GEORGE W. BUSH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

FINAL EDITED TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH KARL ZINSMEISTER

July 25, 2016
Charlottesville, Virginia

Revised by Karl Zinsmeister
April 30, 2018

Participants

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Riley: This is the Karl Zinsmeister interview as a part of the George W. Bush project. We are in Charlottesville on a very hot day—It is supposed to 100 outside today—so we're grateful for Karen Hult and Karl joining us. We reviewed the ground rules before we got on the tape, most importantly about the confidentiality of the proceedings.

We always like to begin by getting a little bit of autobiography. We talked a little bit before the tape came on about your family and your roots in upstate New York, but tell us a little bit about your upbringing and about how you came to be interested in politics, and in particular your own philosophical bent toward politics as you were growing up.

Zinsmeister: As I mentioned, my children are seventh-generation residents of our little county in upstate New York. If you put a pin in the geographic heart of New York, that's where we come from. It's a rural area: dairy farms and small towns. The little town of Cazenovia, where our children went to school, is about 2,500 people; it's one of the old lake towns. There was a fascinating period in upstate New York history when it was the Silicon Valley of America. Around the time the Erie Canal went through, there was a massive explosion of commercial and religious and social and political innovation out of that area.

Even when I was a young child, it was still a very formidable, fertile part of America. The area's dynamism increasingly disappeared—largely, in my view, because of bad governance, and because of opening opportunities in other parts of the country like the Sunbelt. So I viewed very much firsthand a political, economic, and cultural decline up close, painfully.

That's on the downside. The upside is that upstate New York is a good analogue for the massive middle of our country. Some people imagine New York State is uniformly urban and, like New York City, a cultural outlier from the rest of the U.S. Actually that is not true. I've always said the Midwest starts just west of Albany. And I say that with experience; my mother from Columbus, Ohio, was the daughter of a dairy farmer, and I spent a lot of time in Ohio. The difference in culture between central Ohio and central New York is nonexistent. In many cases it's the same people, who went back and forth on the Erie Canal.

So there's a very middle-American aspect to upstate New York. It's about 50/50 Republican-Democrat. Ethnically it is quite representative of the country. I only figured this out much later. When you grow up, you think your part of the universe is the center and the whole sun revolves around you. You learn later that isn't true, but in my case I did grow up in a very unpretentiously central culture.

I eventually came to realize that that is where I got my politics. I was not raised in an especially political family, but I began to feel political when I went to college. I went to Yale after growing up in a public school with lots of farmers' kids and mechanics. I honestly did not know what a prep school was when I got to college. I didn't know that there were 18-year-old children driving BMW convertibles. I didn't know what drug culture was. I was just an innocent, small-town kid, and it spun my head in a very unpositive way.

Riley: Did you have a history of college education in your family?

Zinsmeister: We do. My father was the first in his family to attend college, but my grandparents on my mother's side both had college degrees—in agriculture and home economics, but they were educated. I had a strong tradition of reading and taking life seriously. My family went to church. My dad had a huge vegetable garden in the back yard. My mom canned the food.

Hult: There were how many of you as children?

Zinsmeister: Five, I had four sisters—a very hard life! Looking back, it's funny to realize we had one bathroom and five kids. But lots of us grew up that way in the '50s and '60s. It was delightful. I had a very happy childhood.

Riley: Which church?

Zinsmeister: Methodist church, which means something to those of you listening to the tape, if you know anything about American religious history. That individual, reforming, nonelite religion was part of my background too. Anyway, there are lots of people like me; I'm not at all unusual. But when I got to the Manhattan and Georgetown and Boston world, it was new to me, and much of it was off-putting. In particular, what really bothered me was the elitism that I felt, the snobbery, the disrespect and disdain for the way average people live in our country.

Riley: This began at Yale?

Zinsmeister: That's when it really hit me. To be honest, I reacted badly. I was a very immature person at that point. I wish I'd been more open and less defensive, less threatened by this. I could have learned a lot from many of these folks. They were not bad people, but they had different upbringings and values.

I retreated from college social life—the Whiffenpoof and BoolaBoola thing was definitely not for me, and I looked for other places I could pour my energy into. I was actually recruited to play football at Yale. I played one season, very fitfully, not very happily, and wanted to move on.

Riley: I was also recruited by Yale to play football—didn't work. Let me put it this way, the football coaches would have like to have had me at Yale; I'm not sure the admissions office did.

Zinsmeister: I was the opposite; the football coaches shouldn't have bothered with me.

But I soon got obsessed with a new sport. Once I was on campus I got recruited to row, which ended up fitting my physiology, and more importantly my mentality, perfectly. Rowing is a very intense sport. It's a 12-months-a-year sport. You get up early in the morning and you row before

the sun is up because that's when the water is flat. You don't dabble in it; it is very, very intense. We were rowing at an international level. Most of the guys in my boat won Olympic or international medals. We were collegiate champions a couple of years. I was also a national champion one year when I rowed in Ireland. Rowing gave me a vessel to pour my natural intensity into. I'm not a casual person. Whatever I do, I like to do it full blast, and really well if possible.

That was my escape from college alienation, and I'm delighted I found it. It was a way for me to keep my self-respect when I was floundering socially and floundering academically. But I still wasn't quite happy at Yale. So I left campus my junior year. You'll laugh to hear this now, because I know at this point all kids are encouraged and even pushed into taking time overseas. But I can tell you that I had to fight through a lot of resistance in 1979 when I went to my college dean and said, "I've become obsessed with Ireland. I've been reading all about the country. I love the history; I want to go over there and master that history. I'll make you very proud." I wanted to use Irish history as a case study to figure out why a society rebels politically. Why does a society become revolutionary? When do a people decide to overturn all the apple carts?

I said, "I know the Irish revolution is not the Russian revolution nor the French revolution in terms of international importance. But it is small enough and manageable enough that I can get my mind around it and become an expert in a year. I want to do that." The Yale administration said, "You can't," or actually, "You can do it, but you won't get credit, and you'll have to come back and retake your entire junior year." I was amazed and outraged, so I said, "I'm going anyway."

Bless their hearts, my parents backed me. So I enrolled on my own in Trinity College in Dublin.

Riley: Beautiful.

Zinsmeister: It's a beautiful school. It was founded in 1592. When I attended it had a particularly powerful history faculty. The provost was a historian, a brilliant historian.

At Yale, by that point, I felt like I was in a bit of a meat grinder. At the highest levels, rowing becomes an extremely consuming sport. We had a full-time guy who did nothing but adjust our boats. Our diet was controlled. They took our pulse rates every morning when we woke up, and recorded them on charts. Our body fat was measured. Our training was ferocious. It was fascinating and wonderful, but it was all-consuming. I was ready to shift gears and devote myself to a life of the mind.

So I escaped to Ireland with the goal of really pouring myself into my studies. And I did. It was a marvelous, fecund period for me. I came back with really great grades. The dean took the grades; he did not make me repeat my junior year in the end.

Then I returned to Yale for my senior year. Yale had a senior thesis requirement that was quite serious. I knew exactly what I wanted to write mine on. There is a remarkable character in Irish history who I became fascinated with. A crazy, quasi-Marxist, self-educated manure carter (that was his day job in Dublin) named James Connolly. He was a classic blue-collar, uncredentialed, brilliant autodidact. He was very poor, but he was a man of innate talent, great seriousness, and

had real courage and charisma. He became radicalized and ended up being shot by the British for his role in the 1916 uprising.

I wanted to go back to Ireland to write my senior thesis about him. Again, this was difficult to work out. As a result, I'm pretty sure I haven't graduated at Yale [*laughter*], but I managed to go back. I put in a monkish three-month blitz at the National Library and produced a very detailed thesis I was proud of. Officially I graduated the next year.

So I had a few marvelous experiences that taught me if I pour myself into something, I can succeed. I poured myself into rowing. I poured myself into history. Just pour yourself—that's the key.

Riley: Yes.

Zinsmeister: And good things happen. I tend to have manias. That has lots of downsides, I'll be the first to tell you. But I don't have the talents to succeed at the highest level on natural gifts. I succeed by grinding really hard.

This fits with my politics of Middle America. Middle Americans have a real commitment to excellence and meritocracy, and a real allergy to aristocracy or elitism of any sort. Those are things I feel strongly about.

I'd be the first to tell you that there have been times in my life where I had too sharp of an edge. As I've gotten older, I've mellowed. I've loved getting older. You hear people say, "I hate being old." Well, I love being old.

Riley: Karen thinks you're not old.

Zinsmeister: Oh, I'm old. But there are so many sharp edges that you wish you could take back. Anyway, the combination of cultural and genetic inheritance gave me a sense of what I wanted to do, and a sense of direction. I never wondered who I wanted to be when I grew up. I also never had a plan, to be honest. I sort of followed a chain. Which is what took me to the White House. I am the last guy who ever wanted or planned to be in a Presidential administration. I never once fantasized about working in the White House. I never had interest in that.

I will tell you quite frankly, when they called me up to say, "Would you be interested in serving as the Domestic Policy Advisor to the President?" I wasn't even aware that the position was open. I didn't follow politics at that level. I have never been an inside-baseball politics guy. My interest is in the ideas. I love the ideas. I love the whole process of political invention, but I am not a "politics with a capital P" guy.

I love the intersection of inherited wisdom with current crises. That is what I began to do in Ireland, to understand the huge inheritance of cultural and economic and religious baggage a society possesses, how it will affect the process of navigating through problems today. So I wanted to do that in America.

Hult: So the politics of ideas, is that what led you to Senator [Daniel Patrick] Moynihan?

Zinsmeister: It is. Moynihan, as you know, is famous for being a politician of ideas, and that is the thing that attracted me. I wasn't dying to work in the Senate, to be honest, but who else was going to help me marry these two interests of intellectual life and current events? He was one of the few people who did it, so I applied. I've been so blessed in many lucky serendipitous things. I just applied over the transom. I didn't know what I was doing.

Moynihan was famous for recruiting interesting people. I've known a few people in my life who had amazing eyes for talent. Moynihan was one; Irving Kristol was another. They could just spot people.

When I went into Moynihan's office, Tim Russert was there, Checker [Chester E.] Finn was there. Rob Shapiro, who founded the Progressive Policy Institute, was there. Mike McCurry, who became Bill Clinton's press secretary, was working in that office. People like Elliot Abrams and Les Lenkowsky and Charles Horner had just passed through. That's the kind of environment it was. He had all these really first-rate intellectuals and operators.

Checker Finn is the guy who mostly hired me. I'll never forget him putting me through the wringer at one point. As I told you, I grew up with this very Midwestern background. My mother washed aluminum foil and hung it up to dry, [*laughter*] saved rubber bands. So Moynihan had this huge 50-page writing assignment you had to complete and send back to them to get these jobs.

Riley: Is that right?

Zinsmeister: Yes, even totally junior bunny jobs like mine required major submissions. So I took it home and did all my homework, then I did what my family always did: you find an old envelope that is perfectly good, isn't ruined at all, and you peel off the stamps and you cross out the address and then you address the other side. It was not because we were environmental zealots or anything, it was just thrift.

I sent this in. Then I got this outraged phone call from Checker, who has since become a friend. He calls me up and hollers, "We need people with fire in their bellies. What is this slapdash thing you sent back to us?" The material wasn't slapdash, he never said that. But he was shocked that I would return it in a recycled envelope, which had never occurred to me was a bad signal of any kind. [*laughter*] But he was horrified. So that ended up being the most expensive envelope I ever recycled. They made me fly back to D.C. for another set of interviews—paying the airfare on my own.

Riley: Oh gosh.

Zinsmeister: That 50-cent envelope cost me about $500 in Eastern Airlines airfares, but I got the job.

I got to do some interesting stuff for Moynihan. I remember I did a huge report for him on menarche. Most people don't know what menarche is—it's the age of first menstruation for women. I got some interesting looks when I went over to the Library of Congress and asked for all the books on menstruation.

But he had this theory that part of the welfare boom was the fact that good health and good sanitation were making women develop earlier, become fertile earlier, childbearing was advancing in the lifecycle. Was there a mechanical root to the burst of early childbearing and welfare dependence that had nothing to do with culture or society? We had to figure this out. I loved to chase those kinds of crazy long-term intellectual puzzles.

In the end, though, that was not my milieu. Too much retail politics for me. That was an election year for Moynihan, so he was running, and that brought painful compromises. If he had been a conventional political hack and made all those compromises, you'd expect that. But I knew him to be a man who was capable of much more, and who really understood some of the things he was saying were not true, or wise.

When he said things that I knew he didn't believe, because it was an election year and he had to, it was a little cynic-inducing for me. I'm a very idealistic person, so I moved on after a year or so.

Riley: Now he's a Democrat.

Zinsmeister: Yes.

Riley: We haven't talked partisanship before now. You're coming through college in the Reagan era.

Zinsmeister: I voted for Ronald Reagan.

Riley: You did vote for Reagan?

Zinsmeister: During my college years I kept quiet about my politics. I never took any role in any of the clubs or publications. I voted for Reagan, but I kept my mouth shut because I knew nobody else on campus who did.

Hult: You were there at the end of [Jimmy] Carter going into Reagan.

Zinsmeister: The whole Carter experience was really horrifying to me.

Riley: OK. That's it.

Hult: Let's go back there.

Riley: Go ahead.

Zinsmeister: I'll never forget the morning after the election, waking up and people at Yale were shocked. It wasn't only that they were horrified that Reagan was elected; they were surprised. This is part of my concern: that many elites today don't know who's living out in the rest of the country.

I was not shocked. I knew the election could go either way. I wouldn't have been shocked either way.

Riley: You were at Yale at the time?

Zinsmeister: Yes, I was at Yale.

Riley: So the people you're talking about are your classmates?

Zinsmeister: My classmates, my friends.

Riley: Understand.

Zinsmeister: I remember one woman in particular. She was one of my best friends, a very talented person. I'll never forget her saying, "How did this happen? Where is our country?" I thought, *Oh, that's so sad you're that disconnected from the majority of Americans*. Whether you hate the man or love him, you have to understand he represents a huge vein of our tradition. The Reagan election illustrated anew for me what I felt was a fundamental misapprehension of Middle America among many elites.

Riley: This is interesting, Karl, because I would have guessed, based on where you ended up and based on the portrayal of your autobiography in the briefing book—as thin as it is—I would have thought your motivation for politics would have been Reagan-oriented. What you're suggesting is that there is something else going on here more philosophically about your orientation toward politics and that Reagan was secondary.

Zinsmeister: He was a side effect; he was not formative for me. It was a lovely confluence. I remember being deeply depressed by the '60s. I remember waking up one morning when the Syracuse University campus was taken over by protesters who spray-painted and burned and did horrible things. I remember vividly the Vietnam protests.

Riley: This is where you and I do have a common experience. I remember 1968—I'm 10 years old and I'm thinking the world is falling apart.

Zinsmeister: Exactly.

Hult: Exactly. I'm not much older than you, I was 12 years old, but that's OK. That is a formative experience. The late '60s into the [Richard] Nixon years and the things that go on in the '70s. Do you have recollections of your period growing up through that as well, oil shocks and so forth?

Zinsmeister: Very vividly. My dad subscribed to three or four newspapers. We didn't watch much TV, but we read a lot and we talked a lot about current events. I found that era really depressing. I felt like the whole country was going through a national nervous breakdown: everything falling apart at once, fundamental premises of our country being questioned. I found it very disorienting and unpleasant. So when Reagan came along, to me it was a breath of fresh air. So I embraced him. But it's not like that's where I got my politics.

Reagan was a man of his time and he was a God-sent antidote to what we needed right then. But that's not the politics we need now. The hagiography of Reagan you sometimes run into on the right is not something I've ever shared myself. Again, I'm a huge admirer, and his arrival was a

delightful and important thing. But it wasn't just Reagan. There was a whole resurgence then of revived American conservatism, culturally, intellectually, as well as in politics.

Riley: Sure.

Zinsmeister: I read all those books: Allan Bloom, Charles Murray, all that stuff. There was this whole uprising of an alternate intelligentsia.

Hult: Yes.

Zinsmeister: That's what excited me.

Riley: OK.

Zinsmeister: Intellectual guerrilla warfare has been a theme of my life. I'm attracted to principled remnants who preserve the lessons of history. Untrendy—antitrendy—underdogs who have some deep base and—without any encouragement or support from the establishment, and flying in the face of a lot of conventional wisdom—create alternative solutions to serious problems. I love that. That's what I wanted to do, and aimed for, and have aspired to my whole life. To truly think originally, drawing on ancient wisdom.

I rarely open the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* and feel that anything I believe deeply is ratified. It's quite the opposite; that experience is often quite alienating.

A conservative intellectual can't ever, *ever*, go to a party in Georgetown or Manhattan, or a discussion on campus, or a jury for journalistic prizes or a New York publishing house, and assume that anyone there understands you, or takes seriously what you believe, or trusts that anything you say is something other than bigotry or bias or lack of education.

So there is this strong swimming-against-the-stream aspect to conservative intellectual life. I don't want to make it sound like I'm a victim or that I feel bad about this. At times it can be thrilling in many ways. You feel like you're resisting group think, really earning your opinions, having to constantly sharpen your arguments because they're not conventional within the establishment.

I don't feel a part of the conservative mafia either. I don't feel comfortable in a pigeonhole. So there is an invigorating aspect to not really fitting anywhere easy, and having to make your own way, and having to constantly defend your ideas. It's very good for sharpening your sword.

People get intellectually lazy when everyone else in a class agrees with them. You can get away with flabby orthodoxy when no one is challenging you. So not being part of the establishment consensus was very invigorating for me. I never minded that. In some ways it suits my personality. I tend to be a lone eagle type, though I've tried, as I've gotten older, to be better at finding allies. But my initial instinct is I don't mind being alone, and I don't mind being challenged. I like to climb tall mountains, the harder the better, so there was an aspect of that that just fit my personality.

But you have to be careful. All these things can become exaggerated tropes. You don't want to just be against what somebody else is for. You do have to constantly examine the truth and reality of your views. I'm a very empirical person, super data- and reality-based. That's how I develop original positions I can have confidence in.

I'll tell you a funny story about going to the White House and being a data-based thinker. It's kind of embarrassing.

Whenever I have a new problem to solve—whenever someone says, "Here's a huge mess, figure it out"—the first thing I do is I dive into the facts. So I have a huge collection of really boring Census Bureau material and economic data and historical studies and international statistics. In my early work with Moynihan and with Ben Wattenberg, that's what I did. I was a mole. I burrowed through these very dusty old books and papers and figured things out. I connected dots and brought prior information into contemporary relevance. That then became the basis for all of my own journalism.

When I went to the White House I thought, *That's what I'm going to do here. That's what I've always done*, so I brought this huge collection of empirical reports and factual stuff that I've hauled around my whole life. It was eight or nine file drawers of stuff, and I moved it into my White House office. The Secret Service guys looked at me oddly when I brought these big cabinets in. So I moved all this stuff in and guess what? I never cracked one of those drawers. When you get into the White House, you realize the pace at which you have to work is *so* brutal, you as a senior advisor have to run entirely on what's in your head.

Riley: Oh?

Zinsmeister: Not only the facts and statistics and data and arguments that are in your head, but the judgments of human nature, the understandings of historical precedent, you have to have that in your memory bank. Thank God I had this bizarre, everything-but-the-kitchen-sink background as a journalist, because I needed it. Man, did I need it. If I couldn't go to my records—which I would have loved to do, but just did not have the time—I had to remember key things, and use rules of thumb, and go with my instincts.

Riley: We're going to bear down on that. Why don't you take a few minutes and get us from Moynihan to your editorial—?

Hult: Through Wattenberg to being an editor.

Zinsmeister: So Moynihan, as I say, was the right person but the wrong time and place, and certainly the wrong kind of environment for me to be in the middle of a political race.

Riley: But you were OK working for a Democrat?

Zinsmeister: Oh yes. I was much more into the fact that he was a man of ideas; that's what mattered to me. And I was a New Yorker, so working for a New York Senator was somewhat natural. I was frankly a Republican and he was frankly a Democrat and we kept that to ourselves, but I could certainly work around that. All my life I worked around that. Ben Wattenberg was a Democrat.

Hult: Yes.

Riley: And Moynihan had worked for Republican Presidents.

Zinsmeister: Exactly. And Wattenberg was a kind of conservative Democrat, so it's not as if we were just crazy, randomly throwing ourselves into a tiger cage together. We had affinities, but partisanship has never been a huge part of my life. Being a person of principle and a person of ideas is a huge part.

Riley: Understood.

Zinsmeister: I met Ben Wattenberg in the elevator. At one point Moynihan asked me to go to a conference at the Census Bureau. I was his representative at this conference. It was a very small group around a table this size. I don't even remember the subject, but Wattenberg was there and I was there. Literally in the elevator on the way down we started to talk and bond. He called me up and eventually offered me a research position at the American Enterprise Institute.

Wattenberg had a tradition of every 10 years, when the census came out, writing a popular book interpreting the census to the country. Really wonderful idea. Today, censuses aren't quite as interesting as they used to be, because we have a constant stream of data flows, and new trends don't sneak up on us as much. We used to be much more excited by census results.

Riley: Right.

Zinsmeister: So Ben basically hired me to mine the 1990 census and tell him what the salient facts were, and then he was going to write this popular book about it. Ben was a fascinating character. He was a real popularizer of complicated information. I learned a lot from him in that regard. He was able to take abstruse subjects and put them into terms that everyday people could identify with. He was also a delightful man—warm and completely unpretentious, and just my definition of what a good human being should be. He'd come to the door in his PJ's and invite me in, and we'd talk, although I was just a kid.

He embodied many of the wonderful parts of high intellectual life in D.C. without the off-putting parts. He was a little bit of a fatherly figure for me, and I worked hard for him. I slept in my office a lot during those days, as I tried to master the census results and learn about the real America. This again deepened my respect for the massive middle of our population. Ben was another lover of Middle America. Although he was a Jewish Manhattanite, he wisely recognized that the ballast in our country is not among our urban elites.

That is something I learned from him. As I traveled a lot, I discovered that our elites are no more impressive than anyone else's elites. Our advantage is our middle class—they are vastly more impressive than any other country's middle. A lot of intellectuals are frustrated that America isn't run by intellectuals, in the way that France is, or Japan. But there are marvelous upsides to our pattern. We don't have the manias and the wild swings and the inhumane ideas that intellectuals are famous for generating. Ben was one of the people who taught me that everyday people are ultimately more moderate and sensible than the highly educated.

I worked with Ben at AEI [American Enterprise Institute] for four or five years, a data-rich period, and a time when I edged into independence as a thinker and writer. He started cowriting things with me and he started getting me on his TV show. I had a perch at AEI where I was surrounded by fascinating people. Those were the glory days of AEI. Irving Kristol was there, and Michael Novak, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Judge Robert Bork, Arthur Burns, Herb Stein, all kinds of marvelous intellectuals. It was a very collegial place, where everyone talked and shared ideas without barriers or boundaries. Despite my lousy social skills, I was able to get to meet interesting people and learn a lot.

Then AEI had its financial crisis. People don't realize that AEI almost collapsed. It did collapse, and almost ended its existence as an institution, but was rescued by a man who became a dear friend, Christopher DeMuth. As part of the rescue, though, a bunch of people got laid off. I was one of the most junior researchers and, appropriately, was laid off. At that point my wife was six months pregnant and I had about $18 in the bank.

I told you, I've always identified with blue-collar America. I love brain work, but I get fidgety and itchy after a certain period of time sitting at a desk. So even before I left Moynihan, I had taken up serious physical labors as evening and weekend work. I bought a junk house on Capitol Hill. There were lots in those days; this was early '80s. It was a house that somebody had bought on spec and mostly demolished, even tore off the roof, and then ran out of money. So it was a façade of a row house with no roof, rain coming in, dirt floors, empty. The guy was desperate; he was broke. I was desperate, and I was broke. So I made a deal with him.

Riley: I hope you didn't spend a lot of money on it.

Zinsmeister: I said, "I don't have money even to buy the empty hulk from you, but if you will trust me, I will move on to the premises, live there, use all my salary to renovate it in the hours after work, then sell it, and pay you after I sell it." It was a very unconventional deal, but he went for it.

My grandfather had a 12-foot travel trailer that he had used for years in retirement. I moved it into the back yard of the row house in Washington, D.C., and I lived in that trailer with nothing but a garden hose supplying cold water. I won't get into the hygiene. It was very unorthodox!

Hult: At least there were Senate gyms, I guess.

Zinsmeister: That's one of the things that saved me. I literally lived in that trailer for about three years. I had all kinds of thrills and chills. It got set on fire once by some neighborhood kids; this was a rough neighborhood. I got a German shepherd at that point. I worked all day in the Senate or at AEI, then came home and labored. I told no one about this dual life. I found that people in suits found it weird and disreputable that I would spend a lot of time swinging a hammer. And on the few occasions one of my carpenter, plasterer, or bricklayer buddies found out I worked as a researcher, they tensed up. There is this weird divide, today, between the white-collar and blue-collar worlds. I don't think it's healthy for the country.

I personally loved living in both worlds. I had this dual life. I had tremendous energy in those days, and all weekends and all evenings, after I'd get home from the office, I'd go lay bricks or whatever all night. I built this first house up over three years, sold it, paid off the guy who I had

bought it from, and then had a little bit of cushion left. That was the only money I ever had to start with.

Then I did a second house. Anyway, I've done eight complete house rebuilds like that. During the many years when I was raising kids on the earnings of a freelance writer, it was a big part of the way I fed my family. And I loved it. I loved the physical work, I loved the design, I loved the problem solving. I've never owned a house that was less than 100 years old, and some were a lot older than that. If you hire a modern-day workman, they'll often walk into an old place like that and throw up their hands at something like a terracotta sewer pipe and say, "You can't; you have to tear it all up and put in PVC [polyvinyl chloride]," so I had to improvise my way through solutions, and found that stimulating.

I only bore you with all these details because this is part of my intellectual life too. I've learned not to be hypnotized by "experts." Experts often get caught in orthodoxies. They get caught in the way they've been trained, in the way things are conventionally done. Sometimes an outsider perspective can be really useful in solving a problem in a fresh way.

I would come in with a good mechanical sense—My dad is an engineer, my grandfather a farmer who could fix anything—and I would think my way through a solution. I took car engines out when I was in high school and then figured out how to put them back. Over the years I learned not to be intimidated by the "right way" of doing things. That has always been my modus operandi throughout my life.

I recognize there are downsides to that, and I try to protect myself against hubris, or dumb mistakes. But in our era of manic specialization and deference to credentials, fresh original thinking is becoming one of the rarest things in America. I don't try to impersonate an expert on things I don't have any competence on, but I believe in the power of dabbling. As a result, I know a little bit about a lot of things, and am very good at connecting dots. That's my thing. I connect dots. I find experts and learn enough about their field to connect it productively to other kinds of knowledge. A real problem with modern thinking is that it is so segmented and siloed that fertile connections get lost. Today you're not just an orthopedic surgeon, you're an orthopedic surgeon who works on left-handed Lithuanians only, and somebody else has to deal with other patients.

Riley: We don't have that problem in academia.

Zinsmeister: [*laughing*] I know. Now, I'm not an idiot—I know specialization of labor has lots of upsides, and I'm in favor of it. But I also believe it leaves a huge market for people who can see across boundaries. So that's the little gap I've tried to fill in my life.

Riley: OK.

Zinsmeister: As you can imagine, this was very good preparation for becoming the Domestic Policy Advisor—who is the ultimate garbage can of knowledge in the White House. I think there were 12 or 13 Cabinet or Cabinet-level departments that I was responsible for. It was a huge, vast expanse of intellectual waterfront. That was perfect for me.

It was not a problem, or particularly intimidating. It was actually a delight for me to have this wide range of subjects I could touch. My personal predilections and my wide-ranging research experience with Moynihan and at AEI, capped by wide-ranging journalistic work, left me well prepared.

Riley: So you were laid off?

Zinsmeister: Yes. One of the best things that ever happened to me.

Riley: You went back to the Hill?

Zinsmeister: No. I used this as an opportunity to try something bolder. It was a big decision. My wife, bless her heart, has been on many roller-coaster rides with me. As I say, she was pregnant with our first and, I'm trying to remember, I think at that point I was on my second house. I'd moved the same trailer I used to live in when I was single into the backyard of this second house. It had been burned at this point by vandals—Did I mention that? It was half burned, so we weren't actually living in the trailer. My wife and I were sleeping in the house, but we were cooking in the trailer because that was the only semiclean part of the building site we were occupying. So that was our kitchen, and we camped in the house. This house had a roof, but the premises were bad. I won't get into many details.

Now, I don't come from a wealthy family. I did not have a trust fund. I did not have a safety net. So being laid off at this stage was a serious challenge.

So I had a conversation with my wife. I said, "I've had this three-, four-year period of time where I am writing more and more. But I always had a paycheck to fall back on. I'm pretty sure I can make my living as a writer now, but time will tell." I didn't know any editors, so I said, "I'm going to just send stuff over the transom to publications and I'm sure I'll get lots of rejections. But if you bear with me, I'm going to pour myself into establishing myself as an independent writer on serious topics."

Meanwhile, I also continued the manual labor and house building. That was the way I fed my family, flipping these houses. In the beginning, honestly, it was probably 75 percent physical labor and 25 percent writing labor. Then as I got more and more successful as a freelance writer, it was 50/50. And it was 75/25 the other way. Eventually, when my back gave out, I retired from intensive building, and just did labor as a hobby for fun, after that. It was nonstop work for many years.

Riley: Where were the venues that were accepting your work?

Zinsmeister: Initially they were very specialized journals. I wrote a lot of economics stuff, and cultural stuff. *Policy Review* was the first place I sold something. I sold an article there for a thousand dollars and I thought I was a rich man. That was really great.

Then I worked my way up. Eventually I was writing cover stories for the *Atlantic*. They pay real money. I never made enough to completely keep the family in diapers at that point, but the combination of writing fees, my physical work, and flipping these houses was enough for us to live economically on.

Riley: Sure.

