WILLIAM J. CLINTON PRESIDENTIAL HISTORY PROJECT

FINAL EDITED TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH EDWARD WIDMER

December 3, 2007
Boston, Massachusetts

Participants

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Russell Riley: This is the Edward Widmer interview as a part of the Clinton Presidential History Project. Thanks for letting us come to Boston.

Edward Widmer: My pleasure. Thank you for coming.

Riley: We're in the Honey Fitz [John F. Fitzgerald] Suite at the Parker House Hotel in Boston doing the interview. For the record, we just talked about the confidential nature of the proceedings. I want to repeat for the transcript that this is confidential until you sign off on it. As an aid to the transcriber we usually go around and say a word or two so she'll know who we are.

I'm Russell Riley. I'm heading up the Clinton project.

Bob Strong: I'm Bob Strong from Washington and Lee University.

Widmer: Ted Widmer, now Director of John Carter Brown Library, but I was speechwriter and other things in the Clinton administration.

Riley: You were given a copy of the briefing book.

Widmer: It was very impressive.

Riley: But you did have one criticism of it, which is that we missed your illustrious rock-and-roll career.

Widmer: That's true. That was a joke I sent in an email but it's true. I don't know if I was relieved or disappointed, but it certainly got attention after I came to work for Bill Clinton.

Riley: How was that?

Widmer: I was in a number of rock bands that were in some cases outrageous, and in some cases hilarious, and in other cases just kind of pathetic. I was also trying to be a serious historian and writer and I was hired to be a speechwriter. The word trickled out to the media that I had had a previous existence in rock bands and a number of newspapers including the *Washington Post* wrote generally very funny articles, sometimes a little bit hostile, but mostly funny articles about my alter-ego as a rock-and-roll singer.

Riley: You were a singer? A lead singer?

Widmer: I was a guitarist and occasional singer. I wouldn't say a lead singer, exactly, but I was one of two singers in the band.

Riley: So, just one band that you were in, or a series of bands?

Widmer: I was in a series, but one was more popular than all the others. It was becoming especially popular around the time I was hired, so it was a funny time in my life where I was ending one project, and I was ending it even before I got the speechwriting job, but the media is often very slow to understand these things. They thought I was still in the band when I wasn't, so there was a series of funny articles.

Riley: This was sort of a Paul Revere and the Raiders act?

Widmer: That's exactly right. There was some historical reenactment going on, with old costumes from the 18th century. It was all extremely tongue-in-cheek, but if an energetic reporter wanted to depict it as a kind of off-color thing, it was possible to do that. Mainly it was just a fun, creative project when I lived here in Boston.

Riley: So you didn't intend to become a part of the long tradition of Boston rock-and-roll?

Widmer: I would say that I absolutely did when it started. I thought this band might become a significant band. There were some very talented people in it. But it ran its course. It was winding down when I needed to leave. I mainly needed to leave because my wife and I had a baby. I couldn't be in a rock band anymore, so it was the end for me personally. I didn't know I was about to be hired to be a Clinton speechwriter, but I was, and then people began to connect the dots. There was a briefly titillating news story at the beginning of 1998 or end of 1997.

Strong: Did Bill Clinton read those stories and comment to you?

Widmer: I don't know. He never commented, although certainly other people in the White House did. It was widely known. These were stories in the *Washington Post* and—not the *New York Times,* but the tabloids in New York had it. This was a band that was more than just a little local band. It was a band that was threatening to become a big American rock band. It didn't quite do it, but no one quite knew at that moment.

Riley: Do you know why it didn't?

Widmer: No, one never knows. Bands become famous for the merest reason and then they don't make it for the merest reason. I don't know. I do know that I had left before I came to be a speechwriter but that was a little unclear as the media developed the story.

Riley: All right. I'm only following up on that because I was provoked in your email.

Widmer: It is a funny story. It's especially funny ten years later. At the time it was a little strange.

Riley: I'm sure.

Widmer: The whole experience of leaving academic life to become a speechwriter was strange to begin with, but then with this other wrinkle added in it was even stranger. But I survived.

Strong: How, in fact, were you recruited for this job if you had this unlikely background?

Widmer: I did have a very unlikely background. I had not ever worked for a political campaign. I had voted for Bill Clinton but I had no personal relationship with him or anyone in his administration, with one exception. I had met a young speechwriter named David Shipley at the wedding of a friend who was a writer. Shipley had been a writer and I was becoming a writer. I was a grad student, but I was somewhat unusual in that I was writing history articles for mainstream media—magazines, mainly, and *George* magazine in particular. I was almost 100 percent an academic product, but I did have this unusual interest in writing for the public.

Separately from that I went to the wedding of a friend who was a comedy writer. I had been on the Harvard *Lampoon*, the humor magazine, as an undergraduate, and have a lot of writer friends from that. At this wedding I met David Shipley who was not quite yet, but would become, a Clinton speechwriter. He and I hit it off and he recruited me a few years after the wedding. The wedding was of a friend who wrote for *The Simpsons* TV show, so I always said my path to the Clintons went through *The Simpsons*, and it's true.

It was a number of accidents, but it was people who loved writing, connected to each other. Shipley called me in the summer of 1997. A number of people were leaving speechwriting at that moment. President Clinton had just won reelection and started his second term. A number of people had been in the trenches with him from the beginning and were ready to try something new. Eight years is a very long time. We often forget how long it is. European Presidents often serve for six years. We've now had two Presidents in a row with two terms. It really is a long time.

So I was coming at this moment of new direction for the White House. It turned out to be more exciting than I ever expected. But I did not know that at first. There was a bit of a feeling of drift in the Presidency during the transition between the first term and the second . Maybe not exactly drift, but the media had had a field day with a number of stories in the first term, and then it felt like the stories were getting smaller in 1996 and 1997. The President won reelection, but it felt like the news was slowing down. Younger staffers were leaving and new people were coming in and no one could have predicted how much excitement there would be in the second term. It was really a remarkable time. In retrospect, I feel that I came at a very good moment for history and for personal experience and all these things that I'd hoped to observe and participate in, but no one really knew. It was possible that it was going to be a dull, [Dwight] Eisenhower-like second term. It was anything but that.

I was an academic who had received a PhD but not quite settled on an academic career. Among other problems, I was interested in very different periods of American history, which is excellent for a speechwriter but it's not so great when you're trying to get a tenure-track job. I was excited by my magazine work, which was growing in quantity and frequency. So when this job offer came in, it was exciting and I felt I had to do it. It did disrupt my life quite a lot; I was very settled here in Boston, but I did it and I'm glad that I did.

Riley: The appointment that you had at Harvard was a term appointment, or were you on fellowship?

Widmer: I was very involved with a single program called History and Literature, which is unlike the rest of Harvard. I don't know if anyone is interested in this, but Harvard is mainly run by departments and they are usually run by senior professors. Grad students have no power of any kind. This one exceptional program studies history and literature together and also studies a number of different national traditions together, so you can study England and the United States at the same time. It is far more free-form and creative than most of the Harvard programs. It's largely run by grad students, not professors.

I had a position that was quite senior within this program. I was one of the top administrators for a number of years, so I was very involved in the lives of young Harvard students, including many of the best students of American history at Harvard, but I had a very shaky foundation in that I wasn't a professor; I was called a lecturer. And all of these positions have about a three- or four-year limit on them. They're incredibly intense and rewarding, but they're fleeting also.

I had one year left when the job offer came in. It was a bit of a hard decision because I loved Harvard, but I knew that after one more year I'd have to find something to do and this just seemed exciting. It seemed very different. I was worried I'd never be able to come back into the academic world, which I wanted to do, but I still thought it was worth doing. I didn't think I would get too many offers like that in my life, so I did it.

Strong: At the point of being hired, was there already understanding that you were going to work on foreign policy speeches?

Widmer: Yes and no. There were several offers that came in over the summer of 1997. I had met David Shipley, and he and I hit it off. He was a *New Republic* writer when I met him but then he became a Clinton speechwriter, one of Clinton's best speechwriters, in the middle years of the 1990s. He is now the editor of the op-ed page at the *New York Times.* He had seen my stuff in print in *George* magazine, and I think he felt that it would be nice to have another writer—some of the speechwriters came out of campaigns or legal work, or had been floating around the Hill. I think David Shipley felt another journalist would be desirable in speechwriting. All the speechwriters were good writers, but not all had worked for magazines or newspapers.

I was especially unusual with my academic background. No one else had an academic background. In the pretty large number of speechwriters who came through the Clinton White House, I believe I was the only academic over the entire eight years. I think that Shipley had the sense that I was kind of a new voice that would offer something a little different. We all know that history is relevant to political speechwriting; but, in fact, academics don't usually make very good speechwriters. The fact that I'd done this journalism raised my profile a little bit with the powers that be.

The first job he called me about was writing for Hillary Clinton—to be her speechwriter. At the time, she had only one or two so it would have been a very important job in her world, working closely with her. I didn't know if I wanted the job or not, but I thought I should throw my hat in the ring. I was a finalist for the position but didn't get it. I had many interviews. To be honest, I

was quite surprised that I was a finalist, because I had never written a speech in my life. But I had become pretty versatile and pretty fast, and a lot of this is about speed of writing, not quality.

Riley: Did they ask you to submit a sample?

Widmer: Yes, a sample speech, at least one, maybe several. I was one of a number of candidates and then I was a finalist. At each stage I had to submit a speech and come down for an interview. I did not get that job and I was somewhat disappointed that I didn't. It all surprised me. It surprised me I was a candidate, it surprised me I was a finalist, and then it surprised me that I was disappointed.

Strong: Were you interviewed by Hillary?

Widmer: No, by her Chief of Communications, a woman named [Alison] Lissa Muscatine, whom I did not see much later. She left not long after that. Another month went by. I thought that was my one chance and it hadn't happened. I was happy at Harvard so I didn't think about it too much.

Then a new position became available. It was called Director of Speechwriting at the National Security Council. In fact, it wasn't the director of anything; it was one of three speechwriters working for someone who was a senior director. That was the position I ultimately got. I think the fact that I'd just come through a search process helped me, and I was very fast on the turnaround. I was given a couple of assignments and I did them both the day after—I had a week, and I did them in one day.

Riley: Were you writing for the National Security Advisor? Is that the voice, or was it the President?

Widmer: It was both, but it was overwhelmingly the President.

Riley: I'm talking about in the trial period.

Widmer: That was for the President only. That was a point of confusion throughout my time there, not for me, but for people I talked to. They thought I only worked for people in the NSC [National Security Council], or for [Samuel] Sandy Berger. In fact, I was as much of a speechwriter for Bill Clinton as any of his domestic speechwriters, but we were enveloped in the mechanisms of the National Security Council. We were trained to be quieter about our work than the domestic speechwriters, for a number of reasons, including our titles and our privacy, which was somewhat by nature but also by requirement because we were working with more confidential information than domestic speechwriters. We were much further from the public eye than the domestic speechwriters were.

Strong: Were you housed in a separate location?

Widmer: Yes, we were on the third floor of the OEOB [Old Executive Office Building], whereas the domestic were on the first floor, so we were only two stairwells—you could be there in two minutes, but it was quite different. It was offices with locks on them. We had to take our hard drives out of our computers at the end of the day and lock them in a safe. It is arguable that

anything a President is about to say is secret before it is said, but there was a feeling that what we were doing was far more confidential. In fact, we did have higher security ratings. I didn't know that until later. I would have bragged about it much more had I known, but in fact, we did have higher security clearance than the domestic writers.

Riley: I want to probe on all of this, but I caused you to jump out of your narrative and I want to get back.

Widmer: Feel free to interrupt. As an academic I can go off on a tangent pretty easily.

Riley: I want to make sure we have the full story of the search process. I asked you about whether your sample speeches were supposed to be in the voice of the National Security Advisor.

Widmer: No, they were all Presidential only. I remember the topic. It was a sample toast from the President of the United States to the President of Guatemala, which was fascinating and funny and challenging. I did laugh a little at this random-feeling assignment. I was used to pretty focused, journalistic assignments. This just seemed utterly random, but as I did it I felt that it did work to my strengths.

I found this throughout my time as a speechwriter, that what felt to me sort of funny and odd—that I was becoming a speechwriter for the President of the United States—actually drew on talents that I didn't know I had, specifically research. As academics we all are trained in research more than we know we are. We can go into a library and find something pretty quickly. This was preinternet. I was on the cusp of the internet. It was available in theory, but it was nothing like what it became. You wouldn't think to do serious research on the internet in 1997. Being comfortable and very fast in a library was a really good thing that I had over other speechwriters.

I remember specifically the day I got the assignment—Sandy Berger was running the speech, but a guy who was the head speechwriter of the foreign policy office, Tony Blinken, was giving me the assignment. I felt some pressure because my wife wanted to go on vacation the next day. Presidents can inflict heavy pressure on speechwriters, but wives can also. I thought, *I have seven days. I'd really like to do this in 24 hours and go on my vacation and see what happens*. I didn't want to be too nervous about this. It was the White House calling, but I'd just come through a search and I didn't want it to dominate my every waking minute.

I worked very hard for an afternoon and an evening. I was very efficient at navigating the Harvard library system, which is a huge, complicated library, but I'd been in it for almost 15 years as an undergrad and grad student so I knew exactly where everything was.

Riley: And you grew up in an academic family.

Widmer: I grew up in an academic family, and that is relevant if you want to know about it.

Riley: Sure.

Widmer: My parents are both foreign specialist academics who worked on China, mainly. My dad worked on China and Russia and their relationship, and my mom worked on China and

Japan. He was much more of a historian. She is more of a literary scholar. In both cases I got something from them that helped a lot with speechwriting, and with NSC speechwriting, specifically. You really needed an appreciation of foreign cultures.

That became my job in a nutshell: to learn, in a pretty fast time, what was special in a foreign country's vast history and literature and what would work well in an American President's speech to the people of that country. It's the kind of message that doesn't get a lot of attention in the U.S., except for very momentary summary by someone writing for the *New York Times.* "His speech went over well." It's like, one paragraph. But these speeches are dissected long after the event in foreign countries.

I worked hard at getting right the history of every country that he visited. As a historian it was a great job. I feel like I learned about 40 countries' histories. Yes, it was kind of shallow learning but it was still satisfying. To see the satisfaction of the audiences when he would mention an obscure event in a country's history was really a great reward.

Strong: Who made the decision to hire you and who was reviewing these drafts you were sending to Washington?

Widmer: Sandy was the boss of everything in the world that I was in. Bill Clinton was always the top boss but Sandy was the person I worked most closely with and whose approval meant the most. There was always a group of three or four of us in the trenches in foreign policy speechwriting. It was three for some time and then it was four. One of those was the boss of the office, but we were all about the same age and we were about equal. Once a speech was finished in our process among the three of us, it would go to Sandy Berger for a quite intense review. He's a former speechwriter, so he knows what he's doing.

So when you say "boss," I would say Sandy Berger was really the boss of the office I was in, but it was understood by everyone who worked in the White House that Bill Clinton was the ultimate boss. Sandy was the one who approved my hire.

I turned around this very fast speech, a toast to the President of Guatemala, in July or August of 1997. I threw in a lot of historical material and some humor. I probably surprised people by trying a few jokes. That is what speechwriting is: it's a very complicated form of writing where some lightness is valued; and some melodrama, not shallow melodrama, but an ability to connect emotionally with a foreign audience; and some good information about what should be known about two countries' histories; and also maybe what isn't known and should be. So, the ability to pull a relatively unknown fact out of either country's history—an American who went to Guatemala and loved it, or a Guatemalan who lived in the United States—could pay great dividends. Foreign audiences throughout the Presidency of Bill Clinton really appreciated his genuine curiosity about how they lived their lives. And it was genuine. I think he liked the arcana that I would often supply in a speech, because he is a passionate reader of history. He cares a lot about it.

In this early draft I threw too much in there. But I did it in one day. I think that the speed with which I delivered it impressed people so they called and offered the job. I still was sort of amused by this and not sure whether it was the right path for me, and worried it would take me

off my academic path that I'd been on for a long time at that point—I'd received my PhD—but I just couldn't say no. It seemed so exciting. As a kid I was a politics buff. I had not had meaningful experience as an adult, but in my grade school years and in high school years I had followed Presidential elections and read the news a lot. I had always liked Washington D.C. so I was thrilled to try this extremely new thing.

But I will say it was awkward. There were areas of deep interest in my background, but there were also areas of awkwardness, in that I had developed a rather profound bohemian identity as a singer in rock-and-roll bands, and as someone who loved this almost 24-hour-a-day intellectual life around Harvard Square, where I was friendly with many people, young and old, who were working on problems of American history. We were staying in cafés or pubs late at night. It was a wonderful, idyllic, intellectual experience. It possibly would never have led to a normal academic job. I was enjoying the pleasures of academic life more, perhaps, than I was thinking about the obligations of forming a normal career.

I now think in retrospect that the Clinton experience helped propel me back into academic life. I'm not sure what I would have become had I not done this. Ironically, nonacademic life might have helped me get an academic career. It was a strange time and I didn't know what the future held. As I said, it felt very sleepy inside the Clinton administration. It was certainly more exciting than the world of 19th century U.S. history that I was in, but it was not at all the centrifuge of political activity it would become in 1998.

In '97 when I got there, he was a somewhat weak President. Yes, he had been reelected quite easily over Bob Dole, but he was having problems getting any kind of agenda through Congress. There was a mostly hostile, right-wing Congress led by Newt Gingrich. They had been through the shutdown of the government but they hadn't quite worked out the tensions afterward. The Dick Morris episode had happened, which was embarrassing to all concerned. There were little problems, like Bill Weld, the former Governor of Massachusetts who had been nominated to be Ambassador to Mexico and that nomination failed because Jesse Helms didn't want it to succeed. That said a lot about the state of play in the summer of 1997, that Jesse Helms could just shut down a major Ambassadorial appointment, and the White House was more or less powerless to stop that.

There were little things that no one remembers anymore. He was trying to get fast-track legislation passed that would give him more power to make trade deals with South America. That was dead in the water. Congress just killed it. He was having trouble developing a major agenda for the second term. I was too naïve to know any of that at the time. I really was very naïve about hardball politics. I was someone whose head was in the 18th and 19th centuries, but I grew educated quickly.

Strong: There's some hardball politics in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Widmer: That's true, but I wasn't even sure who were the Republicans and who were the Democrats. I knew I was a Democrat at some level. I was naïve in a way that had some advantages as well as disadvantages. I had a deep respect for the Republican tradition in Presidential politics as well as the Democratic one. I always was a huge [Abraham] Lincoln buff. Bill Clinton loves Lincoln and he loves [Theodore] Teddy Roosevelt; they're two of his favorite

Presidents. That was a strength of mine, that I wasn't too caught up in who was working for what party. Then everything changed very quickly in 1998, where the scandals and the crises had the interesting effect perhaps of strengthening his power in ways that I don't think anyone expected.

Riley: How did your wife feel about the decision to go to Washington?

