

So Andy is down there on the ground. I'm going to a bunch of these meetings because in our district 880 foster kids south of Kendall had to be relocated. All these people in ventilator hospitals, the disabled that we cared for, mental hospitals—there were just a million issues that were bouncing back and forth. So Andy is down in Miami on that.

Second, Dade County had a "We Will Rebuild" initiative. That was the name of the committee, "We Will Rebuild." Jeb was on it and I was on it. It was chaired by David Lawrence, publisher

of the *Miami Herald*, and it was to do the obvious. This was also for me a primer on what Katrina was going to look like 13 years later.

I saw Jeb from afar, but had no relationship. He runs against Chiles, and on the night of the [Newton Leroy] Gingrich revolution, Jeb somehow loses. So [Mario] Cuomo fell, [Ann] Richards fell, but Lawton Chiles squeaks by.

**Perry:** You are listed throughout our briefing book and labeled as a Democrat.

**Towey:** I'm working for Lawton as a Dem [Democrat], as a pro-life Dem. I think there are 10 in the country. I was working for Lawton as his Secretary of the whole Health and Human Services of Dade County at that point. So after Katrina, nine months later, he appointed me in July of 1993 to head up the statewide department.

**Nelson:** After Andrew.

**Towey:** Right. It is 40,000 employees; it is a huge agency. The reason I go into this detail is that election also saw the Senate Republicans take over in Florida, the first time since reconstruction. They were PO'd [pissed off] at Lawton. They wanted to throw a scalp there on the mansion floor to kind of pay him back for this close election they felt he stole with his "scare calls" to the elderly and so forth that were alleged. So Jeb was mad, the Republicans were mad, and they were going to do something about it.

Long story short, because I was close to Chiles, I did not get reconfirmed. I got reappointed, but I was not confirmed by the Senate of Florida. First guy in decades. So I'm licking my wounds, Jeb is licking his wounds, and the publisher of the *Herald*, David Lawrence, says, "You two are good people. You should get to know each other." So Jeb and I went and had a lunch to meet that way. It was not a fun lunch. He said, "You worked for Mother Teresa and you stood by and did nothing while they were making these scare calls to the elderly." I said, "I was the only pro-life Secretary in that department's history and had done all these things and you know I did it well and you just had these goons of yours throw me out." That's how it played out, our first lunch. "See you later." Wasn't too pleasant a lunch!

Then months later we started back in contact. I liked what I saw at lunch, though. I liked that he had said it to my face and that he was direct and I think he liked that in me. So then I had to find a job. I was admired and avoided because I had held my ground in the confirmation process. I started this not-for-profit called Aging With Dignity and I asked Jeb if he would be on the advisory board. I needed some evidence to show that I wasn't going to be hounded to the ends of the earth from this partisan dustup I had just had.

He and Chiles were my honorary chairs of Aging With Dignity when I started it. Then as Chiles's term went on, [Kenneth] Buddy MacKay as Lieutenant Governor was going to run and Buddy and I weren't friends. This was again a premonition of what I was going to have—I guess a foreshadowing of what I'd have with Vice President [Richard] Cheney. I didn't like this Lieutenant Governor. So I was helping Jeb as he is preparing to run again for '98.

Jeb runs again and wins. Now he has moved to Tallahassee with Columba [Bush] and Mary [Towey] and I are living up the street, so we are over there a lot. We then spend the next eight

Thanksgivings together in the mansion and then even when he was out of office we had Thanksgiving together up in New Jersey at Mary's brother's. So our families became close. The election in 2000 comes. I had nothing to do with the election; I'm just getting Aging With Dignity going, seeing Jeb and Columba a lot socially at the mansion and hanging out occasionally and whatever.

Then they have the recount. In the building right below me, right next door to my building was the circuit court where all these decisions were being made on the recount. So this is all surreal.

**Perry:** Did you talk at all to Governor Bush, Jeb Bush, at that time while all that was happening?

**Towey:** Yes, all the time. He was up to his neck in it, but I didn't want to snoop. Also the Bushes don't like hangers-on who are prying into—I think they don't want wannabes. I didn't care that much, truthfully.

**Perry:** You didn't wanna be?

**Towey:** I voted for his brother, but I wasn't real excited like he's my candidate kind of thing. I was Dem, but I voted for him because he was solid pro-life and I was impressed by his being a compassionate conservative. That concept of a compassionate conservative really appealed to me. Then the recount is done and the President goes into his office.

Right at that time my wife Mary's dad was getting deeper into dementia. His wife up in the D.C. area was having trouble and we wanted to keep him at home. So Mary and I say we'll open an Aging With Dignity office in Washington and move up there. In January of 2001 at the exact same time that President Bush is moving into the White House, we move into this rental townhouse in McLean near pop. We stayed in touch. I'd go back to Tallahassee some because that is where Aging With Dignity's office is, so I'm staying in touch with Columba and Jeb during this period.

Then [John J.] DiIulio resigns mid-August. It's a lightning bolt. Why is he resigning so soon into the Presidency? A senior staff person, really? Six months in? I remember saying to Jeb, "I can do that job. I'm qualified to do that job." I had never said anything about, "Oh, can I get a job with the administration?" You just don't ask.

**Perry:** Had you met the President?

**Towey:** By August of 2001 I had. I should go back. After we moved to Washington Jeb comes up there shortly after. He came up within a week or two after the inauguration, or maybe it was even before. I'd have to go back and look at the dates. So Mary and I said, "Let's go get lunch." He said, "OK." I said, "You're staying at the White House, how do I—just honk the horn?" So they told us how to clear security. I just remember the first time with Mary sitting in my 2001 Honda Civic getting swept in the back by Secret Service and then coming up the driveway.

**Perry:** Just to paint the picture, they let you on West Executive Avenue? They let your car in?

**Towey:** You'd come in in the back and then you literally would drive up to the circular driveway on the South Lawn. So I parked kind of short of it and I got out of the car. Then this is like our

worst nightmare. There is the President and he's out there with a tennis racket and a ball and he is hitting the ball for the dog to fetch.

**Perry:** For Barney?

**Towey:** Yes. Security had already alerted— “Jeb, your guests are here,” or whatever. So now Jeb is coming out of that door and he says, “Hey, George, come meet my friends.” There's George—“Mr. President.” “How are you doing?” Kind of brusque. All this. I can't remember if it was that time or I think it was the next time because then Jeb was back the next month. So we met him briefly that first time and we went off for lunch. The next time Mary and I did the same drill. This time he had just come back from an arrival and Mrs. [Laura] Bush was there. They said, “Do you want a tour?” We said yes.

We go upstairs. They could not have been more gracious. We were nothing to them. We were just friends of Jeb. But he took us upstairs. There were boxes in the hallway and I watched the President go off with my wife into his bedroom and I'm going, *OK, there you go.* [laughter] They were just so gracious. Tremendous.

**Perry:** And you had not met Laura Bush prior to that?

**Towey:** No, not prior to that.

**Perry:** Not before your tour of the White House?

**Towey:** No, and I went off with Mrs. Bush and Columba and she said, “We're going to do this; we're going to do that.” There literally were boxes in the hallway of stuff that had been shipped up. I met them—that was it. He wouldn't remember me from Adam. So he had no idea.

In August I contact Jeb and I say I think I could do that job. Long story short, because I will never get through this stuff, Jeb talks to his brother, and meanwhile Andy had already thought of me because he remembered me from the Chiles days and from the hurricane.

**Perry:** Hurricane Andrew.

**Towey:** This is what Andy told me later because I was wondering how did my name get on the list, and Andy said he had already thought of me and who were people that would fit the profile to be able to do the job. They were looking also at Catholic Democrats. They didn't want to and they did want to. They had been burned a bit, but they wanted to also.

I get a call from Andy Card's secretary and she says come in and meet this Thursday. This was the Friday before; it was for the following Thursday, September 13. September 11 happens. I just remember taking all the materials I was studying, briefing, just sticking them in a file and saying that's that. The world has changed forever. The meeting of course was canceled. But by December it starts to heat up again.

I'm staying in touch with Jeb periodically, but you can't go, “Hey, I know the country is still grieving, but I really want to help in that vacant White House job!” I just let it sit. I felt if it is God's will it will happen. Then it did happen. I remember getting a call late December, early

January. I went in to see Andy. We interview. Then he wants me to meet some of the senior staff. Then I'm circulated through the West Wing to meet with people and I do that.

**Perry:** And you met with whom?

**Towey:** I met with Karl [Rove], Margaret [Spellings], Kristen Silverberg I think, John Bridgeland, Karen Hughes, and I didn't meet with the President. Previously I was at an event—he was doing a fund-raiser for Jeb in Washington at a hotel on Capitol Hill and I was in the hold with Jeb. The President was there. Then Jeb had to go out on the stage and I'm still in the hold. I remember the Secret Service people, like, "Who is this guy?"

**Nelson:** You?

**Towey:** Yes. Why am I there now? Jeb is gone, I'm standing there and the President is 10 feet away. I said, "Hi, I'm Jim Towey." I introduced myself to him, "I'm being considered for the faith-based position." He goes, "I know, I know, talk to Andy." I said, "Yes, sir."

I found out later that he had told Andy, "I like the guy. He has a good heart. Hire him." That's what the President said. That was my interview. It was in the hold there. I had done the tour, but in terms of when I was an actual candidate he just said, "I like that guy. He's got a good heart. Hire him." I guess the fact that Jeb was saying—he knew my credentials, that I had run a large Health and Human Services Agency, that I had been Mother Teresa's lawyer, all these things. So they were like OK, good. They had a problem on their hands with the faith-based initiative at that point. So that's how I got hired.

**Nelson:** Let me ask you this. During that month in Tallahassee on the recount, the time you spent with Jeb Bush, socially I guess mostly, did you sense any sort of ambivalence on his part? Somebody who had been the Bush brother who was expected to be the President, any ambivalence about wanting his brother to win?

**Towey:** No. I think it was a matter of family pride that he needed to deliver Florida. There had been a fair amount of conflict in the run-up to the election on strategy because some of the things that the President was doing that were helping maybe nationally were hurting him in Florida. So Jeb was constantly channeling that through Karl and others that you're hurting him down here. Jeb did not want him to lose in Florida. He was adamant about that.

**Perry:** On the recount.

**Towey:** On the recount too it was just a matter of family pride that he can't lose Florida. That didn't mean he was going to do anything he could do to rig it, but it meant he was all in for his brother to win. Of course in his private moments he was well aware of it, but he was also very happy as Governor. I was in the middle of that relationship a lot and still am. I'm still getting press calls about Jeb now and his relationship with his brother. Now it's upside down; before it was the other way.

**Perry:** Can you tell us about those meetings that you had with the senior staff prior to your being named to the position?

**Towey:** They wanted to just get a feel for who I was. My résumé was good enough. I'm 40-whatever at that point, 45, so I was old enough. I had the credentials. I would get to know all these people a lot better later. They were all very cordial and nice.

**Perry:** Did they talk to you about the issues that had developed about the office and the problems that it was having and the leaving of the first director, John DiIulio?

**Towey:** To some extent they did. Everybody came at it from a different angle. That was going to be a theme that would be consistent throughout the whole time. You had so many different perspectives and you had this entity called the faith-based initiative, which was one of the President's pet projects, acting as a parallel Domestic Policy Council. The difference was that the Domestic Policy Council actually had standing and established relationships with all the federal agencies, and now you're starting a faith-based initiative with offices and nobody had really thought about this. So who do they bring in? A guy from academia who does not have management experience. Brilliant guy, great friend. We've come to be good friends. It was an accident waiting to happen at so many different levels when you look at it now.

**Nelson:** You said people had different perspectives on this office. For example, what were some of them?

**Towey:** I think of Nick Calio, the Legislative Affairs guy. He did not particularly like the initiative. He only saw controversy. They had been burned on HR7 and the vote that they had had in June 2001. It turned into a partisan fight and it got snagged on gay hiring issues. Everything the President didn't want to happen happened.

**Perry:** So this was the Charitable Choice legislation?

**Towey:** Right.

**Perry:** Your reference to HR7.

**Towey:** The bill should never have been run. It was amateurish in how it got run, I think. It inflamed people so they thought, *What is this "compassionate conservatism"?* *It's just a ploy to get elected. Does he really care about this faith-based initiative?* Then what do they do? They run it for a vote in June with no Democratic support and it breaks down on the issue of hiring. So Nick had been burned on that.

Then you had the Texans who knew the President was a true believer in the initiative and that it mattered to him and that they'd better get it done. So you had Karen Hughes, who was very much aligned with it and Margaret Spellings, who was aligned with it but she had all these other priorities as Domestic Policy Advisor. Karl saw its political value and I think he loved the President and was committed to getting his agenda done, but he in some ways got snagged in it too. As you recall, that was the *Washington Post* front-page story of the Salvation Army agreeing to spend money in exchange for getting Bush support for Charitable Choice. I don't even remember. It was a preposterous story, but it ran. So that spooked Karl on it because now his name was in the middle of this and it was looking like it was just a partisan initiative.

He knew how important it was to the President, but he also was now—he had been burned by it. He was also hearing John DiIulio had done this National Association of Evangelicals speech in March that ticked off a lot of evangelicals with a couple of sentences that were probably gratuitous and John regretted—I don't know that John regretted them, actually, but anyway it had the effect of ticking off the evangelicals.

So the initiative got off to a very bad first six months, with as much altitude as he did. His first day in office he is signing this Executive order. To put that much light on the issue when the office wasn't even set up—it was like a bad tech company startup, a doomed tech startup where you just had people and boxes and mail coming in from everywhere. They had created so much excitement and they didn't even have offices set up. Then you had all these agencies with faith-based offices, what are they going to do? What do we do today? What is the initiative? It was just doomed, really, the way it was started. They should never have put that much light on it without having infrastructure there. Maybe they should have run it initially out of the Domestic Policy Council in hindsight and then transitioned to a stand-alone office. This is all to say that that is how it started.

