March 24, 2005

**Riley:** This is the Samuel Berger oral history interview, which is part of the Clinton Presidential History Project. Let me again say thank you for coming to Charlottesville.

**Berger:** My pleasure.

**Riley:** We’re grateful to have you here. There are a couple of administrative chores that we typically take care of at the outset. The first is to repeat the rules concerning the confidentiality of the interview so that you’re aware that people in the room are pledged to preserve the confidentiality. The transcript is to become the authoritative record of the interview. You’ll have an opportunity to review that and to make any redactions or stipulations that you feel necessary at that point. We want you to feel free to speak candidly, because your audience is not just the people at the table. Scholars and students of American politics in the future, maybe 20 or 30 years from now, will come back and have a better understanding of the times than is available through press accounts.

The second thing is an aid to the transcriber, and that is to go around and identify ourselves and say a couple of words so that the transcriber can put a voice with a name. Jeff is also serving as a note taker today. He’s basically recording interventions and will be taking down proper names and maybe checking with you to help the transcriber, who may not be familiar with those.

I’m Russell Riley, associate professor here at the Miller Center heading up the Clinton Presidential Oral History Project.

**Berger:** I’m Samuel Berger, former National Security Advisor to the Clinton administration.

**Strong:** Robert Strong, I’m a professor at Washington and Lee University.

**Naftali:** I’m Timothy Naftali, associate professor and director of the Presidential Recordings Program at the Miller Center of Public Affairs.

**Chidester:** I’m Jeff Chidester, a graduate research assistant and Ph.D. student at the University of Virginia. I’ll be note taking today.
Riley: Let’s start with a little biography. Tell us how you first came to be interested in politics and maybe a little bit leading up to your involvement in the earliest of the Presidential campaigns that you were involved with.

Berger: I grew up in a very small, rural community in upstate New York, a town by the name of Millerton, New York, which had about 900 people and about 4,000 cows, a dairy farming area. It was rock-rib Republican, always 60 to 70 percent for any Republican candidate that ran. My parents, however, were Democrats. They had grown up in New York and migrated to Millerton. Both my mother and father were active in trying to build a local Democratic Party. My father passed away when I was quite young, but my mother remained active, so it starts in my house. My mother was very interested in public affairs and what was going on. She watched the talk shows on Sunday morning and was quite passionate in her politics.

Riley: Do you have siblings?

Berger: I have an older sister, less interested in politics than I. Then we flash forward to a wonderful teacher we had in high school, the classic teacher story. She was blind and taught social studies as a living, breathing, organic subject. She forced us to read the New York Times every day and used to say the Daily News was fit only to wrap dead fish.

We’d spend at least one day a week talking about current events. But we could always get her off her lesson plan if at the beginning of the class someone said, “Miss Simmons, can I ask you a question about Richard Nixon?” Suddenly we’d spend 20 minutes talking about politics or policy. We wouldn’t have to deal with Mesopotamia. But she was deeply important to me and deepened my interest in politics.

Riley: Did she have people read to her?

Berger: She had readers. But she had a kind of a sixth sense. She had more discipline in her classroom than almost any teacher in the school. She was a no-nonsense teacher. She taught for 50 or 60 years in the school, and you didn’t fool around with Miss Simmons. She was strict and stern but very much excited by the events of the day. I was in high school ’59, ’60 through ’63. We read articles in the New York Times Magazine about the decolonization in Africa. She assigned us things from U.S. News and World Report and from periodicals. I’d say the course was, over four years, half about public affairs. That really intensified my interest.

I’d have to say the greatest impetus for my interest in politics came from John Kennedy. In 1960, when John Kennedy ran against Richard Nixon and I was nearly the only Democrat in the class, there was a continuing debate during Miss Simmons’s class and to some degree outside the class, between this lone defender of this guy, Senator John Kennedy, and the prevailing sentiment for Vice President Nixon.

I remember watching the debates and the thrill of him winning. Then he was truly an inspirational figure as many others, I’m sure, have noted to you, for people of my generation, just as [Franklin D.] Roosevelt had been for people of my parent’s generation, and [Ronald] Reagan
was for people of the next generation. He made public service seem noble. He told us, “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.” He ignited a tremendous sense that public service was a high calling, and probably had the greatest influence of all.

I went off to Cornell in 1964, the graduating class of 1967. Cornell had a great government department at that time, with Clinton Rossiter, Andrew Hacker, Walter LaFeber, and George McHahn, who was the top Vietnam expert in the country at the time. I soaked that up; I loved it. Just at that time, [Lyndon] Johnson won the landslide victory of 1964, and lo and behold he carried with him 43 or 44—I happened to know this because I did my senior thesis on this—43 or 44 Democrats on his coattails, Democrats who won from 55 or more percent Republican districts. One of those was a Congressman from my district named Joseph Resnick, a young man in his 40s, a self-made millionaire. He never graduated from high school, was the son of Russian immigrants, and quite a populist.

He was quite atypical. He was preceded by Hamilton Fish III and succeeded by Hamilton Fish IV in that district. I was determined to work for Congressman Resnick. It became an obsession of mine to get a summer intern job working for a Democratic, liberal Congressman from my district. I had no contacts and no influence, but my aunt worked as a legal stenographer for a judge in Poughkeepsie who knew Resnick’s brother. It was pretty pathetic, but I inundated him with a lot of mail. I actually got the job in exchange for a post office. Sometime in 1966 he was running for reelection, and in May ’65 he came to Millerton as part of his tour around this very large geographic constituency south of Albany but north of Poughkeepsie in what is the eastern side of upstate New York.

I went to see the town Democrat chairman. Being the town Democratic chairman of Millerton was not a full-time job, obviously, because there weren’t too many Democrats to chair. But I went to see Chet Lyle at his farm, and I said, “Mr. Lyle, I know Congressman Resnick is coming to Millerton next week, and I’d like it very much if I could get a summer job. I’ve written him many letters. I’ve not heard back. It would really be helpful if you could mention this, because it would give me a real boost.”

Mr. Lyle said, “I don’t know. I can’t promise you anything, Sandy, but let’s see how it goes.” So Congressman Resnick came to Millerton, and afterwards I went to see Mr. Lyle, and he said, “Well, I think I did you some good. My first priority was getting a new post office. We haven’t had a post office in Millerton since the New Deal. It’s just kind of fallen down and we’ve outgrown it.”

I later discovered that Johnson tasked two of his key political operatives, Marvin Watson and Sherwin Markman, to watch those 44 Democrats during their first term to make sure they received everything they wanted. We had more pork in that district from 1965 and 1966. Resnick built 25 post offices, water and sewage plants. It was pork heaven. But by the time he got to Millerton in ’65, I think he figured he’d gotten about as many post offices as he could. So he said, “I just don’t think I can do it. I was told by the White House that I’d overstayed my welcome in terms of asking for post offices.” So as a consolation Mr. Lyle said, “There’s a young fellow here who lives in Millerton who said he wants a summer job with you.”
Congressman Resnick said, “I’ll tell you what. I can’t give you the post office, but I’ll give this kid a summer job.” So I was an exchange for a post office that Millerton didn’t get for 20 more years.

I went down in 1966 and I actually worked for him in his reelection campaign in the district. Then in 1967 I worked as a summer intern in his office in Washington. He was a wonderful man. This was, as I said, a very conservative upstate rural district. One of the first things Joe did was to march in Selma in 1965. So you have some sense of the fact that he wasn’t necessarily simply going to follow the ideology of his constituency. He was very rich. He felt he was very privileged to be in the House, but if he got defeated he’d go back to business and he’d make some more money and he was going to do it his way. He also loved getting into fights, not physical fights, but kind of crusades for the little guy who was being worked over by the bureaucracy.

In 1967 he got into a huge fight with the American Farm Bureau Federation, which is much less powerful than it was in 1965 and ’66 and ’67. In the mid ’60s it was the farm lobby and it spoke for the American farmer. Of course the farm constituency in Congress was much more powerful in the ’60s than it is 40 years later. The Farm Bureau almost had the franchise. When it spoke, it spoke for the farmer. Resnick had a hearing one day on rural poverty, the first hearings ever on rural poverty, before the Robert Kennedy hearings a few years later. The Farm Bureau says, “There is no rural poverty.” Resnick was incredulous. They persisted in the position that there was no rural poverty at all.

Afterwards he said, “I want you to spend a few days and I want you to find out more about who this organization is and who they represent.” I began, under his auspices, an investigation of the American Farm Bureau. We discovered that it had started out as a farm organization and as the official arm of the extension service. Extension agents in each county created a Farm Bureau, which was their advisory committee. Then they went into the insurance business because farmers couldn’t get insurance in the ’30s. They went into the oil business, then the real estate business, and by the mid ’60s, they were a $5 billion conglomerate. They still had farmers as members, but they had 7,000 members in Chicago.

Why do they have 7,000 members in Chicago? Because of the insurance. Nationwide Insurance was at one time Farm Bureau insurance. In order to get the rates of a mutual insurance company, you had to join the Farm Bureau. So they had three million members, and they came to Congress and said, “We represent three million farmers.” But in fact the three million farmers lived in places like the north shore of Chicago. They happened to be Farm Bureau members because they had Farm Bureau insurance.

This was a great investigation. Resnick was alone in terms of pursuing this. His colleagues were afraid to death to take on the Farm Bureau at the time, to the point where they had a meeting of the committee without informing Congressman Resnick, and they voted 27 to 1 to condemn his investigation of the Farm Bureau, which was later written about by Drew Pearson and Jack Anderson in the newspaper. One was Congressman Kika de la Garza, who later became chairman of the Ag Committee. Kika was a very simple, straightforward man. He said, “You know, if we can do that to Resnick, we can do it to anybody who tries to look into wrongdoing.”
I used to kid Tom Foley, who was on the committee at that time and became a very good friend, and later House Speaker and Ambassador to Japan, about the fact that he abstained. I used to say, “That was not your profile in courage, Tom, when you abstained on that.” But that’s how powerful they were; they were able to get the Agriculture Committee to condemn Resnick’s investigation. I say all that because basically I was hooked at that point.

Riley: I want to ask one question about your senior thesis. You said that you had written on this electoral pattern.

Berger: Right.

Riley: Can you elaborate on that just a little bit more? It’s a point of curiosity because one might expect somebody who ended up in the position you ended up in to have written on something—

Berger: More policy oriented?

Riley: More policy oriented, maybe more globally oriented. This is—

Berger: I was very interested because I’d spent the summer in Washington—this was the great 86th Congress that passed the Federal Aid to Education and Medicare and all the historic Great Society legislation. There were these Congressmen who won in ’64 like John Culver of Iowa and Lee Hamilton of Indiana, many who didn’t last that long but who were there very clearly because they had won on Johnson’s coattails.

What I did was define what the class was. How would you define an upset victory? Then we selected certain votes and saw whether they voted more or less consistently with Johnson than with other Democrats. It was an empirical analysis, an analytical paper.

Riley: Anyone you worked with on that?

Berger: Allan Sindler, previously at Duke University, who came to Cornell in the mid ’60s. I loved doing it and it showed in fact that these 43 or 44—I can’t remember which—Congressmen were very loyal to Johnson, voted with him very frequently, even a little bit higher than average Democrats. This was somewhat of a mixed blessing, because Resnick felt so obligated to Johnson that he became a very strong proponent of the Vietnam War and felt he was supporting his President. Johnson kept sending Resnick to Vietnam, and every time he’d go to Vietnam he’d come back even more of a hawk. I remember George Romney said he was brainwashed when he went to Vietnam. It was a very well oiled, well developed process for dealing with incoming Congressmen in Vietnam. They saw what the military wanted them to see, and Joe came back more and more hawkish. He also was Jewish, and a lot of the leaders of the anti-war movement were Jewish. So Johnson, I think, cynically thought that Resnick was a bit of an antidote, in terms of the Jewish vote, as being someone who was pro war.

In 1968—a tumultuous year, obviously—when [Hubert] Humphrey was running for the nomination against Kennedy and [Eugene] McCarthy in the beginning, there was also a primary
in New York State for the Senate and there was a McCarthy candidate, Paul O’Dwyer, and there
was a Kennedy candidate, Eugene Nickerson, who had been the county executive in Nassau
County, but there was no Humphrey candidate. Johnson called Joe down to the White House and
said, “Joe, I want you to run for Senate.” So he ran as the pro-war candidate in the primary in
1968 and very harshly against Robert Kennedy, who Johnson hated, and used to unload on
Resnick about how the Kennedys were all plotting to get rid of him. Joe was quite hard on
Kennedy during the campaign.

One week before the New York primary, Robert Kennedy was assassinated in Los Angeles. You
can imagine what happened to Joe Resnick’s support in the state. The bottom fell out. In fact,
some of Robert Kennedy’s aides took an ad out saying, “Joe Resnick killed Robert Kennedy.” It
was quite a stinging indictment. Resnick then left the scene in terms of politics and went back
into business and did not return to Congress. That last chapter was not his finest moment.

Riley: In your own journey, what do you do after your time—

Berger: I went on to law school in the beginning of ’67. This was of course a period of strenuous
anti-war activity.

Riley: Are you still at Cornell?

Berger: No, I left Cornell. I graduated from Cornell in 1967. I worked in Washington the
summer of ’67 with Resnick and then in the fall of ’67 I enrolled in Harvard Law School.

Strong: Was there a draft deferment for being in Harvard Law School?

Berger: There was until March of 1968. There was a graduate student deferment. There was a
great deal of anti-war activity on the Harvard campus, obviously.

Naftali: Mr. Berger, did you talk to Resnick about Vietnam?

Berger: Yes I did. By that time I must say he had become almost like a father figure to me. As I
said, my father passed away when I was young and he adopted me as a kind of surrogate son. He
had a couple of his own. It was painful for me to talk to him about the war. He had the courage
of his convictions; he didn’t have the courage of his doubts, as Adlai Stevenson once said. He
was adamant. In fact, I could not help him in the ’68 campaign because of the position he was
taking on the war.

Luckily, another person who worked in the office was going to run for his seat back in Dutchess
County, Ulster County, Schoharie County, Greene County. I said to Joe, “I think I can be more
useful helping John Dyson keep the seat rather than throw me into a state campaign. I don’t
know anything about New York City politics.” So I gracefully exited stage left—I guess it
probably is stage left [laughter]—and didn’t participate in the Resnick ’68 campaign. I worked
for John Dyson, who ran for his seat and lost to Hamilton Fish IV, who had that seat then for
almost 25 or 30 years.
But going back to Harvard, as I say, there was a great deal of activity against the war. So trying to balance—I was not a marcher so much. To me, the way to influence the war was through politics. Some people chose to try to stop traffic in the middle of the Pentagon and some people chose large rallies in Washington. To me the political process was the way I thought you could effect change. In 1968 I was for Robert Kennedy, just as a foot soldier until he was killed, then for McCarthy. But the relevance of your question about the graduate student deferment was sometime in March of 1968, Lyndon Johnson ended graduate student deferments. It was called black Tuesday. It was a stunning day at the law school and I’m sure graduate schools all over America, because suddenly we were all 1A.

**Strong:** It was good for the theology schools.

**Berger:** It was good for the theology schools, rabbinical schools absolutely; medical schools I think did pretty well. I remember taking my spring break and going into my draft board in Poughkeepsie, New York. This was a time of substantial paranoia on the part of anybody who was opposed to the war. You thought people were listening to your phones, surveilling you with a camera. I didn’t even give them my name, and I said, “Let me ask you a hypothetical question. Let’s say you were—” I don’t know how old I was at that point, 24 or 23—“and you’re now in the pool, 1A. Would you get into the draft pool? And if so, when?”

The woman said, “We filled April, but we’ll probably get around to you in May.” That really set me back on my heels, “Or June,” she said, “May or June.” So I went back and said I really didn’t want to go to Vietnam. I didn’t believe in the war. I had had the great fortune of taking a seminal course in Southeast Asian history from George McHah, who was the leading Southeast Asian expert in the country. All you had to do was study Vietnamese history to understand how misconceived this war was, so I decided I would join the Army Reserves. But I decided that simultaneously with about ten million other graduate students.

Some of my friends joined Army Reserve units in Davenport, Iowa, and San Francisco and flew back and forth to the meetings. But I luckily found a unit in Boston. I joined the Reserves and finished my first year and then took a year off, went on active duty, went to basic training in Fort Knox, Kentucky. The reservists went through the same basic training as anyone else. Most of the young men in my platoon went on to Vietnam. My obligation was only four months of active duty, then six years of once a month for a weekend. The Reserves in the ’60s were very different from the Reserves today.

The Army has built up the Reserves and integrated them absolutely seamlessly into the Army planning, as we now know from Iraq. You can’t fight a war now without the Reserves. The Civ-Ops and military police are all in Reserve units now. In the ’60s, the Reserves were sort of a backwater; they were kind of a joke. We had no equipment, no real training. But I went into active duty about November of 1968 and came back about February. Then I wrote a book from February to September on the Farm Bureau investigation that we had conducted with Joe Resnick called *Dollar Harvest*, which has a very small cult following among populist farmers in the Midwest.
I’ll fast forward to a very funny Clinton story. We’ll talk about how I got to know Clinton—I’ve known him since 1972. By the time we got to the White House, sometime in the ’90s, he went down to Arkansas one weekend and came back and said, “You know, I met a good old boy in the Ozarks who said there’s somebody by the name of Samuel Berger who wrote this book on farmers.” Of course, President Clinton saw me as a foreign policy person by that time. It never occurred to him this could be me.

“That’s me,” I said. “You wrote a book about farmers? What do you know about farmers?” I gave him a copy of the book. He put the book in the Oval Office along with all the other books written by members of his Cabinet. Not all of them, obviously. Bob Reich would have taken up a whole shelf. But he had a good number of books. At a Cabinet meeting he told this story.

He said, “I was down in the Ozarks talking to good old boys and they said, ‘Hey, Bill, is that Berger who works for you doing foreign policy the same guy that wrote the book about the Farm Bureau?’” And President Clinton would say, “Beats me.” So I had new respect I think in the eyes of President Clinton when he realized that I actually knew something about dirt farmers.

I went back to Harvard and finished my two years, although this was a period marked by the assassination of Robert Kennedy, by the riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King, by continued turmoil surrounding the Vietnam War. I got more and more active in the political side of the antiwar movement as we got towards my graduation in 1971.

Strong: Is this the right time to ask about when you met Clinton?

Berger: Sure. Let me fill in a little bridge. I graduated in 1971. No question in my mind I was coming to Washington, but I hadn’t really thought much about a job, and I accepted a clerkship on the tax court. Talk about forks in the road, here’s a fork in the road. I went to a professor of mine, quite late—I didn’t really get into the process early enough thinking about clerkships. He said one of the two best federal judges on the bench works on the tax court. I was interested in tax; I took a number of tax courses in law school. So I applied and got the clerkship.

Then about March of ’71 I got a call from one of my closest friends still today, Eli Segal, who later on in the Clinton administration began AmeriCorps, Welfare to Work, and was the Chief of Staff of the campaign in 1992. Eli said, “What are you going to do when you graduate?” I said, “I’m coming down to Washington to do this clerkship for Judge [Theodore] Tannenwald of the tax court.” He said, “What? You’re going to sit in some library and do tax research? We’re going to elect a President who’s going to end the war. We need you to come down here.” I was a pretty good speechwriter. That was my wedge in. I had written speeches for Resnick. I said, “Who?” He said, “Senator Harold Hughes.”

Senator Harold Hughes was from Iowa. He had nominated Gene McCarthy in 1968. At that point, he was an extremely intriguing political figure. Esquire magazine did a cover story, “The Next President.” Mary McGrory wrote column after column extolling his virtues. He was a big man, six foot four, and he looked like Johnny Cash. He was a former truck driver, never graduated from college. He got involved in Iowa politics, won five terms as Governor from Iowa, then ran for the Senate in 1968 and won.
The theory of the Hughes campaign was a little bit like reconstructing the Robert Kennedy coalition, because Hughes was culturally conservative. He could appeal to blue collar America, but because he was philosophically liberal, he could appeal to liberal America. The theory was that this was the way to reach out beyond the base of the antiwar movement to workers and labor unions, etc.

So I said okay. I came down to Washington to see the judge, and I extracted myself from the clerkship, which was a painful meeting. I then took the job with Hughes. About three weeks later he withdrew from the race. That made me feel very good. In fact, I have to boast about one thing. I have only one unique claim in politics and that is, I think I am the only person who worked on three withdrawal or concession speeches in one Presidential cycle. The first one was Hughes; he dropped out. I still was determined to work for an antiwar candidate for President. I went to work for John Lindsay, and Lindsay lasted until Wisconsin. And so we wrote a second withdrawal speech. I was getting quite good at this art form.

Finally, after Wisconsin, I went to the [George] McGovern campaign. Eli Segal had wound up in the McGovern campaign. He was the deputy campaign manager under Gary Hart and Frank Mankiewicz. I worked in the McGovern campaign from probably May or June of 1972 through the end. I traveled with McGovern after the convention, and that’s how I met Bill Clinton. Bill Clinton was working in the McGovern campaign, running the state of Texas, where I think he got 29 or 32 percent of the vote. It’s in his book. Everything is in his book, actually, but that’s one of the things in his book.

I remember very well. We went to San Antonio for a rally at the Alamo. Usually when the candidate lands, the local state coordinator comes up into the plane and says, “Down at the bottom you can see Mayor Jones and Governor Smith and Senator so-and-so and City Council. Here’s the plan. We’re going to motorcade over to the Alamo. You’ll give a speech and we’ll have this reception and lay out the territory.” This guy bounded up the stairs. He had a white Colonel Sanders suit on. He cut quite a dashing figure. He shepherded us around that day. I think we went to Texas one more time during the campaign. Texas was not exactly a state in contention, although as it turned out no state was in contention, except for Massachusetts. But I met him then.

He was part of a quite extraordinary group of young people in their 20s who were drawn to the McGovern campaign as a vehicle both because of McGovern’s decency and because they were against the war. These were more politically oriented people who thought they could actually, through the political process, end the war. That turned out to be a wrong assumption. So that’s how I met Clinton.

Riley: But you kept up contacts with him over the years.

Berger: One of my first impressions of Clinton—it certainly doesn’t come from the meeting at the Alamo, but sometime around then—is sitting in a bar, talking to him. He was Arkansas. Some of the other young people were from someplace, but they were not of someplace. They were from Illinois, Wisconsin, or California. Or they were from New York. But Clinton was
grounded in Arkansas, and there was never any doubt in my mind that he was returning to Arkansas, from the very first time we had any kind of extended conversation.

So he went back to Arkansas, and as you know he ran for Congress and lost. He ran for Attorney General and won. Then he ran for Governor. He was the youngest Governor ever elected in the United States at that point. He served one two-year term and lost. Youngest former Governor, he used to kid. Then he won again, and won three more terms as Governor. In the ’80s he’d come to Washington quite frequently, either as part of the National Governors Association or he was working a lot on education at that point, various task forces. We’d see each other—three or four or five of us who were from that period—the McGovern campaign—would have dinner. He was always energetic, exuberant, and full of life and joy. If we went for an ice cream cone he would wind up in a conversation with the scooper for 15 minutes about something.

Some of the qualities of curiosity and energy and love of people were apparent from the very beginning. We got closer in the ’80s. My wife and I went down to Little Rock to spend the weekend with Hillary [Clinton] and Governor Clinton. We went to Chelsea [Clinton]’s soccer game, went to see Governor Clinton give the award to the winner of the bass-fishing contest in Little Rock—the highlight. We had a great weekend.

The next episode arises in 1988 because there were many people who thought Clinton should run in ’88. This is recounted, I think, in David Maraniss’s book.

Riley: Do you recall how early it was that you felt like this was somebody who had national aspirations?

Berger: I think in the mid ’80s. By 1985 I thought—whether he had national aspirations or not, it’s hard to separate your expectations from his aspirations—but I believed that this was a special person and that if he didn’t have national aspirations, he should. I began to believe in the mid ’80s that this guy should run for President, and I started talking about him. People say to me to this day, “I remember when you were talking about this Governor of Arkansas back in 1985.” He just was an exceptional individual. He entertained the idea of running in ’88—more than entertained it. We actually had a little group going. We were doing some preparatory work and were getting ready for setting up an exploratory committee in 1988. He actually set a date for a press conference to announce an exploratory committee. This must have been ’87 or ’88.

Some of us flew down to Little Rock. Mickey Kantor was there and Jim Lyons from Denver, myself. Of course Bruce Lindsey and a couple of his friends from Arkansas. Carl Wagner, who was a very good friend from Washington, Steven Cohen, we all went down really to prep him for the Wednesday press conference at which he was going to announce his exploratory committee to look at whether or not he should run in ’88.

I remember I called Carl from the airport and he said, “I don’t think this is a done deal. You may want to hang back and let me call you.” I said, “No, I’m coming down.” So I flew down. President Clinton and Hillary and Carl Wagner and a couple of people were upstairs conferring. They’d been up most of the night, I think. The rest of us were milling around downstairs waiting. He came downstairs and sat us all down around the dining room table in the big Governor’s
mansion and said, “I’ve decided I’m not going to run.” Chelsea was at that time about seven years old maybe, and he said, “I just don’t think I could put Chelsea through a campaign. I don’t want to neglect her, and we’ve decided this is not the right time.”

I remember walking in the backyard with Mickey Kantor and looking into the kitchen as he told this to Chelsea. She jumped up and grabbed him around the neck and kissed him. She obviously didn’t want him to do this. So there was a flirtation with running in 1988, but after ’88 and [Michael] Dukakis’s loss, I think there was not much doubt in his mind that he was going to run in 1992.

Naftali: Mr. Berger, were you at the convention where he gave the speech in 1989?

Berger: I was not only at the convention; I have to admit that I actually worked on the speech.

Strong: Only part.

Berger: This is the part that’s going to get redacted. [laughter]

Riley: Not permanently, just hold onto it until—

Berger: No, this is a great project and as much as I can contribute I’m happy to. I was definitely in Atlanta. I did not handle the negotiations between the Dukakis campaign and Clinton. There are two wildly different interpretations of what Clinton was expected to do. If you talk to the Dukakis people—many of my good friends—they say, “We wanted him to give a rip-roaring ‘Dukakis is the greatest thing since sliced bread’ speech.” If you talk to Clinton, he says that Dukakis told him he wanted him to give a serious speech. He didn’t want it to be a tub-thumper; he wanted it to be a serious exposition of the reasons why Dukakis should be President. The truth, I’m sure, lies somewhere in-between.

Clinton was writing the speech himself. He’s a good writer. He’s a somewhat prolix writer, if that’s the right word. I remember the night before the speech being in the Turner Center—that’s the name of the office building—in a conference room. He kept working on the speech. He kept adding and I kept editing, and he kept adding. I’d take some stuff out and he would put some stuff back in. Now, I’m not wholly harmless here because my understanding was that the Dukakis people wanted a really serious speech about Michael Dukakis, which this was, if you actually read the speech. It just was totally inappropriate for its purpose, which was to get the crowd on their feet screaming, “Michael Dukakis, Michael Dukakis, Michael Dukakis!”

I went to the speech and I sat—I remember as if it was yesterday—in the mezzanine section, and I watched this unfold. It was like watching a car crash in slow motion. It was so painful. At some point of course, in the Dukakis trailer, ordinarily you turn down the lights when the speaker speaks and that’s the signal, the crowd is quiet, the spotlight is on the stage. At some point this thing got so unruly that they turned up the lights. Then they have people starting chants, “Dukakis!” It was one of the few times I must say where Clinton did not read the room. Clinton is marvelous at reading a room and understanding what’s happening, adjusting and adapting, throwing away and discarding, and going in a different direction.
I think it’s just so awesome to be standing there in front of this huge convention with lights blaring in your eyes so you really can’t see what’s going on, and I don’t think he realized to the very end what a disaster it had been. It was so painful for me. My stomach was absolutely tied in knots. I couldn’t even watch the end of it. I had to get up and start walking. It’s a basketball arena in Atlanta with a concourse that goes all around. I made about two laps of the concourse and he was still talking. He finally said, “In conclusion—” and people cheered. I was standing there as he came up the ramp after the speech and he said, “That wasn’t very good, was it?” I said, “No, Bill, that was not good.”

He was a little annoyed that he thought there had been lack of coordination between what Dukakis’s people were doing on the floor—at some point they were even encouraging people to start cheering and chanting and stuff—and what he had been told. He said, “I’m going into the press room.” This is actually a story I used to tell a lot when I was trying to convince people in ’91 and ’92 about Bill Clinton. My instinct would have been to go immediately to my hotel room, get a large bottle of Jack Daniels, drink the entire thing, crawl into bed, and hide there for about three days. He went right into the press room and took it head-on. It was a pretty bloody session. “Is this the end of your career, blah, blah, blah—” I’ll tell you a funny little epilogue to the story because Pamela Harriman is a common friend and comes back and forth in this saga many times.

During the ’80s, when Clinton got defeated for Governor, he was looking for vehicles by which he could continue to be active, just as many of the former Democratic candidates are now professors at such-and-such university or adjunct this or forming PACs [Political Action Committee].

He needed a platform. Pamela had, after the debacle of the ’80 race, where Reagan not only won but the Republicans took over the Senate, she formed something called Democrats for the ’80s. I was on the board of that, as were Bob Strauss, Tom Foley, and others. I said to her, “There’s this young Governor in Arkansas that you’re going to really, really like, a dynamic guy. He just got beat, but he’s going to come back. You ought to put him on the board. It will be good for him.” She put him on the board of Democrats for the ’80s. So that was one more reason for him to get exposure to national Democrats.

I remember the night after that speech, I was at the convention with Pamela, and she said, “Let’s call Bill and Hillary and invite them to dinner.” She called them up and we had dinner in a very public restaurant. She invited a few more people and it was just a wonderful—I learned a great deal from that act of generosity. She realized that they were going to be feeling tremendously small and belittled and she wanted to reach out and say, “Here, we’re going to sit in the middle of one of the big fancy restaurants in Atlanta and we’re going to have a great time. We’re going to drink a bottle of wine and life’s going to go on.”

Of course later on we’ll come back to this, the circumstances under which she went to Paris as our first Ambassador. So that’s the episode of the speech.
Riley: And your relationship with him at this point, the foreign policy component, which gets to be very large later on, is not a primary—

Berger: That’s a good question. My career path took quite a sharp turn in 1977. I was a lawyer. I was writing a book about farmers. I had an interest in international affairs, but I had no schooling in international affairs. I took a lot of international affairs courses at Cornell but I didn’t major in it. In 1977 Jimmy Carter was elected, and Cyrus Vance, who was the Secretary of State, asked me whether I would be his speechwriter, because again, speechwriting was a talent I had. When people come to me now and say, “How do you start?” You have to start either with an expertise or a skill. That’s how you wedge your way in. I had a skill. I could write speeches.

I went over to the State Department and wrote speeches for Cy Vance, then that blossomed into becoming deputy director of the policy planning staff, and I spent four years in the State Department from 1977 to 1980. That totally reoriented my career. When I left I went back to practice law, but I started the international trade practice of my law firm and remained involved and got more active, did more writing about foreign policy, did more reading about foreign policy. So I became a foreign policy person really starting in ’77.

Naftali: How did you meet Cyrus Vance?

Berger: I met Cyrus Vance because he was interviewing for a speechwriter, and Tony Lake, who emerges later as somebody I brought into the campaign and then became the first National Security Advisor, was Secretary Vance’s head of policy planning. That’s where speechwriting often is situated in the State Department. All these names float around.

Tony called Bob Shrum, who was a good speechwriter, and said, “Bob, do you know anybody who’s a good speechwriter?” Bob said, “One of the best speechwriters I know is Sandy Berger. He’s practicing law; he’s probably bored to death.” I came in for the interview. I actually almost didn’t get the job because there was a very well-known diplomat by the name of Samuel D. Berger who was formerly Ambassador to Korea and the deputy DCM [Deputy Chief of Mission] to Ellsworth Bunker in Vietnam and someone who Cyrus Vance distinctly did not like.

When Tony wanted to give me the job, he sent a memo to Vance saying that he interviewed Samuel Berger. “He’s a good writer, somebody we should hire.” Vance wrote, “No way Samuel Berger is coming into this State Department,” and sent it back to Tony. Tony thought it was an uncharacteristically sharp response for what was a relatively low-level job. He went back in to see Cy, and Cy obviously had confused me with the Samuel Berger he knew. So I was saved by Tony’s persistence.

Naftali: Did you meet Bob Shrum in the McGovern campaign?

Berger: I filled a lot of Bob’s former jobs. Bob had been John Lindsay’s speechwriter. He left, and I took that job, but I met him in the McGovern campaign. The three speechwriters in the McGovern campaign were Bob Shrum; John Holum, who had been on McGovern’s Senate staff, came from South Dakota; and me.
There’s a wonderful story—on election night in 1972, it’s a debacle, we lost every state except Massachusetts and the District of Columbia as you recall. We sat up in McGovern’s suite. McGovern was unusually calm, not because I think he was defeatist, but I think he felt he’d run the race that he wanted to run on the war and on Watergate, which nobody cared about at that point, and that he’d done the best that he could do. There was an inner peace with McGovern. The rest of us were a wreck and we were doing a lot of drinking.

