Riley: This is the follow-up interview with Tony Lake for the Clinton Presidential History Project. Let me thank you again, officially, for coming down and for making time. We’ve had a lot of back and forth trying to make this work.

Lake: I appreciate your patience.

Riley: Well, as I said walking up the stairs, you’re a busy man. We’re happy to accommodate that. And Mac, we’re grateful for your making the time to come into this also.

Destler: It’s convenient to have your center in the same place where my daughter and son-in-law live.

Riley: At least for the next little while.

Destler: Yes, until they move to Western Washington University.

Riley: Well, we’re not planning on relocating to the West Coast.

Lake: I was in Swaziland in Mozambique two weeks ago for ten days, visiting HIV AIDS sites, which was not exhilarating, and came back for the election and found that my Democratic friends are in a more profound depression than the people working in Mozambique.

Riley: The first thing that we need to do is to help out the transcriber with a voice identification. I’m Russell Riley. I’m heading up the Clinton History Project.

Lake: Tony Lake, former bureaucrat.

Destler: Mac Destler, who teaches at University of Maryland.

Knott: Steve Knott, here at the Miller Center.

Chidester: I’m Jeff Chidester. I’m a graduate research assistant at the Miller Center. I’m note-taking today.
Riley: Jeff is scribbling down the sequence of speakers, and trying to grab any unusual proper names that may get tossed around. Let me begin by asking, is there anything that you wanted to lead with? You said you had looked at the transcript.

Lake: Not really. No. I am sorry that we got so much into frippery. But any way I can help. Again, let me stipulate. I don’t have a great memory and it was a long time ago. Any time my memory disagrees with others I would go with the others. Unless, as I said, it’s an indictable offense, in which case I’d like an opportunity to respond to the charge. [laughter]

Riley: I thought I would begin by asking a question. You published a piece in *Foreign Affairs*.

Lake: Dual containment.

Riley: The title of it was something about “Backlash states.”

Lake: And it was about dual containment.

Destler: Basically, it was about confronting both Iran and Iraq rather than choosing one to align with.

Riley: Given the history that’s transpired since our last interview, it’s fairly noticeable that we didn’t spend much time talking about Iraq or Iran last time.

Lake: It was a wonderful few hours—of not talking about Iraq.

Riley: I wonder if we might open up that subject this morning, and ask you—I’m not sure exactly how to frame a question, other than maybe to get you to tell us a bit generally about how the administration viewed that particular area.

Destler: I guess an implied question is—since you wrote the article, it presumes there was pressure, maybe from within as well as without the administration to shift policy and align or semi-align with one of those states in order to better balance the other.

Lake: Well, I don’t know about pressure. But it did seem clear to us that was one area where we had a conceptual difference with the policies that had gone before. Where should we start? Do you want Iraq and Iran, or let me start with the general.

The first immediate crisis we had, or semi-crisis—not in the sense of a problem that we thought needed resolution right away, such as Bosnia, but specific events that needed addressing—was Iraq, where just before the Inaugural, Clinton had slightly misspoken, as he acknowledged, in saying—I don’t have this exactly right—that he was a Baptist and believed in redemption with reference to Saddam Hussein, which many of us considered an extraordinarily charitable view.

Riley: Many of you non-Baptists.

Lake: Many of us non-Baptists, yes. So that was being sorted out. Then, I’ve forgotten the cause of it—the [George H.W.] Bush administration was attacking sites in southern Iraq. They
consulted with us, but we thought absolutely they should go ahead. We had agreed that was the right thing to be doing. So we inherited—we came in the middle of those air strikes.

A policy issue with Iraq, almost immediately because it flowed from the President’s comments, was were we in favor of the removal of Saddam Hussein? And did we intend to work on that? We looked at it. The answer from both our experts and from the Brits was that we could not say so explicitly, because the overthrow of Saddam was not contained in the governing resolutions passed by the Security Council. If we made that an explicit goal, then the British lawyers would melt down and we would blow the coalition apart.

We consulted our experts in sophistry and would make the following argument, which was that we did believe that Saddam had to abide by all of the resolutions. One of the provisions of those resolutions said that he had to end the repression of his people. Since he did not enjoy the support of his own people, if he ceased the repression then his government would be removed. It was sort of a roundabout way of saying, yes, that we did. I can come back to it later if you want, but as you know, we made one or two efforts in that direction.

The other conceptual problem was that to a lot of us it had been a mistake during the 1980s to get into bed, in effect, with either side in the Iran-Iraq conflict. In fact, we had paid a terrible price when we had done it. Those of us who had been in the [Jimmy] Carter administration remembered well the perils of getting too close to Iran—I mean with the Shah [Mohammed Reza Pahlavi] at the end—and had no love for [Ayatollah Ruhollah] Khomeini and his successors. We were well aware that the [Ronald] Reagan administration had made a terrible mistake on Iran-Contra in trying to reach out to the Iranians in order to get at the Iraqis, and had been mistaken in getting too close to the Iraqis, in all the ways that its critics have noted, in trying to get after the Iraqis.

Martin Indyk, who had been very close to us during the campaign, and is a superb analyst—I can’t remember our discussions leading up to it—argued for a policy of dual containment. We thought the best way to put it out would be to write it in Foreign Affairs.

Riley: Is that kind of unusual?

Lake: It’s somewhat unusual. But we wanted to call attention—it seemed like a good way to get it out. If you give a speech, it gets around, but if it’s reported, it’s a headline and a few other sentences. This was a semi-complicated argument and we wanted it presented whole. Anybody who has the interest to read Foreign Affairs was probably going to have the interest to read the whole article. So we put it there. The point of it, and I think the article said it explicitly, was that: One—they both needed to be contained. Note here that we were not optimists that either one would be overthrown in the near term. Secondly—how did we put it? Something like, dual containment does not mean “duplicate” containment, which means that while you’re containing both of them, and you’re not going to try to curry favor with one to get at the other, the policies on how you contain them would be quite different.

On Iraq, there were no illusions about cutting deals with Saddam, or doing anything but insisting that he implement the resolutions. On the other hand, with the Iranians, saying that we could have a dialogue with them. I think I put it in the article—I know it was our policy—that dialogue
had to include all of the issues, I mean, the issues that they had with us and with them—terrorism, missiles, nuclear issues, et cetera. Of course, it never happened.

Destler: Was this a pretty clear consensus within the administration?

Lake: I don’t recall much argument about it, no. Frankly, I don’t recall a huge interest in it. Martin did the drafting. I was proud to sign it. I worked on the prepositions also. And we cleared it with the State Department. I can recall one or two meetings with the State Department people. But I don’t recall the Secretary of State objecting to it, or arguing about it particularly. It was a fairly obvious policy.

Riley: Can you track through for us what you recall about Iraqi policy in your subsequent years? I know that’s a fairly vague question.

Lake: While I think of it—and I haven’t read it—but I gather the 9/11 Commission—this is somewhat related—goes into what we were doing on terrorism, including my being more concerned with it than I had remembered—by 1993 asking the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] to go after Osama Bin Laden, or to track him.

Riley: That’s part of the reason for my question. One of the authors—his office is upstairs. Philip’s [Zelikow] is not here today. Philip doesn’t work on Saturdays, or if he does, he doesn’t do it here. Is there much you can say about Iraq policy?

Lake: I could tell you that, having anticipated subsequent history, Iraq was the number one issue that we were addressing. That’s not true. It was Bosnia, as topic A. Iraq, it seemed to us, was not going to be soluble at any reasonable cost at any point soon. I recall describing it—and I perhaps shouldn’t have—as a dull toothache that you just have to keep dealing with and make sure it doesn’t get worse. But you can’t quite fix it.

Destler: Under current circumstances, meaning current in that period?

Lake: In that period. It was manageable, but uncomfortably manageable. Well, a number of aspects were uncomfortable. One was when he was making threatening moves towards Kuwait. We reinforced to deter him. Let me back up. The first—and I think we went into it before—was the plot against Bush. Then the threatening moves with Kuwait. The Kurds come later.

Riley: The “threatening moves”? You’re talking about the amassing of troops in the south?

Lake: Yes, which I remember not believing presaged an attack on Kuwait. But I also remembered how the intelligence community in 1991 had assumed that since he was massing his troops so openly it had to be intimidation, because only an idiot would attack after such an open mobilization. We had to be prudent, of course, and reinforce and deter him. It worked. I don’t think we know even now whether he was thinking about doing anything or not. You never know. It’s nice that we don’t know.

Riley: In a situation like that, if I could ask you more directly, with that being primarily a military intervention, what is your role with respect to the President in this?
Lake: Coordinating it with the Defense Department and the State Department. Whenever we would do something like that, of course, the President would approve it, and we would meet with the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the Secretary of State, et cetera. I remember on Taiwan, and a few others, I would go over to the Pentagon sometimes to sit down with [William] Perry and Shali [John Shalikashvili] to go over the military plans.

It still is a wonder to me, and a tribute to our military, that we never lost a plane over southern Iraq, or over the northern no-fly zone as well. That was a concern. And a dull toothache is a toothache, nevertheless. So, especially when John Deutch came in, we were working on possible ways of overthrowing Saddam. There are two in my memory, or one in my memory and one in the figment of the imagination of others.

The one in my memory is the effort through Jordan and tribal folks and the military to overthrow him, which failed, to our great regret. I can remember a number of meetings about it, including my pressing them because of my memories of the coups that I was either present for, or peripherally at a very junior level involved in, in Saigon. Pressing the question of what succeeds Saddam? There was never a very good answer. Although, since it was a coup, not an invasion where we were going to be left holding the Baghdad [laughter]—sorry—we were assuming that almost anything after Saddam was better than Saddam. In the end I didn’t put the kibosh on the plan. But we never did have a good answer to that, as I recall.

Destler: Was there anyone in the administration who was a particular advocate for this plan?

Lake: Deutch. And the rest of us were for it. The issue was never, “Would you want to see a coup in Baghdad?” The issue was, “How do you do it? How do you have any prospects for success?” And as I said, who would succeed him? I don’t remember much debate about it.

Riley: The timeline had indicated one meeting that you had had with the Iraqi National Congress and I can’t remember when—

Lake: I met with them a couple of times, I think. Certainly at least once, in the Roosevelt Room. And we made appropriate positive noises to them.

Riley: This was for public show mostly?

Lake: No, to keep them on board because we were supporting all of them. I can’t remember how much was INC [Iraqi National Congress] and how much was INA [Iraqi National Accord] in that group, or whether they had split by then. I also remember being bothered by how much they were obviously supported by and accountable to the CIA. I honestly can’t remember whether [Ahmed] Chalabi was at that meeting or not. I know it was only later, in the second go-round, that I concluded that he was a charlatan.

Riley: But while you were still in your position?

Lake: Oh, yes. This is the [Wafiq al-] Samarra’i warrior coup. I call him the Samurai warrior, just because I like to. He was the John Belushi of anti-Saddam warriors. Should we go into that?

Riley: Please do.
Lake: This is a mystery.

Riley: I’ve got in the timeline a meeting with the Iraqi National Congress in April of ’93, which was before Deutch.

Lake: Oh, no, I wasn’t meeting with them about any coups. No, they were never—I don’t think we ever saw them as a vehicle for overthrowing Saddam. But I agree, and I’d say the preponderance of opinion—I can’t remember whether this was in ’95 or ’96. I was about to say if you ever figure out exactly what happened, because this is Rashomon and I’ve tried to piece it together, including with people at the CIA, and I’ve failed.

What I remember is getting word from Bill Studeman, who was the acting DCI [Director of Central Intelligence] at the time. They had just learned at the senior levels of the CIA of a plot to overthrow Saddam. I can’t remember whether it was through a coup or an actual attack or some combination, by the INC—although I don’t know if it was labeled as the INC—but by a former Saddam General named Samarra’i, who had this plan. And it was supposed to go forward in just a few days, less than a week.

We had to make a decision as to whether we were supporting it or not. A CIA representative in northern Iraq was involved somehow. He was known only as “Bob” to me. I met with Studeman, [Warren] Christopher, Perry, the Vice President—all of us looking at it. I remember looking at it with enough detail to have a picture on my desk of General Samarra’i, which was not an encouraging picture. I mean, it was just fubar.

Including—and I don’t remember this clearly, but I know this was the case—that we knew they’d been penetrated by the Iranians. Some think that we heard about it from the Iranians. I don’t think so. I think that the CIA got it themselves. Why the CIA didn’t know about it earlier, I don’t know. And nobody’s been able to tell me whether “Bob” forgot to tell Washington, whether the lower levels of the DO [Directorate of Operations] then forgot to tell the upper levels, or the upper levels forgot to tell the DCI, or whether none of them wanted to tell us.

Anyway, it was absolutely crazy, and seemed to me to be an effort to wave a cape so that our bull would charge through it. We didn’t have the wherewithal in northern Iraq, and we didn’t in Turkey, to have a war in northern Iraq with Saddam. We discussed it, and since we were not clear that the communications lines with these guys were precise, since “Bob” had some doubts—“Bob” turns out to be Bob Baer, who has been writing all these books—that messages would get through, we decided we needed to send a message directly to Chalabi, who was the focal point of this.

I didn’t want the President to be hanging out there, because, obviously, turning off a coup against Saddam Hussein may not be a popular move since you can never prove that it wouldn’t work, which is probably one reason why [John F.] Kennedy went ahead with the Bay of Pigs. And it needed more authority than the DCI, and it wasn’t the business, really, of the State Department or the Defense Department. So I wrote the message to Chalabi, saying, “Don’t do it. You do not have our support.” I think the reason it went to him was that he had somehow publicly said that we were supporting such an effort when we weren’t. It was a mess but it got called off. I think we probably prevented a kind of Bay of Pigs.
I can remember clearly—and the President approved all this—thinking to myself, By god, I did a good piece of work—it was over a weekend—in preventing what would have been a mess. And who is this Chalabi? And what the hell does he think he’s doing? Then this all got to ABC News. Peter Jennings and his producers, encouraged by Richard Perle, decided that because of my love for Saddam Hussein, that I had saved Saddam’s goose. I could not persuade them of the alternative, so there were some unfortunate nasty pieces.