Zinsmeister: Those were high-wire days. It was hard. Our kids were young and living in pretty rough conditions. I talked about this with the President in my first interview, I'll never forget.

I bought what I could afford, and what I could afford was always in terrible neighborhoods. The second house this all happened in was directly across the street from what at that point was known as the Ellen Wilson Homes. It was named for Woodrow Wilson's wife, Ellen Wilson, and it was very idealistic in its beginnings, but had become extraordinarily depressing in its execution. The Ellen Wilson Homes were the most dysfunctional public housing project in D.C. in the mid to late '80s.

Hult: Yes.

Zinsmeister: Boy, I saw crack move into D.C. I can tell you the day it happened; I can tell you how it happened. There was a physical tremor across Ellen Wilson Homes when crack arrived. I started seeing horrible things I'd never seen previously. Ellen Wilson Homes was never a pretty place. It was awfully ugly, and had all the usual pathologies of public housing projects. But we had friends over there. There was a lady who occasionally babysat for our kids. There was a guy I used to hire whenever I needed a laborer to do things like mix mortar when I was doing tile work. He was an ex-con and ex-addict, then working hard to save enough to become a long-distance truck driver. But after the crack thing moved in, it became a dangerous place to even be near. Yet it was directly across the street from us.

When we first moved to D.C., it was kind of a sleepy, southern city. It did not have serious gangs like New York and L.A. [Los Angeles]. It had all kinds of pathologies, but not a vicious crime problem. It developed a vicious crime problem in the first decade I lived there. I remember the homicide peak of 479 murders in one year. I started seeing kids with big pistols in their belts right on the street, all the time. Gunshots all the time. We started seeing these emaciated crack addicts selling their bodies on the street, started seeing guys beating on women in the street. It was hard for us. I'd holler out the window all the time.

At one point I was cooperating with the local police and they even put officers on the roof of my house. I knew this was potentially a mortal threat. This was a big-time dangerous part of our family life, but there was stuff going on. At one point there was a guy trying to chop into the skylight of my house, and I had to get a pistol out and brandish the pistol to get him to go away. It was bad.

So I can tell you, I don't take any guff from anybody about underclass life or what inner-city America is like. I know. I lived in it for a long time. There are people there I loved and there were things there I hated. I know all about that.

Riley: Did that drive you back to Cazenovia?

Zinsmeister: Well, that was part of it, yes. As I said—

Hult: It gets emotional—

Riley: We get spellbound by what you're saying and there's emotion attached—

Zinsmeister: I'm sorry. Toward the end, the thing that really got to me—and I talked about this with the President. I know I'm so far afield, I'm sorry.

Riley: No, no.

Zinsmeister: I'll try to pull back a bit.

Riley: No, as I said, we're inclined to listen.

Zinsmeister: The President was interested in this. In our very first conversation we talked about this; it came up somehow. I mentioned to him that the thing that was saddest for me was—I had always been an extremely optimistic person, extremely confident in the goodness of the American people, in the goodness of people, period. That's an article of faith for me. But I started to become cynical. I started to distrust people. I started to assume the worst in people. Race relations—I don't know if you lived in D.C. at that time, but the end of the '80s—even the mayor was arrested for crack. Horrible things were happening. People would snap at each other on the street. I got sucker punched on the street several times just because I was white and in the wrong neighborhood.

I used to work in the front yard a lot, because I had a garden. I was planting. My street was a mess, so I built tree boxes out on the sidewalk, planted flowers, fixed the brick sidewalks, which the city wouldn't fix—take the bricks up, put down sand, replace the bricks level. A couple of times during this work I got attacked, just coldcock sucker punched by teenagers. My wife was almost killed at one point by a stolen car that crashed into a light pole right next to our front yard, seconds after she passed by with a double stroller with our kids in it.

So there were physical threats that were part of this. But honestly more than that, when I realized I was becoming cynical and I didn't trust human beings, I didn't like human beings, I realized it was time for us to go.

Riley: That's why Mr. [Thomas] Jefferson didn't like cities.

Zinsmeister: I identify with that. We packed up and moved. We moved first to Ithaca because I was working on a book at that point and I needed access to a very good library. You'll laugh now because you can do it over the wire, but in those days you physically had to be near a great library, so I needed access to the Cornell library, so I lived in Ithaca. We restarted our whole life there.

And my recovery was almost instant. I'll tell you, I would walk down the street, people I didn't know would say hi to me, look me in the eye. People thanked me for things. It was such a balm. All the brightness came back, restored. I never want to have that happen again. I never want to have that blackness in my life where I don't like people and distrust people. I know that in most of our country that is not an accurate response to community realities.

That's why we made so many occupational and financial sacrifices to live in small towns in rural New York. It's not perfect—There are things I miss—but people are fundamentally good and

devoted to each other's thriving. You get reminded of that every day. It was important to us to rebound as a family.

Hult: Where did the editorial link to AEI come in during this period?

Zinsmeister: I was physically at AEI starting with my Wattenberg years. Then I was laid off, but I kept—on paper—an adjunct affiliation. I used that; that was very important to me. That was my only credibility. I had nothing else institutionally. I forget what I called myself on certain articles, but some kind of adjunct at AEI. That helped me, obviously. But to be honest, it was kind of made up; it didn't have any substance. I never went there. I was not on any payroll. I didn't have any physical connection.

But here is how that developed, Karen. As I became more and more successful, one of the places I wrote a lot was the *Wall Street Journal*.

Riley: Who was your connection at the *Journal*?

Zinsmeister: I didn't really know anybody. I honestly can't remember what editors I was working with. I just sent in pieces cold.

Hult: That's where I first came across your name, I think, was reading in a *Journal* column. So that's helpful.

Zinsmeister: You weren't the only one. AEI people started noticing my essays there.

Riley: Of course.

Zinsmeister: I hadn't had contact with anybody at AEI for probably five years; I didn't know the new leadership at all. Then I got this big *Atlantic* cover story on children and crime. And I began to argue in lots of places, including the *Wall Street Journal*, that American elites were overestimating the success of the Japanese economy. This was the high point of the whole Japan-is-going-to-eat-our-lunch mania, which I never bought. I knew it was bogus from the beginning.

I wrote a lot of very empirical stuff saying this is crazy. They have economic problems of their own. We have secular advantages that are not being seen right now in this current little trade blip. I was very bullish about what was going to happen to the American computer and software business in the long run, although it hadn't happened yet in the late '80s. I warned that Japan's government-driven successes were going to collapse, which they did.

It shouldn't have been me who had to point this out. That was kind of malpractice, frankly, for it to be a young guy like me who called this, but no one else was calling it. Experts like Ezra Vogel at Harvard who had all the credentials were completely starstruck and wrong. I think it was because they were too marinated in group think. For whatever reason, it took a completely out-of-the-loop person like me to call their bluff. I did call their bluff, and I didn't just claim it; I marshaled a lot of evidence. I wrote a whole series of articles saying this is the biggest intellectual mistake of our current period.

After I wrote one called "MITI [Ministry of International Trade and Industry] Mouse: Japan's Industrial Policy Doesn't Work," tearing down Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry for wrecking their private economy, I got a huge spanking from the whole establishment intelligentsia of East Asian studies: Ezra Vogel, Chalmers Johnson, Clyde Prestowitz, right on down. This letter saying Zinsmeister is an idiot, and his mother wears Army boots was published by *Policy Review*. Some journalists like James Fallows, Michael Lewis, and Robert Kuttner also signed it, a total of 33 signatories. It was a six-page letter spearheaded by Fallows, who is a top editor of the *Atlantic*, and was at that point one of the biggest cheerleaders for Japan as number one.

Hult: Yes.

Riley: Right.

Zinsmeister: That was of course Ezra Vogel's book title, *Japan as Number One*. So I wrote, in response to this letter, in which the Gang of 33 tried to discredit me, a very strong riposte backed by lots of data and practical argument. I'm the worst one to judge, but go read it yourself; it's out there in the public record. I believe I pretty much destroyed their case. Certainly the sharp decline of the Japanese economy in the decade following bore out my argument against the conventional wisdom. This big argument got picked up by the *Journal*, and they ran an abbreviated version of my argument.

Right after, I got a call from somebody at AEI who said, "We've been noticing your stuff here; you're doing some interesting things these days. How would you like to work here again?" I said, "Thanks for the offer. I still have very fond thoughts of AEI, but I'm heavily involved in childrearing in upstate New York, my parents are alive up here, I don't want to move to D.C." And that was the end of the conversation.

Some months later I got another phone call from AEI, saying, "We'd really like to have you here." But this time they followed up by saying, "We've been hearing about this phenomenon, it's called telecommuting. Do you think you can maybe run our magazine from afar?"

This may sound pedestrian to some readers now, but this was 1990. There was no Internet. I had a CompuServe account, but it was numbers. My first email account for years was something like 17346.189@compuserve.com. We had to send hard disks back and forth in FedEx boxes to produce a magazine from remote offices.

Riley: That was cutting edge.

Zinsmeister: It was totally cutting edge. I was one of the first telecommuters, I think. Specifically, what they asked me to do at that point was would you take over AEI's moribund magazine?

This required more than just thinking hard and writing a lot. It was running a manufacturing operation. Magazines are a manufacturing business. You need a staff, and a serious graphics department, and constant editorial conferences. It was absurdly overambitious for me to do this from the attic of my house. But I made it work. We totally invented it as we went along. The

telecommuting thing was not trivial. There were many aspects of it that were hard. But I recruited a good team, and worked like a dog.

I'll never forget my first issue. I was working at my dining room table and all of a sudden I realized it was light out. I thought, *Oh my gosh, did I work through the night? I guess I did*. It snuck up on me.

I can tell you my sports training came in handy here. Lots of intellectuals and university people think sports are stupid, or just an indulgence, and make fun of them. Watching TV sports can be mindless. But if you are a serious athlete, it's valuable your whole life. I draw on that all the time. I say to myself, *They think I can't pull this off. They also thought I couldn't finish a race. I'm going to show them.* A lot of success is pure stamina and determination.

There are plenty of folks who are smarter than me, but I have deep reserves of stamina, and I'm very stubborn. I refuse to quit. That was strongly reinforced during my sports experiences. I know that about myself, and it can be my best asset. I know how *not* to quit. I can substitute perspiration for inspiration.

That was certainly the case at the magazine. We did well. By the time I left it, the *American Enterprise* had become the highest circulated conservative monthly in the country—

Hult: Yes.

Zinsmeister: And we did it with only about six of us, so I was very proud of that. We built that up from nothing.

I was very adamant that we weren't going to do what everyone does, give away free magazines. The circulation of many think magazines is heavily giveaways. I cut that out. We had about 500 free copies for the media and Congress, and the White House, total. I said, "I want to use this as a test. If people are willing to put cash on the barrel for our publication, that means they value what we're doing. And if they aren't willing to buy it, then it probably means I'm making some mistakes." That was going to be my market test. That was how I was going to know if we were hitting the bulls-eye, or if we were just talking to ourselves, with no one really caring.

Our subscriptions cost $38, so you had to pay real money if you wanted to get the magazine. We got a lot of people willing to pay for it, and that was very satisfying to me. I took a real interest in the business side of the magazine as well as the editorial side. It's back to my housebuilding thing; I like building things. I like knowing how the pieces work and making sure they connect right.

Riley: Are you advantaged by doing this at the time when there is a Democrat in the White House?

Zinsmeister: "The worse, the better" is the old radical phrase, in terms of getting people to invest time and money to change the world, and get out of their comfort zone to study and learn new things, and subscribe to public-affairs magazines, and invest in political ideas. But politics is not where my brain goes first. I'm interested in ideas, and new ways of solving social and economic problems. That's my fascination, so electoral politics wasn't our focus. Plus, we had a

politically unorthodox group of people contributing—like Bill Kauffman, Joel Kotkin, Christopher Hitchens, Florence King, Eli Lehrer, Marvin Olasky.

Riley: Because Clinton framed himself as a New Democrat, he was approaching at least some major issues in a way that was a bit unorthodox– for the Democratic Party. Was there something appealing about that to you?

Zinsmeister: Sure. I don't know if you remember Elaine Kamarck?

Riley: Sure.

Zinsmeister: Elaine was somebody I worked with. She and I worked together on family policy. We did some conferences together, on topics like reinforcing fatherhood and family cohesion. Rob Shapiro, who worked in Moynihan's office when I was there, contributed to Clinton's economic policy of free trade, welfare reform, tax moderation, et cetera. So I knew what they were up to and admired some of it. What many of us eventually got sickened by with Clinton was the whole character issue.

Riley: Sure.

Zinsmeister: Of course that became a mania. Part of producing a popular publication—and we did aspire to be popular as opposed to academic or "think tank-y"—is that you have to have tang, you have to have some sharpness. But as I've gotten older, I've stepped away from most political sharpness, out of horror at how harsh and ad hominem arguments quickly became in the Internet, cable, social media era. It got so much worse later. It's a blight on our politics.

Hult: Could you give us an example of what you're talking about during the '90s with regard to the Clinton administration in terms of a particularly sharp, provocative piece or theme that you remember the magazine doing?

Zinsmeister: Well, we had a whole cover story on Hillary Clinton, where is she going. This was when it was first becoming clear that she was going to have her own electoral career. It included criticism, although I guess it was a pretty good mix in the end. We included strong apologists for her in the issue. We had people on her team, and we had people in the middle, and we had people who were strongly against. One of the sharpest critics was Lynne Cheney. She is a reputable historian and she wrote about Hillary as a reputable historian.

We didn't totally lose our way, Karen, but it was just the beginning of a trend and I think we didn't realize what it could lead to. Most of it I wouldn't take back. My writing style is very blunt and that's intentional.

Hult: To get a conversation started?

Zinsmeister: Part of that is it, part is to make it fun, part is to lift it above the mush. So much political writing is mealymouthed. That's one of the things I hate about Washington politics, the way it waters down language and evades plainspokenness and calling a spade a spade. That was as true of the White House that I was in as anywhere else. I sometimes really had to hold my nose on the writing-by-committee. It was very hard for me. I'm someone who cares about

language and who likes briskness and crispness and honesty and sincerity in language. You won't see much that is brisk, crisp, honest, or sincere in any President's communications. The whole point is to avoid problems; the whole point is avoid offending anyone, and the muddier the better.

So I disconnected myself from this dreadful process of dumbing down documents, where everything circulates through every office and anybody who wants to take off any sharp edge can, and by the end it has nothing to say. I literally couldn't do it. I felt too corrupted, so I stopped participating and let my aides do whatever needed to be done from DPC [Domestic Policy Council].

Evasive, blandly nonoffending language is a modern political problem. It's more than just cosmetic. It's part of our politics becoming insincere. I honestly think that's Donald Trump's biggest attraction for a lot of people. Politics became so mealymouthed, so false, both parties so interested in avoiding annoying anyone, that politicians stopped saying anything they really meant. That's hypocrisy, that's insincerity, that's dishonesty.

It sometimes feels like politicians have tape recorders in their heads that come on whenever there's a pointed question. "OK, here's my recorded answer of what I'm supposed to say." You lose any sense that there is a human being standing there. Frankly, I don't blame people, when you see how vicious politics has become, and how triumphantly unforgiving the media are toward an infelicitous slipup. But I mourn this self-censoring tendency. It's important to be sincere. That's one of the ways you pay tribute to the people you're talking to. You don't give them the canned reply; you say what you really mean. But there are all kinds of penalties for that now in politics, on all sides.

For all his unbelievable flaws, that is one of the things people like about Trump: What you see is what you get. There is a crude bluntness there. You get the sense that maybe he's letting me behind the curtain. Everyone else has this huge curtain, but now I've seen the wizard behind the curtain. Even when the wizard is ugly, at least I'm seeing the wizard. There was some of this same appeal to George Bush. Part of what journalists and intellectuals hated about Bush was this rough-and-ready bluntness. Much of that in the President's case was because he's a pretty sincere guy. His immediate, personal instincts are to be brutally honest. He likes this directness, admires it in others, I can tell you.

He also was a creature of his upbringing. He was quite aware that he was the grandson of a Senator and the son of a President, and had a lot of luck and blessings in his life. He said that to me. Partly as a result of that, he spent lots of time in west Texas and other unfashionable places, with everyday people who he came to identify with. He picked up west Texas language. He embraced west Texas religion. He chose to live a life that he knew was going to be scorned by a lot of the fashionable class.

Journalists used to whine, "Oooh, we have to go to Crawford again. Why couldn't he have picked Austin for his summer White House? At least we'd get decent sushi in Austin. Crawford is redneck territory, and we get housed in trailers. Oh my gosh." But the President didn't go to Crawford to annoy the journalists. He went to Crawford because he really loves the people; being in the desert, the town, and land there; and he loves talking to people at the diners. He likes

that. He is a man of the people. He doesn't imagine he is really a rancher, but he loves ranchers, he loves ranching. He likes that life. He is consciously eschewing the alternative.

He chooses not to have a fancy-pants vocabulary. That occasionally used to annoy me, because I'm somebody who loves rich words, and tries to keep them alive, because that's one of the most beautiful things we have inherited—an English language that's about three times richer than any other modern language, so let's use it all. But the President didn't like multisyllabic words, or anything that could be mistaken for pretense, or preening, or posing of any sort.

It's basically a healthy impulse. But it gave some elites the impression that he's unsophisticated, crude, a frat boy, unintellectual. He could have changed that public persona if he wanted, but it was more important for him to be true to the people he fell in love with when he grew up in west Texas than it was for him to have peace with the ruling class. He could have cozied up to the sophisticates; he chose not to. To some extent I made that same choice.

Riley: Let me ask you then about 2000. Are you finding in this Presidential candidate interesting things, or are you thinking this is an idea-barren Texas candidate who is taking the Republican Party—?

Zinsmeister: I was an admirer of a couple of things about candidate Bush. I was intrigued with his effort to fold faith communities into our national problem-solving apparatus. I thought that was both intellectually interesting and functionally important.

I was immediately attracted to his sincerity and his what-you-see-is-what-you-get directness. I told you, I admire that in all politicians of any stripe. I liked the fact that he seemed to be a practical person. The Presidency is a dreadfully, oppressively difficult position, and you have to have somebody who is capable of managing all of that. He seemed to be a practical choice, as opposed to some of the people who might have been more interesting as intellectuals but weren't practical, weren't able to handle the task of actually getting elected and then governing.

For instance, around 2000, I was writing and talking a lot about the importance of family cohesion. There were people, like Bill Bennett, who were more interested in the problems of family breakdown than George W. Bush. But most of them would have been quixotic Presidential candidates. Bush was not quixotic. He was the kind of guy you could envision taking the office and having the reins in his hands.

Riley: Bush had pretty well cleared the field by the time he came through, but I didn't know whether there were—Jack Kemp for example.

Hult: Yes, that would have been—

Riley: Was Jack Kemp somebody you admired?

Zinsmeister: Yes. I worked with his son Jeff Kemp on the effort to reinforce fatherhood in America. We were part of a group convened by Bill Bennett. When Bill was thinking about running for President he got a little kitchen cabinet together, a little rump group that he would gather periodically to advise him. I was part of that along with Jeff Kemp and about a half dozen

or so others. Bill was intellectually on a very similar wavelength to me. But Bill would have had Presidential weaknesses that George Bush didn't.

Riley: Why is that?

Zinsmeister: For personal reasons. He didn't have the sobriety and rootedness and slightly boring good managerial qualities that come in handy in the White House.

Hult: Pat Buchanan, does he fit in this category as well?

Zinsmeister: I never would have voted for him for President. I loved Pat's personal story: this whole Gonzaga High School, Irish, scrappy, self-made intellectual. He was a tremendously important thinker and political influence in our country. I read much of his stuff and found him very yeasty in terms of getting me to think fresh thoughts, which is something I'm grateful to anybody for doing. But again he didn't have that boring, practical, meet-the-smell-test ability to run the country without a meltdown.

The intellectual side of me, the idealistic side of me, hates that these qualities have to be factored in. But you get to be a dad and an old guy who's read a lot of history, and in addition to whether you love someone, you consider, can they keep the peace, pay the bills?

To return to my earlier point, I'm not a guy who ever was deeply enmeshed in electoral politics. I never volunteered for anyone's campaign. People will tell you that's the only way you'll ever get a job in the White House, but I hadn't the slightest notion of ever doing that in my whole life. I felt that my role was to wrestle with the ideas that George Bush unboxed, and get them in order, out in the open. I found it very easy to agree with most of them. But my role was to mull and test and hone ideas, not to pass political judgments.

Hult: Pick up on that faith-based theme that you said attracted you to him at the outset, going back to 2000 and earlier. That was there to some extent in some of Al [Albert, Jr.] Gore's public statements, but clearly it was there with George W. Bush. Did you have any involvement in that part of the campaign going in, in 2000?

Zinsmeister: None. I never had any role in any campaign, although that was a topic we developed more than any other magazine in the country while I was running the *American Enterprise.*

Hult: After Bush got elected, were you involved in any of the conversations moving into a White House Office of Faith-Based Initiatives?

Zinsmeister: I knew a lot of those guys. John DiIulio [Jr.] was a friend, another member of the Bennett rump group I mentioned. But I was not involved in setting up the administration. I was living in Cazenovia, New York. I was physically removed.

Hult: But they didn't pick up a phone and say, "Hey, what do you think about this?" or "Could you give us some writing on this thought?"

Zinsmeister: I didn't know Josh Bolten at that point. I didn't know Karl Rove at that point. I didn't have any of those insider linkages; I never have.

Riley: What about your reaction to the idea of—Why am I drawing a blank? Not conscientious conservatism, but—

Hult: Compassionate conservatism.

Riley: Did you have a response to that?

Zinsmeister: Very much. I put together a little book at the time of the election, documenting some of the concepts of compassionate conservatism as developed over the years in the pages of the *American Enterprise*.

Hult: Yes.

Zinsmeister: We were doing that very early on. Marvin Olasky wrote for us. John DiIulio wrote for us. Many of the people who were the intellectual architects of what Bush put into effect in Texas and then later in the country wrote for us early on. All we did in this little book was pull out stuff we'd already published. It's about an inch thick. We had a lot of writing on that topic.

This was to some extent a bipartisan effort at that point. I worked a bit with Elaine Kamarck and Will Marshall and Bill Galston on some of this. Gore was doing it; Clinton was doing a little of this encouragement of faith-based social solutions.

Hult: Clearly it was in the air; it seemed to be. That had been there going all the way back to early Reagan administration, when I remember working in HHS [Health and Human Services].

Zinsmeister: I would go beyond—My work since then has taught me it actually goes back to our founding.

Hult: Certainly it does.

Zinsmeister: This is a huge part of how we solve problems. To this day some of the very most effective social problem solvers are groups like the Salvation Army and Samaritan's Purse and World Vision.

Hult: Yes.

Zinsmeister: Some of the best addiction-control efforts are religiously based. The thing that hurt and saddened me is that people would say cynically, "Oh, this was just like a fillip Bush threw to the religious right." Maybe it had that value as an ancillary effect, but this is sheer problem solving. If you want to fix social conditions in America, and you don't have the religiously motivated groups and volunteers at the table, you're not going to get very far.

Hult: Yes.

Zinsmeister: Prisoner-reentry programs would have almost zero foot soldiers if not for the religiously motivated. Adoption and foster care help comes in vast disproportion from religious Americans. I believe the statistic is that serious Christians foster and adopt at 3-4 *times* the rate of the rest of the population. When it comes to addiction, again a huge part of the success stories are based on some kind of a faith factor. So if you care about people who are hurting—I did and the President did—you have to figure out a way to fold in the religiously motivated.

Now I'll be the first to say it is fraught with difficulties. Many conservatives worry it is a bad idea because the government will then impose federal rules on religious activities, which is not a minor worry. I'm still a little bit of two minds on that. But my work in philanthropy, my last few years, has underlined to me how absolutely vital those religiously motivated groups are in fixing some of our most intimate and most pressing family-related, character-related, education-related problems.

Riley: The period, say, from the transition until 9/11—You get a very different, unexpected Presidency after 9/11, so let's deal with the first period first. Anything notable or memorable about your relationship with the administration then? Are you seeing things that you are editorially opposed to or is this looking like the kind of Presidency that you'd like to have and you're embracing or nudging them in some modest direction?

Zinsmeister: I was not very enthusiastic about the No Child Left Behind legislation.

Hult: The Energy Task Force was beginning then.

Zinsmeister: Yes. I knew things needed to be done there, and I was more enthusiastic. I understood then that America had this vast potential as a sleeping giant on energy production—which has been borne out in the last five years. I certainly understood that this whole peak-oil thing was bogus, and that there was an enormous amount of energy potential in this country, which was not being exploited for spurious political reasons. We put out a special issue of our magazine on that.

But I don't have a lot of clear memories of what my first reaction to the early Bush administration was. Again, I did not focus on that. You're talking now about what the infantry were doing. But I was a scout. We were way out front of the infantry, looking toward the future more than fighting today.

Riley: Right.

Zinsmeister: By the time the infantry got there, I should have done that three years earlier. My job as the editor of a think-tank magazine was to be the scout who found the next hill that has to be charged.

Riley: Do you recall what you were looking over the horizon at, at that time?

Zinsmeister: Entitlement reform. Immigration. I went to Prudhoe Bay in Alaska to produce a special issue on new techniques reviving old oil fields, which certainly became a big thing. We had issues on environmental topics; on the sources of the 1990s' economic boom; on race politics; on military modernization and missile defense; family breakdown, which we knew was

at the root of a lot of our domestic turmoil and unhappiness; the continuing execution of welfare reform, which I had been involved in both as an observer and a participant. I was very excited at that time about education reform.

[BREAK]

Zinsmeister: I have my strong tea, as per George Orwell up in the Hebrides. I identify with that. I have this theory about culture and weather: Cold, dreary, forbidding weather patterns can be very fertile of human production. They force you to hunker down, stay indoors, and get something done. I got many of my books done in the worst possible weather.

Riley: I would imagine that in New York—

Hult: I was thinking—Ithaca, Syracuse [*laughter*]

Zinsmeister: Tea's part of surviving in central New York.

Riley: Let's get started back. It occurs to me that because you deal with the reauthorization or extension of No Child Left Behind while you're in the White House, it is a wise idea for us to start on that here now.

Zinsmeister: My initial allergy was to its utopian nature. What kind of social policy, serious social policy, says you're going to get 100 percent of the population across the finish line? That's a nonstarter for me. I'm not a utopian person. Utopian impulses often lead to very bad things. When you insist on a utopian result, you're building disappointment into the system, and arming fanatics.

Hult: Were you aware of what then Governor Bush and Margaret Spellings were doing in Texas with regard to education?

Zinsmeister: Yes. Particularly racially the results were very encouraging there. Frankly, that was the thing that most of us ended up liking most and being impressed most about No Child Left Behind. We were very excited and very pleased in 2007–08 when results started to come out showing the gap narrowing between minority students and white students. I don't have to tell you how difficult it is to do that. That was hard-won.

And the whole high-stakes testing system, for all the abuse that it took, really was necessary, along with the teacher accountability measures, to force people to make hard choices and compromises they would otherwise never have made. It bore fruit.

Hult: What did you think when they started introducing and talking about No Child Left Behind legislation?

Zinsmeister: I don't remember ever saying anything unpleasant about it, but I do remember distinctly feeling, *This is a crazy utopian route, every single student succeeding by 2014*. It struck me as very impolitic and very unconservative with a lowercase *c*. Conservatives are premised on the idea that human nature is not malleable. Human beings are who they are. You have to accept that, start with that. If you think you're going to reshape human nature, you probably have a totalitarian impulse that needs to be guarded against. The notion that you could do something that sweeping, that quickly—I didn't think it wise.

Hult: Final question along these lines. You've written about your commitment—One of your core values is decentralism, decentralization.

Zinsmeister: Right.

Hult: Was that a concern in seeing this rolled out?

Zinsmeister: That was the other big part of it, yes. I've actually tried over the years, long before I went to the White House, to avoid using terms like "this is a good school." Bad schools are pretty easy to identify. But "good" schools vary by the child. This might be a good school for my son and a terrible school for my daughter, or vice versa. It's all about matching students to institutions. So centralization in education is something I think is wrong-headed. We need an extraordinarily variegated system that parents can sort and select through.

With my own children we used a Catholic school, we homeschooled, we used a lot of public schools, a little bit of private school. We had to, in order to match what each of those children needed at different phases. Other families are just the same way. That's really the root of my militant frustration and disappointment with the American education system.

The U.S. went through a period where we forced thousands of schools to consolidate together. That created a lot of large, bureaucratic central district schools. No Child Left Behind pushed us more in the direction of bigness and uniformity.

The pressure that annual standardized testing put on schools, on the other hand, was not something that bothered me. I had learned from people like Checker Finn and Moynihan and Bill Bennett that our schools were too self-satisfied. Not just obviously failing inner-city schools, but also lots of suburban schools were not nearly as effective as they imagined themselves to be, as international comparisons were increasingly making clear. Serious annual testing could reveal these lags, so they could be fixed.

Suburban schools start from a much higher social base, so the disappointments aren't as obvious. But in terms of how far they move a child from where he or she starts—which is what matters in education, the value added—many of our suburban schools are tremendously underperforming. I am one of those who believes we need the pressure of a national yardstick to reveal the weaknesses and strengths of all schools.

Now we have NAEP, the National Assessment of Educational Progress. That was a huge advance we rely on heavily, but we need more good national yardsticks that reveal how mediocre much of our education system is and how actively bankrupt the worst systems in the inner city

are. So while there is all kinds of baggage that goes with having serious, uniform testing systems, they are essential. That is the part of NCLB [No Child Left Behind] that I really supported.

I'm proud of the bobbing up of the educational achievement numbers that testing and more acute teacher assessment brought, especially for minority and underserved children. That is really important. It made a lot of grownups unhappy because of the pressure on teachers and principals and school boards. But it made many children better off, and that was our bias.

Riley: My inclination is to ask you next about 9/11 and what happens. We'll come back to education.

