Riley: There are a couple of things that we typically do at the beginning as administrative matters: the first one is just to repeat the fundamental ground rule about the confidential nature of the interview. We want you to speak candidly. Your audience is not us but is people 20 or 30 years from now who may want to come to this transcript to learn about the Clinton Presidency and the time running up to it as it truly was.

The second is an aid to the transcriber: we just go around and identify ourselves and say a couple of words so that the person who is working this up will have a sense about who’s—Jess will actually be taking a sequence as an aid to that. But I’m Russell Riley. I’m an associate professor at the Miller Center and have been heading up the Clinton Presidential History Project.

From: I’m Al From. I’m founder and CEO [Chief Executive Officer] of the Democratic Leadership Council. To put it in the context of the Clinton Presidency, Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas was chair of the DLC from March of 1990 through August of 1991, in the period that he shaped the agenda that he ran on for President in 1992.

Morrisroe: Darby Morrisroe, assistant professor at the Miller Center.

Steiner: Jessica Steiner, research assistant for the Oral History Project.

Riley: We’re going to want to spend most of our time on the ’80s and ’90s here, but it’s always helpful to get a bit of biographical background. Did you grow up being interested in politics?

From: I did. I grew up in South Bend, Indiana, which is the home of an institution called Notre Dame. But I tell people that because I wanted to go to a football college, I went to Northwestern, in journalism. I’ve always had an interest in politics. I’ve got a bachelor’s and master’s in journalism from Northwestern. I was editor of the Daily Northwestern. We launched a program the last quarter of my graduate year in Washington called the Medill News Service, which still exists. I just liked Washington so much I decided not to go back to the Chicago Daily News, which thought they had signed me. They may have sealed me, but they didn’t deliver me. I stayed in Washington and went to work for the War on Poverty for Sargent Shriver.

But I like to tell the story about politics: I’ve always been interested in politics. When I was 10 years old, I had this big political thrill. I met the mayor of my hometown, because we lived in an
apartment building and he came on Election Day to drive somebody to the polls. I met him. I had my 50th birthday party in the state dining room. I just think this is a great country.

Riley: You spent some time in the South after you began work. Was that as a part of the War on Poverty, or is that something that came as a result of the second career move?

From: No, in journalism school, for my master’s thesis, I did a case study of the Delta Democrat Times, which is the newspaper run by Hodding Carter [III], and before that, his dad, [William] Hodding Carter [Jr.]. That was the progressive newspaper in the South. That newspaper, through its editorials and its civic leadership, led Greenville, Mississippi from the day of the Brown v. Board of Education case until December, I think, 1964 when Greenville became the first city in the Deep South to voluntarily desegregate its schools. So I had an interest in that.

Sarg Shriver is a really interesting guy. Sarg didn’t trust the bureaucrats to tell him what was going on in his programs. So he hired a bunch of young lawyers and journalists, and I was lucky enough to be one of them. We were sent out around the country to look at what was going on in communities where there were antipoverty programs and report back in New York Times Magazine-type pieces about what was going on.

I got assigned to the southeastern region, which in those days started at South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Florida. This was June of 1966. So in the last half of the 1960s, or at least until Richard Nixon got elected in 1969 and I came up on the Hill—but at least for those 2 ½ years, I had this incredible experience of a 23-, 24-year-old going around, meeting with all the great civil rights leaders. Essentially, the War on Poverty in the South in the last half of the 1960s funded the old infrastructure of the civil rights movement. So I did things like I spent a lot of time in Sunflower County, Mississippi, which is the home county of Fannie Lou Hamer, the head of the Freedom Democratic Party, and of Senator James O. Eastland. I shuttled back and forth between the two of them. So I spent 2 ½ years doing that.

Riley: You were also in Alabama for a while, right? My home state.

From: I met my wife in Camden, Alabama, in Wilcox County, in the summer of 1967. Sarg Shriver sent me down to two counties. One was Wilcox and the other was Lowndes County—“Bloody Lowndes.”

Riley: And you’re still alive.

From: Just barely. I was almost stupid enough not to be alive. But I went down, and my wife—who was at Birmingham-Southern at that time, between her junior and senior years—her stepfather was the only white attorney in Alabama who would take antipoverty programs as clients. He had the Wilcox County SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference], which was the grantee. She was running a youth center, and I was introduced to her by Dr. Rev. Tom Threadgill, who was Martin Luther King’s local guy in Wilcox County.