**Nelson:** So when you say, “I told Jeb I thought I could do this job,” did you know what the job actually had become?

**Towey:** No.

**Nelson:** You didn't know what you were walking into?

**Towey:** I followed it in the paper. I was following it because I cared about it. I thought, *This is the one initiative of his that really excites me*. I wasn't big into the whole tax cut stuff and all that, but I loved that he was a compassionate conservative. When I met him I got the measure of the man and I instantly liked him. So I followed it like anybody. But when John resigned I said, *Wow, I could do that job*. I did not know all the behind-the-scenes stuff. How could you? Nobody talks about that stuff. But when I was being interviewed I got on a train to Philadelphia and had lunch with John DiIulio. I met him for the first time.

**Nelson:** In Philadelphia?

**Towey:** We went to some restaurant. I instantly liked John. Poor guy, he had had a thoroughly exhilarating and miserable experience. He was commuting, getting up at 4:00 in the morning and so on and so forth. He had a hell of a ride there. He was an outsider and he had not worked in politics. I had worked on Capitol Hill for eight years so I had had some training. Then I'd been in the Governor's office and had run—so I had enough political background, as much as any of those guys did, but he didn't and it hurt him. Particularly if your first initiative is going to be on the Hill. He didn't know the Hill. How could he? He knew the issue maybe like no other. He knew the science; he knew where the research was. He came at it as an academic. He also came at it as a street fighter.

He really cared about the poor. He knew those programs on the ground and he was immersed in Philadelphia's inner city. He knew all the African American pastors. He brought those things to bear on the debate and that is why the policy position papers were so well done because he and John Bridgeland were very smart and they wrote very well, and Steve Goldsmith, too. So the



initiative had this great luster, but there was no grounding in reality, what do you do to make it work?

**Perry:** We study at the Miller Center now particularly the first years of Presidents and Presidencies and what to do and what not to do. What are the lessons for an incoming President in the future to learn from this experience?

**Towey:** Don't put a lot of light on an issue if you don't have an office in place that can handle the follow-up. You will create chaos. You'll create headlines, but you will create chaos that is going to bite you later. Two, when you hire people, make sure that their qualifications match what is needed after you're elected, not just what is needed before you're elected. Three, train everybody in how a White House works, just how does the thing work.

One of the things that struck me is you hit the ground—it's like a body roll. You're dropped out of a helicopter, you do a body roll, and you're in the middle of combat. There is never a sit-down saying, "Here is how the White House works. Here's the scheduling office. This is how the President's schedule is written. This is the briefing book he takes and the way it is assembled. It goes through a staffing operation." You have to figure all that out; you're on your own. Nobody has time to sit down and do a tutorial, and you don't really have time to do it either. "The President is going to do an event Thursday. Put it together." "Well, can I first learn how staffing and scheduling work?" "No, you cannot." That's how it plays out.

It is a really big mistake during the transition that when they identify key people, that is a time when you should require them to learn how does the executive branch of government work if they don't already know. If you've worked on the Hill as I did, I knew how the Hill worked; I didn't know how the White House worked. It took a long time. I probably still don't. It's like *The Lord of the Rings*; there are different levels to this.

**Perry:** Then what were the people—all the top senior staff you were meeting with, they gave you their understanding of what had happened. Did they give you their understanding and their hope for what they wanted you to do to right the ship?

**Towey:** When the President was going to announce me in the Roosevelt Room on February first I went in and I said—this was the first time I had met him—I had been vetted by everyone. I'd like to actually go back, OK?

**Perry:** Yes.

**Towey:** To get this chronologically it's better for me. After I had done those meetings with the senior staff, then I'm kind of in a holding pattern, but it's looking like I'm going to get the job. I really did not understand the significance between an assistant to the President, a deputy assistant to the President, and special assistant to the President. Those aren't titles that you have on the Hill. On the Hill you have chief of staff and you have legislative director and you have administrative assistant and blah, blah, blah. I didn't really understand they're like White House ranks, like lieutenant and sergeant. I didn't understand even what that would mean in a White House. I didn't even know that there were 23 assistants to the President and 40-ish deputy assistants and 110—so I didn't even know any of that.

I knew that John DiIulio had been an assistant to the President and I'm interviewing for John's job. Meanwhile, I can't really speak—I have no firsthand knowledge of this other than I knew there was a decision that John Bridgeland was going to leave the West Wing and head up Freedom Corps. It was an awkward time. For a group that prides itself on loyalty, this is now a year into the administration and the decision is made that John is going to leave that cherished turf of the West Wing outside of Margaret's door. He was right there where domestic policy is written and he is going to go head up Freedom Corps.

When Andy Card interviews me, the last time, and this is in the 20s of January I'm guessing, he says, "Now, if I offer you the job are you going to take it?" I said, "Yes, sir." On with the conversation. Then I get called in for another meeting, and this is when they offer me the job. They said, "We would like you to be faith-based director for President Bush." I said, "Thank you." He said, "We're going to make you a deputy assistant to the President." Immediately in my head I'm going, *That's a change*. Anyway, I was thrilled and in reality I hadn't spent a second working on the campaign, not a second. I hadn't given money. I hadn't done anything for George W. Bush and now I'm going to be a deputy assistant to the President? That's coveted terrain. So I was fine with it.

**Perry:** But just so people will be clear, the position was demoted from assistant to deputy assistant, and by that time you did know that that was a demotion, I would presume.

**Towey:** Yes, I knew it was a lower rank. He said, "Now John Bridgeland is going to be an assistant to the President. He is going to head up USA Freedom Corps, but you're going to be independent, but you're going to be coordinated." It was as vague and poorly constructed an arrangement as you could imagine. It seemed set up to fail from the start. So John is now an assistant to the President. He's out of the West Wing. He's friends with all of them. He was working the campaign in '99 and all of this and now I come in as an outsider and report through him? He is now an assistant, and running USA Freedom Corps. The two offices were pitted against each other from the start.

**Perry:** Where is he physically? In the Executive Office Building?

**Towey:** No, he is now on Jackson Place, at the far end of it.

**Perry:** And you're at?

**Towey:** I'm at the first—there is the Blair House, there is the faith-based office, there was Environmental Council, there was the Council of Economic Advisors, and then near the end of the street was Freedom Corps. We joked about how it was the row of descending relevance. *[laughter]* The way Jackson Place worked in terms of the President, what he cared about. The President was all over the faith-based initiative. He ran on it; he was into it. USA Freedom Corps evolved as a response to September 11. The problem for the President on this issue—and I knew firsthand from discussions, it looked like [William J.] Clinton's AmeriCorps. So AmeriCorps was a piece of Freedom Corps now. John was out there trying to fight for Presidential attention, fight for time, and to me it seemed the President's heart wasn't in it.

I can't speak to why it was created and they can drape it up with all the highfalutin patriotic rhetoric, but the reality was I watched how little time the President was going to spend on that

issue. Therefore, for John to be in the thick of things, he also wanted to be involved in faith-based issues. I didn't sign up for that and I wasn't going to stay for that. So I insisted on autonomy, that I would be able to run the faith-based initiative. I would certainly copy him and I didn't mind him looking at briefing materials that were going to go to the President because he was an assistant, but I didn't want him calling the signals on the faith-based initiative.

**Nelson:** Was this part of your conversation when you accepted the job?

**Towey:** No.

**Nelson:** It came later when you figured out what was really going on?

**Towey:** When I accepted the job I didn't even know about Freedom Corps. Andy said John is going to be working on a project but I'm not able to talk about because the President is going to announce it in the State of the Union.

**Nelson:** OK.

**Perry:** With whom did you have the conversation about how you wanted the paper flow to go and who did what and what the rankings were doing?

**Towey:** At the State of the Union the President announces the USA Freedom Corps. Now I know that's what John is going to do. I'm now getting ready to be announced a few days later, February first. I meet John. John is a sunny guy and a very smart guy. He had to put the best face on his situation. He was very smart and competitive, and he did a ton for the President in the campaign and after.

John is a great guy and I felt for him, but it was really clear to me within a very short period of time that he and I would be competing for a finite sliver of Presidential attention. So now how do I make it work? I try to work that out with John. We did as well as we could.

**Nelson:** That bad, huh?

**Towey:** I'll give you an example of what took place once. There was a briefing in the Oval Office on the faith-based initiative and on other issues; there were multiple issues. Maybe a little Freedom Corps. John was still fighting for Presidential attention. He was always trying to get on the President's schedule for things. John was attending senior staff meetings and I wasn't. he had better access and I had the better issue.

**Nelson:** Because he was an assistant to the President?

**Towey:** Because he was an assistant. There was a meeting and I was ticked that I wasn't included in it because it was going to touch on faith-based and John knew it. I said, "John, I expect to be invited into the Oval for the portion that deals with the faith-based initiative. I'm going over to the West Wing and I'm going to sit right outside the Oval Office door to enter when the briefing turns to it."

I go and I sit there and senior staff files in. They all meet and then the meeting ends and they come out and John says, “Jim, I’m sorry, I couldn’t get you in there. The faith-based piece happened toward the end of the meeting and they covered it really fast and all.” But everybody filed out and saw me sitting there. So they all were aware that John and I had our differences. I respected John. We simply were set up as nearly adversaries by the reporting requirements.

I also felt that the benefit of working for Mother Teresa for 12 years was that I had that beautiful experience and I wasn’t all that enamored with the White House “glitter and gold” scene because I saw what that looked like. I loved the President, I respected the Presidency and all that, but I had a bunch of kids and I didn’t sign up to work where I was just going to be a yapper [makes barking noises], a little dog, even if it was the President’s pet poodle. It was the kind of thing that where you’re in the Oval Office you’re sitting in his lap and everybody sees it, but when he’s not there they could kick the dog or not feed the dog and say they fed the dog. You get my point.

That was kind of the dynamic. The initiative has been changed to where it is now sort of reporting through Freedom Corps and there is the Domestic Policy Council over here, and really early on I realized this arrangement is a loser for the faith-based initiative. I’m going to fail the President. So I had to fight.

**Nelson:** How did you resolve this?

**Towey:** I developed a good friendship with Margaret and I just said I think for this initiative to work it needs to be integrated with the domestic policy apparatus and to be in sync with it and not be beholden to Freedom Corps. If you’re talking about initiatives on elderly housing, well, faith-based groups do that. We should be part of it. So I was working more closely with her than with John. I felt for him, but at the same time the way he was overseeing me was not helpful to the initiative.

The deputy who was there in the faith-based office, who was the one holdover from DiIulio, was David Kuo, and David’s allegiances were with Bridgeland. David was very difficult to work with, rest his soul. That also was a problem because you had David working closely with Bridge, so I couldn’t really trust my deputy, and both saw that on compassion issues it was a zero-sum game for my office and Bridge’s. This all played out during the years I was supposed to be getting the initiative up and running, so I had to maneuver around David and Bridge. Dennis Grace ultimately became my deputy and that problem went away.

**Nelson:** What period of time are we talking about here before you got integrated with the domestic policy process?

**Towey:** I instantly knew the arrangement with Freedom Corps wasn’t going to work. John was busy getting Freedom Corps started, so it wasn’t as if he woke up every day thinking *How can I jump into faith-based issues?* I think in fairness to John he was trying to do his job, and faith-based reported through—the reason Andy set it up that way is they didn’t have any assistants to the President that didn’t have somebody reporting to them. So I was under Bridge.

**Nelson:** It is really hard to understand why they would make such an effort to make John Bridgeland feel good when substantively they cut—

**Towey:** But that was part of the whole Bush White House ethic. They prized loyalty. It made my life very complicated because John was an excellent editor so he always improved memos that I wrote, but when he wanted to change the direction or the thrust of the initiative, I pushed back really hard, so we were in conflict a lot. Bridge served the President well, in any case.

**Nelson:** Again, when did this finally—

**Towey:** At the end of 2002 I went to Harriet Miers, who was then Deputy Chief of Staff, and I just said this arrangement isn't working out. I laid out—there were a hundred things. I don't think John was that happy with it either. I waited for that year to pass before I went to see Harriet and then I just said, "This isn't working." Bridgeland was a great guy. But it wasn't working.

I think Margaret saw that it wasn't working. Margaret was a good friend throughout the time I was there. She took me under her wing after I met with Harriet.

**Nelson:** Apart from having to sort out all these things you've been describing, what were you able to accomplish during your first year?

**Towey:** First, I had to organize the office. It hadn't done anything since September 11. It really hadn't done anything from when HR7 Charitable Choice crashed and burned. John DiIulio was leaving. So when John did the "level playing field" report in August 2001, which was kind of his opus after six months, it was a lay of the land of how faith-based groups are treated in the public square. John's heart was never in the Charitable Choice fight. I don't think he understood Charitable Choice that well. His heart was never in that fight.

I was a true believer in the right of faith-based organizations to hire on their religious beliefs; I was a true believer in it. Well, now what do you do? You had a lost situation in the House. You still have a companion measure that is going to go in the Senate with [Joseph] Lieberman and [Rick] Santorum. So the question was, is this thing dead on the Hill? I had to spend a lot of time making house calls to the Senate and House Members to gauge levels of interest, what went wrong, introduce myself. There was a lot of that going on in 2002. It was partly just to repair relationships. A lot of people were mad at John and were mad at the White House. They felt that they had just taken a tough vote for no reason.

**Perry:** Did you therefore go around Legislative Affairs? Did you say, "I'll just go ahead and do this"? Did you consult with Nick Calio?

**Towey:** I would let them know that I was seeing Members, but they did not say, "Hey, go work this." Nick was uncomfortable with the initiative, it seemed to me.

**Perry:** But they didn't say don't go.

**Towey:** They couldn't. I was doing my job. I guess they could have, but the nice thing is I'd worked on the Hill. I would look them in the eye and say, "Here is what I'm going to do." I was courteous to them about the strategy and I'd meet with the head of the Senate for Nick and the head of the House, to get their advice. Great folks all. I followed channels, but I expected to real help from Legislative Affairs.