Zinsmeister: Sure. George W. Bush thought he was going to be the education President. I think he also thought he was going to be the drug abuse-solving President. He thought he was going to be the immigration President. But the 9/11 attacks forced us all to drop everything and shift gears. That certainly happened to me. My magazine was somewhat unusual in being thematic. Much of every issue would be focused on one theme. There was reporting on the theme, analytical pieces. Data sections. The interview was often on the cover theme. Even after 9/11 we continued to have thematic issues on topics unrelated to the War on Terror, but I'd say half of our themes became—almost overnight—War on Terror-related. I was physically in Iraq a lot over a three-year period. Many Americans, from the President on down, had the experience of being jerked into work we never expected to see.

Riley: How did that come about? How did you end up in Iraq?

Zinsmeister: I'm not very good at what most people consider reporting. Most reporting is a very gossipy, very networky thing. You cultivate a lot of acquaintances and sources, do a kind of tit-for-tat trading, and extract information from them. I'm awful at that. However, I know how to go out and carefully observe the world and listen. I've always done that kind of reporting, heavily in the *American Enterprise*. I realized early on that every year I wanted to have an annual issue where the *American Enterprise*, our magazine, goes to America. So I'd pick a city, often a kind of unfashionable city where people thought nothing happened, like Dallas one year, or places in the Midwest, and we'd immerse ourselves.

I'd bring big teams, up to 10 reporters at the same time, and we'd embed ourselves in the locale and do an intensive style of reporting on deep trends, instead of hot-topic headlines. One of the reporters would look at architecture and neighborhood structure. One would go to a bunch of churches and report. Another would be the political guy. We'd just spread across the city. We'd go for about 10 days usually and immerse ourselves. We'd produce saturation demographic/economic/cultural reporting on that corner of America.

I'd often sweet-talk the local cops and ask, "Can I ride around in the back of a cop car for several nights in a row?" I will tell you, you will learn more about a city from the back seat of a cop car at night than by any other method I can think of. It's an awesome way of getting to the pulse of a city.

That style of reporting—vacuuming up hundreds of little details of everyday real life—plus heavy use of data that measures actual behavior—are the two ways that I have always reported.

So I was thrilled when I first heard that the Defense Department was willing to embed reporters with actual fighting units. You remember how the First Gulf War was reported—150 reporters in a room with General Norman Schwarzkopf playing videos? Nobody saw anything with their own eyes. That is what war reporting had devolved to.

Michael Kelly snuck into Iraq. But otherwise there was hardly anybody on the ground seeing actual combat efforts. When I heard that they were considering that, I said, "Oh my gosh, I'm going to be one of those embedded reporters if it's the last thing I do."

Riley: Did you ask your wife before you did this?

Zinsmeister: My wife has ridden a lot of metaphorical roller coasters with me. She knows I like to do dangerous things, to climb towers, to backpack in grizzly country, that kind of stuff. I like to see if I can master something, if I can do something people say can't be done. She knows and accepts that.

I'll tell you who I had trouble with—my sisters. I have four sisters. I was the editor in chief of my magazine, so I could have sent whoever I wanted. I sent myself. Some of my sisters thought that was irresponsible. They said, "You don't have to go. There is no reason. You have three children. You should not be there." I thought to myself, *How can I not do this? First of all, who else am I going to send? Second of all, I need to do my little part.* I had many military friends who were doing really hard things. The whole nation was mobilized. My embedding in Iraq was minor in comparison.

I don't think my wife ever said one negative word. She didn't like it, but we have a pact on things like this. I don't tell her, and she doesn't ask. [*laughter*] To this day I don't think she knows that I was in three IED [improvised explosive device] explosions. I got blown up several times; we had some real close calls. Some of that ended up in my three books of Iraq War reporting and some was filmed and showed up in the PBS [Public Broadcasting System] documentary I made. But she has never ever asked me about it. That's the way we deal with these things—don't ask, don't tell. [*laughter*]

Riley: So you head over.

Zinsmeister: I went over. I wouldn't have gone if it were just Schwarzkopf-style talking to generals in a convention center. I did talk to generals when I was over there, but it was a very small part of my reporting. What thrilled me as a reporter was having the chance to be in a Humvee in combat where the highest ranking guy in the truck was a sergeant. That's what I did. It was real, grunt-level warfighting.

I want to be clear: war is awful, and you can't believe the wastage and the dreadful messes that arise. And that part of the world is just so deeply depressing. I remember going to visit a sheikh with a civil affairs officer and he said, "I have really great news for you. You have this open sewer running in your street here, and we're going to put a proper underground sewer line starting over there and running 1,000 yards this way." The sheikh listened then said, "That's good, but I want you to stop the sewer right here." The officer said, "Why? Your neighbors down the street need that too." The sheikh said, "Those are not our people. That will slow things down.

I want you to stop it right here." There's none of the feeling that we're all in this together; we're all Iraqis. It's a sad part of the world in many ways.

However, the experience of me being out every day in this difficult environment with young American kids, doing hard stuff on their own, making their own decisions, improvising as they went—that was thrilling. I was impressed at how much innate goodness and decent judgment there is in young Americans today. That was invigorating for me, even in the desperate situations we were in in some cases. They were just so uncomplaining, in most cases so anxious to do the right thing, in many cases taking on huge risks to themselves so that they wouldn't hurt somebody else who was innocent.

This was a marvelous opportunity for firsthand reporting. Nobody knew the rules. It was all make it up as you go along. You knew you couldn't have a weapon. You knew you couldn't report live on operations. Other than that, it was pretty much "you figure it out."

Unfortunately, most of the reporters' opportunities were completely wasted. A lot of reporters didn't know how to do this. I'm a big camper, I love the outdoors, I love blue-collar guys, I like big noises, I like tools. This was my element. I was very comfortable, and immediately just started freelancing.

I initially got assigned to an attack helicopter group in the 82nd Airborne Division. It was a great place to start because helicopter pilots are articulate. Helicopters are very expensive, so they pick smart people, and I got a good introduction. But I realized as soon as the combat started that these guys are not forward deployed. They fly out of safe locations in the back. If I stay with them I'm going to be in a supply depot somewhere; so I'm not staying here.

Almost all of the reporters stayed with the soldiers they were initially assigned to, and most tethered themselves tightly to the public-affairs officers assigned to them by the unit. None of this had been tightly codified, though, and there were few hard-and-fast rules as to what you could do. I wanted to jump to the front, where I could watch the war being fought. So how do you do that in a war zone? There's no taxi service, you know?

So I made friends with guys who drove what were called the log trucks—logistics trucks bringing supplies like food and water into the various camps. I'd give them use of my satellite phone or whatever and made friends with them and they'd take me wherever I wanted. So I just started to float. It was actually quite dangerous, because no one knew where I was. When you were embedded with one unit they took responsibility for you, but I hated that, being led around by the hand.

The first thing I'd do when I arrived at a new unit was go and introduce myself to the commanding officer, tell him or her what I was doing. I'd say, "I want to be a fly on the wall and observe everything you do. I don't want to interfere with anything, and you're not responsible for babysitting me. If I get into deep doo-doo, that's on me. But I want to go everywhere your guys go."

Almost every one of the officers said, "That's a deal, we'll do that." It's how you approach them; it's how you talk to them. You have to have some credibility. I tried to be very deferential and stay out of the way, but I got into some amazing things. I did not have any security clearance at

that point, yet I got into rock drills, battle-planning centers, terrorist interrogations, intelligence briefings, night raids, major operations, all kinds of things.

The enlisted soldiers and Marines were very willing to have me with them. And I had all kinds of good luck. Luck is always a huge portion of anything, certainly when you're floating across a free-form battle zone hoping to be in the right place when something interesting happens. But I also got good at floating. You have to use your instincts. They don't tell you anything in advance; you have to listen for little hints. You get wind that some battalion is going to attack a bunch of shooters holed up in a hospital and you realize, *I have to rush over to 2nd Battalion.*

When you're floating like that, as I say, nobody takes responsibility for you. I'll never forget one time. We had been up all night. Combat operations were at night, and then you travel all day, so I wasn't getting any sleep at all. I was groggy. At one point we pulled into an abandoned cement factory and the soldiers were all unpacking and digging in. So I'm thinking, *They're going to make this into a base for a couple days, so I'm safe here. I'm going to go to sleep.*

In the front of the factory, in the managerial offices, there were couches. I had been sleeping on the ground or on the hood of a Humvee and hadn't been comfortably horizontal for a long time. So I lay down on this couch. I thought I'd wake up and then figure out where I am, what we're doing the next day. I have no idea how long I was asleep, probably longer than I would have guessed, but when I woke up, instead of there being a beehive all around me it was silent. There was no one around. I realized no one had a clue I was in here, and they left me. I started running around, thinking, *Oh man, this is bad. I'm in the middle of nowhere.*

I finally found just two trucks left; that's all there were. They initially said, "You can't come, we're full." I said, "I'm coming. I'll hang on the fenders if necessary, but I am going with you." So there were downsides to this style of reporting. But the upside was I got to see all kinds of incredible things, unfiltered.

I went all over the place. I was in the Shiite south. I went to Fallujah as it was melting down. I went all over Baghdad.

I was proud of my country for being so open. The military allowed French reporters to embed. There were guys from Al Jazeera, who were close to fifth-column types. Our government was open enough to let people of all sorts of look over the shoulder of our warfighters under tremendous pressure. If some private corporation was in the midst of a business crisis, and I said, "Excuse me, I'd like to embed myself in your next board of directors meeting," they'd laugh at me. The *New York Times* wouldn't let me wander around their newsroom during some big meltdown. Yet that is exactly what the U.S. military did with embedded reporters during the Iraq War.

As a reporter, I asked myself how this remarkable access happened. I think it was the military's experience in Afghanistan, and realizing that information was going to be a big part of winning the War on Terror. During the Afghan invasion, Special Forces would go into a village and after they'd leave the Taliban would say, "Oh, they raped our women, and they broke into the mosque, and they did this and that." There were no reporters around to corroborate one way or the other. So some of the battlefield leaders said better to have outsiders with us to see exactly what we do

than have to deal with this misinformation—a very savvy, high-risk, high-reward decision. Classic Rumsfeld if you know anything about Rumsfeld. He never really owned the embedding program, but it would never have happened with most any other Defense Secretary.

I thought it was a brilliant decision, and wonderful for openness and truth. But most reporters didn't take advantage of it. And some said, "Oh, this is all hand-fed news; it's all managed, staged news." And maybe it was for them if they stayed with their public-affairs officer. But there is no reason they had to; they could have done what I did. Nobody spoon-fed me anything. I saw exactly what I saw. I hope it's an innovation that survives. It is a much, much better form of reporting than the lock-them-in-a-control-room style, or having reporters operating out of luxury hotels with fixers with little or no contact with what the grunts are dealing with in actual combat zones.

Riley: Did you get a sense of the boots-on-the-ground view of Washington? Was there concern about the $8,000 screwdriver, or is that something that—

Zinsmeister: That was really somebody else's work. I couldn't do everything. I mostly focused on the war fighters, the actual men and women I was with. What was their competence? How did they represent our nation under crisis circumstances? What were the likelihoods that they would be able to come up with a decisive victory against Islamic enemies, making friends with Islamic friends, all that stuff, the actual practicality of the grassroots war fighting?

One of the things that made my blood boil was the big early smarty-pants critique of the war that "they didn't have this planned." That only gets said by somebody who has never been in a war zone and has no idea how chaotic and anarchic it is, and how much has to be improvised. Yes, there were lots of plans and they all went out the window in five minutes, because things change. War is improvisational, especially this kind of a war. It has to be improvisational.

My conclusion was our forces and our leaders are quite good at improvisation, and this is a style of war that the American soldier probably can do well. There was an enormous amount of responsibility and trust pushed down to the humblest levels of our military units: When do you fire? When do you not fire?

After failures like Abu Ghraib it became more rigid, and the rules of engagement tightened and it became more bureaucratic. But early in the war soldiers would take over a house right in the middle of a neighborhood and operate there for a while with maybe 20 guys—very grassroots military decision making. Later there was a big consolidation and forces were pulled back into huge barb-wired main bases. Then the platoon leaders and company commanders had less chance to actually know the villagers, to have the sheiks over for dinner, to meet and cooperate. So there was progress lost there.

In the early stages of the war we understood that counterinsurgency requires close-quarters engagement with the population. We came back to that later on with Petraeus. It was two steps forward, one step back.

Riley: It was more a question about the effect toward the leadership in Washington.

Hult: What was the sense of the folks you were spending time with, sleeping, eating, protecting?

Riley: Soldiers always gripe about their immediate superiors, but are they griping about—?

Hult: Was this something we should have been doing, for example, in Iraq as opposed to Afghanistan?

Zinsmeister: I can tell you at least three-quarters of the average soldiers, I would say about the same fraction of the commanders, felt like, *This is something we have to be doing, we should be doing*.

Now mind you, they were making terrible sacrifices. There was unhappiness about 18-month deployments. That boggles the mind.

I broke a tooth at one point so I had to go see one of the Army dentists set up in a tent in a sandy desert. I think he was from Cleveland. He was a reservist; that's often where they get experienced medical guys, reservists who were trained by the Army, then have their own practices, and get called up in an emergency.

I said to the dentist, "What's happened to your practice back in Cleveland?" He said, "It's gone. I'm deployed for a year, so it's gone. I'm going to have to start from scratch when I go back." I thought, *Man, that's a sacrifice*.

I was staggered that there wasn't more bitterness and complaining and unhappiness. But the Twin Towers experience, that was searing for all of us. A lot of the guys that were there were there specifically because of that.

Hult: Yes.

Zinsmeister: I wrote about some of these guys. Kids from UVA [University of Virginia] who signed up right after 9/11. I had a long conversation with a guy who dropped out of Cornell to join up. I knew guys who were in the Marines whose dads were high-powered attorneys and stuff. There are many people who turned their lives upside down intentionally to serve and who were there very much knowing what they were getting into in advance.

Riley: So you didn't go over there and then come back a more critical observer of this administration?

Zinsmeister: I thought the war had to be fought and I thought it was fought in fairly savvy ways. The way that it finally resolved itself was where things needed to go. I had no illusions about what a lovely country this was or how likely they were to become hardy democrats. That is a place where the President was a little over—a lot over—idealistic. He'd probably tell you that himself.

Riley: Did you talk about this with him?

Zinsmeister: It's interesting. He knew I had a lot of Iraq experience, but he was up to his eyeballs in this. When I first arrived in June of 2006 the war was at its nadir. He was surrounded by alligators, didn't need any free advice, and I wasn't trying to offer it from the Domestic

Policy Council. But we occasionally talked about something while in a helicopter or limo. He'd say, "What are you hearing?" But I was always real gentle about it.

But obviously I was very interested. Little things. I went to all the Medal of Honor ceremonies because I had many friends over there and that was important to me. I was responsible for all the work on veterans' issues, and I put a lot of energy into that.

That bumped me into people on the National Security side. I admired Bob Gates and worked with him a few times where Defense interests ran into veterans' topics (or environmental issues or some other topic I oversaw). I came to know Condi Rice a bit. She went to Notre Dame, she's a classical pianist. My daughter went to Notre Dame, she's a classical pianist. When we found that out, it was a fun bond between us.

President and Mrs. Bush had a nice box in the Kennedy Center they were very kind about sharing. I love classical music, so I used to go once in a while with my wife or kids. My daughter and I were in the box once and Condi walked in. She instantly grabbed Kate's hand, who at that point was about a sophomore in college, and said, "We girls have to sit together; we piano people have to stay together. Come with me." So she pulled her up into the front row.

Hult: Wow.

Zinsmeister: It was an Andre Watts piano performance, and afterward she said to Kate, "Andre is a good friend of mine. Let's go backstage." So she grabbed her and I heard them clicking their heels off down the hall. She's a sweetheart in that way; she was so kind.

But in general there is a big wall between national security policy and domestic policy, and I knew the President needed me to keep a close eye on domestic policy. He was so distracted with the war, he wanted me to focus on that. Part of what they wanted from me was to make sure nothing melted down there.

There were some great souls in that administration, some real princes. You mentioned Fred Fielding. That was one of the things I enjoyed. Like I said I never coveted this job. I didn't like being separated from my family from 4:30 in the morning until 8:30 at night. I had a seventh grader; I hated that separation. But one of the things that balanced it for me was the people I was working with. There were some great human beings.

I don't think that is always the case in every administration. You expect competence. I knew I was going to have highly competent colleagues, that's for sure. What surprised me was how humane almost all of them were.

Riley: One of the things that is a beneficial side effect of doing these interviews is you get an opportunity to see an awful lot of people one-to-one. People that you might—even from a distance, you've seen on television, you might—have sort of a mixed reaction to. It's remarkable how often you sit down and start having an intimate conversation with them that you discover exactly what you're saying.

One of the heartening things about these interviews is I would go to my students often and tell them, "I can tell you that your government is run by terrific people, whether they're Democrats or Republicans." It really does come through in these sessions.

Zinsmeister: Mike Gerson had a great column once. He wrote about how working in the White House make you realize how hard people try, how hard all your predecessors tried, and how much good faith and patriotism there was in their efforts in most cases. And how heavy the burden of those job is. It is very sobering and it gives you respect and makes you more chary about pointing fingers.

Riley: Sure.

Zinsmeister: The other thing it has made me chary about is crusading. I'm much more sympathetic to the person who just keeps a responsible lid on things. We have a country where ideally the federal government is not especially a motive force. The federal government has to set certain rules and boundaries, and do some things, but the things that make our country lovely and powerful and fascinating are basically not governmental. Private life is where the horsepower and energy and fascination comes from in America. So what you don't want is to muck that up from Washington. So my service helped me to become an admirer of somebody who keeps things nice and boring at the federal level. That is really a huge accomplishment. [*laughter]*

Riley: So how were you approached? How does this happen?

Zinsmeister: I still can't give you a good answer to that. I have no idea really why they asked me. I had no pick-up-the-phone kind of White House friends or connections. We did get a special request from the White House at one point when I was running the *American Enterprise*, asking that we express over 24 copies of each new issue the day they were printed. I thought, *Well, that's kind of cool, we'll do that.* But I had no idea who they went to during those years. The circulation I craved was true paid subscribers in middle-American places like Colorado and Nebraska; that's what I was aiming for. But it was cool that somebody in the White House was paying attention too. So I knew we had a readership there.

Early in 2006 I had decided I was going to leave the magazine. I had been the editor in chief for 13 years. I'd had this huge high-pressure period of reporting for the magazine from Iraq while also writing three books and creating a PBS film. I was burned out. I was ready to try something different. So I told Chris DeMuth and some of my buddies that I was going to leave the magazine. I wasn't quite sure what was going to happen next, but I was going to figure that out.

I remember having a conversation with Michael Novak, who is an old friend of mine. I'm embarrassed to tell you this, but I'll tell you the truth. Michael said to me, "Would you consider the domestic policy position that is open now?" At that point I did not know that the Domestic Policy Advisor had been arrested and this whole brouhaha. I've already confessed I've never closely followed insider politics, and I was preoccupied with the work I'd been doing in Iraq. So I didn't even know that position was open.

I said, “That’s not really me, Michael.” Then he said to me, “Would you mind if I sent your name up as a possibility?” I said, “Oh, that plus five bucks will get you a cup of coffee. But sure, go for it.” I didn’t take this at all seriously.

I really don’t know, but for whatever reason I got this call from the White House personnel chief. She clearly had vetted me heavily before calling. Somebody must have gotten the gears grinding.

Chris DeMuth might have had some role in that too. We had become admirers of each other. We weren’t quite friends at that point; he was still my boss. And we were very different people; he is more of an insider guy for sure. He had Josh Bolten’s ear I think.

Hult: Another hypothesis could be Karl Rove, because Karl Rove was reading everything in that White House.

Zinsmeister: Karen, I think you’re absolutely right. That’s the third person I was going to mention. Karl showed every sign. He followed my career very closely. The irony is when I got into the White House I had very few private meetings with Karl. I went to his house a few times. And I admired him both as a thinker and as a person. But at the White House he mostly operated in different lanes than I did.

Hult: He was edging away from being an advisor at that time.

Zinsmeister: In many ways Karl was effectively the Domestic Policy Advisor until just before I arrived. But that clearly changed around the time Josh Bolten became Chief of Staff.

Anyway, I got the call saying, “The President is interested in you for this position.” I’ve told you, I was not anxious to step away from my tight family life, in a beautiful rural village of 2,500 people, and a very satisfying, self-directed creative career. But I took this request seriously.

The biggest and most important reason was that I was—what’s the right word? Not radicalized, not traumatized, but 9/11 really shook my world. For several years prior to that phone call I had been spending most of my mental energy in Iraq. I had become close to a lot of folks making huge sacrifices for the country. I was very impressed by that.

I thought to myself, *Here’s my laundry list of complaints. I have a seventh grader; I don’t want to move schools. I don’t really like politics. I don’t like Washington. I’ve been my own boss for most of my career and don’t want to march to somebody else’s drummer.* Then I thought to myself, *That’s pathetic. If that’s the worst of it for you, there’s lots of people doing harder things that they don’t want to do right now. Maybe you need to do some hard things that you’re qualified to handle, because they need doing.*

I’ll tell you honestly, on the conservative side of intellectual politics our bench is not deep. We don’t have many academics. We don’t have a lot of journalists. In what you could call the thinking and analyzing and writing industries, at best a fifth of the participants are conservative. The Left dominates these sectors.

So I had no illusions that the universe was depending on me. But I knew I could handle the job. And I thought to myself, *If this President thinks that I’m the person who would be most helpful*

to him, who am I to second-guess that? Maybe I should just do this. That can be my service, just as the men and women I've been observing in Iraq are serving. That was honestly my calculus. That and talking to my wife!

Riley: So you did talk to your wife.

Zinsmeister: Oh yes. But my wife is completely apolitical, has no interest in politics. In fact, her family are all bomb-throwing lefties. So political work has no appeal for her at all. But she knows that taking a role in current events is important to me, and she supports that. So while she wasn't anxious for me to do this, she recognized it was an honor for me to be asked, and urged me to consider it seriously.

So I went down for an interview. I decided to completely play this by the seat of my pants. Because I really wasn't seeking the job I felt I had nothing to lose. I went almost like a reporter, just to see what would unfold. That made it very easy and enjoyable. There was no pressure on me, and I felt as cool as a cucumber when I walked into the Oval to meet the President.

Riley: That's the first time you met the President?

Zinsmeister: Yes, the first time I ever had any contact with him. I'm in the Oval sitting right next to the Resolute desk. He pulls up a chair very close. The only other guy in the room is Josh Bolten..

Hult: Had you known Josh before?

Zinsmeister: No. We first met when I had a preliminary round of interviews before I got to the President. He and Joel Kaplan were the most important parts of that.

Hult: Deputy Chief of Staff for policy, right?

Zinsmeister: Yes, and one of the smartest human beings I've ever worked with. I've known plenty of Rhodes Scholars and prize scientists and whatever, but in this administration Kaplan, and Michael Chertoff, and Bolten were some of the smartest human beings I have ever been in a room with.

Anyway, the preliminary interviews are behind me. I'm really not selling anything. I'm telling the President exactly what I think about whatever he raises. It was actually quite enjoyable.

We had a long interview in the Oval. And it was fun right from the beginning. He might have started with something like, "What are you doing here?" And I answered something like, "Well, you and I made a lot of the same mistakes." He laughed and he said, "What do you mean." So I told him my whole fish-out-of-water experience at Yale, that I had this strong identification with middle-American values, that it seemed to me we shared some history in this. I told him I wasn't proud of the fact that I was 30 years old before I had any sophisticated understanding of religion. He raised his hand and said, "Join the club." That's the kind of conversation we had. Right from the beginning.

As I mentioned earlier, he was very interested in the years I lived across from the housing project. Asked me about the name Zinsmeister, what it translated to in German. I confessed it was something like tax collector or interest master. Very usurious and un-Republican. So we joked about that. He was very interested clearly in my character and my family life. That was one of the things he bore in on the most. Then we also talked about policy. I said, "You have some upside on the domestic side. Energy needs to go into this, and it hasn't." He didn't disagree. We talked about some specifics.

I remember at some point marriage came up. I said, "I think the decline of marriage and the instability of childrearing families is probably the keystone to a lot of other social sadness." And he said, "I agree, but I'm not the person to make that message." He said, "I've been so lucky and blessed in my family life." I forget his exact words, but he meant it would be presumptuous for someone of his good fortune to stand up and preach for stronger marriage, or more loyal fatherhood, or better family life, you have to be a better dad. He wasn't the right messenger.

I remember at that point the President looked over at Josh, with whom he had a wicked, teasing relationship. They had a lot of fun together. He raised his eyebrows and asked, "Now, Josh, what do you think about marriage?" Josh said something like, "Well, Mr. President, I'm very much in favor of it in principle, but I haven't managed to put that policy into practice yet." [*laughter*]

Hult: Good answer.

Zinsmeister: So I was just completely comfortable, and pretty charmed by him. The sincerity and decency, that's important to me, particularly if it's someone I'm going to be working for. At this stage I'm not going to work with people who yell at drivers or secretaries. There are plenty such folks in D.C. But the President was the opposite of that.

And he must have liked me, because literally on the way out of the Oval he said, "Hell, yes, I want this guy, Josh." Josh told me later he'd never done that before, never said right on the spot he wanted to hire somebody, so we hit it off.

I don't want to create any false image here. It's not like he and I were buddies and golfed together blah, blah, blah. I joined the administration midway through its sixth year. The President was focused on war policy for most of the time I was in there. I had just a little piece of his brain. I'm not one of George Bush's old friends. He had people like Karl Rove and Margaret Spellings and Dan Bartlett who went way back to his Texas days, people like Al Hubbard he went to college with. He had intimates. I wasn't going to try and impersonate one. All I wanted was to respect him and have him respect me by doing my job very well. That's what we had.

Hult: Did you accept the job right then?

Zinsmeister: It wasn't a formal offer. Plus you have to go through the strip search of a background check.

Hult: Yes, I do know that.

Zinsmeister: There is this unbelievably invasive process. I've been to 40-some countries, and you have to write down exactly what dates you were in each one. Provide all this financial stuff.

Old friends and every neighbor gets interviewed by FBI agents. You can imagine how thrilled I was when I learned some years later that OPM [Office of Personnel Management] had been hacked and now all this personal information is out there somewhere. I'm a very private person.

Hult: Yes, of course.

Zinsmeister: The other thing I wasn't at all prepared for was that I had no idea there were going to be these vicious personal attacks. Oh my gosh, blogs were lit up. I'm not going to rehash that, it's too painful for me even now. But there were so many lies. I hated women, made up things on my résumé, faked winning championships in rowing, was fired from jobs. Incredibly untrue and painful things.

I always told my kids, "Your whole life is your reputation, that's all you really have, so treat it like gold." I never made any money in my life but I had a personal record and reputation I am proud of. Now suddenly anyone with a keyboard could drag me through the gutter.

If I were a private citizen I would have ripped into these guys, but once you're a Presidential assistant you have to zip it. All of a sudden you're representing another person, so you can't fight back. I was literally slandered and libeled, but once you're a public figure that doesn't apply. Lawyers told me these are actual libels and if you were a private citizen, you would have recourse, but you are not a private citizen, and as someone in the political arena, you have no rights, so you have to grin and bear it.

That was deeply traumatizing for me. I don't even like to look back at those unexpected initial attacks. So I went almost overnight from the delightful experience of discovering what a warm and delightful human being the President was to being slapped with angry anonymous attacks that instantly reminded me *this is why I stayed out of D.C. my whole life.* Part of me wished I'd continued to stay on the outside. But I was in the Army now. Not literally of course, but figuratively. My wife and I had that conversation. I said, "Honey, I'm going to treat this like a three-year stint in the Army. I joined up to do my duty. Let's do it as well as we can, then go home."

Hult: Did they ask you to make that kind of commitment, that you would stay through the end of the administration?

Zinsmeister: They didn't, though there were hints they'd like a steady hand on the tiller. But when some folks started to bail out with about a year to go, I thought to myself, *It's going to be difficult to replace that guy at this point.* I felt it would be unfair to the President and a little irresponsible to strand my colleagues late in the game. So I decided I should stick to it through the end of the administration.

Hult: Now Josh Bolten was relatively new at that time as well.

Zinsmeister: Brand-new. I think he became chief a month or two before me, though obviously he was an old hand in the administration.

Hult: Yes, that's what I was thinking.

Zinsmeister: It was actually good. It was a whole new regime. It wasn't just Josh, there were a bunch of us who came in right about then. I helped hire several Cabinet Secretaries at that same time. So there was a surge of fresh legs and fresh eyeballs, which was helpful. It cleared the decks a little bit of some of the inherited stuff. We were able to establish new roles.

Throughout my tenure, I tried very hard to be the least-visible high-level aide in the White House. I didn't want anyone outside our councils to hear from me. I turned down speaking engagements and doggedly avoided the press. I didn't want any public face.

That made for a good marriage with someone like Margaret Spellings—an old and intimate friend of the President, an expert schmoozer of the press and the Hill, all things I couldn't or didn't want to be. So she could be the face, I could be the behind-the-scenes operator.

Margaret started off extremely wary of me. In fact, she was quite unpleasant in the beginning. I remember her calling the chief's office after an early meeting in the Roosevelt Room to complain about my calling her "Margaret" instead of "Madam Secretary." (I've explained how fond I am of aristocracy!)

She's very territorial, and I think she assumed, because I'm more conservative than her, or maybe because of the nasty blog characterizations of me right after my nomination, or my AEI connection, whatever, that I was going to battle with her. But I bent over backward to be respectful of her seniority and her long previous service to the administration, and we eventually developed a great yin-yang relationship.

At the very end of the administration we were in the trenches together coping with some very serious problems in the student loan market. Basically, it was on the brink of collapsing exactly as the mortgage market did. We had to solve this quickly, and quietly, with no precedents to go from. And we became a very effective team, her being visible and me running a very complicated policy process from behind the curtain. We were highly dependent upon each other in that.

Often in politics, the greatest successes are the dogs that don't bark. Very few people know how close the country was to a calamity in the student loan market. The fact that many people who read this will not be aware that student loans almost melted down is because we fixed it in the eleventh hour, under great pressure, out of public sight. That's something I am very proud of.