At the end of the evening, about 2 o’clock in the morning, McGovern says, “I want to make one more toast.” He turns to Shrum and Holum and me and he says, “I want to toast the three young men who wrote the words that moved the nation.” Of course, we moved the nation [laughter], but I thought that was a great ironic toast. So that’s how I got to Vance.

Naftali: One question on the McGovern campaign. Did you work on the [Thomas] Eagleton speech?

Berger: I was in the room. Eagleton was not George McGovern’s first choice. He offered the Vice Presidency to several other people and I think was getting a little desperate, because at some point you had to show up at the convention with your candidate. I can’t remember, I think he offered it to Teddy Kennedy, maybe four other people who could count and could see that George McGovern was not going to be the President. Then someone came up with the name of Eagleton. I don’t know who it was. I remember watching somebody white out somebody’s name from the nominating petition and typing in Thomas Eagleton, but I was not involved with the Tom Eagleton speech.

Riley: We were tracking your ship from a skill, it was basically the question related to your ongoing relationship with Clinton.

Berger: In the ’80s Clinton would come to Washington and often we’d get pizza and go to Derek Shearer’s apartment. We’d sit for four hours and we’d talk about politics and policy and we’d talk about the world. At that point I engaged with him in terms of foreign policy. He began to understand that really was my expertise. If you want to leap forward, I became Bill Clinton’s Senior Foreign Policy Advisor in late ’91 after he had declared and decided he was going to give three speeches at Georgetown, the trifecta. One was on the economy and economic policy, one on the opportunity, responsibility, the “third way” theme, and the third was on foreign policy. I was the only person on the conference call with any foreign policy experience.

The bar was not extremely high in 1991 to become senior foreign policy advisor to Bill Clinton, who wasn’t even a blip on anybody’s chart. I spent a great deal of time working on that speech. That’s when I reached out to Tony Lake, my former boss at the State Department. He worked on the speech. I read it a few years ago; it’s quite a good speech.

Riley: You said we were skipping over some episodes. Let’s go back and take the chronology leading up to that. He decides he’s not going to run.

Berger: Clearly by ’91 he’s running, and there are several meetings that take place in Washington, usually chaired by Mickey Kantor, to talk about everything from the delegate
selection process to the rules. One of the things that impressed me so much was when we got to the policy part of the program, sometimes these meetings would be a day and a half of serious discussion of how we’re going to do this. Clinton would handle that part. This is not a candidate who was fed his policy framework. He knew what he wanted to say and he would lead the discussion of what the policy direction would be. He was weaker in foreign policy obviously than he was in domestic policy, but knowledgeable.

I went to the announcement in October of ’91, maybe September of ’91 in Little Rock, on a very hot day in which he announced his campaign. We’re talking about a period here where George [H.W.] Bush was at 90 percent in the polls after the Gulf War and Bill Clinton wasn’t even on the radar screen of the American people. I remember his political instincts are so sharp—the other potential candidates included Bill Bradley and obviously Bob Kerrey, who did run, and Mario Cuomo. Mario Cuomo was really the 800-pound gorilla. Everybody wanted Mario to run. Mario had given that electrifying keynote speech at the ’84 convention that had not been exceeded by the keynote speech at the ’88 convention. We were all thrilled—I was thrilled—when Cuomo said he was not going to run.

Clinton was disappointed because he was absolutely convinced that he would have beaten Cuomo in the primaries—you establish your credentials by knocking off Goliath. He would have been the giant-killer, and at that point he would have the nomination. He wasn’t afraid of Cuomo coming in. He wanted Cuomo to come in. He thought he could beat Cuomo. The rest of us of course were relieved because we thought Cuomo would be a very attractive candidate.

Riley: Did you also have connections with these other candidates? Had you decided by ’88 that you were basically a Clinton guy—

Berger: Yes.

Riley: That’s who you were going to go with regardless?

Berger: Absolutely. The foreign policy work after the Georgetown speech became more and more time consuming as Clinton—Bill Clinton was not going to win any votes from George Bush on foreign policy. George H. W. Bush was a foreign policy President. He’d won a great war. The strategy was we’re not going to lose any votes on foreign policy.

That was my job. We were going to get Clinton over the public’s bar so that they would decide this on other grounds. They’re not going to say, “He’s just not experienced enough to really be commander-in-chief.” That was what the campaign was about. The campaign for me, as Senior Foreign Policy Advisor, was establishing Clinton’s credentials, which we did in many ways, including surrogates. We put together a military contingent led by Admiral Bill Crowe, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. We had a big military event. We also were very proactive with respect to foreign policy issues, whether it was Bosnia, Haiti, or Russia. We actually were faster on our feet than the Bush people. In a sense we got to the right of Bush on Bosnia, and we were tougher on Bosnia than Bush was, on Haiti. The President took the position we weren’t doing enough to restore democracy in Haiti. Bush had said this was unacceptable when [Jean-Bertrand] Aristide had been exiled. We would get democracy back in Haiti.
In Russia, at a time when democracy was just being born, [Boris] Yeltsin was trying to—[Mikhail] Gorbachev’s era was ending and the Yeltsin era was beginning. People like Graham Allison were writing about the grand bargain, if you recall, in which we would have a Marshall Plan for Russia. We got out sooner than Bush did with a Russia policy. So on the issue side, we were trying to be proactive and out in front of Bush. On the credentialing side, we were trying to surround him with enough serious foreign policy people that he was taken seriously by the press.

Clinton had been Governor of Arkansas and obviously foreign policy had not been his metier, had not been in his portfolio, but this guy was a Rhodes Scholar, went to Oxford, traveled around the world, was extraordinarily well read and it’s not as if he didn’t bring anything to the picnic. He had a great deal of knowledge about the world. What we had to shape were the policies.

Riley: During this period of time, the primary season when he’s trying to secure the nomination, you were in Washington?

Berger: I was in Washington at my law firm until about May or so, when I began to be spending so much time on the campaign that I got very nervous that I wasn’t spending enough time with my clients, and I had a nightmare that I was going to one day wake up and find out that I hadn’t filed a pleading for my client because I’d been meeting with the foreign minister of Peru. My law firm had a sabbatical program, and I had never taken my sabbatical. I was kind of a workaholic and I never took my six months off. So I had an accrued sabbatical and I took my sabbatical in June and I was able to work then from June to the election drawing my law firm salary but working full time for the campaign, but I did that out of Washington.

Riley: My question is about what your routine point of contact was with the campaign. I’m guessing you weren’t having a lot of contact with Clinton himself at this point, who was—

Berger: I think George Stephanopoulos was probably the principal contact. The campaign wasn’t that big. As it got larger, more and more of these people were people I knew. I’ll tell you the story about Eli Segal, who becomes Chief of Staff. The week before Clinton is ready to announce, there’s a huge story in the Washington Post about Bob Kerrey, who was the insider’s favorite, the inside-the-beltway favorite, which is always wrong. It talked a lot about Billy Shore, who had been Gary Hart’s chief strategist, becoming the campaign manager for Bob Kerrey. Clinton called and said, “I can’t announce next week, I don’t have a campaign manager.” I said, “No one cares who your campaign manager is.” He said, “This does not seem like a serious campaign if I can’t say who my campaign manager is.” I said, “Well, you’ve got Bob Farmer,” who had been the finance chairman for Dukakis, the most successful finance chairman in the history of the Democratic Party, who had signed up with Clinton. “People are going to be a lot more impressed by the fact that you’ve got somebody out there who’s going to be raising money, than by who’s going to be running the trains,” I said. “No, no, no, no.”

I had great respect for Eli. I called Eli up and I said, “Would you go down to Little Rock?” There was a big debate whether this campaign was going to run out of Washington or out of Little Rock. The vote was about 100 to 2; 100 for Washington, 2 for Little Rock. The two were Bill
and Hillary Clinton and the hundred were everybody else who didn’t want to be in Little Rock. We kept the Washington operation, but the campaign was run in Little Rock, which was, again, a very smart decision, because all the visual imagery of that campaign was Little Rock. The correspondents had to go down to Little Rock and this was coming from America, not another thing being parachuted out of Washington.

I said, “Eli, Clinton’s looking for a campaign manager.” Eli had just sold his business, so he did have some time, but he said, “I’m not going to go down and spend the next six months in Little Rock.” I said, “How about three weeks? Go down there for three weeks and hire a campaign manager, a press secretary, a staff.” The only person really on the staff at that point was George Stephanopoulos, beyond Bruce Lindsey and the people who had been close to Clinton for years—Betsey Wright, who had been his Chief of Staff as Governor.

I said, “I’ll make it clear to Clinton that you can only stay three weeks and that’s it and your commitment is to get this thing up and running and you’re going back to Boston.” Eli said, “Okay, three weeks.” Well, he wound up being the Chief of Staff of the entire campaign from that point. He went down to Little Rock and never left.

He went on to be the creator of AmeriCorps, which came out of Clinton’s pledge during the campaign that we should marry the idea of public service for young people with educational credits. So anybody who spent two years working for their country should be able to get a stipend to help them get to college. It was the number one applause line in his stump speech. It tapped the same instinct as the Peace Corps and other programs that asked people to make sacrifices. I think the American people want, actually, to have more asked of them than often is the case.

During the campaign I was basically in Washington, but I traveled quite a bit with Clinton.

Riley: This is before you took a sabbatical?

Berger: After I took sabbatical. Basically after the convention, there was enough foreign policy happening every day, whether it was in Bosnia or Haiti. There was no Somalia at that point, or Russia. It was worthwhile to have somebody on the plane who was able, in real time, to communicate with Governor Clinton. So I spent more than half my time traveling with the campaign.

[BREAK]

Riley: I have a couple of questions for you about the primary period before we get back and try to wrap up with the campaign. One of my questions relates to any recollections that you might have about a very rocky period in the campaign, January ’92, the point at which the Gennifer Flowers allegations were coming at him and it was the draft stuff. Do you have any recollections of that period? Were you called in in any way to help out as a friend or—
Berger: I have vivid recollections of it. Clinton had been creeping up in New Hampshire and suddenly the floor fell out with the Gennifer Flowers story and the questions about the draft. Let me just say something about the draft. You have to be of my generation and Bill Clinton’s generation to understand what was happening in the late ’60s and early ’70s. This was a war that most of us believed was wrong. Most people who were in college at that point, or graduate school, or just out of college, were agonized by this dilemma of service versus serving in a war that we thought was morally bankrupt. We saw this played out—this is a theme of American politics that still has tremendous vitality. We just saw the same drama played out in the [John] Kerry campaign and the swift boat ads. Was Kerry a war hero or an antiwar traitor?

I think it’s hard to understand how confusing and conflicted people of my age and President Clinton’s age at that time were about how they deal with the draft in a war that they fundamentally opposed. Clinton’s story is no different from the story of 75 or 85 percent of people like him. Somebody joked earlier about divinity school. That was one avenue for not being drafted. Some people suddenly developed chronic colitis conditions and doctors were dispensing letters rather freely in many cases about health problems. It was a period of great confusion. Clinton in many ways reflected that. John Kerry made a different decision; he decided to serve and go. I respect that very much, but there were many others who felt they couldn’t. So the draft issue is something we could all relate to.

I was not involved in the politics of the campaign too much. I did fly up to New Hampshire just to be there and lend my support. I remember having a conversation with Hillary, saying, “How are you doing with all this press coverage?” She said, “I don’t read it.” I’ve never forgotten that. Sometimes, when you’re in the maelstrom, you have to block out all of the incoming in order to have the stamina and strength to move ahead. He wound up turning that to his advantage because he went down very much in the polls. I was there on election night when Paul Begala proposed the single most important step of the campaign, which was for Bill Clinton to go out at 9 o’clock at night, two hours before the results were finalized—he came in second as I recall in New Hampshire—and claim that he’s the comeback kid.

We all sat in our living rooms watching television, watching the drama unfold of election night and suddenly at 9 o’clock, Clinton made the story. The story was that Bill Clinton was the comeback kid. Everything else was anticlimactic after that. It was a brilliant move. It was Paul’s idea as I recall, although other people probably take credit for it. It was a very bumpy campaign. New York was a very tough primary. But as I said, I traveled with Clinton a lot, even in the early days, before I went full time. He’d go into a living room filled with 50 people who had been gathered for a small get-together, a fundraiser, and he’d sometimes talk for an hour, or more, and exchange views. You could watch people become more and more engrossed because he was able to describe problems in ways that made sense.

He was able to suggest that he might not have all the answers, but he had a sense of direction. He appealed to people first through their minds and then through their hearts. He was charismatic, but it wasn’t charisma. It was people feeling that this is somebody who really has an idea of what direction to take the country. It was an amazing thing to see. People walked away from those sessions absolutely committed.
Hillary would often speak. They joked about two for the price of one, and came to regret that a little bit. But they started off very low, retail politics, 20 people in a living room, 40 people in a living room. But then as the campaign grew, the enthusiasm mounted, the bus tours coming out—another brilliant idea—coming out of the convention, taking the buses and the [Albert] Gore selection, which I think was counterintuitive. Instead of going for the balancing candidate, Johnson for Kennedy, Texas, Massachusetts, he went for somebody who was very much like him, a moderate southerner, about his same age, and a policy wonk. It actually had an electrifying effect, one plus one equaled three in that case, because people thought *My God, he has the self confidence to pick somebody who is as smart as he is*, number one.

Number two, there really was going to be a change of generation from the Bush generation to the Clinton generation, and that was very exciting to people. And as we got into October, the crowds were amazing, enthusiastic. “Bill, Bill, Bill, Bill!” I’ve never experienced anything like it in my life.

**Strong:** Can I ask you a question about Clinton and Vietnam? Kerry would be the extreme example of someone who has credentials on both sides, serves, wins medals, and opposes the war. What’s Clinton’s heritage from that era?

**Berger:** It’s a very good question, and people like David Halberstam have written books about that precise question. I think that for a time after Vietnam, the legacy for my generation was extreme skepticism about military engagement. I think as we got to the ’90s, the end of the Cold War, and we started seeing problems like Somalia, and Haiti and Bosnia, and East Timor and other places where military power had to be part of the equation, I think views matured. Clinton and others of that background were not afraid to use military power.

We used military power so much during the Clinton administration—you may remember in the debate between Jack Kemp and Al Gore, Kemp said, “This is a trigger-happy administration. They bomb before bedtime.” We used military power quite frequently, but married to a diplomacy. So I don’t think the stereotype, which is that Vietnam traumatized a generation that was then afraid to use the military, really holds.

**Naftali:** How did you bring Admiral Crowe onboard? Because that was very important.

**Berger:** Crowe was very important. Crowe was the single most important endorsement we got. I think Crowe knew Clinton from Renaissance weekend or some other contact, liked Clinton and had spent time with him. I didn’t recruit Crowe; Crowe was there. We built a crowd around Crowe. We built a group of about 50 or 60 flag officers and had a big event in Philadelphia where they all came out and endorsed Clinton. It was used so often during the last campaign that it seems almost banal, but at the time it was quite vivid.

Generals like [Bernard] Trainor and the Gulf War commander and others saying, “We think Clinton ought to be President.” I think they were drawn to his intellectual capacity and his understanding that the military needed to be restructured. He also positioned himself during the campaign in the center on the military budget issue. A big issue in the campaign in ’92 was how much to cut the military budget. We forget, in ’89 the Berlin Wall collapses, and it’s the end of
the Cold War. George H. W. Bush starts cutting the military. The precipitous drop in military spending begins in ’89. We’re talking about the peace dividend and how we were going to spend the peace dividend.

So ’89, ’90, ’91, and the debate in ’92 was between John Kerry, who said, 50 percent further cut in the budget, and Clinton, who was much more cautious. He said there could be further cuts. But we actually worked closely with Les Aspin, who was chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. Les had developed a series of different budgets, which went from threat to capability to cost, as opposed to picking a number, saying a 50 percent cut. Analytically, he turned the process around. He said, “What are the threats that we’re going to face? What are the capabilities we’re going to need, and what is that going to cost us?”

Clinton gave a speech during the campaign in which he laid that out. It was part of the Georgetown speech, as I recall. So he was to the right of the other candidates on defense, although it was in the context of everyone, including President Bush, saying, “With the end of the Cold War, we ought to be able to save a considerable amount of money from the military.”

Strong: Can I ask another quick primary season question?

Berger: Sure.

Strong: Your description of the strategy of establishing credentials, keeping foreign policy out, I think worked reasonably well—

Berger: I don’t think there was actually a strategy of keeping foreign policy out. There wasn’t that much interest in foreign policy. We injected foreign policy a lot. Clinton gave about six foreign policy speeches during the campaign.

Strong: I want to ask about one of those—the promise to give Gerry Adams a visa. Was that well thought out before you made it?

Berger: Yes. It was well thought out and it was a gutsy thing to do, and it turned out to have been decisive. Nancy Soderberg, who was our first paid foreign policy staff person, had worked for Senator Kennedy and had been very close to the Northern Ireland issue for many years. She became convinced that Adams was genuinely committed to moving away from violence towards peace, but he was not strong enough within the greater IRA [Irish Republican Army] community, so to speak. His politics were not strong enough for him to be able to sustain that position. So the view had always been that he had to renounce violence and then he’d get a visa. The argument that we made to President Clinton was, if we give him the visa he will come here and be able to go back with the stature to deliver the commitment.

That was a gutsy thing for Clinton to do. The State Department actually hated it with a passion. The State Department is very much anglophilic. The FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] hated it. They thought we were giving aid and comfort to terrorists. It was a calculated political decision based on the advice that he was getting from us as well as his own instinct that
Adams—if we could take that risk, we could credential Adams enough to go back and renounce violence.

**Strong:** And that was the view as early as the campaign promise?

**Berger:** Refresh my recollection—when was the promise made?

**Strong:** In the New York primary. He meets with Irish-American leaders and is asked the Northern Ireland questions and surprises everybody.

**Berger:** It’s something we discussed during that period. Obviously, everything gets relitigated when you’re President.

**Riley:** Anything else from the campaign season? You said that there were five or six major—

**Berger:** In 1992 foreign policy was not uppermost in people’s minds. What was uppermost in people’s minds was an economy that was either in recession or just coming out of recession, depending on whose view you adopt. People were hurting economically, so obviously the economic issues, “It’s the economy, stupid,” was [James] Carville’s very clear message. Keep focused on the message.

But to James’s chagrin, from time to time we were able to have Clinton speak. I think there were six or seven major foreign policy speeches during the campaign. We did a speech on democracy and Eastern Europe in Milwaukee—the forerunner of NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] enlargement. Because we wanted to make—again, our goal was that we were not going to lose any votes because of foreign policy. We’re going to demonstrate that he’s not afraid of it. He’s going to go right at Bush on it. He’s going to be more energetic and more creative than Bush on it. I think that we succeeded in that strategy.

**Naftali:** Did any partnerships, any alliances with foreign leaders begin in that period? When did they start to notice him?

**Berger:** Every foreign leader, first of all, every Ambassador, desperately wants to meet the candidate because they want to be able to report back to their government that they’ve met John Kerry or Michael Dukakis or Bill Clinton. He had a meeting during the campaign with Yitzhak Rabin. It was a rather stiff meeting. Ironically they became very close friends. But I think Rabin was a little bit skeptical of this young kid. Rabin was kind of a hard-bitten war hero, fought every war that Israel fought.

I think there was a meeting with Yeltsin during the campaign—I seem to recall in New York—that I don’t think I attended. We didn’t do too much meeting with foreign leaders. I spent a lot of my time meeting with foreign representatives who wanted to know what a Clinton Presidency would be like. When you’re a foreign policy advisor in a campaign, you have several jobs.

Your most important job is to deal with the breaking events of the day and making sure the candidate is saying the right thing, not the wrong thing, number one. Number two, it’s
developing some initiatives where you’re helping to create an identity. But number three, it’s a process of engaging people, even though you don’t have very much for them to do. You get some people digging holes and some people filling up holes. It’s what I used to call “the illusion of inclusion.”

You have hundreds of people who were part of the Democratic foreign policy establishment who want to feel like they’re part of this campaign. There’s only a little keyhole through which you’re going to get to the candidate. So people did memos and people wrote talking points, and other people vetted them, and other people rewrote them. You keep moving this around so people feel as if they’re involved.

We were particularly interested in getting the neocons, who at that point still were Democrats. I think the neocons have gone over to the Republican Party. But because of Clinton’s war, Vietnam experience, or lack thereof, it was important for us that the more conservative, the [Henry] Scoop Jackson Democrats, supported him. We made tremendous efforts to reach out to them and to include them in the campaign.

Naftali: Did you include Sam Nunn?

Berger: We did include Sam Nunn, although it was sometimes hard to—the difference between Sam Nunn and Les Aspin, particularly after Clinton became the candidate—if I called and said, “We’re going to do a briefing on Tuesday in New York for the President on this defense issue,” Les would say, “What time, where?” Sam would say, “I’m busy on Tuesday, but we can do it in my office on Thursday.” “Your office, Sam? This guy’s running for President. He’s not going to stop and come to Washington.” He’s an independent fellow. Even though I think he liked Clinton—they were both southern moderates—he was a little less helpful than Aspin was, and I think that’s one of the reasons why Aspin became Secretary of Defense.

Riley: Debate preparation—were you involved at all?

Berger: Yes, absolutely. It was one of the most fun things.

Riley: Tell us about it. Why was it so much fun?

Berger: Fun in retrospect; it probably wasn’t so much fun going through it. There were three debates in ’92. In each case we found a location that was remote—in upstate New York, in Kansas City, and one other location. The debate team went up there and we basically would spend three days blocked out from everything else. The candidate might go out at 9 o’clock in the morning and do a little photo op event someplace and then come back by 10 o’clock. But it was totally focused on the debate.

Clinton was a good debater and very confident. Our first job was to shake his confidence. In ’92, Bob Barnett served as Bush. This is Bob’s avocation. He’s a very well known, prominent, Washington lawyer. He represents half the world. But he keeps books on each potential candidate during the four years because he’s done this now several times. So it’s not just that he goes away for the weekend and does this LexisNexis. He’s been thinking about this, how is he
going to be George Bush and how is he going to attack Bill Clinton or Bob Kerrey or Michael Dukakis or whoever the candidate was.

The first job was to get Clinton to really focus—

**Riley:** That’s what you mean by shaking his confidence?

**Berger:** Right. The afternoon of the first day we said we’d take a little break and come down here at 7 o’clock and do a 90-minute debate. We’ll just do a run through debate without any preparation. Clinton was very confident. He went to his room and came down at 7 o’clock. Bob ate his lunch. He had thought about everything that Clinton was going to say. He destroyed it. He had every attack line against Clinton, which Clinton really hadn’t thought through. You play how you practice. Clinton really came away from that first evening, in my judgment, somewhat sobered that he could be beaten in a debate by George Bush. Suddenly he got very focused.

It then broke down into segments, and we’d do an hour on economics, an hour on foreign policy, and an hour—it was important to keep the number of people in the room fairly limited so there weren’t 20 people giving Clinton advice about what to do. “You ought to be more this and less that and more this and you forgot that.” It was a very well run process. Tom Donilon ran the process I believe in 1992.

I think Clinton won all three debates in ’92, and it was not an accident. The second day was more about, “Okay, we’ve knocked down the conviction that you’re invincible. Now let’s build this thing back, brick by brick.” By the third day, you’re really talking more about—the third debate was the town meeting in South Carolina—I may be wrong about that. Clinton walked over to the woman who asked a question, and instead of answering the question, asked her the question back, then she said something back. That was not spontaneous; that was something that we talked about doing.

At the end of the day, people make a judgment of what they think of this person compared to the other person, whether they like him and whether they have confidence in him.

**Riley:** During the entire course of the general election campaign, were there any bullets, so to speak, that you dodged, especially in the foreign policy area? Were there vulnerabilities that Republicans didn’t take advantage of?

**Berger:** The one that really surprised me was gays in the military. The President—also in the New York primary, I think—had committed himself. You hope in a campaign to not make too many promises that you have to swallow when you’re President. We did a pretty good job, although on Haiti and gays in the military we got out beyond where the troops were. He made this commitment that he would allow gays in the military in New York, and it always made me very nervous, not on the merits but on the politics. For some reason the Republicans never picked it up until after the election. We’ll come back to this when we get into the Presidency—it becomes S1.
The Republicans cleverly figured out, between the election and the inauguration, that they were going to flip this issue and not do it on our timing. They were going to proactively do it on their time. They were going to make it the number one issue.

So the one issue that I was somewhat surprised they didn’t go after more was gays in the military, which would have probably appealed to the social conservatives.

**Riley:** I want to make sure I understand how you characterize that. Was this then *not* a case where the position had been fully vetted and a conscious decision agreed to? Was it the case were the candidate sort of got ahead—

**Berger:** First of all, Clinton never exists in a box where there are four people and those four people are the people who brief him and the decision gets made in that little box. He is on the phone with people, he’s talking with people. He’s forming his opinions. He sees you and talks to you and he asks you what you think, or you say to him, “Really it’s outrageous that other armies, the Israeli army has allowed homosexuals and we don’t.” He formulates his opinion from not just the people who are formally tasked with that, but from his own larger contacts. I don’t know where this came from. This hadn’t been something discussed before in my presence.

**Strong:** I was just going to ask about that. It sounded as if you were surprised when he made the statement.

**Berger:** I was surprised. I spent a lot of time during the transition trying to figure out how, knowing that this was rather explosive, he’d made the commitment, and it was the right commitment, but we didn’t have a country with us, let alone the military. During the transition—we’ll come to this later—we had a group of people working on how to handle this issue, and we developed a plan by which he would appoint a commission and go six months, and the commission would come back with recommendations and we’d sort of kick the ball down the road a little bit so we had time to talk to the military.

But what the Republicans very cleverly decided to do was introduce as S1, in 1993, a bill prohibiting gays in the military. Suddenly we were confronted with this issue when we weren’t prepared.

**Riley:** Were there, conversely, areas that you look back on, especially in the foreign policy realm, that you feel you did an especially good job of being proactive in and taking it to—?

**Berger:** There are a couple of them. I think on Bosnia, Clinton was heavily influenced by Gore, who was very hawkish about the fact that we needed to be more interventionist with respect to Bosnia. You had these terrible scenes on the television every night of horrors going on in Bosnia with Bush seeming kind of impotent or feckless and Clinton saying we’ve got to be more proactive, more engaged.

I was very pleased that we’d beat them to the punch on Russia. We discovered that they were giving a speech on April 14th on Russian policy, and we decided we would give our speech on April 3rd. So we hurried up and got the speech done. It was Clinton who outlined how there
could be a new U.S.-Russia relationship and aid to Russia. We were at that point trying to save this new Russian democracy, which was still very much under siege from the left and the right. I think those are two areas where we outflanked Bush.

Naftali: I hope later we’ll talk about Clinton and Nixon’s conversations about Russia, because Nixon would actually endorse Clinton’s approach to Russia.

Riley: Anything else from the campaign period that you have questions about? Is there something that we’re forgetting? I know there’s an awful lot we haven’t covered. We have to watch the clock and make sure—

Naftali: Since you had written three concession speeches, at what point did you feel very confident—or did you ever feel very confident before the ’92 election—that you wouldn’t have to write another one?

Berger: Well, it wouldn’t have been my job, since I wasn’t a speechwriter for Clinton at that point, but I think traveling with Clinton the last two weeks, the intensity of the crowds, the people’s response to him, made me quite confident. I don’t think he believed he had this. This may be totally wrong, but I remember watching him Sunday before Tuesday of the election. He was on the phone with Stan Greenberg, our pollster. Stan was going through the overnight polling data. I saw Clinton exhale. What happened was [Ross] Perot got back in the race, and it became a three-way race. Perot was gaining some ground on NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement] and driving a wedge between us and Democrats on NAFTA, and for a while we were falling. It stabilized and started going back up again.

I don’t think he let himself believe that he was going to win until the Sunday before the Tuesday. We then embarked upon this extraordinary 48-hour trip around the country, where he lost his voice at some point and Hillary had to give the speeches and we all arrived in Little Rock on Tuesday, late morning, having started I believe in Philadelphia and gone all the way to the west and to Albuquerque and Lord only knows where, stopping mostly for airport rallies doing sometimes seven, eight events a day, all through the night, all through the next day. It was the subject of a Nightline documentary because Nightline was with us. There was the long march, but it was triumphant. At that point he seemed very confident.

Riley: You mentioned NAFTA, and we should have asked a question about that because—

Berger: I’m glad to talk about it because it was very interesting. He hadn’t spoken about NAFTA. Perot had dropped out of the race for a while. Then he sounded like he was coming back in the race. I can’t remember what was the action forcing the event, but we basically had to come to grips with where he was going to be on NAFTA. We had a meeting in Roslyn, Virginia. All the political people were there, Carville and Begala and Stephanopoulos and the Vice President was there and there probably were 20 people in the room. All the political people said, “If you come out for NAFTA you’re going to lose the election because you will give Perot precisely what he wants, which is the wedge issue between you and Democrats.”
Around that table, the only people who were contrary to that were Gore and myself and ultimately Stan Greenberg, very interestingly and probably decisively, although I think Clinton probably knew all along—we’ll come back to the substance of this. Stan Greenberg said to Clinton, “I think the polling on this shows this being a negative by X, but I think it would be so contrary to your world view and the way people understand you’re talking about the global economy, that the disconnect between your position on NAFTA and your larger position would cause a separate issue of credibility, and therefore I think you should be for it.”

I think Clinton had, and still does to this day, an understanding of globalization that is more sophisticated than most, and I don’t know that there ever was, in his mind, too much doubt. I think that he believes—and he was able to articulate this much better in the second term than in the first term—that there is a struggle between the forces of integration and the forces of disintegration. Trade, he believes, is a force of integration and liberalization. It would have been a really discordant note for him to suddenly say—but not NAFTA. So the vote was probably 14 to 4 for him coming out against, but he did anyhow. I think that was one of the braver things he did in the campaign.

Riley: I want to be clear, because Greenberg’s position was based on this discordant note that you’re defining. It was that if he took a position against it, it would undermine his credibility on all of these other globalization points.

Berger: Correct.

Strong: I want to ask about those globalization points. Did you as foreign policy advisor play any role? Clinton would talk about healthcare and say this is really an issue about us competing with our trading partners. Or he’d talk about how we have to improve education because we’re in a world market. A lot of his talk about domestic issues really was connected to a global view. Did you contribute to that?

Berger: I think a lot of that came from him. When he got elected we had GATT [General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade], we had Mexico, we had the China trade agreement, WTO [World Trade Organization], all those were tremendous fights within the Democratic Party where he was on the pro-trade side and most Democrats were on the negative side. He was very frustrated that he was not better able to articulate the benefits to America of globalization.

As you look at his speeches towards the second half of the second term, he begins to actually synthesize a lot of things that are going on in his mind. He gives a really interesting speech at Davos. Then he goes to the WTO. Towards the end, I’d say the last two years, he really had developed this integration, disintegration construct in his mind and the fact that what happens in a cave in Afghanistan can desperately, dramatically, and personally affect Americans in an instant. We didn’t obviously envision 9/11, but 9/11 is globalization too. It’s the dark side of globalization.

I’ve discussed this with him. He was very frustrated that we were never able to find the language. Part of the problem is of course that while in the aggregate, globalization is good, its impact falls disproportionately. The benefits and the burdens are not equally shared. It may be
good for the economy, but it may not be good for the tire manufacturer in Louisiana who then goes down to Mexico.

There’s more in his later speeches about how there has to be much more intervention by the government to smooth the bumps and reconcile the gaps between the winners and the losers. Because while overall, globalization makes us a wealthier country, there are losers both within the United States and internationally. You can’t have a laissez faire approach to the consequences of globalization. You can’t stop globalization, but you can’t just think globalization is going to be the solution to all problems, which real economic conservatives do.

Naftali: Did Robert Rubin play a role in Clinton’s thinking during the campaign?

Berger: I don’t know the answer to that question. Bob was not a formal part of the campaign. He was an advisor to the campaign. I don’t really know. I didn’t participate in the budget and macro economic policy discussions, so I didn’t see much of Bob in the campaign. He obviously becomes a mega force once he gets to the White House. That may be a function of just my vantage point. I was not part of the group that would get together and talk about what we would say about the economy, how we would formulate our economic policy.

Riley: Were you in Little Rock on election night?

Berger: I sure was. I was in Little Rock with my family.

Riley: Tell us about it.

Berger: Well, that’s one of the great moments of my life. It’s an exciting thing to see your friend get elected President, let alone someone who you really believe, and have believed for 15 years, should be President. Huge crowds. I brought my kids and my wife. We got up there as close to the stage as we could.

Naftali: How old are your kids at the time? How many do you have?

Berger: I have three children, now 32, 27, and 25, so they were 13 years younger, basically teenagers and below. All had met Clinton, so they had some ownership. They’d all gone to events. It was not a totally alien body. My oldest daughter worked as a runner at the convention. She was probably 14 or 15 at the time, 16 maybe. So they were very excited as well.

I remember Clinton coming out on the stage, finally, after the crowd had built to thousands, and he looked different. There’s something about stepping into a role. I don’t know whether that’s in the eyes of the beholder or whether that’s in the actions of the principal, or if that’s some combination of both. He seemed to stand up straighter, to be grander. Again, that may simply be, “My God, I’m now looking at the next President.” Or it may be his own sense that, “My God, I am now the President and I have to stand before the American people as the President-elect” or some combination thereof, but it was a wild evening. There were lots of parties and there was a great deal of fun.
Riley: Do you remember your first conversation with him after—?

