INTERVIEW WITH MARTTI AHTISAARI

December 17, 2019
Helsinki, Finland

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To cite an interview, please use the following general format: [name of interviewee] Interview, [date of interview], William J. Clinton Presidential History Project, Miller Center, University of Virginia.
Riley: We’re very thankful for your time.

Marjamäki: Do you mind if I ask you a question about the—

Riley: No, please do. I’ve started this [gestures at recorder], but the interview won’t begin until I officially announce it. I just wanted to go ahead and make sure we didn’t lose anything, so please.

Marjamäki: I looked into your questions and into President [Martti] Ahtisaari’s Presidential files, which I don’t know that well, but I know that he’s been working with some of your former Presidents during his career, especially with Jimmy Carter, who was a member of the Elders, like President Ahtisaari. I’m just wondering. How do you see your former Presidents as part of your political scene? What is their role?

Riley: It’s a really interesting question, because there are people who believe this is a terribly misused resource. The conventions—and these are cultural conventions; they aren’t written down anyplace—The cultural conventions are that when you leave the office—

Ahtisaari: —you leave it.

Riley: —you leave it. And you are no longer a part of the active political scene. I was at a private dinner with President George W. Bush, the son, when we were discussing recording his administration’s oral histories, which we’ve done for every Presidential administration. It was a group of potential donors, about eight to ten very wealthy Texans, in an enormous private residence in Texas.

It was an extraordinary evening, because I had an opportunity to view this President, or ex-President, in an intimate setting in a way that I had never done before. At that point, there were criticisms raised about President [Barack] Obama, his successor, and President Bush said he believed that it was appropriate for a President only to maintain silence, and that each President was owed the entire range of options without having a former President there to criticize them. He was firmly committed to not critiquing the President.

I’m confident that President George W. Bush does not approve of what’s going on in the White House now. He’s made one or two public pronouncements to this effect, very obliquely. There is a fundamental sense of duty among former Presidents that they should disappear.

With that, do you have anything else?
Marjamäki: No, no, I’m just wondering, because in very practical terms, for instance, when President Ahtisaari traveled, there was always the Finnish Embassy. The Ambassador would, if we allowed him or her to—Many of our ambassadors are currently women—They would be somehow involved in the program. They would be aware of what President Ahtisaari was doing, even though it would have nothing to do with Finland, and they would be present at dinners, to meet with him, and to treat with him. That is how we get the general view of Finland, what Finland thinks about this and that, and we can gently tell that to somebody if needed.

Also, Finland gets an access on an official level, where they wouldn’t maybe normally get access. There was one occasion, for instance, when the Elders were visiting Russia, and they were welcomed by President [Vladimir] Putin, and there the Finnish Ambassador hosted an internal Elders meeting instead of the United States Ambassador. So that is how the official country is sort of with us, but we don’t represent it. I find that really useful and practical, and I’m just wondering. I understand that you have two different parties, and they are sort of in rivalry in a way.

Riley: Without going too far down this road, the one thing that I would say is that the prohibition is on public comments. In private, I’m confident that significant consultation goes on. President [William] Clinton relied on Jimmy Carter in two or three instances. It was helpful, but also complicated sometimes.

President Carter, as you know, is a very independent-minded man, and so there were times when the Clinton people felt frustrated that President Carter was off doing something that maybe they didn’t completely agree with, in Korea and elsewhere. I think the current President is an exception. But before him, President Obama, I’m confident, would occasionally check in with President Clinton on things. President Bush was, of course, constantly talking with his father.

Ahtisaari: And may I say that I have made a point always that I’m a civil servant; I’m not a politician. I’ve even tried to tell the present President of Hungary, “Keep in mind that you should not behave like the American President, that you kick out all the civil servants. A civil servant’s role is to give politicians, whoever happens to be in power, the right information on all issues that they have to deal with. I have always done that, and I hope that you will do the same.”

He didn’t obey at all what I was trying to teach him, but I want to say, and my attitude is that I was telling my colleagues that I have recently been thinking that I was two years of age when Russia attacked my country. I was born the 23rd of June 1937.

It was ’39 when they attacked, and all the Karelians had to move into the rest of Finland and settle—which we did, very successfully, thank God. But it has always been an easy thing for me to approach the American administration representatives—or academics for that matter—because I have felt that we are from the same stock; we believe the same values.

I’m very Nordic also, because my father was born in Finland, but he had Norwegian citizenship, those who actually came from Norway to work on the wood industry in Finland as supervisors, a gentleman married a young Swedish girl. So I have been told ever since that I have 12.5 percent of Norwegian and the same amount of Swedish blood in me. But I have always felt that I want to be Nordic, and I wanted Finland to be regarded as a Nordic country, particularly during the hard
times, when we had difficult times with our eastern neighbors. I did a lot to promote Finland as a
Nordic country, having the same values as our fellow Nordics.

**Ryback:** Which is what [Jean] Sibelius also did.

**Ahtisaari:** Yes.

**Riley:** If I may—Our intention is to get you to talk about your relationship with President
Clinton, and to hear what you have to say for historical purposes about him. We’ve done about
150 interviews with people associated with the President. We’ve spent four days with President
Clinton himself, but when we began discussions last year, your name was presented to us among
the first group of foreign leaders that he wanted us to go to.

**Ahtisaari:** I was very pleased when he agreed to come to Ahvenanmaa to give a speech. He
called my office and said that he wanted to see me. I said, “Come and have lunch with me,”
because we had met. I think we will provide you with a piece of paper if we haven’t given it yet.