They're all so busy and they were working 50 other things. Faith-based wasn't one of them. That rap song "I've got 99 problems and faith-based ain't one—" They just viewed it that between John's departure, the HR7 debacle, the focus on post-September 11, they had just moved on. The world had changed. I think people who criticized the faith-based initiative never properly factor in—the ones who said it wasn't a high priority for Bush, they never really saw how the Presidency changed September 11th. It did. It changed a lot of the domestic policy initiatives in his Presidency.

**Perry:** So even from your perspective, even knowing that the President's heart was in it and for it and wanted it to work, what you saw was that the whole Presidency had changed, and obviously the President's priorities had had to change.

**Towey:** He was stretched in directions now that he hadn't anticipated when he started. I remember at the December Christmas party—

**Perry:** 2001?

**Towey:** 2002, because I wasn't at the '01, the 2002 Christmas party. We had just had a big faith-based event. It was my biggest deal in 2002. I felt like OK, after six months I could tell the Senate was stalling. The Senate was never going to give President Bush a victory. When Jim Jeffords flipped, it changed the President's ability to snap his fingers and get things done.

I was trying to gauge whether there was Hill interest. Could we get a time agreement to bring the CARE [Charity, Aid, Recovery and Empowerment] Act up? I was meeting with Senators. I met with [Thomas] Daschle. I met with Senator [Edward M.] Kennedy, with Senator [Hillary] Clinton, with Lieberman, a lot of the Democrats to try to see if we could figure out a way to get a vote on some of the elements—at least the charitable giving incentives, maybe an up or down vote on Charitable Choice. Can we get anything?

I remember a discussion where this staffer for Senator Daschle said, "They're not going to give President Bush a Rose Garden signing on faith-based. It is not ever going to happen." I knew she meant it. I knew she was right. They weren't going to give him that. It had gotten so toxic and partisan. It was still so toxic and partisan that they were not going to give him a victory. Then I thought, *OK, we have to pivot to executive action. What can he do?* It's not unlike what President [Barack] Obama has been doing. What can you do with executive action? So we developed an Executive order, an Equal Treatment Executive order.

On December 12, 2002, the President goes to Philadelphia. The same morning he kind of spansks Trent Lott for an improper remark that pushed Lott out, set into motion his demise, which Lott never forgot. At a raucous welcome in Philadelphia he signs the Equal Treatment Order and establishes two new faith-based offices. So it was showing forward momentum.

Part of the strategy, when you say what was I going to do about it, then I have to go back to that Christmas party. Part of it was—my first job was get some order in the federal agency faith-based offices so they know what they're supposed to be doing, organize the White House office and manage this strange hybrid that hasn't really been managed. There was still stuff in boxes. There was mail in boxes sitting there.

Catharine Ryun, who had been there from the beginning, was going to quit as soon as I got appointed. I begged her to stay and she ended up staying with me the whole time, a great woman. She brought me up to speed about just the utter chaos from the get-go. So I got the executive stuff moving forward.

At the December Christmas party, we had just done Philadelphia. It was a great event. He loved it. He saw momentum again. Now he was back feeling more comfortable with the initiative again because it had had a rough first year. After John DiIulio left nobody wanted to get into it because they felt like it was an electric rail to touch. If you got near faith-based, you're going to get dragged into gay issues or you're going to be dragged into religious rivalry and First Amendment issues. You're going to get dragged into partisan politics accusations. So they were all forgetting why President Bush got into it, which was about poor people.

He says to me and I have it in my notes, "Please help me keep this on the front burner."

**Perry:** This was at the Christmas party of '02?

**Towey:** Yes. "Help me keep this on the front burner." I thought, *You're the President*. But it isn't that simple.

**Perry:** Tell us.

**Towey:** It's not that simple because even when the President says I want X to happen, there are a hundred ways to skin a cat, as they say. The people carrying it out are all extremely intelligent people. This is not amateur night at the White House. These are very bright people. There were ways that you could either stretch it out, delay, complicate, propose, study this first, and so on. So you were running into internal opposition. But it was not adversarial; it was just a scrum. They had their priorities. It was a battle for the President's time and I knew that we were a love of his, but we weren't his only love and he is a President who has to get up and worry about the war in Iraq, the post-9/11 aftermath issues, all of the economic issues that he was running into, No Child Left Behind. Whenever you were looking for time that was going to be devoted to domestic policy issues, there was a scrum.

So I realized then I had to figure out how I would get a little piece of the pie. I'm not going to get the share I would like. The President is saying, "Help me make sure it is a big piece of the pie." I felt if I do my job well there will at least be something on that plate. So I had to do that.

**Nelson:** The question I have is why doesn't he say that to Andy Card, "I want this to be—"?

**Towey:** He would. He'd say at meetings, "I want to get this done and let's move this." But there was always an explanation why it couldn't get done. It was just a competition of priorities. The President would also say that on a bunch of other things too. I think that there was a loss of appetite on the faith-based initiative after the first six months. It was just a bad, bad experience. Then in December the *Esquire* article comes out. John DiIulio calls them the "Mayberry Machiavellians," kind of an insider's exposé of how it was all a hoax and all that. The West Wing wasn't happy.

Then in 2004 after David Kuo finally leaves, he goes on *60 Minutes* in the run-up to the election to say the initiative was all political and a sham. Andy is a great guy and a seasoned executive. It's just a big headache. What's the upside other than the President will be happier? But who else is it pleasing? Not their base. They were happy that I was doing my job well. They didn't want a public failure. But it became controversial.

My strategy wasn't just the Executive order. We were getting outside of Washington. We were putting out tools. I created the White House conferences. I said we're going to take this on the road and give technical assistance to the "armies of compassion" as the President calls them. We were reaching out to the mayors and Governors to set up faith-based offices. So there were a lot of things that we were doing to create momentum that would not require congressional involvement or time on the President's calendar.

The only piece that was successful and getting congressional involvement was every year in the State of the Union I would get in the scrum to make sure faith-based was in it. I mean, it was really becoming a tithe operation of time. They were tithing time with the faith-based initiative. It was kind of like that and I wouldn't say it was 10 percent, but there was always something in the tip jar. [laughter]

The first year was the compassionate capital fund. The second year was Access to Recovery drug treatment program vouchers. The third year was the mentoring of the children of prisoners. The fourth was prisoner reentry. All those were fights to get into the State of the Union and to get into the budget. But they got in there.

**Perry:** Tell us how you went about that in the scrum?

**Towey:** I connected the dots that were there. The President in Texas had already done these issues and cared about them. So I figured go with what works. The compassionate capital fund preceded me; that was something Bridgeland and DiIulio came up with to provide technical assistance to the small faith-based operators that just couldn't handle the sophisticated big federal government. What do you do? If you're running a successful job training program for welfare moms, what do you do? Just go knock on HHS [Health and Human Services] and ask, "Do you have any money?" So you have to bridge this because they're just going to be rolling their eyes with the huge bureaucracy.

We looked at what were successful models. Then you'd have someone in Mrs. Bush's box at every State of the Union who would be someone who was a successful faith-based figure. Those were things that I would fight for to make sure we got.

**Perry:** With whom were you fighting? Tell us about the scrum itself. Were you sending memos? Were you meeting with the President?

**Towey:** I would get on the President's schedule periodically. When I'd look at all this—I didn't bring the notebook, but it would average out that I would see him once a week at something. Sometimes I'd see him six times in a week and then there would be weeks I wouldn't see him. Then I'd be with him for two hours on a trip.



I remember one of my notes. I spent two hours with him. It was exhausting. If you were on the plane—he liked me. That mattered. The people knew he liked me. I would tell Mary, when you go into an Oval meeting you never came out of that meeting where your stock didn't go up or down. That's just the way it went because your peers would watch how you interacted and it was all live. If your stock went down, then people were selling.

**Perry:** And it didn't go back up.

**Towey:** Probably not, depending on who you were. People were selling but if your stock was dropping a lot then you would have trouble getting your calls returned or on schedules by those people who were senior staffers. So the challenge was—that was the pressure of the job. You had to make sure that you did well in front of the President and that your things were well thought out so they didn't get holes punched in them in an Oval briefing.

The other thing I think the President liked about me was that I wasn't seeking to be around him. I wasn't trying to vie to go in there as often as I could as director of the faith-based initiative. I want to see the President, I want to do this, I want to be on the plane. If I didn't feel that I needed to be on the plane I didn't ask. In other words, the danger for people who work at that level is that it breeds insecurity. Where do I stand with the President? Is he mad at me? Am I in trouble? How can I improve my standing with him?

So the way you do that is you constantly want a temperature take. You want to figure out how to get a thermometer in his mouth and get in front of him to see if he has a fever about you or not. I felt like the job came so improbably I felt God allowed me to be in this job for a reason, to help his poor and to keep the focus on the compassion side of the agenda and to try to find within the White House people who cared about his compassion agenda—and there were some true believers—and to work with them and see if they could help me advance the initiative.

So when you say how do you get something in the State of the Union address, well, you have to get the domestic policy person behind it. You have to get the speechwriter behind it. You have to get a Deputy Chief of Staff somewhere to sign off. You have to get the budget people to sign off. So you're doing a lot of meetings and you're constantly trying to get in front of Mitch Daniels, the budget director, to make sure there is money in the kitty because at the end of the day Washington measures initiative success by money. Is there money behind it or not?

**Nelson:** Who were the people you found to be sympathetic to your efforts? I'm guessing Mike Gerson.

**Towey:** Andy was sympathetic, but he had a billion things coming at him. He knew that this was important to the President. Andy was a total company guy. This is what the President wants; our job is to go get it. But he knew the President wrote a bunch of checks. His job was to make sure that none of them bounced. He would hold some and float some to make sure nothing bounced.  
[laughter]

Mike Gerson was gold, a true believer from the get-go. So was Margaret Spellings and Karen Hughes and Bill McGurn. Kristen Silverberg was good and very competent and seemed inclined to help. Karl Rove at times was helpful but grew increasingly wary of the initiative, I think. After the reelection, the crew that came in was more conservative and less into compassionate

conservatism at that point. Pete Wehner, who was on the think-tank side of the White House was very good on the issue. Bill McGurn, too, was helpful. And other nonsenior staff, too. Those were the more top tier. There was never any real interest in the Legislative Affairs office.

**Nelson:** Back to the Executive order the President issued in '02. How did you go about making that happen, and how did you go about determining, for one thing, that he had the authority as President to make those decisions through an Executive order?

**Towey:** We had a brilliant lawyer, Rebecca Beynon, who explored these questions for me. I got her on the staff. I had two special assistant positions that I could dole out. I had her on the staff for that purpose and she was great, brilliant. She ran the traps. We worked with the agencies. Legal counsel—I should go back. Harriet Miers was also very sympathetic to the faith-based initiative. So was Alberto Gonzales. Again, the people from Texas knew this was important to the President. They were all very—by the time I got there—helpful if they could be. Karen Hughes got it.

**Perry:** But then she was gone—

**Towey:** She was gone pretty soon.

**Perry:** She had gone back to Texas.

**Towey:** And it was terrible. By that time Dan Bartlett took over messaging—he liked me, I was funny. He was loyal to the President, and very bright, but from a media standpoint the initiative was a loser for him. Whenever there was media interest they were always trying to decry something about the initiative. Our folks were all worried about the gay issues flaring up, the gay hiring issues. Dan was privately sympathetic, but he was not going to stick his neck out. He was in the inner circle. He had no interest in risking Presidential capital on a losing proposition.

From the standpoint of the President's team, I was not in the starting lineup. I was on the team. I was on the bench waving the towel at time outs. Then I would get some playing time if the game was a blowout [*laughter*]. I was not privy—I knew who the key people were, but I was not among them. The ones who went out to Camp David—Condi [Condoleezza Rice], Karl and Karen and Dan and Gerson—the people who were really the inner circle group, they had the influence. That was fine with me because I had five kids and I didn't want to lose my wife and kids.

I had said to Andy when he was interviewing me, “I will give you everything I have except my marriage and my family life. So I will not do anything that is going to put that at risk. Other than that I'm all in.” The President couldn't have been more understanding of that. But he had others whose kids were grown or they didn't have kids, who were working almost around the clock. It was phenomenal to see how hard these people worked. Phenomenal. Such dedication.

**Nelson:** I wonder—in everything you've talked about so far, is the Vice President or the Vice President's office part of this story?

**Towey:** The Vice President's office could not stand the faith-based initiative, and Vice President Cheney felt vindicated when it crashed and burned six months in. He never liked it; he was never

interested in it. Right after the President was reelected, it was December 2004, we were doing an Oval Office briefing for initiatives for the second term and I was doing faith-based initiative. That was the only time Vice President Cheney showed up for an Oval briefing and I think it was because he wanted to make sure that the second term initiative wouldn't make the same "mistake," quote/unquote, that was made out of the gate the first term.

I started the briefing off and President Bush says, "OK, Tutu, what have you got for the second term?" I said, "Mr. President, I think the voters spoke loud and clear. They want a theocracy." [laughter] Everybody laughs, and I remember Cheney, whose head was down, his head just kind of lazily looked up to see if I was serious because I think he thought I was a loony—he never, ever got the faith-based initiative. He never spoke about it. He never lifted a finger to help it. His people were disagreeable about it.

I remember the run-up to the State of the Union in '04, when I was pitching to senior staff a prisoner reentry initiative that would help prisoners get back on their feet and provide grants to groups that work with these people. The President cared about that issue, had worked on it in Texas and so forth. I remember Cheney's top—what was his name—David Addington, going, "None of these people vote. Why are we even talking about this? Why don't we give law-abiding people jobs?" That was his perspective.

I just pushed right back. I said, "You obviously don't understand the faith-based initiative and what the President's compassionate agenda is about." He looked at me like, "Correct, and I won't." It was just alien. I have to choose my words well here. I got along OK with Scooter [I. Lewis] Libby. I felt for him in what he went through. I had absolutely no expectation of assistance from anybody on the Vice President's side the entire time I was there.