Berger: Yes. I stayed down in Little Rock because we had to arrange for CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] briefings every day at that point.

Riley: Did you know about this in advance? Had there been a kind of transitional planning in advance of the election so that—

Berger: I think there must have been some discussions, because I had an agenda that I had to basically take up with him about how he wanted to do this. We ultimately wound up having Nancy Soderberg stay in Little Rock so that she could be the liaison with the CIA. I remember driving over to the capital where the Governor’s office was, I think, and saying, “What do I call this guy?” This is somebody I’d known for 20 years—Bill, Sandy—and he’s no longer Bill. This is now “Mr. President, Mr. President-elect.”

I remember having that discussion with myself in the car on the way over, “This is now Mr. President-elect,” and to this day there are people who have reverted back to “Bill.” When he was President, the people who would talk about Bill were always disparaged. They were usually people outside the administration who’d known Clinton for a long time and they would say, “I talked to Bill last week—” You don’t refer to the sitting President by his first name, you refer to the sitting President as “Mr. President,” in or out of his presence. Since he’s no longer President, some now have reverted back to Bill. I still call him “Mr. President.”

Riley: So you become responsible at a very early stage—

Berger: He asked me to become the head of the transition for national security. During the campaign I had brought in Tony Lake as my partner, and we operated as equals. Tony was living in Massachusetts; I was in Washington. But Tony had been at the NSC [National Security Council] in the [Henry] Kissinger days and had more experience than I did and has a brilliant foreign policy mind. He wanted to go back to his farm, so he went back to his farm and I became director of the transition for national security. That transition took place out of Washington and Little Rock.

In Little Rock were Clinton, Gore, [Warren] Christopher sitting in the Governor’s mansion doing personnel. No one else was involved. There was a backup operation that Tom Donilon was running that was doing vetting, checking these people out, but this was a very small circle. They were calling people, talking to people. Then back in Washington, we prepared briefing books for the incoming Secretary of State, for the incoming Secretary of Defense. That was one exercise. The second exercise was, what are the ten issues that we’re going to deal with right up front, and how are we going to be ready to deal with them in the beginning?

Riley: But you didn’t have a personnel part of your portfolio—that was elsewhere?

Berger: No, only to the extent that I talked to Christopher from time to time. It became clear quite early that Chris was going to be Secretary of State. I had told Clinton that I thought Tony should be National Security Advisor and I should be deputy. I wanted to get that off the table. I
didn’t want him to have to face that choice, and I thought since he hadn’t been in the White House before and since I hadn’t been in the White House before, it probably would be a good idea if the National Security Advisor had. So Tony’s selection was pretty early. There were a lot of moving pieces around Defense, CIA, and UN [United Nations].

Riley: You were in the loop on the discussions.

Berger: I was in the loop by telephone with Christopher.

Riley: Do you have any specific recollections about those appointments?

Berger: The President very much wanted Dave McCurdy to be head of the CIA. Dave McCurdy was a Congressman from Oklahoma, had been an early supporter of Governor Clinton, and worked very hard for him during the campaign. He was very interested in intelligence issues and national security issues and came from the pro-defense wing of the party. We very much wanted to have one person on the national security team who sent the signals. These were not all Carter people or all McGovern people. There were people here who were more robust. McCurdy said, “No, I’m not going to do it, I want to be Secretary of Defense.” Clinton had known Les Aspin a little bit, but got to know Les during debate prep because we brought Les in to do a lot of work with Clinton on defense budget and defense issues. He was very impressed. Les was absolutely dazzling on policy issues.

There was a kind of crisis at the end, because I think they set a deadline for announcing the national security team and the pieces hadn’t fallen into place. It was a little game of chicken. McCurdy thought if he held out for Defense, he’d get Defense, and Clinton wanted him in CIA. Ultimately McCurdy said no, he wouldn’t take CIA. I remember talking to Christopher and mentioning [James] Woolsey’s name as a possibility. Woolsey then slides into CIA and Madeleine Albright slides into the UN, and the pieces kind of came together. But that was a very close-held process. Many people have written about the mistake of that process, which was to do the Cabinet first and then the White House, rather than the White House first and then the Cabinet. I think that’s a fair criticism.

Riley: Did you feel like the foreign policy component was handled a bit better than some of the other elements? I mean, if there was at least fairly early on Tony Lake, and you were going to be NSC and Christopher was going to be State, then you got a couple of the big pieces of the puzzle in.

Berger: I can’t make a relative judgment. I think more time was probably spent on the domestic, particularly the economic team. Clinton believed very much that people should be able to work together. He thought of the national security team, the economic policy team, the domestic policy team. He thought about how these people would work together. Whether he got it right or not is a different issue, but that was part of his thinking.

Naftali: The selection of Woolsey—was that part of the effort to bring Democratic neocons into the fold?
Berger: Yes.

Naftali: How well do you think the process worked?

Berger: [Laughter] I don’t think that was a good fit. Of course Jim leaves the scene after about a year. The CIA Director has to be somebody who is analytically impartial. We’ve run into problems recently where that’s not been the case. Jim’s an advocate, a lawyer, a litigator. He’ll fight you about a comma.

There were a lot of jokes made about Woolsey never getting to see the President. When the plane crashed into the White House, the joke was that it was Jim Woolsey was trying to get in to see the President. It was much deeper than that. I think there was a feeling that Jim was too rigid, and that what he was giving us was not so much the analytical assessment of the intelligence community as it was the world according to Jim Woolsey, and there just wasn’t a good personality fit between Woolsey and Clinton.

Strong: In Washington, preparing those briefing books for the incoming Cabinet officers and the rest, did you need to spend time talking to the President-elect about—

Berger: Not really. I don’t believe any of those books were ever read. I’ve subsequently come to realize that. In fact, when I left in ’92, I left a very different process for [Condoleezza] Condi [Rice] and Steve. I told everybody on my staff, you’ve got four pages. I want you to take all the issues in Russia and in four pages I want you to list the issues, where things stand, what the new administration is going to confront, what the options are. Thomas Jefferson of this great university wrote, “If I had more time I would have written you a shorter letter.” It takes a lot more time to write something in four pages than in forty pages. We produced these big books—I think a new Secretary comes in and first of all they’re mostly concerned with their confirmation process. By the time they get over to the agency, they’ve become part of the agency. I suspect every incumbent Secretary took the book home, flipped through it, spent about an hour looking at it.

It was useful, because the other exercise was the dozen or so issues like Haiti, Bosnia—

Strong: Gays in the military?

Berger: Gays in the military. We knew we’d have to deal with them soon. Rather than have a standing start, we wanted to at least have had some thought given to how we might deal with those issues.

Naftali: I’d like to ask you about a surprise issue, which must have been Somalia. To what extent did the outgoing Bush administration consult with you about their December decision?

Berger: We had a terrific relationship with Brent [Scowcroft], who has become a respected and good friend. But they had no transition on their side. We went over and sat with Brent in his office and chatted. President Bush came in, said hello to Tony, hello to me. I got to see that the office of the Deputy National Security Advisor was a lot smaller than the office of the National
Security Advisor. But there was no effort to really transfer. Don’t forget, this man had just been beaten by Clinton—they’ve become actually quite friendly, but I don’t think there was any friendship at that point.

I got a phone call from Brent one day. We were all watching these pictures on television of starving people in Somalia and the roving bands that were preventing the food from being transported inland to the starving people of Somalia. Brent called up, whatever D-day was on Somalia, maybe three days before, and he said, “I just wanted to let you know that we’re going to send troops into Somalia to open up those supply lines. But it’s not something you’ve got to worry about because they’ll be gone by inauguration day.” I think that’s very revealing and important because what it suggests is that there really wasn’t much thought given to things that we now know are extraordinarily important to peacekeeping: mission, exit strategy, achievability, public support. I think they saw a bunch of thugs that were harassing people at the docks.

Don’t forget, there were TV cameras set up on the beach as we rolled off, I think, 27,000 troops. And we did clear the ports. The only problem was there was no government, so the moment we left, those same thugs would be back again and we were caught in Somalia by the failure—in my judgment—to think about a political strategy for Somalia, not just a humanitarian strategy.

Naftali: So is it safe to assume then that President-elect Clinton had not been briefed on Somalia before this decision was made by the Bush administration?

Berger: Yes. I probably told him what Brent had said to me, but there certainly had been no briefing, and the first briefing he got was as we got closer to inauguration day and it became clear that they weren’t going anywhere and that we had this problem called Somalia. I took Admiral [David] Jeremiah, who was the Vice-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and his team and we went down to Little Rock. We spent a good afternoon with both the President-elect and the Vice President-elect. He went through what was happening in Somalia. This was a surprise.

Riley: So you have a sense that you’re coming toward inauguration day, you prepared your briefing materials, there are a few steps you want to take going at it, and then there are some surprises that show up on the doorstep that intervene.

Berger: We often thought about it—it was the inherited agenda and our agenda. We inherited Haiti, Somalia, and Bosnia. We had a lot of things we wanted to do—NATO enlargement, opening to China, global economic integration. But we were pretty overwhelmed in the first two years with the inherited agenda.

Riley: Let’s break for lunch in about half an hour. What about your first day? Obviously you go to all the inaugural celebrations, I guess?

Berger: We went to a bunch of inaugural celebrations. The most important thing was getting my kids tickets to the MTV [Music Television] Ball. I can remember that was a real chore, but I got that done. I went to the swearing in, another unforgettable moment, sitting up there on the Capitol steps in those seats as the President took the oath of office. It was a very hopeful
moment, hopeful time. Then we got back to the viewing stand. We had a military car and driver for the inauguration weekend, so we had pretty good logistics.

We sat in the stands and watched the parade go by for a while. Then I walked out the back door and into the White House and sat down. There was this office with nothing on the desk. I think the secretaries were there. The job presented itself.

Riley: At what point did you and Tony Lake begin talking about how you were going to organize things and who you were going to staff—

Berger: That took place during the transition. We asked Madeleine Albright, who had worked at the NSC for [Zbigniew] Brzezinski to interview each of the NSC senior directors and to make recommendations to us as to who we should keep. She did that. We actually kept maybe 35 to 40 percent. It was a pretty big holdover, including guys like Dick Clarke, and Randy Beers, and others. But we were also recruiting our own staff during the transition. I should add that, so there’s the third leg of the stool, what we were doing. We hired a lot of people during the transition. George Tenet, for example, who I had gotten to be the transition director for the intelligence community, did the big book on the intelligence community and became the senior director for intelligence.

Tony and I were very active in recruiting. We knew the world pretty well from the State Department. We’d both been involved—at that point Tony for maybe 30 years and I had been involved for maybe 20 years. So we knew the universe. The way the NSC works, you have to have a fair number of detailees, because the budget of the NSC is not very large and therefore you can’t afford to have all people that you pay. You have to have people who are paid by State, sent over for two years, or paid by Defense or by the CIA. So a lot of our recruiting was from within the agencies. People obviously loved the idea of being on the NSC and being in the White House. It was a buyer’s market in many ways.

President Clinton made a commitment during the campaign. We tend to focus on the statements he made that he did not comply with, but he said he was going to cut the White House staff by 25 percent. That was a statement based upon a memo he received that said that Bush had increased the White House staff by 60 percent. That was wrong. Bush had actually cut the White House staff. The author of that memo—I have my strong suspicions who the author of that memo was. He has obviously kept his head down. It’s almost like Deep Throat. The President refused to budge from that commitment. We went to him on several different occasions and said, “Mr. President, this is a big government. You asked it to do a lot of things; we can’t do all these things. People are already working 20 hours a day.”

He said, “If we can’t run this government with X number of people in the White House, we ought to be sent home.” It reflected his more populist instinct. So we had two constraints on our staff. One was the budget, the other was the 25 percent cut. In my second term, we floated up above the 25 percent cut by a lot of legal devices like Council of Foreign Relations fellows and interns. Clarke alone probably had 20 people working for him. Some of them were in the Commerce Department. The staff probably got to be 150 by the time I left, but it was smaller at the beginning.
Riley: Were there discussions—

Berger: At 150, I should say that includes of course administrative people and a very significant technical capacity, because the NSC runs the situation room, does all the communications for the President, so there’s also a certain number of people who are not policy people.

Riley: Did you have discussions with Tony Lake about any kind of formal division of labor between—

Berger: No, but Tony was very smart and had been there before. He’d been there during the Brzezinski–Vance wars, which were not pleasant, when Zbig appropriated a great deal of authority from the Secretary of State to the National Security Advisor. Now the shoe was on the other foot. Tony very cleverly drafted something called PDD1, Presidential Decision Directive One, which was how the system was going to work. It was a very NCS-centric system. Basically, for example, in the Brzezinski–Vance years, there were two different principals’ groups. Some issues went to one group and some issues went to the other group. Basically under our system, the NSC chaired all principals’ meetings and basically ran the process.

I’m sure Chris at some point said why in the world did I ever sign this? But he was busy in Little Rock picking the Cabinet. Tony very cleverly got in place the structure of foreign policy-making that was very NSC-centric in the first term. That’s something he did during the transition.

Riley: What about your discussions with the President or the President-elect himself about two things—one, how he wanted the process to work. Were there meetings with the so-called foreign policy team at some point to get everybody their marching orders about how I want the process to work, or did he farm that out to you folks? Secondly, were there any meetings where you made decisions about priorities in terms of what you wanted to do?

Berger: I don’t remember there being those meetings before the inauguration. Obviously after the inauguration, there were those meetings, but the President was picking his team right up to the very end, and his focus was very much on personnel and believing that if he got the right people in the right jobs, that would be the most important thing he could do during that period.

Nancy was with him and briefed him every day. The CIA moved, opened up a little shop in Little Rock, and they briefed him every day. So he was getting information about what was going on beyond what’s in the newspapers—but I don’t remember a meeting in Little Rock in which we talked about how we were going to organize the process.

Strong: Was he right to focus that much time and attention on personnel decisions beyond the key ones that every President has to focus on?

Berger: No, I think there probably should have been more time spent on the first hundred days and what did we want to accomplish, what was going to face us and how are we going to deal with it, what was our strategy for the first hundred days, three months, or whatever period you
want to choose. There’s nothing magical about a hundred days. I think we probably should have spent more time on that.

The second thing, as I said before, and others have written this in most of the books—I think it’s important to get your Chief of Staff selected and then involve your Chief of Staff in the selection of the rest of the Cabinet. Because if you’re going to have a White House-centered government, which every President says he’s not, but every President does—President George W. Bush was going to have a Cabinet government—this is the farthest thing from a Cabinet government, and the Cabinet are former White House staffers in the first term. If you’re going to have that, you really do need to have a Chief of Staff who’s been really involved in the selection process and who’s therefore empowered. Everybody realizes that they got their job in part because of him or her. So I think that was another mistake.

**Riley:** Did the presence of the National Economic Council create any additional wrinkles for you?

**Berger:** The President decided on that quite early. He asked Bob Rubin to be the chair of it and [W. Bowman] Bo Cutter to be the deputy. Bob and Bo and Tony and I spent a good deal of time together trying to think about how we were going to structure this. We agreed that the place where it came together was on international economics. Rather than have an NEC [National Economic Council] international economic staff and NSC international economic staff, we would have one international economic staff. Not that big—four or five people who would be dual-hatted and would report up the chain through me to Tony and through Bo to Bob. Because I was very interested in international economic issues, that became very much part of my portfolio on the NSC. Bo was my counterpart on trade issues and international economic issues.

We had several meetings with Bob and Bo about how we were going to structure this so that we didn’t bump into each other, so it was efficient. I think the most important was deciding we were going to have one common staff in the place where the two councils came together.

**Riley:** And that managed to work fairly well?

**Berger:** Yes it did. It worked very well. Obviously, you’re only as good as the people you’ve got on the job. We had some people who were better than others, but it worked well.

**Naftali:** Who did those people report to?

**Berger:** There was a senior director for international economics, Bob Kyle, I believe in the first term. He reported to me and to Bo. Because Bo and I had a very good relationship, it really wasn’t a problem. If there was a difference, we’d get on the phone and figure out how to resolve it or we’d convene a meeting of the deputies. How are we going to deal with the Japanese auto issue? We’d work it out as an interagency issue.

**Naftali:** The Vice President’s team plays, from the beginning it seems, an important role.
Berger: That’s a good point, I should have mentioned—for the first time, I think, [Walter] Mondale had David Aaron, who was the Deputy National Security Advisor as well as the advisor to the Vice President, but Leon Fuerth, who had been with Gore for 14 years and had spent his life in national security, was Gore’s National Security Advisor. One of the decisions we made was to integrate that.

Gore had a small staff. Basically Leon was a full partner. Actually the second term, I made him a principal. He was not a principal; he was more like a deputy in the first term. In the second term he was a principal of equal stature to the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense. He was also my number two during the transition, so we’d gotten very close.

Riley: There is, among people who write about these things, a level of uncertainty about President Clinton’s own interest and devotion of time to foreign policy issues during the earliest days of his Presidency.

Berger: Clearly he had won the election based upon the public’s dissatisfaction with where we were economically, and he understood that. He understood he had to address that. The economic summit takes place in Little Rock for example, quite a vibrant event. But Clinton spent an enormous amount of time on foreign policy. We went to 76 countries in eight years. Some of those countries we went to more than once. We made more than a hundred country visits in eight years. I’d say President Clinton traveled to more countries than any President in history. We had a pretty full agenda in both the first and the second term.

So while I do think in the beginning he was focusing—he said in an interview during the transition, “I want to focus like a laser beam on the economy,” we quickly had to focus on Haiti, on Somalia, and on Bosnia. These things, the legacy agenda was sitting there. It couldn’t be ignored.

Naftali: I’d like to ask you about one aspect of the legacy agenda. The administration decides not to support the Vance–Owen plan, which means it’s taking an important stand early on. I think it’s within a few weeks. Tony Lake and you had worked for Vance. Was that a difficult decision?

Berger: No, because I think it was a very clear view that was really a cantonization of Bosnia. It was, “Here are the Serbs and here are the Croats.” It was taking a demographic map and turning it into a political geographic map. I think there was a view that it wouldn’t work and it would just cause more friction, more war, and more tension. It was obviously not fun to take a position contrary to Secretary Vance, but I don’t remember there being any confrontation over it with him.

Riley: Should we go ahead and talk more about Bosnia at this point?

Naftali: I was interested in those first decisions that you make, and that’s one of them. Maybe we should talk about gays in the military now.
Berger: As I said, we had this nice plan in place to kick the can down the road a little bit, not to avoid it but just give ourselves some time to work the military and get by. The Republicans really discovered this issue after the election. They realized it was a delicious issue for making mischief. Senator [Robert] Dole introduced S1 as I recall, which was a bill to prohibit gays in the military.

Suddenly of course, the military went crazy. We actually had a meeting with the Joint Chiefs quite early on in which they’d expressed their opposition to this policy. It was a very bad start because we were on the defensive from the beginning. We had very little support.

Sam Nunn opposed it, and that was harmful in terms of our own party. General [Colin] Powell was opposed to it; he was the Chairman and obviously a tremendously important figure. We were on the defensive until we could finally get a resolution, which I think actually did involve a commission for a short period of time that would come up with a policy, but not before the American people thought that Bill Clinton’s number one issue was gays in the military. That was what the motivation of the Republicans was, to try to define the administration in social-cultural terms rather than economic terms right from the beginning. This was a round that they won.

Naftali: Did you know about Sam Nunn’s opposition before S1?

Berger: I suspect the answer is yes. I think during the transition, John Holum, who worked on this, spoke to most of the key players and had a very realistic view of how hard this was going to be.

Naftali: Did any high-ranking military officers show any support for this to you at least privately?

Berger: Not to my recollection. This was very sudden. This was not a big issue in the campaign, as I said. Suddenly, out of the box, this becomes a defining issue. I think there was not enough time to have a serious discussion within the military about the pros and cons. I suspect, had we maintained the initiative on this and set up a commission including Sam Nunn and others on how to implement this policy, there would have been six months or nine months in which you would have had an opportunity to find out where the support was.

Naftali: Was it the press that came up with the idea of the executive order? Was it that initial press conference where I guess Stephanopoulos was asked whether the President would sign an executive order?

Berger: I think that came after the bill was introduced—it was not our intention that this be the number one issue out of the box.

Strong: It was a promise in the campaign to sign an executive order.

Berger: Correct.
Riley: But there was also a court case that I think came sometime in December that may have also raised the public profile on this, I don’t recall the exact—do you want to follow up on that?

Strong: Is there a larger point to be made about media strategy in the early weeks or months—?

Berger: We should have been faster off the mark. We should have realized our vulnerabilities. I’m not saying this was the wrong policy, but it was certainly not the right time. We should have been clear with the President, which I think we weren’t, that we had to get this issue on a different time track. We never expected that the Republicans were going to sandbag us the way they did. It was very clever. Had the President on day four announced that he was appointing a commission of respected people to report back to him in eight or nine months on what is the best way to integrate gays into the military in a way that was consistent with the maintenance of military order, or whatever the terminology is, the issue would have gone away. They threw the pitch before we threw the pitch.

Riley: I want to ask a related question then about your relationships across the aisle. This suggests that at that very early stage there was a significant component within the Republican Party that’s laying traps for you. Were there efforts early on to try to find some common ground with Republicans, to work with them, especially on foreign policy issues? And do you recall having Republicans with whom you had decent working relations?

Berger: I can answer that much better in terms of the second term when I was National Security Advisor than the first term when I was Deputy. During the second term I made a strenuous effort to reach out to the Republicans. A, that was my preference, which was to have a bipartisan foreign policy, and B, we had some other problems going on in the White House during this period, and I thought it was extremely important that the Congress and the public understand that foreign policy was not going to be affected by any of the President’s problems.

I went to see Trent Lott every two weeks. I went to see Newt [Gingrich] every two weeks and then, after he resigned, Denny Hastert, and developed very good relationships on both sides of the aisle. I think Tony did less on the congressional relations side than I did.

Riley: It would have been a part of his portfolio to have done that—

Berger: Well, there’s always tension between the Secretary of State and the National Security Advisor. There are certain points at which that friction—one is going on television, who speaks for the administration on foreign policy. The second is the Hill. I think Secretary Christopher believed the Hill was his prerogative and that Tony ought to stay in his office and coordinate foreign policy and not do too much on the Hill and certainly not do too much on TV. I think that actually comported with Tony’s own preference. He didn’t particularly like doing the TV stuff. I think he did more in terms of the Hill, but that function was a State Department function.

Riley: So when it came to questions of congressional relations, you would have been in a secondary position, at least according to this early definition of division of responsibilities.

Berger: Yes, I think that’s right.
Strong: We have to get back to Bosnia, Haiti and the bad news from Somalia.

Riley: I don’t think we want to get started on that just before lunch. Why don’t we break now?

[BREAK]

Riley: There was something said at lunch that I wanted to come back to. That is, the question was posed to you whether you had thought about writing a book about your experiences. Your answer was revealing in a number of ways, and I wonder if I could get you to repeat what you said.

Berger: I thought about writing a book and didn’t for a couple of reasons. Number one, having spent then nine years engaged in the Clinton campaign and the Clinton White House, I was anxious to get on with my life and look to the future rather than spend two more years reconstructing the past. So part of it was psychological and economic, quite honestly. Having spent the roaring ’90s out of the economy, I needed to get back in the economy. But second of all, I did not keep notes, nor did most of my colleagues.

You recall that in the early days of the Clinton administration there was a flap about whether Roger Altman had tipped off the White House about something involving Resolution Trust. I don’t even remember what the episode was. But Josh Steiner, who was a young—20-ish, 30-ish at most—staffer at the Treasury Department had a diary, and that diary got subpoenaed. Young Mr. Steiner spent tens of thousands of dollars defending himself with respect to things that were in his diary.

I think one of the unfortunate consequences of what has been described as the politics of personal destruction, which has crept into Washington to a large degree, is that you don’t write things down. You don’t take notes. Even if you take notes at home, they are ultimately subpoena-able by a congressional committee, who for political purposes wants to embarrass you or your President. So for me, in terms of the book, I would have had the burden of starting from scratch and recreating eight or nine years, and just didn’t want to undertake that effort. The larger point here is it’s going to be a sad consequence for history and for historians when they go back to recreate events of the ’90s.

I’m sure it’s equally true now, and for Presidencies going forward, there are not going to be those great written diaries like Harold Ickes’s 43-volume handwritten diary of the Roosevelt administration. That’s unfortunate. I used to, from time to time, raise with President Clinton whether he was keeping a diary, and he said no.

I talked to my friend Taylor Branch, a great historian, good friend of President Clinton. I said, “Taylor, you’ve got to get him to take notes because even with his phenomenal memory, he’s not going to be able to recreate this.” Taylor said, “I’ve discussed this with him and he’s just not amenable to do it.” When it later came out that once a month Taylor was coming to the White
House and they were spending an hour or so doing these tapes, I sent Taylor an email saying that if we ever got back into power he should be head of the CIA because this was one of the better covert operations of the Clinton administration.

I think it’s indispensable. You cannot remember, you can’t recreate, you think you’re never going to forget events that you ultimately forget. This is, I think, something we need to address on a national level. I don’t know exactly what the answer is—maybe taking some of the sting out of American politics in some fashion.

**Naftali:** Perhaps restoring a Presidential taping system.

**Berger:** Not likely.

**Strong:** Would you have had an appointment book or—

**Berger:** Yes, I have a daily log and every phone call I made, but that really wouldn’t have given you the substance. There were people—Dennis Ross took voluminous notes, and in many ways it was essential to his job as a negotiator. Those voluminous notes have produced a wonderful book called *The Missing Piece*. He was advantaged in that by virtue of the fact that he had kept contemporaneous notes. I just think it’s very unfortunate for history that people who are participating in what ultimately is history feel tremendously deterred from writing down contemporaneously their impressions.

**Naftali:** Well, if you wanted to help—after all, what we’re doing is for the benefit of future historians—

**Berger:** That’s why this is such a valuable exercise.

**Naftali:** What kinds of clues would you give them? If a historian wants to know who mattered in a decision, what should they be looking for, since they’re not going to find those very important documents?

**Berger:** That’s a very good question. I don’t want to sound like I’m pandering, but I don’t think there’s an easy answer. The cumulative consequences of this oral history probably will be the principal source for—looking at the list of people you’ve talked to, you’ve talked to almost everybody or will have talked to almost everybody. In that mix, every decision will be different. There will be obviously disconnects between me, who thought I was the most important person in that decision, and Tony, who thought he was the most important person in that decision. Obviously, you also have Clinton’s book, which is quite complete and thorough, so there’s a lot of information in his book.

But there’s something deeper though, and that is we have to move away from the criminalization of policy so that we argue about issues but we don’t launch—there were 15 different investigations in a Republican Congress, Democratic President, and every time we sneezed, Congressman [Dan] Burton started another. He was chairman of the Government Operations Committee in the House and opened up another investigation. You wound up having lawyers and
people subpoenaing documents. It’s very distracting. I’m not suggesting for a second that people are not accountable for what they do, but the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction.

**Strong:** While we’re on this subject, can I ask a related question? They’re starting to open up things in the Reagan Library and finding out that the speechwriter files are useful tools for seeing what the President was doing. When they start opening up the paper files in the Clinton Library, where are you going to find a good source—

**Berger:** It’s a very good point. Clinton was an inveterate writer in the margins. He would read the newspaper—he got the clips in the morning and he’d read the clips—somebody took the newspaper and cut it up and put it in a form that is basically 8” x 10”. You can read it faster than the newspaper. They’ve taken out stories that are totally irrelevant to the President. I’d get every week ten clips from the President with his almost illegible, left-handed writing, saying, “This is outrageous. Why can’t we do something about this?” Or “Is this true?” or “Where did this come from?” I tried to respond to most. Sometimes they were just things that I left floating in the ether. But by and large I felt that if the President asked me a question, I had a responsibility to get an answer. Sometimes it was hard.

I don’t know where those documents are. Those documents would probably be in my file, or Gene Sperling’s files, or Bob Rubin’s files. The senior staff of the White House would have received those documents. I would have turned around and asked a staff person to do a one-page informational memo to the President. I worked for a President who was a voracious reader, and it’s sometimes said because he didn’t take his intelligence briefing in the morning with the CIA that he didn’t care about intelligence. I would venture to say that Bill Clinton consumed more intelligence than any President in history.

I used to give him not just the PDB [President’s Daily Brief], which became so famous after 9/11. I used to give him the State Department INR [Bureau of Intelligence and Research] report. I often gave him the Defense Intelligence Agency report. I gave him special reports. He read everything.

**Strong:** Did those come back with margin notes?

**Berger:** Very often. Not always, but one time out of four. But the responses back to him would be formal memos from Berger to the President, subject: *U.S. News and World Report: Question on X*. You asked whether or not the statement in *U.S. News and World Report* blah, blah, blah is true, and then a couple of paragraphs explaining. I think the Clinton written archives will be rich, but not—what you lose when you don’t have a diary is the subjective, not the objective. What you lose is how I felt about what happened that day, whether I felt terrible, whether I felt elated, whether I thought we’d done good or bad, whether I was furious at somebody or not. That’s what makes history rich. Bob Woodward has his own techniques; he makes up the quotes. After talking to a lot of different people, and obviously based on his own sense of what was happening, but those are not real quotes. You can’t get the real quotes unless you get the notes, and that’s what we’ve lost.

**Naftali:** Did you write memoranda for the record?
Berger: Very rarely, only when I was trying to protect myself, and only if I’d had a meeting with some outsider who said, “[Muammar] Gaddafi wants to make a deal with the United States and he’s prepared to do X, Y, and Z.” I might put that down just in case that person went out and claimed that I had said something I hadn’t said. But I didn’t do that generally, no.

Riley: Did you use email?

Berger: I didn’t generate email. I received email. Email came to my staff assistant, who printed it out and gave it to me in hard form. There were three reasons for that. Number one, I was incompetent to use email, and two, the President, for example, should never be on email. There should be a written record and a written document. Three, I think my staff was always petrified that if I’d gone on the up ramp of the information superhighway Vice President Gore invented that they’d lose total control, because you manage differently.

I now know from my company that you manage differently with email. You manage horizontally, not vertically. It’s maddening. It’s hard enough for my staff assistants to keep track, because I’d get on the phone and task something based upon something that happened. I’d instantly get on the phone and call a staff person saying, “Why the hell didn’t we know X?” or “Can you think of what we ought to do about Y?” Sometimes I wouldn’t download that on my staff.

So they were trying earnestly to monitor the paper flow to me and from me. Email will dramatically change the way an institution is managed.

Riley: Were you ever counseled by anybody? I guess there was a counsel for the NSC while you were there, or anybody from the White House Counsel’s office, about being careful about reducing things to writing, or did it just become a part of the culture?

Berger: This actually did arise. In the ’96 campaign there were various figures who came into the White House for fundraisers—they weren’t fundraisers, they were coffees that might later result in fundraisers, 99.9 percent of whom were upstanding citizens, some of whom were foreign, not U.S. citizens, or of some sort of unsavory background. We had no system. We were not screeners of who came to see the President. Unless somebody contacted us and said, “We’re thinking of inviting Roger Tamraz to this event. What do you know about Roger Tamraz?” My staff person sent an email back saying, “You’ve got to be kidding. He’s trouble, the biggest jerk in the world.” Then later of course, Roger Tamraz did get invited to that event, and that email became the subject of a great deal of attention.

Two things: Number one, when this whole episode of fundraising in the White House in ’96 broke, I called virtually all my predecessors and said, “Did you consider it part of the NSC responsibility, your responsibility, to vet people who saw the President?” Not one of them thought that was remotely within their jurisdiction. The funniest answer I got was from Henry Kissinger, who said, “You must be kidding. Nixon never wanted to see anybody. I never had a problem; he didn’t want to see anybody.”
People write on email like they’re having a conversation, not like they’re writing a memo. If you’re writing a memo you write the memo. Someone in the old days typed it. Even if you write it yourself, you read it again, you revise it. If you’re doing an email, it’s just a stream of consciousness and people don’t think. There’s not a filter. So we did instruct the staff after that episode that every email is an official document, ought to be treated as such, and ought to be done thoughtfully and carefully and with recognition that it might someday be a public document.

Riley: I raised the question because obviously there will be, as Timothy suggested over lunch, especially because of email traffic, an enormous electronic archive of communications—

Berger: I think it will be post-Clinton. Clinton was not on email.

Riley: Not the President himself, but there will be among—

Berger: That’s true, staffs.

Riley: Some lower level, and I understand that the current President wrote his last email before he came in the White House also, or at least that’s what we’ve been told. I guess what I’m trying to get a sense about, and you’ve answered this to some extent, is the extent to which this traffic is likely to be revealing, or, in fact, whether people at some stage in the administration begin to even treat this email traffic as a discoverable source of information for—

Berger: I think the email traffic will continue to be a rich source of information because I do think when people get on the computer and start typing in email, they just run at the mouth. We tried to raise people’s consciousness a little bit, but it’s just sort of the natural—email is much more like talking than it is composing a memo.

Riley: One other question from me on this. You guys may have a follow-up. We were talking about this earlier—they had the Butler Report in England. There was a criticism of the British decision-making process on Iraq. They hadn’t followed what for them was standard operating procedure for reducing things to carefully constructed memos, then people would comment on the memos and so forth. That impaired the decision-making process to some extent on Iraq. Are you of the opinion that there are instances in which in your White House the decision-making process might have been impaired because of extreme caution about reducing things to writing?