When Ron Kessler wrote a book on the CIA he talked to me about all this. And he talked to Baer about it. Baer, in his book, says basically that it might have worked. He sent Kessler an e-mail, which Kessler passed along to me, with a note along the lines of, What happened here? Baer said that in fact he hadn’t been much involved. He was never clear as to what was happening. He had checked with Washington. Washington had said, “Leave it alone,” basically. But he said that they had been very careful not to let the White House know and, quote, “No wonder Tony Lake thought this was insane,” or something.

Anyway, this is after his book, after the ABC News. I was glad to hear that, but I wish that had been the public version all along. That convinced me that, with regard to Chalabi, as my Victorian grandmother used to say, “The truth is not in him.”

**Destler:** I want to ask a general process question that you may find easy to answer very quickly. We haven’t talked at all about formal process—PDDs, PRDs [Presidential Decision Directive, Presidential Review Directive]—that sort of thing. I’ll try to figure out a way to formulate this.

Let me take a more recent example. When Tom Ridge was Homeland Security Director, one of the things that baffled me was how he somehow managed in terms of his effort to get a proposal to unite the border agencies. That he saw it was somehow he had to get a bureaucratic consensus. He couldn’t somehow figure out a procedure that would give a choice to the President to merge the border agencies even though Treasury and the AG’s [Attorney General] office didn’t like it.

This sort of brought to mind the Mort Halperin-designed options process under [Richard] Nixon that worked a little better, and then stopped working for other reasons. But the idea of having a process where the agencies come together on paper, then they have to agree on what the options are, but nobody can veto a sensible option. There are obviously only a few policy issues that are of a sort that you can use that type of process. This is a long way of asking—were formal or semi-formal processes like that useful on certain issues in the Clinton administration? It obviously also depends on the President and how he likes to operate.

**Lake:** Well, there’s no point in going over the whole history of the thing. But you can certainly have processes that screw it up. I think we achieved that in the Carter administration, at the very beginning, with the two committees.

**Destler:** You had to fight about whether it was a policy issue—

**Lake:** Yes, if it’s a crisis issue then the NSC [National Security Council] dominated. If it was a policy issue or a foreign policy issue or something, then it was State. And it matters. Because whoever chairs the meeting gets to shape the paper, which is important. It was just a recipe for...
bureaucratic warfare. [Zbigniew] Brzezinski and [Cyrus] Vance might well have been at each other’s throats anyway. Well, Vance never went at anybody’s throat, but figuratively.

I think I’d be a little less bearish than you are about it. Those processes worked pretty well under Bush, Sr. We’ll leave aside the last four years. And they worked pretty well under Clinton. As I recall, they worked pretty well under Nixon. But there are a number of questions. One is—and I’m just thinking out loud here—the degree to which you’re making policy through the daily flow, and the degree to which you want to call time out and say, “Wait a minute. No, we need a principals’ meeting and a serious review of the options.” I can come back to these. The second would be, how much are you developing the options and then getting the various departments’ views on those options while you refine them? Or how much are you getting the departments’ views and making those the options? You see what I mean? In other words, does the paper say, “Here are the differences among the agencies,” or does the paper say, “Here are the different things you can do”?

Destler: There’s a third way, I presume, in which you involve the departments in a dialogue that leads to the development of the options, but the options are not necessarily—

Lake: That’s right. Ideally that should be happening at the Assistant Secretary-and-below levels. A third issue is, when you’re doing general policy questions, how much of it is in the formal process, and how much of it is in an informal process? On the first, sort of a formal process, I recall it working quite well, but over time it became less working together to develop the options and then picking your positions, and became more—In the first year of an administration when you’re setting policy you need to be doing that. After that, you sort of know what the options are, and then it becomes more, “On this issue, here are the various agencies’ views,” which I and my staff would put in—

Destler: And later it’s, “On this issue we have to make the decision today or this week”—

Lake: Well, that’s the second point, yes. And it becomes that, once you have the policy. But even there, if it’s an important decision, you’re getting the agencies’ views, so that on Bosnia, for example, there is a whole stream of memos that would go to Clinton saying, “Here is what State thinks. Here is what NSC thinks. Here is what I think.” That would come after a principals’ meeting.

One key question there is—before the principals’ meeting, you have at least a discussion paper, if not an options paper. Afterwards, the NSC staff, at least as we had it, would write up the decision paper for the President. The key question is, “Is that cleared with the participants or not?” which was a source of bitter disagreement sometimes in the Carter administration—that the NSC staff was sending stuff to Carter that we never got to see after meetings. Under Clinton, we always would clear it whenever we could.

Destler: Meaning that they saw it, or they had to agree with it?

Lake: They saw it and—I don’t honestly remember, but I’d be surprised if I said they had to clear every word, because then you’d never get anything done. But if they said, no, this was misrepresenting their views, then we’d fix it. I don’t recall there ever being a problem on it, ever.
That’s that process and as I said, it became more and more, “Here are the agencies’ views,” rather than after formal meetings.

In the daily business, as you were saying, versus the formal policy process, over time more and more goes into the daily business because you’ve set the policies. I think that’s appropriate. One place where I violated this, and [James] Goldgeier in his book has in effect said that I was a cunning and devious and wily bureaucrat in doing this. In fact, it was just because we were so damn busy with everything—

**Destler:** This was the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] enlargement?

**Lake:** NATO enlargement, right. We talked about that before. But I do believe that when you’re clearing a Presidential speech, or speeches that have major policy in them—like the speech that laid out policy on NATO enlargement—that’s the functional equivalent of a policy paper, at least, and everybody was getting a shot at it.

The third area is where you might be substituting informal policy meetings for the formal ones, where you can get a lot more done more quickly. Over time, largely for personal reasons, as I tried to drive the process more and more and push my own views more and more, my colleagues were occasionally not too happy with that. I wanted to find ways of making sure that we were still a team and everything was being discussed. So we had the lunches with—it would be Christopher and Perry and me, as I recall—

**Destler:** Roughly how often did you have those?

**Lake:** Weekly, I think. Then we started a weekly breakfast that was larger, with also Madeleine [Albright], and Deutch, and Shali, and Christopher and Perry and me. Both of them, the smaller lunches and the larger breakfasts, were explicitly not to make decisions, but simply to discuss things. Of course, that’s nonsense.

**Destler:** I was just going to say, how can you not make decisions?

**Lake:** Well, when you’re sitting there you can’t make formal decisions. We never came out of them saying, “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do.” But we would come out of them with a general understanding of what we would do, and then go back to our respective staffs and buildings. Occasionally, one or the other of them would fall off after mature reflection, which means getting yelled at by your subordinates for having agreed to such-and-such. Then we’d have to go back—more into the formal process.

**Destler:** As opposed to genuinely coming out of the meeting with different impressions about what had been decided?

**Lake:** This is Rashomon again. I never thought that there was any disagreement as to what was genuinely agreed on. Sometimes they would say that our memories are different. And they may well have been. But it was a very useful way of trying to cut through a lot of the crap.

Finally, in addition, we had what were supposed to be weekly breakfasts—maybe they were monthly—with outside experts and my staff, we’d get people in from other departments also.
Sometimes it made a big difference. Talking to Brian Jenkins on terrorism made a great impression on me. Bernard Lewis on the Middle East. There would be two or three people. They would sometimes have a real impact on policy and the people that would be there. When Joe Nye was at the NIC [National Intelligence Council] we’d occasionally, with policy planning and various others, have Blue Sky meetings on Saturday mornings in the Situation Room. Again, explicitly not to make any decisions or have any impact on policy, but just talk things through.

**Destler:** Things lead to—yes, yes, sure. Getting back to the formal side and the sort of broad, you know, “Let’s step back and look at options.” Can you think of an issue where that was particularly important and particularly useful early in the administration?

**Lake:** Bosnia. Colin Powell complained in his memoirs that I was running these seminars, because they would go on and on. As I’ve noted before, he and I were quite close during all this, so I was a little irritated, but I think it was because he was in the second cycle I was referring to, which is, they’d had those policy discussions in the previous administration. He was now sort of implementing, and who were these guys who didn’t understand we were implementing?

To us, we were in the first cycle, because we didn’t think the previous policies had worked—or the lack of policies had worked. I wanted us to, very explicitly, on that issue—and I regret to say that on other issues I was noted for being impatient and trying to move things along, and occasionally impatiently drumming my fingernails. But on this, I wanted us to have a seminar to go back to basics, because we couldn’t find a good answer. We needed, especially in my view, not to be on autopilot out of the campaign, where we’d all had strong views, but to actually look through all the records and intelligence reports and everything and see why the previous administration had been doing what it was doing—what the bureaucracy thought, what the new ideas were, old ideas, et cetera.

**Knott:** I have a question about Iraq—

**Riley:** Yes, we can go back to that. If I can build on one piece here and then we can come back to that. Tell us a little bit about the process of taking what Mac has just described up to the level of Presidential decision-making. Is this President somebody who responds better to oral briefings, or written briefings? How do you communicate to him and what was his own internal education process in coming to understand—

**Lake:** Clinton?

**Riley:** Yes, Clinton.

**Lake:** I remember—well, I think I remember—that [Dwight] Eisenhower liked oral briefings. And I do remember firsthand that Nixon liked written. Clinton was both. He was just—I’m not a courtier or a “Friend of Bill,” but he really is extraordinary. Read voraciously. Read everything. Would return it with totally undecipherable comments in the margins and backwards checks from his left hand.

But he liked face to face meetings—not oral briefings so much, but I was going to say that he—and he used to drive me crazy sometimes, because it took so much time—he wanted always to know that everybody had had a say and that he knew their opinion. He didn’t often come down
to the Situation Room for our principals’ meetings. I’d say maybe at a fifth of them he would turn up, or less. If we were having a very formal meeting about a military action or something, he’d come down with Vice President [Albert, Jr.] Gore and sit in. But there were lots of meetings in his office, and then a fair number in the Cabinet Room. There would be a discussion, which either he would chair or I would chair, usually him. At the end of it I would try to summarize where we were, and then he would go around the room and ask each person his or her opinion, just to make sure that nobody thought that he or she was cut off.

**Destler:** In a context in which they were more or less free to express it?

**Lake:** Oh, absolutely. And they’d been expressing—

**Destler:** Not the Lyndon Johnson, “Do you agree?”

**Lake:** No, no, no, no. It was why he is a great politician. He just wanted to know. A lot of it was very personal. Then he would talk to—if they wanted to call him on the phone, he would talk to Christopher and various others.

**Riley:** Did you have much trouble policing out-of-channel communications to him on the phone?

**Lake:** No, everybody was pretty good on that. No, not very much. The one that could have been a problem was Strobe Talbott because Strobe was a friend. He would run into him at the movie theater. He’d run into him on social occasions, whenever. Strobe could have abused it, but was very good at always calling me and saying, “I saw the President and this is what we talked about. And here’s what he seemed to be thinking.” I appreciated that.

**Riley:** Was it also the case with Strobe that there was a part of the foreign policy portfolio that was his?

**Lake:** Well, no. I’d say all of the—I’m sorry, this is a silly correction, but I’d say that all of the foreign policy portfolio belonged to the President, not to any of us. But, yes, Strobe had a particular interest in Russia. He dominated it pretty much. He knew so much more than the rest of us. The only time the President really got angry at me was when I got into it with Strobe once over Russia policy in front of him, and he felt I was dissing Strobe, which I really didn’t mean to be doing. I was not a [Boris] Yeltsin fan. That would irritate the President occasionally. But we would generally agree with Strobe. Or Larry Summers, because so much of it was economics.

**Destler:** Vice President Gore—how would you characterize his role in all this? Does he sort of come in and out? I know he had the particular—

**Lake:** He was in.

**Destler:** Does he come to principals’ meetings? How does it work?

**Lake:** He came to every meeting the President came to. I don’t recall his ever going to a principals’ meeting that the President wasn’t at. But I included Leon Fuerth, the Vice President’s National Security Adviser, in everything—in my small morning staff meetings, and—well almost everything. If occasionally I forgot to include him, it was the one time that I can recall.
where the Vice President would get testy. I might get a call from the Vice President, saying, “No, I want Leon there.” I would assure him that it was inadvertence, not conspiracy.

The Vice President was very good. He saw the President all the time, but I don’t recall his having discussions that he wouldn’t tell me about afterwards. I would try to make sure, through Leon, that he was on board, generally, if I was trying to do something, and happily our views were quite congruent. On Bosnia—where he wanted to do things.

Riley: Do you want to say anything about the President’s learning curve on foreign policy? We probably touched on this a little bit last time.

Lake: Well, as I said, he’s a freak of nature. He has an incredible memory and he’s very smart. During the first year, year-and-a-half, you know, he didn’t know the issues. Let me back up. I think I told you that during the campaign how impressed I was with how he actually tried to internalize things before he said them, rather than learn what he should say at a press conference and then leave understanding the issue for later, which impressed me.

But it’s no secret that foreign policy was not his first concern. I don’t recall his ever blowing it off, because it’s serious stuff. And it interested him. But the passion was about domestic policy and that’s why I first supported him, in fact. There were very few of the kinds of meetings that President Bush liked to have, of just sitting around discussing foreign policy issues and playing with it. Clinton didn’t do that.

Riley: That’s rather striking, because we get the impression he did have some of those meetings on the domestic side, at least early on in his Presidency.

Lake: Yes, he did. Absolutely. He loved it. Even later when [Tony] Blair—I guess it was before Blair became Prime Minister—In their first meeting they each did the blah, blah, blah on the diplomacy, and then they got into “the Third Way.” You could see each of their faces lighting up, and off they went to the meaning of modern society. He was a Governor, and that’s—I actually believe that domestic policy does have some impact on the lives of our people, and is therefore worthy of a President’s attention from time to time, no? So who am I to complain?

On foreign policy issues, he learned the issues quickly. He would get a little impatient because his mind—he would sort of leap, almost intuitively, to where he wanted to come out. And usually, in my view, in the right place, i.e., not that I necessarily agreed with it but it was in a reasonable position. But he wouldn’t state the intervening mental steps. In my view, he needed to have those logical steps in his mind so he could explain to other people in press conferences or wherever, and he needed to know about this treaty, or what the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo had to do with, you know, our current trade policy. So I would be pedantic, and say, “Okay. But you know—” and then go through the logical steps, often preparing him for press conferences or whatever. You could see him getting a little irritated with the pedantry.

