INTERVIEW WITH LLOYD CUTLER

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Interviewers

University of Virginia
Charles O. Jones
Clifton H. McCleskey
Kenneth W. Thompson
James S. Young, chair

Vanderbilt University
Erwin C. Hargrove
Young: We welcome Mr. Lloyd Cutler to another one of our now many sessions of interviews or conversations with senior members of the Carter White House staff. The ground rules of the session are that nothing said in the room goes out of it. The transcript of the session will be seen first in its original form only by Mr. Cutler. It will be sent to him with the request that he review it and make such stipulations or amendments in it as would render it accessible for research purposes. The first purpose of these transcripts is for the Miller Center to develop a series of analytic monographs that would constitute a preliminary retrospective on the Carter Presidency.

We don’t have as much time with this session as we’ve had with others, so Lloyd has indicated he’d just as soon start directly with questions. I would like to ask first about the circumstances of your appointment to the White House. First, as I understand it, you were appointed as special counsel on the SALT [Strategic Arms Limitation Talks] treaty in July 1979, followed the next month in connection with other changes that were made in the administration by the appointment as counsel in the White House. The press identified this latter appointment as part of a general recognition by the President and his staff that they needed to tap more, and avail themselves of, the wisdom of people who had been in Washington and were familiar with it. Maybe we can start with that. We would like first to hear about your account of how this appointment came about.

Cutler: Well, Jim, I’ve been a lawyer in Washington since World War II. I was a youngster in a Wall Street law firm when the war started and like so many others I came to Washington and decided it was a better place. Four of us who all came out of Wall Street firms started our own law firm. I did not play any part in the government for the next almost thirty years, except that I was always a Democrat and on the edge of Democratic politics. I worked closely with the Kennedys in the 1960 campaign. I had been offered a job by George Ball, Assistant Secretary for Economic Affairs in the State Department, but I couldn’t do that because we were in the middle of merging two law firms, and if I had gone into the government at that point it never would have happened. But in any event, I was really not either a Democratic insider in the political sense, say a Bob Strauss sense, or a particular friend of President Carter.

I had been a member of the Trilateral Commission, which is now the favorite bête noire of the extreme left and the extreme right, as you know. And in that capacity I had met then-Governor Carter in 1975. We were among forty or fifty American members of the Commission who made
a trip to Japan in May or June of 1975 when then-Governor Carter was just beginning his campaign. I recall that while we were all in Tokyo worrying about the affairs of the world, he would go out to little meetings of five or six Americans, or whatever number he could find, and do a little quiet campaigning. As his campaign progressed, I liked him more than the others. I thought his prospects were the best, and I became a supporter in the campaign, but very much on the periphery, certainly not even close to the inner group. After he was elected I was not among those invited down to Plains to talk about the transition. I submitted some papers and corresponded with him. But I really played no role at all in at least the White House part of the administration. Both Cy Vance and Harold Brown were particularly close friends of mine, and I did a lot more or less unofficially with them.

In the fall of ’77 I was asked by Cy Vance to take on the negotiation of a maritime boundary and fishery dispute with the Canadians. I did that while remaining in the law firm on a part time basis. The negotiations were supposed to take just six months, but they were still going on in the middle of 1979, if only part time.

At that point Harold Brown asked me if I would take the job of Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Planning, which was a new post. It was supposed to be the number three job in the department, and it had been created with the idea in mind of combining such things as disarmament negotiations, military aid, and general national security planning. Stan Resor had the job, and for all practical purposes had given up on it. It was one of these jobs invented in the middle of an administration to be inserted between existing lines of authority within the Defense Department, something that just doesn’t really work, and it really hasn’t worked up to this moment. I thought about that for a month and spent part of that month in the Defense Department looking at what the job would be like. I decided not to do it.

I did say to Harold Brown that I thought as SALT II was approaching completion, just before the Vienna meeting where SALT II was finished and signed, that I thought they were going to have a terrible problem in the Senate, that they really needed a single lawyer to coordinate the presentation to the various Senate committees, and to get the varying points of view in the administration together. In June, after they got back from Vienna, Cy Vance did call me one day just after one of those Friday morning foreign policy meetings to ask if I would take on that job. I agreed to do that. I remained in the law firm, but I spent most of June and all of July on SALT.

I think we made the presentation to the Senate Foreign Relations committee beginning in the month of July. That’s when the hearings were held. In the course of that I began going to those White House Friday morning foreign policy meetings to ask if I would take on that job. I agreed to do that. I remained in the law firm, but I spent most of June and all of July on SALT.

You may remember that that summer was the time when the President made his Cabinet shift after going up on the mountain and after his return from that very tiring trip to Japan. Just after those shifts were made, it so happened that I was on a barge on a French canal with Gerard Smith, who had negotiated SALT I and was the founder of the Trilateral Commission. I had a call from Hamilton Jordan; it is true, the White House operators can find you even if you’re on a barge on a French canal. Actually, I had left the barge to return to Paris. The call was waiting for me in the hotel, but it did get to the barge. Hamilton asked me if I could come back and talk to
him and the President about coming on board the administration. The job wasn’t specified, but it was easy enough to figure out that it was going to be. The President did ask me if I would take on the counsel’s job. I agreed to do that.

**Young:** This was in August?

**Cutler:** This was in August. I took some time to think it over. I had fifty partners to talk to about it. I committed myself, I think, in September, and went in on the first of October. Meanwhile I was spending most of my time down there anyway on SALT.

**Young:** Can you tell us the terms of which the President talked to you about his needs and expectations for this position that you would be filling in the administration?

**Cutler:** It was really a continuation of the same process he had started up at Camp David. If you’ve read his book you’ll see he now feels he did it badly, particularly the Cabinet changes were decided largely for public relations reasons. Asking the entire Cabinet to submit resignations was done for public relations reasons. And that day when we were right in the middle of the SALT hearings, none of us knew whether the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense were still on their jobs. President Carter concluded he needed stronger people, now that Bob Lipshutz was leaving. Bob’s interests and his experience had been a good deal narrower. He was really a bankruptcy lawyer in Atlanta and his principal interest, beyond Atlanta interests and the interest of the President, was in Israel and Middle Eastern problems. It almost totally absorbed his time. He had become somewhat of a difficulty for the people actually in charge of negotiating those problems.

In any event, what the President said was he wanted me to play more of a Clark Clifford role. I don’t know how many of you know Clark Clifford. By now of course nobody really knows that role Clark played. He hasn’t written a book. Everybody thinks he was the true éminence grise of that administration, so that was the perfect charter as far as I was concerned. That meant you could get in on anything you wanted to get in on because legend had it that way. That was Clark Clifford’s relationship to President [Harry] Truman. Incidentally, if you read Truman’s diaries and the biographies, the legend may be slightly larger than the reality. Having been around this track enough before, I offered to draft a letter from the President to me describing what my role would be. I worked that out with Hamilton and with Jody [Powell], and it was satisfactory to President Carter. He signed it and that’s about what it said. It effectively put me into whatever meetings or other things I wanted to get into, and whenever there was a question I could cite the Clifford principle: “Wouldn’t Clark Clifford have been consulted on this?” I never used that letter, I never really had to, but I always had it.

**Young:** You never had to?

**Cutler:** No.

**Young:** So that from the moment that you came in you occupied a role of a key and senior advisor with full access to the President, equal with the other senior advisors? Is that a fair assumption?
Cutler: Well, I don’t want to overstate it. A good example to illustrate it is the hostage crisis, which occurred almost within a month after I got there. It was the single most absorbing problem from then on out. But I never took part in the rescue mission planning or other military option plans until about a week before the rescue mission began, after the Vance battle with the others over it had developed. I was brought in on the problem of what were the President’s responsibilities under the War Powers resolution. Did he have to consult in advance? Who should be consulted? In Hamilton and Jody’s cases, even though they were not part of the national security setup, they of course were in on it virtually from the very beginning. There is certainly a difference between the relationship that Hamilton and Jody had, and that Zbig [Zbigniew Brzezinski] had in this area, and my relationship.

Young: Could you just define those differences?

Cutler: In the sense that they had total access and total involvement in every aspect of the problem. Since the size of the military planning group was carefully being limited for security reasons, there was no need to involve me in it. I talked a great deal to Harold Brown and Cy Vance about it while it was going on. I was aware of it, but I was really not part of that group.

Young: In terms of the things that occupied your time, obviously the hostage crisis was one of them. Were the lists that have been made of special assignments, the Taiwan issue, the Iranian hostage crisis, SALT and so forth, part of the understandings of your projects, or did they later come to you?

Cutler: It would be hard to say they were defined in advance. The only thing defined in advance of course were SALT II and the ratification problem, and the continuation of the Canadian treaty negotiations. The rest of my responsibilities covered anything of a “legal policy” nature. And the letter that I described referred, as a result of the talks I’d had with the President, to defining matters of a legal nature in a very broad sense. I wasn’t just to sit there and give advice on what the law was. I was expected to go beyond that. Pretty much it was a charter to advise on whatever I thought the most important things were to advise about.

As I indicated, scope was not a problem. But whenever you come into any group that’s been working together for a long while, you’ve got to tread carefully and you’ve got to win the confidence of different people and not step on anybody’s toes. Every bureaucracy is different. But this is equally true of dealing with clients and dealing with other lawyers. It’s not a unique problem in that sense. I really think in the beginning probably the biggest mistake I made was to follow the normal lawyer’s practice of waiting to be consulted. I stopped doing that after two or three months. If I heard a meeting was going on or an issue was up that I cared about, I just took part in it.

Young: Were you from the beginning a regular attendant of the ten o’clock meetings? If not, how did that happen? Did you find them important for your purposes or important needs?

Cutler: They were very important meetings. In the beginning I was asked to them whenever one of my subjects was coming up. If I thought the hostage issue, SALT, or one of the more routine
legislative legal issues would be on the agenda, I went. After a month or two, Hamilton suggested that I just keep coming to them on a regular basis, and I did. They were useful. The President, as you know, is an early morning person. In fact, one of the most unique parts of the Carter White House day was that it began, as far as he was concerned, at five in the morning, and by lunchtime it was essentially over as far as his presence in the Oval Office and the relationships that the staff had with him were concerned. The rest of the day he usually spent over in the residence reading, telephoning or doing his jogging.