Berger: No, but you raise a couple of different points in your question. I do think process is extraordinarily important and that there’s a relationship between process and result. I think the problems we’re currently having in Iraq to some degree arise from the fact that there wasn’t a good inter-agency process in the first place, so that the State Department was over here doing a six-volume exercise about what to do the day after, and the Pentagon ignored it over here. The inter-agency process, led by the NSC, is supposed to bring those pieces together. I do think that good process tends to produce good product.

I’ll give you the reverse example—Rwanda. Africa was an area that I didn’t cover, but Tony Lake has been quoted as saying that we really never had a meeting on Rwanda, that it was
happening around us and it just didn’t, for some reason, get our attention. It certainly got our attention individually, but not collectively, and Rwanda was a kind of error of omission rather than commission.

I believe very strongly in the NSC process that has three levels. At the Assistant Secretary level, there are inter-agency working groups. They have different names in different administrations, but that’s the working level. There’s the deputies’ committee, which I chaired for the first four years, which is the Deputy Secretaries who are high enough up that they have the authority to make decisions, but they’re not, like their principals, running around the world, and therefore very often they have much more knowledge of the issues than their principals do. So it’s the wheelhouse of the foreign policy process, the deputies’ committee.

Then the principals’ committee—the principals are testifying on the Hill, are on television, traveling six-country tours in four days. The deputies often know more. They’re much more grounded in the substance of what’s going on. That process, which I think has broken down, broke down from time to time in the first term of the Bush administration. I feel quite proud of the process that we had, at least in the second term. I can speak to that more specifically because I think we did get things to the table. The President has to make a lot of decisions. My objective was that the easy decisions all get resolved before they get to the President; only the hard decisions go to the President.

My view was that we should try to decide what we can decide. After all, there’s the Secretary of State sitting to my left, the Secretary of Defense sitting to my right, the Attorney General, Secretary of the Treasury, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. That’s the senior leadership of the government. But I didn’t want consensus for consensus sake. So I had a concept that I called the “highest common denominator,” which meant, if we could get to about 80 percent agreement, we’d basically go with that. If we were 50/50, I didn’t want to try to mush that together. We’d then focus on sharpening the two or sometimes three options, or option one and one-A and two and two-A so that we could present them to the President and he could decide.

I’m a great believer in the relationship of process to result. I think the war in Iraq and the aftermath of the war in Iraq is in part the breakdown of process.

**Strong:** I want to ask some questions related to that. What I’m interested in is the relationship of that process to Presidential decisions, because sometimes the process is lagging behind. The President has decided we’re going to do something and it gets coordinated, and the options come up and they get ticked off. Other times the President hasn’t made up his mind. He gets that information and it helps him. Sometimes he makes up his mind in the setting of that meeting where the options are presented, and sometimes it takes place after or elsewhere. Is there anything we can say about this President’s style of decision-making that’s going to help future scholars sort things out?

**Berger:** President Clinton generally was inductive rather than deductive in the way he approached a decision. That is, he started with the facts and built to the conclusion, rather than starting with the conclusion and going to the facts. Now that’s obviously an over generalization,
and there are certain situations where he said, “We’re going to do something about Kosovo,” and we did. We then had to figure out what it was we were going to do. But he knew from the beginning that after Bosnia we were not going to watch a million Kosovars being expelled from Kosovo by the Serbs so that the last act of the 20th century would be an act of ethnic cleansing. He knew that. We were operating within that parameter, which we all shared.

But more often than not, he would listen and collect the viewpoints. Sometimes I would be the surrogate—every day I’d be the surrogate for at least the second order of decisions, saying, “We’ve got to decide X.” Secretary [William] Cohen thinks A for the following reasons, Secretary Albright thinks B for the following reasons. I would usually offer my opinion. But my guiding principle was if Cohen and Albright were standing behind me, listening to me present their viewpoint to the President, would they think that I had done a fair job with their viewpoint? I think they did, and I think we had that trust.

You can’t have meetings with the President every day with the whole team. The National Security Advisor is often the surrogate, presenting the points of view, offering his own point of view. The President would listen to all that. He’d often call the person against whose advice he was going. In other words, if Cohen was for A and Albright was for B, and he was inclined to go with A, he’d call Albright. He’d want to hear more from her why she thought A was a lousy option. He’d also call other people.

This was the most eclectic President we’ve had in many, many years. He didn’t stay inside the box. He might see somebody in Martha’s Vineyard at a reception or someone at a fundraiser, or simply pick up the phone and call Colin Powell. He used to call Colin frequently and say, “Colin, what do you think of this?” particularly when it involved issues of use of force. He would not necessarily stay within the box of his advisors. He would reach out beyond that.

**Strong:** This is after Colin Powell had left.

**Berger:** Correct.

**Strong:** This isn’t Clinton trying to build a consensus for what he’s about to do; this is Clinton still searching for information and advice.

**Berger:** Correct. Clinton would reach a conclusion and then he would subject that conclusion to the counter argument. In other words, if he said, “Okay, we’re going to send forces to Haiti,” he’d want to know all the reasons why that was a mistake and be very confident in his mind that he had reasonably good answers to all those reasons before he went forward.

**Strong:** Would that process sometimes lead him to change his mind?

**Berger:** Sometimes, but usually it would actually just make us more rigorous. I’ll take something much more mundane—preparing for a press conference. When we prepared for a press conference, I’d have my hour or my 45 minutes of a four-hour prep session, or my half hour.
You could predict the questions within 99 percent certainty. You’d have 20 questions that could be asked in the foreign policy area. We’d do a Q and A book for the President, which he’d get the night before and read. Then we’d go in and I’d say, “Mr. President, you’re going to get asked about dah, dah, dah Haiti.” Sometimes he would give an answer and we’d critique it. I always thought it was much more efficient when we gave the answer. “Our suggestion is you answer it this way.”

He’d tear that answer to shreds. He’d be the most devastating counter-questioner that you could possibly imagine. “That’s ridiculous. That makes no sense because A, B, C, D and E.” So as I was preparing for those sessions, I not only prepared the answer, I prepared the answer to his question about my answer. When he felt that he was secure was when he felt comfortable in responding to the negatives of his proposition—does that make sense?

**Strong:** It does.

**Naftali:** His calls to Colin Powell.

**Berger:** I used that example. It might be Warren Christopher in the second term—

**Naftali:** I was just wondering if they were in order to get the negatives or because the two had a relationship.

**Berger:** I think they had a reasonably good relationship. Powell was our Chairman for the first year. Colin already was a hero after the Gulf War, and I think he had a bit of a short timer mentality in that first year. All he could do was soil his record at that point. So he was engaged, but not overly engaged. But I think the President respected his viewpoint and I think he also was doing a little politics by those phone calls. I mean, recognizing that Colin would have a very big impact on how the military elite, military leadership would see a decision. “Colin, does it make sense for us to do this Kosovo thing? Here’s what my guys are saying. What do you think?”

Sometimes he’d get pushed back and you’d feel the push back the next day. “But why isn’t it true that [Slobodan] Milosevic will never give in?” So you’d know that he’d been working the phone.

**Naftali:** Would you put his conversations with Richard Nixon in the same category?

**Berger:** He and Nixon developed this relationship rather late in Nixon’s life, and Nixon came to the White House on several occasions. I think he actually stayed over on one or more occasions. Nixon at that point of course had become a senior statesman and certainly was very interested in Russia and had been very supportive of the United States engaging fully with Russia. He still didn’t think we were doing enough to prop up democracy. He came to the White House and I remember the President saying to me, he and Nixon had stayed up until 2 o’clock in the morning talking about Russia. He was very impressed by Nixon’s thoughtfulness and depth of knowledge. Clinton gathered viewpoints wherever he found them.
Naftali: I think early in the administration there was a criticism of the policy-making system. People described the President as running seminars.

Berger: Yes. Things got crisper with time. I think Colin’s view of the administration was very much shaped by that first year, where he had Les Aspin over at Defense. Les was not exactly disciplined. So there would be long meetings at Defense before we’d go into the White House, then there would be long meetings at the White House. The President was too much in the weeds in the beginning. I thought in the second term he sized his involvement much better to the nature of the decision.

Naftali: You’d say then the tipping point is the move from the first to second term.

Berger: It’s an evolutionary change that takes place. In the third and fourth year of the first term, the process was much better. There was one infamous four-hour meeting on Bosnia, when we were basically trying to get the Europeans—the dilemma we faced in Bosnia was that the Europeans were on the ground in UNPROFOR [United Nations Protection Force] providing humanitarian assistance to protect the victims, but their very presence on the ground made it impossible for us to stop the bleeding by attacking the Serbs. We weren’t going to bomb the Europeans. We had to convince the Europeans to understand that they were putting Band-Aids on a problem rather than trying to cauterize the wound. You could only cauterize the wound by military action against the Serbs.

We had one very long four-hour meeting in the White House, which was excruciating—

Riley: About what time?

Berger: This was in ’93, which led to Christopher’s famous trip to Europe. We had this meeting on a Saturday, and Christopher left on Monday. On Sunday Milosevic suddenly offered a peace proposal. Of course the Europeans who didn’t want to go the NATO bomb-the-Serb route, who preferred the humanitarian, let’s-make-sure-people-get-fed route, seized upon the Milosevic fig leaf to reject Chris’s plea for a harder line. Chris took a lot of criticism for that trip because there was such unresponsiveness, but in many ways it was fated to fail once Milosevic had outflanked us by buying off the Europeans with a gesture.

Riley: I want to follow up on this. I know we probably want to track Bosnia through at some point, but one of the corollary criticisms related to the seminar style was what people claim was an evident inability to reach closure on issues. Was that something you found to be problematic during the first term?

Berger: I think it got better over time, particularly on use-of-force issues, when you are committing American troops into harm’s way, it’s an awesome responsibility, and you want to be right. You know some of them are not going to come home. That’s what separates those who have sat in the chair and those who have sat across the table from the President. I think the President in the beginning had a tendency to second guess himself until we actually got to the point where we were moving, and then he would be fine.
I compare Haiti, where up to the end I was getting phone calls from the President saying, “What makes you think that when we drop these soldiers in Haiti that they’re not going to be ambushed?” Those kinds of questions had already been resolved—to Kosovo where the President said, “We’re going to stop this from happening. We’re going to do what it takes. We’re going to convince NATO.” Tony Blair is given a lot of the credit for Kosovo, but Blair did not convince Clinton. They were basically together in their determination to stop this from happening. He was solid as a rock. We had a 78-day bombing campaign in Kosovo, which nobody except Bill Clinton, Sandy Berger, Madeleine Albright, Bill Cohen, and our spouses believed would work.

**Strong:** All the spouses?

**Berger:** No. Actually there were several dissenting spouses. You remember, people thought we should be invading on the ground. People felt we shouldn’t be doing this at all. All the while we were convinced that the air campaign was the right way to approach this, and we can talk about this more.

**Naftali:** I hope so. Let me ask you about the decision to use force in the first year of the first term, the decision to bomb Iraq in response to the evidence that Saddam Hussein was trying to kill President H. W. Bush. How crisp was that process?

**Berger:** We were very proud of that process because it had to proceed in complete secrecy. Keeping any secrets in Washington is virtually impossible. We received intelligence that there had been a plot to assassinate Bush One in Kuwait. They actually seized the vehicle. We sent an FBI team over. The vehicle and the bombing device were identical to vehicles that had been taken out of the Iraqi intelligence headquarters after the Gulf War.

We worked quietly for about three weeks making sure that case was rock solid, and then the President asked for recommendations. I think actually it was the Defense Department’s recommendation that we take down Iraqi intelligence headquarters, which many people called a pinprick. I mean, think of someone taking down Langley. That would not look like a pinprick from our perspective. We were able to do it all without the press discovering it, keeping it in a very small box.

Then actually I learned something very interesting. The President made the decision, we launched the cruise missiles, and then you wait. There’s nobody on the ground to tell you what’s happened and we’re all watching CNN [Cable News Network], waiting until CNN picks up something going on in Baghdad. I actually was sitting in my office, which is the first window to the right of the doors in the West Wing, and I had my curtain open. All of a sudden I saw myself watching CNN watching myself watching CNN. I turned around and there was a camera in my window. I closed the drapes very quickly. There’s this awful waiting time between the time you actually launch something and the time you know whether or not you’ve been successful.

**Naftali:** You just mentioned something about maintaining secrecy, and that prompts this question. You’re all students of John Kennedy. Did you set up some kind of ExCom to make these kinds of decisions so that there wouldn’t be leaks? How did you do that?
Berger: This was basically a principals-only process. Ordinarily, when you’re at a principals’ meeting you wind up having two—the principal plus one—sometimes the principal plus two. You have eight principals plus 16, so you have 24 people in the room. This was principals only. The cell at the Pentagon was very tight. The cell at the CIA was very tight, and I coordinated that with Tony. Surprise was important to us.

The one place where we had an ExCom, so-to-speak, I’ll call it the small group, was with respect to al-Qaeda, particularly after the bombing of the embassies in Africa in 1998. This became a very high priority for us, getting [Osama] Bin Laden, rolling back al-Qaida. Obviously it’s a pre-9/11 world and there are a lot of things after 9/11 that didn’t exist before 9/11. Pakistan was not our ally, Uzbekistan was not our ally. But because of the secrecy involved, and particularly the programs that we had underway to try to get Bin Laden, I set up something that I called the Small Group. It was only principals, basically Albright, Cohen, myself, Leon Fuerth, George Tenet and—

Naftali: Dick Clarke’s on that.

Berger: Dick Clarke and General [Hugh] Shelton. We met in Small Group. There was very little paper. In fact, when the 9/11 Commission went back to look, one of their frustrations was that they lost the paper trail during the ’98, ’99, 2000 period. I had to explain to them that we deliberately did not create much paper. Dick would often give me a little one-page outline of an agenda and we did not do what you ordinarily do, which is there’s a memo that goes to the principals before the meeting—here are the issues, here are the options—and then a summary of conclusions after the meeting that gets circulated as well. That’s the way it should work. But because we were trying to get Bin Laden and because operational security was such an important part of it, I created a process sort of like an ExCon process.

[Berger leaves the room.]

Naftali: I just want to ask one follow-up.

Riley: By all means. Thinking about dialing back and getting the whole story on Haiti?

Strong: I’d start off with the question: What’s a good example of an issue that maybe hasn’t gotten enough attention or a good example of a question that would illustrate how things worked? Partly because we can’t do everything. Then also at some point I want to ask him a question about sequencing. I have a feeling that part of the explanation of Rwanda is what had gone wrong in Somalia. Part of the explanation of Kosovo is what they had failed to do in Rwanda.

[Naftali leaves the room.]

Riley: Just lead on. I think what we’ve gotten this afternoon is extremely rich. It’s not wedded to chronology, but that’s hardly a knock. I think there is value added in what we did with Reagan, but the further removed you get from the time that these people were serving, the less the value.
[Berger returns to room.]

Tim will be back in just a second. Did he have a follow-up question?

**Strong:** I’m not sure. I think he might have.

**Riley:** Let’s hold off.

**Strong:** There are too many issues. We can’t possibly go through all of them in the time that’s remaining. Is there a foreign policy issue that we should be asking you about because it hasn’t gotten as much attention in the memoirs and things that have been published or because it’s a really good example of how the administration functioned? If we were choosing one to do in detail, is Bosnia? Haiti?

**Berger:** I would say Kosovo. Haiti is much misunderstood.

**Strong:** Okay.

**Berger:** We can do Somalia.

**Strong:** Both of those are misunderstood?

**Berger:** Somalia is somewhat misunderstood, yes. Haiti and Kosovo are very much so.

**Strong:** Those are nice brackets too, from beginning to end.

**Riley:** There was one other question that we can go ahead and begin. [Naftali returns.] You had a follow-up that you wished to pose in relation to what we were just talking about.

**Naftali:** The historical ExCom we were discussing included the President. Did President Clinton participate in the Small Group?

**Berger:** No. President Clinton generally did not join the principals’ committee meetings in the situation room. When we wanted to meet with the President, we met in the Cabinet room. So I think it’s a little bit different, for example, than this Presidency, where it’s been a wartime Presidency and President Bush has sat in the front chair. I sat in the front chair during the second term; Tony sat in the front chair during the first term and conducted the process. But that didn’t mean we didn’t meet with the President. We often met as a team with the President, but it would be a meeting to discuss Haiti or a meeting to discuss Kosovo, or a meeting to discuss Bosnia. That would take place in the Cabinet room, and it would be the foreign policy group.

**Naftali:** But this would be after you sought the highest common denominator.

**Berger:** Correct.
Naftali: Last point—we’ll probably return to this, but you never know—we have to cover a lot of ground. I’ve heard that the Small Group actually emerged a little earlier, while you were determining what to do after Khobar Towers, because this was such a very difficult problem whether to retaliate against Iran.

Berger: That’s probably true. Khobar was very sensitive. We had a lot of problems with the Saudis in terms of getting access to the prisoners. We had some friction with Louis Freeh about how to handle this. Louis didn’t feel as if we were leaning hard enough into the Saudis, and I think we were. The President and Vice President on two occasions were brutally frank with the Crown Prince. We finally were in a position to pose questions to the prisoners but not interrogate them face-to-face.

Clearly there were ties of the bombers to Iran. It never was quite established how high up in the Iranian government this went. When Louis left the FBI in the summer of 2001 or 2002, he said he considered the Khobar case still unsolved. But you’re right. I think the Small Group probably started around then.

Naftali: I hope we get back to that.

Strong: We wanted to pursue your suggestion that we spend some time on Haiti and Kosovo and I’m sure other issues too, but let’s try to do those in a bit more detail.

Berger: Okay. Haiti, you need to go back to the campaign. In 1991 Aristide is elected democratically, ousted from office, exiled in Washington. President Bush says something to the functional equivalent of, “This will not stand.” People start flooding out of Haiti on rickety boats, a third of them capsizing at sea. President Bush instituted a policy of return. He intercepted the boats and took the people back to Haiti. That seemed to be, from candidate Clinton’s perspective, a very difficult moral position, to send these people back to face retaliation whether they were political exiles or not. So he said during the campaign that he would no longer return people to Haiti if they chose to come to the United States.

Riley: Was that decision chewed over by the people who were on the foreign policy team?

Berger: The foreign policy team at this point is very small. It’s Lake and Berger and maybe one or two others. It was not a well considered decision. Were there political elements to it? There are a lot of Haitians in New York. I wouldn’t rule out the possibility of some politics—just as in Cuba—we all recognize politics plays a role in Cuba policy. I’m sure it played some role in that Haiti statement. But Clinton also had moral qualms about the policy. In any case, during the transition the CIA came to me with photographs of people taking down their roofs in Haiti, building boats. They predicted there would be more than 150,000 boats on the water on January 21, 1993 headed for Florida, and that in the course of that tens of thousands of people would die. People literally were taking the roofs off their houses to build boats because President-elect Clinton had said he was not going to stop them.

I remember going down to Little Rock for this briefing. It was a sort of breathtaking briefing, literally. It took your breath away, the prospect of 300,000 Haitians heading to the United States,
or 250,000 Haitians heading to the United States on January 20th. I remember Vice President Gore saying rather drolly, “Well, this is a worthy problem.” Clearly that’s not something we could permit to happen.

Riley: I would think the President would be particularly sensitive to this. His 1980 election loss was driven in large measure by the Cuban—

Berger: By the Mariel boatlift. So basically we reversed field, but we didn’t reverse field in a vacuum. The President said, “We’re going to restore democracy to Haiti. We obviously cannot let these people make this trip. We can’t see 30 to 40,000 people capsize. I’ll basically backtrack on my commitment, but only on the condition that we, number one, substantially step up in Haiti the processing of political exiles, so that you can distinguish between those who are asserting political reasons for their departure and those who were simply economic exiles.” Number two was that we’d have a plan for Aristide’s return. That was a priority.

So he gets elected. He reverses field on the interdictions, took a lot of criticism from the Black Caucus and elsewhere for that. But it was always in his mind connected with restoring Aristide—he used to say, “If we can’t restore democracy to this little island 100 miles off our coast, what kind of a great power are we?” I remember a meeting we had on a Saturday. It took place in the Roosevelt Room. We had spent time trying to think about how to do this, and he listened to this and erupted. “This is the same bullshit I heard in the campaign! There’s nothing new in this plan. You guys have to do better than this. This is just bullshit.” It was a bracing moment. He was actually speaking to me at the time.

We then convened the Governors Island negotiations. We asked Larry Pezzulo, who had been a former Ambassador in Central America, to be our negotiator. Larry is a very tough guy and a very smart guy, and junta leader [Raoul] Cedras agreed to attend. Aristide agreed to send a representative. After several weeks we came up with the Governors Island agreement. The Governors Island agreement had a timeline with a set of steps leading ultimately to the restoration of Aristide as President and Cedras leaving—[Michel-Joseph] François and Cedras, the two military leaders. The famous incident with the boat docking—why am I forgetting the—

Naftali: Harlan County.

Berger: Harlan County is what’s misunderstood. As part of this process, one step was that we were going to send Seabees to Haiti. Not troops, but basically Navy Civilian Corps of Engineer types who would be doing some good works and would be insinuating themselves a bit inside the FADH [Force Armée d’Haiti], the Haitian military. Harlan County was not going down to knock down the door; the Harlan County was going down to send a bunch of military construction workers. Cedras and François sent their thugs to the port—blocked the port so that the boat could not get in, and we had a meeting about what should we do. This was right after Somalia. There was obviously a great deal of sensitivity about looking weak.

I remember one of the political guys at the meeting said, “You can’t have the Harlan County going around in circles in the harbor; you’ve got to get it out of there.” We made, I think, a fundamental mistake, which was to withdraw the Harlan County, because three days later we
decided to impose an economic embargo on Haiti and to send six frigates to patrol, essentially seal Haiti. Had we thought about it and sent the six frigates and imposed the embargo first, the Harlan County could have disappeared and no one would have ever noticed it. It would have just gone. But the withdrawal of the Harlan County became a kind of an emotional symbol of America’s weakness, when it actually was the result of us being too rushed in terms of making a decision, not taking our time, not thinking through the consequences.

At the time we decided to impose an economic embargo, Tony and Christopher had a disagreement in front of the President. Chris thought we ought not to decide about military action until after we’d seen how the embargo went. Tony’s view was that you’ve got to decide now whether you’re prepared to go in with a hostile force and take these guys down, because an economic embargo against Haiti actually could be enforced, and after a month or two months or three months, you’re going to see people dying in Haiti. So an economic embargo has a limited shelf life in a place like Haiti where we had the capacity really to strangle them. So you have to decide now that you’re prepared to send troops to knock down the door.

The President accepted that logic, decided that if necessary we would send a force to oust the junta, and we decided to do that. Then President Carter called and said he was going to Haiti and taking Colin Powell and Sam Nunn with him. It was sort of a self-appointed delegation. He didn’t realize that we had a military plan, and Sunday at 4 o’clock those planes were leaving from North Carolina and heading with troops to Haiti. We said to President Carter, “Okay, you go down there, but you’ve got to be out by 12 o’clock on Sunday.”

Riley: There was no effort to dissuade him from going down in the first place?

Berger: No. He’d already announced that he was going down. The Carter Center had been invited to come down.

Naftali: Mr. Berger, all these former Carter officials in and around this administration, how did this happen?

Berger: Go back and look at your Carter files. I was proud to work for him. He’s an extraordinarily distinguished former President, but he answers to a higher authority than the President at this point, and that is his own conscience and his own sense of his responsibilities to God and country. Carter pops up more than one time in the Clinton administration. North Korea is an example. The Carter Center. He’d say, “This is a private visit. This is not under the auspices of the United States government.” I suppose the President could have ordered him not to go, but that would have had its own consequences, Carter offering to go down and mediate this.

We were in the Oval Office on Sunday. It was one of the tensest days of the administration. We knew at 4 o’clock the troops were leaving Fort Bragg. I think there were about 25,000 troops and they were prepared for a forcible entry. I mean, the FADH was not exactly the Russian Army, but nonetheless, they had enough to have caused problems for us getting in, and then once we got in.
We planned this and we exercised it out at the National War College. We brought all the agencies that were going to be involved in this together from the military, the civilian, so that we knew where the seams were and how we passed authority over, and how this organization stepped in here and there. We learned a great deal from that exercise.

Carter called about 11:30 and he said, “I’m making progress.” The President said, “Twelve o’clock, Mr. President, you’ve got to be out of there.” Or “Jimmy”—I don’t remember what he called him. Twelve o’clock the phone doesn’t ring. Twelve-thirty the phone doesn’t ring. One o’clock the phone rings, it’s Carter. “I’ve got good news, Mr. President. They’ve agreed to leave.” And the President said, “By when? They had already agreed to leave in the Governors Island agreement.” Carter said, “I don’t have a date, but they’ve agreed to leave. I think this is solved, and I feel very good about this. You should be proud of the fact—blah, blah, blah.” The President said, “I’ll call you back in ten minutes.”

We caucused, Christopher, Tony, Clinton and myself, in the room, and probably two or three others. We all agreed that simply getting another commitment from François and Cedras that they were going to leave without a date certain was meaningless. So the President called Carter back and said, “We won’t accept that. Unless they are prepared to give us a relatively proximate date certain, we’re going forward militarily. You’ve got to get the hell out of there, Mr. President.”

Then CNN starts showing pictures of fighter planes and squads assembling at Fort Bragg. I believe when Cedras and François gave up is when they saw on CNN that we were coming to knock down the door. At that point they said 30 days and we accepted that, and in fact, they did leave in 30 days. But it was clearly, in my judgment, the impending invasion of Haiti that caused Cedras and François to leave by a date certain. The only commitment they made to President Carter was that they would leave. Well, they had said they’d leave already; it was meaningless without a date. I think that whole chapter, because of Harlan County, got somewhat distorted.

Naftali: Was there some press management in that part of the story?

Berger: I think there was press management in the Harlan County piece. I think we listened too much to the press people who said, “You can’t let the Harlan County just sit there—it would become a symbol of American impotence.” I want to protect one of my friends. One of the political people in the White House said, “It would be a symbol of American impotence to have the Harlan County tooling around the port.” And so we were driven by the political public relations, public affairs view that it was disastrous to keep the Harlan County there, whereas we should have just let it sit there, figured out what the next step was, and then done the Harlan County in concert.

Naftali: I meant the pictures at Fort Bragg.

Berger: Do I think what?

Naftali: Did CNN need some special permission to take those?
**Berger:** No, they didn’t. We had 25,000 troops. I think there were reports in the days before that they were getting ready for something, so CNN was there. They literally started showing footage of guys getting C-130s into the air.

**Naftali:** Future historians will have a chance to look at things that were called PolMil plans for Iran and other—is this the beginning of the PolMil?

**Berger:** Yes, and I think it’s a very good example. Dick Clarke and Jim Dobbins were the two heads of the ExCom. This is a different kind of an ExCom, essentially the working-level group that handled Haiti, both leading up to the ouster of François and Cedras, and then once we had 20,000 troops there, we had to deal with getting Aristide back and we had to deal with what the hell we’re going to do with François and Cedras. We had to find a country where they could go into exile. That wasn’t easy either.

Sometimes history is enormously banal. I’ll never forget getting home one night about 11:30, the phone ringing and the situation room saying Ambassador [William] Swing, who was the Ambassador that we sent to Haiti, was calling from the basement of Cedras’s house and the issue was whether we were going to confiscate his house or whether we would pay the fair market value rent. I thought, My God, here I am, deputy National Security Advisor. I’ve got the Ambassador to Haiti in the basement of this dictator’s house and we’re negotiating a rental agreement. My wife’s a real estate agent. I woke her up and said, “What are you supposed to do in this situation?” We wound up, I think, actually taking over the house. He tried to backtrack during the 30 days.

**Naftali:** Just for the record, a PolMil plan is—

**Berger:** A PolMil plan is an integrated step-by-step playbook and it says that this is what the military is going to do and this is how it’s going to hand off to AID [Agency for International Development], and this is what State is going to do. It usually proceeds chronologically. It talks about what everybody’s responsibilities are. If you’d had it in Iraq, you would have had at some point the Pentagon handing off the postwar administration of the peace to the State Department. But in a microcosm, Haiti was a little pissant country. It’s not like we were dealing with Iraq, where we had a very elaborate political-military plan. I think the best way to call it, it’s a playbook. We went to the National War College in order to exercise it. We went through each step. We found out, that doesn’t work, you can’t possibly do it that way, because these pieces don’t fit together. You need to have some other arrangement.

**Naftali:** How long did it take to do it?

**Berger:** It took a couple of weeks to draft it, and then it went through an interagency process before we exercised it. But it is essential to the new kind of war we’re fighting. Iraq is a perfect example where we fought the war brilliantly and we have been wallowing in the postwar consequences of not having had a political-military plan. Not just for getting to Baghdad, but for getting control of Iraq and moving Iraq to stability and economic vitality and ultimately to exit.

**Naftali:** So the PolMil plan is a result of the President yelling at you?
Berger: Yes.

Strong: I'd like to come back briefly to the Harlan County incident. In a lot of the commentary on issues like this, observers say policy is one thing, press relations or public relations is something else. I find it really hard to see a line between them or to draw it clearly. It certainly does matter how something like that incident is going to be presented in the news. It does matter what it's going to do to world opinion.

Berger: It's a wonderfully rich area to talk about. One of the things I learned from Tony was that sometimes you have to just suck it up and take the press hits for a couple of days until you know you've got it right. The instinct of the press guys is the news cycle. Now we have a 24-hour news cycle. So they're getting bombarded. Every 20 minutes, the picture of the Harlan County is running on CNN, and these guys who are living in this bubble of world—thinking that people around the country are watching nothing but CNN all day, when of course that's not true—tremendous pressure builds up. You've got to do something. You've got to get the Harlan County out of there.

Not necessarily on this occasion, because we succumbed to it on this occasion, but on other occasions, I can remember Tony saying to one of our staff people or one of the political people who was in a similar frenzy, “We're just going to have to take a bad story for two days, because we're not ready at this point to figure out what the right thing to do is.” This is why the 24-hour news cycle has made foreign policy-making even harder. It collapses the time that you have to make good decisions.

Winston Churchill went to Checkers when the D-Day invasion was launched. He didn't know for three or four days whether it had been a success because he got dispatches—little pieces here, little pieces there. We would now have CNN on the beach. That's within my lifetime, almost. So you have to recognize that sometimes you just have to suck it up and take two days of crap on the Harlan County until you have a policy to replace it that makes sense.

Had we taken our hits for two days and then decided we were going to put an embargo on Haiti, send six frigates around, the Harlan County story would not now be legendary, it would have gone away. Well, they couldn't get the Seabees in. They got pissed off and they got tough. But you're absolutely right, there's another example, when we bombed Iraq in 1998, when they wouldn't let the inspectors have access.

You remember the great Albright-Berger-Cohen appearance at Ohio State. Somebody from our press shop had this great idea that we should go out to the country, go to the heartland and explain to people why we should be going to war with Iraq or at least bombing Iraq for four days. We went out there and CNN had totally misled us. We thought we were going to have a controlled audience. We were actually in a 5,000-seat basketball coliseum and they had no idea who was there. There were organized protesters there and they had no idea how they were going to control the event. We looked ridiculous and the policy was hurt as a result of it.
What are the lessons there? One, we had a public affairs staff, and I think when Condi came in she said she was going to get rid of the legislative staff, the legal staff, the public affairs staff, but they all survived. They all survived for a reason. It’s the reason you’re suggesting, which is: The way things are perceived affects the way things are decided. You have to be conscious of how you’re projecting this policy, or you’re not going to have the flexibility to be able to continue to make it.

Riley: I’ve got three related questions, and then we can move on. One, you were involved then in the process of finding a place for these fellows to go. How does that work?

Berger: The State Department did the most for it. I think Vice President Gore called the President of Panama and said, “Will you take these guys for us?” The President of Panama said yes. I suspect that there is a small airfield or something in Panama today that’s the legacy of that deal. As I recall that’s how we ultimately had to have—because no one wanted these guys.

Riley: The other question is about assets that they may have hidden abroad, the accessibility to that. The second question is, Bill Gray at some point comes in to help play a role, and I’m not clear what he was doing and when he was doing it.

Berger: After Governors Island, we were trying to get a negotiated transfer of power. That was what the President was saying was bullshit. We thought, before we went the route of invasion, that we should try to go the route of negotiation, and Bill was brought in as a special negotiator after Governors Island fell apart. Bill tried to broker a deal in Haiti. There was a kind of moderate middle in Haiti, although it had no traction. Bill was basically trying to get a peaceful transfer of power. He got fed up with it and thought it was useless. He thought we had to ultimately simply go in and take Aristide back.

Riley: Then the final question is about Aristide himself. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about your perceptions of him. Presumably you had some dealings with him when he was in exile. There were some press questions about him as an individual.