I remember going out to the Vice President’s home once to say, “I’m just not—I’m getting along fine and we’re getting things done pretty much, but I’m having trouble communicating.” And Gore saying, “You’ve just got to go through the steps with him.”

Riley: But Gore understood what you were talking about?
Lake: Yes.

Destler: Gore would be that way, too.

Lake: Gore would do that.

Destler: He would take it step by step, yes.

Lake: Well, I may have mentioned to you, walking in on them once in the small dining room when Gore had his flip charts on climate change. Just the two of them, which made me feel a lot better, because what I was doing—at least I didn’t have flip charts! But as time went on, I’d say after a year, a year-and-a-half, he was on top of the details.

Oh, and let me add this. By no means was it always me-professor, President-student, because on numerous issues he would know more than we did. Especially, he was way ahead of anybody on what is now called globalization, on the interstices of foreign and domestic policy, et cetera. He really, from his time as Governor, got that, and was trying to tutor all of us in that.

Riley: Were there any issue areas that he just flat-out didn’t like to deal with?

Lake: Bosnia. [laughs] Not an issue anyone would like to deal with. No, I can’t remember any which he would just avoid it. But, especially in the first year, he did not want to get too caught up in the details. Well, maybe the first two years. And so I’d say, “Here’s where I’ll be pushing that,” and he’d say, “Go do it.”

Riley: One more question in this line, and that is, was Mrs. [Hillary] Clinton ever present for you in your line of work?

Lake: No. She was a presence, because she’d travel with him and I liked her a lot but—

Riley: A participant in any of the meetings?

Lake: I can’t recall ever. No, not once.

Destler: She did travel—

Lake: I know she’d talk to him about it all the time.

Riley: You know she talked about it all the time, privately?

Lake: Privately.

Riley: Because you were getting signals from this? Or it was just that—

Lake: Just from what I was told, and you could sort of tell.

Knott: I have a question about Iraq. At some point—it’s probably after your tenure as National Security Advisor—this notion of regime change becoming the policy of the U.S. Government. Were you involved in that? What was your take on that?
Lake: Well, on Iraq I do specifically recall by ’96 thinking this was silly. Why are we dancing around this thing? I can’t remember whether the British position was somehow becoming more relaxed about it or not. I can’t remember what I said now, but in early ’97 I found an opportunity—and I can’t remember where—to start on my own to become more explicit about it. And thinking to myself, This is a good thing. I can be more irresponsible now, while I was still in the government.

Destler: A good thing, meaning to have a declaratory policy?

Lake: Yes. And why not, it was silly. It was a charade. I don’t know what happened after that. But I do know it was for the sake of the coalition that we had to be so cute about it.

Riley: Was there anything else on Iraq that we’re missing?

Lake: Well, there was the crisis when he attacked the Kurds, after being invited in by—I’ve forgotten which party—which was a very difficult time. There was a lot of political pressure to do more. Militarily we were not in a position to—in fact, we were bluffing, largely, in what we were doing. We were not in a position to fight a major conflict in northern Iraq. I don’t know whether Saddam knew it or not. I don’t know. We didn’t have the assets, and I don’t know whether the Turks would have allowed us to use the assets, in any case.

Riley: Did you spend much time dealing with the Turks?

Lake: Shali would do most of it. In the crisis over the little rock in the Eastern Med that the Greeks and the Turks almost went to war over, Imia, we talked to the Turks and the Greeks on northern Iraq, it was very difficult. We had to—and I thought it was the right policy, but we got flack for it—respond by widening the no-fly zone in the south where we were in a stronger position, and put pressure on him in the south, rather than respond directly in the north.

Knott: You could not have used air power in the north?

Lake: Didn’t have enough to actually stop a ground offensive, no. That’s an illusion. Or so the military said. I still believed, right up until the war, regarding Saddam, that an alternative course would have been to declare a no-fly zone over the whole country. Take away his air force, which would make a coup more possible by some army elements. And stop flying the over-flights, because we were going to lose a plane at some point. But just put him on notice that if any plane flew out of any airfield, we would take out the airfield. Then go in and strike him every time anybody flew, and implement a countrywide no-fly zone that way. The military said, “Not feasible.”

I’ve talked to military folks since, and I asked them about this, and some of them said they thought it might have been feasible. So I don’t know whether it really wasn’t feasible, or whether that was a way of just not doing any new policy. I can’t remember whether this idea was right at the end, that I had, or—it was about that time.

Riley: Steve, one of the areas that I actually cut you off at the first interview, towards the end, was on normalization of relations with Vietnam.
Riley: It is a ballgame day, so I’m throwing the issue out. You were involved in this. Do you want to give us your account of that process and what you were—?

Lake: This was an issue that was of huge personal interest to me, since I’d begun my career in Vietnam, and also since, during the Carter administration, Dick Holbrooke and I had failed to sell this, first to the Vietnamese, and then to the White House.

I don’t know if I mentioned my meeting in Hanoi in December ’83. Peter Tarnoff and former Senator Dick Clark and I went to Vietnam and Cambodia. We were perhaps the first Americans to go back there. It was a fascinating trip and I could go on and on about it. I won’t, but it was very interesting to me how popular we Americans were, which I hadn’t expected at all. I remember being in the Mekong Delta, crossing the Mekong on a ferry and a group of Vietnamese gathering around and saying in Vietnamese with some hostility, “Russians, Russians, Russians!” And I said in the Vietnamese I remembered, “No, no. Americans.” “No, you’re not Americans.” “Yes, we are.” “No, you’re not Americans.” So I went into English and started reciting the Declaration of Independence, figuring that some of them had probably learned some English in schools when we were there. And they said, “Yes, yes, you’re Americans.” Cheers. It was amazing. But anyway, we—

Riley: And you were there under what auspices?

Lake: Aspen, or somebody—not the Vietnamese, but somebody. We pressed them on MIAs [missing in action], POWs [prisoners of war]. And then we went to Cambodia where Hun Sen was extremely aggressive. He went after us. We were later told that they had said the Vietnamese had warned them that we asked “difficult” questions. But it was a really interesting trip.

[two pages have been redacted]

Lake: So we met with their Minister of Justice, who had been involved in it, and—this is the reason we go on in the negotiations—

Riley: Now, this is still in ’83?

Lake: Yes, in ’83, with [Henry] Kissinger. Then we went back to the Carter time. I remember saying to the Minister of Justice, who had been on the diplomatic side, “Why, when we were offering you normalization, did you screw it up in the first years?” Because once we started moving towards the Chinese, which is the Brzezinski policy, then we couldn’t move towards the Vietnamese and we got trumped. But there was a window there. I asked the Vietnamese why they hadn’t climbed through the window but had insisted on reparations, which they had to know
we wouldn’t agree to, and even if we in the administration had agreed to it, the Congress would never agree. He laughed, and said, “Well, we had to try.”

**Destler:** Had to try reparations?

**Lake:** Yes, “We had to try.” It’s just the way you bargain with the Americans, very frustrating. So anyway, this went back a long time.

**Destler:** You didn’t have knowledge of windows opening and closing—

**Lake:** No, that’s right. So under Clinton we wanted to do this. We wanted to do it because I had always thought we weren’t going to heal the war until we normalized.

**Riley:** Was the President nervous about this?

**Lake:** Yes. We were all nervous about it. And so I used to meet fairly often with the POW, MIA people, who were of course strongly opposed to it. I still have great sympathy for them.

**Destler:** What was the role of [John] McCain and [John] Kerry at this stage?

**Lake:** Well, I’m coming to that. I wanted very much to do it, but we wanted to do it right. Right, to me, meant not pressing it so hard or so fast that it then became one more source of contention, rather than a part of healing. And it would have been. It would have blown it up with them. So, you know, first lots of meetings with veterans’ groups, working it through, et cetera.

McCain and Kerry really pushed it. They did more than give us cover. They were pushing the pace, in fact, a little faster than I wanted to go. There were some in the State Department who wanted to go faster than I did. But I wanted to make sure that we were doing everything we could to prepare the ground. The President held a number of meetings with the veterans’ groups, to try to build as much of a constituency as possible for it. It was always in the context of trying to get it done, but done right. There are still some who believe that I was actually on the other side of that issue because I was not leaping into it in the way that they wanted, which is not the case. I think it worked out well. In fact. Kerry and McCain get a lot of credit.

**Riley:** Was the Vice President involved in this?

**Lake:** I don’t think very much, no. I mean, he was involved because he was involved in everything, but, no. The President obviously wanted to do it.

**Riley:** Any follow-up on that?

**Destler:** Can we talk about Japan?

**Riley:** Sure, by all means.

**Destler:** One of the things we didn’t talk about much in the first interview was Japan. As you all recall, it was the subject of a certain amount of attention in the first two-and-a-half years during your tenure, and was heavily on the economic side. How does one turn this into a question?
Obviously it was a test of your institutional arrangement of having the NEC [National Economic Council] and the NSC and having a joint staff—

Lake: Actually, the bigger test came—

Destler: I remember a lot of people—Since I was writing a little monograph about NEC and I interviewed a lot of people, and got lots of stories about all the NEC deputies meeting all the time about Japan, and coordinating strategy and all that stuff. And then, of course, Mickey Kantor kind of taking it over in the last stage.

Lake: Did they tell you about the secret negotiation of the Framework Agreement?

Destler: You mean the Framework Agreement in ’93? I know a little bit about that, but go ahead.

Lake: It was more of a test of their institutional arrangements than ours, in the end, if you consider a fistfight a test of an institutional arrangement.

Destler: You’d better say a little more than that.

Lake: I will. This could have been a huge issue, because in ’92 there was a lot of attention to Japanese trade issues, a lot of anger in America and in foreign policy circles about Japanese protectionism and unfair practices. I can recall during the campaign, meeting with friends who were Japanese diplomats, saying, “This is going to be a tough issue but we’re not going to do any more Japan-bashing than we have to.” I think we were reasonably good at not exacerbating that. But clearly when we came in, this was going to be very difficult.

Bob Rubin, head of the NEC, was one of the strongest critics of Japanese practices, and a real hawk on this when he came in. He held a couple of meetings for us over at his office at the Treasury with American businessmen who could educate the non-economists—

Destler: This would have been after—

Lake: Early ’93.

Destler: It wouldn’t have been Treasury then.

Lake: No. Where was he? I’m trying to remember where we met? Because it was at Treasury for some reason.

Riley: Was [Lloyd] Bentsen on his side on these meetings?

Lake: Yes, but he wasn’t as strong as Bob. You’re right. Maybe it was during the transition. I think it would have been during the transition, because it was not in his office in the White House—Businessmen who could just give us firsthand accounts of how tough it was to work in Japan and how they achieved it. I guess it was a G7 meeting in Tokyo then in ’93.

Destler: That’s right. [Kiichi] Miyazawa was still Prime Minister.
Lake: Yes, that’s right. During the G7 meeting in Tokyo we were trying to negotiate with the Japanese—We each had formal negotiating teams—the so-called “Framework Agreement” that would lay out the pieces of how we would deal with all of these issues in a general framework. And those talks were very heavy slogging. I got a call then from [Hisashi] Owada, saying that he would like to have a private dinner with me.

Destler: I can’t remember what Owada’s position was then.

Lake: He was the Vice Foreign Minister—I think he was the Vice Foreign Minister. But clearly tied in very closely to the Prime Minister, and a very senior, distinguished fellow. His call confused me, but I said, “Fine.” We had this exquisite dinner, at a very nice Japanese restaurant.

Riley: This, again, is in ’93?

Lake: Ninety-three.

Destler: You’re over there in Tokyo.

Lake: This is on the second day of the G7 meeting.

Destler: And this is very close to the climax of the negotiations.

Lake: Well, we didn’t know there if there was going to be a climax.

Destler: Right. You didn’t know that. Yes.

Lake: In fact, it didn’t seem to us that there was going to be a climax. Anyway, so we have a very nice dinner, and towards the end he comes to the point, which was that the negotiations aren’t getting there. The Foreign Ministry was concerned about this. He was authorized by the Prime Minister to ask if he and I could drop out of the G7 stuff and negotiate the Framework Agreement in a hotel room in secret. Recalling the frustration of all my economics professors whenever I would try to understand anything to do with economics, I thought that this was not going to serve America well, unless I was there with someone else. I said I’d get back to him. I talked to Rubin. I talked to the President. And for the next day and a half, Rubin and I met with Owada—and I’ve forgotten who—in a hotel room, and pretty much hammered out the Framework Agreement.

Then there was a dinner at the hotel with the President and the Prime Minister, and Kiki [Takakazu] Kuriyama, who was their ambassador in Washington, and me. They sort of blessed it. We turned it over to the regular negotiators, and then late that night I got a call about one or two in the morning from Owada, saying, “Can’t you give us—” I can’t remember what concession it was now. Just this one more small thing, because the MITI—the Ministry of International Trade and Industry—representatives had gone absolutely crazy when they saw that the Foreign Ministry had negotiated this thing. And I was told the next day by reporters—

Destler: Crazy in process terms?
Lake: And substance. Owada needed just something more. I remember calling Rubin and Rubin saying, “Hell no.” And then we finally worked out our own compromise and went back. Owada had enough to go back to MITI. Apparently they were waiting downstairs in the hotel lobby—a MITI representative and a Foreign Ministry representative. According to reporters, they literally got into a shoving match over this thing.

Anyway, we got the agreement, and Rubin and I stood in the back while the formal negotiators announced their breakthrough and it was all endorsed and everything. That was the Framework Agreement. It served us pretty well, not necessarily in reaching agreement, but in giving us enough so that we weren’t screwing up, especially the political-military side of our relationship, as we worked through the economic side.

Destler: As things moved along, there was a summit conference the next year. [Morihiro] Hosokawa was the Prime Minister, the reform Prime Minister who succeeded—and there was his visit to Washington in which the Japanese made a huge thing about it being the first time that certain people had explicitly stated at the summit conference that it had not been possible to agree, or it had not been possible to resolve issues. The Japanese, particularly the media people, were very proud of this, actually.