Widmer: She was supportive at the time, but I think she found it very hard over those years, which turned into almost four years. I was there a long time. Almost everyone who was there when I came in was not there at the end, so I had become one of the senior speechwriters by the last day of the Presidency. It was hard on her and me and our child, a two-year-old when I took the job and almost a six-year-old when I left. It's hard for anyone with a young family. You work unbelievable hours and you never quite belong to your family because you have a beeper or a telephone that is nearby. It's like an umbilical cord to the White House. You can get called at 2:00 in the morning, 5:00 in the morning, anytime, day or night.

It was a great feeling of emancipation when it was all over, but I was proud of my loyalty. I was there through thick and thin. We had horrible days and great days. I later felt that it was all pretty fortunate how it turned out. I was under-trained to be a foreign policy speechwriter in many ways. I mean, I did have two parents who instilled in me a deep respect for foreign cultures. I didn't realize that was a strength until I was doing the job. You don't always know what your strengths and weaknesses are. But I hadn't ever taken a course in the history of U.S. foreign policy. I was fuzzy on many things that everyone knew well, like the history of the Cold War. It was a learning experience, to put it mildly.

I felt more like a domestic person than a foreign policy person when I came in, but the action really was in foreign policy. It's where his interest was, too, to a degree. If I don't say anything else in this interview, I want people to know that he was passionate about foreign policy and deeply learned and knew where he was going. Sandy Berger was a very skilled accomplice in all of that. But the perception lingered in the air, partly through media ignorance and partly through perceptions formed in the '92 campaign, that this was a guy who loved domestic policy and wasn't that good at foreign policy. In fact, his passion was foreign policy. That's probably the single point I most want to make.

It was a very satisfactory kind of speechwriting to work on because he loved it. Sandy Berger was a really good boss, a really smart boss—a hard boss, but a good boss. Maybe the best thing is that it's eternally new. A health care speech can be kind of the same speech over and over again. Foreign policy is always changing. You're always going to new countries. If things are good in the relationship, it's fun. You go to a country and everyone loves you. If things are bad it's exciting and dangerous and it's still challenging for a writer. So it was intellectually a very stimulating part of speechwriting to be in.

Strong: I have a series of questions I want to ask about process: about how things worked, about when the President started to see drafts on a project you were working on, et cetera. Maybe you have a better idea than I do about how to take us through that. Among other things, how are assignments divided up in the office? How many drafts would there be before things went to the President? Did you get prior information from the President, like "This is what I want you to do in the creation of this speech"—that kind of information?

Widmer: There was a normal process and then there were abnormal situations where we got very far from the process. The normal process was to look at his schedule of speeches over the next month or two. Our office did all speeches that touched on U.S. foreign policy and also U.S. military policy, which is quite a lot. There were three of us for a lot of my time there and four of us for some of it. Domestic had five or six, usually, and probably about the same number of speeches—maybe slightly higher. We had a higher ratio of speeches per writer, so we were a pretty tightly knit little group.

We would have casual office meetings where the head of our group of speechwriters would show us a list of what was coming up over the next month. We would talk about it in a friendly way. We were all about the same age. We would pick ones we wanted, and argue why we did or didn't want a certain speech, but end up with the same number over the next week ahead or the next month ahead.

When he was in the U.S., there were one or two—I don't want to get into hard numbers, because it really did change a lot, but there was a certain rhythm when he was in the U.S. doing politics, working with Congress, trying to advance his legislation. Things were a little quieter for us. Even so, he was always meeting with either heads of state in the U.S., or Joint Chiefs, or the Secretary of Defense, or the Secretary of State. We'd have to have various kinds of materials ready for him. We'd also write things that he would never give as a speech. There were things like op-eds that he might be placing. There was a fairly constant kind of literary activity relating to Bill Clinton's foreign policy, which could be an insert of one paragraph into a domestic speech—that assignment would come to our office. We'd prepare the one paragraph, which would be e-mailed or walked over to the domestic speechwriters and dropped into their speech.

Or there could be remarks at the beginning of a press conference where he would say, "I'd like now to talk about what's happening in Bosnia this week." That would come to our office. We always had to be paying very close attention to all global events, which was difficult but satisfying. I'd get up very early every day and read a number of newspapers and turn right to the foreign policy page, which is what I still do. It's now an ingrained habit.

We also got special summaries of the news that the U.S. government would prepare through the embassies and, I think, through CIA. There were times when it really ramped up significantly and whenever he was going on a foreign trip, which he did a lot in the second term. That's something I should talk about for all of you, too, because they were such important episodes, to him and to everyone who went on them. He turned globetrotting into a signature feature of his Presidency that is perhaps a little underappreciated. He really turned the foreign trip into a kind of art form and a political form. He would advance his agenda through his travels.

When those trips would happen, we basically would turn into commandos. Every day would have four, five, six speeches, and we'd all have to be responsible for a lot of them. In addition to writing our own speeches, we would edit everyone else's in our office, so we all felt responsibility for every single word that was sent to him. As far as the process, with a trip coming up I'd have a heavier number of speeches than usual.

Also, whenever a catastrophe happened relating to a foreign country, that was another moment when it didn't matter how well-prepared we were; we'd have to have something ready within an

hour or two of it happening—like a foreign leader being assassinated or a foreign crisis of some kind, an airplane crash, or whatever—we'd quickly need a paragraph or two ready to be sent over, first to Sandy Berger and then to the President's office, for him to have ready to use, either to go out and speak just on that topic, or to insert into something else he was saying later that day on a different topic. We had to be pretty quick in those situations.

I keep coming back to what our ordinary routine was. With foreign trips that's where we really got busy and wrote extensive drafts. We'd have our assignments and each one would be numerous drafts, probably one or two just within our little office of three speechwriters, until we were all satisfied with it. We would check each other's for avoiding repetition, making sure every sentence was strong and emphatic, making sure there was a beginning, middle, and end to a speech—all the things that editors look at in any form of writing—and trying to kill clichés. It's a tough art form, because it depends somewhat on clichés. A good speech can have a lot of clichés. People like to hear clichés more than they like to read them. It can sound great to say, "We're going to build a world that's safe for democracy." People might not know Woodrow Wilson, but at the same time you don't want to repeat every cliché over and over again.

We would try to discipline our own tendency to use the same adjectives and nouns about democracy and freedom and liberty. There are only so many buzzwords that exist in the arsenal of speechwriting. I think we were very good at trying to make every speech a little bit fresh, a little bit new, and to give him a product that would challenge him a little bit to say what it was he really wanted to say. I think it was Sandy Berger who once said to me that our job was to build as high a platform as we could for him to then soar off of, that he was the ultimate person up there, but the higher we could build the platform for him, the better he would do. I thought that was a good metaphor.

Strong: Did he do more soaring than diving?

Widmer: You can see how important word choice is. Yes, he did. I would say there were three stages. There was the little pack of speechwriters who were all about 30 years old—two ex-lawyers and an ex-academic—for most of my time there. We would get something *we* liked, then would forward it to Sandy Berger. Sandy would give it a very close reading, extremely close. He was the hardest judge of all. He would put on these sound-blocking headphones and get out a black pen. For him it was a really important part—he's the National Security Advisor and something can be going haywire in another part of the world and he doesn't want to be interrupted.

He's got his headphones on and he's reading the President's speech in the next day or two. He would make excellent suggestions, very focused, word-by-word suggestions. He had been a speechwriter, both for Edmund Muskie when he was Secretary of State, and for John Lindsay when he was Mayor of New York—a Republican. I'm not sure about Lindsay, but I am sure he was Muskie's speechwriter. So he really knew the score. And he also knew U.S. foreign policy better than anyone, except perhaps Madeleine Albright. He was right there on the front lines. No nuance could get through if it wasn't just right. The adjective choice had to be just right for how friendly, in fact, we felt from this country.

Once Sandy had sighed off on it, we would put his changes into our draft. Then it was allowed to go forward. We were working on computers, and that's an interesting fact. I don't think we were aware of its historic significance, but it obviously was the first time that computers were widely available in a White House. It did make a certain kind of difference. We would enter the last changes from Sandy, print it—and there was a special way we had to print it to give to President Clinton. Then we would bring it to his personal aide in a hard copy, multiple copies, but also email it to various places around the White House so that everybody would have access to it on email.

Riley: The special way you printed it for President Clinton, was that using large font?

Widmer: Large font typed on heavy bond paper, unusually heavy paper that would not blow around in the wind. It was 8-1/2 by 11 but it was like a piece of manila paper with this large font that would get about two paragraphs on a page, so that he could hold it up there. That would help him to see it more easily from the height he was looking down. Also, it would allow him to write more easily in the margins, which he would do.

The second phase is Sandy Berger, and in the third phase it goes to Bill Clinton, usually the night before a speech. Then he would do his magic with it. We were not generally privy to that process. What happened overwhelmingly in my almost four years there was that I would never see it again after handing it off to his aide. I would hear the speech and I would recognize what I had written, and would also be able to tell that a substantial part of it was what he had worked out either the night before, or he was improvising on the spot, which he did a fair amount.

It would vary from speech to speech, but roughly a third of every speech was him either improvising on the spot or reading a couple of notes that he had written in the margins in his handwriting the night before. They weren't just a couple of notes to jar his thinking. He was extremely versatile at thinking on his feet, I mean, to a remarkable degree, probably more than any President since—and I'm not sure whom to say. LBJ [Lyndon B. Johnson] was probably fairly versatile; [John F.] Kennedy, perhaps. I doubt [Ronald] Reagan was. I doubt [Richard] Nixon was. Jimmy Carter probably was.

Anyway, it's an interesting fact for people who will be studying the history of the Presidency that Bill Clinton did not need every word scripted, which is now unusual. He liked improvisation. He's an old jazz musician and he's comfortable in his own skin. He would often soar—to go back to that word—in the middle of a speech. He would usually read from what we had prepared in the beginning. There was a minute or two where he's thanking all the dignitaries, and getting through some of the business of the speech, like the three points that he felt he had to make, or we felt he should make. Then he'd just look up. You could see his body language changing and his hands moving around more.

He'd talk about why this country ought to embrace democratic forums and what it will do for them and how it will enrich them and help them join the community of nations and be good for everyone around the world. He really would get rhapsodic at that moment. It was fun. I would listen and try to incorporate some of that language in my next draft. I felt that to be a good speechwriter I should pay very close attention to what he had rejected and what he was bringing

into each new version. I was almost like a personal secretary following him around, listening to every single speech, and then trying to put that language in the next one.

Strong: Over time, did you get closer to his preferences? Were there fewer replacements toward the end?

Widmer: Absolutely, yes. My first six months I was pretty green and I depended a lot on my fellow speechwriters and Sandy to clean up my run-on sentences or my excessive history quotations or whatever I was doing. After about six months I found my rhythm. I had a few successes. That's all it took. It took a few successes to feel confident. Then I could argue back against the other speechwriters. Then some of them started to leave, so I was suddenly, after only a year, one of the senior speechwriters.

I just had gotten it. I had read more deeply in his earlier speeches, also, before I had come there, so, between reading his older speeches and reading everything that he said every day that I was there—and also I had grown very interested in the history of speechwriting, which I had not really studied as a grad student. Now that I was there, I was reading a lot of Lincoln, a lot of FDR [Franklin D. Roosevelt], Teddy Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, but probably Lincoln and FDR more than anyone else. I was becoming well versed in the history of this pretty deep American art form. That gave me confidence, so my speeches were sailing through more quickly.

Riley: When you went through this original review of Clinton's speeches to get yourself up to speed, do you recall any specific conclusions or surprises at what you were encountering?

Widmer: In his speeches?

Riley: In his speeches. Trying to get a sense about your self-education as you're going along, what is it that you're finding?

Widmer: I found early that he was not at all the simple liberal that my Cambridge friends thought. Bill Clinton was not terribly popular in liberal circles, which would surprise conservatives. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I was coming from—you might have to visit Moscow in the 1920s to find a place further to the left—Bill Clinton was looked down upon—not by me; I was a pretty comfortable centrist Democrat always—but by people who were very angry over his welfare policies, or who thought "Don't ask, don't tell" didn't go far enough to defend gays, or who just thought all of his liberalism was half-baked. It's funny because Republicans thought he had horns and carried a pitchfork and had a tail because he was so liberal. It shows how distended the American electorate was, and probably still is.

As I read the speeches I saw a lot on fiscal responsibility and on doing what is possible. He's very pragmatic. Not inflicting American force on other countries but leading by persuasion, which I grew to be persuaded is the best way for an American President to lead—to be charismatic and to be deeply interested in another country, which doesn't always happen, but ultimately to be leading by persuasion rather than force.

I felt that I was discovering a very interesting middle road that he was on. That was definitely part of his strategy. He was trying to build on the fascinating events of the end of the Cold War

that had been mostly under George H. W. Bush, but a little under Bill Clinton too. The working out of Russia policy was definitely under Bill Clinton, and the completion of the unification of Europe. Pretty big Cold War things were still happening under Bill Clinton. He was being careful and pragmatic in a way that I think he got from FDR and Teddy Roosevelt. This was not a wild-eyed liberal, by any stretch of the imagination.

Riley: Are you finding anything stylistically as you're going through, either noteworthy or surprising about his particular voice?

Widmer: I remember learning, from reading a lot of speeches, that three examples of something is about the right number. Five is too many, and two doesn't quite sound persuasive, so the magical number three, whether you're Republican or Democrat, just sounds kind of good.

In my early years I thought alliteration sounded good. It's sort of speechwriting 101 that if you can begin a number of words with the same letter, you think it sounds better. Over time I began to reject that. I thought it didn't matter at all, and that alliteration was, in fact, stupid. It was like a cliché, and I really fought against my own and everyone's tendencies to clichés. I became a passionate advocate of the genuine new thought, as opposed to the elaborate, stage-managed cliché with five words beginning with the same letter, which you see in just about every politician's—I mean, they can't help themselves; they all have to do it.

I was interested in George Orwell's writing about political language and I wanted to fight to make these speeches have meaning. I think Bill Clinton appreciated that. I think he liked being perpetually challenged by new language. He's the smartest user of political language on earth, so he could revert to something he was comfortable in if he didn't like the formulation you gave him. But if he thought it was challenging he would often use it.

One answer to your question that I felt proud of—I'm not sure of my degree of responsibility, but I do feel somewhat involved in something that happened over his last four years, which was that some of the language of the civil rights movement, which we all know was very meaningful to him, began to be used in his foreign policy remarks. I thought that was a step forward. It was partly the idea that we all need to stick together, that we're all one society, including one global society. But also, the fact that you could point to the U.S. military, which most liberals and Democrats do not feel comfortable pointing to very often, as a really extraordinary example of integration success in its own right. There are few entities on the planet that are as well-integrated racially as the U.S. military.

He started talking about that a lot at the time of Kosovo, saying, "We are not an invading army. This is who we are. Our army is an example to the world of how your society can perform better." It was actually a pretty new thought that armies are not enforcing change through weapons and mayhem but through their example as citizens and their own self-restraint. Certainly, they're using their power, but their self-restraint is pretty impressive too.

Strong: I want to come back and ask a few more process questions. There were three or four of you in the office. How many of you went with him on the foreign trips, and which trips in particular did *you* make?

Widmer: I would say that each of us would go on two out of three trips, meaning one of us would miss every third speech. I'm working on the assumption that there were three of us, but sometimes there were four of us. Usually, two out of the three would go. That would leave one person who was on for every speech and another person who was working on the next speech to come. Once in a while on a very big trip, maybe three would go, but usually it was two working speechwriters plus Sandy, who was another speechwriter, plus Bill Clinton, who was another speechwriter.

The ones I went on were to Africa in the spring of '98, China in June of '98, Ireland and Russia in August–September of '98. I'm probably missing one or two.

Riley: The briefing book covers it.

Widmer: Yes, the briefing book was very good. There were a couple to Central America that I went on. It was interesting—Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras. Another extraordinary one to Turkey and southeastern Europe in the fall of '99. A second one to Ireland and England at the end of his Presidency. I was no longer technically his speechwriter but I think I came to do some interviews like the one you're doing, last-minute interviews for the Clinton Library.

I went on a second trip to Africa; I think that was in 2000 also. But the ones I remember most clearly are the first Africa trip, which was remarkable; the China trip; the Ireland-Russia trip, which was also remarkable; and the Turkey, southeastern Europe trip. They were all quite intense experiences. It's funny that I'm having a little trouble remembering the exact sequence, but they were all very memorable.

Strong: At some point later I'd be curious if you could choose one of those that was important, representative, and take us through it in a little bit more detail. We don't need to go there now.

Widmer: OK.

Strong: When you're traveling, is there more last-minute writing? Is there more or less of the President taking off from written drafts?

Widmer: There is more writing, I would say. You become a tiny White House on the road. In Washington, there's something like ten thousand people working for the Executive Office. The actual number of people working near the White House is much smaller, but you can call anyone for help with anything and they're probably doing it whether you want them to help or not. There are just a lot of people working all the time in Washington.

When you're on the road, you're in a traveling delegation. When you count all the electronics people and security, it's probably several thousand, but the working White House is just maybe one to two hundred people and it's still the White House. It's still the President of the United States who has to form his positions and get them out to the media all the time. The work never stops. We would often be there cranking out his statements on various matters that we didn't know that much about, in consultation with the domestic speechwriters in Washington. It was exciting. We were like a little caravan traveling around the world. We still had to act as if we were the White House in Washington, but we were in a Hilton in a place like Berlin. You hope the internet works, but it might not.

There were some interesting moments that we could not let be known to the public because it would look like we were less than professional. We were extremely professional, but the circumstances of traveling were often very difficult, in part because Bill Clinton thought it was very important to go to the developing world and show that a President cared about developing nations. We were often in dicey hotels with bad communications, trying to act as if everything was completely normal in the White House.

His degree of involvement was—there was still the same process, getting him a draft the night before the speech was to be given. But he felt a little closer to us on the road because we were all staying in the same hotel, and we were all flying on the same one or two airplanes. One speechwriter would get to go on Air Force One and one or two would go on the backup plane, which was identical to Air Force One in appearance, but the President was not on it, so it was much more relaxed. To be on Air Force One at all means you see a lot of Bill Clinton because it's one of the few areas in the Presidency where he can roam around at will, without any security concerns.

It was really charming. It was a really nice part of the speechwriter experience, which, to be honest, is an experience where you have very low status one minute and very high status the next. It's odd. You're not like Chief of Staff, where you always have high status, nor are you a peon working five buildings away who will never ever see the President. You're someone who is brought in at a crucial moment where your expertise is highly valued, and then you won't see him again for months when you're not working on a speech.

So, being on Air Force One was wonderful because he just walks around without a tie on, claps you on the shoulder and says, "How's it going?" He knows everyone's name. He's incredible that way. He'd talk a little about the speech as you're writing it, which was meaningful. It felt good to have that kind of interaction with him. Everything about the road was more intense: the proximity to the President, the interesting scenery, knowing you're in a foreign country, the different venue—every speech was in a different place. Some were outdoors. This is probably the last President of the United States for some time, maybe forever, who will give really important speeches to foreign crowds out-of-doors. I don't know that we can do that anymore because of security concerns, but that was a big part of what Bill Clinton did—to get out and press the flesh.