**Marjamäki:** I can give it to you.

**Ahtisaari:** It’s an informal piece of paper. Riikka has done it for me.

**Riley:** We’re delighted to have you involved, and thank you so much for helping us.

**Ahtisaari:** For instance, this paper says that I first met with President Clinton in November ’94.

**Marjamäki:** And there’s actually a picture of that meeting.

**Riley:** Yes, of course. This is the day that the American midterm elections had taken place.

**Ahtisaari:** Yes.

**Riley:** It was not a happy day for the President.

**Ahtisaari:** [laughter] My different officials who knew what was happening said that we got
along extremely well, and the same goes for other civil servants. Because of my civil servant
background, we have been able to be professional, talk about the substance that we wanted to
discuss, and try to improve our mutual performance. That’s a marvelous thing. I was never
concerned whether the people had a Democratic or Republican background. I could say I have
friends in the civil service cadre from different parties, but they were all good professionals. So I
have a sort of pro-American—perhaps it’s that Karelian background. I wanted to tell you that
because it is very important.

But I have also tried to maintain a decent talking relationship with Russians. One may say
perhaps that I might have acted differently had I been in different positions earlier in my life, but
as President, and as a civil servant, I have always had a speaking relationship, even with Russian
diplomats in New York. I always tell the story of the Russian Ambassador there.

**Marjamäki:** Vitaly Churkin, who died at the UN.
Ahtisaari: I talked to him about Syria. I had an idea that I wanted to test with him at a certain stage. I said, “Look, when we want to have decent elections in Syria, to move out of this war situation, I would like to give a chance to those who have not participated in political life a year to prepare for proper elections before we come to those elections.”

He said, “Martti, a year is too short. We need to give them two years.” I’m sorry he died.

Marjamäki: But maybe as a background to the study that I did yesterday at the Finnish national archives, President Ahtisaari was elected as the President of Finland, and he started in the office in early March in ’94. He started to plan a working visit to the United States, and in late summer, it was confirmed that President Clinton would receive him at the White House, which is maybe quite unique for a Finnish President.

In Finland, our Presidents would obviously all love to go to the White House continuously. The analyses are in the press quite often that when Finland has no problems or is not causing any problems, there is no need for the United States President to meet with the Finnish President. But it was my understanding—and here the background information was quite vague—that it was due to President Ahtisaari’s international profile that President Clinton was keen to meet with him.

Ahtisaari: And the U.S. Ambassador.

Marjamäki: Yes, and the very active good U.S. Ambassador. And also President Ahtisaari had met with President [Boris] Yeltsin. That was one of the first visits that you did. Yeltsin had praised President Ahtisaari to President Clinton, and maybe President Clinton—This is what I hear or read from the memos of the civil servants at the time.

Then in the meeting it became quite obvious to the civil servants that the Presidents got along rather well. So maybe this is why during President Ahtisaari’s term in office our relationship with the President of the United States was quite active and strong. It’s not quite common for Finland.

Riley: Were you helpful to President Clinton in understanding Yeltsin? That became an important relationship.

Ahtisaari: Why did this meeting take place in Finland? It so happened that Yeltsin had to be operated on, and it had already been agreed that he should come to Washington for a meeting. When I realized that, I asked Yeltsin, “If Clinton would come to Finland, would you come and meet him here?”

He said, “Yes, of course.” Then we passed the message through your Ambassador, Derek Shearer, a good man—who had a good wife, as my wife always reminds me. We became good friends. I spoke to the President as well. I said, “Would it be possible for you to come to Helsinki?” He said, “Of course.” I said, “We should not miss these opportunities to meet, because they are important and we can advance on many issues.”
Of course, then what happened was that Clinton went to play golf somewhere in the South and hurt himself, so that we were first thinking he couldn’t come to Finland. But the plane came, and we had to get a Finnair cargo arrangement to get him in his wheelchair from the plane. [laughter]

Riley: [laughter]

Ahtisaari: But it didn’t prevent the meeting from taking place. All the topics that had been on the agenda were discussed. It was very important, for instance, that Yeltsin heard in that meeting that NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] would be expanding, and that four new member states would be admitted.

Riley: When I talked to Ambassador [Eric] Edelman, he said that you were not just a host making sure that you had two people together, but that you were also an active participant in bringing these two men together. Do you have any recall of your own role in this?

Ahtisaari: I wouldn’t describe too great a role for myself, but perhaps my character is such that it’s difficult for me to sit on the sidelines. [laughter] But I don’t think I was actually present in the actual meeting.

Marjamäki: No, you were not. You met with the U.S. President before the meeting, and then with President Yeltsin after the meeting.

Riley: Was there a dinner before?

Marjamäki: Dinner was on the day of the meeting. It was my understanding that the United States was supposed to host this meeting. It was supposed to happen in Washington, but then President Yeltsin was not able to fly there. Throughout the preparations, the Finns were concerned about President Yeltsin’s health and not President Clinton’s health. That is why whether there should be a dinner was an open question, because nobody knew about President Yeltsin’s health.

The United States wanted to host the dinner, because the meeting was supposed to happen in Washington. I don’t know what happened, but in the end, it was a dinner hosted by Martti. Maybe it’s his personality that he got to host. [laughter]

Ahtisaari: I was host, and they didn’t oppose.

Riley: There was also a decision about where the meeting would happen, and you gave up your residence for this. As I understand it, there are three Presidential residences. Is that correct?