Lake: Well, after the first one, I was amused, you know, where they had actually had a shoving match. Then, a day later the Japanese newspapers were full of stories about how they screwed the Americans. Yukio Satoh, my old friend who was then working with the Prime Minister, would come over before the Prime Minister’s visits to Washington, and we’d work through everything we could, so we could avoid that. But I do remember that—

Destler: Yes, there was a period when I think Bo [W. Bowman] Cutter was trying to get something done a little bit out of channels, and got slapped down.

Lake: Yukio wasn’t out of channels. I mean, this was, but they would advance it to try to make it all very Japanese theater.

Destler: But then you go into ’95, and the deadline for the auto issue emerges. We were talking about, you know, end-runs to the President and so forth. As I recall, at least from my research, there were clear end-runs in this sense, at least around the NEC process, in which Kantor would essentially get memos to the President and get the President’s blessing for an approach, prior to or parallel to when the NEC was supposed to be discussing it. You probably would have ended up in the same place anyway.

Lake: I think we would have, in the same place. And we all had such a stake in Mickey succeeding that I remember not getting terribly exercised about it.

Destler: And then we declared victory.

Lake: Went to school on the Japanese.

Riley: Can you talk more generally about the politics of trade and how you dealt with that? Japan is one particular instance. We didn’t talk about NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement] or GATT [General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade] last time either. Were those
politics more complicated than security issues, for example, because you’ve got the President having a greater personal interest, maybe, in that area than some of these others?

Lake: Well, yes, they were certainly more complicated. And the most difficult part at the time on NAFTA was during the campaign, in ’92—and the President figuring out what to say about it—rather than the actual policies afterwards, which was just slogging through. Frankly, I didn’t get all that involved. I’d go to meetings with the business roundtable to say how this was important from a foreign policy point of view and its impacts on national security, et cetera. But we didn’t do—it was mostly Congressional slogging, more than policy questions.

Riley: But you said the key decision was made during the campaign. Were you a part of the process?

Lake: I wasn’t, actually. I was up in Massachusetts and there was a meeting somewhere here in Virginia. I think maybe Sandy [Samuel Berger] was there and we had common views on that.

Destler: Back on Japan—There was concern, I know, at least among some of the East Asia or Japan policy community that you were pushing the Japanese so hard on the economic side that we were threatening or in some way endangering or creating issues for the security relationship. Then at some point Joe Nye moved to the Pentagon and came up with this report, which was perceived as being useful amelioration and balancing. Do you have any particular memory of that?

Lake: I don’t think we ever came very close to going over any precipices. It was irritating. But I think that was overblown considerably.

Destler: But your internals said—there wasn’t a sense that this was, My god, Joe, do something for the security side, because otherwise we’ll be—nothing like that?

Lake: No, no. I don’t think so. I don’t recall ever hearing that from the Japanese very much, any more than as a part of general bargaining. No. Economic issues screwed us up with the Koreans more than with the Japanese, oddly enough, from time to time. And obviously with the Chinese, more than the Japanese.

Riley: Do you want to press on Japan, anything else?

Destler: I don’t think so. I did have one thing on China though. In the earlier interview we were talking about China and early on you made some positive reference to Win [Winston] Lord in his role, and you said, “I want to get back to this.” And you never did, which was maybe our fault. I could find it if you want.

Lake: It may have just been a personal note.

Destler: You said, “Win was great on this throughout. You remind me to come back to that.”

Lake: Yes, it was just a personal note. Win and I, Win’s and my careers wound back and forth. We were on the same territory over the years and we both worked for Kissinger. It was kind of
an accident of fate that when we went to Beijing, I was the National Security Advisor and he was the Assistant Secretary. And god knows, he knew more about China than I did.

I was both extremely impressed and in his debt that on the trip and in general, he played his role rather than trying to play mine, or undercut me, or upstage me, or whatever. I tried to be supportive of his. But it would have been easy for there to be friction. In fact, he would go out and do the backgrounding, and he would just do it straight. He’s a very good guy, and he didn’t have to do that.

Destler: Earlier on, as part of our project that I’ve been running at Brookings in Maryland, we had an oral history discussion on China, which unfortunately, for reasons that were a mistake, was scheduled so that Win couldn’t come to it. We shouldn’t have had the meeting without Win. But we did, and it became a little bit of open season on Win, with people criticizing his role or effectiveness, or lack thereof, as policy coordinator, particularly in the period leading up to the backing off on human rights. I always thought he was put in an enormously difficult position, because of where he sat.

Lake: He was. Well, on two counts. And I wouldn’t have said it was enormously difficult; I would have said it was damn near impossible. On the one hand, and this goes to the larger issue you and I have discussed many times: in my view, an Assistant Secretary of State cannot manage a policy that has such economic ramifications, because the Treasury Department, A—is not going to go along; and B—to the degree the Assistant Secretary of State pushes them, they’re going to go after him. That’s what happened. Win, to his enormous credit, as a former ambassador who did not give in to client-itis—had very strong views on human rights in China, and stood up for them while he was in Beijing, and he stood up for them while he was in Washington. This put him on a collision course with Treasury and a lot of other folks.

So, both in institutional and in person terms, it was very hard for him to “coordinate” a policy when he was also the strongest advocate of one point of view, and from a weak bureaucratic base. So it’s no wonder.

Knott: Were the Chinese at all responsive to the human rights issues that you or others would raise?

Lake: I could give you a long answer on that.

Destler: You said a little bit about that at the last interview.

Lake: I did, and about telling them that they were on the wrong side of history—

Knott: How about a quiet request for particular cases?

Lake: Our first approach failed, of linkage to “Most Favored Nation.” Our efforts to cut private deals with them on human rights cases failed in a general sense in the first three years. Thereafter we would try to let them save face and just raise particular cases. Occasionally, we would have a very modest success. But I’d say in general, no, we didn’t get very far at all.
I’ve since come to understand somewhat why they believe they can’t do it, which I’ve written, and I may have gone into the last time, and I’ll give you the very short version. We’re seeing it now in their statistics of unrest. That is, they know they have to reform their economy and the state-run enterprises. That means throwing a lot of people out of work. They don’t have a social safety net. Therefore, there is going to be unrest, labor unrest, unrest of the kind that is now escalating in China. The only way they can deal with it is repression. If they’re soft on human rights issues, then they can see the regime in trouble. Let me emphasize: this is not justification. It’s explanation.

Riley: And they’ve got a huge urbanization problem.

Lake: Right, and unemployment in the rural areas.

Knott: I’m curious as to whether you heard, during your period as National Security Advisor, from either Richard Nixon or Henry Kissinger on China?

Lake: Oh, yes.

Knott: You did?

Lake: Yes. I mean, the President did. But I would be involved sometimes. Yes, from both of them.

Knott: Would Kissinger communicate with you directly, or was your relationship with him brokered?

Lake: No, no. We communicated. Not often. I recall meeting with him a couple of times. And he would see the President—I don’t think alone so often, but maybe with a few others from time to time. I can’t remember if it was the President reaching out to him or vice versa. I can remember calling Nixon once or twice at the President’s request, to talk to him about things. I was very impressed.

Knott: What impressed you?

Lake: About how precise Nixon was. And how he didn’t hang up on me, [laughing] given the past.

Knott: Did he ever joke with you about the past?

Lake: No. He said something nice once. I can’t remember what it was. You’d think I would remember.

Riley: You keep forgetting the nice things.

Knott: Anything else about him?

Lake: I realized, going over the last transcript, that the loony anecdotes were an interference, but there is one here, speaking of Nixon.
Riley: No, they’re not an interference at all.

Destler: Twenty years from now it’s going to keep some of the readers of these transcripts awake.

Lake: It sort of involves China as well as Nixon. Maybe I mentioned Chuck Colson at the funeral?

Destler: No, I don’t think you did.

Lake: I do have a singular distinction here. I flew out with President Clinton to the Nixon funeral. By the way, on the side at the Nixon funeral, I then met with the Chinese representative to try to set up a secret channel to try to resolve the human rights issues, which led to Mike Armacost going out there. At the funeral everybody is making nice. I had a particular history with the Nixon White House, having resigned, and I see a group of people with Chuck Colson, who, as you recall had said that he would step on his—

Knott: “Run over his grandmother”?

Lake: “Run over his grandmother,” or something, and then had become a devout Christian.

Destler: I think he was the one associated with the alleged plot to firebomb Mort Halperin’s office in Brookings—

Lake: And did a whole bunch of things. He had gone over to the Bureau of Labor Statistics to see if they were Jewish, because they were publishing these bad statistics. But has done a lot of, I’ve learned since—a lot of really good stuff, as a born-again Christian. So I walked up to Colson and said, “Hi. Tony Lake,” stuck out my hand, and he actually recognized me and said, “Hello, Tony. God bless you.” I had no idea what to say, so I said, “Well, God bless you, too, Chuck,” although I guess I’m less authorized than he is to say, “God bless you.” Anyway, so I’d been blessed by Chuck Colson. Then we flew back to Washington. The next morning I had a meeting with the Dalai Lama, who gave me a blessing shawl and blessed me. I am sure that I am the only person who, within twenty-four hours, has been blessed by both Chuck Colson and the Dalai Lama.

Riley: That explains the Red Sox this year.

Lake: It does. Yes, it finally worked.

[BREAK]

Riley: There are a couple of loose ends. I know we want to spend a fair amount of time towards the end. We’ve got about two more hours if we need it.
Lake: If we can, an hour and three quarters would be excellent.

Riley: I think we can do that. We want to leave ample time for the DCI story, but I’ve got a few loose ends here. Let me just go through and throw out some things that we haven’t talked about and see if there’s anything that you want.

Lake: Is there arrest for traffic violations? Any other sort of grim history that we want to go through?

Riley: Any invasive surgery, or—

Lake: Any invasive surgery, yes. I can talk about my hernia operation. It’s really painful.

Riley: It is a nice day outside, so if we get it over with, then you can go out and reward yourself. With the peso prices in early ’95—did you have any piece of that?

Lake: Just remembering our anger that the Mexicans were not being perfectly forthcoming.

Riley: Oh, really?

Lake: Yes. On their numbers.

Destler: This was after it broke, you mean?

Lake: Yes. But otherwise, I can’t remember. I was involved in something else. I may even have been abroad while a lot of that was going on.

Riley: This would have been right after the mid-term elections in ’94, December ’94, January ’95.

Lake: I just can’t remember why, but I remember coming back to Washington after the climax of it. But in general, it was Rubin’s deal, and the President showed some guts, and so it was well done.

Riley: Very good. Cuba. That was one of your backlash states. And we haven’t talked about Cuba at all. Is there anything to know about Cuba from your time? Was that on your radar at all?

Lake: Oh, yes.

Riley: Why?

Lake: Well, it was partly because of the shoot-down, which was a very difficult deal.

Destler: Oh, that was Helms-Burton.

Lake: Helms-Burton was Helms-Burton. You know, they had the votes. And they got it.

Riley: Well, take us back to the shoot-down.
Lake: Or to earlier. Our view generally was that a sensible policy that we were trying to pursue was that the Cuba Democracy Act was the law. You implement, therefore, the sanctions. But in general, the more you could use Title 2 of the law to increase contacts with Cuba, even while maintaining a reasonably hard-line position on the government itself, was good policy. And that remains my view—that [Fidel] Castro is going to be defeated either by the Grim Reaper or by contacts and change from within.

Obviously, there was a good bit of political pressure on the issue. I would meet with Bob Menendez, and with the Florida folks from time to time. I would meet with the folks from the [Cuban American National] Foundation occasionally, and then there was a group of Clinton’s supporters I met with occasionally, who were from Florida, and more liberal on this issue. We would never talk about politics, *per se*, but obviously there was a political context for all of this. The shoot-down—I was out of the—I can’t remember where I was. So, I’m not good on what happened on those three or four days before the shoot-down. But I remember meeting with that group afterwards at the White House. And being very impressed at the impact that the shoot-down had had on them.

Riley: Now, “the group,” meaning the Clinton friends?

Lake: Yes. Clinton’s friends, who were at that point basically in favor of invading Cuba. I mean, they were just absolutely incensed. And it was cold-blooded murder. I mean, the events leading up to it were stupidity on our part also, or on the part of the exiles. Then we brought Mort Halperin in.

But I don’t think there ever really were alternative policies, because we didn’t have the votes to change the policy on the Hill. I’m not sure I would have changed it then for myself. I wouldn’t have changed it that much, anyway, except to make sure that we could, while pursuing the sanctions, to some degree also try to open up Cuban society.

Destler: There has lately been developed a little bit of a backlash on the Hill, including among the Republicans.

Lake: It’s a fight within the Republican Party, between business interests and ideological interests. And it’s fun to watch. I used to, when I was giving speeches—it was always the hardest question to answer, “How come—”

Destler: “How come we have one policy toward Eastern Europe and China, and one toward—”

Lake: Well, yes. “How come you’re not pursuing sanctions against China, and you are pursuing sanctions against Cuba?” For that I had an answer. The second hard question was, “How come you have a different policy on Haitian refugees and Cuban refugees?” And there, in truth, my answer would be, “It’s wrong to. We shouldn’t.” But on the first one, it was, “Look, if we didn’t have sanctions against Cuba, I’m not sure that I would be pushing for them. But we do have sanctions on Cuba, We have had sanctions against Cuba since Kennedy, and to remove the sanctions sends a message that we shouldn’t be sending.” You see what I mean? You know, you are where you are.
Riley: Okay. We have touched here and there on NATO expansion, but we haven’t talked much about it in particular, or about the Partnership for Peace initiative. Did you have—my assumption is you have a piece of that.

Lake: Oh, yes. Jim Goldgeier wrote a very good book on it, which seemed to me accurate. I became probably the most fervent pusher and supporter of NATO enlargement. It flowed specifically from the ceremonies surrounding the inaugural of the Holocaust Museum, where a number of Eastern European leaders came to Washington. I don’t know whether they coordinated it in advance—I suspect they had—but at meeting after meeting with the President before going off to the ceremony, they kept pushing NATO expansion and enlargement. We hadn’t done that much on it in the campaign and I don’t think we’d even scheduled yet, the policy reviews of the issue, but it made a great impression on the President, and certainly made an impression on me, mostly at the time in moral terms, and in the context of the Holocaust Museum.