I mentioned the Cold War and how that affected his foreign policy speeches, but I think also his campaign experience affected it. He loved walking down a street and shaking people's hands and being this larger-than-life figure on a lectern in a big public square in a capital city. It worked. People loved seeing that, because their politicians don't do that. The head of Bulgaria does not stand on a podium in the center of the biggest public square in Sofia, Bulgaria. But Bill Clinton did, and a hundred thousand people came out. It was a great tool of U.S. foreign policy. It made us different from all other countries.

To answer your question, there was definitely more work on the road, but the rewards were great also. And right after a speech he would come up to you more often than in Washington and say, "Great job." It was just this tighter community of people traveling.

Strong: Another process question. Was someone on the National Security Council staff reviewing speeches to be given by Madeleine Albright or by the Secretary of Defense? Was there a clearance system? Did that at all involve your office or was that done elsewhere?

Widmer: That's a very good question. There was an unofficial system, but it was extremely unofficial and didn't always work. And vice versa, they all were desperate to see Bill Clinton's speeches and almost always saw them, but sometimes there just wasn't enough time. Sometimes something was happening in one hour, like the day the [USS] *Cole* was bombed and you have to get a response out within an hour. So you don't always—like our embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam—maybe those remarks were circulated, but maybe they weren't.

Sandy Berger was responsible for interagency coordination. That is really what the job of National Security Advisor is, although sometimes it evolves into more than that. With an egomaniac like Henry Kissinger, it sort of turns into the Secretary of State. But what you're supposed to do is to coordinate State, Defense, CIA, White House, and to manage egos and manage the flow of paper properly. Sandy was very good at that. He was good friends with Madeleine Albright and with William Cohen. From my vantage point, which was a low one—I mean I wasn't up there at the top levels—he seemed to be running it pretty well. They all seemed to be enjoying each other as friends. I'm sure if a Bill Cohen or a Madeleine Albright called over to Sandy's office and wanted to see remarks, he would have one of his assistants fax it or email it over.

Did we seek to see theirs? I believe that we did. I think it would have gone straight to Sandy. I did not see those remarks. I might have been interested, after the fact, just to see what kinds of things they were saying, but I think they would have sent everything to Sandy as a courtesy. He would have looked quickly and that would have been it. My feeling was they tracked our remarks generally. The President is the President. Their speechwriters were doing the same thing I was doing. They were looking at what Bill Clinton was saying every day and then trying to get that language into what Madeleine Albright was saying.

Riley: Were you watching the speeches, or were you reading them?

Widmer: Both. When I could go in person I would prefer to. But if I couldn't, then I would read it. It would instantly go up on the White House website. Also, they were e-mailed to us automatically. The NSC had its own email system, which maybe is a fact people will find interesting. We had our own high-security email system that was different from the White House's system.

Riley: You were getting quick turnarounds on transcribed remarks?

Widmer: Yes, usually within an hour or two from a speech, so probably ahead of the media but not by much.

Riley: So it was that, rather than the prepared text, that he was using as the jumping off point?

Widmer: Right, we would get the actual—it would be transcribed by someone and then e-mailed around to everybody.

Riley: You felt that as a speechwriter you were able to read a speech better by actually watching it rather than by reading a transcript, if possible.

Widmer: It's just more immediate. It's more exciting. I could tell when he was into it, mainly by when he looked up and started using his hands. It meant he wasn't reading what was right in front of him. It was more Bill Clinton, himself, which is important to know. The President of the United States is the President of the United States and he's the one making the decisions, so I thought it was very relevant to know, as closely to the source as possible, what he was thinking about. Day to day it changed.

Strong: Did speeches occasionally go to the President with notations? There are some of those in Presidential libraries. "State wants you to continue to say, 'Palestinian entity.' Other people say it's time for us to say something different."

Widmer: The answer is yes, but I think generally, no. Usually we gave him something finished, trusting him to do what he wanted to do with it. There was zero feeling—maybe this was true in other administrations, but in ours, I don't remember anyone thinking, *We've got to dumb this down for the President because it's so complicated he might screw it up.* Bill Clinton is really a prodigy of learning in every category, whether it's his command of world history, or economics, which I personally know nothing about, but which he is learned about, or the ever-changing nuances of U.S. foreign policy. You never had to worry that something just happened in the past 24 hours, is Bill Clinton going to know about it? Because he would; he would know everything. I don't remember too many of those.

"Palestinian entity" is an interesting question, but we'd already gotten past that. I'm not sure he'd use the word, "Palestine." I think Hillary did, actually, in those years. We would generally say "Palestinians" and "Israelis," which the current White House also still uses more often than not, although [Stanley?] Greenberg has called for a state of Palestine. I don't think we did that. I think we used the word "Palestine" now and then. The two situations on earth where it is most dicey are Israel–Palestine and China–Taiwan, where you really have to say it just right or all hell breaks lose. With China you have to say, "There's one China, two systems." We would really put those speeches through a fine-toothed comb.

Riley: Were there things that you learned that you didn't do with a Clinton speech? Were there any stumbles, when you're finding your way through—things that he didn't like, that he was seeing maybe from a green speechwriter?

Widmer: If he didn't like it, it generally wouldn't get through. He would cut out anything he didn't like. He's not a bashful person.

Strong: Let me add to that. What about the self-deprecating humor, where he would make a reference to impeachment or scandal or other things for humorous effect? Was he doing that on his own?

Widmer: Definitely. We were too timid to ever mention impeachment in a speech. That too was interesting, to see him doing that. We might try humor in a special kind of speech. In a toast to a foreign leader, humor was desirable, and in some of those crowd speeches I mentioned. There must be five or maybe even ten categories of a foreign speech, and of a domestic speech. I grew

to be familiar with those different categories. A speech to a large group of people can effectively have some humor in it. You can imagine how hard it was to find the right people for this job, because you have to be pretty sober and pay attention to the most serious area of American politics, which is U.S. foreign policy, and then have a little Henny Youngman in you at the same time, for a toast or whatever.

Riley: We were talking about this last night. Humor doesn't travel well.

Widmer: Right.

Riley: How do you develop a sense about what you can say before an audience from a different culture that will resonate humorously with them? Is there some universal standard of humor?

Widmer: You do have a rule that every joke told by any President of the United States becomes approximately 150 percent funnier than it actually is, because of their power and the aura of the office. But you're right. Foreign peoples don't always laugh the way we do. Self-deprecating humor did work because this is the President of the United States, so anything that pokes a little good-natured fun at either himself or the power of the United States could work to good effect.

One also had to be extremely careful not to seem too coy about the use of power, and too hesitating, because Bill Clinton never, ever wanted to be a Democrat who was ambivalent about power. There's a long tradition of—Adlai Stevenson and Eugene McCarthy and Jimmy Carter, maybe—Democrats who had good souls but didn't seem to like military power. Bill Clinton did not want to be that kind of a President at all. He wanted to be perceived as someone who enjoyed his rapport with the U.S. military and who was not afraid to send troops into harm's way for a good cause, and was not afraid to throw the weight of the U.S. around for a good cause. That's how he would have said it. Not ever to be a bully, but to continue to develop this vision, which was, in a way, George H. W. Bush's vision of the U.S. as a strong leader in a post-Cold War world, clamping down on conflicts before they happened, and being a virtuous nation but not a simplistic or naïve nation.

I got a little away from your question about humor. We would try some jokes in brackets so he would know it was an option. It was probably about 50 percent—sometimes he would use them, sometimes not. Or sometimes he would say something very funny off-the-cuff himself. But I never once referred to his domestic political troubles in a single speech.

[BREAK]

Riley: In his book, Michael Waldman says that the President was not somebody who was comfortable using flowery language. It's in that vein that I was posing questions to you about whether there were areas where you learned that this wasn't his voice.

Widmer: I agree with that observation. I'm having trouble remembering an example, which would make it better. I figured out intuitively, or maybe someone yelled at me—it's often the

same thing—but he didn't like flowery language, long run-on sentences, elaborate—I want to say, "Wilsonian," although as a historian I'm finding that I argue against the tendency to blame Woodrow Wilson. I think Woodrow Wilson was a less utopian person than people think he was. Anyway, for the sake of argument—

No naïve predictions that democracy will spread naturally. No Vietnam-type false statements of how military means will force peace on the ground. He wanted sentences to be tight and focused like John F. Kennedy's speeches, who is probably, even after all these other comparisons, the President he admired the most. But also Franklin Roosevelt. For me, those were the two—and Abraham Lincoln I guess—who meant the most. In Kennedy you see very little emotional language. You do see the constant hope that democracy will spread, but it's always a very patient sense that it's going to take some time and we have real problems we're up against. I think that's how Clinton wanted to sound: well-informed, resolute, willing to work at this a long time.

Riley: It's interesting to hear you say this, because the personal temperament of Bill Clinton seems to be a much warmer personality than you associate with John Kennedy, almost more like Robert Kennedy.

Widmer: That's true. His public persona is more—John F. Kennedy was very charismatic and funny, but he was a little bit off-putting, maybe, and intimidating. Bill Clinton emanates a quality that is very important in foreign policy as well as American politics, that anyone can go up to him and ask him a question. A car mechanic can go up and say hello to him; or the Secretary General of the UN [United Nations]. He's open to all inquiries. That was a marvelous quality of Bill Clinton as President.

I'm also an admirer of John F. Kennedy and Franklin D. Roosevelt, but I think Bill Clinton did something very important in these foreign trips by bringing a little of his electoral touch to what is also politics—persuading a foreign population to endorse something like signing up for NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization], or not getting angry at the U.S. for bombing a neighboring country. That is politics, also, to persuade. He was very good at that.

Riley: Did you have conversations with Clinton about his predecessors?

Widmer: That's a good question too. Over time I got to know him better but it took some time. As I said, speechwriters had a kind of fungible role in the White House. On a good day we'd be front and center and in the Oval Office talking to him about something. There were moments where that happened to me, where a speech was considered important enough that I would get whisked into the Oval Office for the kind of experience you would expect when you're going to be a White House speechwriter. But there were very long stretches where that experience wasn't happening. You're just toiling away in a tiny office in the Old Executive Office Building, the world's largest and most old-fashioned-feeling office building. It's funny, the White House is very savvy technically, but the major building where most people work is a late-19th century stone office building that feels like something out of the movie *The Shining*, with these incredibly long hallways, and doors just slamming down them.

It took some time for me to get to know him. I actually had an encounter right after I got there that really meant a lot to me. It was an ordinary speech, a speech for Veterans Day. He was going

to Arlington. That was the kind of domestic-feeling event that came to our office because it involved the U.S. military—the Memorial Day speech and the Veterans Day speech, which are given every year at Arlington National Cemetery. There's a real rhythm to Presidential speech-giving. Most Americans don't quite know there's as much of a rhythm to it as there is.

I had written a Veterans Day speech and I was there ready to be part of the motorcade. Usually you're about 20 cars back, which is about how important you're considered. I invariably sat next to, on foreign trips, Mrs. Clinton's hairdresser. That was the barometer. She could be a very important person on certain days; on other days maybe not so much.

Strong: Was there a lot of turnover in that position?

Widmer: No, they finally found the person who is still the person. She's a wonderful French hairdresser who became a friend of mine.

Riley: That's somebody we should interview too.

Widmer: I don't think she would ever talk. I love history, so I think it's important. I spent a lot of my last year trying to persuade people to talk, in the interest of history. I'm completely on the side of open communication.

Anyway, I was standing several cars back and Sandy Berger waved me over. I can't quite remember how it happened, but suddenly I was getting into the Presidential limousine with Bill Clinton and Sandy Berger. We had a great conversation about history during the five or ten-minute limo ride to Arlington. In the short car ride, we talked about Teddy Roosevelt and Franklin, and we were talking about Presidential pets, as I recall. Why was that? He was thinking about getting a dog.

Strong: Buddy.

Widmer: It would become Buddy. He said, "Have any Presidents ever had pets before?" Sandy Berger said, "Yes, Mr. President, all of them have." It was a very quick, business-like answer, and we were all laughing. He said, "I remember Teddy Roosevelt had some kind of goat or something." There was just this unbelievably strange world that I was suddenly entering. Part of his charm is that he can sound at one moment like the best-informed person on a sophisticated foreign policy point in the world, which he is. Or he can turn on that Arkansas accent and sound like Jethro Bodine in *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Both extremes are completely charming and work.

Anyway, that first limo ride meant a great deal to me. Then a long time went before my next encounter. As I slowly went on more and more of these trips, I think he grew to like my speeches because they had a degree more history in them than those of other speechwriters; although, in all honesty, they weren't that different. They all went through this compression chamber of the other speechwriters looking them over and then Sandy. In the final product it was pretty hard to tell one person's from another's. I did try to put more historical information in. There were broad statements about, What is the role of the United States in the world? Who have we been as a country? Where are we going in the new century? That was very comfortable for him to be in. He thinks in those terms, also. He loves history.

Sometimes I'd get called to talk to him a little bit, maybe it was because of a special speech coming up, maybe it was because he was sitting on Air Force One and he just wanted to talk to someone for a little bit. I'd have these encounters. They were quite brief. They were nothing even close to what I've read about in the memoirs of people like Ted Sorensen or Arthur Schlesinger, not even close. Once every few months there'd be a little conversation of a few minutes. It was meaningful. I think he figured out I was different, that I was from an academic world and intending to go back to an academic world, and he liked that because it wasn't quite dog-eat-dog Washington D.C. as most people—They're all good people, but most were career Washington people and I was not.

In the last seven months my job changed and then I was seeing him much more often, and it was about history. Around June of 2000 he hired me to be his Senior Advisor for Special Projects. What that meant was his advisor on a number of projects relating to history, including the building of his Presidential library, which was an enormous project, not quite beginning, but moving very quickly. Also, to ask people inside the Clinton administration to organize histories of each Cabinet department—what policies happened in their various parts of the government, and then interviews, a lot like this one, with foreign heads of state about their impressions of Bill Clinton, in which I was the interviewer.

That was a fascinating time and he tried really hard to do a lot. We probably should have started earlier, but there was a kind of unwillingness, which I think all Presidents feel, where you don't want to admit the end is as near as it really is. I was hired with enough time to make some good decisions and to start some good processes, but we might have started a little bit earlier too.

In those last seven months, from roughly June of 2000 to January '01, I'd see him a lot more often, not quite once a week, but probably every two weeks, to check in about how a meeting had gone over for the Presidential library, or how these histories were going that I was, in a way, the chief editor of, coming in from every department, and what we needed to do in the time remaining. He was very sympathetic. Sometimes he was all business. Sometimes we'd have a little history conversation in which his immense love of American history would come out. That was up to him. If he wanted to talk a little bit, we would, and if not, it was all business.

I remember one conversation in Moscow on a trip. There were a group of us. He was in the lobby—things grew more relaxed in the last half-year, because the [Albert]Gore–[George W.] Bush campaign was underway. He was still President but there was a feeling that an era was approaching its end, so he was a little more available in places like Air Force One, or if we were all staying in a hotel in a foreign city, he would come down and eat in the restaurant of the hotel. It's true that there was security all around, but you could just see him a little more and that was nice. In one of these settings there was a group of probably 20 of us all around him, younger people, and he said, "Does anyone know what the phrase, '*To the Finland Station*' means?"

I said, "Yes I do, Mr. President." He said, "What is it?" I said, "It's a book by Edmund Wilson and it's about [Nikolai] Lenin's trip into the Soviet Union before the Russian Revolution." He said, "Very good." He's kind of a schoolteacher in some ways. He hired me to be his history guy not too long after that. I don't know if there's a connection or not, but he did like odd bits of history. He would often introduce that himself into a foreign speech. If he was in Russia, he would say—and this was better than anything anyone could write—he would say, "When I

hitchhiked across Europe and came to Moscow in 1970, I remember the way it looked, and I remember going into the GUM Department Store." That stuff is fantastic. That's the best kind of material for a foreign speech you could ever write.

He would talk about history both in his own speeches that I was reading and then occasionally in little remarks to me. Did we have the kinds of hour-long conversations that Ted Sorensen was having with John F. Kennedy? No, I would say not. I don't think any of his speechwriters were having that kind of conversation.

Riley: We're going to want to probe a lot into the second job that you had but there's still a lot more on speechwriting.

Strong: I have a really clear picture from your description of what the routine pattern was and that almost all speechwriting is driven by scheduling and the rest. Were there occasions where you were getting communications from the President? "When we go to Moscow I want to talk about this," or, "When we go to Africa I want to talk about Lincoln," or, "When we go to Northern Ireland, I want you to quote Seamus Heaney." Was he giving you that kind of guidance ever?

Widmer: Those are really good questions too. I would say that I absorbed that kind of information, but it wasn't so much him telling it to me. How would I have absorbed it? I'm not sure, but I think Sandy was really the conduit. Sandy was talking with him every day. Part of Sandy's job was to have a pretty serious meeting around 8:00 in the morning, like a 45-minute meeting: *This is what's going on in the world today*. Sandy always knew the temperature and he would convey it to us.

I also would read his previous speeches in a foreign country. I saw that he loved Seamus Heaney from a previous trip to Ireland, so I started using Heaney, which argues a little against what I was saying, that I tried to avoid clichés, but I found some different Seamus—actually, it's funny you mentioned him. I bumped into the poet himself on my first trip to Ireland; I think it was Clinton's second. He told me an amazing quotation that was from an Irish legend, that I used in a speech, but it wasn't an actual poem by Seamus Heaney.

We kind of knew he loved [William Butler] Yeats. There's always a great poet in every country and it seemed like he usually loved that great poet. But did Clinton sit me down and say, "I want you to cite Lincoln," or Heaney, or [Fyodor] Dostoevsky? No. I felt I was learning more by osmosis, or maybe from Sandy Berger, but not from private meetings with Bill Clinton.

Riley: Were you having these long discursive conversations with Sandy Berger on occasion?

Widmer: More as time went on, not at the beginning, because he was extraordinarily busy every minute, as choreographed. Over time, after a few speeches had succeeded, there were little things, like I'd get invited to sit next to him on an hour-long flight on Air Force One, or there were little holiday parties, just like any office place on earth—the White House holiday Christmas party, or NSC's, and Sandy would come over and ask how you were doing and how your wife was doing. He's a very considerate person.

I remember that in Africa we had a bit of an argument. I was still quite junior but we had an argument over a speech. It was the final speech of the Africa trip and how much to say about the subject of slavery. In the course of arguing, I think we grew closer.

Riley: Can you tell us about this episode?