Berger: Aristide would be a good book, actually. He really was a liberation-theology-left priest in a country that was probably the worst run country in the world, the second poorest country in the world, Haiti. He wins this election in ’91, gets ousted, and comes to Washington. He’s a kind of small man with steely determination. He bought none of this negotiated transfer of power crap, thought it would never work. For a while we were getting criticized from the left, and Randall Robertson, who was the head of TransAfrica, went on a hunger strike, if you recall. I went to visit him in his basement. He looked like he was dying. I’m sure he got up and took a shower after I left. That may be the first thing I’ve said that I’ll redact. [laughter]

The pressure from the left by the Black Caucus and others was that you’ve got to move and get this guy back. Aristide wanted no part of a negotiated deal. He agreed to Governors Island, but then grew disillusioned with it. Obviously he was euphoric when we finally took him back. I flew back on the plane with Secretary Christopher when he went back. Later the President came down to speak. But I grew quite disillusioned with Aristide. There were five-year terms in the Haitian constitution. The Haitian constitution became something equivalent to the Bill of Rights.
No one ever read the Haitian constitution. I don’t know when it was written. We had one guy in the State Department who became the authority of the Haitian constitution. Suddenly the Haitian constitution became the template for these decisions.

There was a five-year term. He’d been exiled for three years. So he argued the three years should be tacked on to the end because he’d missed three years of his five years. We made a mistake, I think, in not agreeing to that. We thought, we’ve restored constitutional democracy to Haiti, how can we now violate the constitution? That would make no sense in terms of the message we were sending to the hemisphere. But what then happened was, Aristide goes off for five years, he’s replaced by [Rene] Preval.

Preval has authority, but no power. Aristide has power but no responsibility. So he sat there for five years while Preval just basically spun and hung in the wind, Aristide not at all trying to take that moment when the world really was focused on Haiti. In these crisis situations, the tsunami is over, and people aren’t talking about the tsunami now. You have a moment in time when, if you’re a country in crisis, you have the world’s attention. You better damn well take full advantage of it.

So there was a moment in time when the world was happy that Aristide was restored to power, but he basically was an obstructionist during the Preval five years and Haiti as a result has fallen back to kind of pathetic, poor, failed state.

**Strong:** I want to come back a little bit to the public relations side and maybe shift grounds a little bit, because it’s more commonly said by scholars that that’s the decisive factor in Somalia. Pictures of starving children lead to a major American commitment. A picture of a dead American being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu leads to our withdrawal. There are lots of scholars, lots of people in the military who refer to the CNN effect and argue that it has enormous influence over foreign policy. Do we exaggerate that influence?

**Berger:** It may be exaggerated, but it’s real. The fact is the pictures of the starving children in Somalia did result in President Bush, H. W. Bush, deciding to send troops. I always thought that part of the reason was that they’d taken a pass on Bosnia because they had three former Ambassadors. Larry Eagleburger was Ambassador to Yugoslavia. I think Scowcroft had been attaché in Yugoslavia. They thought, as Powell said, that Bosnia will be solved when they get tired of killing each other. So they took a pass on Bosnia and were taking some criticism because the pictures from Bosnia weren’t too good either. Suddenly this humanitarian crisis takes place in Somalia. They believe obviously by virtue of Scowcroft’s call to me that we can do this in two or three weeks. Just open up the lines of chains of supply, then we can leave, without thinking about the fact that there’s no government, there’s nothing to maintain order once we left. So, did the pictures send us into Somalia? I believe they did.

What happened once we got in there? We inherited this situation in which we had no government. We had these factions headed by [Mohamad Farah] Aidid and others fighting with each other. We turned the operation over to the UN, although our military was still there but not part of the UN. We did not “blue-helmet” our military. The guys that got shot down were not blue-helmeted; they were under American command and control. Twenty-four Pakistanis had
previously been killed by Aidid. Kofi Annan said we can’t let them get away with it, and the mission gets shifted to get Aidid.

We began, I think in June, July, and August, to realize that this was a flawed policy. In a country like Somalia, getting Aidid is like getting Bin Laden. We haven’t got Bin Laden yet. We were running around chasing Aidid where we should be trying to put together some kind of political steering group that would take some responsibility for governing in Somalia. We pushed this shift of policy because at this point the policy is a UN policy. We pushed this policy on the UN. As I look back, this is one regret that I do have: I don’t think we pushed it hard enough and urgently enough on Kofi. He was the head of peacekeeping at that point.

So on the one hand, we see the fact that the policy is heading in the wrong direction; we’re pushing the UN. Peter Tarnoff and Frank Wisner went up and met with Kofi and said, “We’ve got to get off the Aidid hunt and we’ve got to get on to trying to put together some sort of political coalition that would allow us to have a political solution and begin to leave.” Meanwhile we have American troops—I can’t remember how many—in Mogadishu. General [Thomas R.] Montgomery, who was the general on the ground, made the decision to send those troops to that hotel. Now I always believed—this is controversial—that our own military did not have ownership of Somalia the way they have maintained ownership of every other military enterprise I’ve ever been engaged with, because it was a UN operation. There was not the degree of buy-in from the Pentagon that these were our troops and they had to have direction and control.

I would often get a phone call from the situation room at 3 o’clock in the morning and the situation room would say, “CNN is reporting shooting going on in Mogadishu.” I’d pick up the phone and call Frank Wisner or Walt Slocombe over at the Defense Department saying, “What’s going on in Mogadishu?” They said, “I don’t know, we don’t know anything.” They would check with the military and the military didn’t know anything. We’d wind up calling John Howe out in Mogadishu. John Howe was the UN representative. John would explain what was happening.

So there’s a lot of fault to go around in Somalia. Number one, the policy types like me, the policy makers like me, did not act more forcefully on our conviction that we were headed in the wrong direction. I also think there’s some fault that lies with the military for not really owning the troops that we had on the ground. Then there’s fault on the part of Congress, because of Congress’ reaction to October 5th happens—probably one of the worst single days of my eight years in the White House. We all gather in the White House watching that picture time and time again.

There was a volcanic eruption from the Congress. It’s Sunday, so the eruption didn’t erupt until Monday. Aspin and Christopher were summoned to a joint session of Congress on Tuesday. Chris very adroitly let Aspin take the lead, and Aspin got massacred by his former colleagues, who demanded that we withdraw immediately. We had a meeting in the White House of probably 40 members of the leadership of the Congress, all the committee chairs and the leadership. It took place in the Roosevelt Room, so it was a larger than normal meeting. One after another of the Senators stood up and said, “We want those troops out now.”
The President pleaded with them to not precipitously withdraw the forces. If we could not withdraw the forces in an orderly way, we would look like we cut and ran because we lost some troops in Mogadishu. It was one of the tensest meetings we had in the eight years.

I remember Senator [Robert] Byrd in particular, his voice quivering, talking about how we had to get our troops home tomorrow. “We are going to act. When the Congress reconvenes, we’re going to cut off the money for any continuation of American presence there.” We managed to negotiate, I believe, a 90-day phase-out period, which at least allowed us to do this in some sort of orderly fashion. But again, here’s where perception—this goes to your point. We obviously needed to change our Somalia policy, but precipitously withdrawing in the wake of a military debacle sent the wrong message to adversaries of the United States.

When you read the Bin Laden screeds, he talks about the Lebanon barracks, 245 Marines killed in the Reagan Administration; he talks about Somalia. He talks about America as a paper tiger. These things have consequences.

**Strong:** When did the piece of information become known that Bin Laden may have helped the Somalis acquire missiles?

**Berger:** I don’t think I knew that fact when I was in the White House.

**Strong:** Much later.

**Berger:** But Mr. [Philip] Zelikow is the ultimate authority.

**Riley:** He’s no longer here. You have to go to Washington to find out. I did tell Philip before he left that if he couldn’t keep careful notes, at least consult his memory, because we’ll want to talk with him in another few years. Anything else on Somalia? What else is on your agenda, in your portfolio the first term?

**Berger:** We have NATO enlargement. There’s our agenda. We’ve been talking about the inherited agenda. We had an agenda.

**Riley:** All right.

**Berger:** One of the items in our agenda was to stabilize Russian democracy. Don’t forget, Yeltsin was wobbly, not because at this point he was inebriated—later he was wobbling because he was inebriated—he was wobbly because he had General [Gennady] Zyuganov and the Communists coming at him. I never figured out whether that’s the left or the right anymore, but in any case, the Communists coming at him from the left. He had the nationalist [Vladimir] Zhirinovsky coming at him from the right, and the question of whether Russian democracy would survive was very much in doubt in 1992 and ’93 and ’94 and ’95.

We tend to forget that when we look back and say, “This is a period in which all the assets of Russia were ripped off by the oligarchs.” Well, that did happen, but the reason for that was that...
[Anatoly] Chubais and others thought it was the way to break the link of ownership from the Communist Party.

So number one, stabilize Russia. Two, Bosnia, we haven’t talked about much. I’ll talk about it in general terms. Basically, after we were rebuffed by the Europeans, we were determined to bring an end to the Bosnia fighting. The situation got worse because the Croats got stronger. Because we finally convinced NATO to use air power, we were able to get a cease fire, to get to Dayton, to get an agreement, which has basically held. It will be another generation before Bosnia becomes Rumania, let alone Switzerland, but at least people are not killing each other in Bosnia today.

We had a kind of roller coaster relationship with China in the first term because we mistakenly—in my judgment at the time and now—gave a visa to Lee Teng-hui to come to the United States and give a speech at Cornell, which caused a huge crash in our relationship with China, which all the China experts in the administration said was going to happen. But the countervailing view that President Clinton and some others had was how can we tell people they can’t come to the United States? That’s un-American. How do you deny someone the right to travel to the United States? The answer is there’s a geopolitical reality; it’s called a “one China” policy. It’s a tradeoff with freedom of movement and access to the United States. So we had that kind of roller coaster relationship with China. The China relationship greatly improved in the following years with “strategic partnership” an aspirational goal.

We also laid the seeds for NATO enlargement, which was extraordinarily important in my judgment because basically NATO enlargement and the prospect of NATO enlargement, which we led, said to the eastern Europeans, “If you get your act together—and that might mean stop discriminating against minorities—develop democratic processes, and get your economy in order, you could become a member of NATO.” It was an extraordinarily powerful magnet for good for initially Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, and then later for the second troika of the Baltics.

We saved Mexico. I’ll tell that story very quickly. Mexico was in serious financial trouble. We begin to watch it very carefully. It almost goes off the brink and the President calls down to the White House the leaders—Gingrich, Dole, [Richard] Gephardt and [Tom] Daschle, or [George] Mitchell maybe at that point, and he says, “We’re going to have to guarantee some substantial loans to Mexico or Mexico could crater, and if Mexico craters it will have a devastating effect on America. We’ll have thousands of immigrants coming across the border. Our economies are very much intertwined.” All four of them said, “Absolutely, Mr. President.” But the problem was we didn’t really have clear legal authority to use the money that was in an account for the IMF [International Monetary Fund] to stabilize currencies for loan guarantee.

So we sought from the Congress authority to use that fund to guarantee some loans to Mexico. A week went by, and two weeks went by, and three weeks went by, and finally the leaders said, “We can’t deliver. We’ve tried to sell this, Mr. President, and we can’t get 20 votes.” So it’s against that background that I’m sitting in my office about 8 o’clock one night and Bob Rubin comes in with Larry Summers and says something to the effect that Mexico has 48 hours to live. It’s about ready to collapse. Meanwhile there had been a transition from [Carlos] Salinas to
[Ernesto] Zedillo. Zedillo walked into this new office, hadn’t even uncrated his boxes, and he’s hit by this economic tsunami.

So we went down to [COS] Leon Panetta’s office and went through this with Leon, and Leon said, “Let’s go see the President.” We went into the Oval Office and Bob and Larry laid this out quite concisely, and no one was offering the other point of view. I very often found myself in the role of the spinach server with President Clinton. Because I was relatively confident in my relationship with him, I felt I was able to say things that were the hard truths. I said, “You have to understand, Mr. President, I agree with Bob’s and Larry’s position here, but this is $20 billion that you’re putting on the table. That’s a lot of housing that you don’t build in Detroit. They’re saying there’s a 60/40 chance it gets paid back. That means there’s a 40 percent chance it doesn’t. There aren’t a hundred votes in the House and 25 votes in the Senate that will support you, and if you piss this $20 billion down a rat hole, you’re going to be in trouble.”

He listened to all that and said, “We have no other choice.” End of meeting. This is the absolute opposite of the protracted meeting, debate, everything, for hours and hours. He said, “We have no other choice, do we?” All of us said, “No.” And he said, “Do it.” We wound up using somewhat questionable—it never was taken to court—legal authority to use this monetary fund to guarantee the loans, but the Mexicans wound up repaying the loans with interest. We actually made money on this deal in the end, although that was not the purpose.

**Strong:** Just to clarify, the President fully understands the congressional layout. He understands how unpopular this is with the American public. He’s not saying, “I can sell this if I have to. Give me some time and I can move those things.” He’s saying, “I know this is unpopular, but it’s the right thing to do.”

**Berger:** It’s a terribly important story about understanding Bill Clinton and those people who think that he’s simply a political animal and that everything was a calculation and triangulation and was the personification of how you find the middle. He knew there was virtually no upside to doing this. No one was going to give him any credit if Mexico did not collapse. There was substantial downside. Imagine, $20 billion, with a Republican Congress—

**Riley:** That had just happened. This was December, January, right after the Republican—

**Berger:** Right, so we were facing, that’s a pretty big amount of money to throw down a rat hole. But he understood intellectually that we could not let Mexico fail. He was saying, “We’ll deal with the political consequences if we have to.”

**Naftali:** Who came up with the plan of how to do this?

**Berger:** How to do it technically?

**Naftali:** Yes.

**Berger:** Rubin and Summers.
Riley: Was there anybody in the administration who was vigorously—?

Berger: Summers and Rubin were a great team and they figured out how to do it. Bob got the Mexicans to make oil, to collateralize the loan with revenue from Mexican oil, so that was some protection. But there was still a lot of risk, and this was Clinton at his best. I left that meeting and thought to myself, I’m really proud to work for this guy.

Strong: In an earlier age would the Congress have behaved differently?

Riley: You mean before it became Republican?

Strong: I’m not so much thinking about that.

Berger: I think in an earlier time, the leadership would have had more capacity to deliver. The democratization of Congress also means the leaders are cat herders, so you have the four leaders who also got it. Newt got it, Gephardt got it, and Dole got it. They all understood that policy demanded that we do this. They couldn’t deliver when they went back. I think in earlier Congresses, in Sam Rayburn’s Congress, if Rayburn had made a commitment, he was able to deliver it. It’s the democratization of Congress, which has a lot of very good features to it, but it’s also the undermining of the authority of the leadership.

Naftali: So the Republican leaders privately said they supported this.

Berger: Yes.

Riley: I want to ask you a question related to this. We always ask about the fallout from the ’94 midterm elections, and of course on the domestic end the answer is that it was devastating. Did you notice a terrific difference in what was on your portfolio dealing with the Republican Congress?

Berger: As I recall, Bosnia or Kosovo did not receive a majority vote of support from the House. There are two—probably there’s less consequence on foreign policy than on domestic policy because there’s more deference to the President on foreign policy. But there’s more contention, because if you have the House or you have the Senate, you have the committees. Congressmen have learned that the way to get on the evening news is to have an investigation. So everything becomes an investigation.

Did the President abuse his authority on Mexico by misusing the monetary fund law? There wasn’t abuse in that case, but you can imagine that being the topic. Part of it is just that things become harder to do.

Riley: You had mentioned one of the proactive areas, the stabilization of Russia. In that case there is what looks to be an unusual organizational structure because of Strobe Talbott’s role in that. I’m wondering if you could comment on how it was to have somebody in Talbott’s position—
Berger: The corollary of my proposition one, which is process affects results, is that you can’t have a procrustean bed. One size doesn’t fit all. You had Strobe, who clearly was the number one Russia expert policy-maker and was initially brought in for that purpose, then elevated to Deputy. We always had a very strong Senior Director at the NSC, but somebody that Strobe was compatible with, and Summers over in Treasury. So we had an extraordinarily intellectually powerful Russia team, and it worked.

This was not an NSC-centric process. It was a State Department-centric process with Strobe driving it. As I say, one size doesn’t fit all. A lot of it depends on where the people are. In this case, the President was very concerned from the very beginning, if you read Strobe’s book, about whether democracy would survive in Russia. He got Strobe to come on as a senior Russia advisor. That process is then led out of the State Department.

Riley: Is there any part of that story that you can shed light on from your perspective, or has that story been pretty well told?

Berger: Strobe tells it very well in his book, and I think it’s a very compelling story. People sometimes criticize Clinton for being too close to Yeltsin. Yeltsin was the embodiment of democracy in Russia, particularly up to 1996. He was challenged from the left and from the right, and that train was very wobbly.

The President went to Russia on more than one occasion and tried to talk to the Russian people. He gave one great speech in Moscow. It was actually, I think, a town meeting format. It wasn’t, “You’ve got to——” there was no lecture to it at all. The question, he said, is not whether Russia is great; the question is how Russia defines its greatness. Does Russia define its greatness by the amount of territory it controls, or does Russia define its greatness by the opportunities it’s creating for its people to have better lives? Clinton often said, “Yeltsin is able to see a different future. Russians are sort of pessimistic by nature, and 70 years of being under the yoke of Communism——”

Yeltsin was able to see that there was a different greatness that Russia could regain by modernizing, not by trying to maintain the Baltics, although he continued to fight us. When we went to Helsinki—the summit in 1996, I believe, right after Clinton had fallen down the steps and busted his knee. We went to Helsinki and he was in a wheelchair and there were all sorts of contraptions to get him into the plane and down from the plane. It was the summit at which basically we were saying to Yeltsin, “Give it up on NATO enlargement. We’re going ahead; stop rocking it. All you’re doing, Boris, is creating a defeat for yourself. We’re going forward.”

Yeltsin at the last moment said, “But not the Baltics. You have to commit to me that you will not open up NATO to the Baltics.” And the President said, “No, I will not make that commitment, and you should not define Russia in those terms. All you’re doing is moving the line of the divide between East and West. You’re moving the line father to the east. You should define a different relationship with the West.” It was a dramatic moment. Yeltsin was obviously very troubled by Bosnia, by our intervention there, very troubled by NATO enlargement, but Clinton was very firm with him on that.
Riley: Was there division internally within the administration about whether there might be a future for Russia itself in NATO or—

Berger: No. I think that we always said, “Nothing is ruled out.” It was pretty hard to conceive in those days that you could have a NATO that included Russia. But we were trying to redefine the purpose of NATO. The purpose of NATO was being defined in Bosnia and in Kosovo and later in Afghanistan. It could have been defined in Iraq had we gone about it differently. It was not about containing Russia.

What we wound up doing is creating a NATO-Russia partnership, which was a bit of a fig leaf, but at least it said to Russia that there was equity of power.

Strong: Is it right that NATO enlargement was never a significant public issue in the United States? Within the elites it was enormously—

Berger: Yes it was. We had an operation led by Jeremy Rosner to sell NATO enlargement to the Senate because the Senate had to ratify the amendment to the NATO treaty. It was by no means a foregone conclusion. There are big Polish and Czech and Hungarian communities in the United States, but they’re in certain places, they’re not all over.

There never was any question of whether the two Ohio Senators or the two Illinois Senators were going to be for NATO enlargement, but there were a lot of Senators who believed, why should we make a commitment that we are going to send Americans to defend Hungary? What you’re saying by letting them into NATO is, “An attack on Hungary is an attack on the United States.” There’s still a strong isolationist strand in this country and strand in the Congress that said, “We’re not going to war for Hungary.” We had to overcome that.

There was a very active effort outside the White House, coordinated with the White House, led by a fellow by the name of Bruce Jackson and Jeremy Rosner. We had events—as I recall we may have gotten the former Presidents to do an event together in the White House. They were a grassroots, get-out-the-vote effort to build support for NATO enlargement. It was not a foregone conclusion.

Naftali: Given its importance later on, I wanted to ask you a little bit about the process that led up to granting the visa for President Lee of Taiwan.

Berger: Everybody with China expertise in the government thought it was a disastrous idea, that the Chinese would react and it would set back our relationship substantially. As I say, President Clinton had a kind of instinctive view that the United States should not be denying access to come to Cornell to give a speech. There was sort of a first amendment proposition for him. It was decided one breakfast in Tony Lake’s office with Tony and Christopher and I guess by that point Bill Perry, who had had their weekly breakfasts in the first term and decided what do these experts know? The President went along and it set back our relationship for two years.
Riley: As you’ve already said, there was a great deal of attention given to NATO expansion. I’m wondering if there was similar attention given to the question of European integration and expansion more—

Berger: I think less so. I think that was seen more as a European issue. At that point there was the debate in Europe between widen and deepen. There were some who believed that you should remain, whatever it was, 14 or 16, but in the process of integration, more sovereignty should be given to the center, to Brussels. There were others who believed that you had to extend membership out to the east, and they’ve done both. They’ve certainly done the widening—about 25 members, I believe, of the EU [European Union].

I think this is all very positive, not because you look at this in East-West terms, but because Turkey—the reason, for example, that President Clinton was so avidly for Turkish admission to the EU and for the EU to open up an accession process with Turkey. We’d have arguments with Helmut Kohl about this because we believed that you want countries like Turkey to be making the kind of reforms that will make them eligible to be members of NATO and members of the EU. You want them to have that incentive to move not just towards the west, but towards democracy.

Riley: Was there any fear within the administration about the prospects for development of a European defense capability or an expanded European defense capability?

Berger: In the second term we had a discussion with the Europeans about a European security and defense force. The question always was what was his linkage to NATO? Our view always was that NATO should have the right of first refusal in a sense, and when NATO decided it was not going to get engaged, for example in Albania, then the Europeans should have the capacity to draw upon NATO resources without the United States. The Europeans accepted that during the Clinton administration. My impression is—I’m not an expert in this—that that has become more distinct in the last few years.

Strong: Can I ask another question about the first term? You had mentioned earlier that you thought Clinton had a better grasp in the second term, and later on, about how his various foreign policy initiatives are integrated and articulated. Was there lots of discussion in the first term about that question? You’ve inherited these serious problems in Haiti, Somalia, Bosnia. You have your own initiatives. Were you talking about Lake’s speech on enlargement or other themes?

Berger: Yes. We were in what I would call the post-post Cold War period. From ’89 to ’93 we defined ourselves as post Cold War. But by definition, that’s defining your purpose in contravention to something negatively. The question is what were we moving towards? We ultimately were moving towards America’s responsibility in a global community. I think there was a process of evolution by which the pieces began to fit together.

If you look at Clinton’s speeches, the speeches in the last two or three years are more interesting than the speeches in the earlier years because the pieces were fitting together better.
**Strong:** I’m curious about efforts to make it fit together better.

**Berger:** Tony Lake’s enlargement speech was an effort to create a new construct, containment vs. enlargement. Unfortunately it was probably a bad choice of words, because it became kind of phallic in its interpretation by the press. But if you read that speech, it is an effort to articulate a more coherent, forward-looking view of America’s role. So there was a very conscious effort, but I think it was trial and error.

**Strong:** Why was he giving that speech and not Clinton?

**Berger:** Clinton did give parts of that speech. I think maybe it’s easier for the National Security Advisor to fall on his face than the President, so this may have been a kind of trial to see how it played. It turned out that enlargement was not a construct that was sufficient for people. What to me was more compelling was that we were now living in a global world. We were a global power and we had responsibilities, economic and political, and security responsibilities around the world.

What troubles me today is that we’re not exercising those responsibilities globally. We’ve written off Latin America. We’ve written off Africa. We’ve written off Asia except for the tsunami as far as I can tell, and North Korea, and we’re focused very much on what are clearly priority issues: the war on terrorism, Iraq, and now there’s a new theme that President Bush is articulating about democracy, which has tremendous potential. The notion of America leading a global community towards the goals of peace and security was more alien in the early ’90s than in the late ’90s.

**Naftali:** I wanted to ask you a little bit about the forces of disintegration. You saw elements of that in the first term. What was your first reaction besides sorrow and anger to the first World Trade Center bombing?

**Berger:** You know how many people were killed in the first World Trade Center?  

**Naftali:** Seven.

**Berger:** Six. My reaction was, you know how many people were killed in the Lebanese Marine Barracks?

**Naftali:** Two hundred and forty-one.

**Berger:** Correct. Now that’s a flippant answer to a serious question. Obviously we were very upset. Ramsi Yousef, who was responsible for World Trade Center One, was not linked to al-Qaida until much later.

**Naftali:** I didn’t mention al-Qaida.

**Berger:** Did we see the mosaic of radical Islam in ’93? No. I don’t think we saw it clearly until—and as you get to ’96 and ’97, late 1995, we set up something called al-Qaida Station,
which is a dedicated CIA operation focused on al-Qaida. We start becoming much more aggressive about going after al-Qaida cells, but the real wake-up call for us was ’98 and the embassy bombings in Africa. I think from that point on, for me at least, no issue had a higher priority.

There are other issues—Middle East peace, an agreement with China on trade, integrating China and Russia into the international community—that were high priorities, but getting Bin Laden and trying to roll back al-Qaida—I don’t think we saw the picture clearly until ’96, ’97, and then the shocker of ’98.

Naftali: It’s very hard to do this after 9/11, but I think it will be useful to future historians to understand that there was an intellectual process going on in the Clinton administration to try to understand the forces of disintegration. They didn’t know what al-Qaida was at this point—radical Islam, Sunni radicalism, whatever you want to call it, that’s starting in the middle part of the first term.

Berger: Absolutely.

Naftali: I was hoping you might be able to recall how this is germinating slowly. Its evolution. I think the sarin gas attack in Tokyo must have played a role in these concerns.

Berger: I gave the 9/11 Commission a 271-page, single-spaced copy of what Bill Clinton said about terrorism in his two terms. That’s a lot of talking. This became more and more of a concern of his. It began to focus more around al-Qaida by ’96, ’97, particularly as Bin Laden issues his fatwas and his rhetoric becomes much more hysterical and threatening. But Clinton talked a lot, and we spent a great deal of time on the nexus between terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and drugs. It turned out the third leg of that hasn’t emerged quite yet, but there’s a lot of drug money in Afghanistan today.

Clinton talked a lot about these forces. He gave a speech at Annapolis and at the UN on these topics, and internally we were organizing more strenuously to try to thwart what was still at this point a somewhat unclear mosaic of how these Islamic radical groups fit together. Because the more we learn now, the more we see how loosely they fit together, that al-Gamat is connected with al-Qaida, but it’s not al-Qaida. I’d say from ’98 on, al-Qaida is at the top of the list.

I said to Condi during the transition—this has been reported, and I told this to the 9/11 Commission—that the number one issue that she would deal with as National Security Advisor was terrorism in general and al-Qaida specifically. The President said to President Bush during their meeting that there were five priorities, in his judgment. The first one was terrorism. Then he listed North Korea, the Middle East, Korea, and Iraq. The President said, “I know you think that the most important priorities are national missile defense and Iraq. I think the most important priorities are those five, with terrorism being the first.”

Naftali: You raised Hezbollah, and of course, until 9/11, Hezbollah had called more Americans by far, than al-Qaida. Why were you prescient? Because you were.
Berger: Just to underscore a point you’re making, roughly 500 Americans died in the ’80s as a result of terrorism; 67 Americans died as a result of terrorism during the Clinton administration.

Strong: International terrorism.

Berger: International terrorism, correct. That’s not to say the terrorism problem was easing. The perception is that the terrorism problem was being ignored. The fact is we were thwarting attacks. We stopped a number of bad things from happening, and we were very much on the case. Let me come at your question this way. I think it was very hard for those who had served in government in the ’70s and ’80s to believe that a bunch of guys living in caves in Afghanistan could have done 9/11 by themselves. The second I learned about the World Trade Center I knew it was al-Qaida. There was never a doubt in my mind who was responsible.

The fact that many people in this administration looked to Iraq or some other state power was because they were used to dealing with state-sponsored terrorism like Hezbollah and others. The notion of stateless terrorism was something that really emerged in the ’90s and is a much more difficult problem, of course. You can deter states, but it’s very hard to deter stateless troops.

Naftali: In 1995 and again in 1996, the administration proposed far-reaching, anti-terrorism legislation, some of which would later be incorporated in something we know as the Patriot Act. You guys couldn’t get it through in ’95, and I know why, but I’d like you to speak on the record about this. You tried again in ’96, and you got a watered-down version of it passed in ’96. After the election you didn’t try again to get tougher anti-terrorism legislation. Why not?

Berger: We didn’t think we could get it. There were things like marking taggants in explosives, which was something that law enforcement all felt was extremely important in terms of tracing back the source of bombs. But the NRA [National Rifle Association] was inexorably opposed to this. I’m not sure what that has to do with deer hunting, but in any case they were opposed to it. A coalition of civil libertarians on the left and “Don’t interfere with my guns” on the right came together.

We got a lot passed. But there were things like roving wiretaps that we couldn’t get through, which was a simple notion that if I want to wiretap you I should have authority to wiretap you, not your phone, because you’re going to have ten phones in the next two weeks if you’re a bad guy. You’re going to throw away your cell phones. The way the law was written, you have to get a new FISA [Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act] request for each phone. That was just silly. Again, the privacy community was concerned that that would be abused. It took 9/11 to wake people up to this world-class threat that we were facing, this new enemy.

Naftali: The President understood this really well. Why didn’t he use the bully pulpit? It was in large measure the House Republicans who stopped this.

Berger: Go back to my 271-page book that I gave to the commission. The President spoke to this a lot. He was particularly focused on weapons of mass destruction. He read all these books on bioterrorism and The Cobra Event. He had long conversations with their authors and he was convinced. He said, in 2000, “We will be attacked. A terrorist group will attack the United States
with a weapon of mass destruction in the next five to ten years if we do not change course.” I reject the notion that we were not speaking to this. It was not resonating. It just didn’t get people’s attention. It didn’t get the press’s attention. It wasn’t until 9/11 that there was receptivity to this kind of message. We were trying.

Riley: Bob, do you have anything on this?

Strong: Lots more, but I’m not sure we want to follow up.

[BREAK]

Strong: Let’s follow up with one more question we were talking about while you were out of the room. There’s been a lot of attention to counter-terrorism and the terrorism issue after 9/11. Are you reasonably pleased with the record as it is now portrayed in the 9/11 Commission Report and in the other materials, including the Clarke book, that are available to us? Do we have a clearly told story about the emergence of that issue in the 1990s?

Berger: I think the 9/11 report, the Clarke book, and the [Steven] Simon–[Daniel] Benjamin book, which I think is probably the best of the three. The 9/11 Commission Report is a very good piece of work for a commission. It captured the fact that we were on the case, that we were not ignoring the problem. I don’t think they quite captured the intensity with which we were working the problem. I thought about this every day in the ’99-2000 period. When we had the Millennium threat spike, I called the principals to the White House, the Attorney General, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, Deputy Director of the FBI—the director didn’t want to come—and the Office of the Vice President every day for a month for at least an hour. We became a working group. This was after we’d gotten a threat—

Naftali: From Jordan?

Berger: After the intelligence community said to us, based on the Jordan bust, that we could expect five to fifteen attacks against American interests over the Millennium. I turned the principals committee into a working group and we got more FISAs in a month than ever before because George [Tenet] would say, “We have intelligence that there’s a blue van coming across the southern border of Texas. Here’s what we know about it, and here are the people.” Janet [Reno] would turn around to Frances Townsend, who was working for her, and say, “Can we get a FISA? How long will it take, 24 hours?” Normally that process would have taken a week. Somebody would have sent a memo to George, and George would have sent a memo to Janet. Janet would have sent a memo to Frances Townsend, who was working for her, and then you’d have it go back up the process and around again and down again. We turned ourselves into a working group, turned the principals in—when an agency knows that the principal is going to the White House at one o’clock, it changes the tenor of the priority of that agency. So the only thing I’d say is that it may not capture, although I think Dick [Clarke] does, the intensity of the effort.
Did we do everything we could have done? No. There were some policy recommendations we rejected, and I think the CIA probably could have been more aggressive than it was, but at the time I believed, and I think George believed, that the CIA was pushing the envelope. I actually think now in retrospect there was more envelope to push, but this was always my nightmare.

**Naftali:** Do you think the reason you were as sensitive to the terrorism problem was your understanding of globalization? Because this administration did get it.

**Berger:** It was not inconceivable to us that six guys in a cave in Afghanistan could be communicating around the world and money could be moving around the world in ways that were not traceable. I don’t think anybody conceived of something like the World Trade Center. Tom Friedman said it was a failure of imagination. One can imagine a nuclear war. The World Trade Center went beyond my worst nightmare, but a cataclysmic terror attack certainly was very much part of our concern, and I think you’re right. I haven’t thought about it in these terms, but I think it’s true. We realized the potential impact on us of what happened in a cave in Afghanistan in an age of modern communication: the 9/11 hijackers booked their tickets on Travelocity. So all of the same forces that pulled us together also empowered those forces who wanted to pull us apart.

**Naftali:** Do you think this nightmare of a cataclysmic event may have blinded you to the possibility that terrorists could kill a lot of people with conventional means?

**Berger:** No. I’m still amazed that we haven’t been attacked in the last two or three years since 9/11 by someone who straps on a belt, walks into a mall, and blows up a hundred people. I think that probably would scare the American people more than the World Trade Center. If you travel around the country, the farther you get from New York the less people continue to think about this.

We realized there were a lot of modalities. There were car bombs, there were suicide attackers. The notion, for example that we and the Bush administration should have known that an airplane would be used as a missile by a hijacker to go into a building only makes sense in isolation. When you have a whole range of possible modalities, from blowing up a chemical plant to cyber threats, there was no reason, in our period, where that particular modality was any greater than a conventional weapon.