**Perry:** No expectation of assistance, and indeed blockage, it sounds like.

**Towey:** If they could, but they really couldn't. They really couldn't. I think Andy would hear from the Vice President and others that whenever they were pushing something to keep it on the front burner, Vice President Cheney I'm sure was against that, 100 percent positive he was against it. As Andy tried to keep the peace in the White House and after the Iraq War was underway and going, it seemed to me there was a fraying in that relationship I perceived from my distant vantage point.

**Perry:** Between Andy and the Vice President?

**Towey:** The Vice President and the President. I watched it play out in Cabinet meetings in '05 when Scooter—or was it '06—whenever, when Scooter was being shown the door. Then it was all very clear. But there was no doubt, you know, that I was a Bush person and not a Cheney person. I didn't even go through the pretense of trying to brief him, even trying to get on his schedule. I briefed his wife once when I first got there.

**Perry:** You briefed Lynne Cheney?

**Towey:** Yes. I wasn't there to work for Vice President Cheney, and I guess having worked for Governor Chiles, I wasn't there to work for Lieutenant Governor MacKay. So I kind of

understood the dynamic a little. I didn't come to work for Vice President Cheney. I would not have come to work for Vice President Cheney. Few of my views aligned with his views.

Going back to your question on effectiveness and how do you work with the staff, keep in mind I'm a Catholic and a Democrat, so it was uphill at times. They've already seen that act with John. Then I hire Democrats in the faith-based office. So they're looking at me—they couldn't stop me when I did it because I was going to bring in people who weren't partisans but were good and could do their job. I wasn't asking, "Are you a card-carrying Republican?"

I understood why they hired that way in some of the different offices, Political Affairs and so forth, but for the faith-based initiative I didn't hire that way. I brought in Dennis Grace, who now works at Ave Maria University. Dennis came in to be the person to run this liaison with all the federal agencies because it was complete chaos when I got there—chaos, crazy people with ideas about preaching on Uncle Sam's dollar and just doing zany things—they were going to get the President in trouble.

**Nelson:** Crazy people in the office or in the agency?

**Towey:** In the faith-based offices, out in the agencies. Because what happened after the election—and they're doling out jobs now, they gave jobs to some people who were very fired up in their faith but were not aware of what the boundaries were, so you had to have discipline and clearance processes and none of that was in place. The President got bit a couple of times by some of these arrangements that were made to give grants to—

**Nelson:** Alaska?

**Towey:** Yes, the Alaska School or Luis Cortés [Jr.]. I didn't have a particularly high regard for Luis Cortés, and yet they were already a year and a half in courting the guy, and Nueva Esperanza, I think, was the name of his group in Philadelphia. I was just completely uncomfortable with that guy as an example. Yet the faith-based office at HHS had their arms around him. So immediately you come in there and say, "Get your arms off that guy."

There were things that just had to get done. Initially the White House liked me, the President liked me. I was funny. I knew how to work. The faith-based initiative was moving in the right direction. There was some favorable buzz from Governors and mayors. The White House conferences were going well. The President's meetings were going well. I was getting him in front of poor people, which wasn't happening really in a lot of other ways in the White House operation. He was benefiting from that. But there was a headwind the whole time, between the six-month start and me being a Dem, but I got along with Karl and that helped a lot, because John didn't.

Karl is a bright guy. Karl and I are friends to this day. We stay in touch. We butted heads sometimes. He wins. When you butt heads with Karl, Karl wins, so don't butt heads with Karl. *[laughter]*

**Nelson:** So far it seems like every time White House gun-shyness about the program comes up, it's a concern that this is going to generate political controversies that we don't want. That said, one of the themes of press coverage of this effort in the run-up, especially to the '04 election, is

that this office and the initiatives were ways of building political support for the President's reelection among black clergy, the Latino communities, and so on. In other words, as the press was describing this office, this is part of the political apparatus for the reelect. Can you address that?

**Towey:** Yes. The idea that African Americans were going to vote for George Bush because of the faith-based initiative is laughable on its face. The President knew that and the actual electoral results show that. He knew that and didn't care. He understood that their communities were actively affected by prisoners reentering their communities, knocking on the pastor's door at two A.M. when the bus drops them off. He knew that. So the mentoring of children of prisoners and prisoner reentry, he knew this was acutely of interest to the African American pastors and communities, so he was going to have to work with them and wanted to.

The Access to Recovery drug treatment program, a lot of these programs had appeal. I don't believe there was ever any translation of faith-based initiatives into votes for the President, other than it allowed the President to speak about matters of faith, but that worked against him as much as it worked for him. He didn't have a lot of Republicans lining up behind him as compassionate conservatives. In fact, within two years they stopped using that phrase, which was unfortunate in my opinion.

The evolution of George Bush as a compassionate conservative didn't bring a lot of followers on either side of the aisle. So for openers his outreach to African Americans was sincere, and if it was for votes, it was ill-fated because I knew these guys and their congregations weren't going to vote for George Bush or a Republican in a billion years.

The issue of well, you're doling out money to religious allies and buddies was also a preposterous narrative if you just look at the data. They would cherry pick five grants that went to an evangelical organization and the scripture that comes to mind is, "Woe to you Pharisees, you strain out the gnat and swallow the camel." To strain out the gnat of the few grants that went to people who knew the President or had contributed when \$70 billion of grant money was going out the door, 93 percent to secular groups or government entities—all Democrat-leaning groups.

Let's take the Head Start Program, a multibillion-dollar grant program. Almost all of it went to opponents of President Bush. If you just look at who are the Head Start grantees, there is not a vote out there for George Bush. If you believe that political narrative, he would have had to go in there and start whacking those grants and setting up a new grant-making competitor that was going to go to the conservative donor people that I am now going to sprinkle money on. The fact was we did the research. A nickel of the Head Start dollar went to faith-based groups. There was a stranglehold by the existing grantees and we researched it. I asked, "What would you have to do to lose your Head Start grant?" The answer was there was nothing you would have to do. They had a lock on the money and faith-based groups were shut out.

So when people would cite the Luis Cortés grant or the Good Samaritan's Purse one, they always could come up with five. They couldn't come up with 10, and meanwhile there were thousands of grants going to Democrat groups, as always. So one of the things that I did that was helpful that dimmed this debate is I said, "All right, we're going to publish publicly all the discretionary

grants that go out the door to faith-based groups and we're going to give you, AP [Associated Press], the list." So Laura Meckler, the AP reporter, got the list. She went down it.

The *Post* got it. He's going to write a story because he found the five he could cherry pick. It was shameless journalism at its worst the way that the *Post* reported. But Meckler I think fairly showed what this research showed. But what it brought was transparency. Meanwhile, I'm out in the country going to organizations. I'm out in academia taking it on the road. I lectured at Dartmouth, Yale, Princeton, Harvard, Davidson, Notre Dame. I was just out there.

**Perry:** Sweet Briar?

**Towey:** Sweet Briar. But I went out there and I just said, "Bring your questions. This isn't in the dark. What are your questions?" We created a tool to explain what Charitable Choice was.

**Perry:** We were talking about this before. I said I wanted you to do that for people who will see this years and years from now. That will not be a concept that people perhaps will be familiar with, people who are not lawyers who will be reading this. Tell us about that and both sides of it constitutionally.

**Towey:** The Charitable Choice was enacted by President Clinton as part of welfare reform. What it did was say you can still be a faith-based organization and receive government money and hire on a religious basis. Obviously if you don't receive government money you can hire on a religious basis. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, the Amos case [*Corporation of Presiding Bishop of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints v. Amos*], a unanimous decision, upheld the right of faith-based groups to discriminate in their hiring and hire on the basis of their beliefs. You're not an Orthodox Jewish organization if you're forced to hire Southern Baptists. So it was perfectly lawful. How would you remain who you are if you couldn't bring in people who shared your vision and mission?

**Perry:** And the choice, by the way, refers to that?

**Towey:** Yes. It's an odd moniker.

**Perry:** You have the choice to choose whichever person you want to hire and you can do that based on your religious principles.

**Towey:** Yes, as a charity, it is a faith-based charity. It's a stupid title, I don't know who came up with that, it's almost Orwellian, deceptive. But it was the one that was stuck on the thing when I got there. I always called it religious hiring because I felt like it showed the right of the Constitution and the Amos case and Title VII unchallenged, since '64, really. The only issue that has never been resolved by the court to this day is can you receive federal money and hire like that, and that is Charitable Choice.

**Perry:** Right. That's the other—

**Towey:** So what does Congress do? As you would expect, they make a mess of it. They pass some laws like welfare reform that specifically protect religious hiring rights. It is called the "Charitable Choice Provision."

**Perry:** Even if the organization receives federal funds. That is 1996.

**Towey:** Correct. Then they have statutes passed like the Workforce Investment Act that specifically prevent you from hiring on a religious basis, saying you can't get the money and hire on a religious basis. Then there were a bunch of statutes that were silent that were passed or renewed that didn't speak to the issue. So that was the muddle.

**Perry:** So for the separationist side in the so-called separation of church and state argument, the first is should these religious organizations receive federal funds to engage in charitable missions for the fear for the separationists that there will be a sloshing over of religion and state.

**Towey:** Yes.

**Perry:** So that is their first issue. Then the second is, if they are receiving those funds, and they could even agree that they should, then the hiring choice or the hiring preference comes into play for some people.

**Towey:** That's right. What did we do about that? We sent out, immediately, guidance—when I was in office, within a year we had published guidance about you can't preach on Uncle Sam's dollar. You have to provide a public program with public money. You have to be accountable. We only want to fund programs that work. So are addicts recovering? Are the jobless finding work, is the welfare mom getting her life together, and so forth.

That screened out a bunch of groups that were already wary of the God, man, and mammon divide and [Julius] Caesar's money being what it is.

**Perry:** Including a lot of conservatives.

**Towey:** Richard Land of the Southern Baptists and others were vocal critics of the faith-based initiative because they felt this was an entanglement and government was going to make them subservient. My view was, then stay away from it, but respect the right of some faith-based groups like the Salvation Army who can be in the public square and be effective and maintain their religious identity without government persecution.

I remembered something Lawton Chiles had told me. He said, "Never fix a problem people don't know they have." They hadn't done a job of really explaining what the problem was. Is there discrimination against faith-based groups? John DiIulio would come out and say there really isn't. Well, I disagreed. We found a bunch of examples of groups in Janesville, Wisconsin, with the Salvation Army there and the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty in New York City that wouldn't even apply because HHS said you have a religious name. That's why you saw a lot of these groups in the African American communities that did get money. They'd be like Project Hope, Light and Love.

**Perry:** Sounds like a secular name.

**Towey:** Yes, peace and joy. It brings to mind—this goes back to an earlier point. Going back to the issue of the senior staff being interested or not, one of the meetings that took place in

December 2002, right before the December 12th rollout, was a briefing in the Oval on Executive order and all this. So all the key people are in there.

It becomes an Oval within an Oval because the President will sit there in his chair, and then seated next to him he would leave the chair open for the Vice President if he is going to be there. Then first violin on each side of the couch. *[laughter]* Andy would be over here to the President's right. If you're briefing you're sitting first violin on the other side. Then all the other people fill in who are the key senior staff people.

I remember when we were getting ready to discuss this and we sit down—I think it was a Friday or something—and somebody starts to hum “Kumbaya.” *[laughter]* Then somebody else—“Kumbaya.” *[singing the tune]* Then Nick Calio gets down on one of his knees like he is lame. “Get up, brother.” There was this kind of joking. Even though it was in jest it was very instructive for me that this is how a lot of them saw this initiative sort of a squishy, Democrat “Kumbaya” thing. The President saw it too. Anyway, that's worth putting on the record because that happened.

**Nelson:** Watched it with what?

**Towey:** Well, I mean it was a light moment. You have to have a steam valve every once in a while to let some of the pressure out of that damn place because it is just so high strung. So that was a good relief thing, but it was also—he was watching how a lot of his own people perhaps were skeptics about it.

**Perry:** This leads me to a question that I definitely wanted to ask. Did you have time with him—you talked that sometimes you would be with him two hours or you would maybe be with him on a trip. Did you talk about your respective faith traditions and backgrounds and your extraordinary experience with Mother Teresa, his extraordinary experience in coming back to a faith or becoming born again or being evangelical and his openness about how faith saved him from his alcohol problem? I say it now because I think there are people in this country and certainly in the public sphere who get uncomfortable when someone talks about faith because we are in some ways such a separationist country, and certainly in the government realm.

So I'm wondering if people's joking about it is a way for them to get around that they feel uncomfortable. Then how would the President handle that, given that faith was so important to him and he wasn't ashamed or afraid to talk about it?

**Towey:** Over the years we'd have a number of roundtables with people. If we were doing a recovering addict program, if we were doing prisoner, whatever, where he'd be around real poor people. One of the problems with that Presidential bubble is it's hard to have real relationships.

I remember a roundtable once where I had some faith-based success stories, including this Liberian refugee woman who—the meeting started out and you never had time to—I never wanted to coach these guys, so I wouldn't even ask them their story. I'd know a little bit about it and I'd just say, “I want you to tell the President your story.” I just trusted God would work all that out. I felt you were getting into dangerous territory there, for the integrity of these meetings, you know this person, and they were identified to you as somebody that might be good. You bring them in there. I remember this meeting starting out and Harriet Miers is sitting next to me.



This was in the Washington Hilton, some salon. He is in a roundtable and the first person goes, “Mr. President, you’re looking at a miracle. I had a guy point-blank shoot me in the head and leave me for dead.” The President just kind of jerked back when he said this. “Now I’m working at the World Bank. It is what faith did for my life.” The President is like, “Wow. Wow.”

We’re showing the difference that faith-based groups were making because this guy had a lot of help from a faith-based organization to get back on the right road. Right next to him was this Liberian refugee from Maryland. She tells her story and I didn’t know her story. I knew that she had been helped by Catholic Social Services to be resettled from Liberia as a refugee.