Almost every day he was up early working, reading papers, and sending them back. He was very good at getting papers back, the turn around on almost anything you sent into him was twenty-four hours or less. He was in constant communication with people, mostly by telephone during the rest of the day. I have a sense the [Ronald] Reagan day is quite different. His day certainly begins a lot later. There’s no doubt about that. I could imagine in terms of the number of hours actually spent either reading papers or meeting with people, Carter’s day must have been double that of Reagan.

**Young:** Can you give us a picture of these meetings and what the President was using them for? Was the President mostly a listener? Was it a decision meeting for him? Was it a briefing meeting?

**Cutler:** He was more of a reactor, I would say, than a listener. You’ve heard about the meeting from all the other participants. The dominant feature almost always was the legislative calendar and who was to do what about a particular bill or a particular issue. Occasionally there were cross calendar issues. The other dominant issue was what was in the paper that morning and had been on the morning news and what the response was going to be on the evening news. Who was to do what in relationship to that.

**Young:** You also attended the Friday foreign policy breakfast?

**Cutler:** Yes.

**Young:** You did so regularly?

**Cutler:** Yes. That was a lot more deliberate. That was, to me at least, a much better meeting than the ten o’clock meetings. The ten o’clock meetings were valuable. One of their great values was you heard everybody else report on the things they were doing, and you got a sense of the unity or the disunities, probably a better phrase would be the helter skelter. The President tracked it all and followed it all very well. By the spring of 1980, of course, the other great subject in that morning meeting inevitably was the campaign.

But the foreign policy meetings took a good deal longer. They would start at seven thirty. They would frequently not end until just before the ten o’clock meeting unless the President had some other thing he had scheduled in between. And the discussions were very wide ranging. Usually Cy Vance’s agenda and Harold’s agenda had to be cleared with the President at the meeting. But quite often there’d be a very extensive discussion of an issue, and the President would react to
different foreign personalities and problems, most of which I guess we’ll see in Zbig’s book one of these days, because he was the note taker. He kept very careful notes.

**Young:** These were not concerned more with what was in the news that morning? Not so much concern with legislative agenda?

**Cutler:** That’s right.

**Young:** Would it be accurate to say that they were more substantive policy discussions?

**Cutler:** I’d say both were substantive. Let me say two or three things about it. The first is, and this is not unique to Carter, but every President in the end becomes much more absorbed in foreign policy and national security issues than the domestic issues. That’s in part because he can deal with them. He is really able to make decisions and carry them out in the foreign field to a much greater extent than in the domestic field, even though Carter in a sense, as you know, was circumscribed in the foreign policy field with all sorts of congressional vetoes and demands to be consulted and so forth. In the domestic field, whatever you do is controversial. You’ve got all those welfare mothers and budget balancers on your hands. It’s much more of a mess.

**Young:** The Democratic party too!

**Cutler:** So all Presidents get absorbed in that. The pressing issues in Carter’s time were essentially international ones, and the American President has become recognized as carrying the major free world responsibility, and that’s something you take very seriously. Certainly, as you can tell this from his book, the consuming and absorbing part of President Carter’s job was the foreign part. I would say seventy-five percent of that book, which supposedly describes the whole Presidency, is about the Middle East, SALT, Iran, and human rights.

**Jones:** If we could back up to the SALT experience again a little bit and connect that with something else. Could you say who you worked with there and your picture of the White House relationships with Congress when you were working there, as compared with when you got into these meetings? What were your pictures of how they dealt with Congress from the inside once you were a participant in the meetings?

**Cutler:** Of course when I came to SALT it was a done deal. We were past the point of should we give in on this or make this concession. From that point on, the problem was to persuade two thirds of the Senate that what you’d done was right, and that it should be ratified, and that even if you disagreed with part of it, it’s still better to go along and ratify. That is an extraordinarily difficult job at any time. The fact that the treaty did not come until June of 1979 inevitably threw it into the middle of the beginning of the Presidential campaign.

There had been the history before I got there of the Panama Canal treaty too. In retrospect, that’s turned out, I think everyone would agree, to be a major, important and a good treaty. You remember it carried by only one or two votes in the end. But the most important thing as far as the Congress was concerned was that many moderate Democrats and Republicans who had gone along with that treaty bit the dust in the 1978 election, or found even when they won that it had
become a great millstone around their necks. On black and white issues like abortion, right to life, etc., people have an instinctive feeling, and nothing is going to change their minds. It just isn’t susceptible to reason. You remember that famous line of Senator [Samuel] Hayakawa, which I think says it all about the Panama Canal: “We stole it fair and square.” So that was remembered.

The Republican primary was polarizing the Senate. Of course you had Governor Reagan who’d been a critic of SALT I, who had been a critic in 1976 of Vladivostok, which is eighty percent really of the SALT II treaty. When I say ’76, he was a critic in his convention fight with [Gerald] Ford in ’76. The fact that Reagan was out there bitterly opposed to the treaty or any treaty, left Senator [Howard] Baker, who was our key man to get the many other Senators we had to win, in a virtually impossible position. He couldn’t be for the treaty. He was the key that had made it possible to win ratification of the Panama Canal treaty. It was of course a very hard position for him. Incidentally, I have written a piece about this that’s in International Security, the Harvard national security journal. I’ll try to get that for you also. It gives a history of SALT II.

While we did pretty well, Carter’s position was not the best position for a President promoting a disarmament treaty. [Richard] Nixon, despite the rumblings from the Reagan ranks, had established enough of a reputation as a man who believed in a strong defense so that he was able to carry SALT I through. In fact, SALT I went through by eighty-eight to two or some such number. And no Democratic President could have made that first trip to China. Carter, on the other hand, even though he had his Naval Academy training, even though he was an engineer, even though he did believe in a strong defense and was really quite vehement about standing up to the Soviets, as you got to see later in Afghanistan and other matters, Carter had not conveyed that impression. That was due more to the budget fighting that every President has to go through.

But in addition to that, there was his position on the B-1 bomber. There was a lingering feeling, which Sam Nunn and others shared, that he was not committed enough to a strong defense or even to building up our nuclear forces up to the limits of SALT II. SALT II, as you know, set rather high limits. We had room to expand under those limits, in particular putting in the MX. In addition, Senator “Scoop” [Henry] Jackson had concerns that the cuts weren’t deep enough, and that we hadn’t done enough about throw-weight, the big Soviet missiles, etc., from the technical side. So it was an extraordinarily difficult proposition for Carter to prevail on that kind of a treaty. I think, if we’d been able to finalize the negotiations on SALT II in ’78, you probably could have gotten it through in ’79. And if it had been made the first priority ahead of the Panama Canal, it might very well have gone through.

Of course one of the great ironies is that even though it did not go through in the end, it is being observed. The Reagan administration has done something that Carter would have been crucified for, and that is the Reagan administration, in effect, has promised to live up to the treaty as long as the Soviets do. After SALT I expired, Carter indicated that he intended to continue abiding by it. The Soviets said they would also live up to the provisions of SALT I even though it had expired. And the charge was made that this was a Presidential treaty that had not been ratified by the Senate, it hadn’t been approved by the House, and that the President couldn’t do that. When Reagan did it, in part because of his clear position on defense, no question has been raised at all. But we will go through to the end of SALT II, 1985 is the expiration date, and both sides will
probably live up to it in very substantial part, except of course that the Soviets have not dismantled the number of weapons they were supposed to dismantle under the treaty. They have dismantled some, but since the treaty has not been ratified, they haven’t gone ahead to dismantle as many as they would have.

**Jones:** You’ve described this matter of how Presidents get looked at and how important that is in actually getting something done with Congress and elsewhere. Did the strategic position of the President in regard to this issue seem to be understood by the people you worked with in the White House?

**Cutler:** I guess I have to say yes and no. There were very wide divisions between what you might call the [George] McGovern faction versus the Harold Brown and Sam Nunn factions. There were a number of people who did not think it was necessary to increase the defense budget. In the end, of course, Carter did, in the course of the hearings on SALT II, commit himself to three percent real increase in the defense budget. The present Reagan 1982 budget is literally just one or two billion dollars above the Carter budget. If the cuts in the defense budget that Republicans are proposing this year go through, there will be hardly any difference between the Carter defense budget and the Reagan defense budget for ’83. When you get to the out years, the Reagan defense budget is larger.

But Carter understood it, and he moved, both on that and the MX. He made a firm MX decision in July that we were going to go forward and go forward with what’s been called since the “race track” system, which is clearly far and away from the military point of view the best system. Its only problem is the political problem of dealing with the people of Utah and of lovers of the wilderness who don’t want to be disturbed and don’t wish to be a target. Their resistance to MX is one of the most significant things that’s happened in this country. In previous generations, a military program involving the spending of billions of dollars in your state was something that every Senator and Congressman would just knock himself out for. Now nobody even wants these projects, especially the ones that are related to the nuclear deterrent, which implies becoming a target.

That was true not only of MX, and it’s going to stay true for the MX, it was true of the command and control center for the Polaris submarines that was to be built in the state of Michigan. It has to be built on this so-called Laurentian Shield because it’s a low frequency radio system and it really reaches the sub through the rocks of the Shield. And the state of Michigan just wouldn’t have it, partly because somebody dreamed up an environmental argument that low-wave radiation and radio waves can hurt people. But mostly nobody wanted to be a target.

**Jones:** If we could just turn to the second part of my original question about in the ten o’clock meetings, where the legislative schedule seemed to drive some of the discussions a dominant part of the session. Who led that, and can you say something about for the dynamics of how that went?

**Cutler:** Hamilton ran the meeting, but he did not run it in the true executive sense. He would call on different people on different issues and he would discuss with each of us in advance of the meeting what issues each of us would bring up. That one didn’t get into the SALT issue very
much. That was really a Friday morning issue. But it covered the normal legislature reports, the budget, the synfuels program, and the Energy Mobilization Board, which was very important but in the end never happened. Even though it passed both houses, it never cleared one of these multi-committee conferences. I think there were a hundred members of the conference committee. It collapsed over essentially the environmental issue. There would be as always countless numbers of appropriations bills.