**Naftali:** When you thought about a mass casualty attack in that period, were you not usually assuming the use of weapons of mass destruction?

**Berger:** Not always. The fact is we thwarted attacks against the Albanian embassy by a car bomb. There were planned attacks in 1995: there was the Bojinka plot, which was to blow planes up over the Pacific Ocean. [Ahmed] Ressam, who was captured coming across the border in the state of Washington, had explosives he was going to use in the Los Angeles airport. I don’t think we were so much focused on what was the delivery mechanism, but what was the way to get at the potential perpetrators—and probably not as focused as we should have been on the defense of homeland security piece of the equation. The NSC didn’t do homeland security. The Justice
Department did homeland security in the old world. There probably was a crack in the system in the fact that no one had clear responsibility for homeland security.

When Oklahoma City happened, we all thought it was a foreign terrorist at the beginning and we [NSC] had the action until it became clear that it was Timothy McVeigh, and the action then went to the Justice Department. So there was a fault line in the system in terms of not being sufficiently vigilant about threats here. Let me say a few more words about that. I tell the old joke about the guy who’s looking for car keys he lost in the garage. He’s looking outside under the light pole. The cop comes by and says, “Where’s your car?” “It’s in the garage, where I dropped the keys.” The cop says, “Why are you looking here under the light pole?” And the man says, “There’s light here.”

The threat information we were getting every day was all coming from the CIA and the intelligence committee and it all talked about threats abroad. We were getting no similar stream of information from the FBI. In fact, the FBI was saying to us just the reverse, “We really think we’ve got it covered here. We don’t think we have a big problem in the United States.”

We were looking under the lamppost out there against American interests, to embassies and the military installations and other facilities, because that’s where the threat information kept coming in to us. I think in retrospect we were not paying enough attention, although we did start to do critical infrastructure and start the cyber security project. We did start working on these issues. I don’t think to this day we’re doing half as much as we should be doing on homeland security.

Naftali: That’s why I ask, because in ’95 and ’96 you start, and then, after the millennium report, there’s a suggestion that you might do more. Is it just that you didn’t have time?

Berger: We did more after the millennium report. The millennium report talked about the Canadian border. We had talks with the Canadians; we got tighter security at the border. The millennium report talked about having more joint terrorism task forces under the FBI, one in all 26 regions. I don’t think we got to 26, but we got up there. We asked for supplemental for Congress and got a $300 million supplemental I think in May, which was for a partial year, so that we could do more on this INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] work. We were gearing up in 2000. We were probably not moving fast enough.

Strong: Let me shift gears, although it’s not that big a shift because in a way it’s related to terrorism as well. There are efforts in Northern Ireland and then later in the Middle East to address underlying problems that had produced—

Berger: At least, had we succeeded in Camp David defining the landscape—I’m not saying 9/11 wouldn’t have happened, because Bin Laden was planning 9/11 while we were in Camp David, so I totally reject the notion that somehow he was trying to save the Palestinians. But the whole landscape of the region would be different today.

Strong: We need to talk about that, and maybe tomorrow morning we’ll give a big chunk of time. The smaller one in the first term is the President’s commitment to Northern Ireland. He makes the three trips. We’ve already talked about the arguments that surrounded the visa
decision for Gerry Adams. What led the President to make a substantial commitment of his time and political capital to that question?

Berger: It’s a good question, and I’m not sure I know the answer, because in many ways it was not a direct threat to the United States.

Strong: No.

Berger: I think he initially made the gutsy decision to give Gerry Adams a visa. No matter what he said in the campaign, I can assure you there was a monumental fight once we got into office, with the State Department and the FBI really resisting it.

Strong: John Major really resisting it.

Berger: John Major really resisting it. We went ahead and did it. Nonetheless, Gerry Adams came here, went back, in fact, and got the commitment to abjure violence. I think the President saw that we could make a difference. Then I think the Belfast visit was really important. There were probably 300,000 people who came out to hear him in Belfast. The people who wanted peace, who wanted 30 years of the troubles to end. They didn’t know that they were not alone. Suddenly they were together, standing in the square. It’s a little bit like the Iraqi elections or what’s happening in Lebanon when people say, “My God, it’s not just me who wants this over; it’s also my neighbor and my neighbor’s neighbor and my schoolteacher.” That was an electrifying experience because what the President did was empower the people of Northern Ireland to take this into their own hands.

Obviously there had been many, many people who had been working for peace in Northern Ireland—John Hume and the mothers and others—but he brought them out and they looked around and said, “My God,” and others believed that enough is enough. That really launched the process.

Strong: Were there personal security issues about that visit that he has to—?

Berger: I was involved in a lot of personal security issues in terms of the Pakistan trip. For the Kosovo trip, Tony would have probably dealt with these in Belfast. The Secret Service usually dealt with the National Security Advisor when they had a problem. Then I think he became a little bit larger than life.

First of all, Northern Ireland—there’s a reason why it’s the land of magic. These characters—David Trimble, Gerry Adams, and John Hume—they’re all characters out of a novel. It’s impossible not to get enthralled by their stubbornness and intransigence, their eloquence, their hope and their despair. Clinton became, after that Belfast speech—Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern deserve the most credit, along with George Mitchell—but Clinton was able to cajole these guys.

Blair would call during critical moments. He’d call Clinton and say, “You’ve got to call Gerry Adams and tell him he’s got to push harder.” Clinton would get on the phone and push Gerry Adams. Gerry Adams I’m sure was able to get off the phone and say, “I just got off the phone
with President Clinton and he says we’ve got to do this.” So Clinton’s role was on the sidelines as a cajoler, if that’s a word. But it was an important role. Then later we sent George Mitchell over and George made his Herculean effort and actually got these guys together. That last night we were up all night talking to Trimbull. Then we’d talk to Hume, then to Seamus Mallon. They didn’t really want to alienate themselves from Clinton, because he was a larger-than-life figure.

This is not George Bush’s fault. It’s very sad to me that for the first time this St. Patrick’s Day we did not have that ceremony in the White House that goes back 20 years. They’d bring the shamrocks. All the groups would come March 17th. We’d block out two days and spend time with every one of these guys, with Trimbull and Adams and their entire coterie. We’d continue to push them and push them and push them and I think the idea that, “I don’t want to do this, but Clinton’s pushing very hard and we don’t want to lose Clinton” became a leverage point for each of these guys.

I don’t want to overstate it because again, I think if there were a Nobel Peace Prize here, it would go to Hume and Trimbull. Blair deserves a big piece of that; Bertie Ahern deserves a big piece, George Mitchell and Clinton. Clinton got it started in a sense by that visa to Gerry Adams, which gave Gerry Adams the capacity to deliver something.

**Strong:** Were there specific calculations about the President’s ability, if things broke down, to blame one side or the other? Is it all cajoling?

**Berger:** No. Cajoling has got to be a double-edged sword. Clinton would say, “I’d hate to say, Gerry, that we were that close and you stepped away from it.” So there’s always the fear of the negative. Clinton used that carefully, because you can’t use that threat very often.

In my view, Clinton often says that there are some problems for which time is your friend and there are some problems for which time is your enemy. Northern Ireland, I believe, is a problem for which time is your friend, because basically, even though the politicians are still hurling insults, people are not hurling Molotov cocktails. There is prosperity in Northern Island. I don’t think the people of Northern Ireland want to go back to the battle days. After 30 years, they now have had a taste of peace and prosperity. It’s going to take maybe another generation to get the politicians where they can actually function as a government. I think peace has taken hold in Northern Ireland.

The Middle East is just the opposite. Because of Rabin’s death, the process that was building hope suddenly became one of despair. Life was not improving for the Palestinians, and security was not improving for the Israelis, so the two sides were pulling apart. I think Ireland is just an interesting example of a situation where the facts on the ground become your friend.

In Taiwan and China, time is our friend. If we can keep the status quo between China and Taiwan for another 20 years, they will be so entangled with one another that war will be impossible. There’s already $40 billion of Taiwanese investment on the mainland; imagine what that’s going to look like ten years from now. But in the meantime, you’ve got irrational politicians who want to seek independence or use force. This is a very emotional issue.
I believe it’s possible for there to be a conflict between China and Taiwan. But I think every year you buy, it’s going to get easier, because the facts on the ground are going to work in your favor. I think that’s true of Northern Ireland. The IRA seems to have slipped back from being a terror organization to being a gang, to being—

**Strong:** That’s an improvement.

**Berger:** It’s an improvement, but there are some real problems there, obviously. I suspect if we lived there, we’d probably be more involved.

**Strong:** On a related question, who wrote the speech for Belfast? That one has some real poetry to it.

**Berger:** Vinca LaFleur. It’s a beautiful speech, a poetic speech.

**Strong:** What was Clinton’s role in a document like that?

**Berger:** He’d drive you crazy with speeches because he would often not look at them until nearly—you’d write them a week out. I can talk about the second term better than the first term, when I’m running things. I’m an old speechwriter so I know; my staff really had to go through the paces. We went back and forth. There were five drafts before Clinton ever got one. Before it went to Clinton, I’d take it and say this has got to be rewritten, or I’d try to rewrite part of it myself. So the first draft Clinton got would probably be the sixth draft of a speech.

**Riley:** And you had your own speechwriting staff at the NSC that was independent of the—

**Berger:** Correct. They worked with domestic speechwriters, but they were separate. Clinton often wouldn’t look at the speech until the day before, which drove you crazy, and then he’d have a lot of ideas. As time went on, he got more and more confident that we were going to deliver him a good product. Therefore there were times the window closed even more. But we had wonderful scenes of him writing, and his handwriting—he’s left-handed—truly is illegible.

Nancy Hernreich, who has worked for him going back to Governor days in Arkansas and who’s the person outside the Oval Office controlling access into the Oval Office, was the official translator. You’d have to sometimes go to Nancy and say—because he’d write in that left-handed slant that’s kind of backwards—what’s this word? What does this sentence mean? He’d write all over it. He took a very active role, but it was often rather compressed.

Jeremy Rosner, whose name I mentioned in the NATO context, was originally a speechwriter for us. Once literally in the car, on the way to the speech, Clinton is still rewriting and Jeremy is inputting this into his computer so that he can get a new disk to get it on the TelePrompTer by the time Clinton gets up to speak. It was a contest of human and technological prowess against Clinton’s continually tinkering with the words—or he had an idea that he wanted to express.

He also would want a speech often to be more spare in terms of language, and sometimes speechwriters get a little florid. So it was always an adventure. But if you look at the body of
Clinton’s speeches, I think it’s pretty good—domestic and foreign. If you were teaching a class on Presidential speechmaking, I think Clinton would rank quite high in terms of the quality of the speeches. Put aside the content of the speeches.

**Strong:** If you were putting together such a course, are there three or four foreign policy speeches in the eight years that you would say are essential?

**Berger:** Belfast is certainly one. The speech I made reference to at Davos. Towards the end, the democracy speech that he gave in Milwaukee, he went back to Milwaukee after he was elected. During the campaign for ratification of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic as NATO members, he gave a speech on democracy in Milwaukee in this wonderful old theater. The speech at Rabin’s funeral is one of the most moving speeches. That speech goes in a “Hundred Greatest Speeches,” ending with the end of the Hebrew prayer over the dead. Everybody was very moved by it. I can think of others.

**Riley:** We’ll save the Middle East peace and we’ll start with that tomorrow. There are some other things, bits and pieces, that I’d like to come back to. You talked about the importance of process all along, but mostly we’ve been concerned about the process internal to the national security apparatus. This is working within a larger White House apparatus.

**Berger:** Right.

**Riley:** I’m wondering if you can give us your assessment of each of the Chiefs of Staff that you dealt with, what you saw as their relative strengths and weaknesses.

**Berger:** They all had different strengths. Mack [McLarty] had Clinton’s total confidence. Getting started, I think that was extremely important. Mack’s a very well organized person. I think that he did a good job of getting the White House organized, working, up and running. He’s a good politician. He reached out and was able particularly to make good contact with some of the moderate to conservative Democrats as an Arkansas businessman. I think Mack got things off to a good start. Mack, Leon, Erskine [Bowles]. The next is Leon Panetta, a very inspirational leader. Leon is an exemplary individual who has true convictions. He exerted more control over the Oval Office than Mack had. In the early days, 25 people could walk into the Oval Office. Leon basically said, “Nobody goes into the Oval Office unless there’s an appointment.”

Even I—and we’ll talk about my relationship with these Chiefs in a minute—would not go in the Oval Office without letting the Chief of Staff know. Erskine was with Clinton during the dark days of Monica [Lewinsky] and was, I think, a tremendous source of strength to Clinton as he gets through this period. I think [John] Podesta was the best of the four. I think he brought together very good political judgment, the capacity to say no, a kind of toughness, a somewhat contrarian viewpoint. He’d sit at a meeting and wouldn’t say anything for the first 30 minutes, then he would say something that just turned the ball upside down. It was always on point and wasn’t simply for the sake of saying something.

So I think, again, everybody was better by the end. You get better at your job as time goes by, but I think John was probably the best. I had a very good relationship with all four of the Chiefs
of Staff. I worked more closely with Erskine and John during the second term. As long as I kept them informed, I had pretty much free rein.

I was the Chief of Staff for foreign policy. But every document that went to the President was copied to the Chief of Staff and the Vice President. If I was going to go down to the Oval, unless it was something really time sensitive, I’d run down and make sure John knew I was coming, or Erskine, in case they wanted—I respected the fact that they needed to know everything that was happening. And they respected the fact that I was going to stay inside my box and I wasn’t going to try to persuade the President on Social Security.

Riley: There were indications in the briefing book in some places that your name had actually been floated as possibly taking the Chief of Staff position.

Berger: That was particularly true between the first and second term. There were two points where that happened. One was between the first term and the second term, and the other was when Erskine left. I had really mixed feelings about it. On the one hand, it’s the number one job in the White House, and you have a much larger responsibility. It would have been a challenge, but I liked staying in my box. It was a big box with plenty to do. I didn’t have to worry about a lot of the stuff you have to worry about as Chief of Staff. A lot of that is miserable stuff to deal with—personnel issues, jurisdictional issues, turf issues, and why do I have a larger office, and why does he have a window office and I don’t? I had to worry about it only in terms of the NSC, which was a small institution.

It was a distinct possibility between the first term and the second term, but I didn’t encourage it.

Riley: Were there other jobs before you took the National Security Advisor position that you contemplated or eyeballed when openings came up?

Berger: When Woolsey left the CIA, I thought about whether it would be interesting being the Director. I flirted with that for a little while and ultimately decided I didn’t want to do it. At one point Ab [Abner] Mikva came to me and said, “How would you feel about being a Court of Appeals judge?”

Riley: This was when he was Counsel?

Berger: Yes. I said, “It’s not a thought that’s crossed my mind before.” I actually went to have lunch with one of my friends who was a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia, and I said, “What’s it like being a judge?” He said, “I can tell you what I’m going to be doing six months from now on Thursday, but I love my job.” It just didn’t seem to be the right fit for me. I obviously wanted to be National Security Advisor when Tony left.

Riley: You anticipated that he would be leaving?

Berger: Yes.

Riley: Was there any possibility that you weren’t going to get that job?
Berger: I don’t think so, honestly. I had a conversation with Clinton quite early in the ’96 transition in which he asked me to do the job and expressed his confidence. I was very pleased. The real issue was who was going to be Secretary of State the second term. That was the real fight, between [Richard] Holbrooke and Albright.

Riley: Tell us what you can about that.

Berger: It was something Dick wanted very much. He had his advocates. Madeleine had been a very good UN Ambassador during a time when the UN really was central to Haiti, Somalia, Bosnia. There was really almost no period when more action was taking place around the UN, and she did a wonderful job as UN Ambassador. Clinton played his cards really close to his vest on personnel matters. It’s very interesting, very atypical of Clinton, who was usually quite expansive. But I found this true. The three of them sitting in the Governor’s residence in transition ’92, not sharing much with the world about what they were doing.

I found this generally true—this was something he obviously had learned as a Governor—he kept his counsel. He asked your opinion—who do you think ought to be Secretary of State? I expressed it. But he didn’t engage. Unlike most other subjects where he would express his own views, he wanted to wait until he’d decided.

For Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff we had two turnovers, [John] Shalikashvili and then Shelton. We had two or three finalists that the Secretary of Defense brought over. He interviewed them very quietly and secretly so as not to cause a fuss. They’d come over at night. They’d go in the back entrance and you couldn’t really read him until he said, “I think Shalikashvili is the right guy,” which was absolutely the case.

Riley: The defense job turned over as Aspin—

Berger: Yes. I don’t think—Bill Perry is as close to being a revered national security figure in the Democratic Party as there now exists. I was having lunch with Bill the day he was selected because we were both deputies. We were having lunch the day that the President called him over to ask him to be Secretary. He was surprised. He is a very self-effacing man. He was a great Secretary of Defense.

You often have people who are terrific within the building and not very good with respect to policy, or you have people like Aspin who are very good on policy and terrible with the building. This is the largest institution in the world you’re running. Bill was somebody who had tremendous respect inside the building, both among the civilians and the military, who really thought that he was not afraid to make decisions. He was making good decisions. Particularly after Aspin, who was very discursive. They were dealing with somebody who didn’t waste a minute. If a meeting could take two minutes, Bill Perry would take two minutes.

He was also very good in the interagency process and trying to grapple with issues from Kosovo to China. When there was a crisis in 1996 after the Taiwanese election and the Chinese fired missiles at the Taiwan straits, we all went over to Bill’s for breakfast, and Bill had mapped out a
plan of action, which included moving some battleship groups in closer to the Taiwan Straits and sending a very strong message to the Chinese. So he was the full package.

**Riley:** And [John] Deutch?

**Berger:** John is brilliant. He loved being Deputy Defense Secretary. He was more controversial at CIA. John does not suffer fools easily and is not afraid to make decisions. He broke some china at the CIA, but he also got a lot of good things done. I think when you ask the agency people, they have strong views about John, either for or against.

**Riley:** We’ve only got a couple more minutes. Let me ask one more and then Bob might have something before closing. Tony Lake’s nomination to CIA—

**Berger:** Total travesty. It was all garbage. But here’s the lineup. Madeleine Albright as Secretary of State. The Republicans were going to go after somebody. They made that decision first. The question was where was the fickle finger of fate going to land? They’re not going to go after the first woman Secretary of State. I was not in a confirmation job. The National Security Advisor is not a confirmed position, thank goodness. Perry was very well regarded on the Hill by Republicans and Democrats. That left Tony.

He became a dartboard for all sorts of complaints about the first term. It was an agonizing experience for him. He was held up for more than a month with endless hearings and he finally said, “I’m not going to do this. I’m going home,” and he went back to Massachusetts.

**Strong:** My question is related to that. What’s the lifestyle like for people who take those kinds of position? Is it hard to get people—?

**Berger:** Lifestyle? It’s almost an oxymoron. I usually got up around 6:30. I’m not a morning person, so that was very hard for me. I got to the office about 7:30, in time for the senior staff meeting, which bounced around from 7:30 to 7:45, depending on who was the Chief at the time. Some people started a little earlier than others. That was a very important meeting. What’s the day like? What’s going to happen today? Then there would often be a serious, substantive discussion of something that was on the agenda for the day. The President is going to see Gingrich at 3 o’clock. What should he say about X? Or I would have my issues that I would raise. You ought to be aware that we’re going to bomb Kosovo tomorrow. Then I would go back and read intelligence until the President came down, usually about 9:00. I’d get in to see the President. There is something called Clinton time. It’s overstated, but it’s not—

**Riley:** I noticed the dual dialogue—

**Berger:** I’ll tell you about that in a second. It’s hard, because you don’t know—if I have an appointment at 10:00 and I’m expecting to see the President at 9:00, and I don’t get to see the President until 10:00, that means the ten people who are waiting to see me at 10:00 have to be bumped to 11:00. They each have meetings at 11:00 with ten people, so there’s a cascading effect. But Clinton would come in and sometimes he’d be so worked up about something that I wouldn’t be the first item on the agenda. The Chief of Staff would have to go in and deal with
something that happened overnight or something he read in the paper in the morning that drove him crazy.

I’d go in usually between 9:30 and 10:00. I’d usually have a half an hour or so with the President, 20 or 30 minutes. We didn’t have the CIA briefer in there because he could read the stuff faster than someone could tell him. If he had questions he asked me the questions, and I passed them on.

People learn different ways. Some people like to devour information through reading, some through talking. Tony came before me and then I had twelve items that we had to get through. We were acting in the President’s name to do X in the following 24 hours. It would be nice for the President to know that. A, because he’s the President, and B, if it went wrong you’d like to say, “Mr. President, we told you we were going to do this.” We always had a list of seven to twelve items to go through. Sometimes we could go through them in a minute or two.

Rarely were those morning meetings long discussions of fundamental policy. If there was a serious policy issue we’d get on the schedule for a 2:00 or 2:30 meeting to talk about Africa or the African trip. Then from 10:00 on, my day was one meeting after another. Principals meetings, deputies meetings, meetings with my staff, trying to keep a lot of different balls moving. I was very much focused on moving things down the field.

Sometimes there would be a press crisis and the press person would come in and say, “The New York Times is going to have a report tomorrow that we’re going to bomb Benin.” Depending on the nature, the reporter, and who it was, sometimes I would have to get on the phone. Usually the press people would deal with that. But there were some where the pushback, particularly where they were on to something that was close to being true, if you wanted to push back a little bit, or put it in a larger perspective, I would say, “It’s something we’re thinking about but no decisions have been made yet. It’s a little bit premature.”

So there was probably an hour a day with the press. Two or three times a week I’d have background sessions with the press. Then a couple of hours a day with the Hill on the phone with relevant Hill members trying to get things done, chemical weapons convention, issues like that.

Most of the Hill day-to-day work was done out of the State Department, but there were some issues like the chemical weapons convention that we handled and pushed through. About 7:00 PM there was a natural point, almost like a bell going off, and the intensity of the day sort of stopped.

I had an inbox that was a foot high. My intention was never to go home without emptying the inbox. I didn’t want to be a bottleneck for anything that needed to go forward. So I’d work from 7:00 until usually 10:00, 10:30, going through my inbox, going through paper, and get home about 11:00. The kids are asleep, my wife is asleep. Macaroni and cheese in the refrigerator at best. I’d say three nights a week the phone would ring between 12:00 and 6:00, because most of the world is awake while we’re sleeping and most of the world is sleeping while we’re awake. We’d suddenly have a problem that they’re taking over our embassy in Karachi and we’ve got to dispatch the Marines or whatever.
Saturday and Sunday I tried to work at home. Saturday I’d usually work a half day in the office and then I’d take paper home and then I’d work until 8:00 or 9:00. Sunday I basically worked from 9:00 to 6:00 or so. I don’t think I took a day off in eight years.

Riley: You were going to say something about—

Berger: I was very famous on my staff for a couple of things. Number one, I insisted that everybody wear pagers. We didn’t have cell phones at that point; we had pagers. My view was, if you’re working for the President of the United States, you’re working 24/7. You have no such thing as private time. If there was a crisis in Asia at 2:00 in the morning, I wanted to be able to reach you. So you slept with a pager next to you. You had sex with the pager someplace attached to you. There was no excuse. I’ll tell you a funny story about this.

Since I was working 24/7, I called people 24/7, not gratuitously but if there was a problem. Cohen used to get furious because he’d be traveling in Korea and I would call him. It would be 3:00 in the morning and he’d just gotten off a 12-hour flight and had three or four hours of meetings and finally got to sleep, and suddenly I’m on the phone. One day Bill brings me this watch with two dials. He said, “I want you to set this one where you are, and I want you to set this one where I am. Unless it’s war and peace, don’t call me in the middle of the night.”

I’ll tell you one last story that I love. The last week, we had a farewell party for the NSC, and a number of skits were roasting me. As one of the final acts, there were about 12 NSC directors. Someone yelled, “Ten-hut!” and they lined up in two lines and marched into the Indian Treaty Room in the Old Executive Office Building in military formation, that ornate room where we were having this party. “Right face!” They marched that way. “Left face!” They marched that way. They were all one platoon. “Present arms.” They all came up to me and one at a time they handed me a pager.

Riley: I’m glad you told that story because I was beginning to think we were working you pretty hard, but it’s easy compared to what you’re used to. But we really appreciate this. We’re scheduled to start at 8:00 tomorrow morning.

March 25, 2005

Riley: This is day two of the Samuel Berger oral history. There were three things that we talked about last night that I thought we’d begin with. I think maybe the best thing to do at this point is to take the Middle East peace and run with it from start to finish. Since we’ve got limited time, I want to make sure we get to that.

Of the things that we discussed last night that I thought we ought to have on the tape, one was a discussion about the new Canadian Prime Minister and his importance to NAFTA. Then there
was a story you told that I thought was illuminating in terms of lifestyle questions as well as an important subtext about Mrs. Clinton’s visit to Beijing, and that was your trip to the baseball game for Cal Ripkin’s record-breaking performance. We discussed PFIAB [President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board] for a bit just before we broke up, and I thought that was something important to get on the record because we were doing that in a kind of comparative way. Why don’t we start with those three things and then we can move into the Middle East. The story of the new Canadian Prime Minister and NAFTA—

**Berger:** NAFTA had been negotiated originally by President Bush. We negotiated after President Clinton was elected two side agreements, one on the environment and one on immigration, and submitted that to the Congress. It was an extremely divisive issue, particularly within the Democratic Party. There was a great deal of opposition, very hard, particularly in the House, where one or two votes hung in the balance. We thought we had a slight majority, but it was a very tenuous majority.

Coincident to that there was an election in Canada, and Jean Chrétien was running as the Labor Party candidate. Chrétien had run an anti-NAFTA campaign and basically said he wanted to re-open the agreement to renegotiate the terms, which played well in Canadian politics. The opponents to NAFTA in the Congress seized upon this and said, “We cannot ratify and approve a treaty if it’s going to be renegotiated by one of the parties,” and therefore offered a kind of killer amendment which said that they would not approve the treaty unless and until it was reaffirmed by Mexico and Canada. I don’t remember the exact wording.

So the night of the Canadian election, I was trying to reach Eddie Goldenberg, who was the policy advisor to Jean Chrétien. I imagine he was probably having a celebration party, but I did reach him the next day and I explained to him the predicament. He was very understanding and he spoke to Prime Minister Chrétien, and President Clinton spoke to Prime Minister Chrétien.

I think in Prime Minister Chrétien’s first press conference he backed away from the renegotiation language, which was a hard step for him to take in the wake of his election but was absolutely indispensable to our getting NAFTA approved. It was part of the very close friendship that developed between Prime Minister Chrétien and President Clinton. They liked each other a great deal, and they both were politicians with similar styles. Prime Minister Chrétien had a great sense of humor. They both liked to play golf. They had a lot in common. But I think President Clinton also felt that Jean Chrétien had taken a bullet for him, for NAFTA, and therefore he really had an obligation to be as forthcoming as he could to Chrétien.

**Riley:** How would the President have presented this to Chrétien to get him to take this step?

**Berger:** I don’t think Chrétien really wanted to crater NAFTA. I think this was a campaign posture, a little bit. I don’t think he realized the implications that it had for our vote. I think Clinton walked him through it very candidly and said, “Listen, we’re just never going to get the last five votes we need here. We’re probably going to lose so many votes, unless you say that essentially you don’t expect to renegotiate NAFTA.” He understood the politics of it.
Strong: While we’re on this topic, what would be the list of foreign leaders with whom
President Clinton had a particularly special relationship?

Berger: There were quite a few. I’d start with Tony Blair, who in many ways modeled his
campaign after Clinton’s campaign. Some of his aides actually followed us around in 1992. They
watched the Clinton campaign, they learned from it, and then the whole notion of the “third
way,” which is taking a left party and moving it to the center, was something that Blair followed.

President Clinton was particularly fond of President [Fernando Henrique] Cardoso of Brazil and
President Zedillo of Mexico. He liked [François] Mitterrand a great deal, and [Jacques] Chirac he
got along well with. He had a great affection for Helmut Kohl. They were both large men. They
loved to have good meals. Chancellor Kohl would come to Washington every year or so and they
would go out to a restaurant in Georgetown called Filomena, which is not known for the quality
but for the quantity of food. They’d sit in a back room. Often it was the two of them. I’d be there,
plus Kohl’s foreign policy advisor, Joachim Bitterlich. They’d go on for three or four hours,
talking about everything from Turkish accession to the EU to Kohl’s background. Kohl was
really pro-American.

He was, I think, five years old when the American army marched into his town and liberated it
from the Nazis. He was a very sentimental man as well as a very strong man, and truly believed
that Germany’s future lay in being embedded in Europe and Europe being embedded in a trans-
Atlantic relationship.

Riley: Did Clinton ever feel comfortable enough with his German language skills to use them
with Kohl?

Berger: Not really. He played with it a little bit; sometimes he’d say a sentence or something.
But he was actually very careful about it. He didn’t like lines in speeches—politicians always
have one or two lines in the other country’s language. He always thought that was a contrivance
and he wound up mispronouncing the word. He did it occasionally, but didn’t like to do it
generally.

He and Boris Yeltsin obviously developed a very close relationship. He believed that Yeltsin
really was the embodiment of Russian democracy, and that Yeltsin, for all of his deficiencies,
truly believed in democracy. Whenever Yeltsin got in trouble he went back to the people. He had
a referendum. His instinct was democratic.

There were six Prime Ministers of Japan during the eight years of Clinton’s term. He was
particularly fond of [Kiichi] Miyazawa and [Keizo] Obuchi. Miyazawa actually was Prime
Minister twice, in 1993 and then subsequently in this period where Japan was having a hard time
keeping a stable government. But the two that he particularly liked were Miyazawa and Obuchi.
In fact, Obuchi died in ’98 or ’99 and we flew all night to go to his funeral and then turned
around and flew all the way back because of Clinton’s respect for the Japanese and affection for
Obuchi.
He liked President [Jerry John] Rawlings of Ghana, who was a very colorful character. We probably had the largest single event of the Presidency in Ghana. We had probably a million people show up at the stadium for the President when he spoke. Rawlings was a kind of larger-than-life character.

Bertie Ahern of the Taoiseach of Ireland was our partner with Tony Blair in Northern Ireland. Finally I would say Yitzhak Rabin may have been first among equals, perhaps Blair was first among equals, but he developed a very close affection and respect and friendship with Rabin, was particularly shaken by Rabin’s assassination. I’m sure I’m leaving out others as I make that quick tour.

**Riley:** The second piece from last night was the story that you told about your visit to Camden Yards.

**Berger:** This is a rather personal anecdote, but it does show what a global community we live in. This was the day that Cal Ripkin broke the record for most consecutive games that had been held before by Ty Cobb, one of the great records of baseball, because it’s not just a record of strength or skill, it’s a record of tenacity and working through adversity, and of showing up every day for work. I think the American people really related to that record. They obviously were not going to set the record in major league baseball, but that longevity and steadiness and reliability is something people could aspire to.

It was an electric evening in Oriole Stadium, Camden Yards. I went up with the President. For a baseball fanatic it was wonderful. There were all sorts of stars—Joe DiMaggio, Willie Mays, and Henry Aaron, all of them were there. I was there with my son, who was 16 at the time, an age where young teenage boys like to seem blasé. But even my son could not act blasé sitting next to Bob Costas. He couldn’t stop grinning.

All of a sudden my cell phone rang. It was very hard to hear in the box, and I went all the way to the outside, against the open part of the stadium. On the phone was Hillary Clinton calling me from Beijing. There had been a fairly strenuous debate about whether Hillary should go and represent the United States at the women’s conference in Beijing, which was an historic conference. I had fought very hard for her to go. There were people at the State Department who didn’t think that was appropriate. Part of that was turf, part of that was politics. She went, and of course she was a huge hit. She said some very memorable things—“Women’s rights are human rights,” are the words one remembers from that speech. But she had a tremendous impact on the conference. She was calling to thank me for the role that I had played in making it possible for her to go.

I just stood there with my cell phone at the Oriole Stadium. My son is sitting next to Bob Costas watching Cal Ripkin beat Ty Cobb’s record while I’m talking on the cell phone to the first lady of the United States in Beijing. I thought to myself, _Boy, it’s a long way from Millerton, New York._

**Riley:** The disagreement within the administration over China had its roots not just in the conference itself but was part of a much larger debate over China policy at the time—
Berger: Yes, there were people who were relatively harder or less hard on China from two or three different vantage points. There were obviously people who felt, still, that we were in a post-Tiananmen period and China had not substantially altered its human rights practices. There were people on the more political side who thought we had trade problems with China and we shouldn’t be cozying up to them too much.

I think President Clinton understood that China was emerging as one of the great and dynamic powers of the world, and we had every interest in integrating China into the international community rather than isolating China from the international community. It was important that we engage. He exchanged visits with [Zemin] Jiang. President Jiang came to the United States. That’s when the President said in the press conference, “You’re on the wrong side of history,” in reference to their lack of democracy. Then President Clinton went to China. He spent nine days and went to five cities. It was also quite remarkable. The Chinese opened up the press conference to live television, which was quite unusual, and there was a very vigorous exchange between Jiang and the President about Tibet and the Dalai Lama. The Chinese people got to hear—some for the first time—some of the issues.