A student loan collapse would have created millions of innocent victims—kids days from setting foot on campus suddenly with no financing. There were no greedy students misstating their finances to game the system, as there was on the housing side. These were completely innocent people who wanted to go to school. But they were about to get caught up in a secondary maelstrom sparked by the wider stresses in our financial system.

This innocent-victim reality was my whole motivation for doing some of the things I never would have countenanced otherwise, including government market-making for private loans. There would have been too much collateral damage, and possible wider financial panic, otherwise. I realized it would be completely wrong to let a whole generation of people get swept up in a mess they had nothing to do with creating.

So Margaret and I moved heaven and earth. It was a high-stakes race against the clock. She has all these public skills; but she is not an economic animal, I am. She was a little uneasy and uncertain about much of what we did on the policy front, and was happy to defer to me by that point. So I was thanking my lucky stars that we had worked out this trusting professional relationship by then. Despite being such different animals, I had her confidence by then, and she had mine.

I'm happy that we came to trust each other and work together well, because we had to win a very serious and difficult battle against financial disorder. We're both to-the-point, high-energy, similar in some temperamental ways, but she is Miss Inside and I'm Mr. Outside. Despite our differences, I respect her. She has a little of that bluntness of Bush that I prized as an antidote to the phoniness and insincerity of most politics. She too is a what-you-see-is-what-you-get person; that's the thing we liked about each other. That plus the competence. She was one of the most competent Cabinet Secretaries I worked with. She knew how to get a job done.

So that's a positive Washington, D.C., story. We're from different planets: She's not religious, I am. I identify with small-town America, she definitely doesn't. She loves the front page of the *Washington Post*. I wouldn't wrap my muddy hiking boots in it. We're just very different. So it was delightful that we worked this arrangement out. Back to my Army metaphor, it's like we got thrown together in a small unit under fire, and we had to mesh so we could stop bad things from happening. And we did.

Riley: Let me go back and ask—we'll break here for lunch in just a few minutes. I think they're going to bring it to us.

Zinsmeister: I can work through it if you want.

Riley: We'll probably eat in here, but we're not going to force you to talk about this while you're eating. Was there any discussion about what the President's agenda would be for the final two years? There is a sense that six years into an eight-year Presidency, particularly with a President who is enormously preoccupied by problems abroad, that this is going to be kind of a backwater. Was there that sense or was he looking for you—?

Hult: Could I amend that a little bit? That's where I wanted to go as well. I'm wondering if the November 2006 elections were a breakpoint in those expectations.

Zinsmeister: That happened after I arrived, obviously.

Hult: I know that, so really those are two questions. One is going in did you get a sense from the President of what he wanted, and then did that change as you went through the election?

Zinsmeister: Those are great questions. Let me say first of all certainly I was clear-eyed about that the President was focused foremost on Iraq. Frankly, I wanted that myself. That was the problem our country needed to solve more than anything, so there was no disagreement. There was no wah-wah, I'm not getting enough face time.

But there were still plenty of things we could and did do. For instance I argued that there were lots of kitchen-table issues, sort of boring stuff that journalists weren't writing about but that are

important to the way average human beings live, and it would improve the quality of people's lives if we could change some of these. Obviously education reform is a big kitchen-table issue for families. Other things, though, that I cared about included things like transportation reform.

It is criminal that literally one-third of the flights in this country are late or canceled. Think about the missed weddings and the business meetings that get screwed up because of this. In many ways it's a third-world air traffic system we have right now. And there is absolutely no reason for it other than sclerosis and bad government management. The way we navigate our airplanes is much less sophisticated than the way everyday Americans navigate their cars. The technology is a whole generation behind; the funding mechanisms are broken; the management structure is a primitive compared to how air traffic control has evolved in Canada, Britain, and many other countries. This is the kind of thing I loved and was passionate about, and one of the things I tried to bring with me to the White House was an interest in that stuff.

There are few political bonuses in that sort of work. So I had a bit of a hard time dragging some of my fellow White House aides into these kinds of problem solving, but I insisted a few times. And we did some true policy invention. We invented an interesting system of slot auctions at airports, with some congestion pricing, and so forth. Solutions to true government malpractice.

Similarly, we sketched out a radically improved way of delivering disability benefits to veterans without turning them into wards of the state—a big long-term reform I am still working on today, with philanthropic money.

We protected and encouraged an important scientific shift toward a new kind of induced stem cell that is both more scientifically useful and more ethical than embryonic stem cells.

We shone a light on Catholic schools in inner-city neighborhoods. We encouraged faith communities to get involved in social problems like prisoner reentry and hard-to-place adoptions.

And of course we created a major immigration reform with lots of brand-new provisions. That was big-time social invention. It didn't pass, but its fundamentals will necessarily be the heart of whatever we eventually do to secure our borders against future illegal immigration and then regularize the status of the people now here in limbo.

In some ways the Iraq War took a lot of pressure off of our domestic work. People were so focused on other things I could experiment outside the spotlight. I assembled several nerd squads to really dig in on these kinds of issues. The President could have tried more of this inventive work if fate hadn't dropped two towers, a hurricane, a bridge, and a few other things on him. But he did a good job of doing what any executive has to do, which is to focus on the stuff that matters right now.

The other thing that was very important to me, and where we really succeeded in our domestic work while I was there, was to avoid all blowups and disasters. We completely took those kinds of things off the President's worry agenda. We had plenty of fires like the Walter Reed Hospital failure, a mass shooting at Virginia Tech, attacks over things like stem cells, the near mess in student loans—but we put all those fires out quickly. We fixed things. I'm very proud of that.

Hult: How did you divide issues with the National Economic Council?

Zinsmeister: That was a done deal by the time I arrived. As you probably know, the White House is run on a military structure. It's literally a military operation in many ways. They have a structure that was very familiar to me thanks to my time in Iraq where I figured out the Army hierarchies, with decisions moving from majors to lieutenant colonels to colonels to generals. The chain of command is much the same in the White House. There are the SAPs [Special Assistants to the President] who develop issues and hand them up to the DAPs [Deputy Assistants to the President], and then there are the Assistants to the President who decide, or take matters to the President if necessary. I never entirely understood how universal that is or how much it varies by administration, but I get the sense the procedures have been pretty consistent in the White House, under very different Presidents, for a long time.

Hult: So you walked in as an Assistant to the President. You had a staff of what, 14, 15?

Zinsmeister: Yes. I did the math once; I think I was in charge of something like a million and a half federal employees and several trillions of dollars of spending. So I was asking myself before I arrived, *OK, what kind of army am I going to have to help me manage that?* When I got in the saddle I learned it's really about eight or ten very smart people and some administrative assistants. Literally, that's it. I'm not complaining, mind you, in some ways it's brilliant that that's how it works, because it allows you to be extremely nimble. There is no bureaucracy in the White House. There is no human inertia or dead force you have to move. On most issues it was me and one focused specialist who made decisions. Of course, you can call on the full expertise and manpower of each of the federal agencies, but for real intellectual strategy and tactics, it's just a very few deciders, working without a net.

So it was me and my housing guy when we had a big question on housing. Me and my stem cell guy on stem cells. Plus a wise deputy to help orchestrate everything. That's the whole brain trust. Now obviously you pull in resources and details of ideas from the agencies. But I can't tell you how far we are from true cabinet government. People have this illusion that these huge, heavily funded agencies actually run themselves and solve their own problems. That's so far from the truth.

Yes, the day-to-day stuff, the humdrum stuff, gets managed by the agencies. But anything fractious, anything difficult, anything that requires social invention, goes to the White House. It's not that the White House is politically manipulating or stealing—the agencies are not functionally capable of solving those hard problems, they do not have the DNA. They lock up. All their incentives and structures are built up to avoid risk and dodge problems. So they're weak at adjudicating difficult decisions, where there are good and bad options on both sides, and they are very bad at intellectual invention.

The President wrote about this himself in *Decision Points*, describing how he got to the surge in Iraq. He expresses exactly the same frustration I described, over the inability of the Cabinet agencies to pioneer intellectually. He tried and tried to get the Pentagon to abandon old methods and brainstorm with him on new solutions for Iraq. What can we do now? How can we start over with a blank sheet of paper and come up with something fresh? Ultimately, the Defense Department was unable to come up with paradigm-breaking thinking.

He got very frustrated, as he discusses in *Decision Making*. And so he tells his National Security Council staff in the White House to set up their own skunk works to come up with something new, because the Pentagon and the CIA and the State Department had proven unable to innovate in that way. Once the White House staff created a new map and new plan, then the agencies would execute. That they're better equipped for.

I saw the same phenomenon over and over. Overcoming this inertia, I realized, is what you have a White House staff for. The most important parts of my job, I learned, were, one, to be an honest broker of different perspectives and priorities, and, two, to be a creative intellectual impresario who could try to find win-win solutions to really hard dilemmas. So we tapped the many talents and skills of the agencies, but the impetus for every breakthrough we achieved had to come from our own White House staff.

It's also a reality that these huge agencies have many holes and thin spots. I'll never forget when we were up to our eyeballs in the student loan problem, within days of major damaging defaults, and we're killing ourselves trying to create some very complicated financial engineering, to create conduits that can recycle previous years' loans so the banks have cash to originate next year's batch. At one point we needed a series of data run on how different loan-volume scenarios would play out over several years—essential financials. But it turned out there was *one* person in the entire Department of Education who could do this, and he'd had a bad tuna sandwich or something and was out sick for a few days. I said, "OK, have his assistant run it, or have somebody else." They said, "No, it's an old computer and no one else knows how to do it. We have to have William," or whatever his name was.

On visits to my agencies I'd see these flickering green screens and realize how dated the technology often was, how thin some of the expertise is. The notion of omnipotence at the top of our government is a real illusion. But we worked out good collaboration most of the time. My staff would gather up basic information and ideas from the agencies so we could make good decisions. When there were tough calls my job was to pull together the principal people with the best information and the strongest opposing views, and set up a fair collision of the forces—in front of the President if we had to, but preferably solving it among ourselves as senior White House staff.

It was very different from what I'd done before, which was all about concluding. Most of my life has been about figuring stuff out, analyzing and deciding. This is the right answer, that's the wrong answer. But my White House work was different. It was about teeing up two or three answers and making sure every side got its best arguments out. So I would rehearse one Cabinet Secretary making one argument and then I'd rehearse another guy making a different case, and try to get them both to be as strong as possible. Then we would unleash this little contest of ideas before the Assistants to the President, or the President himself.

Riley: I want to go back and ask again, was there a sense from the first interview or fairly quickly after you came into your position about an array of issue areas or initiatives that the President wanted you to deal with? Or are you thinking you're going to come in and sort of be reactive to what the environment is producing and then be entrepreneurial with your own ideas? Or was Josh feeding you ideas?

Zinsmeister: There was no communication that "This is the agenda." We talked a little bit about it. I suspected, and hoped, that we would make a big immigration push. NCLB had to be reauthorized. There were going to be certain things that fell in our lap whether we wanted that or not. I also got the sense that there was fair amount of leash here. What you chose to take up beyond that—we're going to rely on your entrepreneurial skill.

Josh was very encouraging; Joel was very encouraging. They said "that's why you're here. We can't do that. We don't have the energy or time to do that. We want you to dream up things a little bit." But there also was the sense that the world will come to you. Reacting intelligently is crucial.

I came to think of my work in three piles. The first was—let's call them deals. Every year you have to make a deal on the budget. Every few years you have to make a deal on the highway bill, on various reauthorizations. It's a deal. Not very intellectual. It's all about who is opposing you and who is your friend. Not my expertise. That's work often done by Candi [Candida] Wolff or Dan Meyer and the legislative affairs people. But I had to pull my weight.

Riley: Sure.

Zinsmeister: Then there are the crises. We find out there are guys languishing in Walter Reed Hospital with their legs blown off. There is a bridge that falls down in Minneapolis and shuts off half of the city. There is a shooting on Virginia Tech's campus. Instantly everything mobilizes. I'm pretty proud of my record there. We put out all the fires. That again is not my personal strength, but I took it seriously and I applied myself. I was very disciplined about staying on top of the crises because I knew how important they were to the public, and that's a place I wanted to serve the President so he didn't need to have to worry about such things. (And Josh's expectation was that you'd better nail the crises! No fumbles there.)

Then there is a third category, which I'd call maybe controversies. Long-developing, complicated, knowledge-based, judgment-tinged battles. I was well equipped to deal with them. That's what I had done for most of my life. What is the right answer on stem cells? How are we going to handle this immigration issue? How to succeed at faith-based social healing. I could do that kind of work in my sleep.

Stem cells for instance. When I got into the office stem cells were radioactive…

Hult: Yes.

Zinsmeister: Nobody wanted to touch them. There was an interesting sine curve to that issue. Initially the Bush position was considered a subtle compromise and a huge Bush success. Then political opponents found it was a convenient way to paint the President as ideological, antiscience, a religious crazy. By the time I arrived in 2006 the White House staff just wanted the pummeling to stop.

I'm really proud of what one staffer and I did there. When I first came in it was Yuval Levin who was my excellent staff partner on this. But he soon left to finish his PhD and was replaced with a guy named Chris Papagianis, another tremendously competent staffer who came over from Senator Talent's office.

I was fascinated by the fast-moving science in this area, as was Chris, and we did some cool behind-the-scenes stuff, just the two of us. We spent a lot of time visiting with scientists. We got to be quite friendly with some of the researchers; I still keep up with some brilliant biologists we connected with then. We went to their labs, we learned what was cutting edge, we brought them to the White House, including to meet with the President. We wrote a little book explaining why the President's position was both scientifically and ethically superior to alternatives, and published it. We were not only able to eliminate the radioactivity of this subject, but, more importantly, to figure out what really mattered in the field and put the federal government in position to exert good influences.

The oppositional narrative when I arrived was completely false. It was presented as scientific progress versus ethics; you can't have both so choose one. Or in the nasty version, it was a battle between scientific enlightenment versus cretinous religion. There was blatant misinformation. President Bush banned stem cell research. (Completely false.) If it wasn't for Bush, Christopher Reeve would've gotten up from his wheelchair within months, and Michael J. Fox would be portraying a teenager again on television. They were being trotted out as props, which was very painful for us.

My position was always that it was not an either/or dilemma. You can advance science while also protecting ethics. In fact, you *must* do both. The George Bush caution lights are going to look mild when we get our first chimeras that are part human and part animal. When we start getting methodical embryo selection for intelligence traits. We're going to have to navigate all kinds of ugly, very potentially dehumanizing things—which is why the ethical concerns we were voicing were not discounted by most of the serious scientists I met with.

But the most exciting thing revealed by our scientific deep-dive quickly was that biological progress was rapidly making the whole controversy moot, and about to disappear. As you probably know, embryonic stem cells are terrible for therapeutic uses, for a variety of reasons. They create tumors wildly, in dangerous ways. And they are not genetic matches to the patient, so anything you create out of them is going to be rejected by the body.

The exciting alternative we identified in our short book, and promoted through policy, was what came to be called iPS [Induced Pluripotent Stem] cells—stem cells that start as standard skin or other cells and are induced into the flexible stem cell state through genetic switching. That way you can make stem cells that match the patient, from his or her own adult cells. In the years since we pushed the NIH [National Institutes of Health] to support this new field, both the science and ethics in stem cells have swung powerfully in our direction.

We believed that it was very likely that while we were in office, scientists were going to be able to take adult cells and turn the clock back and transform them into stem cells. We predicted that in our papers well before it happened. It did happen, and won the Nobel Prize for the first researcher who demonstrated how. The stem cells that all the scientists are working with now are iPS cells, because they are genetic matches for patients, and much more predictable in the ways they react, and free of ethical clouds.

So, as we said from the beginning, this turned out not to be an either/or issue. It's really unfortunate that political opportunists turned it into a cartoon, and scared a lot of people, and

raised false hopes in others. It turned into one of those media passion plays, "either you care about progress, or you're a religious fanatic." So depressing. We thought all along that the science and ethics could proceed hand-in-hand and end up in the same place.

We encouraged this outcome with Executive orders, with budget pots, with the bully pulpit. We went over to NIH and said, "You should be giving grants to the scientists who want to work with iPS cells. They can't get funds right now because you're pouring everything into these intellectually and physically exhausted lines of embryonic stem cells."

I learned that there is a vital role for outsiders in Washington. You get inbred. You do things because that's the way it's always been. You lose the ability to see the things that a fresh set of eyes can see. An outsider can function as an ombudsman and a stimulus.

Chris and I pushed pretty hard to get the NIH to be more open to this branch of science. We tried to help the media understand the astonishing new things that were coming. When it finally happened, when the iPS cells got announced to the world, the headlines acknowledged that the civil war we had put ourselves through had been mooted. And the Bush policy of balance and patience looked pretty good.

My time in the White House taught me that there are people who don't want to see big public problems solved. *They don't want the solutions, they want the controversy.* Because the controversy is politically valuable to them.

I was a bit of a naïf on this. I always assumed all Americans want our knottiest issues to be fixed. Right? Most do. But there are operators who prefer political success to good policies, the expediency of a controversy to a useful closure.

Anyway, I hope the historical record will show that this is a place where President Bush was at the head of the curve. He took a deep interest in this issue, despite the battle scars it brought him. This was the matter over which he carried out his first veto shortly after I arrived in 2006. I ribbed Rove big-time on this. "You were in this place for six years and you never got one veto out of the man. I've been here two months; I got a veto." [*laughter*]

It came up pretty quickly so I had to figure out the twists and turns of stem cell policy quickly. First of all, I wanted it to not be a crisis for the President, not be something that dragged him down, and we managed that. More importantly, I wanted to put in the intellectual work to put us on the side of the angels when this history came to be written. People will see in retrospect that President Bush was in a wise and good position when it came to stem cells. It was actually his opponents who were obscurantists when it came to scientific advance, as well as insensitive to important ethical matters.

Riley: The other important thing for us to air is that this was a Presidential issue. I mean, not everything that you talk about by necessity would be or would become a Presidential issue.

Zinsmeister: Yes.

Riley: But he had helped to make this a Presidential issue by the way he dealt with it in 2001.

Zinsmeister: Yes.

Riley: So it is striking that when you come in the room is empty, everybody is scattered, because usually for a Presidential issue—right, Karen?—you get a crowd of people.

Zinsmeister: You're absolutely right. It was very remarkable in that regard.

On many of the topics that came up during my service in the final three years of the administration there was this huge baggage of prior experience. Positions had already been staked out, attempts had been made, enthusiasms had run their course. But this was an area where the field was open because people who really cared about it like Mike Gerson were gone, or people who remained considered it so fraught they didn't want their fingerprints on it. Even inside the administration plenty of people had bought the false media narrative and decided there was no upside on the stem cell issue. So let's just not talk about it, let's not do anything. But bless their hearts they did allow me to publish on it, they did allow me to hold a few events on it, and the new science bore us out.

Hult: When had the decision to veto been made, was it before you came or after you came?

Zinsmeister: After. I was part of that. I was very adamant that the President had nothing to be chagrined about for drawing the lines he did. We set him up with some meetings with leading scientists so he could hear for himself that there really were exciting developments around the corner that were likely to eclipse embryonic stem cells. I wanted him to understand that interesting scientific advances are coming and history is on your side if you can hang in there.

Hult: So do you remember enough to walk us through how the veto recommendation ultimately reached the President and your role in that?

Zinsmeister: It went the way everything did. We held a series of meetings, SAP [Special Assistant to the President], DAP [Deputy Assistant to the President], AP [Assistant to the President], and then it went to policy time.

Hult: It went to policy at that point?

Zinsmeister: I wrote a memo, and I believe we included information on the possibilities of iPS cells. Some may have wondered why we were parading speculative high-level science in front of the President, but I thought it was important for him to have some confidence that he was not out on a limb where there was no biology to support him.

The President thoroughly enjoyed one of the briefings we set up for him with three very eminent stem cell biologists. We started off in the Oval, with him asking lots of questions, as usual. And at one point he grabbed all three of them and said, "Come on, let's go upstairs." So he took them on a tour of the private part of the White House. He's very warm and generous, and likes to share experiences like that with folks he enjoys.

Riley: One question and then we'll break. This may be a question that we'll have to carry over. You talked about bringing the people in and having occasionally set up the controversies in front of them in order for him to make a decision. We're really interested in how he made decisions

and how he went about informing himself. So if you could, tell us a little bit about his standard operating procedure for becoming the decider. Did he insist on having paperwork? Or was he somebody who was more comfortable in the back-and-forth of a meeting? Was there a sequencing of this?

Zinsmeister: That's a huge topic. The first thing I have to respond to is the facile critique that George Bush is one of our dumber Presidents. That is really mistaken.

I subscribe to the Howard Gardner-style idea of multiple intelligences. I don't think there is just one way of being a smart person; there are lots of ways of being intelligent. Some people are emotionally intelligent. Others have quantitative or statistical gifts. There are people who are intelligent about relationships. There are people who can get right to the crux of things. Individuals who can memorize.

George Bush is a good example of this. What I would categorize as his executive intelligence is quite good. There were very smart people in all our deliberations in the White House, but I can tell you as a factual matter that in our meetings he often showed an astonishing ability to get to the crux of things in a way no one else had.

The vetting process in the White House is extraordinarily rigorous. Starting with lower-level aides and then methodically working its way up through a series of war councils there is a process for uncovering information and angles of argument, and then fighting it out to put all positions on the table and establish a consensus. It's an extended series of Socratic seminars, really. So you would think by the time it gets to the President every fresh argument has been exhausted. Every new angle has been thought through. All he is going to do is check the box yes/no. I can tell you he startled me a few times by finding some little vein, some little avenue, some little twist that nobody had ever asked about before.

He has a good analytical mind. He is by no means a traditional intellectual. As I've said, he has a very short attention span that could frustrate at times. Like on Fridays when he knew he was going to be mountain biking soon. I can't say this without a smile on my face, because it's a sign of his humanity, his regular-guy decency. But if you had to run an important meeting with him on Fridays from about two or three afternoon on, you might be dead in the water. He could not wait to get on two wheels and blow off steam, roar around and whooping and hollering like a boy let out of school.

I loved him for it, but I'm sure there are people who think, *How immature. Why can't he just read policy papers at a desk until midnight like a President should.* He wasn't a desk-bound intellectual. But he had a solid intellect and ability to do what he needed to do, which is to pierce to the central issues and make hard decisions.

My counterpart who ran the economic policy council once wrote an essay I'd encourage you to include it in the record somewhere. It was called "George Bush is Smarter Than You," and published on realclearpolitics.com, though it started as a lecture he gave at Stanford, where he now teaches.

Hult: I've read that.

Zinsmeister: It's fascinating. I can't tell you how many of those passages that Keith wrote I could have written. In fact I did write on this subject in my memoir that I'll get to you.[1]

And George Bush did his homework. He never, ever was late for a meeting. He did not blow off obligations. He was a tremendously disciplined person. When he made decisions he wanted to know about everything. If you put together a memo, you could be sure he would read it. He didn't have the easy, bright, fast-ranging Bill Clinton mind, that was also enormously undisciplined. Bush is kind of the opposite.

I used to laugh about the whole "Cheney is the real brain in the White House" or "Rove is the mind pulling the strings" arguments. Oh my gosh, trust me, that was not the case. I mean, Dick Cheney was very influential in certain areas, and the President sometimes deferred to him, but by choice and for good reasons. The idea that Bush was too intellectually empty to figure things out and make decisions on his own was not even close to true. He had strong views and an ability to use evidence that you presented to him. Sometimes in policy meetings he would jump three steps ahead. I'd have this whole beautiful little choreography set up, and he'd say, "I got that, Karl, let's go" and he'd jump to the next thing. It could be real work to keep up with him.

I'm sure you know at this point about the reading contest that the President and Karl Rove had. I think starting in 2007, as if they needed more to do, they launched this reading contest. They challenged each other as to who could read the most history books. They must have done some skimming, but Rove worked through 107 books, and the President read 95—in one year. That was in addition to everything else they were doing. Not easy books either. Rove was an omnivorous mind. He sent me clips from all kinds of places. He could whip off statistics from 1872. He was a phenomenon, and George W. Bush, while President, kept up with him.

I'm sure you also know he had this ritual of meeting with war historians. I sat in on a few of those. Victor Davis Hanson, for instance, used to write often for me when I was running my magazine. John Keegan had done some nice reviewing of my reporting from Iraq, so I was interested to sit in on those sessions. The President would wrestle with them. "What did other Presidents do?" or "What is the verdict of history on this topic?" He'd use little snips of current history to get the conversation going. He'd say, "I was just talking to Maliki and telling him that 'You have to let other people who you hate have their moment in the sun, because that's the way democracy works. Believe it or not, good things come out of that.' But he just wouldn't listen." Then he'd ask the historians to jump in.

His enjoyment of those sessions is again the mark of someone who thinks, someone who is trying to understand the world. The President has been abused by a lot of the conventional wisdom on this front.

Riley: Why the image to the contrary?

Zinsmeister: He's his own worst enemy in many ways. He created a lot of that. He intentionally holds himself at arm's length from Brahmin ways of projecting intelligence. He prefers to act and be seen as a middle American. He puts himself on the side of regular guys. He much prefers to spend time with a bunch of soldiers, or athletes, or recovering addicts, than a bunch of…

[1] Submitted to Miller Center, but redacted in April 30, 2018, revision, at Mr. Zinsmeister's request.

Riley: Professors.

Zinsmeister: Those of us who sit quietly for hours at keyboards or listening to lectures with our hands folded—George Bush is not one of them. He's kinetic. I met a lot of guys like him in the Army. They have no problem with their brain, but they're kinetic. They don't sit quietly. They don't love quiet salon conversations. They don't read aloud from scripts well. Because they have a different kind of mind.

The President laughed at his own malaprops and stumbles. He could have trumpeted his Yale and his Harvard credentials and nipped many of those "George Bush is dumb" stories in the bud. He chose not to. He didn't give a hoot about impressing the people who wanted to hate him. He especially had no interest in impressing academics or the press. For them, George Bush was nails on the chalkboard.

The guys he did want to impress, did care about, did hope to be respected by were generals and regular soldiers, Olympic athletes, the Secret Service guys. That's just part of who he was.

Riley: I grew up in the Deep South and I would guess that the culture in Midland, Texas, must be very similar to what I experienced. There is an effort to avoid putting on airs. With a father who was prominent in the community and a grandfather who had been Senator he must have taken great pains growing up—

Zinsmeister: Russell, write that down. That's a huge part of George Bush right there. He actively cultivated this, he worked at it. It was a way of not being separated from everyday people whose love and affection he wanted.

Hult: Yes.

Zinsmeister: And it is completely understandable psychologically, yet most of the press couldn't get this, the fact that he could be both things. He could be both an Ivy League graduate and cultivated, cosmopolitan, educated person, but also have this affinity and desire to be around and identify with and sound like everyday Americans. You can do both. But at some point you have to decide, and declare, who you identify most with. I said before—I loved spending time with the guys I laid tiles with, and I did not tell them about my day job in the Senate or as a freelance writer. Because the few times I did, what happened?

Riley: Change.

Hult: Exactly.

Zinsmeister: A curtain went down. They didn't talk to me the same way, they didn't tell me stories, they didn't trust me. They thought I was a different person from them. This is one of my biggest regrets about America today. There is this iron curtain between blue-collar America and the rest of America. Between the people who volunteer for military service and those who don't have a single buddy who's ever served. It's painful, it's terrible for our country.

The President was kind of a rebel against that. He lived honestly and effectively in both worlds, but his heart was in Midland. And it's a very cheap caricature to jump from there to "he's a dummy."

Riley: I'm loath to interrupt, but we need to break and have some lunch and continue. Let's don't forget where we are and you can pick up and continue with this because it is fascinating, we really appreciate what you're helping us with.

[BREAK]

Riley: If we can pick up where we left off because you were giving us a fascinating set of descriptions of the President as a decision maker and you were teeing things up for him. I would say that among the kinds of scholarly things we cover there is probably nothing more interesting and more important about what it is that we do.

If you are preparing a memo for the President, are you thinking, *This has to be succinct; this has to be a page or two*, or can you write him a 12-page memo and give him 300 pages of attachments and assume he's going to get to it? Or how are you working with him?

Zinsmeister: Usually pretty succinct. But yes, there were times when we had longer documents. Never hundreds of pages. I would occasionally mention a full-length book if he wanted to follow up. I would say it wasn't terribly formulaic, it wasn't rigid.

Hult: Who enforced that? This went through the staff secretary?

Zinsmeister: Yes, it did. But ultimately that's the Chief's business. I don't think the staff secretary was really the decider; they were more of the mechanics of it.

Hult: A conduit? You had to meet their deadlines?

Zinsmeister: Yes, we had to meet their deadlines for sure. But it was ultimately Josh who decided the form and tenor of our communications.

There was occasionally room for something less "White House-y" if it had my name on it and was on a topic that didn't have to be closely scrutinized by the whole staff secretary process. I remember putting a few things like that through, but it's been 10 years, so I'm sorry I don't remember details.

Riley: That's why we wanted you six years ago; we know this happens.

Hult: We want the memoir too. Some of the latter that you were talking about, that would go into night reading? Weekend reading? Were those the kind of categories that the White House used or not so much?

Zinsmeister: There was what we called a night note every night. That was on autopilot; each of my deputies would send in their night note and those would be distilled and put into the DPC night note. This is where I zoned out a little bit because the whole written process was so frustrating to me. I was much more interested in the oral presentations, since that's where you could bring some personal touch.

Our most consequential communications were done live. At my level, roughly the same cast of about a dozen would convene and reconvene repeatedly through any week. On a typical day it would be several times. We'd start off at a 7:30 staff meeting of the principal aides. You'd go around the table and every one of us was expected to give a brisk and no-nonsense accounting of what was on your plate and how it could affect others around the table and affect the President.

It was deadly serious, yet not grim in any way, thanks to the fact that Josh is very witty. You've probably figured out that he's hilarious, and good at puncturing balloons. So it could be fun, though we took our morning staff meetings very seriously, and never, ever came unprepared.