There was, and I suppose others have described it to you, another one of these morning breakfast meetings on Wednesdays with the congressional leadership. A large part of the ten o’clock sessions were often spent in preparation for those meetings and what the President would do at those meetings. Being the Democratic congressional leadership, as you can imagine, they weren’t very effective leaders.

Hargrove: They were hungry, weren’t they?

Cutler: No, that was at the very beginning. I don’t know anything about what it was really like in those early days. White House meals by my time were perfectly good meals.

Thompson: May we come back to your appointment and your role as you saw it? You came in with two other people. You’ve seemed to have had a clear slot. Another one, Al [Alonzo] McDonald, found a slot. The third, [Hedley] Donovan, never seemed to have found a slot. Now the question that goes through our minds as we think about it is: was it the letter that you wrote that the President signed, was it attendance at meetings, or was it a number of other things, not least your Washington experience and having been around the track, that accounted for your role?

Cutler: Well, let me speak of Hedley Donovan for a moment. Hedley came in under somewhat different circumstances. To begin with, he’s a journalist. His principal role was supposed to be to react to the President about Presidential image, how he looked, how things were presented to the press and so forth. He never left the board of Time magazine. He was never on the White House payroll, he kept all of his Time magazine ties. I guess he spent maybe four or five days a week in Washington at the most.

I think he had a good influence on the President. They would have a lunch or an hour’s meeting together, just the two of them, every week. I don’t think Jody involved Hedley as much as he probably should have. Hedley did organize and pretty much run that project, the Commission for the 80s, which others have probably talked to you about, which was quite a good report. And when we got into this terrible mess about the rediscovery of the Soviet brigade in Cuba, Hedley was an enormous help on that. We followed the old Lyndon Johnson method of calling in all the wise men, all the Republican and Democratic national security foreign policy establishment, for a day or two to go over the evidence and to talk to us about what our response would be and how to tie it into the SALT II negotiations. Hedley was enormously valuable on that. Hedley could have played a much larger role in the foreign policy area.

Incidentally, he did come to those Friday morning foreign policy breakfasts and he was very helpful on that. Zbig didn’t always want that kind of help. Let me just leave it at that.
Thompson: Was the way you sold your stocks before taking your position one further difference between what you and Donovan did there? As I saw you sitting beside [Charles] Schultze, I wondered whether you had helped him in somewhat the same way. Was that a positive factor different from Hedley?

Cutler: I think much more it’s the difference between the role a lawyer can play in an administration and the role a journalist can play. I would think that other than serving as the press secretary, there has not been another major role that any journalist has played in a modern administration.

Thompson: Ed Murrow?

Cutler: Even Ed Murrow, though he did a very valuable job.

Thompson: You mentioned Panama and SALT, and their timetable and schedules. Would that have been, if there had been an issue of that type coming up while you were in office, an issue that your Clark Clifford-type position would have included?

Cutler: It’s probably not fair to answer it, because hindsight it so much better than foresight. I think they were probably right to go ahead with the Panama treaty, because they had it in hand. And you couldn’t let the Panama problem drift a couple of more years. [Herrera Omar] Torrijos was a very tough customer, and he might very well have done something that would have considerably embarrassed us all over Latin America. You had it and there it was. Clifford has said, and Clifford did say at the time, that he thought it was a mistake. As he put it, and he had worked on the Panama Canal for fifteen or twenty years, a Panama Canal treaty was something that a President shouldn’t bring up until the third year of his second term. But I do feel that, leaving that aside, if SALT had been finished in ’77, and it could have, that it would have been ratified. That would have been a very valuable and a good thing for the Carter administration if it had happened. And you know the history of that. It’s in Carter’s book; it will undoubtedly be in Cy Vance’s book.

But it was the natural instinct of a new President to put his own stamp on negotiations that had been carried on for six or eight years before that. And they just weren’t willing to accept the Vladivostok Accord with all its ambiguities as the basis of the deal, which is what the Soviets insisted on doing. That’s what we did in the end for all practical purposes, although we probably improved it somewhat. But instead we went for the so-called deep cuts in the first instance. And at the same time, and this is another example of that I would regard as the greatest mistake of the Carter administration, we had pursued our human rights policy to the point of gravely offending the Soviets.

One of the great problems of the system can be symbolized best by saying that [Andrei] Gromyko has been the Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union I think for twenty-two years or some such time. He was involved in the Cuban missile crisis and everything since. Our personnel keep turning over and over and everybody has a different way of going about it and not enough time to get done what he wants to do. I would hope that in the end President Reagan himself is
going to want to have an arms treaty in his administration badly enough to get it done. But up to now I don’t see any sign of that. And ironically, any treaty, I don’t care what it provides, any treaty that he brought to the Congress would go through in two weeks.

**Hargrove:** Was there in fact a failure on President Carter’s part to link Panama, SALT, the human rights overtures to the Soviets in terms of a larger political strategy?

**Cutler:** No. What I mean is that there was no sense of priority. There was a feeling, it’s part of the President’s background, his evangelism that he did believe, when he came to office, that he could make lions lie down with lambs, that you could sit down and reason with people and get them to do what they ought to do, and that you could pursue six or eight noble objectives all at once. And it was only fairly late in the day that he would subordinate one to another.

**Hargrove:** You did see that towards the end of the administration?

**Cutler:** Oh, no question. I think really had he been reelected that he would have had a very good second term, although he would have had to struggle with the same cycle of economic contraction as Reagan has faced.

**Thompson:** Did this change that took place late reflect the influence of some of you who came late, or was it just a general process?

**Cutler:** I would think that it was more that he had three years of on the job experience. That’s probably the predominant thing. A Presidency is so powerful and it imposes such demands on the incumbent that it’s highly unlikely that the views of others are going to turn him around. They can help him. They can present ideas to him. But he’s got to be convinced himself.

**McCleskey:** Can I pursue that for a moment? You say that the man is so powerful, and yet when you comment on the domestic policy problems you characterize it as messy and chaotic, and clearly you had problems in foreign policy. What’s your perception of the nature of that power that the President has? What is it that leads you to characterize that as such a powerful office?

**Cutler:** Partly, of course, it’s the way we look up to him. He comes to office having claimed he can solve all of our problems, and he’s expected to solve all our problems. What I meant to convey is that I don’t think advisors turn Presidents around. They can certainly help avoid pitfalls and point things out that he’s got to be willing to do. And I would point you to Reagan’s goal of a balanced budget with a tax cut and a defense increase. President Reagan certainly wasn’t lacking for advice that he couldn’t successfully pursue all of those objectives at one time. But he believes that, and he was just determined to do it, and there’s a time when you stop arguing or you get out.

**Hargrove:** Are you suggesting that resolve is crucial to surviving in that office? A strong sense of resolve and purpose?

**Cutler:** I don’t mean to suggest that it wouldn’t have been better if the President would listen. If he were much more responsive to and dependent on not only the advice but the support of his
key people, I certainly think if the President would listen to Senators with the experience of Baker and [Robert] Dole, to take the Republican example, it would have been a very good thing. And you do have to say it for President Reagan, he did listen. He managed to make the transition from a diehard opponent of tax increases to being an advocate of that 1982 tax bill. And when it came through it was a triumph for him rather than a defeat.

Young: Could you make some generalizations from your own observations on this question of a President listening to advisors in the deeper sense and about Carter’s own use of his staff? What did he use these people for, what did he see them doing for him? He was certainly given advice at the beginning by some that he needed to have somebody in charge of the staff. There needed to be somebody performing something that is called the chief of staff function, but it’s clear that that was not acceptable to him at the beginning. It’s also clear that he was persuaded to adopt that position, whether it was actually carried through because of events is another question. And all Presidents seem to have different ways of operating with their staff and different ways to mobilize the staff for their purposes; could you tell us something about Carter’s way of doing this and his perceptions of staff?

Cutler: Very few Presidents, as you know, have had a true chief of staff. I suppose [Dwight] Eisenhower came closer to it than anybody because he used the military system. Certainly nobody was Jack [John F.] Kennedy’s chief of staff. Nobody was Johnson’s chief of staff. Perhaps [H.R.] Haldeman was Nixon’s chief of staff. That was such a warped Presidency, it’s very hard to tell. The books go in every different direction, as you know. Ford didn’t have a true chief of staff. I don’t think Carter ever had a true chief of staff. He probably depended on Hamilton more than anyone else just to organize the operation. But he was and is personally a very private man, as you know. He’s also very orderly. He was to some degree his own chief of staff.

He never did resolve, no modern President has resolved, how to get the best use out of the Cabinet as distinguished from having, in effect, personal Cabinet right there beside him in the White House. But I don’t think that was his problem. The White House is always going to be a helter skelter place. It’s the nature of our kind of Executive Office in particular that it’s swept clean every time a new President comes in. It takes the new President a very long time just to get the feel of the operation itself. By that time, he’s got to get ready for the next election or this biannual congressional referendum. The true power in that White House staff, the true continuity in government, really is in the switchboard operators, the Secret Service, and the drivers. They’re the only ones who carry on.

I remember two episodes at the end that might be worth noting. One is that a week or so before January 20 I had a frantic call from Susan Clough, the President’s secretary, asking me to intervene because she had tried to get from the switchboard operators all of the telephone numbers of the people President Carter had talked to, so that she could have them in Plains. And she had been turned down. The switchboard operators had said that a lot of these numbers are private numbers that they had gotten on a confidential basis from the people that the President talked to, and if President Carter needed to talk to any of those people after he left the White House, all he had to do was call the White House switchboard and they would be happy to
connect them. And she wanted me to give a Presidential order to the switchboard people to turn 
over those numbers, which of course I wasn’t about to do.

The other is that, maybe I’ve said this to you before, but after those last two frantic nights—I 
don’t think I went to bed from sometime on Sunday morning until Tuesday after the day of the 
inauguration—after the President had gone with the Reagans up to the Hill and the actual 
inauguration ceremony had begun, I was still sitting on that telephone waiting for the final word 
on when the hostages plane had actually taken off from Teheran. Then I began the process of 
cleaning out my desk, with Fred Fielding’s people waiting outside in the hall to get in. About one 
thirty, finally, with something under each arm and a couple of other people helping me carry 
things out as I walked out of that West Wing basement, something caught my eye. Instead of the 
photographs that I was accustomed to looking at, the President with the Pope, meeting with 
[Leonid] Brezhnev in Vienna etc., there were photographs of Ronald Reagan and his dog. By one 
thirty on January 20, the transition had happened, the new photos were up, everything was ready 
for the new President to return to his White House. And the only people who were going to carry 
on were the switchboards operators and those security guards.