Marjamäki: One official. That’s where it took place.

Riley: One official, but you agreed to leave your personal residence to make this happen?

Ahtisaari: Yes.

Marjamäki: Unfortunately, I never saw the final agenda of everything. I just saw the preparations. But yes.
**Ryback:** You had met with President Clinton before the meeting and then with President Yeltsin afterward, you mentioned. We read things in the press, and what the announcements were. What was your impression of President Yeltsin’s impression of the meeting, and also of Mr. Clinton after the summit?

**Ahtisaari:** I don’t think that I saw any more than what the public statements had been, because I had done my task. I had facilitated the meeting. I was happy with that. I recognized that I had other things to do. But with the administration of civil servants, those contacts were absolutely vital.

That’s why I’m furious about the British now leaving the EU [European Union]. The civil servants there—not only the civil servants, but their intelligence and military expertise—are among the best in the world. When I was at the UN, I could trust them, as I could trust your people. We would always have a very useful dialogue on different issues, and we both benefited from that. I still don’t understand why the British are leaving. It doesn’t make any sense.

**Riley:** You mentioned the Ambassador.

**Ahtisaari:** Derek Shearer.

**Riley:** Yes, tell us about him. Who is he, and what was your working relationship with him? Why was he a good Ambassador?

**Ahtisaari:** He was a good professional. You sense very quickly what a person is. You don’t need to sit for a long time and test when you’re having your first meeting. After that, you already feel *I want to continue this discussion*. His wife was very, very intelligent. My wife was a great fan of hers.

**Riley:** And that was important for the relationship?

**Ahtisaari:** Yes. We are a good working pair, my wife and I. I was lucky that I succeeded in marrying a woman who is more intelligent than I am and who is good in doing whatever she does. That continues still.

**Marjamäki:** I guess it also helped that President Ahtisaari knew Strobe Talbott from before his Presidency, and Derek Shearer and Strobe Talbott were family members and close. What I saw from the correspondence between the Ambassador and your Cabinet—never directly to Martti, but his Cabinet—is that it was Strobe who delivered messages to this and that person, and then Derek Shearer brought those back to Finland. That’s obviously how the system worked.

**Riley:** How did you know Strobe?

**Ahtisaari:** From my New York days.

**Riley:** From your New York days?

**Ahtisaari:** Yes. I’ll give South Africa as a good example of what the UN task was like. I became Commissioner for Namibia, and then in ’78, I became Special Representative of the Secretary
General for Namibia. They had the apartheid regime in South Africa, all the nasties who didn’t want the UN to come and supervise the elections that they were supposed to organize according to the Security Council resolution.

The South African civil servants whom I met in their Embassy hated the apartheid regime, most of them. They didn’t like at all what these people were doing, because they were very anti solution of Namibia and change in South Africa. I could work with them and get them to control the apartheid man who was running the Namibia operation in Namibia. I give this just as an example.

It was the same with the Russian Embassy officials. You have to test people and find out. You have to be careful. But, as I mentioned, the Russian Ambassador in New York was a very worthwhile person for dialogue, as the Syria example shows. He talked sense, and had he not died, we could have perhaps advanced these ideas already, got something sensible coming out of that.

Riley: I wonder if I might ask you about the work that you were doing in Bosnia at the beginning of the Clinton administration, before you were elected President. My recollection from doing the early interviews with Warren Christopher and Strobe Talbott and others was that they did not embrace the plan that you had worked out that became known, I think, as Vance-Owen.

Marjamäki: The ten-province plan?

Riley: Right. Were you frustrated? Do you remember being frustrated by that?

Ahtisaari: No, I am not easily frustrated. [laughter] Otherwise I would not make peace anywhere. I think I’m a calm man, and I’m looking for solutions. And the mere fact that you get the most different clients to approve what we sometimes came up with was also surprising to me. But I was always thankful and disappeared quickly when [laughter] we had reached that level of discussions.

Ryback: I want to go back to this meeting with Mr. Clinton. One of the issues raised about Bosnia and American hesitancy on going in was that Mr. Clinton had read a book called Balkan Ghosts by Robert Kaplan, and when he saw the depth of the tensions and how far back they went, it was Let’s keep away from this. Do you think it was something that personal—Could it have been with Clinton?—or was it more the issue of domestic politics? Or from your perspective, how might—

Ahtisaari: I don’t know. I honestly don’t know, because we have to recognize that we work in certain surroundings, I in mine. Perhaps the sort of surroundings where I am gives you much more freedom as a civil servant and even as a politician. As a President as well I could do what I wanted to do and what I had promised the people that I would be doing. And then I understood that it was time now to withdraw from the Presidency and accept the peace missions, and find the people with whom I wanted to solve these problems that I was asked to work on.

We all have to survive in those—Then the question is, can we find people we can actually get reliable information from, that we are not misled? But that we all do.
Ryback: Well, we eventually brought Mr. [Richard] Holbrooke in to solve this problem that allegedly the Europeans couldn’t solve. Could it have been solved differently, or was this really the way to take this on?

Ahtisaari: No, it solved the problem.

Ryback: Could there have been an alternate solution?

Ahtisaari: God knows. I’m not so worried about who solves it as long as we can solve it. I always applaud that and congratulate the French that they have been able to be helpful.

Riley: I thought I detected a smile when Richard Holbrooke’s name was mentioned.

Ahtisaari: Yes.

Riley: You worked with Mr. Holbrooke?