That was our first convening. On a typical day you'd have one or two or three more convenings of various sorts. Some of them would be formal principals meetings, which as you know there is a whole protocol for. These don't sneak up on you, you have them on your calendar three or four days in advance usually. Sometimes there would be something more last-minute, or informal. A lot happened around those tables. Really all the final business of the executive branch. We had Cabinet meetings, but they were mostly just formalities. No work was done at Cabinet meetings. Big decisions were made by the White House principals with one to four Cabinet Secretaries folded in as appropriate.

That was my world. My world was connecting my Cabinet Secretaries to the President and his staff. I was the connective tissue between the domestic-side Cabinet Secretaries and the President. They were the main people I talked to worked with. and connected to all the time. Some very good folks. I worked heavily on immigration with Mike Chertoff at Homeland—I have high admiration for his mind and his energy level. Mike Leavitt, another really good human being at HHS. Margaret Spellings—who I've told you I developed a good relationship with after a rocky start. Dirk Kempthorne at Interior, Attorney General Michael Mukasey. Carlos Gutierrez at Commerce. Elaine Chao at Labor. Several new Cabinet Secretaries were appointed after I arrived, and I was closely involved in those selections. Like Mary Peters at Transportation, and Steve Preston at Housing and Urban Development, and Jim Peake at Veterans Affairs.

Riley: Energy?

Zinsmeister: Energy was under economic policy. I can tell from the briefing book you sent that somebody in your office had that under DPC, but for us that was not DPC. Energy and Agriculture were both managed by the Economic Policy Advisor.

I enjoyed working with many of the Cabinet Secretaries. Michael Chertoff was a delightful colleague on immigration. We were in the trenches together in a big battle. That effort was totally one of a kind—you could do this job for 40 years and you will never have another White House experience like what happened with us and a group of Senators on immigration. Chertoff was right at the heart of that, so we labored closely for months.

With Mary Peters I worked on many of the market-based reforms of transportation congestion that I've discussed with you. I don't know if you had a chance to talk with Mary, but she has an impressive story. Her parents divorced when she was I think 12 or 13, and her mother ran out of money, so she grew up very poor. When she was 17 Mary got married. I don't think she was out of high school; she certainly wasn't college educated. She went to work at that point in a meatpacking factory. She slaughtered cows and pigs and cut meat, and has scars on her arms to show it.

When Mary was about 30 she decided she wanted a different life. The meat packing company got bought out or went bankrupt. So she set out to reinvent herself—the great American quest. She got an office job as an entry-level secretary in, I believe, the Arizona Department of Transportation. Simultaneously she put herself through school on the side, correspondence classes mostly. She worked hard, taught herself many things and rose and rose and rose. And eventually, Mary Peters became director of the Arizona Department of Transportation, and finally U.S. Secretary of Transportation. A member of what Europeans would call the proletariat who moved herself up through hard work and gumption. From secretary to Secretary with a capital S.

I admire that kind of life course, so enjoyed working with Mary. She rode a Harley, and when I asked her why, she said all the things one usually says—the wind in your hair, the feeling of freedom, et cetera. All true. I'm a motorcycle rider too. But then she said something I loved her for: "And I also like that it's a little dangerous." [*laughter*]

Hult: That's great.

Zinsmeister: Mike Leavitt and I worked on many topics, including stem cells. Mike was necessarily influenced a lot by what he heard and felt from NIH, so NIH is another place I ended up spending time. Listening to and talking with the top officials explaining the President's positions. Making it clear that we were serious. In a few cases talking someone down off a ledge.

That's how the Washington, D.C., blob works. People who have worked in the sausage factory forever develop pretty standardized definitions of the possible and desirable. We are all social animals and get conditioned by what we hear everyone else saying is possible or not possible, desirable or not desirable. So permanent staff at agencies tell Secretaries, often in alarmist terms, "That has never been done, it can't happen, this will be an awful thing." Sometimes Secretaries panic. The Secretaries are doing their job when they report that panic to the President's staff. And sometimes, many times, the President should defer to that judgment of the permanent government. But there are other times when the President has to overrule that judgment of the permanent government, because it is faulty, or incomplete, or incompatible with the mandates that the American public gave him when they picked him to steer us into a new future.

Toward the end of our time there was a very contentious listing of the polar bear under the Endangered Species Act that I had to navigate with Dirk Kempthorne and the Department of the Interior. Activists wanted to use the polar bear under the Endangered Species Act as a long lever to enforce climate-change rules. There was the possibility of blocking a new power plant being built anywhere in the U.S., tens of thousands of miles from where polar bears live, by saying if you let that power plant be built in Arizona you're going to have an increment of global warming

that eventually will hurt polar bears. Therefore thou shalt not build a power plant in Arizona. I use that as an example of the way this was attempting to use the ESA [Endangered Species Act] as a backdoor way of forcing climate rules through an administrative rather than democratic process.

Whatever your view of climate-change legislation, the Endangered Species Act is not the right way to do it. The ESA is a very blunt instrument, and not the way we ought to be making decisions about something that is as subtle, as international, as long-range, as economically consequential as that. But passing climate-change legislation will require lots of compromise, whereas the ESA is a powerful lever activists can pull right now.

People don't realize how absolutist the Endangered Species Act is. It's one of the only acts I know of in government that will not countenance any sort of balancing. It's draconian, it allows no exceptions whatever for economic problems, for societal disruption, for wider endangerments to the nation.

With any other national problem, an elected legislator will say, "Yes, we want to end homelessness. But we don't want to spend $500 billion on that." There is always some level where we say, "that's enough." Under the Endangered Species Act you have to spend whatever it takes to meet the administrative dictates of the small number of staffers who are allowed to look only at one piece of reality—the numbers of an animal. There's no escape hatch. There's no safety valve. Once a species is listed, you cannot argue that any particular remediation would hurt human happiness, or cost too much, or damage some competing social good. It is that kind of radical statute.

So we were determined to list the polar bear carefully and intelligently. Polar bears are actually at their all-time historic peak in numbers right now; there is not a polar bear crisis. This was all about the future. This was all extrapolating from mathematical models as to what would happen when the ice shrinks in the future. So the polar bear was listed at the "threatened," as opposed to "endangered" level. The Canadians had gone through a similar process just before us and listed the threat at an even lower level. And we included administrative guidance that this should not become an excuse to make climate policy through the Endangered Species Act.

We were determined to make a prudent decision with a statute that doesn't allow prudence; it is merely an on/off switch. Some people tried to turn this into headlines that the Bush administration didn't like bears, or science, or apple pie, whatever. I feel good the we didn't let them stampede us. The Obama administration went through the whole polar bear thing after we left and, guess what, they decided we made the right decision, and left it just as we had.

But I'm telling you it is wickedly lonely when you're the guy who says, "That's not the right answer. You and your 10,000-person department need to move in a different direction. We're not going where you'd prefer, and here's why." But that's what we had to do with the Interior Department, or at NIH, that's what you have to do often if you want to redirect the Washington blob.

That's why we took our research and our policy process so seriously. You want to be positive you're on strong ground. And then sometimes it feels like you and a few aides have got your

finger in the hole in the dam, holding back a terrible weight. This is not an academic issue; it's real lives that will be affected. You really feel it sometimes.

I suspect this is a universal experience of Presidential advisers. When you get in the trench you discover there's a very limited amount of wiggle room. History wants certain things to happen. Economics wants certain things to happen. There is terrible bureaucratic and political inertia. There is certainly room for judgment and discretion and choices, but it's not nearly as wide as most people think.

So there is a kind of brotherhood of people who have had to make those hard calls, who have taken terrible bruises in the process. There were occasions I had to deal with panics. Panic is the only right word—emotional responses, people literally crying sometimes. Saying "I won't do it. It's too hard. I'm going to quit." That's what you have to overcome sometimes.

Hult: When a decision like that is made, in that White House, are you also at the edges hearing from the political affairs people and the public liaison people about some of the negatives they're getting back?

Zinsmeister: This is what I always assumed. Ugly politics trumping expert opinion, or science, or precedent, whatever. But I almost never saw that. It was just one idea, one good, battling other ideas and other goods. My job was to set the best policy, and that alone was enough to set up excruciating choices.

The President and Josh both were steely about me not letting politics interfere with policy decisions. Maybe four times, at least, I can remember the President directly saying something like "I really don't want to hear about the politics of this. I have plenty of people working for me who know a lot about politics. That's not what you're here for. You're here to tell me the right decision, the best answers. I may have to ignore you and I may have to do other things based on politics, but that comes later."

I remember when one of the State of the Union addresses was circulating in draft, maybe 2007, there was a note inserted into one of the staff-secretary-circulated documents that said, "We should test out this idea." About 10 minutes later Josh wrote back, "If by testing you mean polling this, the answer is no. I don't care what the polls say on this, I want to know if this would be good for the country. We'll figure out the public reactions later." These instructions were not denying the power and importance of politics; the President and Josh were just saying that's step two. Step one is to get the ideas right. Thank God I lived in step one; I rarely was involved in the step two stuff. I don't recall being overturned or anything ever happening that made me feel I had been stomped on.

One of the things that made it easy for me, personally, to tune out the inertia of the bureaucratic blob, and the expediency of political advantage was the weight of history. When you get in the White House, you feel how heavy the tread of the government is. You realize that no matter what decision you make, you are going to upset so many apple carts. Even if it *is* the right decision, you're going to screw up a lot of lives. I don't know if that bothered anybody else, but it weighed on me. So I tried as much as possible to follow the Hippocratic oath: first, do no harm.

I'm very allergic to the idea of crusading. I was before I went into the White House, but the White House made me even more resistant on this. When he has the full might of the federal government at his command, a crusader on a white horse can do terrible damage to our complex and valuable and vulnerable civil society.

The number of times when you're going to get more human happiness out of crusading change, rather than some incremental evolution is vanishingly small. So you better darn well be sure you know what you're doing before you throw out a whole new set of societal rules—because in the process of chasing your millennium you're going to stomp on all kinds of people's dreams and daily expectations and family patterns and business behaviors. You're going to shut places down and screw stuff up.

I had a little trick, a little device, I used to remind myself of that. When I was in Iraq I developed a hobby of photographing children in my spare time. Iraq is a grim place, but one lovely aspect of the country is that 40 percent of the population is under 16, so there are children everywhere, all kinds of beautiful children. It's a real melting pot, with a fabulous mix of faces. Some children look Italian, some like they're from China. I framed several dozen of these beautiful faces in three big montages that I hung on the walls of my West Wing office. I used them as a device to remind me that there are scads of people out there, most of whom I've never met, and what I do in government will affect them. My big tread could step on them or it could help them; it could go either way, but don't forget they're there.

No one ever understood why the Domestic Policy Advisor had 64 big foreign-looking children's faces on his wall. [*laughter*] But for me it was a reminder. Nothing to do with Iraq, but a mnemonic that there are people out there, they're not just statistics, they're not chess pieces for rulers to manipulate. Always keep them in mind. And try first to do no harm.

Riley: Was there an exception to your policy over politics experience?

Zinsmeister: One modest exception I can think of. Toward the end of my time, when we were starting to think about how do we leave this office in good shape for the next guy, I wanted to get rid of what was called the Freedom Corps, a goofy post-9/11 attempt to encourage voluntarism. By the time I arrived, it had devolved into little more than a sappy feel good. Every place the President got out of a plane there would be a wholesome little kid or sweet neighbor who would be given a Freedom Corps pin for being a point of light. Didn't solve any real problem, was silly, and tried to appropriate some of the halo of charity and civil society work, which doesn't need the government's imprimatur.

No one in the White House thought Freedom Corps was doing anything. But it was part of the Bush "legacy," and it had a momentum of its own. I said no one really believes in it. I wanted to gently let it go and fold efforts to support voluntary action into the President's faith-based initiative, while also cleaning up some parts of the faith-based initiative that were likewise becoming more sentiment than substance. I suggested a cool way to do this would be to run a Bjørn Lomborg–style review.

I don't know if that name means anything to you, but Bjørn Lomborg is a Danish economist I admire who has created a somewhat famous method for convening experts and using them to

draw authoritative conclusions about the benefits and costs of various policies. He calls this process a Copenhagen Consensus, and it has been used to make good, broadly accepted decisions on a variety of complicated topics.

I suggested we could run a Copenhagen Consensus to assess Freedom Corps and the faith-based office, combine and rationalize them, keeping what was good and dumping anything that hadn't worked. Admittedly a little out there. But it has been used in areas like climate change. I thought it would be a good way to put a solid base under the faith-based initiative, one of George Bush's signature efforts, by putting it through a hardheaded winnowing just before we left. Pruning out the dead wood and measuring the successes. That would make it hard for successors to caricature these Bush innovations as a political sop, as opponents were always trying to paint them, and improve their long-term survivability. That was my argument.

In the end, the communications and political guys said, "It wouldn't look good to shut down Freedom Corps, or identify weaknesses in the faith-based work." I got my proposal to the level of the White House principals, and they basically said, "Nah, why touch that tar baby, just leave it alone." Not a big deal, but, yes, an area where politics trumped better policy. So the Obama folks came in, immediately killed Freedom Corps, and eviscerated much of the faith-based work.

Hult: Before we go into some of these meaty policy issues that we want to know more about, I think I heard you say a while ago that with people like Peters and Preston you were involved in them being named to their Cabinet positions, is that accurate?

Zinsmeister: Yes.

Hult: Could you describe how you were involved in those appointments?

Zinsmeister: First I would get a ping from the Office of Personnel that would say, "Who would you like to see in this position?" I'd send along ideas. For instance, when we had to replace the VA [Veterans Affairs] Secretary, right after the Walter Reed Hospital problems, I said it might be nice to have a medical professional. The eventual new Secretary, Jim Peake, ended up being the first MD to lead the department. We had a very competent personnel office who found candidates, and then I would react strongly to the ones they sent to me, and give my reasons why.

Steve Preston was a funny case. I had an accidental personal connection to him that I wasn't even aware of. It turned out his sons and mine had attended the same Christian summer camp for a number of years, and while I was Domestic Policy Advisor and he was running the Small Business Administration we attended the same father-son weekend, and ended up camping together in a small group in the wilds of the Adirondack Mountains. We were both hiding out from the pressures of D.C. and focusing on our boys, and I don't think we even realized we were fellow Bush staffers. It was only when he walked into my office for my interview that it all clicked.

Here's a personnel story I may be punished for, but I'm going to tell you some more truths. As I've explained, the Domestic Policy Advisor has a very small number of aides, and I needed to wring high productivity out of every single slot. These expert aides were my most precious resource.

One of the aides when I came in was the disability aide. I don't know when it started, but this was some kind of tradition for a good while in the White House. One of the aide slots at the Domestic Policy Council was always set aside for a disabled person who was in charge of nothing but disability topics—a tiny, tiny slice of our overall portfolio, yet one of only about eight top aides I was allowed to employ.

All of my other aides had to cover a massive waterfront. This person had a narrow brief, and hardly any substantive work. A token position. Every two years, I think, the position would turn over and they'd pull in a new person with some kind of a disability from one of the agencies and task them to the White House. These were smart, talented people, but it was an inherently patronizing structure, because these aides didn't have the same wide, heavy, substantive duties of the other aides.

I bit my tongue until the aide I inherited reached the end of his appointment. But then I told the personnel office, "I'm not doing that. We're not just going to have this honorific position. We're going to have a real assistant there who pulls his weight and who does hard things in broad areas where he or she has expertise."

I said I had two other specific ideas. One is, instead of someone who had been disabled from birth, it would be nice to have someone who had had to learn to deal with a disability as an adult; that would be a new thing. And the thing I wanted most, growing out of my time with soldiers in Iraq, was my second suggestion: "There are now a bunch of people dealing with disabilities because of our war experience. I would like to have one of them in this position."

They brought me candidates and I picked a guy who turned out to be a real blessing to me and to the country. His name was Dan Gade. When he came to me I think he was literally two days out of his 42nd surgery, sweating like a dog, in pain, still in rough shape.

He had commanded a company of tanks in Iraq, and been blown up twice. His first Purple Heart came from being hit with an RPG [rocket-propelled grenade]; he was back in action a couple of weeks later. The second Purple Heart was a roadside bomb; he almost bled out in a ditch, and was left with a fractured skull, a broken neck, and a broken back.

And he lost his right leg at the hip. If you have a stump left you can get an amazing prosthetic today, but Dan had no stump. So he used this remarkable new robotic artificial leg that sat in the hole where his leg had been, and strapped around his abdomen. In the shoe of his good leg he had what looked like a Dr. Scholl's pad but was actually a very expensive wireless transmitter. When his good foot took a heel-toe step the sensor would send a signal over to the robotic leg saying, "the leg opposite you just took a short stride, you match it." Or, "your left leg just stepped briskly; do the same."

With this device Dan could actually walk. Not easily, but in the past, his kind of injury would have meant full-time existence in a wheelchair or on crutches. It was important to Dan to be able to stand, and look people in the face.

He complemented his prosthetic with a Segway, which really helped his mobility. When he and I went up to the Hill, he would take his Segway down Pennsylvania Avenue while I'd take the

White House car, and we'd meet at the other end. Getting the Secret Service to let him bring that machine into the White House was fun, let me tell you.

I ended up so glad I had fought to hire him. Because three months after he arrived the whole Walter Reed mess blew up, and we appointed the Dole-Shalala Commission to get things fixed. You can imagine how George Bush, who loves servicemembers, reacted to news that injured ones were languishing with inadequate care. So fixing that was a big priority. And now I had a right-hand guy who had just spent 18 months in a bed in Walter Reed himself. So he knew the whole system.

He also was a peach of a human being, a powerful Christian, with an unbelievable wife, beautiful children he pours himself into. A champion triathlete since losing his leg. He never, ever, was bitter or angry, despite having lots of good reasons to be. We had a great partnership, and became close. Dan eventually earned a PhD, then became an instructor at West Point. I've taught classes with him there, and continue to work with him on various projects. I expect some day he'll be a college president or a Senator or something.

The whole Dole-Shalala Commission process went extremely well. When that blew up Josh called me into his office and we started brainstorming. We needed a blue ribbon group that would have credibility on both sides of the aisle. Probably Josh came up with both names but I loved each instantly. They turned out to be really good choices. Dole obviously is a wounded veteran himself so has skin in the game, is super politically connected, is a very sweet and cooperative patriot. He was still at the top of his game then, and funny as a whip. And Shalala was awesome. Just to remind the record, she was the HHS Secretary for Clinton for eight years, so she is very knowledgeable about health issues of all kinds. She was a straight shooter and very interested in solving this problem. Both chairmen, along with all of the other panel members, poured energy and creativity into finding fresh solutions to the problems of wounded servicemembers, support for family caretakers, and reform of the weak and outdated systems for treating and paying benefits to injured warriors.

The commission was powered by the members—an impressive military spouse who was the full-time caretaker for her badly injured husband. Two injured vets themselves. Ken Fisher, whose family has donated all of the Fisher Houses for families at hospitals. So it was a great commission, they took their brief seriously, they had two good leaders, and they issued a good, pithy, readable report that got to the heart of several problems.

Riley: This is a Presidential commission?

Zinsmeister: Yes, a Presidential blue ribbon commission. We put energy into this and had a good result. The VA is recognized as the most dysfunctional bureaucracy in Washington. Just heartbreaking. And it continues to get worse. But we put out several fires, and laid groundwork for what could be long-term improvements.

Riley: What is the reason for the VA problems, bureaucratically or politically?

Zinsmeister: Here's the deepest truth. Citizens are not well served when politicians make sentimental decisions. And on both sides of the aisle on Capitol Hill, and in the White House, there is often a sentiment that, "By God, these are our boys, nothing is too good for them. Let's

throw money at them; increase the budget." So nobody gets asked to make tough choices; nobody's feet get held to the fire; no one is ever fired.

And this is ratcheted up further by pressure from the VSOs, or veterans' service organizations. The VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars], DAV [Disabled American Veterans], American Legion, VVA [Vietnam Veterans of America], and so forth have become powerful special-interest lobbies that oppose most innovation or change, because they are deeply invested in the status quo, including financially through services and products they peddle to vets to help them navigate the current morass. They have made it almost impossible to carry out serious reforms, as the Dole-Shalala commissioners learned.

I spent a lot of time in Iraq and made hundreds of friends among servicemembers, but it is not in the interest of veterans to just spend more money protecting the dysfunctional status quo in veterans services. The VSOs have built industries for themselves where they are invested in getting these guys onto the disability rolls, and keeping them inside the VA health system, and signing them up for things that often distract from the real work of getting a job and becoming an independent citizen.

You can go to the forts and camps and bases from which folks now transition out of the services and into civilian life and you'll encounter this whole business supported by the VSOs where an advocate will stand up in front of a group and say, "So how many truck drivers have I got in this room? I can get you disability for lower back pain right off the bat. If you drove a truck I'm telling you, you have a lower back problem, or it's coming. What about infantry? Sign up for disability for tinnitus; we'll help you." It's that bald and unbelievable. Their whole interest is getting these guys on disability system or other systems so the VSO can play savior, through a massive entitlement.

This is corrupt, and it's disastrous for taxpayers—VA spending has been gushing upward over the last two decades faster than any other part of government. But the thing that infuriates me is what it is doing to a fantastic generation of talented servicemembers.

Because guess what? When you get a person officially classified by the government as disabled, what do you think happens? They start to think of themselves as disabled, as broken, as not competent to take care of themselves and stand on their own feet and produce like other citizens. That is the reason that a shocking 45 percent of the people who served after 9/11 are entering the VA disability system. That will rise a lot further as more retire and age.

I want to remind you that the fraction of our military that actually served in any fighting theater was something like 12 percent last I checked. The number who saw combat was far lower. Most of these "wounded warriors" never left the U.S.; huge numbers collecting lifelong benefits never left offices. It's a terrible corruption. A whole generation of young men and women who are supercompetent and able to contribute to society are being told they're broken and should sit down on their mother's couch and collect a check. There is little expectation and no requirement whatsoever that someone on disability get medical treatment or therapy or retraining so they can pick up a happy productive life. They're just being pensioned off.

I'm pretty upset about this, and so was the Dole-Shalala Commission. They proposed dramatic changes in the disability system, which in a nutshell would have inverted today's perverse system. Rather than trickling you a lifetime of small payments and saying don't bother us, we just paid you, the proposal was to invest heavily up front to get people well, independent, and self-supporting. If your problem is you need a $100,000 robotic limb like Dan Gade, we'll buy that for you. If your problem is you need simpler assistive technology, that will be yours. If you need therapy, we will pour ourselves into you. Psychologists know PTSD [posttraumatic stress disorder] is *not* a lifelong illness. You tell us what your dream job is, we'll help you get trained for it. And then guess what? You can be a citizen like any other citizen instead of a ward of the VA.

Much of the alcoholism and suicide and adjustment problems you see among vets reflects men and women going from a strong fraternity where they had a demanding mission and serious responsibilities, and then suddenly becoming a child of the mommy state, all alone in the basement of your parents' house, living off miserable monthly government checks. This system tells them that they're done, that they're broken, that they have to get used to it. Who wouldn't get depressed? We wanted to flip this mess, put in heavy rehabilitative investment up front, and then expect most of them to be independent.

We turned much of that into legislation and sent it to the Hill. I tried hard to sell it; I really did. There was a lot of sympathy in the Senate. But talk about third rail—veterans benefits are way worse than Social Security. Anyone not immediately for spending more, anyone who would ever say that today's incentives are corrupting people—that's radioactive, from both the left and the right. Democrats love all government spending. And Republicans have sentimental blinders that have them chirping, "By gum, it's for the boys, we have to do it." So there's no brake.

Riley: I've done 300-some odd of these interviews and I don't think this has ever come up in any of them before; it's a new area for me.

Zinsmeister: It's demonstrable. If you look at the statistics on dysfunction and budgetary bloat, the number of agency scandals over recent years, the VA is a disastrous agency.

Riley: From your earlier comments the Defense Department also treats it as radioactive. In other words, once these guys are out-migrated, they're not ours anymore, they're your problem?

Zinsmeister: Exactly.

Hult: But you did get some of that system changed?

Zinsmeister: We did. One of the things we cleaned up was a Kafkaesque mess of clashes between the dual system. Servicemembers had to go through first all the DoD [Department of Defense] disability doctors and DoD forms and DoD rules, and they would figure out what they thought was wrong with you and how much you were owed. Then you did the same thing on the VA side, with different sets of doctors and caseworkers, different set of forms. This became a full-time job for members of the military in the last six months of their career. Not surprisingly many of them began thinking, *Oh, come to think of it I do have a pain here. I don't feel so great.* Wasted time and bad incentives, when we should be helping them become successful civilian workers.

So we did get that duplication cleaned up, and other things happened. We certainly fixed the immediate retail problems of the sort that happened at Walter Reed, where guys were getting ignored and the quarters were in bad shape and that sort of stuff. We did what we could to institute new rules. The disability thing is going to take a revolution. I have a strategy for tackling that as part of my current life in philanthropy.

We got a lot of buy-in from the Senate, but people would not pull the trigger. I tried to sweet-talk the VFW and others, but they ultimately said, "too scary," "too different," "we know the current system and are woven into it." Promising to advocate for vets lost in the current program morass is one of the main ways these groups get members and raise money, and it employs much of their staff.

You can go to the vet websites and type in "how do I get benefits?" and there is a whole cottage industry jumping on you, coaching you. "Here is what to tell the psychologist: Say 'I'm not sleeping well.' Say, 'I have suicidal thoughts.' Guaranteed 40 percent." It's poisonous.

Hult: If we can stay on this for a little bit. You have the Dole-Shalala Commission. They come out with their recommendations. Many of those you can address with executive activities, is that right?

Zinsmeister: We did.

Hult: Then the second part went into legislation.

Zinsmeister: Disability is what required legislation.

Hult: Exactly, and so in putting together that legislation that meant then that you worked with whom?

Zinsmeister: I worked with the North Carolina Senator who was at that point the Republican on the Senate veterans issues, Richard Burr, a good guy. He was sympathetic, and he understood the dilemmas. I made courtesy calls on other Senators, but it was not the Senators that were the problem, it was the VSOs. If the VSOs had been open minded, lots of Members of Congress would have followed. So I invited the established VSO leaders into my office, often with Dan Gade. Dan could say here's why this is not in my long-run interest, even though you think you're doing me a favor.

I was really underwhelmed with the long-range wisdom of the VSO leadership. It is going to require something dramatic to get around that. Probably a generational change. Young vets are not joining the old groups en masse; they are setting up very different brand-new organizations like Team RWB [red, white, and blue], the Mission Continues, HireHeroes USA, Team Rubicon—who mostly want nothing to do with the existing vets gravy train, and emphasize instead independence, mutual support, and job success. I haven't let go of this one, and am currently working with philanthropists to set up a kind of clinical trial proving that frontloading benefits to heal and create self-reliance is much better than lifelong pensioning for most vets. We've raised about $15 million, enrolled disabled vets, are working to get them into their dream jobs and off the dole, and will publish ironclad research on the results. We have great funders who are supporting this.

Riley: I would have thought, given your description of George W. Bush, that this is the kind of issue that he would have wanted to grab.

Zinsmeister: He did.

Riley: And run with. He did want to or he did do it?

Zinsmeister: Both. He was adamant that we had to get on this right away, and kept a close eye on it. I hope it doesn't sound pompous, but we did a good job, so he didn't have to get heavily involved because we did it right. It wasn't just me and Dan and the great commissioners and staff. Josh Bolten was all over this; I think it was he who thought of Dole and Shalala as a kind of Batman and Robin.

I poured myself into it and made sure we had no fumbles and executed it well. That's the optimal scenario. The President tells you something is important. Competent people go to work. He can move on to other problems. I feel like we handled it well. If we hadn't, there would have been an anvil falling on our head, because he was not a President who would accept servicemembers getting mashed in bureaucracies.

Hult: But the final question on this, he did not intervene when you were having the talks with the VSOs and the Senators?

Zinsmeister: No.

Riley: That was more my question.

Zinsmeister: I'm sorry.

Riley: There was not a satisfactory resolution from your perspective, maybe it was impossible to make any more progress.

Zinsmeister: Keep in mind, this was while the President was completely preoccupied with saving Iraq. I was trying to get really good policy made, and then fate will determine what the President and the Senate and the nation have bandwidth to take on. That last part never was my job.

The President definitely got involved with Dole-Shalala. We unveiled the commission's recommendations with the President present. He eventually gave the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Donna, which I wanted him to do. He did other things that showed that he cared about this.

But the President didn't usually do a lot of calling up Senators on the Hill. And his chits at this point were mostly being conserved for War on Terror stuff. That's where he was doubled down. So there were places I had to step back.

A small example: I think I mentioned I care about prisoner reentry as a public issue. That was a topic I would have liked to push on. We had some good ammo there. Some of the faith-based experiments produced promising results as assessed by good, neutral observers. But that went

nowhere, because Pete Hoekstra, the chairman of the intelligence committee, who had a crucial and often scratchy relationship with the White House, was also the guy I would have had to deal with on prisons. The President *had* to have Hoekstra on intel, he just had to. That was an essential relationship. So the last thing that Josh or any of the political people would let intrude on that was some nonessential blitz on prisons.

I completely get that. That was the right decision. But I would have loved to get some traction on that topic, and it's the kind of topic I know George Bush would have loved to be a leader on—if he hadn't had a terror war fall in his lap. Events are now bearing me out; prisoner reentry has become a big hot issue right now, with more bipartisan potential than most topics. It wasn't a big hot issue in 2006, '07, '08, but we could see it coming. That was my job, to look down the road. I knew that the incarceration problem was going to be one that had to be dealt with.

Riley: Any follow-up on this issue? You mentioned a couple of times immigration as an important thing and I wonder if you could give us the story on that. Start with how it presents itself to you and then march us through the whole nine yards.

Zinsmeister: I don't know what Joel told you, did you interview Joel at some time?

Riley: Joel was interviewed as a part of the first time we saw Josh. We didn't have him for a full session and I'm beginning to rethink whether we might not be well served going back to him. You're not the first person—in fact, I think Keith Hennessy has written me an email in the last three or four months.

Hult: That would be a good idea.