Then thinking about it, and with my staff folks thinking about, it also increasingly seemed to make sense in foreign policy terms. The argument went something like this—that it was primarily a psychological question. These nations, having been relieved of Soviet dominance, were either going to live in continuing fear to their East, which would shape their relations with the Russians and shape their relations with the West and shape their relations with each other—all in negative ways. Psychologically, they needed a reassurance of a process of NATO enlargement, whether it was fast-track or not, but the certainty that it could come if they met certain criteria. We needed to do it. The sticking point, of course, was Russia. And this is why the State Department was initially opposed to it.

Riley: I’m interested to hear you say you were one of the biggest advocates, because I thought I’d read even in some of the briefing materials, that, in fact, you had been pushing a bit in the other direction. Maybe it’s just mis-recollecting.

Lake: Against?

Riley: Maybe just in your honest broker role you were—

Lake: Oh, I was accused of not being an honest broker here.

Riley: Oh, okay.

Lake: And it may be partly true, in any case, but not by intent, as I was saying earlier.

Riley: The State Department, you were saying—

Lake: —was opposed, initially.

Riley: Strobe?

Lake: And Strobe, but also Chris [Warren Christopher], as I recall. Our—by “our,” I mean the NSC staff and mine—our thinking on Russia was that if you think down the road here you have two possibilities. One is that Russia will become democratic and will meet the criteria and
someday could join NATO, at which point the greatest defensive alliance in the history of humankind would become what I used to call an OSCE [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe] with teeth.

**Destler:** You bet. Yes, it’s a collective security arrangement.

**Lake:** And become a pan-European collective security arrangement. I remember the Chinese, when I said that, weren’t terribly thrilled.

**Riley:** And the Cubans, probably.

**Lake:** On the other hand, if Russia went south, as it were, and did not become democratic, then at that point, if it was five years, ten years, twenty years down the road, certainly Poland, the Czechs, the Balts—who I’ve always argued passionately should be involved in this—are going to clamor for Western protection. At that point if we said, “No,” then we’re Neville Chamberlain, and if we said, “Yes,” then we’ve exacerbated a crisis with the Russians. So it’s better to do it now.

**Destler:** And you discounted the counter-argument, which was that this might have an effect on where the Russians went.

**Lake:** I tended to. I remember one meeting with my Russian counterpart. It wasn’t a meeting. It was a reception in Moscow at the time of an anniversary of the end of World War II. He’d had something to drink. I’d had something to drink. We had been talking about the 25 million Russians who had died in World War II, and he said, “You know, we made that sacrifice in World War II and we’re prepared to make that sacrifice now against NATO enlargement.” I remember thinking, *This is really good vodka.*  

In general, I never believed that much the dire predictions that this was going to cost Yeltsin an election, or that it had a lot of traction with the Russian people. The polls didn’t show that. What I used to argue strongly within the American government, and then with the Russians, was that, “It’s going to happen. The timetable may not be sure, but it’s going to happen. And if you, the Russian reformers, make this a big issue politically, then it’s going to undercut you at home, and you don’t want to look weak by having made an issue of something that you can’t control.” I thought that was more honest than to pretend to them that it was open, because then you do make it a serious issue in our relations with the Russians.

I was pushing this. The so-called *troika* on my staff, the guys working on the issue, we were really pushing it. I knew that in the end the President was for it. I think he was for it because he was impressed by the Holocaust event. He was for it because he, himself, was the one who coined the phrase, “a peaceful, undivided, and democratic Europe.” He said in a speech, which we hadn’t put into the text, that this was the first time that there was the possibility of a peaceful and undivided and democratic Europe in all of history. I remember saying, “Huh?” Thinking back on it, I guess it was true.

**Destler:** How come I didn’t think of that?
Lake: That was from his fine education at the Georgetown Foreign Service School. He was strongly for it. The Partnership for Peace was invented mostly in the State Department, and partly on my staff when Europe was handled by Jenonne Walker, which is pre-troika, because she was not too enthusiastic about it. It was originally seen as an alternative to enlargement, because you can’t beat something with nothing. They were going to beat NATO enlargement with that. I can remember briefing reporters, then saying that it’s a way station to NATO enlargement, but not an alternative to it.

I felt strongly that you don’t have a NATO, which after all acts through consensus, with second-class citizens. To have sort of a permanent junior NATO seemed to me to be just a bad idea, and it didn’t meet the psychological criteria I was talking about before. Because we were so obsessed with Bosnia, and because the NATO summit, where we were working this through, was more about Bosnia than about NATO enlargement, the process became more informal and was moved through informal meetings, through drafts of Presidential speeches, and through even travel, so that when Madeleine and Shali went off, they were quite authorized by the White House in saying that it’s a question of not whether, but when. The State Department gradually came on board. Then Strobe became very effective in helping to settle the Russians down. Defense did not come on board for quite a while.

Destler: Was that basically for operational reasons?

Lake: I think Russia—

Destler: It wasn’t because they didn’t have the right military force?

Lake: No, I think it was mostly Russia. Then the following summer—it would have been the summer of '94, I guess—Defense said, “No, we don’t have a policy. This is not a Presidential decision.” Again, there never had been a formal process. But there had been Presidential speeches, with the President being enthusiastic about it. They wanted a formal meeting. So we had a formal Principals meeting, and went to the President and the President reaffirmed the decision.

Riley: Was that a collegial meeting?

Lake: As collegial as it could be, under those circumstances, yes.

Destler: There was also—was this later, after Dick Holbrooke came back from Germany to be Assistant Secretary? At least in Goldgeier’s account there is a famous meeting in which—

Lake: Oh, with Wes Clark.

Destler: Yes.

Lake: In which they accused him of treason or something.

Destler: Yes. Are you loyal to the President or not? So, Wes hadn’t got the word, maybe, about your meeting. Or was this prior to your White House meeting?
Lake: This would have been prior to the meeting.

Riley: When you were beginning down this track, you said, “Unfortunately, there had not been—”

Lake: Yes. I wish I had had the formal meeting to lay all that to rest earlier, because it’s a case where I didn’t dot the i’s properly. Goldgeier thought it was because I was cunningly moving—

Riley: That was my next question.

Destler: You don’t have any serious doubts that if you had had the formal process—

Lake: It would have happened. And maybe, actually, if it was conscious, it was in order not to drive Strobe to the wall.

Riley: That’s what’s curious for me. It’s curious to an outsider that, as close as Strobe was to the President, and as firm as he was in his position, that his position doesn’t carry the day.

Lake: Well, because I think it was just the right policy. Occasionally, substance matters. As I said, Strobe was always very good in telling me when he was having offline conversations and trying not to do it that way. I was never in any doubt that at the end of the day the President wouldn’t want this to happen.

Riley: You were involved when Colin Powell left and Shali was moved in. Were you involved in the appointments process for this with the President?

Lake: Yes.

Riley: Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Lake: Not a lot, because I don’t remember very much about it. It was fairly routine. Colin decided to go. I remember telling him I thought he’d served the President very well.

Destler: He could have had another term?

Lake: I suspect so. I think the President did seriously think of bringing him back as Secretary of State. Shali was just a very good appointment. I don’t remember any particular drama about it.

Riley: Was the expansion question a factor?

Lake: NATO?

Riley: Yes. With his personal roots?

Knott: There was no sense that Powell, with his Republican roots, was not a team player?

Lake: No. I don’t ever recall feeling that, myself. Maybe some others were suspicious. I don’t recall feeling that. I thought he was very good. Since I agree with a form of the Powell Doctrine, it never bothered me that he would say, “No, we can’t do this,” and, “Yes, we can do that.” Their
calculations of 300,000 American troops to pacify Bosnia I discounted to some degree, as the traditional, you know—*We need twice as much as we’re actually going to need*. Maybe as a way of not doing it.

But I think Colin was right in arguing that it’s harder to achieve by air power—pushing the Bosnian Serbs back, or the war in Iraq, or whatever—than civilians tend to think. I remember his showing us or describing to us—it never occurred to me when I’d been in Vietnam—how hard it is for a 21-, 22-year-old American at the controls of a fighter-bomber going 500 miles an hour to pick out this mortar from that mortar down on the land. Artillery tubes are designed to withstand huge explosive force, so that they can fire artillery rounds, and they can withstand huge explosive force when you bomb them, which is why they use cluster bombs and go after the crews rather than the pieces. For example, to plan on taking out all these 105s or mortars that are above Sarajevo was not as easy as you might think it was. I came down, in Madeleine’s view, on the wrong side of her famous argument with Colin.

**Destler:** “What do we have this military for?”

**Lake:** Yes. What we have it for is to fight war, but you should ask questions beforehand. And if I may say so, nothing I have seen since we invaded Iraq has persuaded me otherwise.

**Destler:** How can that be?

**Lake:** But then you do it. Just parenthetically, the thing I love about the military is that once you ask the questions and conclude that you’re going to go forward, even if they had questions, they do go forward, and they do it extremely well. They’re too often blamed for our political failures in wars, which then become, in the American view, a military failure, both in Vietnam and in Iraq. Essentially, where we’re usually failing is politically, not militarily.

**Riley:** Do you have anything you want to say about relations with France and Germany during your time? The first interview tended to track in the realm of Bosnia, which I’m sure, from your perspective, was the biggest issue. But were there other things about the relationship with Germany and France that are worthy of discussion?

**Lake:** No, I don’t think so. The relations with the Germans were very good—very good. Clinton was particularly close to [Helmut] Kohl. And with the French, oddly enough, after [Jacques] Chirac came in, while we always had disagreements, I thought relations were pretty good because Chirac knew how to talk to Americans and he would have more straightforward disagreements, rather than more elegant disagreements.

**Riley:** We touched a couple of times on the specifics of some summits. But I wonder if you could tell us a bit more generally about the value of summit meetings, and if you’ve got any more specific anecdotes about Clinton at summits, that would be nice to have on the record, also.

**Lake:** Actually, now that I think of it, the one time I remember Hillary intervening was at the G7 summit in Naples, where she was incensed at something the French were putting out publicly. And her grabbing me in the corridor and saying, “Why aren’t we fighting back publicly?” which we then did. By “summits,” what do you mean? Do you mean group summits, or individual summits?
Riley: I actually am leaving it open.

Lake: Individual summits, in the sense of Presidential visits, are extremely useful in three ways. One, you can get things done in those contexts that you wouldn’t otherwise do. This was true especially in the meetings with Yeltsin. Secondly, the personal relationship between leaders can be very helpful, not in charming each other into concessions they wouldn’t otherwise make, but in establishing some degree of confidence in the channels of communication. And rapidity, cutting through bureaucratic knots that you can’t get at otherwise, especially with other governments. Third, they’re very useful as a driver for the bureaucracy, in getting decisions before the meeting takes place.

Multilateral summits depend. G7 summits are kind of useful. Or can be. The semi-annual summits with the EU [European Union], which you have to do every time there is a new EU president, have been an unbelievable waste of time. NATO summits are kind of useful. But in general, I’d say multilateral summits are far less useful than the individual ones. Since the object is to find forms of words that allow you to claim progress in a context in which real progress is very hard to achieve with so many players, they can be almost a setback; because, while creating the illusion of progress with the publics, you can create the illusion of progress within the bureaucracy, and that’s never a good thing.

Riley: Did Clinton like summits?

Lake: No, not especially. He loved meeting with foreign leaders. But the set-piece summits? No, I don’t think he did. Certainly, the summit in Budapest where Yeltsin turned up, and at which we thought there was going to be some civility over NATO enlargement, and Yeltsin blew up and abused the United States, the President, all of our ancestors, the Boston Red Sox—I can’t remember—anything he could. It was really vituperative and completely unexpected. Clinton was furious, A—because it was a setback in policy terms; B—because it was personally offensive, especially from Yeltsin, with whom he’d always had a good relationship. But most of all, because it had taken a lot of argument for Christopher—for Chris, and Strobe and me—to persuade him to go, because he had other commitments. We got him on the plane all the way there to the meeting. Then, on the plane back, he was ripped. I remember. Otherwise, they seemed to be just a necessary evil, I guess.

Then there was considerable argument over whether the G7 should become the G8. Treasury and I were opposed to it, and State and the President were for it. If you calculate those sides, you’ll understand why we ended up being for the G8.

Destler: One of those people in particular.

Lake: Yes.

Destler: I think you were right, for the record.

Lake: It didn’t make sense to have a debtor in with all the creditors, and I thought the Russians were going to make more trouble than they were—
Knott: You may have dealt with this last time around, and I apologize if so, but was Yeltsin—you referred earlier to your sort of negative assessment of Yeltsin. I was wondering if you would elaborate on that.

Lake: I’d like to say that I was—obviously, he was a hero of democracy, and his early actions saved democracy in Russia, such as it is. I’d like to say that my skepticism about him was because I sensed that he wasn’t, in practice, going to be a great democrat in terms of helping to create the institutions of democracy, political parties, et cetera. But I’m afraid it wasn’t that. That’s more retrospective. I do think that is an area where we screwed up.

It was more—and I tried not to be influenced by this—I just didn’t like him. I didn’t like the way he abused his subordinates. I didn’t like the way he would come into meetings and take positions that they had said that he wouldn’t. I didn’t like, especially—well, I should back up here a bit. I come from a family of alcoholics. I’m not one, but I don’t like it when I see people drunk. And he would get blotto from time to time. Now, it could be useful, because then he would take positions that were helpful to us, and we would try to hold him to it later, but it was unattractive.

Destler: Generally undisciplined in lots of ways.

Lake: Yes. And just a bully.

Knott: But the President liked him?

Lake: Yes, I think for the most part, he did. Because he was friendly and boisterous, and that was the good side to him. Laughing is always a good thing. But I just—especially the way he treated subordinates. He was bullying, and I just didn’t like it.

Riley: Speaking of bullying, one of the subjects that we haven’t asked you about specifically is your own Congressional relations. I’m wondering if you would care to reflect a bit about your relationship with Congress.