Ahtisaari: Yes.

Riley: Can you tell us about him?

Ahtisaari: When I saw your questions, it reminded me that I have never tried to make any judgment on the people I have worked with or say that he was this, that, and that. I have thoroughly enjoyed—if I hadn’t appreciated them, I would never have gone there the next time to see any of them, whether they’re your countrymen or others.

If you feel that this was useful, because there’s enough work otherwise, you should not waste your time in talking with misfits. You’re always running into them, in the best of families.

Riley: Who’s the most difficult person you have had to deal with in your career?

Ahtisaari: Come to think of it, I’m surprised that there haven’t been more. Of course, the relationship with the eastern neighbor is always a complicated thing, because I recognize that my predecessors as President of Finland had a much tougher time than I had. The world had changed when I became the President, and how Russia has behaved during my Presidency and afterward, so that the Western governments had to take sanctions against Russia and so on.

Now for four years they have been excluded from sports events because they were misusing the vitamin inspections. [laughter] But of course we have our Western World who share the same values.

I think that we made a great mistake, which I recognized far too late to do anything. By “we,” I mean the world. When we established the UN, we should have said that every country that wants to become a member of the United Nations has to implement the global values of democracy, rule of law, gender equality, et cetera. Had we done that, we would have given citizens a right then to demand—and to say that everyone can participate, so that certain governments, including Russia, can’t behave the way they have done.
But we didn’t do that. I was surprised, and I was very old at that time, because I say that these are universal. We have been advancing Nordic values in our development programs, for instance. We’ve sometimes been criticized, “You are trying to push your own values.” I said, “Sorry, these are not Nordic values; these are global values. And you should also respect rule of law, et cetera.”

**Riley:** Following up on this, you were—and Finland is—uniquely positioned to facilitate dialogue between the East and the West.

**Ahtisaari:** Yes.

**Riley:** I’m wondering if you can think back particularly on your time as President. Can you talk with us about your role as you saw it as an interlocutor, as a channel between President Clinton and President Yeltsin particularly, but more generally between the United States and Russia, at a time when the world had been turned upside down?

**Ahtisaari:** No, I was quite happy that I could facilitate that the one meeting was not missed. Then both Presidents could somehow manage to get to the other meetings without me [laughter] inviting them here again.

It was using the opportunity and not allowing the possibility to pass for them to meet. I felt that it was important that these two men get together. And I was kept busy with other problems in the world.

**Riley:** [laughter] I guess so.

**Ryback:** I think Russell was saying that in some ways the ’90s was a unique time period, when you look at the resolution of the conflict in Bosnia.

**Ahtisaari:** Yes.

**Ryback:** When you look at the sensitive issue of NATO expansion.

**Ahtisaari:** Yes.

**Ryback:** Or the EU widening.

**Ahtisaari:** Yes.

**Ryback:** And your presence in all that. Then adding Kosovo to it.

**Ahtisaari:** Yes, Kosovo, thanks to your government, as I said already. It was absolutely vital that I could count on your government’s support. Russia prevented me from taking my plan to the Security Council, but they didn’t become so difficult that it prevented Kosovo from moving ahead outside the UN. So it was a sort of semivictory.

**Ryback:** Just one follow-up on this, and this goes back to the role of Mr. Clinton. A different President might have reacted differently to this relationship between the United States and
Russia, when one looks at the dynamics and what you were negotiating at various levels. Was there anything distinctive about Mr. Clinton that made this possible compared with another President in that role?

**Ahtisaari:** No, he facilitated that. That’s the whole point. And we don’t know how somebody else might have reacted in that, because it always depends on what the circumstances are. Somebody who might behave differently in another situation might have behaved similarly. But the important thing was that I felt comfortable with him, and we could talk and get things moving. That’s always the important thing. I have high regard for him.

**Ryback:** What established that sense of comfort, or ability to work with him?

**Ahtisaari:** The fact that you can trust your counterpart. I think I’m rather sensitive to that sort of thing.

**Riley:** With trust.

**Ahtisaari:** Yes. You test it when you go through the different difficulties. You see how your colleagues react. I find it extremely easy to talk to your citizens. I’m at home. I love New York. It’s like a second home. We went there; it was like a farewell trip, and our son was with us.

**Marjamäki:** That’s when we met with President Clinton, actually. And if you allow as an observer—because I have been present in two discussions during the past one and a half years with President Ahtisaari and President Clinton, remembering these times that happened in Helsinki—it has been my impression that President Clinton himself personally wanted this to happen. He wanted to have relations with Russia, and he treated President Yeltsin, despite his problems—

**Ahtisaari:** —with respect.

**Marjamäki:** With respect and dignity, because, speaking as a Finn who has always had a special relationship with Russia, if you don’t treat Russia as a superpower, they start to react and do all kinds of silly things. But President Clinton maintained this level of dignity with President Yeltsin, and I’m sure that he even did some things that meant President Yeltsin was able to save face on certain occasions. That was something that he personally wanted to do.

**Ahtisaari:** Good professional. It’s always nice to do business with a good professional.

**Marjamäki:** He also has extremely good social skills, President Clinton. He can read people, and he knows what they want from him.

**Ahtisaari:** Now you say this.

**Marjamäki:** *[laughter]* Sorry. But that’s quite obvious when you meet with him, isn’t it?

**Riley:** But I wonder. We’re Americans. You must be used to dealing with Americans who have blind spots about Russia.
Ahtisaari: Yes, but I don’t waste my time with them.