The President said at one point to Jiang, “You’d like the Dalai Lama. You should have him come here and sit down and meet with him.” Jiang went through the Chinese pitch that Tibet is better off today than it was when it was more autonomous, but it was quite an extraordinary visit.

Riley: Mrs. Clinton’s name has not come up much in our discussions. She spent a fair amount of time traveling during the second term. Could you characterize for us your impressions of her role in the administration, particularly as it related to foreign policy?

Berger: She did not participate in the foreign policy decision-making formally, although I suspect in the evening, the President had such great respect for her views and her judgment—I often thought in the morning I heard some echoes of Hillary in something he said. So I suspect they talked about these things privately. But I think she played a different role.

She began in the second half of the first term to travel abroad. These trips were quite remarkable in that she went to India, to Africa, and she’d have a much lighter package than we did when she traveled. We traveled with a thousand people. She would travel with maybe half a dozen reporters and a small staff, and she was therefore much more able to travel around the country, to go to outer remote places, to poor villages, to see development projects. And she would come back and talk to the President. “You’ve got to go to India, you’ve got to go to Morocco, and you’ve got to go to Africa.”

Many of our trips were “advanced” by her. Of course by the time we got there, they’d already fallen in love with Hillary Clinton, so they were predisposed to like the President. I think the traveling expanded her view of what’s important and how to look at the world, not just from an American perspective but from a global perspective. It certainly foreshadowed a number of our trips.
Naftali: Can you recall any projects other than Presidential trips that emerged from one of Hillary Clinton’s advance trips?

Berger: She was very interested, for example, in micro credit, a very rapidly growing movement that was started by the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, in which loans of $50 or $75 are given, primarily to women, to start their own businesses. It has transformed villages. We went to a village, I think in Uganda, where many of the people had been recipients of these micro loans. One woman had a little brick-making factory and another had a pottery shop, another had a carpentry shop. The village was much more prosperous than the villages around it.

Micro credit was something she pushed and cared a lot about, number one. Number two, she obviously was very concerned about the role of women and how women are treated. She really brought the whole question of the Taliban’s treatment of women to the attention of the President. We had a conference in the White House on the abuse of women by the Taliban in Afghanistan, which brought public attention to that issue. There were many issues like that, development-oriented issues she brought to public life.

Riley: All right. PFIAB.

Berger: PFIAB is an unusual organization within the United States government. I don’t know what its history is or where or when it started. Do you?

Riley: Carry on, we’ll hear from Tim later.

Berger: PFIAB is an independent commission, an independent group of generally very high-level men and women from security and intelligence backgrounds—scientists, industrialists, people who had spent most of their career in some area of national security. Bill Crowe was our first chairman of the PFIAB. Warren Rudman was our second chair, then Tom Foley was our third chair of the PFIAB. The reason why it was such a valuable instrument was it reported only to the President. Congress had no claim on its work product. So when things arose that were particularly delicate, like security at the national laboratories, which became an issue around Wen Ho Lee, and the whole episode in 1996 about whether Wen Ho Lee had taken codes and whether he had taken designs for nuclear warheads and turned them over to the Chinese. It turned out to be, of course, thrown out of court very harshly. The judge reprimanded the Energy Department sharply for having brought this case. But this was a serious matter.

The national laboratories, which are great treasuries for the United States, are homes of science. They’re like a university. And at the universities and national labs information is generally open. That’s how the intellectual process proceeds. Some scientific discovery made at Los Alamos is put together with some scientific discovery that’s made at Brookhaven, is put together with something at the University of Virginia, and suddenly those three pieces make a whole. So scientists resist secrecy.

On the other hand, of course, in the national lab we’re dealing with matters of nuclear weapons and some of the most sensitive material, and there probably were deficiencies in the security apparatus of the labs. This is something we turned over to the PFIAB to look at. It seems like a
dull subject. Actually it was a very hot subject because of the Wen Ho Lee trial and the accusations of Chinese espionage.

They went off and did their report. They had a staff, some that were dedicated to the PFIAB, some that were seconded to the PFIAB at times. They came back and reported only to the President. Only if the President wants to show their report to the Congress is it turned over to the Congress. It was absolutely invaluable. Because it was independent, because it was private, and because we had people of great integrity and expertise, it really was an invaluable instrument for the President when he wanted to get the clear, straight story and wanted to go outside the government itself, because someone inside the government—he could have turned that over of course to the Secretary of Energy. Well, he would have some vested interest.

There were no vested interests, and that was very important. It has waxed and waned in terms of its influence over the years. I think it’s now on a waning curve, but I would really recommend that Presidents in the future pay attention to the PFIAB and populate it with men and women who are first class.

Riley: Let’s begin with the Middle East, which we touched on episodically. If it’s possible for you to just give us a narrative of your account of what was—

Berger: Well, this has obviously been a vexing problem since 1947 and before. I remember Richard Nixon saying it’s the greatest strategic challenge the United States faces. He probably said that in the ’60s.

Coming off the Gulf War, President Bush convened the Madrid Conference. Somewhat as an offshoot of that conference, the Israelis and the Palestinians began a totally private track of discussions with no government involved in it whatsoever. In fact, I believe it was Abu Mazen [Mahmoud Abbas], the current President of the Palestinian authority, who was the negotiator for the Palestinians. Over 1992 and 1993 they developed a statement of principles, essentially a roadmap to peace, which involved subsequent agreement in which Israel would turn over certain territories to Palestinians for control.

Ultimately under Oslo—within five years, I believe—they were to reach resolution of the final status issues, which were statehood, borders, Jerusalem—the capital, security measures, and refugees. All of those issues were at the core of this half-century-old dispute. They had never been discussed before openly between the parties. Obviously there had been private discussions.

In September of 1993 the Palestinians and Israelis reached an agreement on a statement of principles in Oslo. They wanted to come to sign that at the White House. It was a glorious September, a sunny fall day. There was more optimism in the air than one could imagine. A large crowd was invited to witness. Yitzhak Rabin, the man who had fought in every one of Israel’s wars, who was Prime Minister and had fought Yasser Arafat over the years. Both signed the Statement of Principles.

It’s a funny story. Before the signing ceremony, the President, Rabin, and Arafat were in the residence in separate rooms. Clinton went in to speak to each of them privately. He went into
Rabin’s room and said, “You know, Yitzhak, you’re going to have to shake hands with Arafat.” Rabin looked like he had been hit in the stomach. He really had not thought about that. This man had been his sworn enemy, and yet Rabin, being a man of historical sensibility, recognized, of course you could not have this signing in front of the world and not shake Arafat’s hand. So he hesitated for a moment and looked at President Clinton and said in a very gravely voice, which was distinctively Rabin, “Okay. But no kissing.”

President Clinton went down to the Oval Office. Tony Lake and he and a few others practiced how he could get his body between Arafat and Rabin so that the handshake could take place. Rabin of course, the tradition was you kissed twice. Clinton actually practiced with Tony how he would be able to step forward to keep them apart if any effort for kissing took place.

So we began the administration on a note of tremendous hopefulness. The process moved forward, then a year later there was the signing of the actual Palestinian-Israeli agreement, which had the timetable I described. The process moved rather steadily until Rabin was assassinated, in 1995 I believe. A tragic event. He was assassinated by a young, right-wing Israeli youth who thought he was stopping the peace process. Ironically, he may have succeeded. We flew over to Rabin’s funeral. The President gave an extraordinary speech. “Yitzhak Chaver.” “Good-bye, Yitzhak,” from that speech became a bumper sticker that was on cars all over Israel for months and years.

Prime Minister [Benjamin] Netanyahu took Rabin’s place. Netanyahu was Likud, much more hostile to the peace process, much more hostile to the Palestinians, and the process really slowed down. The premise of Oslo was that you take small steps and with each step trust would accumulate, so you’d build to the point where you could take big steps. That was the kind of trajectory envisioned by Oslo. But after Rabin, the process became attenuated. Each step became harder and trust broke down. Israel was victimized from time to time by violence by Palestinians, although nothing like the second intifada that took place starting in 2000.

Finally the process broke down to the point where we called the parties together at the Wye Plantation in the suburbs outside of Washington and we had three days of very intensive negotiations. The President, Secretary Albright and myself, Dennis Ross on our side, and four or five on the Israeli side—Netanyahu, [Ariel] Sharon, and [Natan] Sharansky—I can’t remember who the fourth was, and Arafat and three of his negotiating team. These sessions lasted 20 hours. Finally we had a breakthrough and Netanyahu agreed to turn over certain areas to the Palestinians. The process got back on track.

But as we got towards 2000, things started really deteriorating again, and there began to be incidents of violence on the West Bank. I should note one other chapter here. As part of the Wye agreement, Sharansky wanted very much for the Palestinians to reiterate the commitment they had made to remove from the Palestinian covenant the sort of vituperative anti-Israeli provisions, which the Palestinians had actually done, but Sharansky thought they should do again. In the exchange of negotiations, it turned out that the agreement was that President Clinton would attend the PNC meeting. Arafat was really afraid of assembling the Palestinian National Council, which was not only the Palestinians that were in the West Bank and Gaza, but also the Diaspora,
some of whom are a pretty radical group. I think he was afraid that he might wind up losing that vote.

Someone suggested: What if President Clinton went for the beginning of the meeting? Sharansky thought that was a great idea. It wound up an irony of that little negotiation. I think from Sharansky’s point of view—he’s a very hardliner—you wound up having the President of the United States visit the Palestinian territories for the first time in history. President Clinton gave a very strong speech to the Palestinian National Council, and then we dedicated the opening of the Palestinian airport, Gaza, met with Arafat, and flew back.

But as we got to 2000 things began to stall. Everything had been so hard, every concession was so difficult, and there continued to be within the Palestinian education system and the Palestinian newspapers vituperative anti-Israeli, anti-Semitic, anti-Zionist rhetoric. It was a poisonous kind of atmosphere. I think both parties recognized that the only way to get a breakthrough was for them to meet in a summit.

In 1999, Ehud Barak was elected Prime Minister, going back to Labor from Likud. Barak had run on a platform saying he was going to complete what Yitzhak Rabin had begun and he was going to achieve a comprehensive peace for Israel. He was absolutely dedicated to that objective. So we entered a period from ’99 to 2000 of really high-intensity activity on the Middle East. There were some mistakes made along the way as you look back on it. Barak headed down the Palestinian track, then he got sidetracked by the idea that maybe he could make peace with [Hafiz al-] Assad more quickly than he could make peace with the Palestinians. So he parked the Palestinians as he pursued a side road toward Assad, which turned out to fail. But in parking the Palestinians, he simply lost the trust of the Palestinians.

By the time we got to the summer of 2000, there was beginning to be more violence in the West Bank, and you could see the situation deteriorating, the hopelessness and the anger and the radical elements gaining strength. Barak tried to have negotiations with the Palestinians privately, in Stockholm, but every time he made a concession, the next day it was in the Israeli newspaper. There was a huge political explosion in Israel in which he’d have to deal with the conservatives, deal with the right. He decided he couldn’t do this. He said he couldn’t be salami-sliced. He couldn’t keep making these concessions incrementally. The only way this was going to get to ground zero, in his view, was to bring the parties together in a cloistered atmosphere and get to people’s bottom lines.

We deliberated very seriously about whether this made sense, because you ordinarily do not convene a summit like that unless you know what the result is going to be. You don’t want to expose the President to failure. You don’t want to expose the process to failure. We certainly couldn’t say to the President, “Mr. President, we know we have a deal here.” We said to the President, “There’s potential here, but this could fail just as easily as it could succeed.”

The Palestinians today say they were dragged to Camp David, and that’s just not true. The Palestinians wanted Camp David just as much as the Israelis did, but they wanted to back it up closer to September, when under the original Palestinian-Israeli agreement the final status issues were supposed to be resolved. They had threatened that they would unilaterally declare a state if
there was not a negotiated state. So they were playing games with the timing. By July you had a
President who only had six more months left in his term, and even if you were able to reach an
agreement, the President would have had to sell that agreement, the United States would have
presumably had to have raised billions of dollars around the world to support the implementation
of that agreement, so we couldn’t really wait much beyond July.

I hear the Palestinians now saying they didn’t want to go to Camp David. They wanted a Camp
David, they just wanted it later. On one Sunday, Dennis Ross, who was our Middle East
negotiator, and Madeleine and I went up to Camp David and met with the President. We decided
it’s time. If we’re going to do this, we have to do this now. We really couldn’t let it slip into the
fall. Plus it was an election year. The President would be campaigning for Vice President Gore
and it would be very hard to absolutely usurp what we imagined would be three or four days, let
alone thirteen days of the President’s time. So we invited the parties to Camp David.

They arrived in July, I believe. Obviously there was security, but there was no press whatsoever.
Camp David is an isolated location. The press were down in town. They weren’t even close
enough to know what the rumors were. So we achieved Barak’s objective of a cloistered, private
atmosphere.

What ensued then was thirteen days of negotiations with, at day ten roughly—I may be getting
these days off by one or two—the President was scheduled to go to the G7 summit. We had
originally set the date so that that was the deadline. The President was leaving on the tenth day or
the ninth day. By the time we hit that day, we weren’t there, but the parties desperately did not
want to break up and they pleaded with the President to keep the parties in session with Secretary
Albright presiding while the President and I flew to Japan—Okinawa as I recall—and flew back
in two or three days.

Camp David is a bit of a Rashomon event. There is the American Camp David, there is the
Palestinian Camp David, and there is the Israeli Camp David, and they’re all different. In the
books that have been written and the rhetoric that has described them—in fact, there’s even more
than three perspectives because there’s Dennis Ross’s Camp David and there’s Madeleine
Albright’s Camp David, there’s Sandy Berger’s Camp David, and there’s Rob Malley’s Camp
David. It was an event that you could look at from many different perspectives.

Riley: But yours hasn’t been written yet.

Berger: Mine has not been written. My own view is that I agree with the fundamental judgment
that in the end Arafat failed to seize an extraordinary opportunity because he did not have the
courage or the disposition or the will to risk taking on his own extremists. I think the major fault
lies there. But there’s also fault that I think lies on the Israeli side, and fault on our side. I think
on the Israeli side, Barak started the first few days by backing up rather than going forward, by
taking things off the table that had already been resolved, thereby simply losing the trust of the
Palestinians even more.

There was such bitterness between Arafat and Barak that they’d only met two or three times
during the whole process of Camp David. Most of it was shuttle diplomacy with us going back
and forth and meeting at the second level. I think we made a mistake by not having focused more in the ’90s on what was happening on the ground in the Palestinian areas. That is, Arafat was not preparing his people for peace. So there wasn’t a constituency among the Palestinians for peace the way there was in Israel. Instead, there were often very conciliatory statements made by Arafat in English and very harsh statements about Israel and the United States made in Arabic to the Palestinian people. So he had not built the framework into which he could try to sell an agreement.

On the Israeli side, I think Barak made a mistake by getting diverted by Syria, and I think there were other tactical mistakes that Barak made along the way. But it was an extraordinary event. Every intellectual, personal skill that President Clinton had was brought to bear. I remember one critical meeting when, after the Israelis backed up, they then put on the table a rather dramatic offer which involved 90 to 93 percent of the West Bank, and that was even probably negotiable upward—the division of Jerusalem, which was an absolute red line for any Israeli Prime Minister. He talked about dividing Jerusalem, including the old city, along demographic lines, and having a Palestinian Jerusalem and an Israeli Jerusalem.

When I was in Israel the preceding May, we had a dinner party with Peres and all of the Israelis put on by Martin Indyk, the Ambassador. They all agreed, except for Yossi Bellin, who is on the far left, that dividing Jerusalem was a red line, that no Prime Minister could get away with that. Barak took that on.

**Strong:** Could he have gotten away with it at home?

**Berger:** Yes. He was doing some very active polling during Camp David. So he was not throwing out ideas that were not being tested. It would have been a very difficult, divisive issue. I suspect President Clinton would have gone to Israel to campaign with Barak, because President Clinton was extremely popular in Israel. But the polls showed that there was a majority for—I’ll tell you a story that I think captures this. Then I’ll come back to the end of Camp David.

In May of 2000 my wife and I went to Israel and I received an award from Tel Aviv University. Martin Indyk, our Ambassador to Israel, gave a dinner party to which he invited all of the players, Palestinians, Nabil Sha’ath, and all the Palestinians who had been involved since Oslo and before. All of the Israelis other than Barak—Abu Ala and Abu Mazen on the Palestinian side, the current President and Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority were there, and on the Israeli side, all the key players that had been involved in the negotiation. We had a very lively discussion at dinner.

One of the main subjects was Jerusalem. As I said, except for Yossi Bellin, there wasn’t an Israeli in the room who thought that any Prime Minister of Israel could touch the issue of Jerusalem. At the dinner was Amos Oz, the great Israeli writer, whom I’d never met before. He didn’t say anything during the dinner. The dinner ended and we went out to the patio in the back. There was coffee being served and he was seated on a bench. I went over and sat next to him and said, “Mr. Oz, you were remarkably quiet during dinner.” He said, “I’m not a politician, I’m a writer.” I said, “You certainly are a keen observer of Israel and the cross-currents of politics here. What do you think?”
He said, “I just had some orthopedic surgery, so let me use an orthopedic metaphor. If I have a leg that is rotted from the knee down and the doctor comes to me and says, ‘I’m going to cut it off, six inches at a time,’ I say to the doctor don’t touch my knee. But if the doctor comes to me and says, ‘I’m going to cut it off. It’s going to be one cut, at the knee. It’s going to be painful as hell, but then you’re going to be through with this.’ I say, let’s go ahead with the surgery.” In other words, he was saying that if Israel truly had peace on the other side of the table, that they would take some painful sacrifices for peace. I think that was Barak’s calculation.

Had Camp David succeeded, Clinton’s skill in that negotiation would have been in the history books. Obviously, if you don’t succeed, that doesn’t get in the history books. But he knew every issue. He could spread out a map of Jerusalem, he learned the neighborhoods of Jerusalem and where the various pockets of population were. He understood the refugee issue and he understood the security issues, that even after Israel withdrew from the West Bank they would need certain security guarantees.

In these negotiations he was very calm, very determined. I noticed this at the Wye and at Camp David—he would explode usually once. It was always warranted, but a huge shock because he had been so steady when the parties around him were screaming and yelling at each other. At some critical moment, when he knew he had to shake up the table, he would just unload. He did that at one point and then actually got the thing started again.

**Riley:** I don’t want you to lose your train of thought, but I do want to ask, was that typical of his anger? Was he typically purposeful in the use of his anger?

**Berger:** In negotiations, yes. He was very calm in dealings with foreign leaders and on foreign policy. He was not somebody who showed anger. He’d come back afterwards and show anger to us, but not in front of others. He recognized that he was representing the United States. But I saw him on more than one occasion—at Wye and Camp David—where we were really being jerked around. In one case, in Camp David, by the Palestinians, who were putting maps on the table that were just ridiculous given the progress that had been already made. They were taking things back. The President said, “You can’t expect me to do this if you’re going to behave in such a ridiculous way.” He wasn’t yelling, but he was obviously angry. He just got up and we all left. It was a jolt of electricity at a critical time.

By the end, as I say, the Israelis had on the table an extraordinary offer that involved almost all of the West Bank and Gaza. It involved the division of Jerusalem and a Palestinian capital. The division of the old city, the most sacred part of Jerusalem, was really explosive in Israel. All of the elements in terms of the refugee issue, a very limited right of return by the Palestinians. A small number of Palestinians would be able to return to Israel, with the right of return being to Palestine. But it was the kind of offer that I don’t know the Palestinians will ever see again.

There was a session the President had with Arafat, just one-on-one in Aspen Lodge at Camp David, which is where the President stayed. There was one of those swinging doors to the kitchen with a little window in the door, and Madeleine and Dennis and I were behind the door, looking through the window, opening the door just a notch so that we could hear the
conversation. It was a funny scene if you captured it on film, the three musketeers straining to hear what was going on. It was Johnsonian. We talked about some of the Johnson tapes. It was a combination of persuasion and cajoling and intimidation. Arafat looked like he was ready to die. He just kept getting smaller and smaller and smaller as Clinton kept getting larger and larger and larger.

But at the end of the day, Arafat would not put on the table a counter offer that enabled Israel to really negotiate. He’d say no and the Israelis would make another concession, and he’d say no and the Israelis would make another concession. Barak probably made a mistake in that respect. It was a great disappointment. All of the final status issues had never before been on the table. It was like this walnut that we cracked open and all the pieces of were on the table—refugees, Jerusalem, statehood, borders. For the first time the parties were talking about these face to face.

You could really see where things could ultimately fit together. But it required Arafat to do something. I’ve often said that sadly, the Palestinians did not have a Nelson Mandela at the moment in history when they needed somebody who could pivot from being a revolutionary and the leader of a movement to being a statesman and the leader of a country. Arafat was simply not capable of doing that.

Camp David broke up unsuccessfully, but it didn’t stop at that point. From July to December, Dennis spent tens, hundreds of hours with each side separately, and we tried to really capture what we had talked about at Camp David because a lot of this was not in the form of written documents. It was simply oral exchanges. We developed something called the Clinton Parameters, which were the five or six key issues.

They would say, for example, that Israel would transfer between 95 and 97 percent of the West Bank and Gaza to the Palestinians, with offsets in terms of other land that might go to the Palestinians—that would be one. Two: the right of return should be A) resettlement to a third country, B) compensation, C) resettlement to Palestine, D) resettlement of only such numbers of Palestinians to which Israel would agree. So in a sense we gave the Palestinians the nominal, the legalistic, way of doing things. We gave the Palestinians the nominal right of return and then defined it in such a way that Israel would have to take a thousand Palestinians or none.

All the elements were there. We put them together in what was called the Clinton Parameters. We called the parties back to Washington at the sub-leader level. President Clinton came in and said, “I’m going to read through these parameters. What I want from you in a week is an answer as to whether or not we can resume the negotiations based upon these parameters.” In other words, you can color inside the lines, guys, but you can’t color outside the lines. These were the benchmarks. If it was 95 to 97, then the negotiation would be 96 or 95.5 or 96.7. But this was based upon hours that Dennis spent with the parties. It wasn’t something we made out of whole cloth. It was what we believed they should be prepared to do based on what they said to us.

We got back a yes from the Israelis, a somewhat qualified yes. We could never get back a yes from Arafat. In the final meeting Arafat comes to the White House in December, and the President is really quite furious, although he didn’t show it. He really cared deeply about this and realized how close we were to ending this festering problem. If there had been a solution in the
Middle East, if we had been able to succeed at Camp David, the whole course of history in the 21st century would be different.

We’d still have Iraq and we’d still have Osama Bin Laden, but the continuing conflict between Palestinians and Israelis is a wellspring of hatred and bitterness and division in that region, and the countries in that region use it, many of them, as a pretext for not dealing with their own problems, by blaming them on the fact that there’s no solution to the Palestinian problem. The President presented these parameters. As I said, the Israelis came back with basically a yes and the Palestinians never got to yes.

There was a final meeting. I think it was downstairs in the library in the residence. The President said to Arafat, “You know, people have always said to me that you would wait until five minutes to twelve before you actually made your final move. I think, sadly, Mr. Chairman, your watch is broken.” At that point the intifada had begun, the violence had begun, although there were only about 30 Israelis that had been killed by that time as opposed to the thousands that had been killed in the four intervening years. But still the violence was beginning to pick up, and Arafat, rather than sitting on that violence, I think believed that the violence would help him and he let the violence ride and it rode out of control, but he to some degree fomented it.

I’m sure that President Clinton would say his greatest frustration was that we did not succeed at Camp David, but I also truly believe that if there ever is a political settlement between Israel and the Palestinians, it will only be along the lines of the Clinton Parameters.

Riley: Mindful of the time, we’d be derelict if we didn’t ask you about the difficulties in the White House in ’98 and where you were when you first heard the news break about the President’s relationship with Miss Lewinsky.

Berger: I don’t remember where I was. The news broke at several different points. Obviously one was the story of the relationship, his denial, later on his testimony, and then later on his admission. But I think both of us understood that we had to wall foreign policy and national security off from impeachment and that there could be no doubt in the American public’s mind that there was any “wag the dog” going on. There was a movie at the time called “Wag the Dog” in which a President gets in trouble and starts a war to divert attention. It was a prescient movie because I’m sure it was made before the President’s situation.

Naftali: The wag-the-dog analogy would come out in the press after the retaliatory strike against Bin Laden’s camp. Before you made that decision, was that metaphor in your mind? Did you say, “We’ve got to be careful because people will misunderstand what we’re doing?”

Berger: Only for a second. I think the larger point that I was making, and it fits in with your question, is that we both understood that there had to be a complete separation between what was happening on the Hill, what was happening with the President’s legal problems, and foreign policy. The American people and the Congress needed to be clear that John Shalikashvili and Bill Cohen and Madeleine Albright and Sandy Berger were not going to use foreign policy or war or whatever to be a cover for the President.
I spent a lot of time during this period with Republicans on the Hill briefing them, keeping them informed. Force was actually used twice during this period. Once again in Iraq when they wouldn’t give our inspectors access to all of the sites that we sought, we bombed for four days against all the WMD [Weapons of Mass Destruction] targets—at least we thought they were WMD targets. Looking back I sometimes wonder whether if the intelligence community knew they were or not. But in any case, I believe in September of ’98, in retaliation for the embassy bombings, we also attacked a camp in Afghanistan, a post where the intelligence community believed Bin Laden was gathering with about 200 of his key operatives. At the same time we attacked a chemical plant in Sudan, which we were convinced—and I remain convinced today—was associated with the production of chemical weapons.

Riley: In the Sudan, Cruise missiles were fired on August 20th of ’98. Then on December 16th began the four days of air strikes.

Berger: So twice during this period we were using force. There were members of Congress who said, “Wag the dog,” but it didn’t stick because I think we had enough credibility among the team that even those who were very suspicious of President Clinton did not believe that General Shalikashvili would be part of a diversionary use of force.

Naftali: That was the feeling within the team, though.

Berger: Yes.

Naftali: But outside, there was some suspicion—

Berger: There were three or four members of the Senate who questioned—

Naftali: [Arlen] Specter for example.

Berger: Yes, who questioned us. But it wasn’t a firestorm. I think people felt that our seizing an opportunity to get Bin Laden and 200 of his key operatives was a risk worth taking and a worthwhile enterprise. There was a lot of controversy surrounding the attack of the plant in Sudan. That was based upon the intelligence, not so much based upon whether it was a diversion. But I was so walled off from what was going on on the impeachment side that I would drive home at night and call my daughter who worked at CNN and say, “What happened today?”

She’d say, “Oh my God—in the Senate, the impeachment committee voted Articles of Impeachment.” I tried to pay as little attention to it as I could. Obviously, I read the newspapers. But I never discussed this with the President. The only time that I had any personal conversation with the President was when he spoke, two times I think, to the Cabinet, one at the beginning of this episode, in which he rallied the Cabinet to stay together. Then once when he finally acknowledged that he was not telling the truth, he convened the Cabinet and there was a very heartfelt apology that he made to the Cabinet. He and I never had a conversation that said we’ve got to wall foreign policy off from all of this, but he understood it and I understood it and we didn’t have to say it to each other.
Naftali: So when he was deciding whether to use force against the Sudan and Bin Laden and then later against Iraq, in his discussions with you he didn’t say, “Well Sandy, we have to be sure that people understood that we’re doing this for—”

Berger: I think there was one exchange in which somebody said something about people are going to say it’s a diversion, and the President said, “We’re going to get criticized either way. Let’s just do what we think is right and let the chips fall where they may.” That was his instruction to us. Do what we think is right and let the chips fall where they may with respect to how it would affect his legal and congressional issues.

Strong: During this period would there have been any change in White House routine? Was it harder to get to see the President? Were there fewer of those newspaper clippings with the marginal questions, or was there surprising continuity?

Berger: A little bit of both. This was a man who has tremendous capacity to do many things at once. People talk about compartmentalization or multitasking or whatever word you want to use. He was able to carry on with his schedule as he dealt with his legal issues. But one did bleed into the other.

We were in Jamaica for a summit of the Caribbean countries, and after the summit, as usual, the head of CARICOM [Caribbean Community] and the President would come out for the press conference. Our press only wanted to ask questions about the story of the day. The Caribbeans were stunned by this. They would never imagine that their leader traveling in a foreign country would be asked about some domestic issue. Of course it was par for the course for us. So it intruded and there were days when I thought the President was distracted. But I don’t think it affected any decision. It certainly didn’t affect the intensity with which we pushed our agenda. The President was functioning, maybe at 90 percent, but his 90 percent was the equivalent of 150 percent from many other people.

Naftali: Nineteen ninety-eight was a tough year in foreign policy, a challenging year. You had the Indian-Pakistani problem in ’98. The Indian story begins I guess with an intelligence failure. Could you give us a little bit of that story from your perspective?

Berger: The most dramatic and important part of the story is when the Pakistani Prime Minister made an initiative to go to India. When spring came, the Indians did not withdraw from the line of control as they usually did, and there was a conflict between India and Pakistan in Lahore, which escalated very sharply.

You had two nuclear powers who had fought four wars. You had a real possibility of conflict breaking out between India and Pakistan with countries that had nuclear weapons. Now we had nuclear weapons and the Soviet Union had nuclear weapons—but actually the Cold War was a fairly stable period except for the Cuban missile crisis. We knew what they had, and they knew what we had. We knew their strategy, and they knew our strategy. We knew their red lines, and they knew our red lines. There was a balance of terror, but it was a rather stable balance of terror during most of the Cold War.
With India and Pakistan they didn’t know each other’s red lines. They didn’t really know what would trigger the use of a nuclear weapon in retaliation. Prime Minister [Nawaz] Sharif got himself very far out on a limb in early July of ’98. He called the President and asked the President please to come. He used to say, “If you would give the Kashmir 10 percent of the time that you give to the Middle East, we would save Kashmir.” The problem is the Indians never wanted third-party mediation in Kashmir, so there’s never been an effort for third-party mediation in Kashmir. But Sharif said he wanted to come to Washington on July 4th.

Clinton said, “If you’re coming to Washington because you think that I will agree to mediate in Kashmir, that’s wrong. I will not. I cannot mediate a situation where one party will not permit mediation.” Sharif said, “No, I still want to come to Washington.” So he came to Washington and we learned he was bringing his family. We thought, My God, he’s going to be seeking political exile here. On July 4, 1999, there’s a wonderful monograph written about this by Bruce Riedel. We were, I think, as close to nuclear war as the world had been since the Cuban missile crisis.

The President spoke to the Indian Prime Minister. He was very transparent. The Prime Minister of Pakistan is coming; I’m not going to violate any of your red lines. We were able to negotiate a statement with Sharif saying that he would withdraw his forces. His staff was rather unhappy. They ran after me after the statement was signed and we were going out to tell the press. The staff ran after me and I said, “It’s too late.” We read the statement and after that Sharif was able to back off. But it was a very tense time.

Naftali: Apparently, in ’98, after the Indian nuclear test, President Clinton tried to convince Sharif not to test.

Berger: Right.

Naftali: There were press reports that the President spoke to him quite a few times.

Berger: Yes. Sharif was a weak leader. I don’t think he wanted to test. I think he was under unremitting political pressure to test after the Indians did. There were several very intense conversations with Sharif and the President on the phone. The President said, “You will not win this; you will not gain by doing this. You’ll only lose.” But in the final analysis, and I don’t know how much control Sharif really had over all of this, the Pakistani military was pretty powerful.

Naftali: So if we fast-forward to ’99 then, you have this weak leader. Your concerns are not simply what he’s going to say but how the Pakistani military is going to play this.

Berger: Right.

Naftali: And you had reason to believe that the Pakistani military was actually considering the use of force?

Berger: Well, is it ’98 or ’99 when he comes to the Blair House for the—
Naftali: I’m not sure when he comes to Blair House.

Berger: I’m a little confused on my dates. There was this confrontation around the time of the Lahore incident, which spun up very quickly, in which threats were getting sharper. I said to the President before we went into the meeting with Sharif, “This is one of the most important meetings you’re going to have as President, to back him down.” The President succeeded in doing that.

Riley: I want to ask a couple of more general questions related to the Lewinsky business before we leave that behind. We had asked this in one way, which was there were a couple of major events or major foreign policy interventions you said had not been adversely influenced by the President’s domestic situation. Can you think of any instances where you didn’t do things in ’98 or early 1999 that you might otherwise have done because of the President’s political situation?

Berger: No. We had a pretty crowded agenda at this point. We pressed ahead. Our instructions from the President were to do what we think is right. The politics will take care of themselves. He was very explicit about that and we took it very literally.

Riley: My final question on this, and I’ll turn it over to Bob to see if he has anything, is I was in Europe in the immediate aftermath of this and I experienced what I think a lot of Americans did, which is a lot of questioning and a great deal of confusion abroad about the circumstances internally in the United States. Do you have any specific recollections of having conversations with your counterparts?

Berger: The President received a lot of support from foreign leaders during this period. They were somewhat mystified. Every country has its own culture, what’s a scandal. The French often have l’affaires d’état. People like Nelson Mandela wanted to come to the United States to stand with the President. Tony Blair, Crown Prince Abdullah came to the United States during this period—and was quite explicit in his comments to the press about what a fine leader Clinton was and how important he was to the world. I say this by no means to justify Lewinsky, both the incident and how it was handled, because you can’t justify it. But it was interesting to me that by and large, foreign leaders really rallied to Clinton. Blair specifically came over here to stand with Clinton in a press conference and talk about what a fine leader he was.