Lake: I had a number of friends up there, and I would meet with them. Until ’97 I don’t remember any bad relations with them. But I certainly, in retrospect, didn’t have enough relations with them. I should have worked that a lot harder than I did. I was just so damned busy all the time either working the policy questions or getting involved in the various negotiations I was doing, which I loved—

Riley: Is it possible, then, for a National Security Advisor to spend much time cultivating friends on the Hill?

Lake: Yes. It’s always at the cost of doing something else. But I should have found the time, somehow, to do it, because it would have been helpful to the President. He used to sometimes call and complain to me about not doing more, when he would talk about a member of Congress and he would say, “I never heard from him on that issue.” You know, you can never meet with all 535 of them. So a President’s always going to hear that so-and-so didn’t let me know this, that, or the other thing.

Destler: Did you get involved very much in lobbying for a particular action?
Lake: Well, that’s what I mean. Yes, I would go up and talk to them about this, that, or the other thing. And I would have, occasionally, group meetings with them. After some of the early disasters, I would sit in sometimes when State and Defense would be meeting with a committee, especially on Bosnia. But, no, I didn’t do enough of it. In retrospect, I probably never, when I was doing it, had the time and maybe, regrettably, the patience, to do it the way you ought to do it, which is kicking back and having a drink and bullshitting, and all of that. I should have done more of it. I enjoy that with friends, but I just never did enough of that.

But it’s also not my conception of the job of National Security Advisor, which in Washington has changed. It’s like going on Sunday morning television, which I neither watched, nor tried to participate in. I did it occasionally. You’ve got to, I guess. I think Condi [Condoleezza Rice] does too much of it.

Riley: Well, you actually touched on two things that I was going to ask you to flesh out. One was a question about whether you thought there were others who have served in this role who have done a more thorough job of keeping up good relations on Capitol Hill?

Lake: Sandy worked it a lot more than I did. My own view is that the National Security Adviser should do more Congressional than public. I think Brent [Scowcroft] did that very well.

Riley: So your overall press relations were mostly just responding to inquiries from—

Lake: Oh, no. I would have backgrounders and stuff. And I had friendly relations with the press, but I didn’t do nearly enough of it. Mostly I didn’t do very much television. Part of it was because I just don’t like being public. The second reason was that since I was quite actively involved on Northern Ireland, China, Bosnia, et cetera, if I became more public—and this was either explicit or very clearly understood, then I would have been undercutting Chris. So the price of doing what I was doing privately was—for example, when I went to Europe each time on Bosnia, in the summer of ’93 and the summer of ’95, I held no press conferences.

Riley: Leaks. Any comment?

Destler: Were there any leaks during the— [laughing]

Riley: Or can I phrase it directly—did you leak? And how would you describe it?

Lake: I think by definition, anything I did wasn’t a leak, if you see what I mean. The great thing about being near the President is that you’re not leaking.

Destler: James Reston said, “Government is the only vessel that leaks at the top.”

Lake: But that’s not a leak. If the President tells a reporter something, how is that leaking? I wasn’t the President, but you see my—No, I didn’t. I think I was noted for being a bad interview in that sense. I would try to explain policy. I very seldom “leaked.”

I did occasionally use CNN [Cable News Network] as a way of sending messages. I can remember explicitly one case in which we needed to get some message to the Bosnian Serbs to deter them from something or other. We had no communications with them and it was going to
take too long to do it circuitously, so I remember calling in the CNN reporter at the time—it was on a weekend—and telling her, so that she could go on camera so that the Bosnian Serbs would hear it. And I can remember going out of my way to say that if there was a war on the Korean peninsula, we would win. It would be very bloody but we would win, just to let the North Koreans know that that’s what we were thinking. But, no, I don’t recall leaking things.

I do recall that Bill Gertz in the Washington Times had some source, either in the Pentagon or the CIA, who had really hot stuff that was being printed, and was very damaging to us in some Intelligence operations. Pressing folks to try to figure out who the leaker was, and we could never find him or her. I don’t like leakers. I think we wildly over-classify, so a lot of leaks are things that you could just be talking about publicly. In talking to reporters, I should have been more open about things.

In general, on information that really should be classified, which means that if it’s released it’s damaging to our foreign policies or military operations or whatever—this is perhaps too strong a word—but it’s a form of treason. If you are tipping off an enemy to something publicly, that’s only different from tipping them off privately in the form. Again, I would couple that with, we way over-classify, and a lot more ought to be out there because the American public needs to know.

Knott: So if somebody is serving in the government and has difficulty with a policy, they should resign instead of trying to—

Lake: No. They should fight it from within. I’m all for whistleblowers if they see something that is illegal or wrong, then, yes, I think you’re justified to—well, I think you go to a Congressional committee or something. It depends on the nature of the information that you’re hearing. You could argue that on non-substantive issues, but issues simply of who is taking what position in meetings, that that should be more public. I think it should be, but not right then. I’ve seen that when it’s out on the street immediately after a meeting, that So-and-so is for this and So-and-so is for that, people start to posture within, so that they’ll be taking popular positions rather than what they really believe. That’s bad policy.

Knott: There was this case of Richard Nuccio, who might have been a Torricelli person, releasing to Torricelli, who then, in turn, released information to the press about the CIA—

Lake: And then undercut Nuccio.

Knott: Right. I’m wondering what your reaction was to that. That must have come up during your—

Lake: It did. I thought he was wrong, and I told him at the time. I kind of admired his doing it, because he thought he was acting on a moral issue of some sort. But it was the wrong way to go about it. Now, whether he knew that Torricelli was going to do that or not, I don’t know. But that did not strike me as a kind of an issue where, morally, he had to do it because he had no other recourse. So he should have done it a different way.
Lake: First of all, checked some of these options with me. And then I tried to find him a job.

Destler: One issue that’s on my checklist that we haven’t talked much about, which was important during your first term, was Middle East policy, the Oslo Agreements, and the follow-up to those. I know it was not the period of the most intense Clinton involvement in the issue, but do you have any—

Lake: But it was pretty intense. It was the White House, the South Lawn. That was pretty intense. I have said that Dennis Ross was to Middle Eastern policy what Strobe was to Russian policy, with the difference that Strobe was doing a lot of it directly, and Dennis had huge influence with Chris. Chris became extremely involved, almost to the exclusion of other things.

Destler: Yes, with his many trips to Syria.

Lake: His Syrian trips, his work on it. Chris really knew it extremely well. The President got very involved, including all the details. That’s one issue that he loved discussing, because it was, in terms of the negotiations themselves and possible outcomes, intellectually satisfying, and it was so political. In terms of Israeli politics, Palestinian politics—the President loved all of that. Of all the foreign leaders who had an influence on him, and that he—I won’t say “liked” in this case, I’ll say “loved”—Yitzhak Rabin, was the first. True for me, too. Rabin had a huge influence on him.

Destler: Combination of personality, sense of character—

Lake: All of it. Watching Rabin struggle with shaking hands with [Yasser] Arafat was moving. He and the President had a great relationship. The hardest thing I had to do was first to tell the President that Rabin had been wounded. The President was very upset. He went out to the putting green and by himself was out there putting, waiting. Then I had to go out to the putting green and tell him that his friend was dead. That was the pits. And had a huge, huge impact on the history of the Middle East—very sad. It would have turned out differently.

Riley: Any observations about Arafat on the other side? I should note, for the record, that as the interview is taking place, Arafat, I guess, is in a coma still.

Lake: Sounds like it.

Destler: I didn’t hear anything this morning.

Lake: Well, we misjudged him in the sense of, perhaps, thinking that he was a pain in the ass, but that you could eventually bring him around somehow, rather than that he simply lacked the imagination or character or strategic sense to be a little bit of a statesman rather than a survivor. But after all those years, in my view, of learning how to survive, by never quite taking a stand on anything, he just couldn’t break that mold. Repeatedly at the last second, even before the South Lawn ceremony, at the last second, suddenly there was some new rejection, or he hadn’t really agreed to what he had agreed to.

I can remember watching on television, poor Chris sitting on a stage—I can’t remember what the event was—with the Israeli representative, at which they were merely supposed to sign
something that everybody had initialed. And Arafat suddenly having a fit about it. He was impossible. Actually, I had difficulty shaking his hand before the South Lawn event, in the room in the White House.

I don’t know whether that contributed to it, but our greatest failure on the Middle East, in my view, was not a failure to work extremely hard—which Chris did, the President did, Dennis did. I would get, in truth, peripherally involved in that I would sign off on the memos. Martin and I would go over the memos and occasionally I’d have views. But they knew more than I did and I thought they were doing the right thing, generally.

Our great failure was in not pushing much harder to get both the reforms in the Palestinian Authority, and the aid programs, while addressing the corruption—which could have shown the Palestinians the benefits of the peace process, so that Arafat had more of a political base for moving, or more political pressures on him for moving. We tried some, but we never did get far enough.

Riley: Were there other actors in the region who played an important role that either you found positive or negative in retrospect?

Lake: Well, [Hosni] Mubarak and the President got along well, and he played a positive role from time to time. I used to meet with Osama El-Baz, his National Security Advisor, who was, and still is, a great character. I don’t know if you have a picture of him. He’s a rather small man with a very expressive face, who just loves intrigues. Arms waving, “Here’s what the Syrians are going to do!” In and among all the bullshit there was a fair amount of solid stuff. So the Egyptians, I’d say, were pretty good, but you couldn’t, in the end, absolutely rely on them.

I liked Amr Musa, their foreign minister, who was very anti-American and had a very difficult relationship with Chris. But I always kind of enjoyed him. He was an intelligent guy; now the head of the Arab League. As long as you were under no illusions about where he was going to come out in the end.

Very difficult meetings with the Syrians and [Hafez] Al-Assad. I remember before the first meeting with Assad—He was famous for never having to break to pee during meetings—and joking with the President about whether we were going to be able to outlast him or not. The President obviously took precautions and I, like an idiot, was so sleepy, I forgot and I had lots of coffee. I was humiliated after two and a quarter hours by having to excuse myself from the room for a while. I could see the President smirking. He said something about camels, or something.

I remember being impressed at how, compared to the Egyptians or the Jordanians or anybody else, when it came to Israel, the Syrians have a deeply visceral hatred and obduracy about it that goes beyond anything of the Saudis and anybody else, the Iraqis. On the other hand, as tough-guys, our impression was always that you could make a deal with them. If you could make a deal with them, it was a deal, unlike the Palestinians.

The Saudis—I don’t believe that they’re the source of all evil and that they make policy for the Bush administration. But they were difficult, in the sense that, first of all, their internal politics are more within the family, and are more complicated than most of us might credit.
Riley: Very active in this country.

Lake: Extremely active in this country. I got quite friendly with [Prince] Bandar [bin Sultan]. It ended—no, it didn’t end, actually, when I left. I went to his wedding anniversary party, which gave “wretched excess” a bad name. But the Saudis were in a tricky position, which I got to understand through a number of lunches with Bandar, because of their fears about the Iraqis and the Iranians. They want us there, but they only want us there if they’re sure that we will offer complete protection. They don’t want us there if they think that we’re going to create animosities and get the Saudis lined up with us and then not be able to offer that protection.

We had a very difficult time after the bombing of the Khobar Towers, where we were pretty sure, especially from the CIA, that the Iranians were involved somehow. I still believe that they were involved indirectly, in the sense that they had been training folks who had been involved, but I doubt that the Iranians themselves had pulled the trigger, if you see what I mean. But there was a degree of involvement, I would bet almost anything.

And the Saudis weren’t telling us, and I don’t think they ever have told us. It became clear to me from talking to Bandar, that the reason was that they knew if we could prove to our own satisfaction that it was the Iranians, we were going to have to react, but it was very unlikely that we were going to try to achieve regime removal in Iran. Therefore, the nightmare scenario for the Saudis was: They tell us. We whack the Iranians. We then pull back, and the Iranians then stir up the Shia in Saudi Arabia or even whack the Saudis. And then what do we do? I think that’s why they stiffed us.

Riley: Poking a hornet’s nest.

Lake: Yes. If you knock it down, you better kill the hornets. Sometimes you can do it and sometimes you can’t, at any reasonable cost. A big issue for the next administration, by the way. Note it—that we are within months of the Iranians enriching uranium. That window is closing fast, and is a more important issue right now than Korea or Iraq, but sort of off-camera for the Europeans.

Knott: Have we talked about the Jordanians and King [bin Talal] Hussein?

Lake: Very impressive. And the President listened to him very closely. They had a very good relationship. Hussein both offered good advice, and clearly was a very stabilizing force. That sounds like political science. I don’t mean that. But he was, in the sense that he could really talk to the Israelis. They had dialogues in various ways. He was a real voice of reason with other Arab leaders and he had a lot of influence with them. Very engaging man. He had this sort of serious demeanor, would say very sensible things, and then, like Rabin, he had this, I can only describe it as a sweet smile, that would light up his face. He was just a good guy. The President, as I said, liked him and relied on him a lot. That’s after Rabin.

Riley: The President’s own personal background, his biblical training, is sometimes said to also be a factor in his interest in the Middle East. Did you find this to be true?

Lake: He never said so, but I would suspect so, yes. And a real devotion to Israel—to the whole area, but to Israel, especially. When we went over for the Rabin funeral, I was very struck by
how many Israeli officials were coming up to the President, and really to all of us—an interesting psychological moment—seeking comfort somehow, at their own tragedy, of what their own future was going to be. The President was always great in moments like that, and especially there. Very emotional.

**Knott:** You mentioned earlier that the Syrians, of all the Arab states, were the ones who seemed to most despise Israel. Was that simply a result of the ’67 war, and losing the Golan Heights? What’s your take on that?

**Lake:** I think so. And they’re tough guys. Ask the inhabitants of Hamma.

**Destler:** There’s also ’82.

**Lake:** Hamma, the town that Assad destroyed—or what residents are left, afterwards. It’s a tough regime. I wish that we had found a way to get to young [Bashar Al-] Assad before he fell into the policies he’s fallen into. I don’t know if that ever would have been possible.

**Riley:** There are a couple of smaller items on the timeline that I wanted to touch on, then we’ll go on to the DCI business. One was that there was a decision to let the Taiwanese President into the United States in 1995. You’re smiling over this.