Zinsmeister: There has been no legislative effort like our immigration reform done in years, and there probably won't be one like it for years hence. It was unusual. There was a little bit of reporting on this, not much. I remember a story in Politico where they noted how unusual the process was that produced the bill. Here's what happened.

I don't have to tell you, I'm sure, that the President was heavily invested in immigration. He really cared about it. He is a Texan. He has Mexican relatives. Lot of reasons. He cares about immigration.

Riley: Good.

Zinsmeister: We knew he wanted to do something. It was a matter of timing it, trying to figure out the really knotty issues, make it all fit together. The normal process as you know is to use the committee structure on the Hill. Take testimony from experts, get the numbers together, find compromises through the committee membership.

But in this case what happened was that the White House led a process for intensely exploring new ideas among key people in meetings that were not only private but secret. A tiny group of people. On the administration side it was Joel Kaplan and Michael Chertoff and Carlos Gutierrez and myself. And on the Senate side—

Riley: OK. Gutierrez because of his portfolio or because of his background?

Zinsmeister: A little of both. I think the President wanted an Hispanic person to be part of it.

Riley: Commerce didn't naturally—

Zinsmeister: Doesn't naturally—Well, there were guest worker and economic ramifications where Carlos's background came in handy, but to be honest the President was very sensitive to this stuff. He didn't want to have a big thing dictated to what will be Mexican immigrants by a group that didn't include anyone of Hispanic heritage.

So those were the personnel on our side.

On the legislative side it was again a very small group. It was basically Edward Kennedy, Jon Kyl, Lindsey Graham, and Ken Salazar. Those were the main four; there were also a few floaters who came and went. As we got closer to a realization that a very new consensus was about to happen, then all kinds of "me too" folks came out of the woodwork. Barack Obama came to one of our last sessions. John McCain showed up literally at the very end (and tried to have a fist fight with John Cornyn, who had been a semiregular). All the cocks of the walk showed up at the end. But in the beginning it was the opposite.

In the beginning it was almost like a corny Hollywood movie. We came into the room every day and the baggage was left at the door. First of all, no staff allowed. None. That never happens, first of all because the staff are usually the ones who know everything, and second because they provide cover and a way to defer commitments and protect yourself from accountability. But in this case the only living beings in the room other than the principals were Kennedy's dogs. He would bring these two snappy dogs.

Riley: Sunny and Splash.

Zinsmeister: Regularly they would try to bite me; the Senator however never did bite me.

Now, Kennedy and Kyl–You could not get two men further apart on the political spectrum. They were literally the anchors of the left and right in the Senate. Nobody had any illusions that there was easy common ground there. But almost right away the group developed a magical willingness to listen to each other and try to find fresh solutions to old impasses.

Riley: But it was not going on when you first came in?

Zinsmeister: Oh no.

Riley: It happened after.

Zinsmeister: The first meeting was December 2007.

Riley: December of '07.

Zinsmeister: The very end of '07. Joel sat down and said, "We're going to do immigration and you're going to be the lead idea maker. We're going to try and hammer out something, an informal consensus, directly with the Senate to try and figure out what the boundaries are, what's

feasible, and then we'll worry about how to actually execute it. We're kind of doing an end run here."

Riley: OK.

Zinsmeister: Nobody else came to these meetings. Our legislative affairs people didn't come. No political staffers, or coalition managers. Just the pure policy staff. It was very unconventional, very high risk. But right from the beginning people were way more honest and direct than the norm. There was much less of the usual posturing and speechifying. There were multiple good-faith exchanges. I would have loved to have had a tape recorder. I wish I could re-create it—There were amazing heartfelt exchanges like, "My friend, fellow Senator X, you know and I know that we could hurt each other by publicizing the trade-offs we are talking about here. But I'm going to tell you right now, I promise you, I will never ever use any of this to make you look bad, because I want you to do the same thing with me. We really have to figure this out, our country needs us to have a meeting of the minds."

That was the spirit of the thing. We gathered a few times with modest expectations, and it quickly developed momentum. Then we started meeting I want to say up to three times a week, and for two or three hours at a time in a very small room. My job was to shovel intellectual coal into the boiler, while Joel would help lead the discussion and Chertoff would offer very sharp analysis and idea leadership. But the Senators themselves powered most of the actual negotiating to common ground.

It was a little terrifying for us at the DPC, because someone would say, "We need an extended meeting to figure out that darn guest worker piece," or "How do we moderate family chain migration in order to make enough space for more educated and expert arrivals in the national interest," or "what are the things that will make the difference between a successful border barrier and a porous one," whatever.

And I had to go home after we'd break up around five and figure out how to have a short paper ready the next day, or maybe in three days, analyzing and explaining that problem and suggesting creative solutions. That would be the document the next session's discussion started from.

Riley: And you're having—while you're doing this research you're having to maintain the secrecy of these proceedings.

Zinsmeister: Totally. There were like four of us who did this. It was a very small group who did the research and analysis and proposing. Me and two of my DPC staffers, really sharp lawyers who dug whatever we needed out of the Justice Department agencies, and Chertoff had a very smart guy at Homeland Security named Stewart Baker who was extremely helpful, and important in pulling data out of his agency. It was a mad scramble every day where we figured out stuff on the fly and tried new things. Hugely inventive.

Luckily this is an area I cared a lot about myself and had followed for years. And this was exactly what I wanted to do in the White House. Social invention. So I loved it even though it was exhausting and highly pressured.

We started with a blank slate. I had a huge amount of latitude to do things that wouldn't normally be possible, or that would usually have been initiated on the legislative-branch side. Constitutionally, most social invention is supposed to come from Congress, but for whatever reason we became the idea factory, and the Senators and two Cabinet members became the court where all this was adjudicated.

So we went through this with gathering momentum, and started making rapid progress at coming to consensus on things that had been yawning breaches up until then. We were all shocked at some of the places we found common ground. One of the things I'm proudest about was creating a new system for recognizing and rewarding nationally valuable skills in our immigration admissions, really for the first time in our history. This was an old hobby horse of mine, starting with one of the very first issues of the *American Enterprise,* the magazine I edited. I published a story by a labor economist at the University of Illinois, Chicago named Barry Chiswick, the national expert on skills-based immigration. We noted that our immigration system is completely oriented toward family chain migration and refugees, and has almost no sensible component to serve national interests. We need some kind of point system that would acknowledge potential immigrants who have economic skills, or language capabilities, or useful small business experience, or science expertise, or some other capacity that would make you valuable to our nation, and give them some extra credit for that. We'll still do the humanitarian thing, but also start accepting people who can fill important national needs. We need to have much more balance.

Our existing system is literally about 95 percent family chain migration or refugees, both of which are good causes, but that should not be the way we pick 95 percent of our entrants—most of them lucky enough to qualify simply because they have a relative in the U.S.—and just 5 percent of new Americans picked on merit. It should be 50/50 or something. Frankly, this is part of the reason for the backlash against immigration. People have a sense of this arbitrary core to how we pick the next generation of citizens and they have a sense this is not in our long-term interests.

The third brother of a guy coming in as a chain migrant—that's unlikely to be the first choice for us, among the many tens of millions of people who would like to become Americans. We ought to be picking somebody who has a nursing degree, where we have serious shortages. So pretty commonsensical, it sounds easy, but it's a reform the nation has never been able to master.

So I thought, *I'm going to push on this door*. I'm going to see if I can inject this new principle into the system. This has always been taboo. There's tremendous special-interest pressure to maintain the current sloppy system. Extended-family immigration is hugely popular with the ethnic groups who dominate our current flows, and they know that their automatic entries would have to be reduced if you're going to make some room on the meritocratic side.

The businesspeople are mostly too obtuse to figure out how valuable this could be for our economy. They were never any use; they were way too parochial. They wanted just their thing. I don't care about nurses; I need computer programmers. They had no sense of solidarity or wider national interest. So it was hard.

I started injecting these ideas about point systems into our discussions with the Senators. How about if we had a system that recognized things like English language proficiency? Like coming here with a good education as opposed to not? Among our legal migrants right now, a third don't even have a high school degree. Among illegals the education level is much lower. We really don't need to be importing the peasantry of third-world nations right now. That's neither in their best interests nor our best interests, at least not huge numbers of them.

So I started setting up this point system where you get points for bringing educational, language, business, occupational, or other assets.

Then we set up a temporary-worker program, which we've never had. The Europeans have these, but we have never had a true temporary-worker program. When you have a strawberry crop in southern California, you need people to pick it. That's urgent. The participants don't need to have a high school education. But we also don't need to make them permanent members of our society to get that done. We can bring them in, treat them very well, pay them very well, send them back to Mexico where they have homes, families, and beloved memories, and help them thrive there with American dollars.

These things may seem commonsensical, but these are not the ways we've ever done immigration. So we started putting these things in. I'm excited about the power of immigration to enrich America, and have daydreamed on the subject for forever. We created the hard pieces to make meritocratic immigration a reality, and figured out how to mesh it with family-based immigration. Raising the ceiling on legal entrants (while reducing illegals) made it easier. Raising the ceiling is not hard to defend if you can show you are making intelligent, rather than random, immigrant selections. We were able to sell that to the Senators.

The other huge piece, which we knew was going to be politically central, was the enforcement side. So we worked very hard on that—making sure we policed the border, and the hiring process, properly. This is what ultimately bit us.

The American people are not stupid, or racist. But they really are put off by line-jumping and continuing illegal acts, and by the idea that we don't have any control over who will become future Americans. No one in Washington has any credibility in saying "oh, we'll fix that," because politicians have been claiming that for decades, yet it has continued and continued. They said they were getting tough on enforcement as part of the amnesty for illegal aliens in '86, they've said it in every single immigration bill, and they've always fibbed. Massive undocumented influxes have continued.

So, understandably, the public is extremely cynical about this. We knew that in advance. So we said we are going to use triggers—another new concept. Hard triggers stipulating that if clear empirical evidence doesn't show the government has kept its promises on the enforcement side, then the liberalizations we've agreed to on the other side will be delayed or canceled. If you don't have X miles of fence built and X number of enforcement agents hired and X number of provable arrests of felons—that sort of thing—then this countervailing expansion of meritocratic immigration is not going to happen.

This was pretty savvy. I give much credit to Chertoff for this balancing. Chertoff is a judge, and he has a very judicial, Talmudic, temperament of balancing: you get this, I get that. It was very helpful.

So we ended up with this impressive, interesting policy architecture—a high mix of sweet and sour, enforcement and liberality. An insistence on rule of law together with a welcoming attitude toward legal, talented immigrants. It was emphatically not one of those horrible compromises that has an elephant's body with the head of a giraffe and the tail of a donkey. It didn't just draw a line down the middle and give you half of your junk and me half of my junk. It was new. It was an artful, intelligent, inventive compromise that added fresh policy creations to restart a completely stale and stalled debate. And it wasn't just political salve—it was very much in the national interest.

So people got excited about it. People got really excited about it. All of the negotiators in the room, spanning that vast ideological divide from Kyl to Kennedy, got excited about it. I was excited about it.

Riley: At this point you're still just the core group?

Zinsmeister: Just the core group the whole time. When the new synthesis finally began to be spelled out, *Politico* published a story saying something like, "This is not the way things are normally done in D.C. This is highly irregular. There was no committee oversight. No calling in the interest groups to ok pieces. There was this all done in meetings around fireplaces. But we hear it's a big breakthrough."

Then all the joiners started to show up.

Hult: They were finding out about it through leaks or through other mechanisms? Did you begin inviting them in?

Zinsmeister: We invited some of them in, yes. We had no illusions that this could stay intimate forever; Senators will talk to each other. But it became less and less productive the more rings that got added, as you can imagine—

Hult: Yes.

Zinsmeister: But by then most of the work was done. We did this—I want to say—how long did this go on? Four months maybe. It was exhausting. My job was to keep ahead of this train. These guys were making very fast agreements. I had to keep feeding factual, predictive, analytical, and new-approach ideas to the group. It was a lot of work.

Riley: Are you producing paper for the President as well? Are you giving him nightly or weekly reports?

Zinsmeister: Much of that happened through the Chief of Staff's private morning meeting with the President. The President was not a micro manager. Sometimes he got criticized for that. You saw that in the TARP [Troubled Asset Relief Program] process. He finds people he trusts and has confidence in, then gives them some rope to run with. We knew exactly what his dearest

priorities and principles were on immigration, and we carefully represented them. I could write the guy's laundry list for you right now. You get in his head after a while. But we also added pieces like the meritocratic admissions, and many enforcement details, that he had no prior history or investment in. If we said they were an important part of the deal balance, he trusted us. Josh and Joel were much closer to the President than I was, or almost anyone was, and were with him constantly, so a lot of the responsibility of keeping him up to date on what we were cooking up fell on them. But as I've been saying, this whole policy process was an end run, a guerrilla movement by a small group of negotiators.

Riley: One follow-up before I get out of your way. Is there likely to be paperwork then in the library to document what is going on here, or is this so highly sensitive that you're not committing anything in writing?

Zinsmeister: I can't really say. It definitely did not go through the staffing process. It didn't go through the whole staff secretary thing. And I suspect that's all that got saved. There will be stuff in there, but all these real action-oriented memos, I doubt much of that got saved.

Riley: Interesting.

Zinsmeister: I know I didn't save anything. I didn't want any visibility; I just wanted a fresh and original solution that would get us out of a deep national hole of bitter disagreement and social conflict. I suppose some paper exists, but I wouldn't think a lot. Certainly none of the conversational record, which was the key.

Riley: Exactly. But I didn't know if you were capturing or trying to create sort of informal minutes of the meetings afterward.

Zinsmeister: Nothing like that at all.

Riley: OK. That's important to know because the Miller Center is a sort of halfway house for political scientists who are interested in history and historians who are interested in politics. I'm under constant duress from my friends who are historians who don't believe in oral history. If it doesn't appear on paper, then it didn't happen. There are an awful lot of document fetishists out there, so I'm constantly probing my sources to find out whether the paperwork—

Hult: Increasingly there are documents—decreasingly are there documentary sources.

Riley: Exactly. Anyway, continue with your narrative.

Zinsmeister: This was a very exotic, one-of-a-kind operation. All of us knew it. We were very much aware. I'll never forget—I wish I could remember who this was. I think it was Lindsey Graham, who is a very articulate conversationalist, as you probably know. He said something right at the end, when we pretty much put a bow on the intimate negotiations, and were starting to open up the doors to socialize other Senators to the ideas.

The speaker may even have been teary, and he said something along the lines of, "This is like nothing I've ever done in my whole career." And all of the participants in this monthslong effort nodded and said, "Me too, nothing even close."

Then he said, "But you know what it *is* like? It's exactly what Mrs. Mcgillicuddy (or whatever her name was), my fifth-grade civics teacher, told me the American government was all about. You get a dozen good-spirited human beings sitting around the same table and you put all the posturing and pretense aside and you just talk, and you make good decisions in the national interest." He offered that and everyone said, "That's right!" and thumped the tables. Even some of the more cynical Senators were moved in this way by the end of the negotiations. It was quite dramatic, and all of us knew something special had happened.

Riley: I don't remember—there are very few instances where I've heard things like—I'd have to search my memory pretty carefully from Carter on.

Hult: It's hard for me to think of anything.

Zinsmeister: It was like the Camp David accord almost, where you break bread together and something magic happens once in a while. But anyway, you know what happened after that. The new, balanced, proposal ultimately foundered.

Yet I never felt too heartbroken about that. Because it's going to come back. Chertoff and I talked about that once. We kind of said, "You know what? We found the golden mean. That's it. Hard and soft. Lawful but open. Meritocratic and generous. And it isn't going to change. It might be five years, it might be 15 years, but they're going to come back to what we created, because there is no other place." He was confident; I feel confident. It isn't like we got this done slapdash. We explored all the arguments, all the paths, and there is no other route to balancing our national needs.

So much of what gets done in any White House is just fast. Not optimal. Just adequate—and done, thank goodness. I rarely had the confidence that we had absolutely looked under every rock; you can't, given the pace of events. But in this case we looked under every rock. We had the time, and the reprieve from spotlights and all the old hackneyed special-interest pressures, to really think. So we could come up with a full, rounded policy. I really feel that way.

I forget what was happening in the rest of my life during that time. All bets must have been off. I can't remember how I kept the wheels going in the rest of the DPC work. For me and a couple of my aides this was our focus for a few months. This was a case where the tiny scale of the White House staff, that narrow and intimate system I was describing to you earlier, made tremendous speed and flexibility possible. The rest of the White House staff had almost no idea what was going on, but for me and my two aides, and Kaplan, and Chertoff and Baker, we were in combat.

When a compromise stretching from Kyl to Kennedy went public, everyone realized this was big. The President put energy into it. At that point I lost control of it. It went to Rove and the communications shop and our legislative people. I became more of an observer frankly, and happily so—those were not my specialties. But the policy creation in this case was a thrilling process.

Riley: Give us a little bit of a sense of where things go from there. It unravels, but where did—?

Zinsmeister: It ultimately foundered, in my opinion, as I just hinted, because the American public just did not buy our trigger thing. Our triggers were premised on the idea that we

understand that you, the public, have been smoke-screened and faked out in the past. You were told during the last amnesty that illegal entry was now over—and then it soared to record levels, as many as two million coming over our national border illegally every year. So we know you feel lied to, but trust us, this time it's different. Border fences. E-Verify. Electronic databases. Et cetera.

"Trust us" is not something you're likely to do when you're listening to a politician. But we had no choice. We thought the best route was to set up this trigger system. Nobody liked the triggers; they were hard and inflexible and obnoxious. But we had inherited massive public cynicism because of the shady political fast-ones pulled in the past, and we had to try to earn back credibility with the public. We came close, but ultimately couldn't overcome the poisoned well the '86 deal left us. Distrust from people who value law and order brought the deal down.

And I couldn't entirely blame them. The public trust on this topic had been abused. I knew in this case the reforms would unfold in a very different way, with a good balance of law and openness. But I saw the sausage being made, they didn't. They assumed this was one more smoke screen. I couldn't feel outraged, though I was obviously sad. It may take another generation, and the success of a unilateral border enforcement agenda for some period of time, before the American people are willing to be trusting on this and open to extensive immigration again.

Hult: If you were to redo this, would it have made any difference in your estimation to have included one or more House members in this group?

Zinsmeister: It probably would have helped. But that would have undercut the intimacy and trust, and may have turned it into a conventional policy discussion with all the usual hedging and suspicion and lack of real innovation.

And we didn't have a lot to build on in the House. We talked about the 2006 elections earlier. Up until 2006 we had nominal allies from our own party running the Congress, so we ought to have been able to work with them. Then after the election we had the opposing party in control of both chambers, so we had avowed opponents. Yet the difference was less than you'd think.

We had a Cabinet meeting right after the 2006 elections, and President Bush said something interesting. I might have jotted this down in my memoir. He said something like, "You know, weirdly, this might in some ways allow us to operate more freely or be more honest. Before, we had this pretense that we were all on the same team, getting along, yet there wasn't much cooperation taking place." He said some pretty sharp things along those lines.

If you remember, there were character scandals in that election. Mark Foley picking up teenage boys, or some such awful behavior. There was the whole earmarks scandal, abuse of the appropriations process. The bottom line of which was that the Republicans in Congress, and especially in the House, had not turned out to be such great partners. They were not proving themselves much less addicted to the pork barrel, or nobler as citizen-legislators, than the Democrats. That Congress did not acquit itself very well. I don't know if things would have been better had House members been involved in the formulation of the proposals.

Riley: I'm wondering who you would have invited.

Hult: That's what I was thinking about as well. The other thing of course that is going through all of our minds is that the economy is having all kinds of difficulties in the same time and it's a Presidential election year. All of those put all kinds of constraints over what could—

Zinsmeister: The election year thing was big.

Hult: Yes, that's where I was going.

Zinsmeister: We were quite aware of that. There was a huge amount of posturing for electoral purposes once the public debate opened. One of the reasons we got so excited about the private negotiations (and very surprised initially when we were just in the exploratory stage) was that the participants in our little brain trust left all their baggage at the door *despite* the political cycle.

But as I say, I had this strange out-of-body reaction. Part of me was hugely disappointed. Part of me could look at the history of immigration reforms and say, "I don't blame them for being cynical." We asked a lot of the public and the Congress. This was a superidealistic undertaking.

We tried to overcome the distrust in many ways with clear, hardheaded innovations. We created our point system to guarantee higher-quality immigrants. We added brisk new measures for encouraging acculturation and citizenship. Americans are very concerned about Balkanization, and that's not unreasonable. We tried to address that, rather than dismissing it, or calling it racism, the lazy conventional responses. We said, "If people are scared about that, it's our obligation, to fix that, to take concrete measures to show we will be one country, one people, with reasonable unity in the future, even with this generous immigration flow." So we created various Americanization measures, language instruction, and better civic education. We offered to pay for these things for the first time. We proposed making the citizenship exam harder so it would be meaningful, and administered the right way.

It disturbed all of us in those Senate negotiating rooms that so few of today's immigrants show interest in becoming citizens. I don't remember the exact figures now, but only something like 20 percent of immigrants apply to become citizens in their first three years of eligibility. They're hardly panting to don that precious mantle. That indicates something is wrong. What are we doing wrong? Is it too hard to become a citizen or is it too undesirable? Are we not picking the right people? What's going on? We want people who are hungry to become American citizens as soon as they're able. So we figured out some ways to encourage people to make that final bond with the nation.

We worked hard on that concept. There were requirements in there on English language facility for the first time. These were difficult consensuses, that would have created a civil war under different circumstances. And there were like 20 breakthroughs of that scope.

All of that unraveled after the proposal was rejected. The fracturing and the posturing and the politicization of the immigration issue now make it impossible to fix. The best we can hope for are small incremental repairs of egregious problems.

But time heals wounds. I'm hopeful that eventually things will calm down. And I support the demand that we first pay our dues on the enforcement side. Prove that we're being honest about the stick, and then the carrot of openness to future legal flows is much easier to get agreement

on. But we have to pay our dues on enforcement now. Make it unambiguous, make it completely clear that we are doing serious things to stop illegality. And you will be amazed how generous the American people will become.

We made a great deal of progress. Illegal entries were reduced a lot on our watch. Obama squandered a lot of that, rhetorically as much as through administration actions, refusing to push felons back over the border, suspending deportations, allowing "sanctuary cities" to grow up, and so forth. That was politically damaging and set back the goal of achieving a continuing robust, open immigration system with intelligent criteria, and normalization of people in limbo. If you're promiscuous on illegality, and not willing to bite the bullet and do the hard things there, Americans are going to turn against all immigration, which would be very sad.

Riley: Were there Department of Justice issues going on?

Zinsmeister: There were. Much of this immigration work went through the Justice lens. The Homeland Security reorganization changed a lot of that, but the Justice Department remains important on enforcement. And much of our legal framing was done over there.

There were issues preceding my arrival in the White House that put the Justice Department in a kind of special hands-off category. There was care taken not to tell Justice Department lawyers what to do, or even seem to.

Hult: That comes out of White House counsel's office and everything else at the beginning of the administration? Do not talk to those folks.

Zinsmeister: Right. I would have no hesitation in talking to somebody directly in the bowels of HHS or Homeland Security. But we could not talk to people in the Justice Department. Things had to go through official channels.

Riley: That was exacerbated by the U.S. Attorneys issue, I would assume.

Zinsmeister: That's right. Which cost [Alberto] Gonzales his job of course. There were other aspects making people very chary, so there was a lot of walking on eggs with Justice. It was awkward. The rules weren't always clear. Oversight and collaboration were much harder.

I'm now fuzzy on some of this, but I remember there was a second amendment issue where we thought the initial Justice paper was a really fundamental misunderstanding and misreading. I was exercised about it. Joel Kaplan was exercised about it. We both tried to figure out how best to start a more nuanced appraisal. It was not good history, not good policy. That was tricky.

Riley: That wasn't the case that got the Vice President at cross-purposes with the President, was it?

Hult: Heller. The D.C. gun law.

Zinsmeister: Yes, Joel and I were both involved with trying to work that out. I also seem to remember a fair amount of other Supreme Court litigation at that period. Weren't there affirmative action cases that were either being prepared for the Court or actually going to the

Court? We had some modest vetting of some of that. We were asked to fill in some of the policy background and the origins. To answer your question, Russell, the Justice operation was somewhat hermetically sealed. It was definitely not approached with the same kind of openness and White House involvement as all our other policy making was.

Riley: I'm trying to survey the landscape to see the question areas that I should ask you about. I'm not coming up with anything. Karen, are you?

Hult: I have a range of areas, but since we've touched on the Vice President at least briefly, at least there is a narrative in some of the writing about Vice President Cheney, that he tried from the very beginning to include his aides on the White House staff. What kind of interaction did you have with the Vice President and the Vice President's office?

Zinsmeister: There was an aide from the Vice President's office, a real confidant of the Vice President, who operated with the principals at the Assistant to the President level. There were comparable aides at the DAP and SAP level, so yes, the Vice President had essentially a separate office's representation at each of the policy councils. They got involved at different levels. As you know, the Vice President had special interests, particular interests in economics, in energy, in foreign policy. He was very quiet in other areas, at least by the time I got there.

Hult: Homeland Security, at least at the outset as well.

Zinsmeister: Obviously that was a different policy council, so I only saw that indirectly. His biggest involvement I think was in foreign policy. He was very involved there, but that was over the Chinese wall from me. So I didn't see much of that.

A kind of sclerosis had set in long before I arrived. I don't know what preceded me, but when I arrived there was a very rigid, settled alignment of forces that never really changed. We all felt at times like the Vice President's office had given up on actually trying to make a difference and changing anything on the domestic policy side. Their interventions were often symbolic, virtue signaling, not practical help. A lot of putting down markers without helping to move the consensus, or add a new thought, or change what was going to be done. Again, I don't know the history prior to my arrival, but in their office there was a lot of fatigue and resignation on the domestic policy side. It was very much of a pro forma participation. I do not believe that was happening on the national security side. But in my world I can hardly think of an issue where there was an engagement that had either the effect, or seemingly even the intention, of being anything more than just a protest.

Riley: OK.

Zinsmeister: There were a few hot button issues where you knew you were going to get a hot email or response from the Vice President's representatives, but even then it was not like "I'm going to fight you on this in the trenches and we're going to get it different." It was like, "I just want to let you know—your mother wears army boots."

I say that in real mourning. Dick Cheney was from AEI, the same as I was. I knew him at AEI and liked him a lot. I knew his wife and liked her. He is a true public intellectual, a national asset. As you know, he has written history books that are still read today for their value. He's a

really smart person, not just a politico. But he was using his bullets on Iraq, Guantanamo, the intelligence program, et cetera. and probably didn't have ammo left on the domestic side.

As I said, I don't know what happened 2000 to 2006, but there was a lockup fixed in place as far as the representatives of the VP [Vice President] participating in domestic policy. I'm not commenting on the relationship between the Vice President and the President; I don't know about that. As you know, they had lunch every week; I'm sure that was a productive relationship. But at the staff level there wasn't much going on that was very useful, I regret to say.

Hult: Final question to that. Would David Addington be in your policy time meetings with the President?

Zinsmeister: Yes, he would always.

Riley: As an active discussant or is he more just there to monitor and listen?

Zinsmeister: World-class curmudgeon. David is super bright. You did not want to cross paths with him on things like legal issues, where he is a walking encyclopedia. A very bright guy, very principled guy. Unfortunately I think he thought he was the only principled guy at times. That never is a good thing to communicate.

As I tried to describe to you earlier, probably not very well, I had this prudent impulse that kicked in at times that said, "when he has the coercive power of government behind him, sometimes the knight on the white charger does more damage than good." I tried to be very careful about smashing up the national china. Once in a while you do have to smash up the national china. Are you sure this is one of those issues? And how do you go about it?

It's easy to criticize others for "compromising," "selling out," "being unprincipled," blah, blah, blah. The difference between armchair pundits and people making actual policies are that the pundits only have to be rhetorical. They can just launch screeds, and tell you what's bad. Building something better to replace what's bad is much harder, and more grown up work.

Riley: Yes.

Zinsmeister: Do you want to make the perfect the enemy of the good? Is it better to be pure or to be done? Those are big boy things; those are dad issues I would say. That's the stuff I learned by being a father, and by studying history. It's about maturity, about recognizing that even those of us who live for principles, not money or fame, must know when to say, "Good enough."

Riley: Right.

Zinsmeister: When it becomes rude and counterproductive and inhumane to keep insisting on your way, you become a destructive force rather than a constructive force. All of us are on a spectrum here, but you pretty quickly see who is a whore, and who is sensible, and who is a hermit. That's the spectrum, from one end to the other. [*laughter*]

Riley: I'll be glad when that passage is open.

Hunt: Exactly, that's just what I was thinking.

Riley: Not everything that is contestable should be contested, in other words.

Zinsmeister: That's like military logic 101. You have to know when to fight and when to fold. I can give you Robert E. Lee quotes about the crucial importance of that. It's more a matter of taste than of intellect—it's judgment, prudence, not smarts.

Riley: I see. I'm trying to think of other issue areas where there might have been something.

Zinsmeister: I have to put a little advertisement in here for my crazy market-based reforms.

Riley: OK.

Zinsmeister: Some of this transportation stuff I mentioned to you I was very proud of. We worked hard with the Department of Transportation to reduce today's very understandable popular frustration with our extremely inefficient air transport system. Shockingly, our car navigation systems today are much advanced over our airplane navigation system. The technology in any car is satellite-based. Airplanes you're still literally navigating by visual, radar watching, and spoken command. "I need you to go 141 East." "Did you say 141 East or 141 at least?" Literally spoken; it is 1940s technology. It's crazy that this is the way we fly airplanes.

It ought to be all satellite-based and computer controlled. You have a transponder in each plane. Transponders talk to the satellites, the satellites tell you where you are, they tell you where the other planes are. The transponders tell each other where they are so you can have safe spacing between planes. It's not brain surgery, trust me, it's all about bureaucracy, politics, financing, and stupid administration. This could be done quickly, and it would already be done if we had a normal business environment. But our air traffic control system is run by the government, so it's a mess.