Widmer: Yes, we were on this very ambitious trip to Africa that was 10 or 11 days long. It was the longest trip of the Presidency. I think it was the longest trip any President has ever—no, that can't be, because of Woodrow Wilson going to France, but in the last 50 years maybe the longest trip. That may or may not be true but it felt true at the time. It was a very long and difficult trip in these not very fancy hotels and with primitive communications equipment.

It was extremely meaningful to Bill Clinton because of his lifelong commitment to racial justice, but it was fraught for a lot of reasons. One was because it happened only about a month after the first allegations had come out about Monica Lewinsky, and the Republicans were really smelling blood and were after him in a very aggressive way. Everything he said was negated by the Republican leadership the next day, no matter what he said.

If it was, "I think we should go to Africa to build trade relationships with people who will be important to the U.S. in the 21st century," the Republican talking point would be, "This trip is a boondoggle. Bill Clinton is just escaping the United States because he can't face his problems." It was politically very sensitive and it was a shame, because he just wanted to advance the agenda of African American relations.

Strong: Was that the Rwanda apology speech?

Widmer: Yes. A lot happened on that trip. We went to six countries. The agenda was just to say we want to start a better relationship with Africa. It has been a kind of neglected part of the world, colonized by Europe, then it was a place of proxy battles in the Cold War, had never been that important to the U.S. and it's time to say it is important to the U.S. That was the agenda in a nutshell.

But a few things happened. The press corps was very sarcastic and the Republicans were very dismissive of this agenda. Every day we were getting bludgeoned pretty badly by the nonagreement of the U.S. with this pretty idealistic hope to elevate Africa.

Riley: How were you getting that information?

Widmer: We would get press clips every day.

Riley: So you're still getting them. Were they faxed to you?

Widmer: Yes, I think they were faxed. Somehow we'd get a big sheaf of legal-document-sized press clips, erratically, like it wouldn't come to a jungle in Uganda but it would be available on the airplane. We were getting beat up by the right-wing press, which was unrelenting in its criticism. The left-wing press was rather feeble about defending Bill Clinton because it hadn't worked out its own ambivalence toward him—people like Maureen Dowd, whatever wing she occupies, I'm not sure she does—she just is sarcastic; that's what she does. It's frustrating, if

you're working to make good change happen for American people and other people, to get caught in this vortex of sarcasm and actual hostility. For a long time we were in that vortex and it did affect foreign policy.

On his second day he was in a jungle in Uganda and he blurted out that he regretted that the United States had been involved with slavery. The press went crazy. It was a strange moment. I'll go off on this for a minute because I was very involved. The press said, "Bill Clinton has blown it. He admitted—he almost apologized for slavery. Can't believe his naïveté that he would ever do that." No one ever thought to say, "Well, who on earth would defend slavery?"

Riley: Especially in that setting.

Widmer: All he did was express regret. He said, "You know, we've had a pretty flawed relationship with Africa. First slavery, and obviously that was bad." Something like that. It was just spun like that. It's important for future Americans to realize how much he was having to deal with from the U.S. media and a more or less incessant barrage of criticism from the Republican right throughout eight years. Of course he had very capable defenders here and there, but still there was a feeling through a lot of this Presidency that even on a very good day of policy achievement, the press would get it wrong, and the Republicans would spin it to their advantage. It could be very frustrating at times.

Rwanda came after that. Rwanda was also an apology and it was a very clear and abject apology, unlike this sort of half-remark in Uganda. I was happy that that went over pretty well. You could never quite predict the response. He did feel terrible about the genocide that happened in Rwanda. It's still quite unclear what anyone could have done to stop it, but certainly he could have done more than he did. There's no doubt about that. But what any U.S. President could have done is a little harder to figure out.

Riley: Was this a subject of conversation inside your shop?

Widmer: Inside the shop, yes. I don't think I've ever talked about it with him personally, but inside the shop, yes. I've heard him ruminating on it privately. It wasn't quite a conversation, but just that it's a genuine regret of his Presidency that he did not do more to prevent that horrible and very fast genocide from happening. When I say that I'm not sure what could have happened, all I mean is there's no U.S. Army base nearby. People think the U.S. can magically send forces into action, but in fact it's not so easy. It probably would have been attacked by the Republican leadership of Congress, which is not at all a reason that he shouldn't have done it; he should have done it, but it probably would have been hard.

Riley: Was there any internal finger-pointing among the people that you dealt with, that if these people had just done what they were supposed to do, we wouldn't have—

Widmer: No, I don't think so. I formed the thought personally that France had been especially useless in that problem. I don't think anyone ever told me that, I just read about it. It's kind of a typical situation—everybody likes to beat up on the U.S. In fact, France was kind of complicit in the way certain radio stations were egging on the killers. I don't feel comfortable saying I know this, but I remember reading at one point—the U.S. was simply clueless. It wasn't on either side;

it just was clueless and did nothing to stop it from happening. Some European powers were a little more—they saw an advantage to be gained if one African tribe dominated another.

Riley: I got you off-track again.

Strong: In that period, were there discussions in your office about when the word "genocide" is to be used?

Widmer: There definitely were. I did not write that speech, but a senior speechwriter who was leaving did. He was in very serious conversations. That's a very good question. The use of that word is extremely complicated because the second it is used we are legally obligated to prevent it from happening, which means sending in troops, so it can't be used frivolously. There were NSC lawyers and State Department lawyers whose job is basically to prevent it from being used. The U.S. government is designed to have people clashing over all of these issues and it is often kind of nasty. I think in that case a high-level decision was made that it was all right to use it.

It wasn't saying that genocide is happening and we have to stop it. It was saying that genocide happened and we intensely regret that it happened. I'm sure Sandy was involved in that decision. The speechwriter was Dan Benjamin. Probably the lawyers from State and NSC and presumably—I would imagine that Sandy was the one talking about it with Bill Clinton, probably not the writer. That was a breakthrough speech. It was well-received and a very brave and great speech.

We had a last day speech about slavery. It had been planned months in advance. It was at the site of a fort from which slaves were allegedly taken from Africa to the New World—in Goree Island, Senegal. It was understood that this would be the last place for a major speech. It would connect us back to American history and how connected we are and then he would get on the plane and fly back to Washington. It is also a point in the Atlantic facing toward the U.S. Some choreographer of public events had planned this event.

I volunteered to do it. I did most of the speeches on the Africa trip. I was very interested in Africa. A feeling of anxiety about this particular speech began to grip the upper echelons of the White House. If you were to ask me who felt nervous and who didn't, I either couldn't or wouldn't say, because I don't think it matters—

Strong: Was this before or after the Uganda flap?

Widmer: Exactly, it was all at the same time. A certain version of the speech was written before we even left for Africa, but the blurting out of the regrets in Uganda led to hostile press comments from people like George Will and Pat Buchanan, who began to call this the apology tour of Africa. It was like the twisting of the knife into a Democrat's self-inflicted wound.

I began to have pressure on me to dilute what was a pretty hard-hitting speech about the history of American slavery. I had only been there six months but I felt very ambitious as a writer and I think my ambitions were justified, even with ten years of time since then, that this could have been like a Martin Luther King "I have a dream" speech. Bill Clinton would have risen beautifully to the occasion and said that slavery was a terrible pox on American history and yet we all got through it and no one got through it more gracefully than African Americans

themselves. Now we're ready to begin a great new phase in which we're all doing this together—to admit in stronger language than any President ever has that it was a tragedy of American history and the only reason we got through it was the remarkable resilience of black people themselves. It was something like that. I had written something like that that I was very proud of.

Riley: It had been vetted?

Widmer: It had been vetted. Who is to know if it was as good a speech as I felt it was? Probably it wasn't. I was a young, naïve speechwriter. But pressures began to be brought to bear midway through this trip because of the political feelings attached to the word "slavery," that it should be toned down. How much it should be toned down was a lively argument. Even though I was extremely junior, I really felt that it shouldn't be toned down one iota, and I still don't.

But there were a lot of political voices in many parts, from the domestic side especially. I don't think this even was an argument inside the NSC. The people whose job was to read the newspapers every day back home and to gauge Clinton's day-to-day standing in American politics were bringing pressure to bear to not have a big slavery speech. My argument was, "Why did you schedule a speech in a site of slavery and ask a speechwriter not to write about slavery?" This was a kind of *West Wing* episode, although the TV version hadn't happened yet.

There were a lot of incidents where there were bitter arguments within a White House of people who were all on the same page ideologically and who all really respected each other, but occasionally could argue very intensely when they disagreed. That, for me, was a case like that, but I lost the argument. It was a good episode for me because by arguing I got to know people better and I probably raised myself in their estimation. Sandy, I think, was impressed. I had been a quiet little bookworm. I wouldn't say "boo" to anyone. I was shy. It's a very intimidating workplace. But I got riled up over whether to talk about slavery. I didn't think we should be letting the Republican pundits of the world dictate policy to us.

Riley: Was the President himself inside those conversations?

Widmer: Not with me, and I don't know if he was with people like his press advisor and National Security Advisor and Chief of Staff—probably a little bit. I always had a sneaking feeling that if it had been laid out fully on the table in front of Bill Clinton, he would have said, "Let's do it." This is elemental to who he is as a human being, that racial injustice is unacceptable. He doesn't even think about it; it's just who he is.

Strong: Has he said anything about that episode in the aftermath?

Widmer: No, and I've had plenty of chances to talk about it with him and I've never raised it. It was water under the bridge. I later got to know him much better and I could have raised it, but I didn't.

Riley: So your sense is that a strategic position was taken by your opposition to make sure—

Widmer: I think by domestic political advisors inside the White House, but I don't really know. It doesn't matter. Well, it does and it doesn't. It would have been a great speech in my opinion,

but I may be wrong. I may be completely wrong. It might not have been as good a speech as I think.

Riley: Did you keep a copy of it?

Widmer: I probably have a copy somewhere. Every speech had like ten versions.

Strong: They're all in the Presidential library.

Widmer: To be honest, what I was most looking forward to was Bill Clinton's taking it even further. It was important to have great historical opportunities. They don't happen that often. You have your first inaugural and your second inaugural, and then something really big might happen once a year. There aren't too many great platforms to speak from. Even though this was a kind of ceremonial event, touchy-feely, I thought it might be a great platform to give a historic speech rather than a current Africa foreign policy speech.

Riley: He had this experience in the first term. It was the speech—

Widmer: Memphis.

Riley: Memphis, exactly. It is considered to be sort of—

Widmer: It really is a great speech. I always wanted Bill Clinton to find those opportunities, because seeing him up close I was in such awe of his abilities. He's a remarkable human being. He is routinely described by people as the smartest person they've ever met. I feel that that's true. Also he has these shifting abilities. I mentioned earlier that he can talk to a car mechanic one second, a short-order chef the next, and then Stephen Hawking the minute after that. I wanted someone with those skills. I was not aware that he was a prodigy when I was simply someone reading the papers. I was a well-educated person living in Boston but I was not aware that a prodigy occupied the White House.

When I got there I began to become aware of it. I wanted the rest of America to become aware of what I was becoming aware of. I thought we should really maximize these speech opportunities. I'm not sure we ever did. That speech in Memphis that he gave off the top of his head may have been his best speech as a President of the United States. It's an argument without end. He gave a lot of speeches. Not as many as I would have liked soared, you know, just jumped out at you off the page the way that Memphis one did. But if I talk about every speech in this much detail we'll be here for 20 hours.

Riley: But you're talking about a moment and a setting which would have provided—all the ingredients were there for something extraordinary.

Widmer: I'm trying to give you a flavor of my time there, which is what I can do best. I was not a high-ranking official there for most of my time, but I brought a little more historical knowledge than most of my colleagues, simply because of the fact that I had chosen to be a grad student for a long time.

I also want future Americans who will presumably have access to this to know about some of the arguments inside of the White House as well as the many areas we all agreed on. This was an interesting episode where everyone was against slavery and everyone was in favor of the civil rights movement and everyone was in favor of a better policy with Africa, but through outside political pressures we allowed ourselves to water something down a little bit more than I think we would have.

Riley: This is a good stopping point.

[BREAK]

Riley: During the lunch discussions we talked a little bit about the relationship between the main speechwriting office and the NSC speechwriting office. You told us a little bit about the day-to-day relations, but also, you had indicated that you did some things differently than previous administrations.

Widmer: I believe that this was the only Presidency that had a dedicated office for speechwriting inside the National Security Council. Previous Presidencies had speechwriters in a single office who would wander around, either to the domestic or foreign policy experts to get the information for a speech, but in our case we were actually embedded in the NSC, which meant we were on the third floor, not the first floor, of the Old Executive Office Building and our doors all had special high-security locks on them. We had to shut our computer off at night and put our hard drive in a safe in the office. We were very much inside the foreign policy apparatus of the United States, which had immense advantages. It meant we were more trusted by the foreign policy advisors to the President than we might have been otherwise, and by that I mean everyone from State Department to CIA to DoD [Department of Defense]. All of those people understood that we were part of the team.

In fact, the NSC is people on detail from all of those agencies, so in a sense we were all on detail together but in the same physical space and that did breed camaraderie, which was helpful. There was an NSC-only email system that was incredibly useful. You could just send a quick email to someone. If you needed information about the Middle East, you'd write to the guy who is the Middle East expert—the NSC is pretty small—and he would write you right back in this secure email format. It was good for feeling part of a team in a meaningful way. Sandy Berger was the leader of this team.

It did cause some problems, specifically being some distance from the domestic speechwriting outfit, which was a larger outfit. They were usually about six writers; we were usually three or four. Two floors separated us in the OEOB.

There were just different attitudes. They were responding very quickly to domestic political pressures and we were not. We were part of the never-ending American foreign policy establishment. Of course there are daily pressures, but you also have the feeling that you're on an enormous battleship sailing forward. They were quicker to be alert to Congress and criticisms in

the media and moods of higher-ups in the White House. In many ways we had a better existence because we got to think hard about this one topic and to be a little bit impervious to domestic political concerns. That to me felt preferable. When I came in, I probably would rather have been a domestic speechwriter, but it quickly became apparent to me that I was exactly where I wanted to be.

Strong: How did the two offices work together on, say, a State of the Union, or on things where you were both contributing?

Widmer: State of the Union is a good question because that is the one time where we really did have to work together. They had the pen on that, meaning they had the assignment. It was their biggest night of the year and they wanted it to be that way. We would draft some pages for insertion in their speech, but the feeling was definitely that this was the domestic staff's night. In a way it felt fair because I felt we had more attractive assignments through most of the year. I'm sure that's debatable, but I felt that it was more exciting to be working on foreign policy. We also got the advantage of these fun trips to foreign countries.

After a while it seemed to me that domestic speeches revolved around a pretty predictable set of issues. It was health care, education, the domestic economy, and sort of ordinary political speeches to supporters or groups of Congressmen—that kind of thing. No one would ever say that any work for a President was boring, but it seemed a little more prosaic than the never-boring issue of America in the world and how vast a topic that is. So I thought it was good that they could have this one night, the State of the Union, to really shine. We would draft our few pages, but we were not the lead players on that particular speech.

Riley: Do you recall ever getting any pushback from them on that or others?

Widmer: There were moments of stress. I think it's best to say we were all friends. Again, we're all about the same age. We were all loyal to Clinton. There were men and women in both shops. I'd like to say there was an educational diversity but in fact almost everyone had been at a northeastern Ivy League university.

We were chummy but at the same time there were differences that were noticeable. The NSC writers would never talk to the press about anything, as far as I know. I never did. The White House press office, and by that I mean the domestic shop, was a little more attuned, not only to what was being written every day but who was writing it. There was more chumminess with the press corps than in our office. They were more wired into the political establishment than we were.

I think sometimes they felt some jealousy about not being able to travel to foreign countries, because that was a real perk and everyone wanted to do that. I know of a few episodes where they lobbied very hard to come on a trip. Sandy would always shoot it down and we were very grateful to him for shooting it down because that was our big perk. If they had the State of the Union, we wanted our trips. We were working on a serious job, so we needed to do our job. A domestic writer wouldn't even have the clearance necessary to be in half of those spaces.

On foreign travel we would work in these remarkable rooms. The advance teams from the White House would take over hotel rooms like this one and transform them into working NSC offices.

They would take brown paper and cover every window and hang radios from walls and ceilings to create white noise to defeat eavesdropping. Then we'd set up laptops. It was a very strange environment to write a speech in. It was about the least conducive to good creative thinking you could imagine. I remember one time I was trying hard to write a speech and there was a loop of REO Speedwagon [rock band] coming out of the radio hanging there. It was impossible. In spite of that discomfort it was really exciting to be on the road and we wanted to be in that position. A domestic speechwriter, I don't think, could have even gone into those spaces because the security was too high.

So there was some playful rivalry, that is fair to say. Sometimes they would get annoyed if we wanted too much space inside the State of the Union and sometimes we would get annoyed if they were trying too hard to come on our trips. But generally we worked together as two complementary teams. We were very different, but we were complementary.

Strong: Some of the commentary about speechwriting in the Clinton White House, particularly in the first term, and particularly the domestic speeches, tells the story of lots of people weighing in, lots of last-minute rewrites that are not trivial changes—a kind of chaotic process. Is that a fair description of the domestic side when you were there? It sounds from the process you were describing earlier today that there would be less of that in connection with the foreign policy speeches.

Widmer: I believe it's a fair characterization of the first couple of years, although I was not there, I've just read this in books. It seems that there was more chaos in maybe the first two or three years. In my time, that was not true. It was certainly not true in the NSC, where Sandy Berger ran things with a very firm hand. He was the boss and everyone knew it. There was no way an extra message would get in after he had signed off on it. He also was very well-organized in terms of time. We would be submitting something about a week before the speech was to be given to him, and then he would have a day or two to think about it and get us his changes. We would make changes and then it would go to the President a day or two before, often the night before, but it had been through enough revisions with Sandy that it was considered safe.

There were no eruptions. I began to feel a little lonely because I'd heard about Clinton's famous temper and I thought it might be a way of getting some attention if he would yell at me. But in fact our process was very smooth so we didn't have those kinds of eruptions. It was a little more chaotic—that's not quite the right word to use—I think it was a little less clear that there was a strong hand guiding everything from above on the domestic side, but there were many more people involved. It was just a different system.

The actual number of writers was larger. They were reporting to a couple of different people. They were reporting, in theory, to the Chief of Staff and also to the head of communications. There were several people who were in that world of whatever it is that communications is. It's someone like Sid Blumenthal, who is working in his own office. It could be someone like Don Baer, who has employees. It could be someone who is setting up the backdrop of an event before it happens. There were a lot of people in that murky world of communications that domestic speechwriting had to check in with—not quite report to, but just check in with.

Then, of course, they too were writing for the President of the United States, so they had many bosses. By the second term it really was under control. I wasn't aware of chaos, just slightly less clear-cut organization than we had. I would not use the word chaos to describe them.

Riley: One of the things that the NSC routinely does is it is involved in moderating or settling disputes among the various constituency departments. I'm wondering if you had any observations about that during your time there, and the extent to which the speechwriting shop was privy or involved in those discussions.