She tells a story of how they were coming in and they would line up everybody and execute them all. They left them in a pile of bodies and she went and hid in the pile of bodies. Harriet Miers looks at me and says, “Did you know they were going to tell these stories?” Because the poor guy’s job is hard enough as President, and now this sorrow. The woman is just bursting into tears as she tells her story. How could she not?

The President, I remember him hugging her while she is crying and also just looking. That woman was lying in a pile of bodies in Liberia and she is now in the embrace of the United States President. You look at that and this is the glory of God, right? So it was a beautiful moment. For me, it was what he needed to feed his soul, even if it was painful for him. But for Harriet and others who were trying to protect the poor guy from getting battered to his knees with emotional distress, you could see why they were protecting the poor guy. This was his schedule.

That was always the tension. I wanted him around poor people—that’s an aside. To your question on the constitutionality—on the faith-based—we have two open questions now. On the faith, I knew his story because I heard him tell it over and over at roundtables and they were beautiful. His own personal story, what the Lord had done in his life. It was always an encouragement to the people and that’s why he did it. He wasn’t doing it to say, “Look at what the Lord did for me.” He was saying, “Here is what the Lord can do for you and help encourage your brothers.”

So I knew his story and he knew that I had worked for Mother Teresa. The thing was, though, there wasn’t downtime. I’m going to see him next week in Dallas. Now we talk about here’s what happened at the White House, what was that all about. I always wanted to ask him a million questions, so I’d come with some to just tie loose ends around this, and what do you think of that and people. But when you’re working there, it is the NBA [National Basketball Association], every possession, every second of the clock. There is no downtime. There is no sitting in someone’s office; that is the sign of an amateur if you’re wasting somebody’s time.

I remember going to see Karl after his dad died. I felt like I should go in his office. He is my friend. I know that nobody has time for this kind of personal stuff, but I just go in there. I remember Karl was thankful I came in. It was a brief exchange. He doesn’t have time for the pain; he has a job to do. The President will sometimes joke about—whether it was the President or Jeb—but the Bushes have this thing about navel gazing, this self-introspection and all.

Karen would be more in touch. They were all there. The President was not a person who was hard to get to tears. He had that Bush characteristic. You all knew that about 41, and President 43 is the same way. You had to be careful there that you weren't setting into motion something that was bad for the country. I wanted him to see the success stories and I wanted him to meet people whose lives had changed because I wanted him to keep the fire for faith-based initiatives because some of the senior staff—the accounts had been brought down to where there was \$1.38 left in that faith-based account with some of these people. It had all been drawn down, especially after the election.

**Nelson:** Jim, I know you—

**Towey:** Can I go back to the other just to close the loop on the other one on the secularist view—

**Nelson:** Yes.

**Perry:** Sure.

**Towey:** —that I hope answers the question about faith. I would see him reading scripture. He knew I prayed. He knew I prayed for him, and in fact, for the February 1, 2002, announcement, I'm in the Oval with him for the first time. He is doing a picture with my mom and my wife and my children. Click, click, click. They get rushed into the Roosevelt Room. Then I'm alone there with him and he is standing there with his glasses. I'm standing in the Oval Office trying not to wet the carpet. *[laughter]* But I'm also eerily kind of—Lord, if you've thrown me into this deep end, I've already done this. Why was I around Mother Teresa? Now here I am.

I said, "Mr. President." He's looking at his remarks he is going to go read in there. "Mr. President, I just want you to know that I will be praying for you every day and I admire your own—" He just looks at me, "Great, but you know the issues right? You know about religious hiring, right?" Like I had spooked him a little. He was like, *Oh, crap. Does he know his job, the issues?* I had studied the Charitable Choice thing and it had been very poorly communicated the first year what it was. It had done a disservice to him. So yes, I knew the issues.

That was like, do your job. I'll pray, you pray. But work! I remember one time before he was doing an event and I went into the Oval—I didn't go in there a lot. When I left, I was thinking, *You had this incredible access. Did you take full advantage of it? Because he liked you and he liked you the whole time. He didn't want you to leave, and all that stuff.* Like when the Pope's dinner was in 2008 he had my wife sitting directly next to him. Everybody was like, "Who is she?" But he liked her and me.

I always felt like I wanted to make sure I did everything I could in that job to not squander the gift that God had given me. He knew that I loved him. I do love him. I admire him. I love him. I would do anything he asked of me. I can't say enough about how much I love the guy. I got the measure of the man and I loved what I saw. He was the same in front of the curtain as he was behind the curtain. He treated people so well and he was so badly judged. He was persecuted by people who lied and misrepresented and were poisonously mean. He bore a lot of that with as much grace as you could. He had faith.

He could get mad. He's human. I'm not idolizing him either. But I admire him and what he did for our country and how he did it. He did a hell of a lot of good. I want to have a time at the end to summarize what I think were the successes and all that.

**Nelson:** Before we started this, you mentioned in your office that you kept notes of meetings with the President. I can see you've made some other notes as well. I want to make sure that if there are any of those meetings that you think are particularly important or representative and you want to go through one or more of them, or if there are other things on your list of topics, we want to make sure you get a chance to address those things.

**Towey:** Thanks. Did you get your question, though?

**Nelson:** That was the question.

**Towey:** OK, sure.

**Nelson:** It is a prompt more than a question.

**Perry:** Be sure there's plenty of time for that. I wanted to circle back to something chronologically, and that is the 2002 congressional midterms. I think I read in the briefing book that you did do some campaigning. Is that correct?

**Towey:** No, I did not. Here's what happened. David Kuo said some things that were true, but they weren't all true and nothing but the truth. David was not privy to a lot of discussions. He exaggerated his influence. For example, with the *60 Minutes* piece, he is shown in a photo on Air Force One. The reason he was on Air Force One was because he was already leaving the job and he asked if he could go on it once. So I gave up my seat for him to go on it, which I found ironic that then that photo would be used to project an access and altitude he did not possess. He wasn't a bad person. He was a tenderhearted guy. He was an idealist. He was disillusioned that they were going to get \$8 billion in faith-based funds.

The President—it was never about money with him, but they were all like, “You didn't get the \$8 billion for the poor.” It was a very simplistic, false view of it. So David's criticisms were born of disillusionment and were biased by a lack of access to what actually happened. He wasn't in the meeting with Karl; I was. I told Karl my strategy is to get out in the country, get out of Washington. It is dead here. My job is to get out there and to get Members of Congress interested in it if you ever want to get anything passed and get them in touch with their faith-based communities. I will go to any Senator or Congressman's district if they ask me to come. If they invite me, I will go. But I'm going to go to Republicans and Democrats alike.

Well, Karl likes the Republican side and I suspect he ginned up invitations for me to go to Republican districts. I have no idea and I didn't care. From my standpoint I'm going to go out there. If they want me to be there—and I did, I went to a couple of congressional—all the congressional Members were up for reelection.

**Perry:** Right.

**Towey:** I went to Dems. When I met with Daschle in the majority leader's office he came out of the meeting and walked me in front of cameras, a TV bank—he was up for reelection—with me standing next to him. He opened, “I’ve just met with the faith-based director.” He wanted to sound faith-friendly for his reelect. So it wasn’t as if the Republicans were alone hijacking this for political purpose; the Democrats were too. [Harold] Ford, what’s his name, from Tennessee.

**Nelson:** Harold Ford Jr.

**Towey:** Yes, Harold Ford Jr.

**Nelson:** My Congressman.

**Towey:** Your Congressman. He invites me to a roundtable. I knew it may have ticked off Karl. He had all the media there. I went and did the roundtable with his African American pastors and others that he had invited to his meeting. But those you didn’t hear about from David and weren’t in his book, but the fact is I did them.

**Perry:** Did you ever hear Karl Rove get upset? Directly?

**Towey:** Karl had gotten used to the fact that I was who I was. He saw me go do the Republican events. He lived with the fact that I did the other ones. I did Democrat Senator Bill Nelson of Florida’s event because he was my friend and he was a newly elected Senator. We were up on a roof with the prisoner reentry project, a bunch of prisoners who were roofers. We went up and did that together. He had media there. I didn’t care. I felt like this initiative was supposed to be bipartisan. I got it straight from the horse’s mouth. The President couldn’t have been clearer about it in the early meetings with him to be bipartisan, reach out to everybody. This is about the poor. It’s about results. It’s not about the politics. Keep it as clean as you can in this stinking town where even the hot dog vendor is political.

I did. So there were those criticisms, but they didn’t see me with Senator Mary Landrieu. I’m going off of memory now. She had me in her district. But they didn’t see those Democratic Senators who were trying to exploit the faith-based initiative. I didn’t mind being used. I felt like if we can get more buy-in and more of these Members caring about the initiative, maybe we can break the impasse in Congress.

**Nelson:** I do have a question, because the election did turn around the Senate. So now you had both houses controlled by the Republicans. Did that cause you or others in the White House to reconsider the legislative strategy?

**Towey:** Which election?

**Nelson:** In 2002.

**Towey:** What happened in that election?

**Nelson:** Republicans regained control of the Senate. Bill Frist became the majority leader when Lott got pushed out.

**Towey:** Bounced.

**Nelson:** So in other words, the extent that the Democratic Senate, after the Jeffords switch, had been an obstacle. Did the fact—

**Towey:** So we had from '02 to '04 and then it flipped in '04?

**Nelson:** No, it stayed Republican.

**Towey:** Then it went in '06.

**Nelson:** It flipped in '06. So he had a four-year window, which basically coincided with your time, in which the Republicans had a majority in both houses of Congress. What I wonder is did that cause you to think maybe we can go legislate after all?

**Towey:** No, because there was no real Republican interest. When you went on the House side, the only people that were—like Hastert's people—I met with his chief of staff and with this woman—I forget her name. They did nothing but criticize me for not pushing the envelope. Why can't groups preach on Uncle Sam's dollar? Why don't you just push it and let it get tested in the courts? I went to Republican Congressmen. "We don't have any blacks in our district. I don't care about this issue." The way they drew those district lines, they were drawing lines in ways that Members could care less about food stamps. They could care less about elderly housing, some of them.

The ones who were interested on the House Republican side were interested in fighting the culture wars. They were interested in maybe the First Amendment fight and the defiance of ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] and Barry Lynn and so forth. Those were the Republicans. The Dems were interested in it, but I didn't care about trying to get their support. We had to get the Republicans to be interested, even to schedule time on the calendar for it. You now had HR 7 that passed and then it died at the end of that Congress because the Senate never took it up. They struck all its contents and inserted a bunch of stuff and Lieberman and Santorum—I love Joe Lieberman, great guy, just a thoroughly decent human being.

Senator Rick Santorum was the only guy who cared about the faith-based initiative, really, on the Senate side. [Roy] Blunt on the House side at the leadership level was interested to a point. It just became synonymous with "it is going to be a fight over gay hiring."

**Perry:** So it really got reduced to that.

**Towey:** Yes, and some wanted that fight and others didn't. On the Senate side, I remember going to the Republican conference periodically where the Senators would get together. I think it was a Wednesday afternoon. "Today on the program we have from the White House Jim Towey, the faith-based director." I'm not kidding. There might be 15 of them, 20 of them, around a conference table. I'm saying, "The President is very excited about it. The Executive order—did this—we have—dah, dah, dah." They'd be reading—I'd see the back of the newspapers. [laughter] I'm not kidding. There would be newspapers up while I was talking.

**Nelson:** Now they'd be looking at their phones. You get promoted to assistant to the President.

**Towey:** Here's how that happens.

**Nelson:** Yes, and what difference did it make?

**Towey:** It could not have come soon enough. By the time the President is up for reelection I had been in the job now all of '02, '03, and '04. It was taking its toll on us emotionally, physically, and financially. Since that time we had had our fifth child, so we had a baby at the house, but we were going broke. I had made the decision I was going to leave. I was going to stay through the reelect and then leave.

Election night, you remember what happens. Dick Cheney is asleep on the examination table in the basement of the White House, in the physician's office. It's like four in the morning. I'm with Dick Tubb, my buddy, the White House physician.

**Nelson:** What do you mean? In the physician's office?

**Towey:** Yes. He's sleeping over there. The motorcade stayed humming the entire night on the South Portico.

**Perry:** In case they could go to the victory celebration over at the Reagan Building.

**Towey:** Yes. I'd been to the party and then Andy came and this was just another Democratic insult at Bush that they did in 2000, too. President Bush never got a victory party, never got one.

**Perry:** Two victories with no victory party.

**Towey:** Yes. The next day he did a victory event in the Commerce Building at four in the afternoon. So I was going back and forth. Mary and I had been at the party, but she had to get home because the kids had to go to school the next day. She left. I went in a White House car back to the White House and I'm hanging out with Dick Tubb. "Don't go in there." [*whispering*] "Vice President Cheney is sleeping in the examination room. He's just stretched out there."

We're waiting to see if the President is going to go up at four. Then the decision was made at some point that we're not going tonight. I remember going home for a couple of hours of sleep and I came back because this is a once in a lifetime thing. So I'm back in the White House. It was 8:45 or something like that. [John] Kerry finally concedes the race and the call takes place. So now the word is out. We already knew that he had won. Everybody in the country but Kerry and [John] Edwards knew that the President had won.

I go into the Oval and he is sitting at his desk; it's in the afternoon now. He is taking congratulatory calls from all the world leaders and Members of Congress and donors, who knows. They were queuing up, call after call. I just go to—I don't remember who it was. It wasn't Ashley [Estes Kavanaugh] then, I think it was Karen Keller. I say, "Mr. President." He says, "Tutu." He got up from his chair and I came over and hugged him, he hugs me. I said, "Congratulations, sir. Thank God." He says, "You're staying, right?" First thing. "You're staying, right?" I'm thinking, *How do you say, "Hell no"? This is the President of our country! He just won! Keep him happy.*

I said, “Yes, sir. I need to talk to Andy, but yes, sir.” He said, “Well, talk to Andy. We need to do something with this faith-based initiative this term. We’re going to be free now. We can do this. I want to hit the beach on this initiative. We’re going to schedule some time. I want to make sure we get this done before the State of the Union.” The meeting I told you about where Vice President Cheney lifted his head up, that was the meeting.