And there are huge costs to this. I think I told you a third of all flights are late or canceled, and flight volumes are going to double in about 10 years, and they're going to double again. What is on the horizon right now, by the way, is micro-jets. It's going to be possible to buy a jet for $900,000 that will fly at 30,000 feet. That puts a spike of small craft around the corner. And you know what, an air traffic controller at the FAA [Federal Aviation Administration] doesn't know and doesn't care whether there are four people in that jet or 480 people. He has to give them all the same amount of attention.

If you start selling airplanes for $900,000 and double the number of dots in the air, you have a huge congestion issue to handle. It's going to bog us down; it already is bogging us down. So we tore into this and we quickly figured out that it's in a relatively small number of places where the bottlenecks are concentrated. Specifically, something like 40 percent of all of today's delays, we figured out, touch on one of the three New York City airports. That metro area is a dreadful bottleneck. And you know the way dominos work. If there is a flight late from La Guardia to O'Hare, then the O'Hare to San Francisco leg gets screwed up. Then you have this cascading series of problems.

The root of the problem is that the FAA has an awful conflict of interest. They are both the regulatory agency and the operating agency. I don't know of any other place in the government where that's the case. It's a stupid way to run a railroad. They are supposed to both be the overseers and also run this big empire themselves—about a $10 billion annual operation with tens of thousands of employees, a huge militant union, all kinds of perks, annual congressional appropriations.

The Canadians and the Australians and the Germans and the Brits and everyone else has figured this out, and they spun off their air traffic units as privatized companies. Nav Canada was our case history, we held it up and celebrated it as a model. Nav Canada was spun off by the Canadian government as a cooperative, nongovernmental enterprise, guided by a board with representatives of passengers, companies, airports, all the interested parties. And it has much better throughput levels than we have, much better technological advancement, it runs better in all ways. So we said, "Look, folks, we're not giving you a Milton Friedman lecture and asking you to bank on some crazy economic idea. This is real life; other countries are doing this. We're falling behind in this area and it is penalizing us. There is no reason it has to."

We were ahead of our time on this. In 2017 legislation began moving through Congress to spin off FAA's air traffic operations into a kind of Nav Canada-like user-controlled cooperative. We helped get that started.

Today's dreadful lack of modernization in air traffic control is a huge problem. If it wasn't tragic, it would be funny how hard it has been to get the most basic transponders put into airplanes. What happens is none of the airlines are willing to buy these transponders for their planes, because they know that before the FAA can get the other half of the transponder network that receives your signal up and running, this one is going to be out of date. You know how electronics work. So that is going to be wasted money so they say nah, put it off, put it off. So there is this chicken and egg problem. You never get any of the transponders in effect, so you can't get the satellites working. It's—Kafka would be proud.

We knew all this, so we're trying to figure out where are the soft points. Where could we start to make a more productive system? We decided that we'd dig into those three New York airports. If we could get some of the congestion fixed there, particularly in ways that would raise some revenue that could be reinvested into other technological solutions, maybe we could get a virtuous circle going.

I invited many economists to come see me, and did a lot of reading, and worked with an aide on this. I invited Mary Peters to detail a couple of her smartest people to this, and got some outside engineers involved in a congestion-pricing experiment. We figured out that if we could auction off some of the inefficiently used landing/takeoff slots at La Guardia in particular, but all of the New York airports, we could make a big difference in passenger throughput, and new competitive opportunities for service improvement. Legacy airlines camp on these valuable landing slots, and use them for inefficient small regional flights, because that keeps competitors from getting hold of them. We discovered we only have to reclaim a small number of those under-utilized slots and auction them, to establish a market price for all the slots.

And once there is a market established for those slots, then rational things start to happen. It might not make sense to send a 25-seat puddle jumper to Buffalo out of a slot that I could sell for a lot of money to someone who wants to use it to dispatch 250-seat planes to XYZ. That alone would solve much of the air-congestion problem. Fewer dots in the space for us to fit together. And much more rational incentives for airlines that currently have zero incentive to care about optimizing landing slots. It also would be fairer to customers and to other companies. Many hubs are dominated by one carrier and that has a near-monopoly. If you had a pricing system, you could break some of that up. (You can begin to see where we ran into vested interests.)

So auctioning landing slots was one element. Then we wanted to institute some congestion pricing that would make it more expensive to take off during busy periods and less expensive to take off when there is spare capacity in the system. Very commonsensical. We do this all the time in real life. If you want to go to movies, or buy electricity, or use the high-speed toll lane at an hour when everyone else does, you have to pay. Then the nonurgent users delay slightly and get it cheaper. The people who have to use the service right now aren't blocked by overuse jams. What do you think a matinee is all about? Why do you get a cheap matinee ticket? To spread demand more efficiently across a wider period. We tried to apply these incentives to air travel, in a cool package of reforms we built up.

I had a meeting with all the CEOs of the major airlines, and got a good reception. I promised that all the money we raised from slot auctions would not be thrown into the federal fisc but channeled directly back into technological modernization, which is very much in your interest. I told them outright: "You are presiding over one of the most hated industries in America. People are sick of flight delays and cancellations, and they are getting cynical about your whole product. That's poisonous. You have a strong interest in working with me on this and trying to get them to feel better about air travel."

Everyone rationally got that. But the politics of this are really difficult. The one that ultimately became the obstacle was this—people who have lucked into control of a valuable asset want to hang onto it. The legacy carriers were very threatened by the idea that we would pull any of the slots away from them or let others bid on them. So Virgin America *loved* the idea; United *hated* the idea. We had allies as well as opponents.

Anyway, we did some very creative rulemaking and we got it right to the finish line. We literally had it timed out so that the rule would go into effect three days before the Bush administration ended. But some of the airlines figured out all they had to do was play out the clock, so they got a lawsuit going and just pushed the deadline enough to go beyond that period, to torpedo the whole thing.

I'll be interested how people interpret this in the long run. Some will say, "Karl was tilting at a windmill there." But I think not. Look at what has happened since then. Fistfights on airplanes among disgusted customers. Meanwhile we're about to get autonomous cars. Suddenly stuff like congestion pricing and slot auctions and speeding satellite navigation no longer seems like something to push off into the future. People understand this is a big quality of life issue for America right now. We were on that early.

Now, if I had put too much energy into that it would have been malpractice. But I feel like a little bit of that blue-sky invention, trying to figure out fresh ways of coping with trends on the horizon, that's one thing that White House advisers should think about. What did I call that earlier? That's the creation part. As long as I'm handling the crises part well, and navigating the deals part adequately, I felt that dreaming up new transportation solutions, new immigration solutions, was useful to the nation, even if it didn't become law on my watch.

Hult: I had been reading recently in some White House transition work that among the things your White House did and I guess Josh Bolton and Joel Kaplan's recommendation, was to write domestic policy memoranda. Did you do that?

Zinsmeister: In what sense? You mean at the end?

Hult: At the end for the new administration.

Zinsmeister: Yes. Josh was a real patriot in that. Let me tell you a little bit about what was going on.

Hult: So that would also be available as records for folks to follow up.

Zinsmeister: Yes, those are definitely going to be out there, though I wouldn't raise historians' hopes too high. The initial impulse was classic Josh, classic George Bush. You remember when the Bush staffers came in, literally the keys had been pried off many of the computers, the phones were intentionally broken. There was real obstructionism going on from the prior administration staff. Very stupid and very dangerous and very unpatriotic. And startling to those early Bush staffers, and never forgotten. They determined that whoever succeeded them was going to get a much better welcome. Not because we're better human beings, but because it's not safe for the country to have the new team come in and find things aren't working.

Josh and the President drilled this into us. We were going to hand off the baton with class. We want the people who follow us to succeed. That's in our national interest. Every decent human being wants every President to succeed. I want every President to succeed, including the ones I didn't vote for, because the country needs that.

So not only did we write all kinds of memos handing off institutional knowledge, but there was a real effort to make sure things were in good shape, and that our successors could hit the ground running. I must say, a lot of that didn't seem to be taken up by Obama staffers. I invited my successor to lunch, and invited her to come over to the office and get a data dump, or whatever she wanted. Really didn't have any interest. I'm sure she felt the normal impulse—I know better, what could you possibly teach me? But that was a lost opportunity. We tried. And we certainly didn't leave behind a mess, that's for sure.

Those policy memos that you're referring to, Karen—I remember about 15 of them in my area that were tabbed. There was one on education, more specifically No Child Left Behind. There was one on immigration. There was one on race issues. There was one on justice reforms. There was one on competitiveness.

Don't get your hopes too high. Those were written by committee process, which made it very common denominator-ish. It's also a little cheerleader-ish, frankly.

I did not get myself heavily immersed in it. I told you about my gag reflex when it comes to bureaucratic language and documents. But I did do my duty. I made sure we recorded what needed to be recorded. I don't think you'll find them to be a gold mine.

Hult: Thanks. I know that you want to go on into overall view of the administration and things like that, but if I could ask quickly about two different policy issues.

Riley: Sure. We have plenty of time

Hult: One I think we can deal with quickly and then I'll go to education after this. We've mentioned energy a few times. You said that you didn't really have energy in your portfolio and yet our briefing material included things about energy and offshore drilling and things like that.

Zinsmeister: Right.

Hult: Did you and your staff participate in that at all?

Zinsmeister: None. That was all NEC [National Economic Council]. Now I was at the table when those principals meetings took place. But I had no skin in that game as a progenitor. That was completely NEC policy in our White House. I don't know how that was done in other administrations.

Hult: That always has been an interest to me. You said earlier domestic policy is a kind of garbage can and where one draws those lines becomes almost arbitrary.

Riley: I don't remember where it was in the Clinton administration, whether energy would have been in the NEC or in the—

Hult: I have a vague recollection it was in domestic, but it may not have been.

Zinsmeister: There is some discretionary room there for the administration.

Hult: Certainly.

Zinsmeister: The classic one in our case was the Department of Homeland Security. I had most immigration issues. But big pieces of enforcement were obviously in the Homeland Security Advisor's portfolio. But that was pretty clear-cut; it wasn't fractious. Housing had some overlap with NEC.

Hult: Housing and agriculture I guess would be.

Zinsmeister: Agriculture was totally NEC.

Hult: Housing would go back and forth.

Zinsmeister: Housing was a weird mix. The Fannies [Federal National Mortgage Association, Fannie Mae] and Freddies [Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation, Freddie Mac]—all that was in the [Benjamin] Bernanke Treasury/NEC portfolio, completely. Understandably and appropriately. The stuff I had was more the helping portfolio, the lower income work by HUD [Housing and Urban Development].

Hult: Public housing?

Zinsmeister: Public housing surely and FHA [Federal Housing Authority] was in my—

Hult: So Section 8 would be in that category as well.

Zinsmeister: It would as well. Section 8 and public housing weren't issues in the housing meltdown. But the FHA was one of the central mechanisms for responding to the housing meltdown. We had to work out boundaries with NEC during those housing discussions.

To remind you, the FHA became a kind of a refi agency of last resort. Our goal was to get some of these subprime people—the more viable of the subprime mortgage holders who were both really not to blame for the pickle they were in and who had better economic qualifying factors—to refinance into FHA 30-year mortgages at very moderate rates. That would take a certain pressure off of the market. Instead of them becoming defaulters, they would pay off their subprime mortgage as part of their refinancing, and get that money back into the system. That's one less house sitting there vacant and boarded up, dragging down a neighborhood.

The irony is that the FHA, which is not a particularly nimble or wonderful agency, looked golden at that time in comparison to the dreadful underwriting practices that had been tolerated in the rest of the housing industry. FHA actually had held the line. We tried to stick with that. There was pressure as you might remember from Barney Frank and others to just turn on the spigot at the FHA and have them go into the subprime business: no income, no job, no assets, no problem! We refused that and wanted to keep reasonable FICO [credit score, first established by Fair, Isaac, and Company] scores and demonstrated ability to repay a part of FHA qualifying. We wanted to keep a down payment—they wanted to have zero down payments. We said that's not businesslike, that's how you set up these false expectations in the first place, getting people to think they could buy a house with no down payment. Those are people who shouldn't be buying houses, they're not ready for it.

Riley: Did you have a follow-up to that, Karen?

Hult: Education—

Zinsmeister: I believe social historians are going to look back and say the most interesting thing that happened in our generation in terms of social invention and helping the poor is what happened in education reform—charter schools, inner-city school choice, saving the parochial schools from collapsing. Those are big developments. There are now something like 7,000 charter schools in this country and growing fast. And they are intensely focused on a population that has not been served well by government in the past. The children in these innovative schools almost all fled from dysfunctional conventional public schools.

Hult: How does No Child Left Behind fit in with that, or does it?

Zinsmeister: No Child Left Behind is important in some ways, but No Child Left Behind isn't the whole story. Setting up the high-stakes testing system, and exposing how bankrupt many of our schools were—including how mediocre many of our allegedly wonderful suburban schools are—was a huge contribution of the NCLB mechanics. A turning point in public opinion and in expert opinion. Even apologists for the system had to see we have big problems.

That spurred a chain of useful secondary effects. Like the push to start assessing individual teachers, instead of certifying literally 95 percent of the teachers in the Chicago public school system as above average. Just absurd practices that had been norms, had to go away once the NCLB testing started to expose deep problems. Hard meta-data began circulating through the public school system for the first time thanks to NCLB. Unfortunately that was attached to a utopian pretend vision of 100 percent success that soon tainted the whole enterprise.

When people realized NCLB was so rigid and so formulaic, the whole thing really suffered in the court of public opinion, in the court of expert opinion. But that doesn't erase the gift it gave us of forcing lazy school districts to really test and then be transparent, showing how much weakness we need to overcome.

Any time testing came up, the President used to say, "Don't tell me what inputs you put in, I want to know what the outputs are." That was a big transition. It now seems perhaps prosaic to us, but it wasn't prosaic then. Prior to that, education "progress" was all about more spending or fewer children per teacher. It was all about inputs. You know what? If we don't get better test scores out of fewer children per teacher, that's not a good idea. If we don't get better results for the kids out of higher spending, it's not a good idea. We need to test that.

Of course when we did test, we found those inputs were not especially helpful after all. We learned those are not the things that really matter. What really matters is teacher quality. What really matters is time on task.

But we needed a big hatpin to pop the balloon of false satisfaction. NCLB's testing regime was a hatpin in a balloon. Boom. Big noise, scared everybody, made a lot of enemies, but it was a necessary first step. So I give Margaret Spellings and the President credit for that. But it opened the door for what then needed to be fixed.

Part of the beauty of NCLB was that it was very helpful in allowing you to figure out where each school—and even each classroom and teacher—fit in the pecking order, via actual student results. It let you figure out, without the fakery of previous state tests, where you really stand. How you then fix any problems is up to you.

That part of the NCLB modus operandi was valuable. But it discredited itself because the demands were so utopian that people eventually gave up. Every single student at proficiency? Really? Some regimen that measured *added value* rather than final standing—where did those students end up compared to where they started—would have been much wiser. In the end, the Education Department tried, by granting waivers liberally, to take the poison out of the fact that almost no one was able to meet the utopian standards. Arne Duncan continued that in the Obama

administration. But it was too late. By then, everyone was treating the NCLB demands as pretend standards. Unattainable and therefore not to be taken seriously.

But placing real demands and serious accountability on public educators was a good impulse. And it will always be resisted by a weird mix of unionized teachers, self-satisfied district administrators, and conservatives who like their status quo and don't want things stirred up. I remember a conversation I had with Jim DeMint. He was saying, "By golly, we have to get this out of the federal government and get it back to the state level." I said, "There's some logic to that, Senator. Government that takes place closer to the people is better in most cases. But let me just ask you one thing. How wonderful, how tremendous, how reliable, how trustworthy are the people who run the State Department of Education in South Carolina?" And he immediately answered, "Oh, they're terrible. They're horrible."

I pointed out, "Well, *that's* who is going to be deciding if a particular school is fine, good enough, if you dump the accountability portion of NCLB." There was this failure to understand that the problem with going to the local level, if you just do that and nothing else, is that they have all kinds of incentives to cover up their failures. You have to have some outside audit function that honestly explores performance, and says to those institutions that are not performing: You have to take strong medicine.

So anyway, I feel NCLB had some value in helping us understand and accept the importance of testing and accountability. And the widespread granting of waivers toward the end of the administration helped rationalize things a bit and reduced some of the inflexible demands. Margaret was whole hog to get the whole thing renewed as is. She would never acknowledge in public, and didn't want me to ever say, that there were problems with NCLB, so I worked gently and quietly, and mostly left reauthorization to her. But it became clear to all of us that the Congress and the public were not going to extend NCLB into the future. NCLB lost its luster long before I even joined the administration. So I was a good soldier in trying to keep alive one of the President's signature items—I did not in any way resist or torpedo that—but I also concluded it would be wise to add some other elements to the President's education agenda to help signal where the ed reform movement might go in the future.

For instance, we got the concept of Pell Grants for Kids entered into the State of the Union address, I think in 2008. The whole notion there was just that it's not a revolutionary idea to let public money follow the student rather than the institution, we do it all the time in college. It's portable money. The money goes where the kid goes. If the kid hates this school and goes to the next school, the money goes with him. That's the market test. That's the way we empower people seeking opportunities. There is great utility in that.

That's a tiny little rhetorical accomplishment, but it was not easily done. We also got a little experiment set up that would allow the Opportunity Scholarships in D.C.—which had given poor kids who were badly served by the public schools an opportunity to get a voucher that they could take to a private school—to be replicated in I think six other cities.

Then we proposed something called the Promise Scholarship, and tried to make that part of NCLB reauthorization. It basically said that if a school repeatedly fails to meet its targets, instead of trying to micromanage the administrators and strip down the school and all the stuff that

NCLB had as sanctions, we're going to let the kids walk. We're going to give them a scholarship to enroll in some better place. Again the whole notion was to empower the customer. That was the whole thing.

We put on a major conference where the President spoke, and many superb educators took part, to encourage greater understanding and support for the role Catholic schools play in rescuing children in many inner cities. We wrote and published out of my White House office two books on this subject that I'm proud of. And today we're seeing an end of the long decline of urban Catholic schools, and the beginning of a renaissance.

I don't want to oversell this. We didn't score any big touchdowns here. But we kept alive that notion that the future of ed reform is to empower children and families, open up new options, to stop insisting that one size fit all. That was the big failure of our previous ed reform, the pretense that one size fits all. One size doesn't fit all.

The ideas we were keeping alive have subsequently come to fruition in lots of places. As we talk in 2017 there are new scholarship programs for kids ill-served by public schools in dozens of states all across the country. Options just like our Opportunity and Promise scholarships have boomed. And of course the whole charter school revolution has spread like wildfire. There are now more than 7,000 charter schools in the U.S., and more opening at accelerating rates, and studies from groups like CREDO [Center for Research on Education Outcomes] at Stanford show they are doing remarkable things with our most needy children.

We were also very friendly to charters in the White House. We set up some of the first public financing mechanisms for acquiring a school. One of the biggest obstacles in creating a charter, as you probably know, is getting a building. Once they're up and operating they can collect the per capita state fee to cover their expenses, but many states won't pay them anything for a building, a terrible unfairness compared to other kinds of public schools.

I always encouraged language that would help condition the educated class, the voting class, the population at large, that the solutions in education in the long run are to keep the standards high, hold people's feet to the fire, empower the customer, let the financing be portable, and assess the teachers hard. We need high professional standards for educators that in the long run will make them respected the way other people who must meet high professional standards are, like nurses and CPAs and medical technicians. If you don't pass regular certifying exams and show good results in those kinds of fields, you can get thrown out of the profession. That's part of being a professional.

The only thing unions ever propose is paying teachers more. The public is willing to consider that, as shown by reforms in places like the District of Columbia, where teacher salaries are easily into six figures. But *only* if the pay is tied to strong accountability. D.C. has fired *hundreds* of poor teachers since that pay-for-tough-accountability reform went through. There is now a very aggressive system for weeding out teachers who get substandard results two or three years in a row.

We anticipated and tried to encourage these things. So I feel good about that ed reform work. It was very much in the glacial mode, and much of what I did was plant seeds for the future. But as

the old saying goes, “You can count the seeds in an apple, but you can’t count the apples in a seed.”

I don’t want to claim that we solved the education problem. But NCLB’s strong testing regimen was an essential first step. And then some of these other choice mechanisms we sketched helped socialize people to new ideas, to help prepare the country for next steps.

Riley: Let’s take a five minute break. We’ll come back and have not quite an hour and a half to go.

Riley: You came in, I can tell you have some notes here, and you also referred to a memoir you’ve written yourself. You must have expected to talk about some things when you came in. I thought maybe I ought to give you reins to deal with some of the things that you prepared to come and talk about that we haven’t touched on.

Zinsmeister: You two are marvelous. I will tell you briefly maybe about the student loan thing. I think I referred to that earlier.

Riley: Yes, I have that in my notes.

Zinsmeister: You’ve done a good job of hitting all the bases, both of you, Russell and Karen, so I’ll let you have most of the rest of the time, but quickly the student loan thing. I’m sure this is completely invisible. I doubt most people even know this happened. I’d be curious if anyone has ever written this up. I doubt it ever will be.

Riley: I don’t remember hearing about it in any of the interviews, but I’m famous for a bad memory.

Zinsmeister: I suspect it didn’t come up because there were very few of us who were involved in it, remarkably few. Again this was one of the things where the fewer people who knew about it the better, because part of any market panic, as you know, is not letting people get more panicked. So we were anxious to keep this close to our vests.

It was right at the same time of the housing meltdown. It was in fact a corollary effect. The lifecycle of a student loan has become exactly what happens to a housing loan—which is, the originators don’t hold the paper. They repackage the loans and then resell them as securities to somebody else. Then with the proceeds, the originators go back out and write new loans. That’s now as true of student loans as of mortgages. The proceeds from securitized resale is what finances next year’s loans. Well, guess what happens if you can’t sell last year’s packaged loans? You don’t have the money to originate new ones next year.

This is basically what the lenders came to us and told us. We got contacted by some of the loan originators, the banks, that they were starting to have a hard time. The markets were not liquid anymore; they were not able to sell the previous year’s loans, so they were not confident they were going to write new loans as promised in the coming year.

While a lot of the housing meltdown hit innocent victims, there also were many reckless actors. In the mortgage market they were lots of fake loans. Nobody did the due diligence up front to be sure the borrowers had jobs, assets, anything else. Then the rating agencies were incredibly derelict by stamping their ok on packages of these loans without ever looking at what was underneath the surface. There was a whole chain of effects. I don't need to review that at this juncture, but it was malpractice, and sometimes criminal. It ticked me off as the kind of abuse that can unfairly give capitalism a bad name.

But that's not what we had on the student loans side. In this case nearly *all* of the potential victims were innocent. These students wanting to get an education had nothing to do with the meltdown. There had been no out-of-control behavior. They were the classic definition of collateral damage. So I decided to do whatever we could to prevent the victimization of millions of innocent families.

Honestly I don't know how much of this I even brought to my colleagues. There were people who knew about it, but not many. NEC didn't know a lot about it. Our feeling really was we were in the middle of a panic, and we had to handle it without creating more panic.

Hult: So the information was coming directly to you or coming to you through someone in the education community?

Zinsmeister: Much of the intel was coming to us directly at DPC. Originally they were just saying "we're having a bit of trouble." Then it got more and more urgent. Sallie Mae and other lenders felt that the Education Department and the Treasury Department weren't taking this seriously. So DPC held a series of policy meetings. And after a couple months Ed and Treasury recognized this was a serious problem that had to be addressed.

In the first year we were able to get by with a little repair package we hoped would be enough. I don't have all this in front of me, and it's been years now, but there are standing programs that allow the Ed Department to act as a lender of last resort if there's a situation preventing students from getting loans somewhere else. So we beefed those up and we brought them to the forefront, made sure they had adequate funding, that there were people to answer the telephones when the calls came, and so forth. Very practical, boring, but important things to make sure this system would work, as opposed to being a theory only.

We also set up a program to purchase loans from the banks, but at a steep discount to discourage lenders from using it casually. All of this was done on a "no net cost to taxpayers" basis.

Riley: Again, just to be clear. This is at the same time that the markets are collapsing.

Zinsmeister: Had collapsed.

Hult: The housing markets.

Zinsmeister: And other markets. Banks had collapsed and so forth. For whatever reason, it never reached the newspapers that a secondary contagion was happening in student loans. If it had, it would have been a lot harder to fix. Then you would have gotten all sorts of investor

resistance. People assume, *Oh, student loans, they're solid as gold, they have government backing; everybody knows that.*

My first reaction was, *The housing market is completely different from the student loan market. Why is this happening? It seems artificial and irrational.* The packaged student loans were *not* toxic as the housing loans were. But in a financial panic, if people think something is bad, it's bad. There was a refusal to buy all securities.

When I realized what was going on here, we knew we had to do something aggressive. Josh Bolten knew what we were up to, obviously, and Joel Kaplan knew, though neither got into the details of this. First of all they were in a swim with the alligators over on the side of housing/Fannie-Freddie/TARP/auto companies, et cetera. Everyone was preoccupied. So it played out a little like stem cells. Just a few of us involved. Not in this case because nobody wanted to have anything to do with it, but there was no bandwidth left.

Riley: Sure.

Zinsmeister: In this case it was me and John Bailey, my excellent Education aide, and an aide we got detailed over from Treasury. As I said, Margaret was a deer in the headlights at first and then got some confidence in what we were doing and bless her heart was really great in first staying out of the way and not being a problem, and then helping with a few things at the end. But this was mostly a DPC commando operation.

We quickly got legislation passed and signed by the President, I think May of 2008, that gave us options for restoring liquidity to the student loan markets. So in very short order we were able to offer lenders a put option, where we basically said if you can't sell your loans to anyone else, the government will buy them. So this was a little bit of insurance for the originators that they're not going to get stuck holding a loan they can't flip. You think I wanted to set up a system for the government to buy private loans? Believe me, I was very reluctant to do this, but it was an emergency situation.

Riley: Whose authority do you have to have in order to—?

Zinsmeister: That was the other thing. We weren't anywhere clear about a lot of that. That was nightmarish for a fiscal and constitutional conservative like myself. The last thing I wanted to do was set a precedent that somebody else who is *not* a fiscal conservative could drive a Mack truck through.

Riley: Right.

Zinsmeister: So this was very difficult territory for us. John worked hard on that, and we eventually figured out the legal authority, and got sign-off on that. We raced to get everything set up, and then prayed that would be enough to get the private markets liquid again, and that few of our guarantees would be needed. And it worked. Student loans go out in a big gulp in August, and then in the new year. This is a very seasonal business, and we got through August and September. Then around January we started getting noises again from the banks—it's going to be worse this year, we can't get through this next year. Then we realized uh-oh, we have to go to phase two. So we had to navigate two rocky years in a row.

The second season we had to do more. We got together this little squad of people to look at the precedents and how we could handle this. All of us hated the whole TARP para-constitutional thing, including the President. But we all decided when we looked at the trends that we would have been derelict in our duty if we didn't intervene.

So we realized we were going to have to do something creative on student loans. What we created was what we called a conduit. Officially it was known as the Asset-Backed Commercial Paper facility. It was a backstop for restoring liquidity to the larger student loan market. I don't want to put on the record here definitive information that is not accurate, and this is years later and I have no notes, so I'm going to limit my detail here.

When I knew we needed some serious financial engineering, we asked Paulson to detail us someone from the Treasury Department. He sent over a guy named Steve Shafran. I have no idea what Steve is up to today, but he was a godsend. He was a high-level investment banker and he knew how a lot of this very opaque securitization machinery had been used over the previous five years on Wall Street. This is a little weird, because these were the guys who made a lot of the financial mess, and suddenly we were inviting them to come help fix it. [*laughter*] I was quite aware of this irony, I assure you. But we also knew you can't untangle what you don't understand. We had to understand this.

Steve was very tortured too. He and I knew that the securities and derivatives that were at the heart of the housing meltdown had gotten out of control and been abused. But generally, financial instruments are tools. They're like guns. They can be really bad in the wrong hands; they can be really good in the right hands. They're morally neutral. It's a lot about how you apply them.

We discovered we had to build some complicated mechanisms for collateralizing these loans, putting them together, packaging and reselling, to restore liquidity to the market and avoid having a whole cohort of college kids get the shocking news that no college loan was available to them. Essentially what we did was we created an instrument that allowed the banks to resell these loans to private investors, but with federal guarantees to establish the liquidity of this market. We became convinced that these sales would never be made without us standing in the shadows as either a buyer of last resort or at least some kind of a guarantor.

It was not anything that any of us wanted to do, but we decided it had to be done. And I feel very good in the long run that we fended off what would have been a calamitous scenario. Right up until August we were hearing from banks, "We're within days of pulling out of the student loan market. We'll hold off a little while longer, but if you don't tell us this is done soon, we're going to have to say publicly that we're not going to originate loans this year." We were that close. I don't know what the scenario would have been; it would have been awful.

I assume many colleges would have said to students, "We'll take you anyway and assume it's going to work out and we'll have to catch up your finances later," but I'm sure there would have been colleges that said, "We can't do that. You're not going to school this year." It would have been a big mess. Of course this would have fed into the larger panic. It would have made the bigger mess worse.

Normally we would have had all kinds of help from NEC and other people on this, but they were up to their eyeballs in their own problems. So we had to do this on a shoestring. I told you earlier how at one point we had no ability to access this crucial database of financial information at the Education Department because one worker was sick. I kept saying, "He can't be sick. You have no idea what's involved here. This is a national emergency. He has to come in and operate that machine. How sick is he? Is he bedridden?" They said, "No, it's not going to happen." So that was the kind of thing we were dealing with. We finally got it written at the last minute and it worked. The originations went out that year. We got over the hump.

I honestly have not had the temerity to go back and figure out what happened to those conduits, and how did they shut down, and what was the glide path. I don't know even who could tell me that history. But I do feel good about the fact that we successfully figured out and completed this emergency intervention in a moment that was the financial equivalent of wartime. It's stuff the government really shouldn't be doing outside of the equivalent of wartime, but it was an absolute last resort, to avoid damaging millions of families who didn't deserve that, if we failed.