Widmer: There must have been moments of friction, because there always are. Specifically, one would expect them to be between the Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State, and National Security Advisor—maybe even more specifically, between Secretary of State and National Security Advisor, because in the last 50 years that has been kind of a sensitive relationship. But I'm not aware of any serious problems. I believe there must have been moments of friction, but I don't remember any and I certainly don't remember any serious ones.

Sandy cared a lot about checking in on a constant basis, mainly with Madeline Albright and Bill Cohen in my time. There was something called the ABC meeting, which was Albright, Berger, Cohen. There were also very frequent meetings of their top deputies. There's the Principals Commission and the Deputies Commission meetings once a week each, but at certain times, like at Kosovo, more or less every day for the deputies.

So the communication was good. They would go out together and do things. They spoke in public together. Everyone knew that they were serving Bill Clinton best when they were getting along together. For the most part they did. I know it would be a better interview if I had a feud I could remember, but I truly can't. I'm sure Sandy or Madeleine would be able to come up with something.

Riley: I don't recall you mentioning the Vice President in any of this. Does he have his own speechwriting person?

Widmer: Yes, he did, at least one or two. Two, I think.

Riley: Was there a role in your shop?

Widmer: They had no role in our shop. They were on the second floor, in between. We were third, they were second, domestic was first. I think they temperamentally were hanging around the domestic shop a little bit more. Again, we were all friendly, but they literally couldn't come into our offices. They weren't supposed to be there unsupervised, anyway.

Riley: The speechwriters?

Widmer: Yes, anyone who didn't have an NSC clearance. They did not come into our lives very much. Sandy was friendly with his equivalent, Leon Fuerth, who was a well-regarded foreign policy advisor to Gore. And Gore himself was well regarded. This is the way people felt at ground level. Everyone knew him to be a very intelligent and serious man. There were certain areas where he had more flexibility than others. For example, he was very involved in our Russia policy. It seemed like that particular policy was parceled out a little bit away from the NSC,

although I'm sure they didn't feel it to be that way. But Gore was very involved with his equivalent in Russia, Viktor Chernomyrdin. For a long time there was a Gore–Chernomyrdin Commission.

Gore was also somewhat involved with South Africa, as I recall. So there were these special areas where Gore could say, "I'm really interested in this. I want to go out and give some speeches and be involved." And he was. He was shaping policy. He was obviously involved with climate change, which was on the radar screen, although it never quite rose to the level it's now at. Gore was giving speeches in '97 around the time of the Kyoto Accords, trying to whip up support for that. Then we all realized pretty soon that Congress never was going to approve it, so that kind of went away. Gore was well-liked, but not involved in any kind of daily way in our lives. I think Sandy was seeing him in evening events, and Sandy was always checking in with Leon Fuerth.

Riley: Did you scrub the Vice President's speeches if he was speaking on foreign policy?

Widmer: No, they did their own. There were two writers working with Leon. Gore was also, like Clinton and like Sandy, very capable of writing his own remarks.

Strong: Were there issues about environment or energy, or the things that clearly had big domestic and big foreign policy dimensions—about which organization was responsible for them?

Widmer: I don't remember clearly. We were saying things about the environment in speeches. We were basically saying the world is becoming more and more interconnected and there are good examples and bad examples. Currencies are being united and tariffs are coming down, that's a good example. Terrorism is able to perforate borders more easily than it used to be able to. And there's environmental degradation, also. Pollution can float from one country to another. So we talked that way. But did we actually have a clear-cut way of assigning environmental and energy topics? I don't think so.

There was one person in the NSC who had the environmental docket, so we would check with him, but we didn't have a big environmental set of speeches. It was sort of random. Once in a while one would be given. I think far fewer speeches were given than would be given now. Even though we were aware of these changes happening, it somehow didn't rise up to the highest level.

Riley: I'll ask the same question of you about the First Lady's speechmaking. She did a lot of international travel—

Widmer: She did.

Riley: Were you involved in doing speechwriting for her or did you scrub her speeches?

Widmer: Once in a while there may have been a polite showing of a speech, just among writers looking for creative ideas, but there was no formal review policy. The actual policy was that they were entirely independent. She also had two writers, like Gore. You're right. They went on an enormous number of trips, an unbelievable number.

That's something I hope future historians will pay some attention to, because I think Hillary Clinton learned a great deal from her trips between about 1997 and 2000, where she really got interested in the developing world. She went to places that probably had never been visited by an American First Lady. It didn't get that much attention in the media, but it seemed to me a very interesting thing she was trying to do. But I don't think she felt a responsibility to show her speeches to Sandy or to us and we didn't ever ask to see them either.

Riley: You mentioned some of these cross-cutting issues. Was terrorism something that was on your radar at the time?

Widmer: It definitely was. Even the environment—I don't want to say it wasn't on our radar, or to imply that. It just wasn't as high as the actual wars that were happening. Terrorism was high because things were happening and we were responding to them. There were the African embassy bombings in August 1998, in Kenya and Tanzania, and that led to a retaliation against Osama bin Laden that failed, but we were aware of Osama bin Laden.

There was a quite serious office within the NSC, the office headed by Richard Clarke, who later wrote many books. That was an office inside the NSC well-known to us, but not well known to the public, that was doing counterterrorism and tracking terrorist money and giving us as much information as they felt they could, but not giving us everything. So did I ever know where Osama bin Laden was? No. But I can say absolutely that the NSC office under Dick Clarke was following him closely and that Bill Clinton was following it closely, and Sandy Berger. There were moments where it rose to the level of a big national speech. It certainly was mentioned in many, many speeches. Probably all of his States of the Union in my four years there would have a paragraph about it.

Every now and then there was a whole speech dedicated to it. I wrote one of them. It was the opening of the UN the first week of September 1998, and Clinton went. The theme of the speech was terrorism. It was asking the world's leaders, the world's nations, to work with him to fight terrorism. It was in the wake of the embassy bombings. That day was an amazing day because the Republicans leaked his videotaped testimony from weeks, maybe months, earlier. That completely dominated the news that day. They leaked it well before he was to go to the UN to give this pretty serious speech on terrorism.

Everywhere you went, every TV in every shop window in New York City, which is where we were, showed him giving this testimony to the Ken Starr investigation. It was just sad because we were trying to say something important about this rising threat, and had trouble getting the message out. The UN Assembly rose as one to give him a standing ovation when he came in. That was great. Nelson Mandela led it. But we had a lot more trouble getting that message to the American people.

Riley: Was there much attention given within your shop to how things were going to play with the press after a Presidential speech? I mean, is there any gaming of press coverage?

Widmer: Yes, there was. I was not involved with any of it. I was a speechwriter, period. My job was done as soon as the speech was done, which was a nice way to be. But the NSC had its own press office and did work—I implied that the NSC was above caring about the press. It was less

worried about the press than the domestic White House was, but it's not true to say they didn't think about it at all, because they did have their own press office. Now and then exclusives would be arranged and Sandy would get interviews with members of the press corps, or say to the President that it was important for him to go to the back of Air Force One and give a five-minute briefing on something. That sort of thing was certainly happening with NSC coordination. Sandy was very involved with that. I was not.

Strong: At some point, I do want to ask some questions about the disjunction between the heavy international agenda that was being carried in the second term, and the bizarre domestic events. Lots of people have observed, or said, that the White House did a good job of keeping those things apart from each other, and doing the regular business, and responding to the embassy bombing and the rest.

Widmer: Right.

Strong: That's a fairly well-established version of the picture. But for outsiders it's hard to imagine that it could have been that way, particularly for the people who were higher up.

Riley: In that context, I'll ask the simple question, what do you remember about coming in, in January of '98, when the story broke?

Widmer: It was a remarkable time. I still was in my very green period of not knowing many people. In fact, I had just had an unpleasant experience of my own with the media, where the *Washington Post* had written a kind of unfair article about my rock-and-roll career that was embarrassing. I was trying to get through every day myself. Then this much vaster piece of news came out. It was strange. We all just kept our heads down and did our business. You heard that phrase a lot, "We're here working for the American people." That is how people felt. Certainly, there was anxiety, and people talking in the hallways, and all those things you would imagine, but, to an astonishing degree no one left. I'm not aware of anyone who ever left.

We were just like the American people themselves. We were concerned at first, and somewhat confused, and didn't know if it was true or not. For a long time at the beginning we didn't know if anything had even happened. It seemed very plausible that nothing might have happened, because the people leaking information were so unbelievable unsavory that it seemed totally plausible that they were liars. Linda Tripp—

As it became more clear that there was substance to the allegations, it was depressing, certainly—I'm mainly speaking for myself, but I imagine I'm speaking for others, too. We had figured out after a few weeks that the accusations were depressingly accurate, maybe not a hundred percent but there was substance to them, but that it was part of a partisan drive to undermine a President. In the grand scheme of things we were more disturbed by what felt like a palace coup than a sexual indiscretion. That's the way we stayed for the whole time, and that's ultimately how the American people felt. We were right in line with them, which was not at all denial of what had happened, or anything even close to approval, because I don't know anyone who approved, but it was a sense that the way this unsavory information was being fanned and disseminated across the landscape for clearly political purposes was unattractive. We wanted to help him survive this. That was my prevailing attitude.

Now, for various reasons, foreign policy became a really important part of his Presidency right around that time. Part of the answer is that trips had been planned years in advance and they just were going to happen anyway. It's not so unusual that you plan some big foreign policy activities in the second year of your second term, while you still have capital to get things done. But it certainly was comfortable to get out of the U.S. in 1998 where his every utterance was subjected to incredible scrutiny. Not just to get away from the media in the U.S. but to get to genuine affection in every country he went to, for the most part.

It was an odd year of split screens everywhere, where you have all this turmoil in the U.S., and then you land in just about any foreign country you could name and a hundred thousand people are there waiting to hear him speak and are deeply in favor of Bill Clinton and his agenda. There was a good side to what happened, even though there was a tragic side too. It was certainly a tragedy in many ways, the scandal and impeachment, but it forced people to come to terms with what they felt about Bill Clinton, both in the U.S. and abroad.

At this point, five or six years had elapsed and people knew that he was working hard for progressive causes and he was a canny politician who was making some progress. Bosnia had happened and had gone pretty well. The first missteps were over and he had found his footing. Europe was very pro-Clinton, especially after Tony Blair was elected. But in the U.S., too, people began to see that his foreign policy had a direction it was going in and it was achieving results.

The good side of the scandal is it forced all of the kinds of people I had known in Cambridge, the contented liberals who thought he wasn't perfect enough for them, to admit that he was a pretty good President, and to come on to his side, which they had not been before then. A lot of people in the middle had to say, "We don't approve of this but we do want him to finish his Presidency." Then, foreigners everywhere said, "This is, for the first time in a long time, a President who really cares about us."

These huge trips to places like Africa and China and India really did have an impact. People could tell he was making more than an ordinary effort to reach the rest of the world and trying to argue for a new world struggling to be born in the aftermath of communism. For all those reasons, I never stopped believing in him and even grew to admire him tremendously. He was certainly under a strain and it was a strain of his own making, but he performed well under that strain.

Riley: Could you tell a difference in his demeanor, even though you hadn't been around all that long?

Widmer: It seemed like everything was more urgent afterward. One misstep might have really caused a big problem. There were some early days and weeks there where no one was sure if he was going to remain President. I remember a state visit from Tony Blair. I think it was his first one. It was in the aftermath of the first revelations, maybe a few weeks after. It was tense. Even ordinary toasts at a state dinner were high-pressured.

I worked really hard on a toast and I dared to put in some humor, which wasn't always easy to get through. It got through. There was one specific joke that was right at the beginning where he

said he was so happy that Tony Blair had visited that he decided to rename the Presidential guesthouse in his honor, and it would forever be known as Blair House. It's a pretty dumb joke, but remember, every joke is twice as funny when a President says it. It got an enormous laugh. It was because people were so tense, not knowing what was happening with the Presidency.

Not long after that, Tina Brown of *The New Yorker* wrote an incredibly glowing account of her evening at that event. The press began to—it was never an easy ride with Bill Clinton and the press, but defenders began to be noticed. That was helpful. But every speech was important. You couldn't have a misstep. I'm sure he felt the same way, and he performed brilliantly throughout 1998.

Riley: Were there any internal discussions, just water-cooler chatter or otherwise, about that State of the Union message in '98—about whether he ought to say something about this in that message?

Widmer: I was not privy to any speechwriter conversations about it. I was in the White House when he gave that speech and a lot of writers were watching on TV together. Then we went over that night and he came in and everyone applauded. It was very moving. It was behind closed doors but everyone applauded. He gave spontaneous candid remarks. I don't remember his exact words, but he expressed regret for all the difficulty he'd caused all of us, and said he was going to go on working hard and he wanted everyone else to. It was moving. It was what we wanted to hear. It was an uplifting evening, even though everyone knew it was a shaky time.

I remember my own almost-contribution to that speech—it has nothing to do with the scandal. We were having repair work done here on our roof in Cambridge. I was talking to my wife and she said, "We've got to do it now. You do it when the weather's good. That's when you fix your roof." I submitted a line for consideration to the domestic shop saying, "The best time to fix your roof is when the sun is shining." Everyone loved it and I was very excited because I thought I was going to get a line in the State of the Union. It was in it until the day before, and then someone remembered that John F. Kennedy had used a line like that at some point, so it was taken out. I was really upset because I wanted to have one line in the State of the Union.

Then the next day, he went out on the stump with Al Gore and said, "John F. Kennedy once said, 'The best time to fix your roof is when the sun is shining.'" The day after, he went to Arkansas and gave a speech and said, "You know, my old granddaddy used to tell me, 'The best time.…'" So the line survived. I didn't, but the line survived.

Riley: No footnotes. Did you ever—this relates to his relationship with the press. Do you have any insight into what was going on between Bill Clinton and Howell Raines at the *New York Times*?

Widmer: No, I don't. I heard second- or third-hand that there was tension between them. I don't know any of the details. They're both remarkably talented men who came out of the South at about the same time, but that's not a good enough reason. I don't know. The *Times* was hard on him. I felt the *Times* was always hard on Bill Clinton. I just don't know why that is.

I think it's related to the ambivalence my Cambridge friends felt about him. He just didn't feel like the great liberal champion. Maybe Mario Cuomo was supposed to be that, or someone

different. He seemed too centrist. Maybe they didn't like his southern accent or the fact that he grew up poor. It's hard to imagine anyone would consider that a reason, but he didn't seem to fit the bill of a great champion of Northeastern liberalism somehow, and that may have rankled. I don't know anything, I'm just speculating.

Strong: Isn't it enough to get a Rhodes Scholarship and go to Yale Law School?

Widmer: One would think so, but then you're damned in the other direction. Then it's hard with Arkansas voters. He was always in between these different constituencies, seeming a little too conservative for some and too liberal for others.

Riley: Where was his base?

Widmer: His base expanded. I think now the *New York Times* would say this was a pretty good Presidency. I'd say the middle class was his base, not the *New York Times.* Lower-middle class, great, hard-working Americans, immigrant-Americans, African-Americans, the elderly, the young, I would hope. But not sophisticated, wealthy Northeasterners as much. Certainly, all those states voted for him, but it wasn't quite as natural.

Strong: In some White Houses they have sometimes said, "From time to time we have to give a speech to those elites. Our audience isn't going to be most Americans or the people we normally write for. We have to write for the *New York Times* columnists; we have to write for the academic world." Were there occasions when you were given a kind of different audience assignment?

Widmer: I don't remember any with that particular audience, although I remember Sandy Berger went to the Council on Foreign Relations once or twice. I think he wrote his own speech, but I can't quite remember. I didn't, in any case.

I would write for different audiences just through the normal range of foreign policy speeches. Sometimes he's speaking to a Parliament, sometimes it's to a large crowd, an outdoor crowd, and sometimes to a dinner. Each of those was a slightly different feeling. Sometimes it was right after a war and sometimes it was just a normal visit to a country, so different levels of seriousness would be called for. I don't think I was ever told to go draft a speech to the Council on Foreign Relations, to our elites. I don't remember any particular speech like that.

Riley: We talked about the trips earlier, but I think it might be a good time now to stop and ask you more generally, what are some of your favorite recollections of these trips that you made, places that you went? There must be some indelible memories having done these things.

Widmer: There are. Africa was incredible. I mentioned some of the stress, but it was very moving to be in this continent that is so large and so diverse and so worthy of attention, and to be part of the first serious Presidential trip there. On his trip to China in the summer of '98, I remember an amazing moment where he was on a stage in front of the students of Beijing University, taking their questions and handling them all so beautifully. I was thinking, *No communist head of China could do this in a million years*. It is just so different from what they do and it is so impressive. That to me was almost better than any speech he could have given in a parliament. It was covered on television too—just taking questions from students. It was great.

The trip to Ireland and Russia was fascinating because it showed how different two countries could be. We went to Russia first and they had just had a financial crisis and they were really gloomy and they didn't want to hear him say, "You have to work toward democracy and capitalism," because their economy was in the tank and they were unhappy. We got a very cold response in Russia.

The same day, we got on an airplane and flew to Northern Ireland and people were lining the streets. It was like the Second Coming. He loved it. He loved the Irish people. He's convinced that he is Irish even though it's not clear that he is, or which tradition. It doesn't even matter, he loves them all. He gave beautiful speeches in Ireland. There was a serious one in Parliament, and an open-air speech.

I wrote one that I cared a lot about. It was my first breakthrough to that point. It was in the evening on a lawn between a Protestant and a Catholic church in a city called Armagh. He gave a nice philosophical speech about how important it was that the Irish had forged this peace, the Good Friday Agreement, because then he could go around to the rest of the world and say, "These people did it," and that was going to help in the Balkans and other difficult places. The Irish really liked that argument because they want to be considered a great people far from Ireland too. It just was a nice moment.

Riley: Do you remember how this came to you?

Widmer: In that particular instance, I had been reading Kennedy's speech in Berlin, which is a pretty well-known speech, a very short speech but a very beautiful speech. He says, "Anyone who thinks freedom is in danger of disappearing, come to Berlin." He says it a few different times, in a few different ways. So it was the same idea. Kennedy of course works well in Ireland, or Northern Ireland. So he was using the same idea but saying, "You've done something as significant. You've done something extremely rare in human history." Two traditions have forged a peace without going to war. That's really big news—telling them, even more than they knew themselves, what big news it was.

I was becoming someone who was spending a lot of time reading old speeches of American Presidents. I read John Donne. There was a time in the lead-up to the Good Friday Agreement where all of the leaders were involved—it was Tony Blair, and John Major before him, and also the Premier of Ireland, Bertie Ahern, and the leaders of the traditions in Northern Ireland, and Bill Clinton. One question was how do you refer to these different places? Someone was saying "these islands," meaning Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Ireland. So I was thinking about islands and John Donne came to mind: "No man is an island." I used that at the end of the speech. As usual, he improved upon it a lot. I wrote something, but that was a good example of him rising to the occasion and really doing a great job, adding a lot of text.