**Young:** Did President Carter find it difficult to delegate authority to people?

**Cutler:** No. I don’t think so at all.

**Young:** This was not a problem?

**Cutler:** No. And even though he is accused of mismanaging the congressional relationships, he 
was always willing to call up a Congressman, no matter how obscure, or a Senator about a 
particular bill at a particular moment. But mostly he left that to others. He certainly left also the 
difficulty, of course, which makes it not unique to the Carter administration, that each Cabinet 
member has a single mission. You’re going to help the farmers, or you’re going to bring about 
labor; virtually every foreign negotiation except the Camp David one to Cy Vance or Warren 
Christopher. I don’t think that was a major problem. In fact, in when you analyze the Carter 
personality or work habits, while it’s very fashionable to attribute the fact that he didn’t get 
reelected to some of those elements, I think they were relatively small in the total picture. I think 
it was more the events of those four years, the way he was perceived, and to a considerable 
degree his small stature and high voice that accounts for his 1980 defeat.

**Thompson:** The press coverage on tennis court assignments didn’t hurt him?

**Cutler:** Not any more than all the little stuff hurts the Reagan administration. Oh, those things 
hurt probably. I don’t think we managed the relationship with Congress anywhere near as well as 
the present administration does. I would say that [James] Baker and [Richard] Darman are far 
more skillful, and I think I would extend that to [Edwin] Meese and [Michael] Deaver in 
managing the congressional relationship and the press relationship, than the Carter people.

**Thompson:** Because they’re professionals?
Cutler: Well, they were more experienced. Maybe Hamilton and Jody would do a great deal better the next time around if they had a next time around. It was partly that. Partly the personality of their President. It is true that the cynical Washington press has better views of this White House staff than of the Carter White House staff.

McCleskey: Your perceptions of the staff before you joined it, of course, were undoubtedly much better informed than those of us relying on the mass media. But I’d be curious about any changes in your perception when you got into that White House operation. Did you find that it was pretty much what you expected, or did you even have some mistaken perceptions?

Cutler: I liked the people. I liked Hamilton very much. I liked Jody very much. In fact, I think I said once that if I were going to make some changes in that staff, it wouldn’t necessarily be the Georgians. I don’t know where to begin on this, in part because I don’t think it’s terribly important. The biggest criticism I would make of the staff is that it drove off in too many directions at the same time, was pursuing too many issues and it tended to get into unnecessary conflicts with the Cabinet and the departments. This was less true, much less true, in the national security/foreign policy field simply because of the importance of the problems. The two Secretaries and their other people are living with the White House people half the day anyway. But it’s certainly true of the other departments, all of which, as you can tell from Griffin Bell’s book, as close in as he was, got terribly offended by the staff. That was equally true, of course, in the Johnson administration.

Jones: Can you pursue that a little bit and maybe connect that with, as you talked about before, the President naturally going toward foreign policy? Is he drawn toward foreign policy in part because on the domestic side there are so many pressures? The consequence of submitting to that temptation is that it gets more and more uncontrolled on that side. Is that the way it is?

Cutler: Well, I’d say there are two parts to it. That’s one certainly. The second is an element of human access. A staff gets very protective of a President’s time. They can’t cut off the Secretary of State or the Secretary of Defense because that’s so important and they themselves are so interested in that. But they can and will cut off the other Secretaries, not necessarily Treasury, which is something of an exception, but the others because they think it just isn’t that important to bother the President with it. They tend to look at whatever happens in each of those other departments as itself a problem. Something gets into the paper. How the hell did this happen? Why did you do that stupid thing?

There is also the difficulty, of course, not unique to the Carter administration, that each Cabinet member has a single mission. Your job is to help the farmers, or to bring about labor peace, or you’re going to make the trains and airplanes run on time, or you’re going to improve Medicare. And all of those goals tend to conflict with one another. They certainly conflict in demands for resources, if each Cabinet member is pursuing his own mission. We still lack any kind of machinery for reconciling all those overlapping demands. Of course, we’ve got OMB [Office of Management and Budget] and we’re beginning to give the OMB people more and more power as time goes on, so I think that will be reconciled. But it always comes as a bitter blow to the department and the Cabinet member. This is one of the failings of our kind of Cabinet government. Then you add to that the fact that nine times out of ten the President never even met
the Cabinet members, except for these two or three key jobs, before he picks them. So they have to build their own relationships almost from scratch.

**Jones:** Is this what you meant when you said Jim was probing on various problems with the staff? You said you really didn’t think those were the major problems of the Carter administration. It was much more the events of those four years. Could you say a little bit more about that?

**Young:** You were mentioning that the defeat of Carter was more clue to the events than the faults or operating style of the President’s personality, if I understood you correctly.

**Cutler:** Yes.

**Young:** The 1980 defeat was not due to the Cabinet problem or to some fault of the President’s personality; it was more due to the events in which he got enmeshed.

**Cutler:** I think it was more due to the events, two events in particular. One, the acceleration of inflation and the jump in the interest rates. And the other, the general frustrations resulting from the seizure of the hostages. To a degree, it could be attributed to a general public sense that the President didn’t seem to be in charge, that he wasn’t managing those problems, and that he changed his mind. This sense was due mainly to his lack of the physical stature and communicating ability that Reagan so clearly possesses. We talk about the importance of Presidents not changing their minds. But look at the way President Reagan has changed his mind on the tax bill and on a number of other things. And yet, he has managed to do it in a way that doesn’t give the public the impression that he’s indecisive. Carter gave that impression, at least before I got there.

I did not find him indecisive at all. I found him deliberate and decisive. But it may have been too late by that time to erase the image. As for the seizure of the hostages, our inability to make some emotionally satisfying response, I think, is what hurt more than anything else. It brought home, as almost nothing else had done, a sense of impotence, that the great United States couldn’t do anything about this bunch of crazy militants in Tehran who had seized fifty-two people. There was nothing we could do about it that we were willing to do. It induced a sense of outrage and frustration and humiliation that we just had to take out on somebody. Vietnam had done that in a way, and had cost Johnson his job.

**Jones:** On the domestic side, tremendous pressure and the variety of interests are poking at the President every day; how can that ever be solved? Reagan seems to be able to handle that in part by rising above that to note the overall budgetary problem, the growth of government, and to establish a direction that rises above the immediate interests. Everybody has to cooperate. Carter did some of the same, but that wasn’t very attractive for a Democrat to be doing, I suppose.

**Cutler:** We will see just how successful Reagan is despite what we call his communicative and political skills. He’s very good on some things and he’s very weak on others. I don’t think he has conveyed to the public a great sense of intellectual capacity or even of hard work. And if things
continue to be depressed, if we really are in a long period of contraction, it’s going to be seen as his fault in the end.

**Hargrove:** We have some testimony that Carter was very interested in microeconomic issues because they were tangible and he could get hold of them, there was often a moral component. He could manage those. But macro theory, macro reasoning seemed to bewilder him and he never seemed to have a coherent strategy nor a close advisor in that area. You seemed to see a drift between periods of inattention and then action. How would you characterize that?

**Cutler:** Well, he did have a close advisor in Charlie Schultze. But he came to be very skeptical of a good deal of the macro economic advice he got, and one might say for a good reason. I’m not being critical of Charlie Schultze. But macro economic policy is still a very crude instrument, as I was trying to convey last night. It’s dealing with problems that didn’t exist before. Thirty years of economic growth had induced expectations and demands that we don’t know yet how to cope with. The only way we know how to cope with them is to tighten the money supply deliberately, causing a stifled economy and creating unemployment. If the contraction goes farther than we wish, the only way we know how to reverse it is by increasing the money supply and increasing the deficit. It’s very hard to steer that course, and for all we yet know, government policy may have a relatively minor influence on long term economic cycles.

**Hargrove:** Did he develop a certain fatalism then about this?

**Cutler:** In a sense, I agree he did. Unfortunately, he, like all candidates, had criticized events during the previous administration and had induced expectations, and invented tests like the misery index, which came to haunt him in the end. But that’s not unique to him. You see the same thing happening today.

**Thompson:** Could I get back just for a moment to this staff relations thing? You mentioned the coldness of the print in the Carter book; several of the people we have interviewed have said that after working with him for quite a while he not only didn’t remember their name but didn’t recognize them when they met him again a few months later. Reagan’s political power seems, in part, to be linked with his being a good fellow. People like him as a person. Could you say just a little about the human relationship between Carter as a leader and his staff?

**Cutler:** It’s more a difference in the surface qualities of joviality and hamming it up than it is in the two inner individuals. You remember the famous story of Reagan going down the receiving line and not recognizing Sam Pierce, his own Cabinet member, because he was slack in his memory for names. I don’t think Carter ever did anything like that. As for Reagan, I’m sure he doesn’t know my name at all. But every time I’ve seen him, he’s jovial, and he thinks of something to say that doesn’t give you the impression that he doesn’t know who the hell you are.

There are many Senators like that. You walk down the halls in the Senate office building and you can catch the eye of any Senator and he won’t take a chance. Today they might know who I am, but thirty years ago they didn’t know who the hell I was. But they’ll always walk over and ask, “How are you? It’s good to see you. It’s been a long time.” You might be a constituent. That’s the political instinct.
Carter, more or less, had to fight himself to be a good politician. He’s much more private than that. He is a reader. His idea of a pleasant evening isn’t to hang around with six Senators shooting the breeze, as Johnson or Truman would do. I guess Reagan’s isn’t either. He’s pretty well protected his evenings. I do think in President Carter’s political past in Georgia and in Georgia state politics there was a sense of reprisal in getting even with the politician who fought you, which he brought to Washington. There were some petty revenges that were taken that I don’t think Reagan takes. I think some of that came across. Scotty [James] Reston, as much as he admired Carter, identified a mean streak in his politics. A little bit of that, I think, came out in that critical debate where Carter had the best facts and arguments, but what came through was a touch of meanness to Reagan.