But I always think about all the incredible progress that America has made. I mean, we’re certainly not a perfect society, but on that trip I went down to Lowndes County. Bloody Lowndes...
probably has the reputation of the most dangerous place in the civil rights movement. After the Selma-to-Montgomery march, the SCLC and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee [SNCC] split up the two counties that were adjacent to Dallas County.

Riley: Which is where Selma is.

From: SCLC got Wilcox and SNCC got Lowndes. There was a SNCC organizer down there named John Hewlett. Governor Lurleen [Burns] Wallace—George Wallace’s first wife, whom he got elected Governor because he couldn’t succeed himself—had accused John Hewlett of stealing money from the government. And she accused a guy who was the head of the committee action board, a lay leader named Robert Strickland, of being a first-degree murderer.

So I went down there to see what was going on. It was quite a scene. As it turned out, Strickland was convicted of first-degree murder. She was right on that front, because as a young kid, he had been chased back into his shack by a bunch of white kids, and he pulled a shotgun out and just fired it and killed one of them. He was pardoned years before I went down there by Governor Jim [James Elisha] Folsom, [Sr.].

Riley: Big Jim.

From: Big Jim. So I assume if Big Jim Folsom could pardon him in the ’50s, he probably wasn’t very guilty. In any event, Hewlett wasn’t stealing money. He didn’t have to. He had so much money coming in from all sources, I’m sure. But he was clearly the leader of Lowndes County.

I was driving with him, and he had a four-year-old son, I think named Harold—this guy is probably almost 50 now. I didn’t think very much of it at the time, but we were riding down the road in my rental car, and a pickup truck came right at us, and we swerved around, got run off the road. But we were able, without any damage, to get back on. I didn’t think anything of it. In 1983, which was now 16 years later, I pick up the New York Times. John Hewlett is now the Sheriff of Lowndes County, and he was delivering the black vote to George Corley Wallace. I said, “Things really change.”

Riley: You mentioned his name. I knew his name as “The Sheriff.”

From: I’m pretty sure—I think this is right—that I got Clinton to do him a letter or something on his 30th anniversary of being sheriff or something. I’m not absolutely sure of that. But that always struck me. There are people I’d run across during those days who had done something good. I always tried to get Clinton to recognize it if we could get it done, which was usually not very hard to do.

Riley: There were periods of time, more localized to the period that we’ll be talking about today, where you were in conflict with the civil rights leaders of the 1980s and 1990s. Were you protected in any way because of your experience there? Were you ever able to draw on that to defend yourself from charges that you were insensitive to race issues?
From: I think most of my problem with the civil rights community was really a political battle with Jesse Jackson more than any real widespread problem with the civil rights community. I think this goes, actually, to the heart of what the New Democrat philosophy, to some degree, what the Clinton Presidency was about. That is, I’ve always believed that what we were about was to reconnect the Democratic Party with its first principles and offer new ways to further them.

The thing that got us in trouble was this line item in the “New Orleans Declaration,”1 which was the Clinton philosophical bible for the Presidency. The first line said, “The promise of America is equal opportunity, not equal outcomes.” In the 1992 campaign, Clinton came out against quotas, came out against race norming. The challenge for the Democratic Party, it seemed to me, was to become a party of opportunity, and ironically, not a party of special privileges.

We always supported things like affirmative action, but affirmative action defined not as quotas but as taking affirmative steps, sometimes compensatory steps, to make sure everybody had a fair chance. To me, that is the big difference, incidentally, between American liberalism and European social democracy. Our value has always been equal opportunity. Theirs has been equality. There’s a difference. It’s why the Europeans are in trouble now, because they have always wanted to equalize things at the outcome level, and we say we want to make sure everybody has a fair shot.

Teddy White’s book, America in Search of Itself, in 1980, a passage that I thought was the most important—I think it was in the last chapter—it said something like this: “By the time of the 1980 election—” this was the book where he stretched from 1960 to 80, those five campaigns—he said, “By the time of the 1980 election, the question became whether the insistence on equality came to quash the equal opportunity, the opportunity of ordinary people. And too many people judged that it had.” He also had a thing where he said, “The 1960s began with the Democrats decrying local school children being bussed beyond their neighborhood school because of their race, and the 1970s ended with them insisting on it.”