What may have been my best single speech—and when I say "my" I really want to be careful because, as I said, it went through my fellow speechwriters and Sandy before even getting to Bill Clinton. Every speech had many cooks—but a speech I was the principal writer on was a speech he gave in Turkey in November of 1999. That was a real watershed speech for Turkish American relations. It did receive decent coverage in the U.S. press but just for one day. It was something

that happened yesterday and then it's all over. But people in Turkey still talk about Bill Clinton's great speech to Parliament.

It said to the Turkish people, "What you're doing here is really important to us and to the entire world. Keep doing it." For too long people have said Turkey is important just because it's a buffer against Russia, because of *where* it is. Bill Clinton said, "I want to tell you, you're important because of *who* the Turkish people are. You're Muslims who are forging a very interesting democracy. You're promoting stability in every direction, in the Balkans, Kosovo, toward the Caucasus, toward Iraq, Syria, Iran, and the Middle East. Turkey really is a world-class nation for the 21st century and we can't forget that." They just loved it. They hadn't ever heard it said in language that was actually analytical and smart and not just, "It's great to be in Turkey." The whole country was ecstatic over that speech. That was a rare moment where I felt like a single speech had made a big difference.

Often I would write a good speech and the event would go well, but not much would happen, really, whether it was in a country where people already liked the U.S., or the U.S. media was too lazy to cover it properly. This was one where it really went through and it felt like it was 1963 all over again, where the words of a President really mattered to people.

Riley: Did your interest in Turkey precede this, or was it developing—

Widmer: In this moment it was just a trip I signed up for. I did have some curiosity about going, I had never been. But it went so well. It was a combination of loving the people, and the experience of being there, and that the speech had gone so well, that I began to think about going back. I've gone back about once a year since then. I have a number of friends now in Turkey. The fact that I wrote that speech has nothing to do with it anymore; it's just how I got interested. Most of my friends there are history teachers.

Riley: Any other specific recollections from some of these travels? I'm looking at the timeline to see if it provokes anything.

Widmer: A slightly funny story: In the middle of Kosovo time, which was not a funny time, but the story is a little bit amusing, he wanted to go speak to some of the people on the front lines. Interestingly, one of the groups of people on the front lines were based in rural Missouri, because the B2 bomber can fly so far; it can fly from Missouri to Kosovo and back again without refueling. So he went to talk to pilots there. He gave a really nice speech.

That was a speech where some of these civil rights ideas began to enter into what he was saying. I was somewhat involved with that. I don't remember who wrote what phrase. It had occurred to me that it's very moving to actually look at the U.S. military, because there are so many black officers and there are so many female officers. It's one of the best-integrated organizations on earth. And its effectiveness is beyond dispute. He went and said some of these things, saying, "I'm so proud of what you are doing and I'm just so proud of who you are as people. It makes me proud to be Commander in Chief of an organization as well-integrated and impressive as the U.S. military." I looked up, and on the banner above him was the name of the military base. The name of the base is Whiteman Air Force Base. Fortunately, no one noticed it.

Riley: A little bit of humor. You talked about some of your successes. Were there ever clunkers, or something that got through and you felt later, *What was I thinking?*

Widmer: There were not too many. There were speeches that failed to excite people, certainly. That happened all the time. As far as false information conveyed, which you were always worried about, especially when—sometimes we were writing very quickly when something had just happened, and we didn't really have Google available the way it is now.

He went to South America right after I was hired, but I did not go. I was too junior. He went to Argentina and went to a monument to a great general in the past. I had written something like, "It is moving to be here at the tomb of this great hero of Argentina." And it wasn't a tomb; it was just a monument to the guy. The translator apparently was so quick that he or she caught it and translated the way it should have been into Spanish so no one ever really knew. But I knew, and I think Sandy knew, and my immediate supervisor knew. They let me know and I felt terrible. But that didn't happen too often. It could have. We really were flying by the seat of our pants sometimes. It didn't happen too often.

We had a very good library in the OEOB, the Executive Office Library, and unbelievably talented librarians. I liked them a lot. It was foreshadowing. I think that I would like to work in a library some day. I would fact-check with them and they were very helpful.

Riley: In one of the readings you mentioned having access—where you had gotten all of the States of the Union from.

Widmer: Oh, yes, that's that room. It's a beautiful room. It's like four stories tall.

Strong: That's in the Library of Congress, you mean?

Widmer: No. It's this room—I wish more Americans could see it. It's an old iron library room inside the OEOB. The OEOB was the Department of State, and the Department of War and Navy in the late 19th century. Apparently, the *Declaration of Independence* and the treaties were all kept on display and you could just come in and go look at them. It's a quite ornate public room with these iron balconies going up four or five stories. It's really incredible.

It's mostly legal books. The books aren't quite as good as you would like them to be but the space is amazing. That's where I would go to escape my office and find a little alcove and read in it for a while. They had all of the old inaugural addresses in there, so I started reading them for fun. There was one librarian, in particular, I remember. I could ask her anything and she could find it. She was amazing.

Riley: Were there other kinds of things that you would routinely read to try to get inspiration for speeches?

Widmer: Well, I've said Kennedy and FDR were the two I found most moving, but I read big biographies of Americans. This was the kind of book I had never read as a grad student. It's funny, I had been in American history for the better part of 15 years, if you include undergrad, and I wouldn't read those big fat doorstop biographies; I was reading academic history. Then I found, working in the White House and living in Washington, that I loved those big, fat patriotic

biographies. David McCullough's *John Adams* came out then, and Edmund Morris' *Theodore Roosevelt.* Then I started getting older ones about other Presidents. I read a couple about Lincoln and obscure Presidents.

I would read Clinton's domestic speeches as well as his foreign. He'd often the next day talk about what he had been reading the night before. In a pretty unimportant-seeming speech, like just one of five speeches he's giving to a group of visitors, he'd say, "Last night I was reading a biography of Rutherford B. Hayes and I noticed this…." It was really fun. I wish it had become an actual dialogue between me and him. It didn't, but I felt like, *God, Clinton is staying up late every night reading these biographies,* and I kind of wanted to do it too. So I would take out a lot of Presidential biographies.

I now am something of one, although not exactly—it's not my major career, but I did a little book on Martin Van Buren for the series that Arthur Schlesinger edited. And I'm often called by the media as if I'm a Presidential historian, even though I'm not one, so I'm grateful that I spent that time reading about the Presidency. It's hard not to get excited about it when you're there.

What else for inspiration? Some literature, but I didn't read that much—my wife reads much more than I do—mainly just great speeches. I think we all like Winston Churchill. At the time, William Safire's book had just come out. It's a sort of compilation of excerpts of speeches called *Lend Me Your Ears.* Peggy Noonan's memoir was also available. But I was frustrated that there were no Democratic voices in that literature and that you couldn't get the real speeches themselves. Even Safire was just giving you a paragraph here and a paragraph there. So I went to the Library of America publishers in New York and said, "We really need a book of great American speeches." It took a while but they said yes, and did a two-volume series. I didn't write any introduction at all. It's just for people to read and judge for themselves. I felt good about that.

I like older things, too, so I read a lot of [Daniel] Webster, [Henry] Clay, [George] Washington, [Thomas] Jefferson, and even some Puritan sermons, which most people would not want to read, but I like colonial history.

Riley: Poetry?

Widmer: Not as much as you would think. Clinton loves poetry. I mentioned he loves Yeats and Seamus Heaney. But I would not put too much in—I did do the John Donne in Northern Ireland, but not too much, generally. I think we did Van Morrison once in Northern Ireland.

Strong: I have a question related to that, although this is more the kind of question that comes at the very end of the interview. For your Library of America you did pick a couple of Clinton speeches.

Widmer: Yes.

Strong: If you were doing a volume of his best speeches while President, what else would be in it?

Widmer: Good question. It was not an easy decision to put those two in there; they're not terribly famous. One is not famous at all, the Little Rock one. I can briefly explain my thinking on that if you want and then go on to the other question.

Strong: Sure.

Widmer: It felt like the end of the 20th century was an ending we should get to. I thought it was important to use something by George H. W. Bush or Bill Clinton or both. The George H. W. Bush speech that most people know is the "thousand points of light," but it's extremely long. It's a convention speech and it would have taken up 20 pages of the book. It's just not good enough, and we were including only entire speeches.

The Memphis speech, I thought, was worthy of inclusion. It really is a very interesting speech. It speaks against his own constituency, which makes a speech a good speech. He's not saying, "It's great to be with a lot of black people and I love black people." He's saying, "I'm really disappointed and I think Martin Luther King would have been disappointed in what African-Americans have achieved since he died here," which is a much more sophisticated point and that's why it's a good speech.

But to have only one seemed a little odd, so the editors asked me to look for one more. I remembered that speech in Little Rock. I had just started working there and it was a big hit at the time and it was very personal to his life, because he remembered the original moment in Little Rock. I read it and I thought it was a beautiful speech. The second volume of that book is basically saying—it begins with Lincoln speaking on Reconstruction and it's working through the whole problem of racial justice. I thought, *This is a good, emphatic note to end on*. The Memphis one is a little bit of a downer. The Little Rock one is saying, "We've really come a long way." I thought it was a better ending. That was the thinking.

What *I* would include? That is a good question. Among the ones I worked on, I would say Northern Ireland, Africa—the Rwanda one, and maybe one or two others on the Africa trip. China, I don't think there is a great single speech. A lot of his best moments are in press conferences or give-and-take with journalists. It doesn't quite lend itself to conventional speech form. I did like the UN speech on terrorism. I'm only saying speeches I remember clearly, which isn't quite what you asked. There were a number of good ones throughout the Kosovo crisis about the kind of world we're trying to build in the aftermath of this struggle.

There's a group I had nothing to do with that were quite good. Around the time of the Oklahoma City bombing he gave a nice speech in Oklahoma City a couple of days afterward about how, "This isn't America, this isn't who we are, and we need to think about who we are." I thought that was a true Presidential speech. Not long after that he gave a really good speech at Michigan State, maybe, or Michigan. He built on what he had said at Oklahoma City and said, "It's the easiest thing on earth to blame the U.S. government for our problems. Anyone can attack me from the left or right, but it seems like mainly from the right, and say the government is trying to raise taxes or it's this Orwellian nightmare. That's not what the U.S. government is all about. The U.S. government is supposed to empower people to build better lives for themselves, whether it's through education or tax incentives to start new businesses, or highway contraction or whatever." That was Bill Clinton at his centrist best.

Maybe some of the remarks on race—I remember a few. The details are a little hazy but in '98, '99 he was still doing that national conversation on race that admittedly didn't have a very satisfying conclusion, but the fact that he was having these widely publicized conversations with leaders of the black community about how to do a better job showed some imagination.

One night I remember well that was a beautiful speech—Elie Wiesel came to the White House during the Kosovo time—I'm slanting this a little bit toward my time—it was something called a Millennium Evening, which were these cultural events. Clinton gave a really great introduction to Wiesel. "No one wants to send American troops into Kosovo. It's far away and for unclear purpose, but about the world that we might be able to build now that the Cold War is over. Something better is possible." I thought that was a very good speech.

Here and there, often when one wasn't totally expecting it, he would rise to great eloquence, sometimes more when there wasn't a well-prepared speech in front of him than when there was. You can measure this because he speaks without speechwriters now and his speeches are magnificent. When it is just him alone he's really fantastic.

Strong: I have a question related to that, because I think there would be wide agreement that he is an amazingly articulate individual and that, both from prepared remarks or off-the-cuff, he can really move an audience; however, if I ask my students to give me a famous quote from [Harry S.] Truman, they say, "The buck stops here." For Kennedy, they say, "Ask not what your country can do for you.…" If I ask for Clinton, they don't have an answer except for maybe the finger-wagging and the statement about Monica Lewinsky.

Widmer: That's true.

Strong: Why is that true?

Widmer: Partly it's a problem of history that isn't anyone's fault. There was no existential threat to the United States in his eight years. There was no Cold War, World War II, Berlin or Cuban Missile Crisis. Kosovo was very serious, Bosnia was very serious, but they weren't ever going to lead to an invasion of the United States. That's part of it. People were content and a little bit lazy during his eight years. Had Canada invaded the United States, he might have given a memorable speech about why we need to resist the northern invader, but nothing like that ever happened.

The benign message of greater integration globally and building a more fair world, while true and important, wasn't the sexiest message of all time. I mean, if you want to see a speaker who was truly lost, it was George W. Bush between January 20th and September 11th, 2001, where he had nothing to say on any subject. He didn't even believe in this global integration. At least Clinton believed in that. It just wasn't as exciting as the Cold War. But after 9-11 Bush's speeches got good and people paid a lot of attention to them. Some of it is just the urgency.

He might have suffered a bit by one of his virtues, which is that he's naturally garrulous and so he likes talking. When you talk a lot it's hard to pick out a sound bite. That just strikes me as a possible answer. People got used to this soothing sound of his voice and a kind of longish speech happening at the time of the State of the Union. They wouldn't expect an arresting sound bite to jump out.

Riley: Is it also possibly a function of this aversion to grandiosity in speechwriting? I've heard some Democrats express admiration for somebody like Michael Gerson, who was given free rein to take off with the language and have the President voice—

Widmer: It's a good question. I feel that Bill Clinton has gotten slightly short shrift in the religion department, because he knows his Bible extremely well. I'd love to see him go against Gerson or Bush in a real contest of biblical arcana—

Riley: I'd like to see that too. Can we arrange it?

Widmer: Bill Clinton really knows the Bible well. I'm not sure how he got it, but he has it and he can quote extensively off the top of his head from the Bible, from many different books. But all of his speechwriters were nervous little agnostics. Maybe we didn't do him—I mean, he certainly could have overridden us but we were trying to write in the kind of centrist—the word "centrist" isn't very satisfying, but in a voice that felt honest and avoided the Reagan extremes of "God is on our side and all history is tending our way," which we did not want to be saying, because it sounded arrogant in a time when a lot of things were going America's way. To call attention to it seemed arrogant. But we didn't want to be like Jimmy Carter calling attention to our malaise and problems. We wanted to say, "Look, we have some challenges and we're able to solve them. Here's what they are." But they were often sort of small-bore challenges, rather than, "We're going to rewrite the rules of the economic order."

As you remember, there were left-wing protests while Clinton was President. The World Bank—was it the World Bank?

Strong: It was the Seattle meeting.

Widmer: The Seattle meeting. Clinton was President. The leftists were still—it was unclear how we related to the American left wing. By and large, we did not.

Riley: Were there discussions during your time, or were you informed about any discussions when you came on board, about any kind of grand doctrinal pronouncements in relation to America's place in the world?

Widmer: I later became aware of things. When I came in, no, nobody told me anything. I later became aware that Tony Lake in the first term had floated "democratic enlargement." Was there another part of that? It hadn't really gone anywhere so we were avoiding that phrase. We were also avoiding "new world order," which was associated with George H. W. Bush. We were trying to find new phrases. I tried "new world" for a while, that we were trying to build a new world, which is very simple, but it didn't stick especially.

Certainly, we were aware that everyone liked the idea of a more integrated planet with the U.S. leading. It wasn't ever abdicating responsibility, it was that the U.S. leading a group of countries was better integrated economically, both within each country and among the countries, and would have far fewer wars. It did feel like, for a number of years, that there might not be a war for a long time. The only thing happening was Ethiopia–Eritrea, the only old-fashioned war. By that I mean between one country and another country, so you can't quite count Yugoslavia.

It had been quite a number of years since one country had declared war on another country and we thought maybe this was going to be a better time, or maybe I just thought that. Obviously, it wasn't. Most of it was by osmosis and not because someone said, "Our theme of this year is going to be *X*." That didn't happen. Sandy trusted us to come up with our own ideas within the scheme of what we already knew to be the major concerns.

Strong: This may have been after you were out of your original assignment, but was there language drafted in case the Middle East peace succeeded?

Widmer: There were glimmers. I don't think there was anything drafted, but there were glimmers that it was coming. There had been the Wye River meeting, which was pretty optimistic, and then this incredible day when King Hussein [bin Talal] came to the White House, although dying of cancer. He and Clinton and whoever was the Israeli Prime Minister—it was either [Benjamin] Netanyahu or [Ehud] Barak—all spoke beautifully about what they were doing. Actually that would be a good day, in this book of Clinton speeches, whatever he said that day.

We didn't have anything drafted. Nothing ever happened. But there were other interesting episodes. Clinton actually flew to the Palestinian territories, which most people don't remember. I believe he's the only President to have spoken to the Palestinian Assembly.

He was very comfortable with Israel, and pro-Israeli in many ways, but he wanted to be equal so he flew into the West Bank and gave a pretty interesting speech there too. We thought it might be coming. Also, Sandy was showing signs of frustration early on so we didn't have anything ready to go. I'm not sure who would have even written it. Sandy might have wanted to do it himself. I was always hoping for Cuba. I was thinking that might be a world historical event in this Presidency. It might have happened if they hadn't shot down that airplane. When that happened, it couldn't go back to a normal relationship.

Remember at the end of the Presidency Madeleine Albright went to North Korea? That was a strange trip and it was never repeated, but that was part of the same impulse, that maybe everything was about to change. But things weren't about to change. It just felt like maybe Cuba or North Korea, one of these problems, might actually get solved while we're all here, but it wasn't going to happen.

Riley: Maybe we should move on to—first, is there something we haven't touched on with respect to the speechwriting that's obvious to you?

Widmer: No, you've asked good questions. I may remember something tonight but not right now.

Riley: You'll get the document and if you want to put an addendum to it, you're welcome to do that. What were the circumstances then that created the movement to the new position? This occurred in 2000?

Widmer: In May or June of 2000, I was getting ready to leave. I had signed a contract with Washington College and I was going to be going there July first. I wanted to go back to teaching. My wife wasn't terribly happy in Washington. She had come back here to Cambridge to live, so

I was commuting on weekends, which was pretty uncomfortable. I just needed to go back to a normal life and had signed up with Washington College. I had given my notice as an NSC speechwriter, and even had a farewell party on Air Force One as if I was leaving.

Then the idea of this new position was created pretty quickly. John Podesta mentioned it to me. He had never been my boss. My boss was always Sandy, and I still feel in retrospect that Sandy was my boss, but for the last seven months John Podesta was my boss. He was the Chief of Staff. He said, "We need one person to do a lot of things that are going to start happening very quickly now, from the planning of the library to our getting our historical house in order." He wanted me also to initiate projects. It was exciting. It was going toward history, which I felt I was going toward anyway, but it was a new job. I went to Washington College and they gave me permission to come on January 20, so I said yes.

It was a very hard seven months, I really worked like a dog to make some of these things happen, and we did make a lot happen in that time. I think John's feeling was simply that I was the only guy for miles who had a PhD, or a PhD in history, anyway, and at that point I'd been around three years. I knew a lot of people. I was very shy and green my first six months, but by this time I knew everybody. I knew Clinton himself. I knew Clinton's personal assistants, which, believe me, was very helpful in every way. I knew everyone in the NSC and I knew a lot of people in the domestic part of the White House. I was trusted.