**Lake:** Not in pleasure.

**Riley:** You had a part in this decision, I take it? Speaking of difficult issues.

**Lake:** Yes. I love Taiwan and have gone over there a number of times since, and was actually carrying on a kind of a private dialogue with them just after that period. First of all, when we let him in, we had not achieved clarity—let’s put it that way—as to what, exactly, he would say, and were surprised by what he said.

**Riley:** You hadn’t achieve clarity with what he would say?

**Lake:** We thought we had, but apparently we hadn’t. When he went to Cornell—

**Riley:** Because he had communicated what he would say?

**Lake:** No. He had not communicated what he would say.

**Riley:** But you thought you had clarity because your—

**Lake:** No, I said we had not achieved clarity. I guess we didn’t try hard enough—I’m being diplomatic—to achieve that clarity before, you know—

**Destler:** So your memory is that the crisis wasn’t just admitting him, but what he said when he was here?

**Lake:** Yes. And on admitting him, I can remember Chris and Bill and my discussing this at a lunch, and agreeing, all of us—Chris somewhere has taken a bad rap on this. We simply didn’t
have the votes on the Hill. We were going to get rolled on the Hill if we didn’t agree to let him in.

**Destler:** What were you going to get rolled on?

**Lake:** There would be a resolution or something saying, “Let him in.” And therefore, we had to let him in.

**Destler:** You don’t have to let him in if there’s a resolution, though, do you?

**Lake:** Whatever it was going to be. Maybe it wasn’t a resolution. I just can remember that we were going to get rolled on the Hill if we didn’t do it. So, let’s do it and try to make the best of it that we can. For myself, I think that there are a lot of ticky-tacky little restrictions on the Taiwanese here that we shouldn’t be doing, and that we’re kowtowing a bit to Beijing on the issue. But at the time, that was a big deal. We should have been taking smaller steps, for example, with regard to their residence in Washington, and then leading someday to his being able to visit here. And I think they should be allowed into the WHO [World Health Organization].

**Riley:** Could I ask you your evaluation, I mean, in international settings I’ve had to deal with this—is that the most delicate issue, in terms of calibrating a proper response, that’s out there? I mean, you dealt with Bosnia; you dealt with Cuba; you dealt with China.

**Lake:** That’s an interesting question.

**Destler:** Yes, the Taiwan-China issue.

**Riley:** Is that the one, or is it just in a league with—

**Lake:** Yes, I think so. Yes. By “delicate” you mean that every word counts, with very huge consequences for the words?

**Riley:** Yes.

**Lake:** Absolutely, yes. There are more oral minefields in that, and more need for consistency in finding the right formulas, I’d say, on that than on anything.

**Riley:** I’ll give you an illustration when we’re off-tape of my own experience with this, which was not consequential, other than just highlighting—

**Lake:** Yes, I remember in some talk saying that the people in Taiwan think something or other. And the Taiwan rep here saying, “It’s the people on Taiwan. *On.*”

**Riley:** We didn’t talk about gays in the military, or actually, I guess we did touch on it ever so briefly.

**Lake:** I think we did. I pointed out that it was not our most fervent desire to have this be the first issue we had to deal with.
Riley: Right. But we didn’t go into it.

Destler: My memory is that that was kind of accidental. That it sort of was raised by the press.

Lake: And then the Republicans on the Hill weren’t going to let go of it, because they had such a great thing going.

Riley: So we can pass on that. August ’93 reported that you were engaged in efforts to revive the National Endowment for Democracy. Any recollections on this?

Lake: No, but I’m not surprised. I’d been a vice chair with Ben Wattenberg of the group that had put it together back in the early ’80s. Teddy Kennedy had made me a representative on it and I have always, almost always, believed in it.

Riley: All right. The [Bobby Ray] Inman nomination?

Lake: Yes.

Riley: You want to tell us about that?

Lake: No.

Riley: No? Okay. The Perry nomination?

Lake: No. Because there’s personal stuff there.

Riley: After the Inman nomination? The stuff on the Inman nomination that was coming out is generally valid?

Lake: Not necessarily, no. But that’s history. If Inman ever wanted to talk about it, that would be fine.

Riley: Fine. And Perry’s nomination after that?

Lake: We really got blindsided on the Inman thing. So we were being very cautious. Bill had been a great deputy and he’d been great in the Carter administration. He didn’t want to do it. His wife especially didn’t want him to do it, particularly. We had to persuade him, and then talked to his wife a number of times and persuaded her. He was a great Secretary of Defense. There was never any argument that I can recall, at the time, that there was somebody else that we ought to be going after, because it was so obvious that he would be a—

Riley: All right. Just before the mid-term elections in ’94, there was a reference to discussions with Congress over the War Powers Resolution. Do you have any memory of that?

Lake: Yes, a vague memory.

Riley: A Washington Post piece, October 25th, “Lake Announces that the Administration Will Hold Discussions with Congress to Resolve the Longstanding Dispute between Congress and the Executive—”
Lake: Well, that worked out well, didn’t it? [laughing]

Riley: That’s what? A week before the mid-term, I guess.

Lake: Yes, they may have been hyperventilating over that event. What a stunning announcement it was! I don’t know. My view was always that—and it still is, and Mac and I wrote it in our book—that it’s a fraud, now, that the administration always reports to the Congress “consistent with,” rather than “pursuant to,” the War Powers Resolution. The Congress wants no part of it because then the Congress would have to share responsibility for these terrible decisions rather then criticize the President for them. So it’s been only invoked once, and that was by the Congress over Lebanon, and in the same breath, they gave the President 18 months, I think it was, or two years, of authority, as a way of avoiding longer term responsibility.

My view was that we needed to reform it in order to require more Congressional involvement. While Presidents don’t like that because it’s a pain to deal with the Congress, it’s in Presidents’ interests, so that the Congress is in on the take-off when you get into a bumpy landing. I guess at the time it seemed like a good idea to try to involve the Congress in that dialogue.

Riley: Your CIA appointment.

Lake: I don’t know why that makes me want to take a quick break.

Riley: Okay, let’s do that.

[BREAK]

Destler: Let me just raise this, sort of in the broader context of the transition—Was there basically an understanding and expectation that Sandy would be National Security Adviser in the second term? How did the CIA issue come up as a prospect? If you could just talk generally about that part of the—

Lake: Okay, I will give you my honest account of what I think happened. And by honest, I mean what I honestly remember. Different people will remember different things. Let me go back to my relationship with Sandy, who was a very close friend going in. It is very hard for close friends to be in a deputy–non-deputy relationship.

Clinton was a very good friend of Sandy’s, going back to the [George] McGovern campaign, and remained a very good friend of Sandy’s. For reasons I described earlier, I didn’t want to be a friend of Clinton’s, although we got along very well and still do. So that made it difficult also. And I think, in retrospect, I mishandled it for the first year or two by being too sensitive to Sandy’s relationship with Clinton, and therefore, trying to keep Sandy from taking over anything. Sandy chafed under this. He once discussed how he would dribble up the court and then I’d put the ball in the basket. And the second two years I got better at it.
But the understanding had been that I’d do the job for a year or two and then leave. It was never explicit that, after four, Sandy would replace me, but it was clear that the President wanted to work in that capacity with Sandy.

**Riley:** Did you stay on happily after a year or two? Or was there arm-twisting?

**Lake:** No, no arm-twisting. It was my decision. I can remember getting my secretary to find out for me, or to give me a list of the terms of all former National Security Advisors and what the average length was. It was 1.7 years or something.

**Destler:** That was influenced by the Reagan administration.

**Lake:** Yes. I knew I could leave if I wanted to, but I was goddamned if I was going to leave before we’d fixed Bosnia, which stuck me there. There was other stuff going on, so I stayed on. In any case, there was never any explicit conversation with Clinton saying, “Okay, let’s just make it four years.” I remember thinking that if George Mitchell, with whom I had a relationship, who I thought would have been superb, became Secretary of State, it would fun to stay on for six months. My assumption was I was going to leave, but maybe I would seek an extension or something. The President—and I can’t remember when or how—asked me if I wanted to be the DCI. He seemed enthusiastic about the idea. He went on and on about what fun it would be.

**Destler:** Is this the first time it came up, as far as you were concerned?

**Lake:** I think so, yes. Oh, no. Before [John M.] Deutch was appointed, I remember a conversation with the Chief of Staff in which I had said, “Gee, that would be a fun job. Maybe I should think about that. Naah.” Maybe that was what put it into Clinton’s mind. I don’t know.

**Riley:** Was that Mack [Thomas McLarty] or Leon [Panetta]?

**Lake:** It would have been Leon, I think. It would be fun if you have a perverted sense of fun, both in terms of trying to make sure the intelligence was good, but also, the covert operations are interesting to manage. Contrary to what then was said by some conservative folks, I was always very interested in covert operations, which can serve a very useful function if they’re properly managed, very useful. Although they’re seductive—as an aside—because they then offer a way of doing things that aren’t quite war, and might be more effective than sanctions, and so you can sort of slip into them.

Anyway, I just can’t remember how Clinton asked me to do it, but it didn’t sound as if it was, “But you’re out as National Security Advisor.” I think, in retrospect, that’s what it was, because he wanted Sandy in. Nothing personal. That’s what I think, and that’s my honest view. If I’d said no to the DCI, I was probably out of there anyway. But I have no idea. And I say that completely without rancor, because he had always wanted to work with Sandy. They think in more political terms, and they’re good friends. That’s cool. Sandy did a very good job.

So he named me DCI. Then began my not terribly graceful dismount from public service. Months of—should I just rant? Should I just do it chronologically?
Destler: Yes, talk a little bit about that, about making the rounds.

Lake: It’s reasonably vivid in my memory still. Although, what amazes and pleases me is how most people don’t remember it when I talk to them about it. I was worried it was going to define me for the rest of my life, but so far, other sins have.

Riley: You may have the good fortune in your choice of enemies.

Lake: In this case I’m proud of my nemesis [stress on singular]—who just got overwhelmingly reelected.

Destler: Probably with my parents voting for him.

Lake: So, the President names me, together with the others on the new National Security team. I remember I was sick.

Destler: This was done at the same time as Madeleine?

Lake: Yes. They called me in for the TV thing, announcing all of us. Even though I’d been for Mitchell, I was thrilled for Madeleine, in personal terms. We each did a little statement. Somehow I worked the Red Sox into it. I can’t remember how. I’m not a serious person. Then I started talking to CIA people to get ready. They said it was going to be unanimous, that they’d done some soundings in the Committee. Trent Lott issued a statement, saying that he thought these were good appointments. It all looked cool.

The difficulty had been that—and here, I am speaking with precision. This is God’s truth. In ’93, the ethics people in the White House Counsel’s office, for all of the appointees, had said, “What do you want to do with any stocks that you have? You can either put them into a trust or dis-invest them.” I said, “I want to do it right. We’ll just dis-invest them. Get rid of them.” And we listed the ones that might have any conflict, anything to do with Middle Eastern oil or anything. It still irritates me.

A few months later, my wonderful secretary—she’s very competent. She had worked for Kissinger and everybody and just retired—sent me a form in this pile of stuff going through my office, with a little yellow sticker on it saying, “This is a copy of your dis-investment certificate. I’ve put the original in the safe.” I didn’t know the process. I should have concentrated on it. It still irritates me.

I’d never—it was mostly my then-wife’s—it wasn’t that much money anyway, and I’d never concentrated on that. So I thought, Cool, threw it in my out-box. The original went into the safe. A year later when it’s time to declare, there are still the stocks. Alarm bells go off. Ab [Abner] Mikva was the White House Counsel. He says, “You’re in a technical violation.” I said, “My God, I thought I’d done it.” So we dis-invested the stocks.

Then Ab had to decide what to do, since I’d been holding these stocks for a year, blissfully unaware. He said, “We have to report this to the Justice Department.” He’s told me since then
that he thought they’d just drop it. He sent it over with a note saying, “This is a touch foul and there was no intent.” They started an FBI investigation. And the FBI went through all of my documents looking for any possible conflict on any of those stocks, and found some Middle Eastern policy meetings that might impact Exxon, or—I don’t know. Anyway, it went on and on and on, and the investigation goes into ’96. It just went on forever.

Before naming me as DCI, the White House wanted to get this resolved. I hired a lawyer. We start pushing the FBI and the Justice Department, and they dig their heels in that we’re trying to push them for political purposes. Finally, the White House decided that they wanted to go forward with the nominations and they weren’t going to wait for the end of the investigation, although everybody was sure it was going to turn out fine. So they announce it, and really pissed off the Justice Department folks investigating this, who then start leaking it.

They leaked it to Bob Woodward, who called me and said, “What’s this about your having stocks that you shouldn’t have had?” I said, “Call my lawyer.” The lawyer explains it to Bob. Bob calls back and says, “This is bullshit,” and doesn’t write it. They leak it again, and finally they got NBC to run it. Then it’s in the Washington Post. I called Bob when I heard this and said, “It’s about to come out on NBC, so you should run it, because I don’t want you to miss a story.” So he ran it, very fairly.

Now there’s blood in the water. This is after Trent Lott has said, “This is a good appointment.” They’ve named Richard Shelby the new chairman of the Intelligence Committee. He’s in Europe, I think. He reads this. He hates Clinton, because when he switched from being a Democrat to a Republican, the White House tried to get him by shutting down some base. Or as the Wall Street Journal later reported, they did the worst of all possible things, which was when the University of Alabama football team won the National Championship and was invited to the White House, they invited the other Senator from Alabama, but not Shelby. Those are fighting—

Riley: Okay, now it all fits.

Lake: Shelby smells blood. He starts saying, “I’m troubled by this financial thing and I want this looked into.” Then a number of conservatives around town, who—going back to when I had resigned over the Cambodian invasion, and they thought that I was a threat to the Republic—started putting out stuff in the Washington Times—that I had founded groups that were outing American agents abroad—groups I’d never even heard of, much less ever been associated with—or that I was a part of the Institute for Policy Studies, because I had once done a seminar there for a friend. Not a seminar, just a one-evening session. Otherwise, I had no contact with that, but I was a part of the “dangerous IPS.”

It put me in a very difficult position because it was kind of a witch-hunt, guilt by association. But if I said no and I refused to do this at IPS, then I was saying, “Yes, there is something un-American about them,” and while I’ve disagreed with them over the years, I didn’t want to do that. Anyway, it was very difficult.