Riley: The TARP piece and all the other financial sector stuff, that is completely apart from what you're doing.

Zinsmeister: Yes. All that was apart. I sat in all those meetings.

Riley: Tell us about the tone of those meetings.

Zinsmeister: Hank Paulson drove a lot of that. He can't be in a room without being the center of it. Hank was Josh's guy, so I was a loyal soldier.

Riley: Old Goldman connection, right?

Zinsmeister: Yup. And Paulson knew what he was doing. Very dominant and not much of a listener. Very awkward participant in White House councils. Yet there was a part of his choice that was brilliant. He knew where the bodies were buried and he could make things happen. But it was so unconventional, it was so out of order how he operated.

Hult: How so?

Zinsmeister: It was so much the Hank Paulson show, you can't believe it. It was not the way anything else operated. Everything else in the White House was this very careful, consultative process following the quasi-military chain of command I've described. I understand that this is an emergency situation. But you know what? The military follows its chain of command even in life and death situations. There's a reason there is a chain of command.

From the outside it seems so boring, so bureaucratic, and so awful to have this rigid, lockstep, procedural system. I'm a very independent person. But when I saw a strong chain of command in operation in life and death situations during my embeddings in Iraq I understood where it had come from, and I came to respect it a great deal. That made it much easier for me to play my part when I was in a very similar chain of command in the White House. Frankly, if I had done it five years earlier, before that military experience, I might have been too immature.

When Hank came to the Treasury Department he'd been the cock of the walk for a long time. He had not been socialized with any chain of command that restrained action. And they told him, "You're the czar, fix it." Maybe that was the right thing for the moment, but man, he didn't respect any of those procedural limits that the rest of us lived with and worked through.

Riley: In this case is he able to do this because there is—to further your metaphor—there is the fog of war? In other words, the people who may be at his level or even above his level, the President, is it the case that the President is not confident in his own grasp of this?

Zinsmeister: Yes. I would say that all of us were not confident that we had an accurate grasp on the facts. As I said, this was an extremely opaque area. The honest people on Wall Street would tell you none of them had a clue. Bernanke didn't have a clue, and he is one of the most sage scholars on these panics—

Hult: Bernanke even said that.

Zinsmeister: Bernanke was sent by God to oversee this. This was his expertise. This was his academic specialty. And even he had no clue. The President was just one of many who really didn't know where the boundaries were and what came next.

Riley: Did Paulson know?

Zinsmeister: He didn't know. He did a very good impersonation of someone who might know, but he didn't know, by any means. We all fumbled through this. There were all kinds of subjective judgments. Why was Bear Stearns bought out and Lehman Brothers allowed to perish? It's arbitrary ultimately. No one quite knew. Again, it's not as if the President was flying blind or wasn't getting good advice. Bernanke was as good an advisor as you possibly could get. Paulson knew the inside-baseball on Wall Street, how these things operated. He had the confidence of major players there. He was very good at soothing markets, at sending messages, at getting people not to do things that they would have done otherwise in their own interests. He probably was the right guy for the right moment. But man, it was very unconventional and not a good feeling for many of us.

Riley: Right. You're expressing discomfort with this in retrospect. I guess I'm trying to pin down the discomfort was that the President wasn't making Presidential decisions, or was he making Presidential decisions too heavily influenced by one party, and does that one party have biases and blind spots on this issue that a properly operating chain of command would have accounted for?

Zinsmeister: I think this is a sui generis case, a one of a kind. I never got the sense that the President was in any way derelict. I do remember feeling a few times like he was a little detached. But I was not in the inner circle on those discussions. That was NEC territory. The President made some good calls from his gut; he had good gut instincts. As much as we all *hated* the idea of TARP and *hated* the idea of involving ourselves in rescuing an investment bank that had gone on a limb partly by its own foolishness, this was all about avoiding collateral damage, protecting the rest of America from going up in flames in the crash. He was tortured like the rest of us; this was not something he really wanted to do. I give him credit that he didn't dodge the bullet.

Riley: Sure.

Zinsmeister: I remember once he told us—I was shocked at first, but then I thought, *That's really a beautiful sentiment*—he said, "I'm glad this happened on our watch. This could have all unfolded about one year later, and it would have been on the new guy's watch. He would have all newbies in office, without experience, and it would have been worse." Not to mention that they wouldn't have been constrained by all the programmed genetic impulses Republican have to do as little as you possibly can in terms of entangling the government and the private economy.

Riley: Or the professional expertise that Hank Paulson had.

Zinsmeister: And Ben Bernanke.

The President knew this was going to be a huge albatross, but to his credit he never wished it on someone else. That's the kind of guy he was. He felt like somebody has to take a bullet, better me, because I'm already damaged goods. I want the country to succeed. Let me take all the crap for this.

He said this even though, let me point out, this problem had been building for more than two decades, and was rooted in the cancerous incentives created by Fannie and Freddie, not in short-term policy. But he was focused on getting it behind us, not on casting blame. He hoped the new President could walk in without that burden and move the economy forward. So he asked us to get as much done as we possibly could.

There were lots of times I think things could have been punted and the President decided to just do it now. The idea was, we have Bernanke here now, we have Paulson here now, let's try our best. There was no illusion that this was pretty; everybody hated it. I dreaded policy time in those days, though I never did at other times. So I think the President made some good and selfless calls from his gut. He would probably be the first to tell you he wasn't certain they were right or wrong at the time. In retrospect they worked out pretty well.

Riley: Yes.

Zinsmeister: The worst damage was the precedent it set. It would be easy to say sometime in the future, "During the great housing meltdown we had to buy up private investments, and rescue private companies from collapse, and put government guarantees on bonds, and so forth. So let's do it again now." The terrifying scale of the government interventions into our private economy—several trillion dollars added to the Federal Reserve balance sheet. Stepping in to preserve some companies, but not others. Things I've argued against my whole life. The only way we could justify these things was via a war metaphor. The entire nation was in great danger, and the well-being of millions of innocent people was threatened, so the government had to take extreme and odious measures, as in wartime.

And as in the Iraq/Afghanistan war, the President was mostly deferential to his generals. I told you he was not a micro manager. That was very striking. He had good instincts and let you know if you were getting off the rails, but he didn't intrude on the details. He expected you to know your knitting, and to do what was necessary to fix problems.

He really wasn't one to meddle anywhere. So the long leash he gave Bernanke and Paulson was not a departure for him. He wasn't one of those detail-obsessive Presidents like you hear Clinton was, someone who insisted on getting into the nerdy stuff.

Hult: That is a very good set of insights into President Bush. From your perspective were there lines of argument to which he was not exposed because of Mr. Paulson's domination of the meetings?

Zinsmeister: I doubt it. He had good economic advisers apart from Paulson. I have to note that Paulson had a special dispensation. He had this very aggressive, very strange, and flummoxing way of hijacking conversations and dominating decision making. He was not a good public speaker. Very much to the contrary. A stutterer and meanderer royale. He would go on endlessly.

I'll tell you honestly, I had qualms that there was too much resting on his shoulders. But honestly I don't know where else we would have gone. If people say that Hank Paulson had a blank check or something, that's not accurate. The President made the final decisions and there were other people involved. There were definitely cases where Paulson got backed off. I was involved in some of them. He was one of the guys who wanted to use the FHA much more aggressively. I argued against that. I have to assume there were lots of things Hank wanted that he didn't get. Keith Hennessey managed him carefully. I definitely don't think he had a blank check.

There was an absence of knowledge and leadership around these unprecedented economic events, and Paulson was embraced. I suspect that's the way people felt about [Ulysses] Grant in parts of the Civil War. You pray to God you have the right general, and you hold on to him because he is at least decisive, and there isn't an alternative on the scene.

Riley: That answers my question pretty directly. What I was hearing from you was an assertion that this was an extraordinary example of decision making in this White House that didn't follow normal chains of command. What I was listening for next was an indication of how it departed from that, which you've explained. Then how it might otherwise have been would have been the next question. What I think you've said is it was such a catastrophic emergency that you don't really have an answer for that other part. Is that a fair assessment?

Zinsmeister: That is fair. The other thing we all have to put on the record is that the other shoe never dropped.

Riley: That's exactly—

Zinsmeister: The economy did not melt down.

Riley: Exactly, and that was my reaction when you—

Zinsmeister: We have to acknowledge that. Because that was a distinct risk at several junctures. Hank Paulson and I are never going to have a drink together. But to his credit, his basic diagnosis and raw solutions headed off disasters that were staring us in the face. It worked out. It was ugly and none of us liked the precedents it set. But did anyone like suspending habeas corpus during the Civil War? No, yet we did it. It was necessary.

Riley: I remember driving to Washington to do an interview—it must have been for the Clinton project, and listening to WTOP radio and the market is dropping, 6, 7, 800. I drive 10 miles and the market is dropping another 250 points. The fear and the chaos is too easily forgotten in retrospect.

Anything else on that, Karen?

Hult: No.

Riley: I wanted to ask you about entitlement reform and whether that was something that was ever an issue as you were—?

Zinsmeister: It was a huge issue in the Bush White House, but not in my years. As you know, there was this big effort to work on Social Security, which I think was driven mostly by Karl Rove. It was a deep disappointment, and that was mostly the end of that.

There obviously was lots of tinkering work on Medicare and Medicaid, but those were NEC issues so I did not have any direct gestational role in any of that.

Hult: So TANF [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families] was off the table, we've talked about public housing. Medicare Part D was passed, so that's done as well.

Zinsmeister: Yes. That was a heavy push obviously, but it predated me, and was not something I had any direct experience with.

Riley: You were not monitoring progress or anything like that?

Zinsmeister: Oh sure. That was being monitored, but first of all it was an NEC issue so I wasn't directly a part of it. I'd hear scuttlebutt. I remember senior staff discussions about drug prices. People clearly understood that was going to be a big part of the President's legacy and monitored it. But again the pace in the White House is such that once you get something done, you move on. You'd be amazed how little energy goes into looking backward; you keep churning forward, because something else is about to hit you.

Riley: Any piece of PEPFAR (President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief)?

Zinsmeister: Oh yes, PEPFAR was a big deal.

Riley: How far along was it when you came in? My sense of that timeline is not very good.

Zinsmeister: Much of that ramped up on my watch. I was heavily involved in that. The President cared a lot about that, a real lot. There was, however, plenty of momentum before I arrived. Those decisions had mostly been made. The spending mostly increased when I was there, but a lot of those decisions had been made prior to that.

I focused a lot on execution. For instance, we know that pumping large amounts of American funds into African countries is a great way to buy corruption and destroy governments. So I favored channeling the spending as much as possible to NGOs [nongovernment organizations]

and charitable organizations. They were doing some of the most effective work in these nations. Many religious charities, for instance, were running very lean, very efficient public-health programs in Africa. And by not funneling money through the governments you sidestep the egregious skimming and corruption problems.

People already kind of agreed on that. But I had to be a little bit of a pest occasionally to make sure that didn't get lost. The Left wanted to dump the behavior-modification parts of PEPFAR (discouraging prostitution, promiscuity, multiple partners, and so forth) and just wanted to put more money into condoms and AIDS drugs. We had a lot of pressure on that. That was mostly speaking to domestic audiences for domestic political reasons. I don't think that was based on Africans' best interests. Lots of Africans concluded it's not just a matter of putting on a condom. You also have to talk about faithfulness to your spouse. You have to talk about shutting down the truck stops where the hookers were transmitting the virus all across the continent. Common sense stuff. But that was part of the culture wars. Very unpopular in some quarters, so I tried to keep some sensible discussions going in those executional kinds of areas.

The President supported both the behavior-change programs and the condom distribution. He felt both were important. And the President is very proud of PEPFAR. The First Lady was also quite involved in it, as were their daughters. DPC was very involved.

Riley: That was something that Josh was also very interested in?

Zinsmeister: Very.

Riley: Because of the President's personal interest?

Zinsmeister: I t stemmed from that, first and foremost.

The President is kind of a bleeding heart. You know that he has a soft, sentimental spot. He felt he could help many people quickly in this way. There was a very lovely personal impulse. There was also a practical side to it. How many things do you get to do in the White House that might save seven figures of human lives? That's dramatic for anybody.

Riley: You should know that the foundation has Bono [Paul Hewson] on our prospective interviewee list. We're hoping that—

Zinsmeister: Awesome.

Riley: We're hoping that it works out at some point still. Did you have an occasion to meet the man?

Zinsmeister: I don't think I ever did.

Riley: Tell us about Josh's role and your sense of him as a White House Chief of Staff. He was already in that position by the time you came in, so you didn't have any—

Hult: But just barely. It was a couple of months.

Zinsmeister: Yes. We were part of the same new class.

I'd always heard what a master Andy Card was as Chief. I have some friends who'd worked very closely with him, even back when he was in Reagan's Cabinet, and everyone always said he's the ultimate Washington operator, gets things done. Well, I didn't have any personal experience with Andy Card, who was well thought of and well loved, but I can't imagine he was any better than Josh. Josh was really impressive. First of all, he is very smart. He has tremendous energy. And he wields this disarming wit.

The President loved him and they had a real bond. Josh was very good at helping the President blow off steam and keep perspective, all those things that a Chief does as a loyal servant in addition to being a central cog of governance.

Josh had the respect of all of us. He was extremely competent. It's intimidating when the guy who has to range over the whole field of events manages to know something in your little corner that you wished you knew before he did. [*laughter*] Both Josh and Joel could do that if you didn't do your homework. They were very good. I viewed them as a package; most people did. They really were Batman and Robin. They went together on everything.

Hult: Did you have much to do with the other Deputy Chief of Staff, Joe Hagin?

Zinsmeister: Almost nothing. Joe was on the operating side. I saw him every morning at senior staff, but he was like, get the motorcade set up, make sure the Secret Service is there.

Hult: So it was really Kaplan and Bolten that you—

Zinsmeister: Totally on the policy side. Obviously Hagin had big responsibilities. On the foreign trips he was up to his eyeballs in crucial work. Imagine getting armored cars and helicopters into Africa. Good luck with that. He had a very serious brief, but it was not a policy brief, and he was not involved in policy deliberations.

Riley: You mentioned Mrs. [Laura] Bush. Were there other places where she had a particular role in your portfolio?

Zinsmeister: Yes, there were. In addition to PEPFAR she was very interested in education. I went up to the Residence several times, the private Residence, and would brief her on things, get her advice on things, work with her at events. It wasn't formal, but she was very useful, on education in particular. People liked her a lot. People on the Hill liked her. She brought credibility to education discussions.

I remember going up to the Residence. The whole central area is yellow, but there is a room with a lot of windows that is bright yellow. I would brief her on education topics when she asked for it, as a courtesy. Of course Anita [McBride], her chief of staff, was in many of the principals meetings. Mrs. Bush did a very nice job of not being a wallflower but not being intrusive. She threaded that needle pretty well.

She had some fun projects. She was the one who transplanted that wonderful book festival they had in Texas up to the National Mall so we had the National Book Festival. That was a very

interesting and lovely gathering of writers and intellectuals every year at the Library of Congress. She created certain things like that.

PEPFAR was a definite interest. You can see how important she has been in the Bush Center post-Presidency, bringing attention to causes like Burmese women. She's tough and spunky yet very kind. I have fond feelings for her. And she was a good influence on the President. He's a guy's guy, and she was very good at refining him and bringing him back to earth a little bit.

Riley: Knock the mud off your boots when you come in.

Zinsmeister: Exactly.

Hult: What about your interactions with some of the rest of the White House? Were you involved at all in State of the Union addresses, the preparation and the kinds of speechwriting efforts that went on in the White House?

Zinsmeister: Yes, we were all involved in that. Speechwriting was pretty territorial about their work. I was a voluminous writer myself before entering the White House and probably could have been helpful in some of that, but I was smart enough not to volunteer and they certainly weren't interested in having volunteers.

Hult: They wanted your policy input, however, on occasions.

Zinsmeister: Exactly, very much. You've got it. The State of the Union process was a massive goat rodeo. It was about a monthlong process. It started with people just throwing their best ideas into the hat, then they winnow and winnow and winnow.

It was the symbolic side of politics I'm not especially interested in. A lot of it was cosmetics and visuals. It was not inconsequential to get a phrase like "Pell Grants for Kids" into the State of the Union, as I described earlier. I recognize the importance of that bully pulpit stuff. But I didn't pour myself into that process, I must confess. It was much more communications and politics land than heavy policy land. But, yes, to answer your question, we were all very much involved in reviewing and vetting those speeches.

Again, by the time I got there in '06 they had a long laundry list of leftover ideas. We did add some new things. We got some language into circulation on some of those transportation issues I described. The speeches talked a lot about NCLB, and a lot about immigration obviously.

The delivery of the speech itself was fun theater. It was like nothing else that ever happened in the whole course of the year. We were all packed into the House chamber—all Members of Congress, tons of foreign diplomats, military brass, the entire Supreme Court, pressies, and senior White House staff. Literally packed, brutally hot. For whatever reason the White House staff stood back with the diplomats. All these people in gorgeous costumes. We're all jammed and sweaty and stinky.

It was always a slightly worrisome time too. That's the gravest opportunity all year for a terror act. Everyone in Washington in one room. Obviously they take extraordinary precautions. I'll never forget—I was sitting in the motorcade, ready to race to the Hill for one of the State of the

Unions. I'm listening to the Secret Service radio in my limo and I hear that the Presidential motorcade is coming down 15th Street. And I'm thinking, *No, it isn't. I'm in it. And we're sitting right here on the oval at the back of the White House. What are you talking about?*

Then the radio voice said the motorcade is at such-and-such an intersection. I thought, *What is going on here?* Then when those cars reached the White House gate, what happened is that fake motorcade merged with our real motorcade, and all the cars intermingled, then half went racing down Constitution Avenue, and half went down Independence Avenue, and no one knew which was real and which wasn't. That was the whole point. You instantly cut in half the odds of any strike succeeding.

No one ever told me that, mind you. And I probably shouldn't have told you! But I figured it out.

Hult: And guess which Cabinet member is not there at the State of the Union?

Zinsmeister: Right.

Riley: Were there any security scares when you were in the White House?

Zinsmeister: There were a couple of famous ones before I came in. My pals who were in the West Wing when the towers went down told me that was a zoo. They were told, "Get out right now there's a plane heading for the White House," and of course there was. So they left everything behind. There were people who made their way home in their bare feet because their shoes were under their desk when the alarm came, and the Secret Service wouldn't let them reach down to retrieve them; they ran that fast.

I will tell you right up front. I have hugely mixed feelings about the new security apparatus permeating D.C. I hate this security state we live with. I used to walk into the Capitol Dome, the Library of Congress, go up in the congressional balconies to listen to debates. You could enter almost anywhere, which is wonderful in a democracy.

I hate the closed access. The barriers. The security lines. The streets shut off. The Ellipse often blocked to the public. Never mind the surveillance and so forth behind the scenes. But I try to stifle my gag reflex and be a grown-up who recognizes we've been forced into much of this. You see all these horrible things taking place in Europe. Trucks plowing into crowds. Bombed transports. You wonder, *Why isn't that happening here?* It's not an accident; some very hard things were done. And Bush deserves a lot of credit there.

I also think there was much faddish overreaction. I don't think we need to have huge concrete pylons in front of the Asian art museum. There are a lot of things where we went too far. I hope we can ratchet back from some of that.

It was World War II, more than the New Deal, or the income tax, or intrusive technology, or other factors that really demolished many American liberties and began the intense centralization of government and expansion of state power. Alas, after the war was over, a lot of things were not uncentralized. Security clampdowns were not lifted. Income taxes were never fully reduced. I think the War on Terror had some of that same effect. It ratcheted us up in a way that is going to be hard to undo.

I rankle at the idea that there may be a police car out on the street right now listening to our cell phones. There literally could be; many local police departments now have those. Part of me rebels against that idea. But part of me also says we don't want bad guys blowing up our communities, and pushing us even further onto a war footing. It's one of those things we're all going to have to sort out.

Riley: Were you at all involved in 2008 in trying to support the Republican effort to maintain the White House?

Zinsmeister: No, I didn't have any role; very few people did. We got the usual Hatch Act memos. If you want to volunteer in your neighborhood or if you want to give donations, here's how you do it. Don't use White House phones to make phone calls. We were all carefully coached in that.

Many of the people at the White House had their jobs there because they had been active campaign volunteers, and there was a robust culture of electioneering among many of the staff. But I already told you I arrived at my position through a very unconventional route, and I'm not a campaign guy. I don't have that history of electoral activism. I had never been a Republican operative.

Obviously I took a big interest in the race as a citizen very interested in politics. And I was fascinated to watch how the President reacted. I've mentioned that in addition to taking responsibility for the electoral burdens he put on his own party in prosecuting an unpopular war, the President also felt the 2006 election results were a verdict of voters on unattractive ethical behavior in Congress—on things like pork-barreling earmarks, and some behavioral shenanigans.

He had a very interesting reaction after the Obama elections in 2008, as well. He said something like, "I just think it is so awesome that a black man got elected and is President with so little hullabaloo. There were people who said that would be hard, it would never happen, too many bigots. But ultimately it wasn't a big deal. It's a tribute to our country that the election was fought over things other than race."

He also said a few appropriately sharp things that I remember. Along the lines of: "It's going to be interesting. For years there have been people saying, 'All we need is someone of our own color in the White House, someone who understands us; that will change everything.' Well, they're going to develop a new and less utopian view of saviors in the White House, racial or otherwise. They're going to learn that American success is up to us as individuals. If you want to live a better life, you have to make better decisions. No political messiah is going to ride in and save you. That excuse is going to go away."

Riley: It sort of foretells Obama's inability or unwillingness to follow through on a lot of what Democratic voters thought he was going to do, like shutting down Guantanamo.

Zinsmeister: Yes, yes. You get in the White House and you realize how fake so much political posturing is. We all knew shutting down Guantanamo was not possible, and that he almost certainly knew it wasn't possible, so it ticked us off that he would make hay on that.

President Obama was much less gracious to President Bush than the reverse. President Bush went out of his way to never say mean things about him in public, to really pull himself out of public life at a time when he could have scored cheap points. That was very much a reflection of his gentlemanly character and his patriotism. They were all the right decisions.

But we all noticed when Obama repeatedly said snide things and pointed fingers about all the terrible things he had to undo. For his first three or four years! Very cheap.

Hult: Just very quickly, while the election was going on and the campaign, what was the atmosphere like in the White House?

Zinsmeister: In 2008 you're talking about?

Hult: Yes.

Zinsmeister: Well, as you recall we were right in the middle of the financial mess then, so—

Hult: Exactly.

Zinsmeister: It was grim, it was combat really, it was all combat. When you're a candidate—

Hult: When you're domestic policy and you're not exactly on the economic portfolio but you're seeing all the implications for what you care about.

Zinsmeister: We were all involved, I assure you. Even though it was mostly an economic crisis we were all up to our eyeballs. The other thing that was going on there, of course, is the candidate—McCain and the President had a very freighted relationship. If I was involved on the political side—I wasn't, but many of us in the White House had no love for McCain. The President himself, bless his heart, took the position, "As part of my duties I need to support the man and do everything I can to help him." Duty is a big deal for him. So he did everything he could to try and be helpful even though they didn't like each other.

Riley: That went back to 2000?

Zinsmeister: It goes way back. There were a lot of things involved in that. Again, I'm not an expert and I won't comment much. But for many reasons they weren't crazy about each other. But President Bush rose above that. I think he feels like leadership is a burden in itself and there needs to be a certain level of solidarity among leaders, an understanding of the burdens that being a leader involves, in order to override resentments and make it easier to forgive some of the human frailties and some of the bashing that goes on in politics.

Riley: We haven't asked you about religion. You referred to it a couple of times in your original interview. Was it a subject of conversation between the two of you thereafter even in casual way?

Zinsmeister: Only in casual ways, but yes. I went to church with him at Camp David. I'm trying to think of exact examples rather than—I mean we knew this about each other. I knew it was

central to his character. I hope you know how central it is to his character, and his whole view of the world.

We went to a meeting in Baltimore once—a halfway house where guys were transitioning out of prison, but still under some court supervision. It was a tiny little place. The air conditioning wasn't working. It was sweaty, jammed with these convicts and the President and some very nervous Secret Service.

So we're all in there and the President barrels right in. "Addiction, I know about addiction. Let me tell you about addiction. I was a drunk." At one point one of the cons gave him a gentle way to get out of it, something like, "But you're doing the right thing now." Gave him a good opportunity to puff up his redemption. But he went right back to talking about his weaknesses and failures and failings-down. He was really in this Methodist confessing mode.

Some of that may come from being a later-in-life Christian. If you just inherit your faith, it is a reflex, it's something you do because you've always done it. But if you've lived in ways you're not really proud of and then you choose to live a different way, you really own it. Then it is a serious choice. You know the alternative. Those of us who have been through that, there is some commonality there. Sincere faith can put a President next to a convict and make them completely comfortable and understanding of each other.

Anyway, that striving religious mode is a big part of how George Bush understands himself and understands the world. Sometimes for better or for worse. He assumes other people are as willing to be honest, and as anxious to change themselves after they've made a clean breast of things. Possibly this is how he got a little disconnected from the devious, deceptive, sharkish reality of the Middle East. He would like to think the best of people rather than the worst of people.

I have some of that same flaw myself. I would like to believe there is this universal impulse that everyone wants to run their own life and have control of their future, and will generally try to do the right thing. But I've learned that some people love amoral strong men. Not just in the Middle East. There are plenty of Russians who are thrilled every time [Vladimir] Putin sticks a finger in somebody's eye.

Bush represents a more innocent and idealistic style of leadership. A lot of it comes from his faith. Christianity is the ultimate leveling philosophy. It is not a respecter of power or class or privilege or wealth; it insists on the equality of all men before God.

Riley: We may find out that there are admirers of strongmen in the United States right now.

Zinsmeister: There might be a few here too, yes. I would like to say it's an un-American tradition, that we don't have that peasant mentality that says there are the lords and then there are the rest of us.

Hult: This isn't directly linked, but in your interaction at the White House did you ever see the President lose his temper? And if so, about what and at whom?

Zinsmeister: You know, I'd love to give you a dramatic—

Hult: But the evidence of that not being there is another bit of an insight.

Zinsmeister: I don't think I can.

Certainly he can sometimes be gruff. He can be rough edged. Again, Mrs. Bush was sometimes after him for this. "George, don't be rude." So I saw him displeased, but I never saw him out of control. First of all, he has a healthy set of disciplines. He goes to bed early, gets his sleep, gets up early. He knows his limits. He knows he needs exercise. There are many former addicts who develop healthy compensating habits. If you're a high-energy, compulsive person, that is one of the ways you keep yourself on track. Probably that frustrated some people who would have liked him to not be so dependent on getting out to Camp David and riding the bikes and doing the other stuff he used to keep himself in equilibrium. But those things made him extremely sane.

He had meetings on time. He never veered off into something unexpected. He developed habits that frankly made him a little predictable and probably less fascinating to historians than somebody who just kind of winged it and followed impulses wherever they led him, like Clinton. But one result was that Bush never scared me. I never felt like he could get out of control or unbalanced. He had this lovely ability to inspire confidence because he was so solid and rooted.

He knew the part of the country he came from; he knew he wanted to go back there. He knew he loved his wife; he knew he was never going to leave her. He knew his faith; he knew what was inside his heart. He had a pretty good sense of his own weaknesses. He valued loyalty really highly; that's something that might have ticked him off, disloyalty. Somebody who said one thing and did something different, that is something that would anger him. But I never saw anything like that, though there is plenty of perfidy in D.C.

Hult: The final thing along these lines, he at least in the popular press and some memoirs is treated as almost a low-level bully, if you will, in terms of sarcasm, giving nicknames and all of that, which doesn't fully square with much of what you've been saying. How do you respond to that kind of comment?

Zinsmeister: I can see where it comes from. Let me give you an example. We're in the Oval one day and Karl Rove is sick, pretty badly sick. He is sick as a dog. He blows his nose, pretty bad goose honk. The President stops everything, stares at Karl. "Karl, that is *disgusting*." If you're a fly on the wall and see that, you might assume it's bullying. But it wasn't bullying—because it was Karl Rove and George Bush. These were two old buddies. These are a couple of frat boys who were on each other. A really politic guy, a smoother operator with an eye toward history, would never have done that, precisely for fear of being accused of being a low-level bully. But George Bush was never that calculating. To me this raw, guyish, roughness was part and parcel of his sincerity.

To me, he was a completely uncalculating, unfake guy. I've just been reading about Henry Stimson, this classically elegant, never anything out of place, slick, always-complimentary politico. I totally distrust that kind of guy. [*laughter*]

Now, mind you, George Bush is on the record that he was a bit of an aggressive and unpleasant young man. He's told everybody, he said it in *Decision Points*. But as a mature adult he appears

to have done a good job of putting that away. I believe his faith is a big part of it. I know his wife was a big part of it. His discipline is a big part of it.

And the nicknames, in my experience, were completely fond. Totally fond.

Riley: And yours was?

Zinsmeister: Big Z. Not very original. But it kept him from stumbling on Zinsmeister.

Riley: That's probably why he wanted to know what it meant in German. He could use that—tax guy, tax guy.

Riley: Anything else? We have reached our appointed hour. It is the case that we never completely exhaust all the possible subjects of conversation, but we do a pretty good job of exhausting the person.

Zinsmeister: You did that.

Riley: You have been a very good sport in allowing us to probe and pick at things. We have a very broad definition of public service here at the Miller Center, which includes leaving for posterity some interesting observations. There is going to be an awful lot here that people will find illuminating and useful for understanding both your time and the man you worked with. So we're grateful for it and appreciate the time and look forward to getting this back. Again, if you will send us your manuscript, that will be an absolute gold mine and we will treat it with the same care that we treat this using whatever stipulations you want to have on it.

Zinsmeister: Great. You've been lovely to work with; I really appreciate it.

Hult: It's been wonderful. Thank you.

Riley: Yes, and if there's anything we can do to return a favor, let us know. Thanks, Karl.

Zinsmeister: Appreciate it.