But what we tried to do was tie back to original first principles. I believe what we fought for in the DLC, and what was really—I want to emphasize this—more a political fight than a fight over civil rights, even though we probably disagreed on some of the tactics with Jesse Jackson—when I was in the War on Poverty, our value was self help, was empowerment. In fact, what cost the War on Poverty its momentum—it really wound up killing it politically—was a concept called “maximum feasible participation of the poor,” which was really empowerment. It was giving the poor a chance to be part of their own decisions.

Just for an example, I’ll never forget going to Nashville, Tennessee. There was a mayor there named [Clifton] Beverly Briley. He was in charge of the community action program. He had five neighborhood centers. I went out and looked at those centers, and every one of them was padlocked. So I went back and said, “Mr. Mayor, what’s going on?” He said, “I’ll be damned if I’m going to have five little political machines to operate against me.”

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1 “New Orleans Declaration”—see appendix.
In any event, this value of empowerment, what I think we argued for was a return to that value which was a fundamental Democratic value. So the answer is yes, we had big fights. Our fight with Jesse Jackson was because we, before the 1991 Cleveland convention, made a decision that he could participate like everybody else, but he wasn’t going to get a major speech—and he went ballistic. A lot of it came after me. Did my antipoverty program background help? Maybe. But in those days I wasn’t very important anyway, so it probably didn’t matter.

Riley: You had three different career stages that I could identify after that period in the ’60s. You went on Capitol Hill, and you were on the Senate side for 10 years. Then you were with the [Jimmy] Carter administration for a couple of years. Then you get into the period when you’re back on the Hill but on the House side. Can you tell us how each of those periods played into giving shape to your sense about politics and what you’re picking up about Washington, and whether there are, for historians, seeds of the New Democrat philosophy that you can see represented in each of those three stages?

From: Actually I talked a lot about this in my Hofstra speech.² I traced what I thought was the genesis of the New Democrat movement.

Riley: But it wasn’t autobiographical, and I guess I’m asking from an autobiographical point of view.

From: Sure, I understand. In 1969, after Nixon got elected, I went and worked for two years as, I guess, a counsel to the Senate, the Committee on the District of Columbia. It was before home rule. In fact we passed home rule. Joe Tydings of Maryland, who is still a good friend of mine, was chair. I did a lot of stuff on crime and drugs in the District. If you remember, Nixon ran in ’68 as the crime capital. So I did a bunch of investigations and hearings on drug abuse in the nation’s capital. I wound up getting the first city-wide narcotics-treatment program put into place in 1969.

Riley: You didn’t happen to know Bill Clinton at the time, did you?

From: No, I probably met him when I was in the Carter White House, but I really didn’t know him until we started the DLC.

Riley: We’ll get back to that later. It just occurred to me that you were probably both on the Senate side.

From: He was working for [James W.] Fulbright. And Lee Williams, whom I didn’t know at the time—Fulbright’s A.A., later was a very close friend of mine—was sort of his patron saint.

I think, from that period, what I got an appreciation of was that crime was an important issue not only to middle-class people, to ordinary people, but to poor people who, I thought, are one of the most important constituencies in the Democratic Party. That was a period when a lot of liberals in the Democratic Party were rebelling against the establishment. Obviously the war in Vietnam was a big part of that, but also police officers were called all sorts of animals, usually pigs and all

² Hofstra speech—see appendix.
that. I got a different kind of appreciation from my experience, because the victims of crime, and the people who like to see police officers in their neighborhoods, were poor people.

So to that extent, maybe that had an impact on my philosophy. In 1971 I went to work for Ed [Edmund] Muskie of Maine, who was the frontrunner for the Democratic Presidential nomination in 1972—short lived, I might add—a brilliant man. We actually drafted the bill that created the federal drug abuse office. I went in and did the hearings and all that on that. But within about six or eight months, I became the staff director of that committee. I think I learned a lot.

Another really important element of what became the New Democrat movement, or at least my part of it, I learned from Muskie. That was, Muskie believed very strongly—and this is something I quoted in my Hofstra speech—that government reform, and making government effective, and rooting out waste and inefficiency was a social good, not a social evil. We did the Budget Reform Act.