Riley: With people who have blind spots?

Ahtisaari: Yes.

Riley: Well, even political figures. Did President Clinton come in with a fully formed notion about what he needed to do? Or was he relying on people like you to help him figure out how to deal with Russia?

Ahtisaari: I don’t think that—you have to use your own—if you didn’t have your own nationals to work with, in your case, and you would have to rely entirely on foreigners, you would be lost. That’s my advice.

Riley: Yes. But it does help to have—

Ahtisaari: That’s why I have seen Republicans and Democrats, civil servants. If I were in a situation that I badly needed good people, I would know where to go. That’s important. It’s the same thing here. I’m proud of my team here. We have Americans. Now we have someone who worked with one of your Presidents for—Was it seven years?

Marjamäki: Yes. Itonde [Kakoma] came from President Carter’s center.

Riley: Oh yes? Who is this?

Marjamäki: Itonde Kakoma, one of our colleagues. We stole him from President Carter.

[laughter]

Ahtisaari: No, we didn’t; we advertised and he applied.

Marjamäki: He applied, yes, true.

Ahtisaari: The director of CMI [Crisis Management Initiative] said, “Martti, are you going to interview him?” I said, “No, because he’s going to be your colleague. You are recruiting your own people. If you find him or somebody else suitable at this moment to be recruited, you make the decision, not me.”

It was decided that he’s now here. We are very happy and hope that he is happy. He’s very thankful for the seven years that he worked with your President.

And may I say that when we advertised for three medium-level posts in CMI, we had 650 applicants. I said to my colleagues, “Yes, I started this, but the reputation that brought 650 applications is yours, not mine anymore. That’s why I’m proud about this organization, and that’s why I can retire.”

Riley: I guess it’s a combination, right?

Marjamäki: Yes, thank you. He tends to fade himself away, but it’s not quite true.
Riley: Which makes it very hard to do an oral history interview! You want to talk about everybody else but yourself. 

Ahtisaari: I learned very quickly that alone I couldn’t do a damn thing, but if I had excellent helpers in special areas of the problems we had to deal with, we might succeed.

Riley: Did you have that with the United States? Was your relationship with President Clinton unique? Or was there an Ambassador to the U.S. who was—

Ahtisaari: No, the Ambassador here was permanent advisor and dialogue.

Riley: And who was—

Ahtisaari: Derek Shearer.

Riley: Oh. From the United States, but you’ve been telling us that your teams are very important. I’d like to identify who the members of your team were during the Clinton Presidency who would have been useful to you in helping you succeed with American relations. I don’t know who the Ambassador to the United States would have been at the time.

Marjamäki: Ah. I don’t know if we had more than one, but one of them was Jukka Valtasaari. I believe he was at least during the beginning of your term.

Ahtisaari: Yes, yes.

Riley: This is somebody that you relied heavily on.

Ahtisaari: I have trusted my own colleagues. We don’t send bad people to the United States, I don’t think.

Marjamäki: Actually, President Ahtisaari, before he became the President of Finland, was a diplomat from the foreign ministry, so he knows everybody and his brother in there. He has very few enemies, so any Ambassador was a good friend.

Ahtisaari: Yes, they dragged me back in ’91 from the UN, but then I was taken to Geneva very quickly for another UN assignment. 

Ryback: I have a question about the ancillaries, the deputies, who actually serve the executive. Who from the Clinton administration do you remember working with most effectively? Secondly, how do these people who are serving at the behest of the President reflect on the President himself? Are there any unique qualities to this team of people who were working with you?

Ahtisaari: I don’t think that I disliked anybody. I am a civil servant, and I would have stopped meeting if I said that I don’t want to see you again. That meant the sort of professional I am, and I’m very proud that we professionals keep up the standards, because if we start slipping, then the politicians are making enormous mistakes. It’s easier, actually, to be a civil servant.
Ryback: I was thinking of someone like Strobe Talbott who was working with you—

Ahtisaari: Strobe was always a pleasure to meet.

Riley: Derek Shearer was Strobe’s brother-in-law.

Ahtisaari: Yes, one is lucky when you run into these sorts of people. The mere fact that I managed to get to New York in ’77 gave me an opportunity to start meeting people and learning from those friends that I already had, the new friends that one could actually open, keep on discussing. So you didn’t need to. I never made a sort of assessment, a plus for this fellow and minus to this one. I don’t even remember that I had some great disappointments. Perhaps I was lucky.

Riley: In the second part of Clinton’s term you become very involved in the Kosovo matter.

Ahtisaari: Yes.

Riley: Do you remember how you got drafted to do that?

Marjamäki: You mean the discussions with Slobodan Milošević or the process?

Riley: Yes. You were President of Finland at the time. It’s not a part of your formal portfolio as President to do this.

Ahtisaari: No. Perhaps it was felt that it didn’t take full time. [laughter]

Marjamäki: Didn’t you get permission from the—What’s the title in English? The justice counselor, whatever his title—that you can do whatever as long as you are in Finland on Fridays when you’re supposed to meet with the government.

Ahtisaari: [laughter] Yes.

Riley: So that was an official waiver? I’ve never heard of this before.

Marjamäki: Let me find you the name of the person.

Ahtisaari: That’s why Riikka is here; she knows more of my life than I, and that’s how it should be.

Riley: You have your memory seated next to you.

Ahtisaari: No, I have had—You were four here. Now you are only three.

Marjamäki: Yes, we have been six here.