**Hargrove:** There are other indications and clues in the transcripts that he was not comfortable working with individuals whom he didn’t really know or trust. He kept people at arm’s length. So you came in and I presume you did not know him well and had not known him well before. How did you go about establishing his confidence? You obviously got it in time.

**Cutler:** Well, I didn’t come in cold. I had gone through that SALT period as I mentioned. I did not become an evening intimate, although I certainly spent several private evenings and Camp David weekends and such things with the Carters.

**Hargrove:** You slept in the Oval Office.

**Cutler:** I never had anything like the easy relationship that Hamilton and Jody had. That’s perfectly natural. Oddly, his best personal friend and closest, heart-to-heart relationship among all the people of that administration was with Cy and Gay Vance, even though he really hadn’t known them well until he picked Cy to be the Secretary.

**Hargrove:** Why were they close?

**Cutler:** He admired Cy. They had an easy relation, a friendship and a trust that formed early. It fell apart in that last year under the strain of the hostage crisis and a few of those famous changes in our position on UN [United Nations] Middle East resolutions. We can all put Presidential personalities on the laboratory table and pick them apart. I don’t think those are major decisive elements. Even with his personality, Richard Nixon got reelected, although he certainly came a cropper quickly enough after that. I don’t think the public reacts that strongly to the warmth of a President. I think they react much more to how he is doing while he’s President and whether they think he’s up to the job.

**Hargrove:** I was fishing for something slightly different. Does he have to really trust you in order to listen to you?

**Cutler:** Oh, I suppose so.

**Hargrove:** He clearly established that?
Cutler: I guess you could say that. There are people in Washington who will listen to you and display great interest that they don’t have. They’re politicians, like Senators. You can go talk to a Senator for half an hour about a particular point and think you had a wonderful hearing and he took every bit of it in and he’s damn glad you came and he’s going to do something and he’ll do anything, and it just washes right off. He was being nice to you. Carter had a lot of trouble concealing impatience. If you wanted to talk to him about something that he didn’t have the time for, or if he was preoccupied with something else, it came through. That’s not necessarily a fault. It’s a quality that I think I probably have myself. But he was an intense man, very factual and really an excellent analyst and I think an excellent writer.

Young: Many of the pundits in the press attributed many of Carter’s problems to the fact that he ran against Washington, didn’t know the fine print of Washington, came in somewhat confrontational with it, didn’t follow the rule book about how to get things down there and surrounded himself with people who were also outsiders to Washington. How much attention should serious research pay to that assessment?

Cutler: There is undoubtedly something to the proposition that you can operate a Presidency better if you have had experience in the legislative or executive branch of the federal government. It may be harder to get yourself elected. There does seem to be a great virtue in coming from the outside, at least in recent years. When Carter first came, even though he was a narrowly elected, he came on a great wave of personal popularity and interest in his “simple man” quality, walking down Pennsylvania Avenue, making that first fireside chat in his sweater, and so forth. His preparation was very similar to Reagan’s preparation, they were equally from the outside. Reagan also brought in a lot of people from his state administration as Carter did, and yet it worked out quite differently at the start in the sense of their being able to operate well inside the Washington environment. A good deal of that probably is due to the fact that Reagan brought in Jim Baker. I do think Baker is extremely competent and experienced and that he’s kept the Reagan administration from being a political disaster. I’m not speaking substantively. Carter did not do that because there was no one in his White House with Baker’s quality.

Hargrove: Nor did he reach out. That’s what I was getting to a little earlier; because he didn’t know and trust somebody he wouldn’t reach out. Reagan didn’t know Baker; he hardly knew him.

Cutler: That’s right. He came to know him during the campaign and to respect him. That is true. It meant picking up someone from the staff of your principal rival who might be a rival again sometime later. That’s also true. But Carter, even though he didn’t bring someone like Baker into the White House did bring experienced hands who had served in prior governments into the Cabinet jobs. You match up Vance, Brown, Mike Blumenthal, and Joe Califano against the people in the Reagan administration. I think the comparison would have been quite favorable to Carter. Certainly, they had a greater degree of prior experience.

Young: Do you think if Bert Lance had not left, that he would have developed into any kind of Washington side operator for the President?
Cutler: He would have helped enormously. The Bert Lance episode was probably the first big defeat for Carter and changed public impressions materially. To a considerable degree, you can attribute that to a mistake of judgment and analysis inside the White House. Where that thing was going to lead and what that report meant when it became available were really misread in the first instance. Lance did have a degree of confidence of the business community, which no one else in the economic jobs in the Carter administration was able to restore. Once this thing happened to Lance, I don’t think there was any way to save him. It should have been recognized and acted on sooner. Part of that is Carter’s personal loyalty. I was not inside at the time, but I know that some of the people inside felt exactly the way I do. Some of the Georgians and I have talked about it since. But by the time the report came out, there was no question at that point that Lance’s departure should have been arranged.

Young: There’s another view that has been expressed opposite to the one that the media talked about, explaining some of Carter’s difficulties and contributing to if not causing his defeat. That is not the view about his so called ineptitude in the ways of Washington and his latent hostility perhaps in dealing with it, but rather that his great problems came from caving too much to the spending agendas in Washington and the departure from his true economic or fiscal conservatism, and then having to switch. That is attributed to his responsiveness to traditional Democratic welfare state agendas, if you will. If he had stuck to what he really was, maybe he would not have had some of these problems. That’s an alternative.

Cutler: I wasn’t there. It’s a good hindsight reading, but you have to remember it’s hindsight. In 1977, there was reason to believe that economic growth was going to continue and the favorite Democratic tools for managing the economy would work. Not wage and price controls or anything like that, but Charlie Schultze’s kind of tools. It turned out that stagflation was much more stubborn and much more difficult to deal with than the economists or anyone else thought at the time. It was going to happen no matter what Carter did at that point. A bigger political catastrophe was the failure of the energy legislation in ’77, and, as I indicated earlier, the delays on SALT II.

Jones: I wonder if you’d talk a bit about the whole hostage matter from the perspective of how it came to dominate the government in the last year and what it did to the rest of the management of government as reflected in these meetings. You were terribly involved with the hostage thing but you also attended these meetings and presumably got a picture of what else was happening. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Young: Well, there is no question it came to dominate the agenda because it came to dominate the public attention and the news. It was one of the spectacular events that the media just couldn’t keep its hands off of because it was news. ABC developed that whole Nightline show out of it. This notion of counting days, this is the hundred and tenth day or the two hundred and thirtieth day and so forth, spread to all three networks. It was genuine in the sense that the public was upset. It certainly came to dominate the President’s attention, as his book reflects, almost to the exclusion of everything else. And it did clearly interfere with other priorities, including management of the economy, until those interest rates by March of 1980 had climbed to twenty percent and began to dominate events. We had driven them down back to eleven percent by June.
But we created a recession in the course of doing it, and that made the deficit higher rather than lower.

**Jones:** At that time, were the ten o’clock meetings affected in some way by the news?

**Cutler:** To a degree.

**Jones:** Could you give some examples of that?

**Cutler:** Most importantly as to the President’s time. You’d get to such issues as, should he make a trip to Canada that he promised for a year—he was going to return the [Pierre] Trudeau visit of the year before. He came to the conclusion in the spring of 1980 that he should not go. He just didn’t want to be that far away from the White House. This led to what came to be known as the Rose Garden strategy, which at least started as a genuine desire on his part to keep working on what he had identified as the most important problem from a true, national point of view, and from his own political point of view.

**Jones:** So it began, I suppose, in a way almost as an advantage for him politically. You don’t like to think about those things as an advantage.

**Cutler:** But under the worst of circumstances. The seizures of the hostages was an enormous disadvantage. One could argue that it had offsetting benefits, since attention was focused on the President and what the President was doing about this issue, and that if he had gotten them back in a month or two it would have been a big triumph for him. But net, it was a great disadvantage and it is very much to his credit I think that he did not do what other Presidents might well have done, which would have been to take a very extreme, firm position, a declaration of war, an immediate naval blockade or some such thing. That could have won him the Presidency in 1980. I don’t have any question in my mind that had that been our response, regardless of all the other dreadful consequences that might have occurred, it would have so dominated public attention that he would have won in 1980. And he didn’t do that. He didn’t do it. Recognize that by not doing it, he was imposing a political penalty on himself.

**Jones:** Those options were considered and he actively rejected them?

**Cutler:** That’s right.

**Young:** There are some who say that given the damaging effect of it upon him, his very sticking to Washington and immersing himself in this problem gave greater public attention to it than might ordinarily have been given. The idea was that it disrupted the normal workings of politics and election of government while the economy was being neglected.

**Cutler:** You can argue it, it was argued at the time, and you could argue in hindsight that the right way to have handled the problem was to have ignored it and just let the militants wear themselves out. But there wasn’t any way to keep the television reporters from interviewing those militants every night and showing pictures of the hostages that they chose to take and furnish to the reporters. And here was this anomaly of American journalists running all over
Tehran talking to everybody when no American diplomat could say a word to any Iranian. We were just absolutely cut off.

I said last night and I do think it’s true that whatever one might feel, whether the hand was played correctly by Nixon, Ford, Carter, or others, before the fall of the Shah or after the fall of the Shah up to the seizure of the hostages, I think from then on it was handled about as well as it could be handled. There are experienced British diplomats and others who have spent a lot of time in that area who think the right response would have been to go to war immediately and that if you put on a big enough show of strength to the Iranians, they would have buckled right away. But failing war, I think he played it right and that war was a very risky course as we all know.

There’s no question in my mind that if the Iranians had not buckled—and we’ve seen enough of the Ayatollah by this time in the war between Iraq and Iran to see that he doesn’t buckle easily—the Soviets would have helped themselves to Azerbaijan beyond any question by now, we would have had enormous turmoil in the Gulf, uprisings, and we would have lost the Arabs’ support if we had just gone in there, and especially if we had killed a few thousand Iranians.

**Jones:** Would you say something about the rescue mission, the reaction to that and the exploration of possible scenarios?