He said, “Get on my schedule. Let’s get this done.” So I go back to my wife Mary. “Well—” I went to Andy and I said to Andy, “I can’t stay at this salary. We’re broke.” That obviously meant the only way I could make more money was to be an assistant to the President. I knew what I was doing and he knew what I was doing. I also was communicating I’m not going to beat my head against the wall anymore as a deputy assistant, because there was a fair amount of that in the first term.

I thank God we got a lot accomplished in the faith-based office. I’m proud of what we got accomplished, but it was against such a steady headwind and I also sensed that it was going to become even more difficult in the second term in light of the fact that some of the true believers were going to leave. I knew Gerson wasn’t going to stay. Margaret was going to Education. All my allies. I was just like, *Gee*.

**Nelson:** Did it make any difference?

**Towey:** It definitely made a difference. Now I’m in senior staff. They look at you differently. You’re an assistant. It’s definitely a hierarchy. I mean, I was the faith-based director, but I wasn’t an assistant. There were things that only assistants get invited to, so I’m now one of them.

Now again, I’m the towel waver. I’m paid the same as Condi and Karl and Andy. Something is wrong with that. They should be beating me up for my lunch money [*laughter*] because it wasn’t fair. What was demanded of them versus what was demanded of me wasn’t equal. They had the burdens nonstop—I mean I marveled at how incredible—Josh Bolten, these people were so damn smart and so good, and they were smarter than I was. It was an honor to just watch them think of things that I didn’t think of when I’d staff a document that I’d written. They’d come back with 10 things I never thought of.

Or you’re in a meeting and they—but in my little terrain I knew that better than they did and they knew that. So that’s how it worked. In terms of working around these people, they were brilliant. But I was being paid the same as the Chief of Staff of the United States. Really? But hey, I needed the money. [*laughter*]

**Nelson:** Well, you’re finally making as much as John Bridgeland made.

**Towey:** John had left. I think he left some time around September of ’03, is that right? Maybe it was December. It was around the same time Kuo left. Kuo and he left within months of each other.

**Perry:** This just occurred to me and it should have occurred to me long ago, since I’m a political scientist, but in discussing the Executive order and still not getting any traction in Congress, it just occurred to me if the President decides to go down the Executive order road, does that in some ways mean Congress has even less incentive—the people who are for doing something

have even less incentive because they can just say the President is getting what he wants anyway?

**Towey:** There just never was incentive. There wasn't incentive to pass any of the President's package.

**Perry:** There was not a critical mass of people with political incentive to do this?

**Towey:** That's right. They just never bought into the faith-based initiative of the President. There weren't 60 votes and you had to have 60 votes. The legislative leadership really wasn't into it. It was the President's thing. Now that matters. The President gets some things that aren't congressional things, but the question was how much political capital are you going to spend? To get to 60 votes, you have to spend a fortune on it. You have to twist arms. To get 60 votes, those last five votes are going to cost you stuff.

Nobody in the White House was saying that it was worth it. So maybe within the White House your argument resonates, but they were like heck, you're already getting this and that through executive action. We'll continue to push and we'll try to get this, and so I kept pushing, and by the grace of God and the President's willingness to back me up whenever I needed to be backed up, we got stuff done.

I recall Christmas 2003. People were trying to keep out of his 2004 State of the Union and out of his budget, the prisoner reentry initiative.

**Perry:** And those people were—who were trying to keep it out?

**Towey:** Some senior staff. I went to him and I said—in the Christmas receiving line—which is a violation of all protocol, but I didn't care because I was going to leave in a year anyway. I just said, "Mr. President, I'm trying to do prisoner reentry and I'm not getting any support on it." He looks over at Blake [Gottesman] and he says, "Blake, get this on my schedule tomorrow."

**Perry:** That is a meeting with you?

**Towey:** Me and some senior people. It got fixed.

**Perry:** This was Blake Gottesman, by the way, we should add.

**Towey:** But it ticked off people that I'd gone around the system, and if you did that a lot, you'd better hire a food taster!

**Perry:** Then your stock would go down.

**Towey:** They would wait for your first turnover and then there would be a chorus saying we need new energy and new ideas or whatever. I was not at their level, but I did have the President's support, and so that was always the challenge for me, how far to push, where to push, when to push, whom to push.



**Perry:** Because you had his support on the content and the substance and you've described a friendship that you had with him.

**Towey:** Right.

**Perry:** I should ask you, by the way, do you want a little break?

**Towey:** Yes, then we'll finish.

[BREAK]

**Towey:** I'm rambling on too much.

**Perry:** No, this is wonderful. I wanted to circle back, and I think this links to what we were finishing with before we broke for a few minutes. That is, if you could characterize your meetings with the President. One time you said you met with him and it was a two-hour meeting and you were exhausted.

**Towey:** With him, in his presence. You might be talking with him some. I wasn't talking two hours with him.

**Perry:** It might be one-to-one?

**Towey:** It might be your event and he's sitting there. I remember a number of times where I would literally be moderating a debate with the President here, 10 people here, and it is all live theater because we didn't stage it. It wasn't like I'd say to the participants, "You're going to say this and then—" I would not do that. I felt like if I was expected to do that, I needed to get out of the job.

**Perry:** That would be certainly exhausting to have that pressure, I presume.

**Towey:** Right, because you never knew what they were going to say and you didn't know what was going to happen, and it was the stock up, stock down deal where at the end of the meeting people are all watching you. If the event goes well and the President is smiling, your stock is up; if it doesn't go well, then—there was always that pressure. So being around him at events, you wanted it to go well for him.

One of the hardest parts of the job for me was the constant pressure with the faith-based initiative. I once had my photo on the front page of the *Washington Post* in a story critical of the initiative. Fortunately my quotes were fine. But if you made a mistake it would be on the front page of the paper. For some initiatives it didn't really matter some of the work that was being done. But that faith-based initiative, any chance the mainstream media would have to cast it in a bad light, misrepresent it, they would do it. So you had that pressure on you to make sure the speech stuff was vetted right.

For example, I met a woman in a drug treatment program named Tonja Myles. She ran this program in Baton Rouge, Louisiana called Set Free Indeed that she had started with her husband who was a plumber. She was a former prostitute and drug addict; they met and so forth. She finds Jesus. She, her life—like so many stories, they start this little tiny program to help people. So he would do his plumbing, she was doing odd jobs, and on the weekends they would go to their church and they would have a program for people with addiction issues. It was dynamic. They were terrific people and truly the embodiment of the President's initiative.

I heard about her program. I called her up on the phone. I talked to her. I liked her instantly, trusted her instantly, probably stupidly, but I did. I knew the President is going to do this Access to Recovery announcement at the State of the Union. I thought it would be great if Tonja is in the box for that. The West Wing people typically before the State of the Union would say, "Do you want someone in the box, someone who will feed this message?" I had been working to get stuff in the State of the Union. It was through the budget process, through the policy shop, through the speechwriting. So I thought, *Tonja will be good*.

I go to a speechwriter and I say, "Here is a person who is the face of what this initiative is about. She is not only recovered she is out there doing this work. She can help a bunch more people, but we need to be partnering with groups like this and she can do the addiction-treatment part on her own time and do the worship stuff separately and do it all right." "What's her name, what's her address? Get her Social, date of birth." I get all this stuff and send it in.

They come back. "Are you freaking kidding me? She's got a rap sheet." That happened more than once. Bill McGurn, chief speechwriter, loved this. Bill would always make a joke about it. Everybody I would send in for speeches, a lot of them, had colorful pasts.

**Perry:** It's the nature of the business.

**Towey:** The Prodigal Son. There was a period there—that was part of the pressure of the job too. You're dealing with complicated people—it bit me one time with a White House staffer. I had asked him to vet this juvenile justice program in Boston because in the second term President Bush started the Helping America's Youth initiative that Mrs. Bush was going to be involved with to help teenage kids and even gang kids. In fact, I set Mrs. Bush up with a meeting with gang leaders in LA [Los Angeles].

**Perry:** How'd that go?

**Towey:** It went very well. I mean, all these issues had an edge to them and you were on the tightrope with no net. So many things can go wrong in a roundtable with Mrs. Bush and gang members, or President Bush with recovering addicts and so forth. The program in Boston that I'd heard about—I wanted to have this guy that had been a gangbanger who found the Lord through a program and his life was going well. I had told the staffer to vet this thing, vet it fully, and make sure that this program is clean.

This was in the '05 State of the Union. I think it was '05. The staffer forgot to call the victim's family, because this guy had killed somebody or he had been at the scene. He was the accomplice to someone who pulled the trigger. He didn't pull the trigger but he was there. Our office didn't vet it. The guy is seated with the First Lady at the State of the Union and is

mentioned in the speech. I had represented that this was all cleared because I was told it was, but it wasn't. That staffer left the White House shortly thereafter. Right? Stock down.

Next day, front page of the Boston paper about an angry mother of the victim of this guy. And it was the only time I worked for Andy Card when he called me to his office and he was ticked. Andy was unfailingly a gentleman—cool, calm, and collected, the consummate professional. But he was ticked and he should have been. I blew it. My office failed on that. But that was the nature of the job. You just had this stuff and when you made a mistake you were going to have it stuck right in your ear. That happened over and over. So that came with the turf.

**Perry:** I wanted to ask you about the President and speeches because the one particularly that is included in our briefing book, which I think is from '05, that he gave up in Northwest Washington, perhaps one of these conferences for faith-based initiatives. First of all, I think it is really well written, but it is also his voice. Did you meet directly with the speechwriters before this would go to the President as a draft? Then did he typically go through, mark them up? It just is his voice. Are they writing in his voice? Is he ad-libbing up on the podium?

**Towey:** What you have is a transcript.

**Perry:** That's right.

**Towey:** All the time he left his remarks. All the time.

**Perry:** That is what it read like to me.

**Towey:** Always.

**Perry:** In a good way.

**Towey:** The way it worked, my job was to find quality beef and vegetables and make sure that they're the top quality beef and vegetables you can find. Then you send it to the chef. The speechwriters would then season it and tie it all together beautifully and anecdotal this and scriptural quote that and get it nice and lovely. You can make suggestions, what about this theme, what about that, but at the end of the day they're the chef and you're the one who is procuring the ingredients. Give them the substance, give them the meat. They're going to season it up and serve it.

The President would get drafts of it. It would go through the vetting process. Another bunch of eyes would look at it. But with faith-based, especially as you got further into it, you just realized he's not going to stick to the script, and he wouldn't.

**Perry:** You could tell from the transcript that it was really well received by the audience because there was lot of applause and laughter in parentheses. That would come at the lines that I think I'm pretty able to identify now were his own and probably ad-libbed as he was speaking to the group.

**Towey:** The issue was in his heart. He didn't need to be briefed on why he was doing the faith-based initiative. He was 100 percent from the heart on the issue. That conference was after his

reelection when he was laying out some of his plans for his second term. He had done enough of these—he had done the White House conference in Los Angeles in '04. I remember flying out there with him on the plane. I had one of these George Bush dolls that had a little string in the back you could pull that would have him mangle a sentence or something.

That's a long flight. He would be up in the front of the plane and I'd be back with staff. I remember that flight. He would typically on Air Force One come back. If it was your event, he would talk to you a little about it. "You all set for this? Any surprises?" I'm waiting for him. I saw him come out of the front and I ducked back to my seat. I got back in my seat and I just was lounging there and I had my George Bush doll. I had it cuddled up to my face like this and I just pretended I was napping.

I didn't know when he entered. I just was lying there like this. Then I heard this big laugh around me. I look over and he is just doing this thing.

**Perry:** Shaking his head.

**Towey:** But he loved that. I felt like any time I could make him laugh I'd done something for the country. That's why I cut President Obama some slack. I don't agree with nearly anything President Obama is doing. Nothing on the faith-based front and a lot of policy issues, but I tip my hat to the guy. I know how hard that job is having watched it from my little seat.

President bush would ad lib that stuff. If he were tired, exhausted, overwhelmed by all the other pressures of the job—because if you would be waiting and ready to go into the Oval to brief him, you'd see coming out [Donald] Rumsfeld and Vice President Cheney or the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] director and you just—now he is coming to us. It was almost a surreal existence to be going from this to this to this and now you're going to have the Prime Minister visit. It never lets up.

**Perry:** In his demeanor do you see change over that time? People always say Presidents age with all of the pressure.

**Towey:** He got better at it. I think he got way better at the job and he learned how to—I think everybody gets better at it the longer they're in it. You manage the staff turnover. After the first election—I want to make sure I get on the record about Katrina because I think it's important. Those jobs are just relentless. Maybe now is a good time because it ties in.

**Perry:** Yes, do.

**Nelson:** Go ahead.

**Towey:** The thing about Katrina—because it is considered one of the big lapses of his Presidency and I don't think what actually happened has been fairly represented, from my view. You had all these senior folks who were starting in '99 in the campaign and who were a core for him. You had joining Dan and Margaret and Harriet and Josh and everybody. Then you had Andy and all the other people like me who were grafted on, working around the clock, and it never let up.

You have September 11, and then we declare war March of 2003. Then it is wartime, you know, everything that happened during this period of time. It never, ever let up. It never let up. But even before the 2000 election, none of those guys got a break between the election because of the recount. So there was no—then they were foot to the floor to get the transition team in and to get the place staffed up so they can run on Day One. It's one of the reasons the faith-based initiative suffered; they had only a month's time to transition.

Then you go through the whole first term. Then you have the election. Senior staff could never take time off. They can't go on vacation. I'm talking about even the second tier of people who work even harder, some of them. The Staff Secretary and the speechwriters, all the people who are like special assistants. Those jobs are just all you can eat, 24/7.