Ahtisaari: Yes, but even the last time, four. A few people have been recruited—one, a lady, for an EU field mission, and one went to Finnair, Asia program. I recommended him there. I said, “This is not a prison.” I’m proud that they recognize what good people we have.
Marjamäki: Some of us never leave. But others [laughter] went to Finnair. No, actually the longest-serving staff members of CMI all work in this office. It has been a privilege.

Riley: I’m sure. Can I ask you? Do you have any memories of Mr. Milošević?

Ahtisaari: Yes, I was very pleased that it went so smoothly that we got his approval.

Riley: That was not expected?

Ahtisaari: Of course it was expected; otherwise, we wouldn’t have gone there. But it went more smoothly than I—He recognized, perhaps, that this was something he had to do. You should not read such people and say that he will never be. It surprised many; we were lucky that we got the answer from him.

Ryback: You played a particular role there in mediating Russian as well as American interests.

Ahtisaari: Yes.

Ryback: Could you maybe talk a little bit about that?

Ahtisaari: Russia is not a democratic society. That’s why I say that we are in a different camp. But we have to keep decent relations with Russia. As a Finnish diplomat and citizen, I learned that when I was very young. I have never, even as a Karelian, even dreamt for a moment that I should start a campaign to get Karelia back. We lost it; that’s the end of it. I was more concerned that we should not be seen in the world as a Russian stooge. That’s why I tried in the ’60s before I was even in the foreign office—Jaakko Iloniemi, who later became Ambassador in Washington—He and I from the ’60s have been working together and still work.

We decided we had to make Finland seen in the world as a Nordic country sharing the same values. And we went every weekend to Nordic meetings in different Nordic capitals. We went to UN meetings and said, “We come from a Nordic country,” because that was one easy way of establishing Finland as a Western democracy.

Ryback: And yet you were able to retain the trust of Russia as an honest broker.

Ahtisaari: Yes.

Ryback: How were you able to manage those two?

Ahtisaari: I have never been very close with Russians, as were many of the Finnish civil servants—and politicians particularly. I didn’t see any need, because I was dealing with development policies in the foreign office. I was very lucky. I was brought in in ’65 to start planning a development aid program of Finland, which we didn’t have.

There was a lady also, a very competent lady, a French speaker, and we started a very good aid program in Africa. Russia, of course, had very few activities on that front, but everybody else in the Western World did, so they could keep all those contacts, and the Nordics particularly.
So it was a decent relationship, but I was never in charge of Russia relations, except you could say that when you become President you have a different situation. It was always very matter-of-fact. When you are a civil servant that gives you a possibility to behave.

**Riley:** You’ve emphasized several times that you’re a civil servant. Why did you decide to run for President? Or why did you decide to become President?

**Ahtisaari:** When I came back, there were quite a number of people who had seen what I had done already and successfully. They said, “You should run,” and I decided why not? I didn’t have a clue whether I would—but many of my party colleagues who were active politicians wanted to help me, and that’s always very nice. And then—come surprise—Martti Ahtisaari was chosen.

**Marjamäki:** It was really a surprise in Finland. I was 16, but I remember that it was a surprise.

**Riley:** You had spent your career in the foreign service. Was it difficult for you to focus on domestic politics?

**Ahtisaari:** No. Perhaps I had always been interested when I was dealing with development issues. Development is also a Finnish issue, and it is rather easy to establish and support. Gender issues came much later. I have always been front and center. Here’s a good example: you don’t see a single man in my outfit, because the one was stolen by Finnair.

**Marjamäki:** Finnair. The only one who went away.

**Ahtisaari:** We gave him the right to go, because we felt that he could do good things there as well, and he’s always welcome. We say to these friends who have gone either to UN or EU tasks, “If you want to come back and they don’t treat you well, tell them that I have said that you are welcome to come back.”

**Riley:** I want to ask you a question that did not appear in the briefing materials, but it occurs to me. President Clinton got in a lot of trouble in the United States in his second term with something that ended up in his impeachment. Did you ever detect that that distracted him from his foreign policy?

**Ahtisaari:** What was the reason for that?

**Riley:** This was his misbehavior with a woman in the White House.

**Ahtisaari:** Ah.

**Riley:** I’m just wondering whether that had an impact at all on his ability.

**Ahtisaari:** I don’t know whether I was even aware. I don’t think that I followed these sorts of social issues at all.

**Ryback:** I want to come back to another question that I think is very fundamental to Finland, Europe, Russia, and the United States, which is the role of NATO.
Ahtisaari: I have always been pro-NATO, and I have not hidden my view that NATO is the best peacekeeping organization we have. I have benefited. When I was in Namibia, I had a NATO operation. I had a Finnish battalion there as well. I have been very proud of Finnish peacekeepers, because they are the best in the world. I don’t hide my praise for the Finnish peacekeepers. It has been a pleasure always to associate with them.

We have even recruited some of my former colleagues who cooperated with me. We have one former general who is assisting the CMI.

Marjamäki: Yes, at the CMI, we work in countries where there is military leadership, or otherwise the military has a big role. We have found it very useful to have a retired general in the delegation. It opens up doors to—

Ahtisaari: And they have field experience.

Marjamäki: Exactly. They have lots of field experience.

Ahtisaari: And I have worked with them before. I can say that they were damn good.

Ryback: Finland was a nonaligned nation at the time. Did that put the President of Finland in a unique position to work with both Russia and the United States on some of these issues that Mr. Clinton was involved with?