**Cutler:** As I indicated earlier, I was not in on the decision. There’s no point in my speculating as to who was right and who was wrong between Cy and the President. I think there was a lot to be said on Cy’s side of that argument myself. Oddly enough, although I think the failure hurt the President and hurt our own image, all of the criticism and reproach went to the failure and not to the intent. Another strange thing that happened is that after the attempt was made, no one criticized the President for having made the attempt. And once we had gotten it out of our system that we had to make a response, no one advocated more strenuous military measures thereafter. The one military measure that we had laid on the line even before that, and I think would have gone through with, is that if the Iranians had persisted in going ahead to try the hostages as spies, we would have imposed a sea blockade, and we made that very clear. And they didn’t do it.

**Thompson:** At every one of these sessions, we somehow seem to make a list of the things that newspaper readers and political scientists think hurt the President. Yet there’s one dirty little name that never, up to now, really entered into the discussion, and that’s Billy Carter. At the time, it seemed to be something that was harmful to the President There’s been very little talk about it harming him in our discussion. One report has it that you played some role in that whole thing. I wonder if you’d care to say anything at all about the way that was handled.

**Cutler:** Yes. As you say, that was on my plate once it happened. I think it probably hurt the President fairly badly. You will find very little about it in his book. Once it happened, I think it was disposed of well. He certainly owned up to the problem. He made full disclosures in that very effective television talk, and much as the public ended up condemning Billy, I don’t think they condemned the President. They had a certain sympathy for him because everybody’s got some black sheep relative, and the problem of being loyal to your relative is always one people understand.
The fact that it happened, that a President’s brother could actually be bribed by a foreign government in this way and that he would lend himself to that, especially the Libyan government, which has zero support in the United States, probably was damaging. There was some awkwardness, effectively exploited by the Republicans, as to this age-old problem of how the Attorney General conducts himself when he’s investigating someone very close to the President. I think the Justice Department came out to the right result, but I think we would have been better off if the Attorney General had disqualified himself completely from the matter. Since it was not the kind of case which could have been referred to a Special Prosecutor, Attorney General probably should have appointed a special counsel to handle it from the beginning.

The President reacted to it in a very commendable way. It’s true that throughout that time, he never interfered in any way with what the Justice Department was doing. He never would. We got a lawyer for Billy as soon as we heard he had been called up to the Justice Department, and the President did what he could at the proper moment to persuade Billy to make the filing—it is legally required to make a foreign agent’s registration filing—which Billy had refused to do. The President did bring what pressure he could on Billy to do that and follow his lawyer’s advice. But never in any way did he try to interfere at Justice. Despite the enormity of what Billy did, the President was always as considerate of his brother as one could ask a family member to be. A really ruthless President would have hung him out to dry.

Thompson: Do you think there is anything in southern culture at all analogous to Philippine culture? I was in the Philippines when President [Carlos] Garcia was charged with having given money to members of the family. There have been articles written about what was called the two faces of Philippine morality. Garcia in the testimony said, “I have two moral guides, one loyalty to my family, and a second loyalty to the state.” Is there anything in Carter’s Presidency that suggests that this touching loyalty he felt to Lance, to his brother, to the family, to his closest associate in Georgia affected his Presidency at all, or is that too far-fetched?

Cutler: Well, in the sense that he wasn’t ruthless enough to protect himself, I’d say yes. But not in the sense that his family ever prevailed on him to do anything improper as President. Of course in Lance’s case, as you know, the charges against Lance had absolutely nothing to do with Lance’s own conduct in public office. And in Billy’s case, Billy was anxious for money and perfectly willing to take Libyan money, but never did anything to try to influence the U.S. government on any matter.

Hargrove: Did that general approach apply to other Cabinet officers like Califano, [Brock] Adams, Blumenthal? Perhaps he should have been more forceful with them at the outset to establish a good relationship. Could you argue that?

Cutler: How do you mean?

Hargrove: Well, some people had said that in fact he gave them free rein, then was dissatisfied, and then didn’t discipline them. He found it difficult to discipline people.

Cutler: I think that’s true.
**Hargrove:** Ruthless is too strong a word. But discipline would be a better one.

**Cutler:** Those three cases had much more to do with the frustrations of the White House staff and the perception that something had to be done than it did with any insubordination. In Mike Blumenthal’s case, Carter’s decision to get rid of Mike had much more to do with the perception that he was not being effective with the Congress and that the economy was still bumping along than with any feeling of disloyalty or failure to follow the President’s wishes. Califano is a different case. Califano is a little bit like Al Haig. It’s an irony really that both Califano and Haig sat in key positions on a White House staff and knew how to protect Presidents against Cabinet members and knew how to handle Cabinet members who tried to go around them. When they became Cabinet members for Presidents they didn’t know personally, they themselves got into fights with the staff and tried to go around the staff. It must be in part due to their own personalities.

But your other point is fair enough, that if he was disappointed in what somebody had done, he was more likely to say to one or two of us on the staff what he thought of that person than say it to the person himself. The same thing may be true about his dealings towards me, for all I know.

**Thompson:** Jim Rowe and others have talked about [Franklin] Roosevelt’s tendency to discipline people when they made statements publicly. Did Carter’s failure to discipline staff in their relationship with the media hurt the Carter Presidency?

**Cutler:** I think more often than not he was disappointed that a Cabinet official did not step out and attack someone who had attacked the administration rather than the other way around. I saw that several times, and as he writes in his book, that was one of his disappointments in Cy Vance. But it was rare that a Cabinet member said something that he regarded as out of line and embarrassing.

**Thompson:** The [Samuel] Huntington thing on SALT was unique then? Remember early in the administration there were contacts with Jackson and [Daniel P.] Moynihan and others from some people in NSC [National Security Council] that the media picked up and reported in detail, saying that having fought and lost for a position in NSC, Huntington and others then went to friends in the Congress and talked with them about what had been debated. That was an isolated occasion, if it is even true?

**Cutler:** Well, you’re speaking of leaks more than official public criticism of the administration. Like any other President, Carter would get madder than hell about leaks, with good reason. But it’s an insoluble problem, and it’s insoluble in part because every Presidency wants to maintain good relationships with the press and wants to maintain an atmosphere of access, to show it’s not like the Nixon White House, where you couldn’t find out what was going on. The press is very smart. Most people whom they get in touch with want to indicate that they’re in the know and they will report things that they’ve heard second or third hand. Then, of course, we have these terrible problems about the losers in any fight getting their side out to the press. But those are going to go on. Were not going to solve those problems, other than by narrowing the circle, which is what most Presidents do.
Let me say this, because you’ve heard it from others but I was probably more in a position to know than anyone else: Carter was totally ethical in everything he did. His sense of propriety not only in his personal relationships but in how you dealt with other people was totally beyond reproach. I never had the slightest problem with him by advising I don’t think you should do such-and-so. Of course, I didn’t succeed in keeping people out of the White House who I thought shouldn’t be there and who had money to give to the party. That’s something different. One of those fellows, in particular, shows up in every administration. He’s a convicted felon and a wily businessman, but he’s been in every White House and he’s decorating this one.

An episode that I don’t think is in Carter’s book is this: when Camp David came along, it was suggested by someone whom I won’t mention that the [Menachem] Begin quarters and the [Anwar] Sadat quarters should be bugged so we’d know just what was going on. And the President said they were his guests and he would not do that. And that’s one reason why he was so offended when the Washington Post later published that item about the Blair House being bugged when the Reagans were staying there. That was false, but most reporters will never be convinced that places like Blair House are not bugged.

**Hargrove:** Hamilton Jordan is something of a shadowy figure in our transcripts. He is characterized as a political advisor to the President. We know he wrote long memos to the President about political issues. Very little is known about what was in those. Could you flesh that out a little bit? In what way was he political advisor to the President, and to what effect?

**Cutler:** He was an architect, I think, of the 1976 victory.

**Hargrove:** I think that’s understood. But once they got there, what happened?

**Cutler:** In Hamilton’s book, the bulk of his 1980 memos about [Edward] Kennedy and how to fight the election can be found. Hamilton was the main political strategist. I would think Bob Strauss was probably the main tactical political advisor throughout. Others have probably said this to you as well, but Mrs. [Rosalynn] Carter was very important in every single one of these fields—political, substantive, personnel, and other matters. It was very visible that they had a very close relationship and that he talked to her about absolutely everything. You would see her sitting there quietly in the back of the Cabinet room while we were all meeting on critical occasions.

**Hargrove:** Could you illustrate an example of strategic political piece of advice that affected the policy decision?

**Cutler:** That Hamilton gave?

**Hargrove:** Yes. And Strauss.

**Cutler:** In my day, the main strategy vis-à-vis Kennedy was Hamilton’s strategy. The Rose Garden decision was one the President made himself, which his political advisors were against. They wanted him to get out earlier. Hamilton recognized sooner than anyone else the importance
of trying to persuade Kennedy not to make the primary fight and how damaging that was going
to be. I don’t know that there ever would have been a chance to persuade Kennedy not to run.
The feelings, as you can tell from both of those books and the recent Barbara Walters interview,
run very deep on both sides.

**Hargrove:** Would Jordan get into policy matters and say, “We ought to raise the minimum wage
more, because we owe a lot to labor”? Would he do that sort of thing?

**Cutler:** No. I would say on most domestic and foreign policy issues, Hamilton was not
substantive and didn’t try to be. The most sensitive of all, of course, was the domestic political
repercussions of what we did in the Middle East when we denounced Begin, or when we didn’t.
Hamilton did have a great sensitivity on that, as did the Vice President. He would weigh in on
those matters as to what the political consequences might be. He had a very good perception of
how the hostage seizure was affecting Carter politically. As you can tell from the book, that
became his principal substantive task up until he had to be brought in to run the campaign.

**McCleskey:** Could I pursue that point just a little bit, not just with respect to Jordan, but with
other senior staff? How well did they understand the mainsprings of American politics? That is,
did they really understand how to get things done and not just in terms of what the polls show or
something else? Was there some overall comprehension of what it takes to be effective in
dealing with Congress or the bureaucracy or groups and so on? Can you comment on that?

**Cutler:** In the broad strategic sense, Hamilton had a very good feel for politics. The 1976
strategy was really an excellent strategy for Carter. It was pulling off a hundred-to-one shot. As
for day-to-day relationships with members of Congress and party leaders and others, Hamilton
didn’t have much feel for that. He admits that. That was much more in the Bob Strauss line. If
Hamilton had had the qualities of a Jim Baker, that might have made a little difference. He
recognized that. He himself was much more of a backroom personal advisor to the President than
an upfront person dealing with other political leaders in Congress or elsewhere. That was costly
in that there was nobody really close to the President, closer than Hamilton, that the
congressional people could talk to. They could talk to Stu Eizenstat. A lot of them tried to talk to
me when I got there, mostly on issues that were peripheral to my main assignments at the
moment.