He gets reelected. Now the President wants to charge hard: "I'm going to use all my political capital." He wants to have a robust agenda. He wants to be ready. So from after the election to the State of the Union and the rollout of the State of the Union, it was full-boogie work, no relief, harder than ever. After you had been working like this. When is the one time you can grab a vacation? The one time is—he is going to get some quiet time, by God, in July at the break when Congress goes home, whether Cindy [Sheehan] is going to sit out there and protest or not. *I don't care anymore. I'm going to my ranch.*

Everyone on senior staff was of the same conviction. It's like there is never going to be a time for vacation. Everybody needed a break. They all left. I had five kids at home so I'm at the senior staff meetings in the morning from the Roosevelt Room. The senior staff is sprinkled all over the place. Andy, I think, went up to Maine. Karl was out in Texas. Some of them would go out to Texas and then they'd have a satellite thing so you'd have a split screen. You'd have the ones who were out in Texas at a little table and you could see them and they could see you in the Roosevelt Room. So that is how we would do senior staff and that's how it happened.

When Katrina was coming, all the conventional wisdom said we were going to dodge a bullet. The storm was not going to be a direct hit. When it did hit we were OK. If you remember, when the storm passed through, the levees hadn't broken.

**Perry:** For New Orleans.

**Towey:** Right. The levees hadn't broken. There was no news of any of this. So they're all on vacation. Hurricane—get in line with all the crap that comes at you from every direction every day. Everybody thinks the President is safe—you're the conductor of the orchestra, but the guy comes out of the orchestra pit with a machete while someone is taking your daughter hostage. That's the White House job every day. So the pressures were great on everybody, and it never let up.

I'm back there and it was relaxed-ish, but we were doing senior staff. There was that sense that we dodged a bullet. So that day at that meeting it was, "OK, the storm came through last night. We're OK. It is manageable." Later, when the levees broke, no one was around each other when the crap was hitting the fan.

**Perry:** Was there anyone with you in the Roosevelt Room?

**Towey:** There were a few, but nobody really senior.

**Perry:** Right. Lower-level people who were behind?

**Towey:** They were all senior staff, but they weren't like—the Chief of Staff was gone, Karl was gone. Condi was Secretary of State then. They were all gone. I think Claude Allen was actually there. He was Margaret's successor. That was not a successful reign Claude had, particularly with Katrina. I liked Claude as a person, but he was so over his head, and it played out in a very dramatic way post-Katrina. It was difficult to watch.

There was a bumbling White House response and it was a late response. It was born of a certain defiance by a lot of people that there is never a time to take off. So they all stayed a day too long on their vacations. Then they realized, *Oh, crap*. Every critic wanted to stick this around the President's neck to choke his second term.

Those who were his critics jumped at this. All the hysterical media—"I was in the hospital, Mama." It was all a lie. The tragic story the guy told on national TV turned out to not be true, but it played on *Meet the Press* to great effect, just like the Dan Rather story played to great effect in the run-up to the election. It was all fabricated story. They're still lying about it in the movie coming out. This was the media atmosphere to where you get the mentality in the White House they're never going to tell it straight. It's rigged, biased. It's like playing sports where you just resign yourself to a corrupt umpire. You're going to have to swing at a pitch way up here because they're going to call it a strike if you don't. You adapt to that reality.

Senior staff had all felt like there was never going to be a break. So I'm taking my break. There is always something going bad. That's why they were all gone when Katrina hit. That was a big part of what happened. Then the President did the flyover over the damage, which has its own backstory I wasn't party to, but it had its effect. Then he lands on the South Lawn and comes straight into the Cabinet Room that was assembled where the agency heads that had anything related to Katrina were there. Then senior staff. It was arranged for that afternoon. I think he flew in at five o'clock or something; it was an odd hour. Usually Cabinet meetings were ten o'clock and they were scripted. The gaggle came in and left. I was back bench.

I sat directly across from him at Cabinet meetings, behind Cheney, on the back bench. He'd look at me sometimes like, *You paying attention?*

That Cabinet meeting in August 2005 was the only time that I ever saw a meeting that was live, that wasn't scripted, that was a high-level, this is how it plays out in real time. There was no time to prepare. He had a Governor who was messing everything up. He had a mayor who was completely over his head. You had the bad image that was dominating all the news cycles and the human tragedies, all the terrible—the estimates of how many people were killed. It was never realized, but there were all these estimates that were flowing in and it had this racial tone to it that was making this now a serious issue. President Bush's good name was being attacked and his second term jeopardized.

I will say this. I went to a bunch of meetings with the President that year with African American pastors and leaders. By process of elimination I became a kind of liaison to the African American faith community, which is a lot of their leadership. It broke President Bush's heart to

hear people speak of him the way they did about his feelings about African Americans. It was the only time I ever saw him get really, really mad and hurt when someone challenged him on that, that he doesn't like black people. It was so untrue. I couldn't believe how that cut him to the quick. It really hurt him and it hurt him that some of these black pastors whom he had known for years were distancing themselves from him in an hour where they could have stood by him.

Some were saying just hurtful things. It was an insight into the President that made me love him more. This was how race played out at the national level. To this day it plays out this way. Then you had the guy out there with FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency], so there were all these elements of the quote/unquote perfect storm that were in play that made the response so halting.

Claude was over his head and Margaret was over at Education and Condi was over at State. Karen Hughes was long gone. A lot of the people who would have been all over damage control weren't there. I think Karl was leaving. He left before I left. I can't remember when he left, sometime late '05 or early '06. People were just tired. You can only do so much. Man has natural limits. I'm on God's accelerated depreciation plan. *[laughter]* It just never lets up. That job was like that all those years.

**Nelson:** Was there a faith-based office component to the response in the hurricane-affected areas?

**Towey:** By then yes there was. Faith-based groups were the first responders. The reality was all the relief is going to come through the federal agencies, and that was going to be a big bureaucratic mess. I had already worked most with the Domestic Policy Council stuff anyway. That was part of the reason where after a year and a half into the second term I was done. I liked Claude and I felt bad for how he left the White House, the circumstances under which he left. But I also felt like, man, this is the NBA. When the ball comes to you, you'd better hit the shot. The President suffered.

The President was suffering from it. I was going to all the meetings. I would watch these meetings go on. Not a chance in the world this was going to get done properly. We let the President down.

**Nelson:** I wanted to ask you—you started out talking about structure and the absence of structure in the office that you inherited, then some of the complications in the faith-based offices in the agencies. I just wonder: by the time you left did you feel like the presence of faith-based offices in the departments and agencies was set and was functioning well?

**Towey:** Yes.

**Nelson:** In ways that have endured?

**Towey:** Through his second term they endured. I think when I left—every President, their last two years they are lame duck, but he had it worse. First of all, the Congress flipped, then the White House had to play a lot more defense. Second of all, he is old news. He's not running and his approval numbers were low and so forth, so there were just limits on what you could do. Jay [Hein], my successor, at that time was doing more of a summary kind of recap, legacy type. Here

is what the initiative accomplished versus creating things. He didn't see the President like I did. It was just a different environment. It isn't a criticism of Jay. Great guy.

I had worked four and a half years in that job, so I had a special relationship with the President that wasn't going to carry over to Jay. When I told the President I was leaving it was hard for me to tell him, and I could tell it was hurting him and it was coming at a time—I had that meeting with him in April of '06 and it was hard for me to leave, but it was so time for me to go. Katrina had left me with just a lot of frustration, and I felt at that point that I did what I could do for him and I couldn't stay forever.

He appreciated it. He knew; we had a family. Others had come and they had all gone broke. Even with the new salary it was just \$20,000 more. It wasn't like, *Oh, now I'm on easy street*. He knew that I couldn't stay forever. Yes, the initiative was in a good position when I left. It was functioning.

The President would meet periodically with Cabinet Secretaries who had big faith-based offices. I'd meet with him in advance and I'd say, "In my opinion here are the Cabinet Secretaries who are moving it, really penetrating their programs, and here are the ones who are just phoning it in." He'd go in there, chew some of them out a bit, and these Cabinet Secretaries would not like me, some of them. I know two who come to mind who would come after me after the meeting. They were mad and hostile and I said, "What he said was true and your office hasn't done this and that." I'd lay it out. You can't go into that job and accomplish something, particularly like the initiative that already was an uphill climb, and think you're going to do it without conflict. But the President trusted my counsel on it.

I saw his relationships with some Cabinet members, and some who would run late and bug the President because he ran on time. That's a Bush thing. He'd ask me my opinion of some of them. There was a little bit of downtime—he'd ask me about church leaders. I remember one time being in there on April 1 when he came over. There had been a false report that the Pope had died, John Paul II. He came over to me. "I'm really sorry about that." The Pope hadn't died; he died the next day.

There were some times I'd see him at White House lawn events. I stayed at a distance. I was available to him; I was there to serve him. If I could make him laugh, great—that's why he'd put me in the limo with him sometimes.

I remember driving to Tennessee for some event. I'm in the limo with him and he is doing his Elvis [Presley] imitation. I brought him an Elvis tie. It was like a silkscreen Elvis. "Why don't you wear this?" I gave it to him. Because I was older and white-haired and I looked way older than I was, but I was part of the gray eminence of the White House at 48 or 49. He came to my farewell, which he didn't usually do. It was just beautiful. He is one of the most tenderhearted, decent people. Great husband, father, boss.

He's got a temper and he is irascible, but I love that about him too. He is authentic and sincere and he loved his country. I've been seeing him all these years since he has been out of office and just watching the humiliation and the weight of all that has transpired during the Obama



administration and the targeting of his initiatives that they could unwind and hijack like they did with the faith-based initiative.

President Obama had a conference call in the Oval Office with black pastors to get them to go out there to get votes for the Obamacare legislation. If President Bush had brought in the evangelicals to whip up support for the Iraq War and had me as the faith-based director to organize that, I would have been on the front page of the paper and he would have been pilloried for it. The double standard has been astonishing to me.

I had raised with senior people in the White House that it was my view—but I was two years before his Presidency was over—that he should close the office before he left. That Republicans shouldn't just start up a new office and have it going in perpetuity. Close the office. Have a plan—this is my second term, and when it's over I'm closing it. The job is done; we've leveled the playing field. Faith-based groups are treated with respect. There is an Executive order in place. We tried to get it codified. We couldn't, but it's in place. I've done what I can do, but I'm not going to leave the office open. That was my counsel to senior folks at the White House.

I would have thought that Republican thinking—but the senior folks were saying, “Oh, it will look bad. It's like he's turning his back on the faith community. They'll say it was all just a ploy.” That was the reason the office stayed open.

**Nelson:** Is it your understanding that it is still a level playing field for faith-based groups?

**Towey:** Obama's group has done nothing with it. It has been nothing but a political outreach operation, period.

**Nelson:** I mean in the departments, at the grant-making agencies?

**Towey:** I don't know. I haven't followed it closely enough to be able to answer that. I feel like when he left it there was that apparatus in place and Obama got the benefit of there being infrastructure in place that didn't exist before. It's like here at Ave Maria, this university. This was all tomato fields 11 years ago. It takes a lot to just grow flesh and bones, create something from nothing.

**Perry:** But that brings us to an interesting circle as we're coming down to our last minutes here. We're asking of you what would be your lessons for starting up an office like this, an initiative like this. It is kind of interesting to come full circle, to hear your thoughts about how it should have been left.

**Towey:** They needed to spend a lot of time at the very beginning to map it out and think it through.

**Perry:** And this is to close it down.

**Towey:** No. At the beginning. Something this ambitious that had the risk of being a parallel DPC [Domestic Policy Council] operation where you have offices in all these agencies just like they all have Cabinet liaisons in all these agencies. Who listens to whom? You've set up a system that was going to be very difficult to operate. You have these parallel structures. I think at our biggest

moment we had like 60 people. This for the whole apparatus of the federal government? Still, one could make their Secretaries in agencies cry for mercy because you could get it on the President's radar screen instantly. So that was the nature of this. A lot of thought should have gone into how do you build this and how do you bridge this in the agencies.

In retrospect I think you could have a President—let's say Jeb gets elected President and he wants to have an initiative to restore religious liberty that has been so systematically attacked by this administration for eight years. He wants to look at regulations and he wants to look at agencies, and I want a point person and I want to keep this at a high level for the President to be able to go and do this. So he would be doing something somewhat similar, right?

**Perry:** Right.

**Towey:** Probably the way you would have to do it is you'd have to give that person some staff. It is a war of personnel. There are 800 over here. We'll overwhelm your 20. We'll just tie you up all day with the long memos. It never ends. But how do you do that? You either get your Secretary of the agencies where it is most relevant, understanding that their job is to fix this or else, or then you have one White House person who is calling these three people and monitoring it. So they have to take two calls. They have one from the DPC person saying, "What are you doing on the 11 things the President wants?" And then you get a call from this one saying, "What about the 12th thing?"

The problem with the faith-based initiative is that it was addressing federal poverty programs. So for example at HUD [Housing and Urban Development] it is elderly housing. Over half of the elderly housing in Section 202 was done by faith-based groups. So you're just necessarily in the weeds of HUD operations. How do you do that? I don't know that there is a nice clean way to do that. The Secretary of HUD wants autonomy, not interference.

I think there has to be a lot of thought about how you structure it, the personnel you put in there, what you have in place early on, discipline on messaging, boundaries that are clear. A lot of bureaucracy will have to be built immediately because the federal government is so unmanageable. One of the failures of the initiative is that it didn't ever get the government to measure results of federal programs.

The President always said, "I want to know if your program works." The information that we tried to get, but I just broke my pick on this problem, was getting them to see whether these programs worked or not. We failed to get the data. Can I go jump into—

**Nelson:** Absolutely.

**Towey:** Here's what I think the successes were. With Congress, the narrative has been it was a failure. It wasn't. He got a bunch of initiatives started that were funded each year by Congress. So these were enacted by Congress. The Compassion Capital Fund, Access to Recovery voucher program, which was a trial project in 15 states that worked well. Vouchers where people could go to faith-based programs and choose that, and that was constitutional. Mentoring of children of prisoners was started, the prisoner reentry program, all these were done through State of the Union addresses. Helping America's Youth program, too.