Ahtisaari: I don’t know. It didn’t prevent us; let’s put it that way. That’s very important because, of course, my view has been much more open to possible Finnish membership in NATO, for instance, than public opinion polls show Finnish citizens to be.

I accepted years ago the fact that as long as Sweden doesn’t want to join, I would be wasting my time, because the fact that we have a cooperation agreement with NATO is more than adequate, and it functions well. We can work in NATO-led operations, so it hasn’t prevented us. I’m very practical; I’m not wasting my time unnecessarily.

Marjamäki: Can I ask you, Martti, a question? Sorry. [laughter]

Riley: Please, it’s very helpful.

Marjamäki: Do you think that if you are President of a small country such as Finland, and openly pro-NATO, it brings you a better relationship with the United States than if you’re against NATO?

Ahtisaari: Against? I don’t see how that would ever happen in my case.

Marjamäki: No, not in yours, but in somebody else’s. Do you think that was a significant matter, your close relations with the United States, that you were openly pro-NATO, which was a unique thing in Finland?
Ahtisaari: No. I don’t know. I never thought that way. I am what I am, and I don’t hide my views. I never saw NATO as—it was not established to attack Russia. It was for defense purposes and for peacekeeping purposes, and it has worked really well in that sense.

Riley: It was about how you dealt with the sensitivities of the Russians on NATO and expansion. You have a very firm view on NATO.

Ahtisaari: Yes.

Riley: Yeltsin was frightened of this, so how did you deal with Yeltsin’s anxieties about—

Ahtisaari: No, but the fact is that it’s the countries that have left the Soviet Union that want to join EU and NATO. So why are you grumbling? It’s none of our business. It would be surprising if everyone in their right mind must understand that they want to join the Western organizations. You can be candid without being too insulting.

Riley: Even with Yeltsin?

Ahtisaari: Even with Yeltsin.

Riley: OK.

Ahtisaari: But how I actually formulated it, I can say now whatever comes to my mind, but don’t ask me what I actually said to him. I made it perfectly clear that I fully supported the fact, and wanted Yeltsin to understand, that NATO was going to expand. There was a historic reason for this, but it was not in any way directed against Russia. I could easily maintain that sort of argument. And Finland didn’t join. We know how to defend ourselves. Ahem.

Marjamäki: [laughter]

Riley: [laughter]

Ahtisaari: We are not sending our application yet, but if they keep on attacking different countries and taking pieces of land every here and there, yes, don’t be surprised if the number of countries will increase who want to join NATO.

Riley: That’s a good point.

Marjamäki: That’s not how the Russians might see that. But I was asking this because in the memos I was reading yesterday—and these were not at all perfect—In many of the discussions you had—and not only you—with President Clinton, but in general in the world, it was that the withdrawal of Russian troops in the Baltic countries, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania—and then if these countries should join NATO, how their security would be guaranteed. It was interesting that Finland had such a big role in these discussions, but at the same time, Finland did not want to become a NATO member state.

Ahtisaari: Yes. No, but I don’t see any dilemma in that. It’s good that we felt comfortable and we were able to help our friends. Because they really were in—I could understand why they take
into consideration their history and how they have been treated. We were not treated. We have been an independent state.

**Marjamäki:** We were Nordic. They were not.

**Ahtisaari:** And more and more Nordic.

**Riley:** In your dealings with Yeltsin, I get the sense that you’re telling us that you were very matter-of-fact with him about your position on things, that you didn’t feel like you had to sugarcoat it to—

**Ahtisaari:** No, but not rude.

**Riley:** Right. Not rude.

**Ahtisaari:** Yes. I still have some diplomacy [*laughter*] from years living with all my colleagues in the foreign office, because we had damn good diplomats. I have been very lucky to have some of the Finnish diplomats, like we did in Kosovo. Our former Ambassador to United States who—

**Marjamäki:** To the UN.

**Ahtisaari:** Kai [Sauer], to the UN in New York. I got him on the Kosovo team. He told me—because he was working there for many years in the UN operation—“Martti, take this man; never take this man, he’s totally hopeless.” I took all the people he recommended, and they were good. I took none of those he said were useless. That’s why I have always praised him and supported him for new, more demanding tasks.

**Marjamäki:** This will be my final comment. I have worked with President Ahtisaari and also with some of the politicians. The difference between him and an average politician is that he never makes any mission about himself. He builds a team around him that knows about this and that issue and that will bring him the information he needs. It’s never about him.

That’s why he’s not telling you about his personal relations with this and that person, because his entire Cabinet had these relations. Whichever was most suited to have a certain kind of discussion had the discussion. That is the unique thing with President Ahtisaari.

**Riley:** Thank you for adding that.

**Ahtisaari:** I trust them more than I trust myself. No, no, it is important, because if I had thought in the beginning of my career when I started getting these tasks that I knew everything, that would have been the end of it. I recognized that the most important country I needed always to check was your government. I could always count that that support was there, because we knew that we were rallying for the same end. So, lucky me.

**Riley:** Lucky us. Lucky United States and lucky President Clinton to be in a position to rely on you for these things, and thanks for giving us time today to talk about this. Am I missing something important? From your perspective is there anything about your time with President Clinton that we haven’t touched on?
Ahtisaari: I doubt it.

Riley: He’s an interesting man, isn’t he?

Ahtisaari: Yes.

Riley: Have you ever met anybody else quite like Bill Clinton?

Ahtisaari: I don’t think so.

Marjamäki: No.