Mandela came here. I should have mentioned by the way, in people with whom he had a particularly close relationship, it was like a father-son relationship, still is to this day. So I think foreign leaders thought the President had committed a very serious indiscretion, but they couldn’t quite understand this machine that had built up to pursue him, the Ken Starr operation and the way the House was treating impeachment, which I think was not what impeachment was intended to be used for.

He arrived at the United Nations for the annual UNGA [United Nations General Assembly] speech in September of, it must have been ’98, and he got a standing ovation. One of the deadliest audiences in the world is the UN General Assembly because it is simultaneous translation. But of course simultaneous is not simultaneous; there’s a lag. You can’t tell a joke
with simultaneous translation because you tell the joke and nothing happens, and then about a minute later laughs start taking place in different places in the room. It’s very hard to give a speech with simultaneous translation. It’s hard to give it with consecutive translation. So it’s usually a deadly audience. They’re very polite and they clap at the end. He got a standing ovation when he went to the United Nations. Kofi Annan said he had not seen that before.

I think most foreign leaders are the subject of attack for some reason or another. Maybe there was a certain identification with the siege that Clinton was under and feeling that they, not necessarily for a similar kind of transgression, but that they had felt the brunt of an angry press and an angry Congress and could understand what Clinton was going through.

Naftali: Was there ever a time when you didn’t think he would prevail?

Berger: I believed that he would prevail in the Congress, in the Senate. I didn’t think the House would vote Articles of Impeachment. I thought what Clinton did was a serious transgression, but I’ve read a number of books about impeachment. It’s not what the impeachment power was designed to do. It was not high crimes and misdemeanors in the Constitutional sense; it was a totally political and partisan process. I was stunned by how far things went in the Congress and how far things went in the House and how far things went in the Senate. I thought that he would survive. The question was how injured he would be with the American people.

The amazing thing was in ’99, 2000, he made a comeback, and when he left office he was at roughly 60 percent favorable rating. I just read, actually last night, that President Clinton now has a 56 percent favorable rating, which is the highest rating he’s had since he left the White House. That may be some degree of sympathy for his medical problems. We had the unfortunate closing act of the pardons, which were very badly handled and a particularly sour note to leave on. But before the pardons, he was at a 60 percent favorable rating at the end of his second term, which is almost unheard of.

Naftali: Before we leave, just a general comment or question about the partisan atmosphere, the relentlessness of those kinds of stories when you become the center of them, and about the hardening of life in Washington. You had mentioned yesterday that Tony Lake advised that sometimes you just have to do a bad story for a few days. This is a lot bigger than that, and it’s also not a story about judgment on policy. Is there something wrong with our political culture?

Berger: Yes, I think there’s something wrong with our political system. Let’s take it out of the impeachment context for a second. That was a unique event. I think the process to get President Clinton after the mistakes he made was highly partisan. But almost anybody who serves in government today has to suspect that they’re going to be subjected to vicious attack and investigations.

To go back to the Chinese espionage scandal. When an official of the Department of Energy concluded that the Chinese had stolen our design for our number one nuclear warhead, he came to me first and told me the story. To my nonproliferation expert, Gary Samore, I said, “I want you to go over and tell this to the FBI.” And I gave him three or four instructions. Gary said to me, “This doesn’t quite compute to me.” I didn’t tell the President until the energy official came
back in ’96 and he had more evidence. Then I told the President. But the fact that I didn’t tell the President between ’95 and ’96 became a huge controversy on the Hill. A hundred members of the House of Representatives sent a letter to the President calling for my resignation. The *New York Times* wrote an editorial saying that Janet Reno and I should consider resigning.

One of the sweet ironies of these kinds of matters is when the Wen Ho Lee case collapsed and it turned out this Department of Energy official was way off base, the *New York Times* wrote an editorial and they said something to the effect—it was a wonderful *New York Times*ian apology, “We may have been too harsh in our judgment of the Attorney General and the National Security Advisor.” They couldn’t just say, “We were wrong.”

But it’s not just the President. It’s less true when you have the Congress and the Presidency in the same party. But when you have in the Presidency a Democrat, and you have at least one House of the Congress Republican, you have the committees and the committees have subpoena power.

Vince Foster’s suicide was one of the tragic days of life in the White House. I had not known Vince before he came to Washington, but I’d gotten to know him, and he was a remarkably wonderful man. He got wrapped up—also, I think the *Wall Street Journal* was crusading against him and calling him incompetent. This was a man who had been head of the Arkansas Bar Association and who had a great sense of his own rectitude—there were cartoons being run in newspapers making fun of him. He was depressed. He killed himself.

What should have followed, in my judgment, the media should have looked at the question of depression in our society, which is a serious problem. There are 40 million Americans who have suffered from depression. Instead, Congressman Burton opened up an investigation as to whether or not he’d been murdered. There were allegations that Mrs. Clinton had murdered him and dragged his body over to the George Washington Parkway. You remember, Congressman Burton took a watermelon in his back yard and shot his watermelon to see whether or not the shots could be fired by somebody else. It is the criminalization of policy in a sense.

We can disagree sharply about whether it’s a good idea or bad idea to do X or Y, but what has happened is in attacking the policy it has become almost normal to also attack the person, attack the motive, and attack the intent. Even to say the intent is wrongful, not just wrong. I think this is a terribly destructive element. Democrats do it, too, when they’re on the outside. If the Democrats took over Congress two years from now, I suspect because there’s so much residue of animosity that has grown up that Henry Waxman would be having hearings from time to time going after what the administration was doing. There’s congressional oversight, but there’s also congressional harassment.

I think the whole fabric—I first came to Washington as a summer intern in 1966, so it’s now almost 40 years that I’ve been in Washington. I came to Washington and worked in a Congress where people knew each other. There were friendships. People were here five, six days a week. They went out for a drink after session. Now Congress is here three days a week. In the House they go home four days a week. They don’t really have personal relationships anymore. The way we’ve handled redistricting in the country, we’ve made Democratic districts more liberal and
Republican districts more conservative to preserve incumbency, and the result is we have a more polarized Congress. I think there are some major problems in our political system.

A lot of them to me relate to how we finance campaigns. I happen to believe the single most important thing we could do to recapture our democracy would be to have public financing of congressional as well as Presidential campaigns and take the money out of politics.

Riley: Kosovo we touched on a little bit yesterday. That, by my count, is about the only major issue—

Berger: When Milosevic started moving against the Kosovars, having gone through Bosnia and having taken us two years to actually get NATO to go along with using military force, we were not about to see this happen again in Kosovo. We tried to negotiate Milosevic to back down, but he didn’t. President Clinton and the rest of us agreed that we had to use military force to stop the Serbs from their intent, which was to ethnically cleanse Kosovo and drive a million Kosovars out of this part of Serbia.

We decided on an air campaign for a reason. This is important because many people think the only reason we did an air campaign was because we didn’t want to have casualties. I believe that from the air we had a thousand to one advantage on Milosevic. Once we got into those mountains of Yugoslavia where the Germans had been savaged—we were on the ground—our advantage was no longer a thousand to one. Maybe it was two to one. It would have been a daunting prospect to go over the Albanian Alps and send a land force into Belgrade. We’ve seen from Iraq how difficult it is, once you get to Baghdad, to actually get Saddam Hussein. Once you get to Belgrade to actually get Milosevic.

So the decision to use an air campaign was a strategic decision. The theory was that we would bomb military and command and control targets and then gradually we would select targets that were closer to the regime—some of Milosevic’s cronies, their factories. We actually had quite good intelligence during Kosovo. We could see Milosevic under more and more pressure. We could see his wife under more and more pressure.

So track one was military, track two was political. Let me say one other thing. NATO had been created in the late 1940s and never really used except in Serbia for a brief period of time. This was the first war that NATO had fought. It was like building this great fire engine and never taking it out of the garage. When we finally took it out of the garage, it was kind of creaky and it didn’t make decisions instantly. You had to go back to capitals for sensitive bombing targets in the beginning.

I think that many people, including some people in this administration, walked away from that lesson saying alliances are cumbersome ways to conduct war. We should do coalitions of the willing—where we lead, they follow. I believe just the opposite. I believe that we won in Kosovo because Milosevic discovered that he could not divide the 19 democracies of NATO.

To me the key day was the summit that we had in April during the bombing campaign and the 19 leaders, including the three new leaders, came together. They looked each other in the eye and
said, “We will not lose. Whatever it takes, we will get Milosevic to withdraw from Kosovo, we’ll have a NATO-led peacekeeping force, and the Kosovars will come back.” Those were our three red lines. Even Italy and Greece, where 90 percent of the public was against the war because of their affinity for the Serbs over the years, the leaders [Massimo] D’Alema from Italy and [Costas] Simitis from Greece stood firm with the alliance.

The key to the political settlement was getting Russia on side so that Milosevic did not feel that he had Russia to rely on, that Russia would save him. So we started a second track, which Strobe Talbott really led—the Vice President was quite involved in this—to get Viktor Chernomyrdin, who was the Prime Minister of Russia at the time, to agree to our conditions for surrender. The Russians had a really hard time with the notion of a NATO-led force because they were not part of NATO. We finally got Chernomyrdin working with President [Martti] Ahtisaari of Finland, representing NATO, to agree that it would be a NATO-led force and we’d figure out some way in which Russia could attach itself to this force.

This is in many ways the most dramatic period for me in the White House. We’re in day 70 of the bombing. We’re under enormous criticism from John McCain and others saying we should be on the ground, we should have a land force there, we made a huge mistake by thinking we could do this from the air. I’m reading the intelligence, which says that Milosevic is beginning to crack up here a little bit. You can see the pressure he’s under. This is going to work.

You’ve got Strobe over here working with Chernomyrdin and Ahtisaari getting them so they can go to Belgrade and deliver the same message. We wanted Ahtisaari saying, “Mr. Milosevic, the conditions are all Serb forces out, Kosovars returned, NATO-led force.” We wanted Milosevic to turn to Chernomyrdin and Chernomyrdin to say, “I agree.” So that effort is going on over on this track, the bombing effort is going on over in this track.

It was taking a long time and we were facing the possibility of heading into winter, and winter comes fairly early in Kosovo. It comes in September and October. We had the prospect of 200,000-300,000 Kosovars up in the mountains unable to survive. So we had to begin to think about the ground option. I remember calling Wes Clark saying, “What’s the lead-time you need?” We had always operated under the assumption that we needed a 60-day lead-time from when we said, “Wes, we want to go in on the ground” to the time that he could get in on the ground.

I called Wes and Wes said, “We’ve done some reexamination and it’s a little bit harder than we thought because some of the tunnels are smaller than our M1 tanks, so we’d have to blast our way through some of the tunnels to get there, and there are other logistical problems.” So it was a 90-day lead-time. Suddenly we’re at the end of May, beginning of June, July, August, September. You’re getting pretty close to the time where you have to say, “Wes, get a ground force ready.” The one thing we decided was we had to win. We couldn’t lose.

I remember one night—this is maybe the most dramatic night for me in the White House. I’d just gotten off the phone with Wes. Our military was very skeptical of the ground option. They thought it was a miserable option, they did not like it at all, but we were not going to be caught in
September bombing Belgrade while 400,000 Kosovars were starving in the mountains. Meanwhile, we thought Chernomyrdin would say yes.

Chernomyrdin and Ahtisaari went to Belgrade and I sat in my office and I wrote in longhand a memo to the President saying, “Here’s the decision you’re going to have to make, now, in the next week or two. When 60 days went to 90, July became June. I said, “Number one, we can let the Kosovars starve. Number two, we can stand down. Number three, we’re going to go in there with a ground force of several hundred thousand troops and go in and take Belgrade.” I wrote this thing through the night. It was the bleakest memo, because all three of these options were absolutely horrible.

The phone rang at about 5:00 in the morning. I don’t know whether it was Strobe or somebody calling for Strobe saying Milosevic had met with Ahtisaari and Chernomyrdin and it had gone just exactly the way we’d planned. Ahtisaari said, “Mr. Milosevic, these are the conditions.” He turned to Chernomyrdin. Chernomyrdin said, “I agree.” Milosevic said, “I’ll call a meeting of my Parliament in the morning,” as if he had a functioning Parliament, and he put up the white flag. But we came very close to a ground invasion of Kosovo, which I think would have been a really bloody battle. Once the Serbs got us on the ground, the possibility for guerrilla attacks, insurgency, there were all these tunnels that had been dug in World War II to protect against invasion. It would have been a bloody mess if we had gone in on the ground.

Just to make the larger point here, the conclusion I draw from Kosovo is that alliances work. It was the unity of the alliance that got Milosevic to back down. Yes, there are times when coalitions of the willing are necessary, but we should not neglect our alliances, because the unity of the alliance can be a strength. I bristle a little bit when I hear Secretary [Donald] Rumsfeld talk about the mission driving the coalition rather than the coalition driving the mission. We derive a benefit from a NATO alliance that is coherent and functioning.

**Strong:** I was just going to ask whether your counterparts in Paris and London were writing a similar memo to their leaders at the same time about a ground invasion.

**Berger:** Certainly in London. Blair got there before anybody. I think Blair was ready to go. Chirac—I think they all recognized we could not lose. We had invested the prestige and the credibility of NATO and the West on getting Milosevic to surrender. I had on my desk, as does the current National Security Advisor, a phone that had drop lines. I could pick up the phone and push a button and speak to [Jean-David] Levitte, the foreign policy advisor to Chirac, and I could push another line and talk to John Sawer, who was the National Security Advisor to Blair. There were five or six of my colleagues, we talked almost every day.

**Strong:** I want to ask you a question about sequencing of events. You were there for eight years. You just said, correctly, part of the decision-making in Kosovo was affected by the experience you had earlier in Bosnia. Does that happen a lot? Let me give some examples. Is it easier to understand Rwanda if you look back at what happened in Somalia? Is it easier to understand the need to act in Kosovo if you look back at what was then recognition of a failure to act in Rwanda? Do those shared experiences in the White House of the team players affect how you deal with the next issue that arises?
**Berger:** Absolutely. I think Kosovo certainly was affected by the experience we had in Bosnia. I say this, not to cop out, but I was not involved in Africa policy much during the first term. I think that our reluctance to intervene more aggressively in Rwanda has to be seen in the light of the setback we’d just suffered in Somalia. That hardly is justification, but we basically—Rwanda happened very quickly, in ten days. Eight hundred thousand people were killed. It was mishandled.

I’ve read Tony Lake, who was National Security Advisor during this time, who says that it never really got put on the agenda the way it should have. It was not so much a decision not to intervene, it was just not elevating this to the first level that in retrospect seems self-evident. But we’re watching Darfur go on in front of our eyes, having gone through Rwanda, and we’re still not doing what needs to be done to stop the genocide in Darfur. Pictures are important.

You asked this question yesterday about photographs. We saw the starving Somalis. There weren’t a lot of pictures in Rwanda. So it didn’t really penetrate the consciousness of the public or decision-makers quickly enough. It’s a blemish on the record of the Clinton administration no matter how you slice it.

We went to Rwanda on this wonderful trip in Africa. We went to Ghana, to Liberia, and we went to South Africa and Uganda and one other country. We tried to go to the countries that were succeeding, by and large. The purpose of the trip was so that the American people could see that Africa was not just a place of pestilence and war, that there really were countries—Mozambique—that were vibrant, that were joining the global economy, that were developing democracies.

The President made a very moving stop in Rwanda, made a very heartfelt apology—

**Strong:** And was it controversial, what he was going to say?

**Berger:** Tremendously controversial on this trip, because he also apologized for slavery. We took an unmerciful criticism back here, again partisan to some degree. That was called the “apology trip.” But great countries ought to be able to acknowledge great mistakes. Slavery was a great mistake, Rwanda was a great mistake. I think we gained an enormous amount of credibility in the world because the President was prepared to do that. There was not uniformity among his advisors about whether it was a good idea to do it, but he just felt it and he did it.

**Naftali:** I wanted to ask you about the Cole.

**Berger:** This is a point where al-Qaida and Bin Laden are very much in front of the queue in terms of our attention. The Cole is attacked and 22 American soldiers, I believe, are killed. From the beginning we suspected al-Qaida. One of the things we’ve learned—these groups are a lot of separate Islamic radical groups, which may have connections to each other but are distinct. By the time we left office we didn’t have a judgment from the intelligence community that said al-Qaeda was responsible for the Cole. The most they could say was that it’s probably true that
some al-Qaida operatives had had some involvement in it. So we were still awaiting essentially a judgment.

It’s hard to attack another country and say it’s based upon the fact that probably they did it. You’ve got to have, I think, a fairly firm conclusion from the intelligence community and/or the FBI that they are responsible. Things have changed since 9/11, but when America uses force it has to justify that use of force.

**Naftali:** But in 1999 you had very serious conversations about using cruise missiles, again, late ’98, against Osama Bin Laden, and there hadn’t been an additional reason. You had already had, of course, the east African bombings. Why did you need an additional reason in 2000? Even if you couldn’t prove the *Cole* was linked to the mother ship, why did you need this, why couldn’t you just go ahead and attack? You were going to attack in ’99 anyway.

**Berger:** You’re either attacking for retaliatory purposes, or you’re attacking for other purposes. If you’re attacking for retaliatory purposes, you need to respond against the group or the country responsible. We just didn’t have that level of confidence from the intelligence community. There was a proposal in 1999-2000 that we attack the camps in Afghanistan. Just attack the camps. Regardless, you don’t need any more provocation. You’ve got this guy standing up saying, “I want to destroy America.” What more do you need?

My own view was that this was not a target-rich environment. The camps were not—the Army called them “jungle gyms.” They were not sophisticated training camps. They were basically jungle gyms. So we could have launched 50 cruise missiles or 100 cruise missiles, or 300 cruise missiles and knocked out a bunch of camps. Unless we had gotten Bin Laden, and/or his top people, I think we would have looked weak and he would have looked strong. So I opposed the idea of simply attacking the camps. Now, reasonable people can differ—

The opposite argument, “We’re going to come after you, whether we get you or not,” is a fair argument, particularly after 9/11, it’s an argument that looks more compelling. But, as I said to you yesterday, only 67 Americans had been killed from terrorism during the Clinton years. It’s not like we were seized by this as a country. To attack the camps and knock down a bunch of pup tents, and not really get any big chiefs, I thought would glorify Bin Laden, enhance him in the eyes of his followers, and make us look feckless.

**Naftali:** You were seized by this problem, it’s absolutely clear. What was your preferred strategy then? You did think about it.

**Berger:** Our preferred strategy was to get Bin Laden. We had a lot of things going on to try and get Bin Laden. I can’t talk about all of them, but we had groups on the ground that we were working with, groups in the neighborhood that we were working with. In 2000 the President got a memo, a status report, and he wrote, “We’ve got to do better than this” on the section about finding Bin Laden. The problem is always getting actionable intelligence as to where Bin Laden would be. This is the hardest kind of intelligence.
It’s one thing to know Bin Laden was over here two days ago, it’s another thing to know Bin Laden is right here now. It’s another thing to know, Bin Laden is going to be over there tomorrow, that’s predictive intelligence, and you have to be inside the intent cycle of al-Qaida, which we never were. So we never got the kind of intelligence that enabled us to attack again after ’98. But, to go back to my story, we sent the President a status report where he wrote on the side, ‘We have to do better. This is not good enough. We have to do better in terms of our intelligence on Bin Laden.’

That provoked a review that Dick Clarke and somebody from the CIA and somebody from the Pentagon did, and we came up with the Predator. The Predator was an unmanned vehicle with cameras, real time pictures. The problem was we often had anecdotal human intelligence saying, “Bin Laden is going to be in Kandahar at this compound tomorrow.” But it was never confirmable. But if you had the Predator, you stick the Predator over the compound. And we had stationed two submarines off the coast of Pakistan, so we had basically a nine-hour cycle. From the moment the President said yes, we would be on target in six to nine hours.

I was quite optimistic when we developed the Predator in the fall of 2000 that we finally had a way of triangulating information to get eyes on target. We tested the Predator, it tested very well. It was an operational test, not linked up to the use of cruise missiles. The CIA just wanted to see whether it could fly, whether the photographs would be coherent and clear, what kind of granularity they would have.

There was one instance where they photographed something, a tall guy surrounded by a lot of short guys. I don’t know whether it was Bin Laden or not. Some people thought it was. But had you had that photograph juxtaposed against some human intelligence—we had sources that were providing us with intelligence about where he might be—you would then suddenly have the capacity to put cruise missiles on target within, I think, nine hours.

The Predator was tested in October and proved to be viable. For some reason it was never sent back up in 2001 because there erupted a controversy between the Pentagon and the CIA about arming the predator with hellfire missiles and then who was going to pay for that. The Predator never went up until after 9/11. But forget about hellfire missiles. To me it was a great intelligence platform, and it was a way in which we could finally, when we had a stream of intelligence, some of it reliable, not reliable, we could put eyes on target very quickly.

Naftali: What role was Pakistan going to play in your strategy? You’ve just focused on getting the man.

Berger: Pakistan gave birth to the Taliban, and they were not a very reliable ally. The Pakistani Army and al-Qaida and the Taliban were as close as bugs in a bed, totally tied up with one another. At one point Sharif came to us and said, “I want to train a special force that will go after Bin Laden.” We were very skeptical, quite honestly, that this force would ever amount to anything, but we thought there was nothing to lose by trying it, and so we trained this force. Then [Pervez] Musharraf ends this initiative.
The Pakistanis were helpful only in the respect of turning over to us Ramsi Yousef and some highly sought after terrorists. They did cooperate with us in turning over some top al-Qaida figures that we captured, or they captured with us.

Naftali: But you never had the sense that you had the support of the entire government.

Berger: To the contrary. We actually made a trip. The President really wanted to go to India. Hillary had been in India, had been talking about this trip, and I think he wanted to go. We had it scheduled before the nuclear test. So it was called off as part of the reaction to the nuclear test. But in 2000 the President was really determined to go to India.

We decided that if we’re going to go to India, we needed to go to Pakistan. The Secret Service came to me and said, “There’s no way in the world you can take the President into Pakistan. We cannot protect him. We cannot protect the President if that plane comes down from hand-held missiles or other kinds of al-Qaida attack.”

Never in my eight years was the Secret Service as worked up as they were about this. We actually had two meetings in the Oval Office in which the Secret Service laid out their concerns and said, “Mr. President, we have to rely upon the Pakistani military, which is totally penetrated. They’ll know your car route, even if you go only to Islamabad”—which is the capital, and probably one of the safer, relatively, it’s a planned city, so it’s kind of an anodyne city—“Even if you only go to Islamabad, we are not able to protect you, and we strongly recommend against this.”

Clinton understood that he had to go to Pakistan because he had to talk to Musharraf about al-Qaida and push him to do more. He also wanted to talk to him about the conflict with India and Kashmir. So I was also in favor of the trip. Clinton made some wisecrack saying, “I guess you just volunteered to come with me.” He decided to go and we went in the most stealthy way possible. We had decoy planes. The President was in a completely separate plane, no markings on it. I’m not really good on the names of planes, but it was a small jet. When we took off, we took off in what was as close to a 90-degree trajectory as I have ever experienced. I mean, you literally felt the Gs on your body. We went down the runway and they warned us this was going to happen. I don’t know what the angle was, but it was three times what your normal takeoff angle was.

I remember calling the head of the Secret Service detail, who was not with us. There were obviously Secret Service with us, but he was on the ground coordinating all of this. As we left Pakistani air space saying, “Okay, Larry, you can come out of the bathroom now.”

Riley: We only have about 15 or 20 more minutes, and we usually like to end these interviews with some more general reflections. What is it about your time in the White House that you are most satisfied about, that you take the greatest amount of pride in?

Berger: First of all, there is nothing comparable to public service in my judgment, at the most general level. Going to work every day for the sole and exclusive purpose of trying to make the United States safer and more secure is more satisfying than any profit-making undertaking I’ve
ever engaged in. I think that’s generally true. I talk a lot to college kids about public service and try to encourage them to think about a career in public service. They won’t make as much money as they will on Wall Street, but their lives will be greatly enriched. So the overall context of public service is something that was tremendously satisfying.

Working at the White House is a very special experience. I had ten rules for my staff. The first rule was: “Never forget where you work—the White House—and for whom you work—the President. If you ever lose a sense of awe about either, it’s time to leave.” Every day that I drove in the gates I felt as if I was someplace special. The White House is a place I came to love. I’ve read many, many books—one of my favorite things was giving tours of the White House. Because I read so many books about the White House, I became a little bit of a White House expert. I gave very good tours. Being a doyen at the White House, it occurred to me that I probably could not get that job in this administration.

In terms of accomplishments, I feel very good about Kosovo. I think for the final chapter of the 20th century—the bloodiest century in modern human history—the ethnic cleansing of a million Kosovars would have been an unforgivable blemish on the West. I feel very good about integrating China into the international community. For China, the final chapters are not written. China, as we speak, is growing stronger, more important, and more energetic. But I think during the ’90s we took China from outside the international system and brought it inside the international system, partly through trade, and economics, and otherwise.

I’m very proud of the Good Friday agreement and the peace in Northern Ireland. I think that even though we failed at Camp David, the ’90s were the period of greatest peace and prosperity since the founding of Israel in 1947. The hope that was there during that period resulted in the most prosperous and peaceful time, both for the Palestinians and for the Israelis, and we did succeed in negotiating a peace agreement between Jordan and Israel. We obviously failed on the biggest accomplishment.

I feel very good about NATO enlargement. I think retrofitting NATO from its Cold War anti-Soviet purpose to an alliance that had a continuing purpose of acting together out of area to deal with conflict areas as in Kosovo, in Bosnia, then enlarging NATO to the East so that the countries of the East had a magnet to build their democracies and to settle their border disputes, and to settle and deal with their minorities in an appropriate way—I think that was a very important accomplishment.

I think the saving of Mexico. It’s one of these things—we never know what would have happened if it had gone the other way, but I think it would have caused a real unraveling of the global economy. I think that we, President Clinton, left the United States with two surpluses. He left the United States with a budget surplus estimated to be about $5 trillion, and he left the United States with a surplus of good will in the world. I’ve been greatly disturbed to see both of those surpluses dissipate over the last several years.

The President, as I think I said yesterday, made over a hundred visits to foreign countries, sometimes more than one visit to one country, but a hundred visits, and was greeted enthusiastically every place we went. That was not, I think, simply a tribute to Bill Clinton and
the fact that he was charismatic and people around the world liked him. It was a tribute to the United States. The United States was held as a beacon, and I think we have to be very careful we don’t lose that standing in the world. So I think we left the world in a safer and more secure place than we found it.

**Strong:** I have a series of questions about sources and guidance for future scholars. That’s really our audience. If you were going to write a book about Clinton foreign policy and all you had was the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, how much would you get wrong and what are the sources you need to correct that first draft of history?

**Berger:** I think you’d get it about half-wrong.

**Strong:** Half?

**Berger:** I think the *New York Times* is a great newspaper, *Wall Street Journal, Washington Post*, but newspapers have an interest in conflict. There’s a little bit of a “gotcha” ethic to reporting, and a post-Watergate innate suspicion of government. So everything tends to be written from a quite skeptical and negative perspective. I think these tapes and conversations are going to be a great source to historians, the books that people will write. There are already about ten books by Madeleine Albright and President Clinton and Dennis Ross. Martin Indyk is writing a book, Nancy Soderberg has just written a book. I think there will be a fairly rich body of self-accounts. Now obviously, they have to be read as what they are, which is self-serving. Very few people write books saying, “We did a lousy job.” But there’s a lot of rich detail.

Strobe Talbott’s book about the U.S.-Russia relationship is a first-rate book. Strobe was a journalist before he was a diplomat, and he brought the journalist’s eye and pen. I think that’s one of the best books so far that’s been written about the Clinton administration. He’s written a second book about the India-U.S. relationship. I think it’s published by Brookings; it may not be widely circulated. I think it’s a very good book.

So I think the writings of the participants, the file, we talked about yesterday. Historians will have no lack of paper. The amount of documents produced by the Clinton administration was greater than any other Presidency in history because we had a very full agenda. We had a full foreign policy agenda and a full domestic agenda. As those get declassified, those will be a great source for historians.

**Strong:** If you had the full shelf of interviews done by people who worked in the White House, whose would you want to read?

**Berger:** I don’t know if you’re going to interview Clinton—that would be the most interesting one to read. I think it depends on what your area of interest is. In the White House there were really four: the Chiefs of Staff, the three policy advisors, Bruce Reed on the domestic side, Gene Sperling on the economic side, Tony, and then myself on the national security side. Amazing continuity. Bruce and Gene and I were eight-year veterans. That’s really, on the policy side, where the rubber hit the road. I think their recollections would be very important.


Naftali: In his memoirs, President Clinton says that you understood very well his strengths and his weaknesses. Would you like to comment on his strengths and his weaknesses?

Berger: Let’s start with his strengths. I’ve always believed that Bill Clinton is the most unusual combination of head and heart of anybody that I have ever met, certainly anybody in political life. That is, an intellect which is world-class. He’s an extraordinarily bright man. Very few people that I’ve dealt with are smarter than Clinton. And a tremendous compassion, a real generosity of spirit, infused what he did. So I think that’s number one.

Number two, he loved people. One of the reasons he was late all the time was because if the speech at the New York Hilton was at 8:00, first of all, we probably left 15 minutes late, so there was a certain lack of promptness in terms of when we started. Then the Secret Service would always take the President in through the kitchen, through the service entrance, because that was safer than going in through the public entrance. He’d stop and say hello to every cook, every chef, and every dishwasher. He’d get in a conversation with a dishwasher about the fact that his son couldn’t get into college. He connects with people. He has tremendous joy for life, tremendous exuberance.

He knows, whether it’s history or—don’t play Trivial Pursuit with Bill Clinton. I think the only person who can possibly beat Bill Clinton in Trivial Pursuit is Chelsea Clinton, who takes after her mother and her father. He’s curious about things. When we traveled, I was responsible for planning foreign trips, not from the perspective of logistics but from the perspective of the content and substance of the trip. We always thought about trips in three parts. One was the official part of the trip, what were we trying to get done, what do we have to do for state and protocol reasons, a state dinner, the meeting with the Prime Minister, the visiting of the shrine—whatever.

The second was people events. Clinton always wanted to go out into the marketplace, always have some event where he was very visible, connecting with the people of that country. And then there was the cultural side. He always wanted to see the pyramids. I don’t mean that literally, I mean figuratively. He always wanted to see the archeological sites or natural sites of a country. It was very conscious, because he wanted to not only get the business done, but he wanted the people of that country to see that the United States respected their heritage. That was very important in terms of how he wanted the trip to be portrayed. Plus the fact that he was just curious.

Once we were in Mexico City. There’s a great archeological museum in Mexico City, the name of which I can’t remember. We were supposed to go there for half an hour with Zedillo because he wanted to see it. After about three and a half hours, Zedillo’s Chief of Staff came over to me and said, “If President Zedillo doesn’t leave in the next 15 minutes, he will not be able to be at the state dinner in time.” So I had to go over to the President and say, “Mr. President, it’s probably time for us to go. President Zedillo needs to get back.” He would have stayed there six hours. So he has a tremendous curiosity. He enjoys life.

I’m a lousy golfer. He’s a good golfer, but I love to play with him. I didn’t play with him in the White House but afterwards, because you’d wind up after the 18 holes sitting in some 19th hole.
restaurant, and he’d sit down with eight or nine people and they’d all of a sudden be talking about the event of the day. I think his southern heritage is important in understanding Clinton. He’s a respectful person. He is courteous, and I think that was very important in terms of how he dealt with foreign leaders.

When Jiang was in the United States and they had the joint press conference, Jiang dropped his papers accidentally on the floor. Clinton went over and picked up the papers. I’ve been told by many Chinese that Jiang was enormously moved by the fact that the President of the United States would go over and pick up his papers. If that had happened in China, flunkies would have come out of someplace and picked up the papers. The fact that the President did that was a natural thing for him to do, but not necessarily a natural thing for anybody to do. So those are the strengths.

Weaknesses. Clinton said to me when he asked me to be National Security Advisor during the transition, “The first four years I drove you crazy by what I don’t know, the next four years I’m going to drive you crazy by what I think I know and I don’t.” There are the obvious weaknesses that we’re all familiar with, the mistakes that he made. Sometimes I think there was a lack of discipline in recognizing that we had to do things within a certain kind of a box. He was always kind of resisting the box.

I don’t think we always set priorities as sharply as we could. Because he’s a person of such eclectic interests, he wants to do everything, and you can’t do everything. President Bush is a good example of someone who has set his mind on doing three or four things—building a national missile defense, getting the antiballistic missile treaty. Got it done, checked the box. Get rid of Saddam Hussein. Got it done, check the box. There’s a balance. I’m not terribly comfortable with such a narrow focus, but I think sometimes, because of his ambitious nature, we were doing more things than we could do well. Sometimes if you’re doing everything, you’re not doing anything. So I’d say those were probably the biggest weaknesses.

Riley: Mr. Berger, we’re deeply grateful for your time. I think I can speak for all of my colleagues when I say that this has been a deeply enlightening experience for us. I’m sure that we’ve added a tremendously rich document to our archive.

Berger: Thank you. I think this is an enormously important project. I congratulate you for doing it and I look forward to coming down here and spending some time listening to transcripts of my colleagues.