I took the job and then went around to all the Cabinet departments trying to get the Secretaries to find one smart person in each department to write a history of what had happened over the last eight years. I got some really great stuff. I hope future scholars will read these documents, because some of them were very impressive.

Strong: Who did the one for the NSC?

Widmer: That is such a good question. I used to know. I had a copy. I'm having trouble remembering. It would have been done under Sandy's supervision, certainly, but who would have done that? I don't remember who did State, either. That would be one of the best ones to see. It's funny because I was in the NSC and I can't remember.

The quality varied a little bit. Someone would do a 25-page thing that wasn't very helpful and someone else might do a thousand-page history of every decision, which was extremely helpful. There wasn't really time to get them all to be consistent with each other. It was a miracle we were getting them in at all. We got them in and sent them off to Little Rock.

Talking about the library was fun. I would go to New York and meet with the exhibit planners. An architect had been hired to do the outside of the building and another interior architect, named Ralph Applebaum, had been hired to do the guts of the museum. I met quite a bit with his staff about what should go into exhibits, what could not be mentioned. I was always very far on the side of openness. I didn't think we should be concealing information. Other libraries had gotten into trouble for doing that. I didn't think this one should.

I was involved in the earliest stages of some of that, but then the strangeness of the end of a Presidency is it ends and you're still in the middle of all these projects. It's too late; they just end. I was frantically running around the White House trying to get people to call me in the last

72 hours. Then suddenly I was an untenured history professor at Washington College and that was it. It was that rainy day of the inaugural. I remember wondering a bit what it was all about.

It was a hard time because Bill Clinton was not nearly as popular on the day he left office as he is now. I was still deeply loyal to him and I always have been but it was hard because he had done the Marc Rich pardon in the last couple of days. That had a catastrophic impact, almost beyond Monica Lewinsky. It was sort of the straw that broke the camel's back. Everyone had been very supportive throughout the impeachment. This was an unexpected problem that no one had patience for. That was hard. And that was exactly my job, to try to get people to think of this as a very serious Presidency that accomplished a lot. One pardon had done a lot of damage.

But time is amazing. Another six months went by and people couldn't remember the Marc Rich pardon very well. Then another couple of years and he was becoming more and more popular. It has been a remarkable thing to watch. If you ask for a scientific explanation, I'm not sure I could give you one except I think it is related to the knowledge that he is the "anti-Bush." He is clearly extremely different from the person who is in office.

His good works were becoming well known to the world, and people liked that. There was some nostalgia for the good years of the '90s, and also just genuine affection. We often feel a lot of affection for our Presidents when they leave office, as with Gerald Ford or even Jimmy Carter. It was some of that. But whatever it is, it's very powerful and he's extremely popular in a way that he was not on that day at the end of his term.

Riley: You had indicated that you also did some interviews and we talked about this downstairs at lunch but I probably ought to go ahead and get you to talk a little bit about what led to that, who you selected, and why.

Widmer: We thought it would be good to get some foreign heads of state talking on camera about Bill Clinton for history, so future historians could have this kind of personal statement by someone who worked closely at the highest level with Bill Clinton. It would have been nice to get a larger sampling, but we did four, maybe three. I did Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic and also Jacques Chirac of France.

The Havel interview was long and very interesting. The Chirac one was short and pretty boring. Jiang Zemin of China spoke with someone else and gave sort of ordinary answers to questions. We were in Brunei for an economic summit meeting and Jiang Zemin was there so we asked if we could have half-an-hour and he did it. These people were very gracious.

Bill Clinton was not only the President of the United States but at that point he was one of the longest-serving heads of state on earth, because now most governments are democratic and not many people make it eight years, just as George W. Bush now is one of the longest-serving heads of state. If we called, people would always say yes, but we just didn't have that much time. We hoped to get Tony Blair. I don't think we did. I hope that will happen. Maybe you will get that interview.

Riley: I hope so.

Strong: These are videotaped?

Widmer: Chirac was audio, Havel was video, Jiang Zemin was video. They were mostly videotaped, but for Chirac I think we only did audio.

I was a one-man office and it was hard to make a lot of these things happen even with all the power of the White House. I did my best but not every interview could be arranged.

Riley: Were you aware of the recorded conversations that the President was having with Taylor Branch?

Widmer: I either was aware of them dimly, or I became aware in my next phase when I was helping him on his book project. I think I was aware dimly. I was one of the few who knew. I don't remember who told me. I would stress *dimly*. It was not a known certainty. I knew Taylor Branch a little bit. I don't think he told me, but I did know him a little. Yes, I was aware. It probably came up as we were planning how to capture history. In that last seven months, someone probably pretty high up told me that we had these but they were private and they belonged to the President. I don't remember. In fact, I'm not sure that that is true. I know there are strict legal guidelines as to what belongs and what doesn't.

Riley: I don't know either. When it was raised in our advisory committee meeting with Bruce there, I asked him how in the world all those subpoenas managed not to find their way—and I was told it was because the President kept the tapes in his sock drawer and nobody knew they were there.

Widmer: Yes. Around the time I started working on the history project in those last seven months, I became aware then. But it was pretty intimate with the inner circle of the White House at this point. I'd been the least likely guy to ever come in. I really was so green; I can't stress it enough. Partly for that reason—People knew I didn't have a political ax to grind. I wasn't going to go out and be a lobbyist. They just trusted me with information and I kept it confidential.

I've never heard those tapes to this day. I gather Taylor is now writing his book about it, which will be fascinating. When I was hired to help him think about his book project, that was the precedent. He wanted me to do what Taylor had been doing, which was to turn on a tape recorder and ask questions so he could just talk off-the-record about things that were on his mind. I was the next person in that cycle.

Strong: At the end of the administration, when they're talking about how to preserve a historical record, what were those conversations like? Everybody in the White House is so busy. They have to get today's deadlines done. Hardly anybody has more than a few minutes to think about history. Occasionally an event comes along—there's a handshake on the White House lawn—and you know that it's a big deal. People tended not to keep diaries. After some of that stuff was subpoenaed then nobody had any reason to keep them.

Widmer: Right.

Riley: You didn't keep a diary.

Widmer: No, I didn't.

Riley: Were you instructed not to?

Widmer: I might have been. Either I was instructed not to, or one of my fellow speechwriters said, "You'd be crazy to keep a diary." I have a feeling I was instructed not to.

Riley: You'd be the type that would keep one because of your great interest in history.

Widmer: Yes. My recollection is that something written came to me when I was coming in, because I was in the NSC. I'm sorry, these are important questions. I don't want to give you any false information. I truly can't remember.

Strong: You know where my question was headed. It's a real problem for White House staff to turn around at that very end and think about historical legacy and what it is they're leaving behind, because they're leaving behind so much junk.

Widmer: Well, it was really hard. Both Bill Clinton and John Podesta helped me by telling everyone they had to work with me. I was invited to Cabinet meetings at least once, and I think twice, where I was introduced to the entire Cabinet. John Podesta said, "This is Ted Widmer. He's working for me. He needs from you all your complete cooperation. Specifically, you need to assign someone to write a history of your department." It's Washington, they would get it done. If it's said clearly like that, they'll do it.

But it was hard on me because, at the end, a lot of information was coming in. I lacked a large enough office to process it. I did do it. I felt like I did a good job for them, but it was incredibly exhausting. I was barely sleeping in the last couple of weeks. I had one assistant who was very good who came on at the very end, but for some of that time I was doing it all by myself. It was unpleasant. I guess I had a certain Zen attitude because I knew I couldn't do everything and I knew that whatever I got done was better than if they hadn't hired me. I just tried to get as much done as I could for future historians and then I left on the day of the inauguration.

Riley: Some of them are extremely valuable. I had a chance to look through the domestic policy stuff, which I guess Bruce Reed probably either did himself or farmed out.

Widmer: Yes.

Riley: It's fabulous in the sense that it was not only the secondary reporting of what had happened, but they also had gone through and included photocopies of the President's decision memos related to things as a way of leapfrogging into the head of the queue for getting stuff publicly releasable. That's just a gold mine.

I had been in conversations with Bruce about taking some of the money they've given us and sending somebody down with a high-speed scanner in hopes of scanning this stuff and making it available on the internet. Now, you've got to go to Little Rock to do this.

Widmer: That would be great.

Riley: In principle we've got an agreement.

Widmer: I read it all at the time, but then I shipped it off, so I don't have it, but there was very little that was top secret, almost nothing. I think it could be released and it would be a good thing to release it.

Riley: Sure.

Widmer: Our goal was ambitious. I did a little study of previous Presidencies and thought that Lyndon Johnson had done the best job dealing with his historical materials. There's a feeling in the community—you would know better than I—that the LBJ Library is really a great Presidential library and not as up-tight as some of the other ones. They had done an oral history project. We called ours an administrative history project, but we wanted to do something as ambitious as they had done.

Riley: Then you were also the recipient of communications from Philip Zelikow.

Widmer: Yes I was.

Riley: I had long mistakenly thought the original communication from Philip had occurred in October of 2000 but there's a reference in the letter that is addressed to you that an original proposal had been generated about a year before then, but I haven't been able to find the copy of that or even who it was directed to. Do you have any recollection of when you first became aware that the Center was interested in doing this kind of work?

Widmer: Around when I was hired in the summer of 2000, Podesta told me that this was on the table, that we needed to generate our own documents, and we needed to figure out which university was going to do an oral history, and we needed to make sure that the plans for the Clinton Library were really good. Those were the big items. It was UVA [University of Virginia] and Arkansas. Both had perhaps submitted proposals before then, but then we asked each to tighten up their proposal because there was a judgment process. I was the point person on it for some time. I was the person Philip would have sent a letter to, and then also Arkansas.

I presented it all to John for decision. The decision that was made was made a little after we left the White House, which was odd to me because I thought he could have made it earlier, but I'm sure there were a million things going on. I remember driving in from my new situation to Washington. It was maybe March or April of 2001. It was probably my last meeting on all these subjects. It was in D.C. It came up with this split verdict, and until today I haven't been involved with it since.

Riley: It's going great guns on both sides. They've conducted somewhere in excess of a hundred interviews down in Arkansas also. It has now been absorbed into the Barbara and David Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History. They would like to do more videotaping. They've done a lot of interviews in the Hope and Hot Springs years. There was a release of some of those interviews about two years ago, so you could actually go to the Arkansas website and get access to some of that stuff.

Because of the change in organization down there, they haven't made a lot of progress beyond that. I think they're trying to get geared up to do Georgetown, Oxford, Yale, but that's a different order of magnitude. As long as you're doing Arkansas, it's all local. Contacts out of the state are

all over the world—the resource questions, preparations questions and things of that nature. They've done about the same number of interviews that we have.

Strong: There is a series of questions I'd like to ask about helping future historians who are going to have a chance to look at papers in the Presidential library. I want to see if I heard you correctly earlier. One of the things people want to know is what part of a speech did the President contribute? That last draft is going to have those margin notes. Will anyone be able to read them other than Clinton?

Widmer: That's a fair point. They're just notes, like, "three things to talk about.…"

Strong: So if you had that last version of the printed speech—and those are fairly well labeled in the files—and then you had the papers of the President in which you had the very final draft, you could attribute that last round of changes to Bill?

Widmer: If it is not in that final draft, and it is in the printed version, it is something he made up.

Strong: Something he made up?

Widmer: Yes.

Strong: And there would be a fair amount of that?

Widmer: Yes.

Strong: That's interesting to people. Some of the writing out of the Reagan Library has been a very interesting set of observations about what he did to the various drafts.

Widmer: Yes.

Strong: What else would you want to look at if everything was opened in the library?

Widmer: Well, you mentioned the Taylor Branch—I would love to hear that. That's spoken.

Riley: So would we.

Widmer: Well, if there were anything written—I don't think there is—that would shed light on his highly unusual and highly successful marriage, that would be fascinating, the communications every day back and forth between these two extremely intelligent people.

Strong: Did they communicate on paper?

Widmer: No, I don't think they did, so I don't think that's possible.

Strong: It just would be something you would want to know.

Widmer: Yes.

Strong: I think people are going to struggle with that relationship for a very long time.

Widmer: Hindsight has given us a sense that terrorism was the great issue of that time, which wasn't always obvious then, so memos and speeches, and private conversations relating to terrorism would be fascinating. There are also huge success stories that we often don't pay enough attention to, like the largely successful unification of Europe, which began under Bush Senior, but certainly continued under Clinton—to see where the strategy was coming from, and who were the architects of that.

Let's see, what else? I mentioned race earlier as something I thought he was unusually good at. It doesn't seem like a great Presidential topic unless you step back as a historian and say, well, of course, it's one of the great historical topics of American history. I thought he did heroic work advancing the agenda and didn't quite get credit for that.

Riley: To what do you attribute the shortcomings of the conversation, of the dialogue?

Widmer: I think it was swamped by impeachment. Probably that's it in a nutshell. I think he himself stopped planning it because it was just too much.

Strong: If there was a full set of these interviews, of the various people who worked in the White House, giving their recollections, whose recollections would you be most eager to see?

Widmer: Well, Berger comes to mind because he was at the center of so many world events in those years. Strobe Talbott is someone I always admired a lot for his intelligence and his deep familiarity with Clinton because they'd known each other for so long.

Strong: Did they have lots of conversation outside of Talbott's expertise?

Widmer: I have a feeling they did, but I don't know. I went to a couple of briefings when they were in the same room and you could just tell that Bill Clinton was really amused by Strobe and impressed by him also. He just enjoyed his reports better than the stuffy report of an underling to a supervisor.

In the middle years before I got there, [Robert] Rubin was doing very creative things with the U.S. economy that seemed to have largely worked well. So, maybe not me personally, but I think future historians might want to know what were the actual economic steps that allowed this great prosperity to happen. I'm sure historians will argue whether it was caused by the administration's decisions or if they merely responded well to things that were already happening. It seems like this administration did a better job steering the economy than many have, but I say that with relatively high ignorance of what it takes to make an economy hum.

Let's see, who else? Relations with Congress were always interesting, but that was far from where I was, also. Albright is sort of in the same category as Berger. Pentagon relationships were always interesting, not as good as they might have been but not as bad as they might have been also. I think he had a pretty good relationship with Bill Cohen. It would be interesting to know the degree to which Bill Clinton was involved in target selection and hard military decisions of that nature; I don't know that. There were episodes that were horrifying, like the accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy. It's always interesting to know the degree to which a President is involved in warfare.

Riley: The President got off to a very rocky start in relations with the Pentagon and the armed services.

Widmer: He did.

Riley: Had that completely disappeared by the time you came along?

Widmer: I can't speak for the Pentagon. It felt pretty good from my point of view. The people from the service branches who were in the NSC were all happy to be there. They were all loyal. They were great people. Were they representative of the entire military? I don't know. Probably there was some simmering resentment based on "Don't ask don't tell," or probably even further back in history on Vietnam. It's amazing to me that Vietnam has never been a source of tension with this President with both [Richard] Cheney and—it might have been but it hasn't been. Clinton brought out those tensions more clearly. He just seemed more liberal, as he obviously was.

There were a number of rituals that were very pleasant throughout my time. I mentioned the Memorial Day and the Veterans Day speeches. He always worked hard at those. And things like presenting trophies to the best football team of the service branches, I mean, there were soldiers and sailors, airmen, coming in fairly frequently. There certainly was no bias against them. But it wouldn't surprise me if that residual cultural gap had persisted.

Riley: I want to hear from you a little bit on—although the post-Presidency is not really our brief, but the chances that Arkansas is going to get to you anytime in the near future are probably not real strong, so let's talk a little bit about what you were doing in your interviews with him for his book.

Widmer: Well, it was amazing. I got to have a second phase with Bill Clinton that was completely different from my first phase and I feel grateful that that happened. He called on me around August of 2001, around the time he signed his contract—in fact, it was the same day or the day after—and asked me to come speak to him. Of course, one says yes. He said, "I'm sure you're very busy, but I'd like to talk to you about my book if you don't mind." I could swear I saw tumbleweed rolling down the main street of Chestertown, Maryland. So I went into his house in Washington that he had just bought with Hillary, the house she lives in when she's a Senator.

We had a great talk, one of the best talks I've ever had with him, for hours in that house, about what makes a great book, about what he wanted to do. I don't know if it got into the meaning of life, but it was that kind of academic, intellectual, writerly kind of conversation. It was really fun. I remember talking about Eudora Welty a little bit. There must have been others, I'll try to remember—who had written great autobiographies. [Ulysses S.] Grant. He always liked Grant's autobiography.

I couldn't say no, of course. I started to see him about once or twice a month for two or three years. It was like this process. I would bring a set of questions to him. I had a little hand-held tape recorder. I would also do it in Harlem and then, increasingly, in Chappaqua, more and more in Chappaqua. Each session would be maybe one to two hours. I would prepare for it by reading extensively in various sources, such as his mother's book and the David Maraniss book about

him, and a few others. There weren't too many then; there are a few more now. But Maraniss and his mother's book especially. Then I'd just ask questions. Like you, I wouldn't hesitate to go off if something was interesting. I'd try to get him talking about it, get him thinking. The whole idea was to get as much text spoken by him, which I would then arrange to have transcribed, and I would bring it back to him at the next interview.

He would read over what he had said and then he would put it down and then go and start writing. It was to give him some mass of history to work with but it was not the book itself. The book itself was him writing. It was just a step to get past writer's block and to begin to put all this in a framework. I went from earliest memories up to about the election to be Governor of Arkansas, at which point, whether he was writing more seriously or he just felt he knew the story very well after that, or for whatever reason, I stopped coming to see him. In that time we did about 30 interviews. So it wasn't always once a month. There were times when he was traveling when it would be less than that. It was about twice a month in the first few months, then it was about once a month, and then it might even be less than that later on.

Strong: Were there interesting things in those conversations that didn't make their way into the book?

Widmer: The answer is almost certainly yes. I know I enjoyed them a lot. They were funny. They were moving. It was everything he wanted to talk about. He didn't have any restrictions on me. I could ask any questions I wanted to. Sometimes he'd tell a joke and we'd laugh, and other times it was very serious, about the loss of someone in his life. It was really the whole gamut of emotions and experiences. I think a huge amount of it did get into the book in one form or another, maybe not a full, drawn-out telling of a story, but there were no gigantic stories about young Bill Clinton that he told me that aren't in that book. I bet if I went through all of the transcriptions in the book, I'd find a few things here and there. But it was a really human experience.

It was really captivating because he just talked honestly about what it had been like to be this kid under pretty unusual circumstances in a small town in Arkansas—how he knew he was going to be OK. We can all focus on how poor he was and how his dad had died and his mom wasn't always around, but he had a great network of friends and supporters always around him. That is profoundly part of his politics—that people need to depend on each other.