I think of all the White House staff in my day, the congressional staff was the least effective.
And when I say that, I recognize that the individual people were really very good, very sensitive
people. Certainly you’ve seen the congressional members did not feel comfortable dealing with
the White House staff and did not feel they were getting heard.

**Thompson:** Did Anne Wexler help at all?

**Cutler:** Anne helped enormously on so many things, dealing with the business community,
dealing with congressional members. She’s very much a pro.

**Thompson:** But that wasn’t enough to make up for this other deficiency with Congress? Was it a
different type of appraisal?
Cutler: It was unconcentrated. Anne only occasionally had responsibility for dealing with particular legislators or a particular bill. She couldn’t be doing it all the time. And you’ve got to be able to deliver something. Quite often, she couldn’t deliver or persuade the others to deliver.

Jones: Was the lack of effectiveness with Congress a problem of the staff organization, was it the President himself, or was it because Ham Jordan didn’t take command of that and make that work?

Cutler: I think a good bit of it was rigidity on the President’s part. Some of it might have been in the personality and follow through of Frank Moore and the other people on the liaison staff. One concrete example was the Synthetic Fuels Corporation. That was one of the two key elements of the Carter energy program. Finally in the spring of 1980, I think, Congress finally passed that bill. It might have been as late as May or June by the time it was finally passed, but it had passed both houses in December or January. The rest was ironing out the conference problems. I had been pushing and others had been pushing to go ahead and pick the board and get it started. We wanted people like John DeButts and Frank Cary or Reg Jones. We wanted one of the great businessmen to run it. All the congressional leaders who had helped pass that bill had their own ideas about who should be on the board. That dragged on and on and on and it was not until election time, or just before election, that we finally settled on a group, which had to be confirmed by the Senate.

We got into an argument with Gary Hart over the fact that we had nominated four out of the seven directors plus the CEO so that we could get started, get those people confirmed, and get them going. Gary Hart, who was running that year as you remember, asked for a commitment that at least one of the three remaining places would go to a candidate from west of the Mississippi River. He wasn’t even saying somebody from Colorado, although he had a candidate from Colorado. We had every intention, in fact, of taking probably not one but two people from west of the Mississippi River, and yet the President was unwilling to commit to Gary Hart that he would limit his own discretion about who he would name to those remaining three places. And we could not make that deal with Gary Hart. As a result, he blocked the consideration of the nominations and we never got them through at all. If we had had a Synthetic Fuels Corporation in place, it would have been much harder for Reagan to have dismantled our energy policy.

Hargrove: That was not a constitutional inhibition on the President’s part, was it? It was a personal one?

Cutler: It was whether he made a deal or whether one of us could let Gary Hart say publicly for his own campaign purposes that he had a commitment that one of the remaining three would come from west of the Mississippi.

Hargrove: He didn’t like anything that smacked of a deal?

Cutler: He just didn’t want to limit the President’s discretion.

Hargrove: I’m trying to figure out whether there’s a moral overtone or not.
Cutler: There was a moral overtone. And it was a question of a President versus the legislature. He wasn’t going to make that kind of deal. The President had the nominating power.

Young: On the congressional side, was the problem complicated by the fact, if it was true, that the President did not put such a high priority on a congressional advisor among his own advisors? You mentioned that the congressional staff tried to, but there was nobody for them to talk to. They came to you; they came to everybody. That suggests that the President did not put the kind of high priority on that staff or his accessibility to their advice of a sort that Reagan does. Here is an administration that has elevated legislative strategy to a very high status on the staff. The National Security Advisor or others are close to him and have access and dialogue with him.

Cutler: I think that’s probably right. As I tried to indicate earlier, however, he was perfectly willing to pick up the phone and call any legislator on something he wanted or if we needed his help in moving the legislature. But the atmosphere between him and the person he was calling just hadn’t been built up enough in advance.

Young: He would do this on request. Did he initiate it very often himself?

Cutler: Oh yes, when he particularly cared about something he’d say, “Give me a list of people I should call.”

Hargrove: But when he went over to the residence in the afternoon and used the telephone, do you have any sense of how widely he was calling people in town and around the country?

Cutler: I don’t know firsthand. But quite likely, he did a great deal.

Hargrove: More than is thought? He reached out?

Cutler: Oh, very much so.

Hargrove: I don’t think that’s generally known.

Young: It’s not generally known. The perception is quite the reverse: that he was a loner, drawn into himself, and he didn’t do enough of that.

Cutler: Certainly in the campaign period in big legislative issues he’d make fifty or more calls a day.

Hargrove: What sorts of calls? Just characterize the range of people he might call.

Cutler: Well, Congressmen to begin with and in the campaign, people out in the state who had been important for him either from a money point of view or from a political point of view. Businessmen, labor people, others.
**Hargrove:** This is saying thank you for helping me, or will you help me? But would he just get on the phone? Lyndon Johnson would get on the phone and call Robert Anderson and say, “What do you think about this economic policy idea?” Did Carter do much of that? Did he have a network of informal influentials out there to call?

**Cutler:** Yes, he had people he would talk to. In particular of course [Charles] Kirbo, Griffin Bell. He’d call a few businessmen, Irv Shapiro he would talk to sometimes. He asked Anne Wexler and me and Kirbo to talk to many business people, but he never did feel close to the business community.

**Thompson:** This is ironic, given his approach that emphasized the private sector.

**Cutler:** That’s right. In addition, how clearly set he was from the very beginning against price and wage controls. But I used to argue with him a great deal about the “faults” of the auto industry, whether the bankers had really misbehaved on a particular matter or whether an oil company in particular had overcharged. And he formed quite strong convictions on those.

**Hargrove:** Negative?

**Cutler:** A lot of it was a Puritanical streak. It wasn’t that he was anti business in any sense. He’d feel they’d just done something wrong.

**Hargrove:** He felt the same way about the professionals, legal and medical professions, I understand.

**Cutler:** Yes. He didn’t like paying legal bills.

**Jones:** No different from the rest of America.

**Hargrove:** It is a Puritanical streak, you’re right. The inquisitive impulse was not his style.

**Young:** He didn’t come out of a political tradition in a state where these people were particularly revered. In his own experience, in his own political education, the bankers and the lawyers as professionals were not particularly desirable people.

**Jones:** On issues where you worked with him on Congress, SALT and other issues, did you work with the staff people in the congressional liaison office and, for example in the SALT treaty, were the Senate people there, sort of directing the operation, or were you on your own?

**Cutler:** On SALT we really had a very good group in which the principle legislative liaison fellow was Bob Beckel, who I see you have talked to. He was absolutely first class. And we had a substantive group from the NSC staff that included Roger Molander, the fellow who’s written this Ground Zero book now, and Walter Slocombe from Defense, and a couple of people from State. They were very effective. Then Ralph Earle, who had been the SALT Ambassador after Paul Warnke, played a very major part in helping him prepare the testimony. But a lot of what you might call lobbying, I did myself.
Despite the Soviet brigade in Cuba, and despite all the problems of dealing with Frank Church, who had a tough race coming up in Idaho, we did get a nine to six vote out of the committee. We should have had an eleven to four vote in the committee. We carried two Republicans with us, [Jacob] Javits and [Charles] Percy. John Glenn wouldn’t come at that point, although he’s now fully prepared to agree that the verification surveillance is good enough so that we could tell that the treaty would be properly enforced. Richard Stone, the Democratic Senator from Florida who is no longer among us and who would never go with us, mostly because of the Cuban issue, was in a tough election fight of his own, and he put that priority first. Whether we would have made it through the Senate is hard to say, and it all of course became academic when the Soviets moved into Afghanistan in December.

**Young:** When you say you did the lobbying, what does that mean? It means you talked with the individual people?

**Cutler:** Yes, I would have visits with Baker, with all the committee Senators, and as many of the other Senators as I could get to see. I think our head count was, if I recall correctly, about twenty firmly against us, somewhere between forty and fifty firmly for us, and we were fighting for the other, thirty to forty, which is pretty tough when you think that it only takes thirty-four votes to beat you.

**McCleskey:** There have been several occasions that the argument was made, not here but by other commentators and writers, that Presidents get cut off from contact with the real world because they’re surrounded by yes men and all of that. Did you see any indication of other senior staff members having any difficulty in talking candidly with the President and pushing the forthright point of view? Was he receptive to criticism or to different perspectives?

**Cutler:** He would certainly hear different points of view, but he fairly often went his own way. In his book, as you’ll see, he described several occasions in which Stu Eizenstat in particular was urging him to do something he finally decided not to do. In the foreign policy field, he often had to referee differences in view between Zbig and the NSC staff and the State Department people. For the rest, and this is natural enough because the staff is so big and there was only one President, it is hard for a President to make people on the staff to feel they had had a chance to present their point of view. You’ve heard many of them who were second or third level people and I gather from what you were saying earlier, Jim, on the whole, they felt they did get a hearing. They tend to reproach themselves more than to reproach the President.

**McCleskey:** In many cases, in hindsight.

**Cutler:** I’d say the two major things inside that were different from what I thought from the outside. First, even though I thought I had come in with an appreciation of how difficult it is to be an effective President, it’s a hell of a lot harder than even I thought. The second is that a President has relatively few options, and that he is repeatedly overcome by a new crisis before he’s solved the ongoing one. It’s just like waves dashing up on the beach. You never get the time to absorb a matter, think it through, argue it out, look up what you have to look up, and come up with a reasoned conclusion before something else has hit, and you’ve got to deal with that. All of
this has been enormously intensified by the evening news. The evening news tends to dominate the making of policy and the ordering of priorities within the White House to a much greater extent than I would have thought. You need to have some response out there by five or six in the afternoon, which is overriding. Whatever else we were doing got dropped back in order to take care of that particular deadline.