Obama has never mentioned his faith-based office in anything other than the National Prayer Breakfast every year. He has never had a State of the Union initiative. He is scared of his rabid secular extreme left; there is a sizable group there.

Then President Bush started Helping America's Youth. Four were started under me and one was floundering at CCF [Compassion Capital Fund]. I was very proud that we got all that moving and going forward. No controversies. The poor benefited.

The CARE Act tax incentives ended up being enacted into law. So some of the charitable giving incentives to promote giving to faith-based organizations did get enacted. The narrative that he got nothing through Congress is factually wrong.

**Nelson:** These were people who take the standard deduction?

**Towey:** People who itemized. There were tax credits that you could take. I'd have to remember what they were. Some of them were corporate. There was a whole package of tax stuff. I was fighting all the time with the Senate Finance Committee staff and the White House Economic Council and all. It's complicated to get this stuff in, but we kept pushing. We succeeded.

The CARE Act, some of the tax incentives for charitable giving did get passed, and Rick Santorum gets a big shout-out for that. Rick bird-dogged this thing. The Charitable Choice piece of TANF [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families] was reauthorized. So it is not factual to say that President Bush never got Charitable Choice passed. In fact he signed it into law in his second term, and I was there in the East Room when he did it. Part of his remarks talked about that we are now enacting Charitable Choice, but we never could get a stand-alone bill up. But those things did happen in Congress. So the narrative that you couldn't get anything done was baloney.

From an executive standpoint, all the Executive Orders speak for themselves. The expansion—they were good. From a legal standpoint we won in the Supreme Court. It wasn't on the merits as much as on standing. However, in the arguments, *Freedom from Religion Foundation v. Towey*, which changed to Hein, [Antonin] Scalia and others pointed out these White House conferences were run legit, aboveboard, all comers, no discrimination on who came, and so forth. The initiative stood up under intense scrutiny.

I felt very good that there was never a challenge, and in fact I was working with the Office of Legal Counsel and the Justice Department for legal policy and White House Counsel when Notre Dame was in a lawsuit with their ACE [Alliance for Catholic Education] program and they lost in federal district court. And so a lot of people said just stay away from the case. I was like, no way. They have the right as a faith-based group. It's a complicated legal fact pattern, but this is for the record.

We pressed Justice for us to appeal it, which we did appeal, and we won unanimously in the circuit court, a unanimous reversal. So from the legal standpoint, all this criticism, "Oh, it's unconstitutional, it's a violation of the Constitution," all the Barry Lynn ravings from Americans United for Separation of Church and State—by the way, they should have sent President Bush flowers every day for the fund-raising they did off the faith-based initiative. The fact of the matter is, that narrative, the narrative that we were funneling money to the President's

supporters, was never validated by facts. They actually stopped the narrative at the end because they couldn't show any evidence of it. Most of the evangelicals weren't interested in government money to begin with, never were. The issue is the principle. I felt that was great.

In the country, 33 Governors opened faith-based offices, hundreds of mayors, all bipartisan, all the White House conferences, all the tools we put out—all this was very successful in helping faith-based groups encounter this big massive blob called the federal government and at the state and local level, too. When they had a problem they would call our office and say, "They're telling me that we have to take our cross down in this building." That was the Janesville, Wisconsin Salvation Army story. It was nice that we had a federal agency contact to say that's false, it is a misinterpretation of what is permitted and what is not permitted. All the armchair First Amendment scholars who were telling them what was legal and what was not permitted. So I felt very good about that support we provided.

I just think the President was vindicated. He did what he could do. With the Congresses he had, with the tepid interest in compassionate conservatism that I think grew to actual frigid cold by the time he left, it was amazing what he got accomplished as a one-man band and what he did, and the encouragement he provided.

Every State of the Union he mentioned it, at least when I was there. Every Presidential budget had a new initiative in it. All the meetings, events. He really did take executive action when Congress was *stymieing* him. I just felt like there was a great record of success, and most of all the poor that were served through the program. So I want that on the record.

What were the failures in my view? I mentioned we couldn't get the bureaucracies to do the job of measuring results. That's not his fault, that's just the nature of the federal government. They still don't. They never did. So that's that.

We didn't get the statutory expansion of Charitable Choice, although we did get new regs [regulations] that we argued applied to statutes that were silent, so that was an advancement of it. I know it faced difficulties in the public square at times and in the media, but that is the mainstream media's bias. I had no illusions they were going to be fair about this initiative. On my watch I thank God there were no scandals or suggestions of wrongdoing.

If you have any follow-up questions—

**Nelson:** Were there media that you felt reported fairly on this or sympathetically on this, Christian media or conservative media?

**Towey:** The *Wall Street Journal* was fairly evenhanded. They were more disinterested. Laura Meckler when she was at AP I thought was fair.

**Perry:** Any coverage on Fox?

**Towey:** They didn't—no, there just wasn't—it was too hard to explain in sound bites. You'd go out there and do media. You'd go out on the West Wing beach and do media—it was more like Pat Robertson and the Christian media—or Joyce Meyer and the *Hour of Power*. I was on like the B circuit. Only if there was a scandal, Bush was politicizing—then you'd go out there and

you'd rebut it with the facts. You'd never get fair treatment. Conservatives didn't seem to care, and liberals hated all things Bush.

**Perry:** But the positive story would not be covered.

**Towey:** No.

**Perry:** Or it would be covered in the lower—

**Towey:** They ignored it. President Bush would talk about that. I was looking at my note of a conversation with the President once. He said, "I say something on Iraq, they'll write all day long about it, but when we do these faith-based events they won't cover it." It was true. We'd go do these incredible events; he'd have these announcements and it was as if it didn't happen. They were not going to report about it. This was the attitude. I do think the initiative was branded so badly those first six months and became a synonym for gay intolerance on employment, that they never recovered from that. As much as we salvaged, as much as we were able to achieve, there was just such a negative association with a lot of people because they did it so badly at a time when there was the big klieg light, spotlight, on the faith-based initiative and poor John. It was just too much.

**Nelson:** John DiIulio?

**Towey:** Yes.

**Perry:** It just couldn't make up for those lost six months?

**Nelson:** I was thinking too, if you think about the administration officials while Bush was in office who went out and were critical, Paul O'Neill of Treasury, Scott McClellan, other than that it was John DiIulio talking to *Esquire* and David Kuo writing that book.

**Towey:** Right.

**Nelson:** Is there something about faith-based initiatives that would make it a wellspring for people to become publicly disillusioned?

**Towey:** People were always a little wary about—they're going to Christianize government and they're going to impose mandatory religion.

**Nelson:** But these were Christians, John and David, right?

**Towey:** The critic's point was, the perception was, President Bush is coming into office. He is a crazy right-winger who was going to Christianize government. He is going to take all this federal money, push all the poor to the churches, and government is going to wash its hands. That was the narrative that the critics of it had at the beginning.

Nobody came back eight years later and said, "OK, did they close down a bunch of programs and push the poor on the church steps?" No. It didn't happen. How many grants went out to evangelicals versus to the secular nuts? There was never an effort to go back and say, "Wait a

minute, the courts upheld you, those accusations weren't true." It is because, I think, faith plays into that. It's just when Republicans talk about faith it's always to some, code talk that they're about to get into the church-lady moralizing. They say Republicans don't really care about the poor.

Here you have a Republican saying, "I care about the poor and I believe in compassionate conservatism. I think these groups can do a better job than a government agency because a government can't love." He sincerely believes that to this day and believed it as Governor and believed it as President. But many people thought this is just a ruse; Republicans don't care about the poor.

You know, Arthur Brooks is making progress now articulating a conservative vision that talks about concern for the poor and how to lift them up, but what is the way to do it in order to—and it is not through bigger government, more government programs. Well, he's not in elective office and he's providing intellectual capital to that perspective that a Republican should embrace. But how many actually embrace what Arthur is doing? How many candidates are out there running on it, talking about that? The reality is they're just not identified as "We care about the poor." Then [Willard Mitt] Romney runs and he says, "those 47 percenters" and the bad image perpetuates. The media, the minute you say it, no matter the context, they're going to take that one sentence and that just bought another three years of bad image.

It reminds me of *Midnight Express* in the judicial proceedings in Turkey when the guy was trying to get out. Good luck getting out of the mainstream media's jail.

**Nelson:** I was thinking of not a contradictory point but an additional point, and that is bringing people who are motivated by ideals, whether it is faith or something else. You put them into a political process and they're bound to be disillusioned.

**Towey:** Yes.

**Nelson:** They're more likely to become disillusioned than somebody who comes in with more realistic expectations.

[phone interruption]

**Towey:** Anything else you feel is hanging out there on your list of questions? I know I've talked forever. I certainly want to make clear that even in the dustups I had with Claude or Bridge it wasn't personal—or Karl. Karl and I are pals to this day and stay in touch. I was frustrated with him too at times, but it was never personal. I really did admire the people I worked with. It was a privilege.

One of the things that President Bush did is he brought in some incredibly talented people. Al Hubbard, Blake, Josh Bolten—these guys were just—you go down the list of the people who served there and in the Cabinet, there were just some extraordinary men and women, so that was a privilege.

**Perry:** We should end by saying it has been our privilege to interrupt your day and to listen to these stories and your comments and your insights.

**Towey:** I hope it was helpful.

**Perry:** It is very helpful, and we can assure you that your service to the country is continued through this because we see this as a continuing service, not only now but for generations to come of students and professors and scholars and journalists—maybe the journalists will get it right after they listen to this.

**Towey:** Maybe. It will be interesting to see what they write when this stuff becomes public. Who is going to plod through a three-hour transcript? Except they'll find the one sentence that they can run out with. So I'm going to have to read this carefully when it comes back.

**Perry:** We also see this as we released the Bush 41 in 2011 and the Clinton last year. We just released the Kennedy project this past week in Washington. We can watch the media stories, and the first 24-four hours will often be that. It will be the one sentence that we think is not even particularly important, but they'll focus on it for whatever reason. Then usually there are some responsible people in media, and usually within a week there will be a feature that is much more responsible. Then it is up to us, the scholars, the historians, the political scientists, and the constitutional scholars, to delve into it. That is what we love about it.

**Towey:** It is important work. It preserves it. All these stories—there are things that are private that you see that are just—as you balance it you don't want to betray people, so there are things you're not going to talk about and I wouldn't talk about. But you do leave with convictions about what you saw and heard and the privilege it was to be in a ringside seat or to be in the ring for some of it.

**Perry:** We view it as a big puzzle and a big portrait, and this is a big piece that goes to flesh out that puzzle. Historian colleagues will say, "I just read documents." We say that is a piece too, but we think that this has a contribution as well.

**Towey:** Will I ever be able to read what my colleagues wrote?

**Nelson:** Oh, yes, when the event occurs—and I hope it is in a couple of years, certainly no more than three. When these are released they'll all be posted instantly, the full transcripts.

**Perry:** With whatever stipulation. Anybody who has cleared a transcript with whatever stipulations he or she wishes.

**Nelson:** They'll be posted on the Miller Center website.

**Perry:** As well as the Bush 43 library website.

**Towey:** Good, that was the thing. We've only had reunions—I couldn't be there for the portrait unveiling and I didn't even want to go in the Obama White House then; it was just bad karma for me. I just didn't like how he treated the transition with the President and how he handled some things on the religious liberty front. He has been a nightmare from my view. So I missed that one. Then the library dedication, I was out there. When we get together then you want to ask what was going on then. I can track down Blake. Blake had a fascinating job. Blake was in the center of it. He knew so much.

**Perry:** That's why we love these rollout conferences, because it does offer another reunion opportunity. When we do these commemorative books usually in consultation with the foundation, we noticed for 41 that we had the alums come back to the Miller Center and they were standing with their commemorative books like students when the yearbook comes out. "Oh, look, here is the picture of me, in 19—such-and-such. Here is the picture of you. Look, here is the quote."

**Towey:** The speech that you put in there—you had Bush doing his Mother Teresa riff and his Towey with all his kids. He loved to do that stuff.

**Perry:** I would say, wouldn't you, that that is a representative speech for this topic, but also I thought his personality really came out. When you did these conferences, you liked the President in part because he was the same behind the curtain as in front of the curtain. I was going to ask, though, given that this speech seemed so loose and so successful—given the transcript—but we didn't always see that coming through on television with press conferences or a set speech. I was going to ask you why you thought that was?

**Towey:** He was comfortable in that room. The President had a great radar of whether people liked him or not. He could tell it at a roundtable. He would sometimes ask me about a Cardinal and I'd answer. He knew people always criticize him about his gut, and I'm living proof. He hired me after a brief meeting, right? But you don't get to where he got without having an incredible perspicacity, and he just measured—he could feel in a room whether he was liked or not.

He would get defensive if it was hostile. He has got a sensitive side to him. He'll fight if he's attacked and so forth, but it's just—I think that he was always comfortable at faith-based events because that fed one of the reasons why he ran. I think he felt good that we were doing something with it. He didn't want it to founder. And he now has a record of success.

The Presidency changed after September 11. His Presidency changed and I wasn't there for the before. But I was there when his approval ratings were at 79 percent, when it was just unhealthy for any President to have that kind of approval rating, and then I watched them go down. They went lower after I left. He got reelected. Then Katrina happened. Then there was just a wilding that took place on his reputation, that people just savagely used that to try to weaken him in his second term.

I think it was purposeful. I think it was shameless that they grabbed that Katrina as a way to weaken him so that he could not have success in the second term. God knows the truth.

**Perry:** It certainly diminished the political capital that he talked about at the end of the reelection in 2004. We know you have an appointment. Thank you.

**Towey:** God bless you. I'm sorry we couldn't go longer, but it seems like we hit it.

**Perry:** I think this was perfect.