Families are great, but broader kin networks or fellow students helping each other out—he really believes in communities pitching together. That came out over and over again. He was very close to his friends from grade school, his friends from high school. His friends from Georgetown. At each stage, the same thing happened. He just found these amazing collections of really ambitious and eccentric friends, and the combination was very successful.

Strong: Lots of the accounts of his youth describe that kind of natural-born politician with an incredible capacity to make and keep friends. Were people at that stage of his life observing how smart he was? How did those two things go together? It's unusual, I think, to have someone who is intellectually brilliant and socially gregarious.

Widmer: It's extremely unusual. That's a good point. Jimmy Carter, there's no doubt that he's intellectually brilliant, but the social side can be lacking.

Certainly, people were aware this was a special child early on. He was getting good marks in school. It may not have been until Georgetown that it really all started to come together. I'm not sure. In high school he had his band experience and that was a very political experience, as he explained to me. I'm sure that this is in the book, but it wasn't just that he liked playing music. His band instructor organized the state weeklong meeting of all marching band players in Arkansas every year. To get ready for that was exactly like planning a campaign where you have pieces of paper thumbtacked into bulletin boards about where everyone is going to stay. He said it was an incredibly useful political experience. And of course his visit to the White House when he was still in high school.

But it seemed like something really clicked at Georgetown. He was absorbing a lot from more challenging teachers than he had had in high school, but he was also having a lot of fun and he was developing this incredible ability to multitask—going over to work for William Fulbright a couple of days a week, doing well in his classes, getting to know everyone on the Georgetown campus. Something important happened at Georgetown. But how do I reconcile these two different talents? I just don't know how to. It's like a freakish gift from God.

I think at Georgetown it became funny and charming, in a way that it had not been, to be from Arkansas. In Arkansas you're not going to go around saying how great it is to be from Arkansas. At Georgetown he was sort of a fish out of water. There were not very many southern Protestants at Georgetown University. There he began to really appreciate that he was from a very special place. He has always had immense self-confidence. Some of that is from the love his mother gave him. That's one of the great relationships of his life, obviously.

Also these great friends everywhere. All Presidents have a lot of friends, but with this President it may have made more of a difference than any President in history, because he wasn't rich, he wasn't from a state that was that important in the Electoral College. He has friends in every city in the U.S. and probably every city on earth. There's just something mesmerizing about him that pulls in friends and makes them want to help him 20 years after they meet him. I don't quite have the answer.

Riley: I understand, coming out of a state like Alabama. One of the things, a very common situation—you sort of try to hide from it as a young person in a rising situation. It does speak to extraordinary levels of self-confidence that, rather than doing that, he celebrates it. That's remarkable.

Widmer: It is remarkable. He always had this confidence even though he wasn't a great athlete. It's funny, George Bush, the father, was a great athlete, so you can expect some confidence, but Bill Clinton was not, and yet the confidence is absolutely there. It's just the way he talks, the way he holds forth in a room. He's absolutely arresting.

Riley: Did you, during the course of these interviews, detect any bitterness or regrets about the treatment he had received as President?

Widmer: Generally no. I don't remember anything specific off the top of my head. There may have been some sarcastic comments about the *New York Times*, like maybe before the tape recorder went on. There might have been that kind of comment, maybe a rolling of the eyes. But that also may be my projection. That may be my own response. I'm not quite sure, but it wouldn't have surprised me if there was something like that.

There was frustration among those of us who worked in his White House. We felt like we weren't getting quite fair treatment. We didn't feel that it was consistently horrible but it was a bit of a letdown, a letdown from the so-called liberal media, which isn't that liberal, and an unrelenting attack from the right wing. The combination felt a little off. If there had been unrelenting support from the left wing, that would have been fine. But in fact, there was this great mealy-mouthed media in the middle and then a very well-organized media on the right and that felt a little unfair.

Strong: Why does the right wing hate somebody who balanced the budget, did welfare reform, and gives a speech and says, "The era of big government is over"? I would have thought, in the range of Democrats they might have had, Bill Clinton should have been their friend.

Widmer: That's a very good question. I think the cultural divide was profound, going back to the '60s. The '60s are still unresolved, even to this day. Bush gave a speech a few weeks ago saying we would have won the Vietnam War if we had just toughed it out a little. It's a ridiculous, untrue statement, but people still want to think that. It's not just the Vietnam War, but new ideas about sexuality and gender, women, and new ideas about race. It was a lot to bite off and chew in one decade.

The cultural part of the right wing, which is a big part of the so-called right wing, which is very hard to define anyway, will never let Bill Clinton in, no matter how much he does for causes they support. I also think there was a feeling growing that this was a prodigy who was dangerous to them. He kind of sneaked in in a split election in '92. Then they realized he was actually quite a good politician and was thwarting them, and did thwart Newt Gingrich. War was in a way declared at some point; I don't remember when. Maybe it was at the time of the government shutdown. No, there was Whitewater before that, the investigations.

Maybe it goes back to the cultural divide and nothing else. Again, I don't feel it's the greatest answer, but it's all I can think of. Your question is excellent. That's why my Cambridge friends had trouble liking him because they felt he was too centrist.

Strong: Does that cultural divide just go on until all the baby boomers are senile and gone?

Widmer: I'm hoping that we've swung so far back now that Bush has awakened all the paranoia on the left-wing side. Each side has had their moment of paranoia. I'm hoping that that will mean it's the end of paranoia and we can build something good in the future, more bipartisan. I have no idea. Actually all recent history would indicate I'm ridiculously optimistic, but it would be a great thing if we could do that. We need a little more time. If Hillary—

Strong: Some people say we need a Presidential candidate of the next generation. That wouldn't be Hillary.

Strong: If it is Hillary, the problem will not go away for some time, because she also awakens all those fears even more than he does. If it's [Barack] Obama I'm not sure it would go away, because he also awakens a lot of fears. It's a big step forward to have an African American President. It's a good step forward but it's a big step.

Strong: How self-conscious is Clinton about those cultural issues and the degree to which he became a lightning rod for them?

Widmer: He must be aware of it. It has been a part of his life since the '60s when he was already very involved. He was helping Fulbright. Fulbright was a lightning rod even at the time. I don't think he wants to wallow in it. I think he'd vastly prefer to move on and build this better time in the future if we can do it. But I've heard him say a couple of times since he left the office that you can pretty much decide if someone is conservative or liberal by how they feel about the 1960s. He said it once and I thought it was a good line. I've heard him repeat it a few times since then. If you're largely in favor of what happened in the '60s, you're probably on the Democratic side and if you're largely against, you're probably on the Republican side.

Strong: If he had not gotten a favorable draft number, what choice would he have made?

Widmer: I don't know. That's a hard question.

Strong: He could have gone to Arkansas Law School and been in the ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps].

Widmer: I don't have any idea. I do know that it was a source of deep torment, because this was someone who was opposed to that particular war, but it is also someone who believes deeply in the value of service to one's country and respects the military, and dislikes elitism that allows certain people to be excused from service while others are required to perform it. He's a fair and patriotic person. I would imagine it was an extremely difficult moment, but I have no idea what he would have done in that situation.

Strong: That wasn't one of the interview questions as you were going through his—

Widmer: If I were to guess, I think he would have chosen a form of service. That's just my gut feeling because he's intensely patriotic. I'm obviously pro-Clinton and I'm just speculating. I don't really know the answer.

Riley: During the course of your interviews did he have a sense of what he wanted to do from that point forward? Was he still feeling his way along about what to do with the rest of his life?

Widmer: What was happening in those years? He was setting up his New York office and was going out and giving speeches for money and helping Hillary with her political life and helping the foundation and the library in Arkansas. Then there were occasional specific projects like the India earthquake relief and also the Asian tsunami relief. I think he really got fulfillment from those. That's a big part of who he is—going to a remote location and trying to help out. He enjoyed—in one of those cases he was paired up with George H. W. Bush.

Strong: The tsunami.

Widmer: I think he liked that. And with [Robert] Dole, he did something. It was a campaign to ease overweight—I can't remember the exact name of it. Then we were moving toward CGI [Clinton Global Initiative]. The beginnings of that idea had been expressed while I was still around, but then I left six months to a year before the first one. They brought me back in, so I was quite involved with the first one as an editor. I edited documents that were related to it. In the second and third ones I much more modestly helped them with some writing, like keeping a blog during the event. I'd write a little blog on a website that probably three people would see, but it's fun. I like to be involved a little bit.

Riley: Did he talk much about—you would have been having meetings with him around 9-11 and afterward?

Widmer: I was hired just before 9-11 but I don't think I met him right around then. I would remember. That's a good question, but I don't have a memory of him saying something about it. Maybe a month or two went by right then when I didn't see him.

Riley: There was a sense in the popular media, anyway, that gets confirmed or not in certain other areas, that that was the kind of moment in a Presidency that he didn't have. Was that ever discussed?

Widmer: No. I don't remember him saying that, which doesn't mean he didn't say it to other people, but I don't remember him saying that. I do think he was frustrated. This may be based on my talking with other Clinton alumni or with Bill Clinton himself, but there was definitely an attempt to paint him as indifferent to terrorism, which was necessary to paint the Bush administration as alert to terrorism. That was wrong, and I think that was irritating.

The truth is he paid quite a lot more attention to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda than Bush did. A fair judgment would probably be that neither paid enough attention. Clinton paid some, but didn't catch him or prevent 9-11 from happening; Bush paid almost zero—that's how I feel—then responded very aggressively once it happened. So you have two imperfect responses, but one, I think, is better than the other.

There were other attempts to put down Clinton, right after Bush came in, that were painful, like saying that he caused problems in the Middle East by trying to make peace happen. That's kind of an *Alice in Wonderland* thing to say.

Riley: That line of reasoning still survives.

Widmer: I know.

Riley: It was revived with respect to this Annapolis meeting last week.

Widmer: Right. Or things like the disarray of the White House, or the W's ripped out of typewriters. There was always a feeling in the media that things were chaotic and disorganized. My personal belief is that that may have been true for the first one to two years of an eight-year Presidency, but in my whole time there, you had to wear a full suit, not slacks and a jacket, but a full business suit, and usually a white shirt and a tie of course. And every meeting started on time and ended on time.

So it had started a little awkwardly but then corrected itself. There was all this attention paid to how meetings were not starting on time. Well, they have been for the last four years I've been at them. Probably every Presidential alumnus feels a little that way. That's the beauty of the system.

Strong: Presidential first impressions matter a lot and they do tend to last longer than the reality.

Widmer: That's true.

Strong: That's one of the lines of questioning we're interested in exploring at the end. As people revisit the Clinton years, are there big mistakes in the current set of public impressions that are going to get corrected over time, either because they were wrong in passing time—let's just forget them—or new evidence is going to come out when we see what's in the White House records from the library and the rest. Are there big mistakes that people make about Clinton that are yet to be corrected?

Widmer: I think he will be perceived as more of a force for change then he was perceived at the time. We always felt his failure to completely revolutionize things—it's funny because the left felt he was doing too little, the right felt he was doing too much, and neither was totally satisfied. In fact, he was making a fair amount happen.

We were developing some new economic ideas. And even if he had nothing to do with the end of the Cold War, he certainly inherited that moment and built upon it pretty effectively and was articulating a new world order, for lack of a better phrase, in a way that was meaningful. It was a moment of optimism that was important in the world, just as Reagan's moment of optimism in a very different way was important in the '80s. A lot does come from one human being.

He was articulating concerns that were important. He was fusing the domestic and the foreign in ways that they really hadn't been fused before. We were seeing this post-Soviet Union world where we might have had lower taxes and better relations between countries and race-blind policies in every walk of American life and something like a new Peace Corps—there was an AmeriCorps—young people more involved. Not all of that happened, to put it mildly. But I think the fact that he was trying so hard and never gave up trying will seem better and better to people in the future. It's not the greatest answer.

Strong: What is going to be the legacy of the personal failings? You mentioned earlier the public sort of absorbed very early on, OK, there are some flaws in his personal behavior, but it doesn't rise to the level of removing him from office. Let's try and move on. That view didn't coincide with Washington elites and media, though it is the view that prevailed. What's the long-term view going to be on that score?

Widmer: I don't think people will start remembering different sound bites from speeches. I think he's stuck with that one he mentioned. That scandal seared itself into American consciousness and will never go away. But obviously as he continues to do good works, and incessantly everywhere he goes, the natural affection for him that already existed will increase and he will be remembered as a good person who was President at a more interesting time than perhaps we realized at the time, and as someone who did advance things.

Future Presidents will look back for economic decisions and other kinds of decisions to see how to govern. He was rather good at the art of governing. He combined legislative pressure with public speeches, with personal diplomacy on Capitol Hill in ways that were pretty effective. I'm very aware there were many shortcomings, but still, for a lot of people in the progressive half of this country, and we are divided pretty closely in half, he showed how it can be done.

We haven't had very many Democratic Presidents since Lyndon Johnson, and to be further to the left of Bill Clinton is almost, by definition, to be unelectable. I think people will be impressed he got done as much as he did with an opposition Congress and a world picture that was anything but simple. Nostalgia will kick in even more than it has. I don't think it has that much yet. In the next few years, after Bush leaves office, I think there will be a more generous way of looking at Bill Clinton. The two do somehow go together in some interesting way.

George W. Bush seems so different from Clinton in every way. They do rise and fall long after they've stopped being President. I'm anticipating that Clinton's reputation will go up some. He'll probably write more books, also, and that will help too. But this is all the purest speculation on my part.

Riley: What about the legacy for the Democratic Party? Is that more easily definable or not?

Widmer: That's a tough one. I'm not a political scientist at all. Well, if the party can't win in 2008 it will have serious problems winning any time soon. I do think it should make an effort to reach across the divide and include progressive Republicans and not be afraid of military power and not be afraid of coercion toward allies as well as enemies. The worst thing would be to be afraid of American power in this next time.

We need to win first. We need to win. Then we need to come up with creative governing ideas, redistribute some income, not radically, just roll back some of Bush's taxes, pay for some good social programs and rehabilitate America's image in the world, and avoid extreme left-wing programs. The worst thing about "Don't ask, don't tell" was that it came so quickly in the Presidency, and health care not long afterward. It would have been much smarter, many people would agree, to do some nice centrist reforms first and then work your way up to the bigger ones. Not to wait forever, either, but to time it a little better.

Riley: Is there anything we haven't gotten to that you—there's no way in a single day that you can cover everything.

Widmer: No, but you have me thinking about a lot of things I haven't thought about for a long time.

Riley: An appendix is always welcomed.

Strong: Have you read books and articles about Clinton, and are there some you like more than others—the administration memoirs or the [John] Harris book?

Widmer: I read the Harris book and I reviewed it, and I liked it a lot. I thought that was the best so far. Of course I read his and I liked it. There's so much information it's hard to absorb, but it is still an essential book for anyone studying him and his Presidency. I thought the Harris book

was well written. In my review I point out a few things that he ignored, in my opinion, including a lot of foreign policy. My single point is that Clinton's foreign policy was surprisingly good and he still doesn't get much credit for it.

Sid Blumenthal's has some good moments, but I think for major issues and day-to-day feelings inside the White House and also about the White House, John Harris' is better. It's obviously more objective because he wasn't in the White House. I guess I feel Maraniss is still the best one for the early life, and Harris is the best for the Presidency.

There have been some kind of dumb ones. [David] Halberstam's was not very—I admired David Halberstam but I thought his Clinton book was kind of bad. It had a lot of that liberal elite, looking down one's nose at Bill Clinton, so it irritated me. I'm missing—there must be some from the point of view of the right wing. I did not read Nigel Hamilton's, but I heard it was not that great.

Riley: You're talking about the latest one on his Presidency?

Widmer: No, the one on his early life. I haven't seen the one on his Presidency yet.

Riley: It just came out three or four months ago.

Widmer: I was once a candidate to write—I think publishers were hoping I might, and I never did. I still feel my loyalty to him keeps me from wanting to write that way, but we'll see. It's possible to be loyal and also to write. I also want to be loyal to the history profession. I want to call things the way I see them. That's very important too. I just have to figure out what I want to say, if anything. I also want to admit that I was mostly a pretty low-ranking speechwriter for a lot of this time. I saw some fascinating things, but I was not in a policy-making role.

Riley: Let me take this opportunity if you're concerned about your contributions to history, by thanking you on two dimensions. One is you've given us a day today that is going to be very helpful and a very valuable addition to what we're doing. Beyond that, we wouldn't be doing what we're doing if it hadn't been for your efforts.

Widmer: Thanks, that's nice.

Riley: I'm preparing the end-of-year report for the foundation with the ask for next year. The last thing I did before I left the office last week was to print out the list of people that we've interviewed, organized by positions. I have to admit that I view that document with a bit of pride. After five or six years, seeing the accumulation of 100 to 115 of these, each of them will have some individualistic deficiencies, but the accumulation of this archive, I think, really serves a tremendously important role.

Widmer: Definitely.

Strong: And for someone who works in Presidential libraries, you desperately need these as a starting point to begin to then think about, *Well, what files do I want to see? What are the issues I need to explore?* If you didn't have this kind of base you'd have real problems.

The other thing is the libraries are going to be so slow at opening up documents. By the time all the files at the NSC are open, everyone will be gone and there isn't an opportunity to check with both memory and witness and the paper trail. I'm afraid it's going to be harder for Presidential scholars who, in an earlier time—in the Kennedy era and such—could talk to players and look at some of the paper and have a different feel for what went on than is now going to be possible.

Widmer: I'm thrilled. It meant a lot to me before it even started. I was hoping it would go well and it seems like it is.

Riley: If you combine what we're doing with what Arkansas is doing, you will end up with a project that will rival the most extensive ones out there.

Widmer: That's great.

Riley: I spent some time looking at the listings of the collection here at the JFK [John F. Kennedy] Library, which is immense. There are about a thousand participants, but many of those interviews are only eight or nine pages in length and they're done somewhat haphazardly, too, especially in the early stages.

Strong: And a lot of them are done by people connected to the family and the foundation and that's not the right people to do it.

Widmer: Yes, this was intense. It was longer and harder questions, too, than I expected. But it was fun and I like wrestling with this.

Riley: I don't want to discourage you from writing anything. I hope that you will write.

Widmer: I hope I will someday, but I don't think it will be soon, maybe in 20 years. And it will be filled with not remembering well. *These are the things I kind of remember about this amazing man.* But I don't think I want to get into the heart of a political argument.

Riley: It's too early.

Widmer: I wasn't in the heart of those battles. I had this great but pretty unique situation where I was a guy who loved history who just happened to be there. I don't think that kind of person should write an intensely partisan book.

Riley: You'd be doing a disservice to the profession because of your obligations to your principals not to reveal certain things, so it's understandable that you'd want to wait. But if you go through this and you find that there are some things you want to add, do it. If you want to get back on tape with me at some point for an hour or two—If you're thinking about this and you think, *Oh my God, there was this, and this I really wish we had talked about*—We probably could arrange something by telephone or something like that.

Widmer: Great.

Riley: We'll leave it as closing off today but open-ended in the event you come across more.