Meanwhile, Shelby is going after me in various little ways—himself and his allies on the Hill. My Republican friends up there were reporting to me of Congressional staff folks who would get from conservative Senators on how they were going to use this to get after Clinton, really, and
embarrass him. It was Orrin Hatch who told me that it was a mistake for Clinton ever to have appointed somebody so close to him to be out there. It was a way of getting at the President. I don’t know. I’d never met Shelby. I’d met with Shelby a couple of times. He would read his points and then flee. Never had a personal conversation with him. Made the rounds on the Hill. All the Democrats except for [Max] Baucus were cool, and Baucus was going to be cool, but he had trade differences with the administration, or something.

Riley: “Cool,” meaning okay?

Lake: Okay, yes. Or enthusiastic. I had Senator McCain introduce me. It turned out he hated Shelby. McCain and I had very quietly worked together during the ’96 campaign when he was representing [Robert] Dole and I was representing Clinton. Various other Republicans were important. In the end, I was told by the Congressional people at the CIA that I had half the Republicans on the Committee, and all the Democrats, at the end. But this put Shelby in the position, then, in which he could not afford to have a vote, because this was going to be his first vote on his new committee, and if he lost the vote, then that would be a bad thing.

There were—I’ve forgotten how many months it was—but months of my just hanging out there and getting pummeled in the Washington Times and occasionally in the Post. Meanwhile, on the damn stocks issue, the Justice Department refused to exonerate me, because it was a technical violation, and because Janet Reno didn’t want to look as if she was giving Clinton a break when she was working on a number of other issues with regard to Clinton. My lawyer went to meet with her and got no help at all.

Finally, the lawyers suggested that I settle it. I didn’t want to, but it was going to cost—it cost me $80,000, and it would have cost me, they said, three or four hundred thousand dollars to fight it with the Justice Department in court. It wasn’t worth it. So we settled it, and the Justice Department said that there was no intent to do anything wrong, but it was a violation. And I said that it was a violation.

Destler: That means $80,000 is a fine you paid?

Lake: No, it wasn’t a fine, because it was a settlement. The difference being that they never found me guilty of anything.

Destler: It was money that you earned somehow—

Lake: No, it was $10,000 that I then did, as a settlement. The $80,000 was just the fees. It’s outrageous. To my lawyers.

Destler: Oh, okay.

Lake: No. The settlement was, I believe, the minimum that you can do for a technical violation. It still pisses me off. Finally, after much wrangling, and meeting with many Senators on the Hill, most quite friendly, the big issue then became—Shelby insisted that the committee have not only the FBI background investigation summaries that they then had conducted on me, but also that they get all the raw materials, which is never done except for nominated judges. The problem
with it is that there is bound to be negative stuff, you know, the people that you’ve irritated in the past, or that you owe money, or whatever. I said, “On principle, this is a bad thing to do.”

**Destler:** You mean, all the security background investigation stuff?

**Lake:** Well, no. They go out and interview people. Then they read summaries to the committee, saying, “Nothing bad turned up.” Or, “We think . . .” And if they get some loony thing, then they just say, “Well, that’s not consistent with the pattern.” But Shelby wanted all the interviews of everybody, not just summaries. The problem is that future senior appointees, if that becomes the pattern, may be less willing to serve. The White House wanted to fight to the last drop of my blood on this. They were saying, “Give it to them.”

**Destler:** “Give it to them,” meaning, not give them the information?

**Lake:** Give them the information. Give it all to them, in order to try to move this forward, because they knew we had the votes. Finally, I said, “Look, my position is personally fine,” because I’d heard that the FBI hadn’t found anything bad, which shows not a great deal of competence on their part since none of us lead blameless lives—although I am boring. So I said, “Fine, personally. But I think in principle it’s a bad thing. But that’s your decision.” The White House decided, “Okay, we’ll send it all up.” So they sent up all the background stuff.

Meanwhile, I was told that Shelby’s two assistants went to NSA [National Security Agency], and said, “Do you have anything negative on Lake?” They were informed that would be illegal, and they retreated back to their holes on the Hill. Anyway, Shelby gets the raw files, and senior members of the Committee read them. One of my friends said he read them and it was boring, boring, boring. Nothing much in them.

We went through the three days of hearings then, the confirmation hearings, which were highly repetitive, because they’re never all there together, so they don’t know who’s asked what question beforehand. They kept coming back to the question of why we had given our ambassador in Croatia no instruction over arms going into Bosnia without informing the Congress. We should have informed the Congress, and I said we should have informed the Congress, and that was a mistake. It just hadn’t occurred to us, but should have.

My position was that we should have informed the Foreign Relations Committee. It was not an intelligence matter, because it wasn’t a covert action since we weren’t doing anything. If we’d said no to the Croatian government, we would have blown apart the federation between the Croatians and the Bosnians, which would have meant no Dayton [Peace Agreement]. If we said yes to them, then we were violating—no, we actually, technically, wouldn’t have been violating it, because the Security Council Resolution said that we should not violate the arms embargo. (Not prevent others from doing so.) But it still would have offended the Europeans (to tell the Croatians to go ahead) and we didn’t want to do that. I thought it was good policy.

It was all about that. I don’t think my finances ever came up, in the three days. It was also all about Alger Hiss—go figure. I was on Meet the Press a couple of days after he’d died, and Tim Russert, suddenly out of left field, said, “Was he guilty?” Frankly, I hadn’t thought much about it, and didn’t want to trash a guy who had just died. While I thought he was guilty, I wasn’t sure of it, so I said something like, “Not certain,” or “Not clear,” or something. This showed that I
was sympathetic to Communists. Anyway, so it was all about that. They verged on comical from time to time. Generally, they were either softballs from the Democrats or nasty from some of the Republicans. Mike DeWine, who is terrific, tried to be substantive. Orrin Hatch was good, and a few other Republicans.

After the hearings the idea had been there would be a vote, and then I heard on a Friday that Shelby was telling people now that he wanted a whole new FBI investigation. It became clear to me, I mean, I thought they’d get no luckier the second time in discovering my many sins—but what it meant was I was never going to get the vote. And I would go on getting pummeled. I had had it. So I scribbled a letter to the President, which friends, then, made me cut back a little bit. And I’m glad they did. Not angry at the President, but—

The next day, on the Monday after thinking about it over the weekend, I went to Chief of Staff and said, “Look, I’ve had it. I’m never going to get the vote.” I understood I was going to see the President, and I said, “Please ask the President not to ask me to hang in there, because if he asks me then I’m going to have to say no to the President, and I’ve never done that.”

They talked to him. I went and saw him. He had just hurt himself somehow. He was on crutches. It was quite an emotional meeting. One, because we had worked together, and, two, because he really wanted to beat Shelby. At any rate, I remember his twice getting up out of the chair to come and hug me, sort of staggering on his injured legs. I told him I was sorry. I wasn’t going to do it, and suggested that George Tenet do it.

On that Sunday I called George, because he would have been my Deputy. We went for a walk up along the towpath, and I told him. Very emotional, and I was saying, “Look, George, you were going to get this job some time anyway. I’m going to recommend you.” And I remember him saying, “But not under these circumstances. Not now.” He was a very good friend. And then I pulled the plug.

Then I asked Tara Sonenshine, who was the public affairs person on the staff, to get in the Wall Street Journal reporter, the New York Times reporter, the Washington Post reporter, and AP reporters, all of whom I knew—that I would give them a story if they would print the letter. They agreed. I wanted the letter there. Called them in and told them. The next day the letter appeared in the New York Times. And I was out. It was a very painful thing.

What appalled me afterwards—because it’s symptomatic of what is one of the things that’s wrong with Washington—was how many people just thought, Well, this is business in Washington, didn’t hold it against me, didn’t think I was—you know, it just wasn’t an issue. And it should be. Maybe I was involved with all these organizations. Maybe I had been trying to make money on my pathetic stocks. It seemed to me a part of a sort of Washington comedy now, not tragedy, in which there is scandal after scandal, and it’s all theater and nobody takes it seriously, because there’s just so much of it. The real miscreants are let off because there are so many cases of it.

I used to tell friends when they were going through similar periods—maybe I mentioned it at the last meeting—I remind them of a movie called The Paper. Have you seen it? It’s a movie with Glenn Close, Michael Keaton, and various others, about a newspaper in New York. It’s a very
funny, interesting movie. One of the subplots is a story of a junkyard dog columnist who goes after the New York traffic commissioner for having double-parked. They had a picture of his limo double-parked, and they hound him from office over it.

The commissioner hates, therefore, this columnist. There is a scene in a bar in which the columnist is sitting at the bar and the commissioner, or former commissioner, wanders in dead drunk with a pistol, threatening to shoot the columnist. There’s a scuffle, and the columnist is lying on his back and the commissioner is holding the gun on him. The commissioner says to him something like, “My department was always terrible. It was terrible while I was there. It’s going to be terrible into the future. Why me? Why did you choose me?” The columnist, facing death and this pistol, still snarls up at him, “Because you work for the city, and it’s your turn.” I guess this was my turn.

We need the capacity to sort out the real cases from the stupid cases if we’re going to hold government officials accountable. The other side to it is that, within the government, since everybody gets it, you teach yourself just not to give a damn what the press or the critics say, and then you’re not holding yourself accountable in the same way. I think we need to change it.

**Knott:** Did this alter your view of Congressional oversight of intelligence? This was a reform that came out of the ’70s. What was your position on it prior to going through this experience?

**Lake:** It’s very important. And it remains very important for two reasons: One, you do need Congressional oversight. There hasn’t been enough of it in the last few years, in fact. This is during an operation or event. We’re great at going back and holding people accountable and holding endless hearings. And that’s making people risk-averse, and there’s grandstanding, and all of that. What you need is real Congressional oversight in real time, for two reasons: One, because especially with covert actions, it’s how a democracy should work. Secondly, because within the Executive branch, if you know you’re going to face Congressional oversight, it tightens you up, in making sure that you know what the CIA is doing, and making sure that the White House is on top of it. I think it’s very useful and I’m all for it.

**Knott:** Do you accept the argument that it may have contributed to a risk-averse agency that, in turn, was unprepared for events like 9/11?

**Lake:** I don’t think so. I really don’t. So long as the oversight is private, I don’t think so. Not public. These are secret matters. What makes analysts risk-averse is when they get hung out to dry afterwards. It’s more on the analytical side, which is less subject to Congressional oversight in any case, than in the DO, because I haven’t seen it in the DO. They may claim that, and that’s just an excuse for not being, in my view, aggressive enough.

But on the analytical side, we pay the analysts for their judgment in predicting the future. Sometimes they’re going to get it wrong. If they get it wrong out of incompetence you fire them if you can. If they get it wrong because you’re going to get it wrong sometimes, and they’re good analysts, we should not be holding them accountable and ruining their lives, potentially publicly, because then you do get risk aversion.
I’m told that the White House has now been getting swamped by the Intelligence Community (after 9/11) with possible terrorist plots because the analysts are unwilling to make the call—that this one’s real; this one isn’t real—because they don’t dare get that wrong.

**Destler:** Yes, it’s the one in a thousand chance you might get through.

**Riley:** We’re about out of time. Let’s try to end on something a little more upbeat.

**Lake:** Retrospectively, I have a huge affection for Richard Shelby. He made my life during those next four years much more pleasurable than they would have been otherwise.

**Riley:** I’ll keep that in mind if I ever happen to meet him.

**Lake:** There should be a better way to work it out.

**Riley:** Reflecting back, what do you take the greatest pride in, in your period as NSC Advisor?

**Lake:** End game in Bosnia. Haiti. Even if it didn’t work out, it worked out better than it would have been if we’d left [Raoul] Cedras in power. NATO enlargement. The cease-fire in Northern Ireland, which wouldn’t have happened without the visa for Gerry Adams, and pushing on that. A number of things.

**Riley:** That’s not a bad term’s work.

**Lake:** The strategic dialogue with China. And at the end of the first term, a lot fewer crises on the plate than there were, together with some fundamental stuff on Europe and with the Chinese. I’m not too unhappy with it. Your next question is, I would hope, “So what are you not so proud of?”

**Riley:** All right, well—

**Lake:** And, I’d say that the top three were Rwanda.

**Destler:** I suppose it’s not much solace to say that—

**Lake:** Well, it’s actually two: Rwanda, and then, I was very concerned about terrorism. It’s what I used to call the nexus between terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. It really did concern me. In retrospect, while I pushed on it, as Dick Clarke has said and the Commission says, if I could do it again, I would push harder on it—not so much on the substance, but on reforming the government and how you deal with it.

**Riley:** Would you go back in?

**Lake:** Actually, I’ve had that conversation in theoretical terms. No. But what gives me the greatest satisfaction of anything I did was the Ethiopian-Eritrea peace agreement.

**Destler:** You would be available for missions?
Lake: That’s now irrelevant. I auctioned in my class three days ago a set of transition papers that a number of us had prepared for the Kerry administration, and I got $1.10 for that. [laughing]

Riley: We could probably make use of those in the historical archived instruments.

Lake: They were actually quite good. We’d gotten them from a number of people on various issues.

Riley: You said earlier, when I asked you a question about press relations, that you felt like you weren’t a good interview. Maybe that’s true for press, but it certainly isn’t true for oral history purposes.

Lake: Well, thank you.

Riley: We learned an awful lot. As I said, rereading the first interview was instructive, as well as a pleasure.

Lake: Really? Because I was very worried about it, that it was frivolous and—

Riley: The same is true here. We probably reeled you in a little more this time than we did the last, but you’ve given us a very good set of materials.

Lake: What you could do in return, when you’re interviewing other people, if my memory is wrong, I’d love to hear about it.

Riley: We can do that later, but the bounds of confidentiality prevent us from—

Destler: You can’t raise it directly.

Riley: Exactly. In instances where we’re aware that there is a conflict, then we—

Destler: But presumably you take into another interview—

Riley: Since our last meeting, we’ve done about 35 of these. So we’re progressing, but we’ve still—

Lake: You’re remarkably sane, for having done that.

Riley: I’m telling you, it’s fascinating work, fascinating work.

Lake: Well, do get George.

Riley: We will, certainly. So thanks.