The famous case of the Soviet brigade in Cuba is a marvelous example. That really was an intelligence error, and I think I can say that categorically because I used to be in the intelligence business, and I went into it very carefully after it all happened. Some of us said, “Let’s sit on this and study it more and probe it and think about what we’re going to say,” because we all knew how serious the consequences could be if the intelligence people were right. We were overcome by the people who felt we had to make an immediate response. We really went off on half-baked intelligence in the sense that that brigade was not new, it had been there since 1962 during the Cuban missile crisis. We had demanded its withdrawal in the Cuban missile crisis along with the withdrawal of three other, brigades and the bombers and missiles.

When the Soviets finally agreed they would withdraw the bombers and the missiles, we had just quieted down about the brigades. And they have been there ever since; they’re dinky little brigades of twenty-five hundred people. Presumably they are there, I don’t know why they’re there, but one reason might be for the same reason we had troops in Germany: as a trip line to deter an invasion. Certainly the Soviets and the Cubans had every reason to believe in 1962 that we might actually think of moving in if we learned about the missiles. Of course they were put there in the first instance to protect the missile sites. But the intelligence community, over the years, had stopped watching everything that happened in Cuba as closely as ten years ago. We had hundreds of other priorities. We had missiles in the Soviet Union to worry about. We had the war in Vietnam to worry about and all sorts of other things. When they were rediscovered when intelligence attention was paid again to Cuba, people in the intelligence community had simply forgotten all of this, so they regarded their rediscovery of this in 1979 as a new discovery. That’s really what happened in my view.

**Young:** Thanks to a pair of pants that had to come from the dry cleaner’s. Senator Church didn’t help on this either.

**Cutler:** Senator Church didn’t help. Actually, we had gone no further than to inform him. The decision was we had better let Senator Church know that here is what we’ve heard and we’re studying it further. And then he went public with it because he was in a campaign in Idaho against [Steven] Symms and he was being hurt badly by some television film Symms was showing of a visit Church had made the year before to Cuba. These films show both Castro and Church in fatigues, and running around in a jeep, and Church was smoking a big cigar and running around in a jeep. So that’s how the fate of the world gets decided.

**Thompson:** Would it have mattered if Carter had had a commanding view about the nature of foreign policy similar to the strong notions that Reagan has had on the economy or that Kennedy has on some things? Did it make much difference whether Carter said at Notre Dame that we were suffering from an inordinate fear of Communism, and later on said that the Russian invasion of Afghanistan was the greatest disappointment in his whole administration?
**Cutler:** I think he came in with a coherent view of foreign policy. One can quarrel with particular, little pieces of it: the way in which the human rights policy was carried out, the way in which the neutron bomb decision was made. But on the whole, it was very much in the tradition of American foreign policy since World War II and it was oriented very heavily toward accommodation with the Soviet Union and the Third World. It was largely the foreign policy developed within the Trilateral Commission. You can find in the things Brzezinski wrote and said and the President wrote and said once he took office the effect of the Trilateral Commission. Papers that Brzezinski, Vance, and others wrote for the commission helped to form Carter’s foreign policy. I don’t think that was the problem.

These events that happened are very much like the events that are interfering very seriously with the Reagan concept of foreign policy. Even today, a centerpiece of Reagan’s foreign policy is Carter’s accomplishment at Camp David. It’s very much in the mainstream of the Camp David proposal and that was a major Carter achievement, and qualities for which he’s been most criticized—personal absorption, attention to detail, concentration, and unwillingness to delegate—turned out to be great virtues in this case. And if you read not only Carter’s version of Camp David but almost everybody else’s, it was indeed a remarkable personal accomplishment on his part.

**Hargrove:** President Carter seems to have been satisfied with the division of labor established for Brzezinski and Vance and then [Edmund] Muskie, despite all the fuss in the press. The one slight disappointment was that Vance was not a good spokesman, so he turned to Brzezinski for that. Do you think he felt he was well served by that division of labor and do you think he was, in fact, well served?

**Cutler:** He did. I guess he did. As I indicated earlier, Vance is one of my closest friends and I am very much on his side of that particular issue. It didn’t take Muskie long to come to the identical conclusion. I don’t think I’d better say anything more.

**Hargrove:** At least you’re pretty clear Carter thought it was working to his advantage?

**Cutler:** That’s right.

**Hargrove:** In what sense? How would characterize it from his perspective?

**Cutler:** Number one, he wanted to set the foreign policy agenda himself. Number two, he enjoyed Zbig as a source of ideas and as maintaining the traditional presidential view of the fuddy-duddy old State Department. Where the real crunch came was on this issue of being spokesman. He felt unhappy that Vance was not being as outgoing and quick in public retorts to what some foreign leader said, or some Republican Senator said, as he wanted. So more and more he urged Brzezinski to do that. Zbig loved it.

**Thompson:** Did he also think it was good politics? We had Paul Nitze here some time ago, and he said once during the campaign when Carter was asked about his two foreign policy advisors his answer was the two Pauls, Paul Nitze and Paul Warnke. Nitze, at least, thought that this was
in order to consolidate positions on both sides of the political spectrum, that he was reaching out
to the right and to the left with the two Pauls.

Cutler: I don’t think that’s true about Brzezinski and Vance. There were some issues on which
Brzezinski sounds like more of a hawk than Vance. In fact, they are both what you might call
dovish, certainly compared to Haig, Richard Allen, Judge [William] Clark or even George
Shultz. Zbig’s hawkishness had far more to do with rhetoric than with action. Zbig was never in
favor of strong military action anywhere that I can remember. The differences between
Brzezinski and Vance had far more to do with personality traits than any other issue. Hamilton
analyzes it very well in his book.

Young: What would a second term have been like, given the same state of the economy we are
seeing now? It has been suggested that the second Carter administration would not have received
many of the criticisms that it received the first time around. Others have said that it would
probably have been a terrible second administration because all the problems that were already
intractable would have remained.

Cutler: Well, I think these things would have happened in a second term. I think on the home
front, he would have been far more conservative and much more supportive of reducing
government outlays because he believed in it. He agreed with this emerging consensus that the
scale of government ought to be cut back and that government spends too much money. He had
already lost patience with the single-issue environmentalists, the Ralph Naders and others to
whom he paid much more attention in the early days. He learned you can’t do everything at
once.

I think his particular economic package would have made a lot more sense than the one we came
up with. There would have been a much milder tax cut, a somewhat smaller five-year defense
buildup than the one you see, and probably something of a smaller budget deficit. But it would
have been otherwise pretty much along the lines we see today. It would have been a
macroeconomic effort to change the atmosphere of the economy, bring inflation and interest
rates down, etc., rather than a hands-on price and wage control approach. We would have had
SALT II, he would have gotten that done and he would have attacked the rest of Camp David
with tremendous vigor. He was absolutely fed up with Begin by that time. He would have been
ready to take about the same turn the Reagan administration has taken by now. Those, I think,
would have been the principal consequences.

So far as public reactions are concerned, I think that’s harder to say. We certainly would have
this same recession or maybe less of a one than we have right now. And if supply side economics
and the tax cut had not been tried, the criticism out there that that’s what we ought to do would
be even stronger than it is right now. In foreign policy, I would have expected a much harder and
earlier concentration on Camp David, greater pressure on the Israelis earlier, and much more
progress on SALT II. I don’t think it would have been very different from what you see today,
especially now that we have George Shultz.

Young: Do you think that the President would have done more or gone about differently trying
to build constituencies for his programs in Washington? This has often been noted that there was
a general public sentiment in favor of various directions in which he was moving that he somehow never managed to articulate and rouse interest for.

**Cutler:** Once he had been reelected he would have concentrated entirely on engineering the job, being the President, and getting it done. He probably would have neglected the public relations side of it more than he should have.

**Young:** Do you think then the Democratic Party would have given him less trouble on the second go-around than it seemed to the first?

**Cutler:** No. He would always have had the continuing problems in Congress. But if I’m right about that consensus that was emerging, and if he had won a narrow victory instead of a narrow defeat, he probably would have found the votes for contracting government just as they turned up under Reagan. The consensus clearly wasn’t there for a Kennedy kind of solution to problems, and he would not have done that. We’d also have MX.

**Jones:** He might have had a smaller margin in Congress even if he had won. Since we’re really talking about a margin going back to ’74, which didn’t really get corrected in ’76 or ’78, it looks like even if he’d won, there might have been more Republicans.

**Cutler:** All these things are hypothetical. The only central point that I want to underline is I realize somewhat at variance with what you’re trying to do. We tend so much to analyze the failure of a Presidency in terms of the personality and the abilities of the man. I think that’s a great mistake. So much of it is systemic. This was a pretty damn good man.

**McCleskey:** What sort of systemic qualities are you referring to?

**Cutler:** I’m speaking of the separation of powers between the legislature and the executive, and the over expectations that all presidential candidates and incumbents induce to get their office.

**Jones:** The primetime Presidency.

**Young:** I think that we fall perhaps less victim to this error of attributing everything to the President’s personality, but the fact is that in many ways the Carter Presidency is a misportrayed Presidency. And part of it is when you look at most of those criticisms, it does operate on the assumption that somehow if only the right people were there doing the right things with the right personality, everything would be fine. I think it’s very generally recognized now that there are new aspects as well as old ones, changes in the American political system that make it ever more difficult for a President to deliver the kind of governmental responses that are expected. There’s a high level of frustration built into his job. Public expectations are a problem as well.

**Cutler:** Unfortunately, most people who reach that office reach it thinking they can do all the things that they said they were going to do when they got there, and that the Presidency is able to shape the course of events. It certainly can do it more than any other office in the world. But it’s harder and harder for any government, even one we might build or run with the people in this room, to manage either the economy or the security of the United States and the free world.
Young: Someone said that the President’s job has come to be damage control in terms of the economics of our time.

Cutler: And compared to the 1950 to 1975 period, we’re in a bad patch. It might be a good time not to be President.

Jones: Just exactly what I’ve determined.

Hargrove: The irony is because the institutional problem is so intractable, we assume we have to have a hero to cut through. It’s an old strain in American thinking.

Young: And the standard is the old Roosevelt myth.

Cutler: And if we get big enough catastrophe, then we find a consensus.

Hargrove: Yes, that’s right. But that doesn’t happen very often.

Young: Well, we shouldn’t want it to.

Cutler: That’s the point.