Riley: He’s extremely smart.

Ahtisaari: Yes, but that’s the charm, for God’s sake. That’s why he has had the career he has had. I’m very honored that I have been able to work with him. We don’t make any fuss about it, neither he nor I, but we see the results.

Riley: Exactly.

Ryback: Is there a moment or an incident that for you encapsulated the essence of what Mr. Clinton is during your time with him or even afterward?

Ahtisaari: He has right values. That’s his polestar. If you don’t, it doesn’t matter how busy you are. You can be busy for the rest of your days and cause more trouble than—

Ryback: Is there a moment when you watched his decision making when those values were articulated and then came forward?

Ahtisaari: I didn’t need to. It came through everywhere, everything that we did. You sense it; sometimes it comes in concrete issues that we discuss. Sometimes we don’t even need to discuss because we know that we think alike.

Riley: And those values in his relations with you were related to his vision of a global world and peace and democracy? Or is there something more than that?

Ahtisaari: Yes, what we stood for in our respective societies. We didn’t need to talk about the values that both countries share. Tell me where are more ardent supporters of democracy, rule of law, gender equality, et cetera, the right to political participation?

We don’t behave like the Turkish leaders do and arrest civil servants and journalists, prevent opposition politicians from participating in elections. That’s why it’s so easy. That’s why I felt so comfortable in your country and still feel whenever I have a—I hope that I still have—I thought my last trip was a farewell trip with my wife and son. God knows.

I’m 82. I don’t live forever, but I’m lucky that I’m still alive, and I keep my fingers crossed for your next round of elections. I pray for a good outcome, that sensible people from all sides of the political field will be elected, and that they are capable of building, continue building, a proper society, and maintain the values.
Riley: We’re grateful for your prayers and for your time and for your service. The world is a better place because of what you and your colleagues have done, and it’s been a privilege to come sit with you today and talk about these things. Thank you.

Ahtisaari: No, I always think when I read the papers, talk to friends and others, that I’m the lucky one. First of all, that I got a chance to get the ambassadorship of Finland in Tanzania. I learned to know [Julius] Nyerere, and I learned all the liberation struggle leaders, because the OAU [Organization of African Unity] secretariat for liberation movements was in Dar es Salaam at that time. I learned to know them all. That facilitated me.

I’m thankful for the Finnish missionaries who worked in Namibia. When they went there after the Germans left Namibia, the Finnish followed. They didn’t start lecturing on religion. They opened a hospital and a school for children. They maintained the trust of Namibians through difficult apartheid years, and the respect Namibians got from them perhaps made the Namibians come and ask me, another Finn, to become the Special Envoy for Namibia to the UN. I’m so proud of them, and I have learned to know many of them who were there for many years and did excellent work and gave some hope for Namibians during difficult times.

I have been lucky, and that my wife accepted me as her husband. As I said, she’s much more intelligent and culturally motivated and keeps me up-to-date on what happens in my country.

Riley: Well, there are two values you’ve just mentioned that are absolutely central to President Clinton as well, one of which is a proper role for religion in the public sphere without making a big fuss about it—the missionaries that you identify. The two of you are very much alike that way.

Ahtisaari: Yes.

Riley: And you’re both very much alike with respect to the role that the spouses played in their public career and in their private lives. You’re very much alike in those two things.

Ahtisaari: Yes. When we were in Tanzania and I was Ambassador, my wife got only slightly over a year’s leave of absence from her job in Finland. She was a secretary in a very important function in one of the Finnish communities near Helsinki. When her leave of absence ended, I said, “Eeva [Ahtisaari], do you want to go back to Finland? If you do, I’m prepared to move back.” She said, “No, I’m not prepared to go back if you should have to cut your assignment here. I would rather work with you. We will work together for a better world.”

Riley: Thank you very much for your time. This has been very illuminating.

Marjamäki: We have an American colleague here by chance. Do you want to come and greet your countryman?

Itonde Kakoma: Itonde Kakoma, good to meet you. Welcome to Finland.

Riley: Thank you. We’ve had a wonderful time. You worked with President Carter.

Kakoma: I did, post-Presidency.
Riley: Post-Presidency. Were you in Atlanta?

Kakoma: That’s right, assistant director for conflict resolution. We worked very closely together on Sudan and other issues.

Riley: I don’t know many people down there. Steve Hochman.

Kakoma: Yes, of course, director of research.

Riley: Right, Steve was a PhD.

Kakoma: Missouri.

Riley: No, at UVA [University of Virginia].

Kakoma: UVA, sorry, but he’s from Missouri.

Riley: He’s from Missouri, but he worked with Dumas Malone, who’s the eminent [Thomas] Jefferson scholar. Steve was always very helpful. We interviewed President Carter. The first project the Miller Center did, the first Presidential project, was on the Carter Presidency. He hosted a delegation down at the lake house in Plains. One of my most prized possessions is a picture of that, and then we talked with him about President Clinton for a couple of hours for this project as well. They have been supportive, and Steve in particular has been terrific.

Kakoma: I hope you had a good visit.

Riley: It’s one of the great pleasures of my life, being able to come out on these visits, meeting really fascinating, interesting people who make it worthwhile.

Marjamäki: I’m sure you have heard all kinds of stories and—

Riley: Heard all kinds of stories. But it’s always interesting to meet the people behind the stories that you’ve read and to see that they’re flesh and blood like the rest of us.

Marjamäki: Exactly.

Riley: All right, I’m going to stop this. I think we’re done.