The Budget Reform Act was a unique experience in the Congress because it was one of the few bills where Senators actually knew more about the details of than members of Congress. We had about a year debate, a complicated debate, with real rivalries in the Senate, and finally passed it. The House decided they needed to pass a budget bill, so they passed one real quickly. The great Dick Bolling from Missouri, chairman of the Rules Committee, led the deal. We got into conference and Bolling says, “This bill is far too complicated for members. Why don’t we put together a group of staff people who will come back with a conference report that we can then either accept or reject?” So I was one of three Senate negotiators on that deal.

But in any event, we did the Budget Act. We did the Sunset bill. We did a really interesting bill called Countercyclical Revenue Sharing, which was antirecession aid to states and cities who were adversely affected by the recession, because when you have a recession, tax revenues go down and demands for services go up. So it was tied to the unemployment rate. That was the important part for the philosophy.

Because part of what I’ve learned and I’ve tried to have guide me in the ideas that I promote—and that we promoted here—is that you want to have government programs that are aimed for a specific objective, and that if that objective was achieved, then they ought to go away. Countercyclical Revenue Sharing was one of the first times we ever did that. We had a trigger. If the economy hit a certain level, the program went into effect. The money was, as best as you can ever do in a Congressional deal, targeted to the places that needed it the most. We used the unemployment rate. Once I had to defeat an effort by Senator [Lloyd] Bentsen to change it to the number of unemployed, because the number of unemployed is a measure of size. Unemployment rate is a measure of need. But in any event, that part of my philosophy, I guess, was built on that. As we go through, I’ll tell you how that actually manifested.

I’d always believed, from reading Teddy White’s books—and I think his 1976 book was really on China—that inflation was a killer for the middle class and that Democrats didn’t appreciate that, because we were always driven out of the Great Depression by unemployment, and that one of the reasons we had a hard time holding on to middle-class voters is that we didn’t understand
that inflation was a bigger deal to them than unemployment, for the most part, except when you’re in a depression, of course.

I was hired to be Deputy Advisor to the President on Inflation. When I speak, I tell people that for those people who thought the Carter administration couldn’t do anything well, we got the inflation rate up higher than his positive ratings in the polls. But I learned a lot about that. The answer is that all these things helped shape my philosophy. It started to come together after the Carter debacle.

Mitch Landrieu is in the runoff for mayor of New Orleans now, and his dad, [Maurice] Moon Landrieu, was one of my mentors. I got to know him because he was, like a lot of mayors and leaders around the country, early on the Muskie bandwagon in ’72. Little did they know that the bandwagon had better hook up to some horses or it wouldn’t get to the starting gate.

But in any event, I remember, during the Carter administration, I think—I can’t remember whether I was still on the Hill or in the administration—but I ushered him through his appointment to get to be Secretary of HUD [Housing and Urban Development]. I must have still been in the Senate, because we did the reorganization that created FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] in ’77 or ’78. I can’t remember exactly when. I think they wanted Landrieu to be head of FEMA, and they asked me to call him. I called him and he said, “I have nine kids—” every one of them has a first name that begins with M, incidentally— “and I’ve been on the public payroll for all of my life, and I need to make some money, so I’m not going to do anything if it’s not a Cabinet job.” Later they gave him HUD.

But anyway, he told me something that was really important and has had profound impact on me. He said that the way politics and policy come together is in how the policy plays out. It’s not whether you get the interest groups bought in in the beginning but whether the policies work. He said, “You get every interest group bought in, and the result of the policy is that the inflation rate goes up two points, and your politics out of that policy is a failure.” I think that’s something the Carter administration never understood, but it had a big impact on me as I was going through that Carter experience.

Just to give you a couple of examples: I went down there at the beginning of 1979, and Carter had instituted these wage-price guidelines, which were not very good to begin with because they were all voluntary. They enforced them like they were mandatory guidelines, but they were voluntary. What they should have done is it should have been no bureaucracy, just a vehicle for the President to beat companies over the heads with, and basically a jawboning tool. But we did it exactly ass-backwards, and we paid for it.

One of the first things we did—I think the oil workers had a contract, and we stretched and stretched the guidelines to get them in compliance. This was, like, in February or March of 1979. I kept saying, “This is crazy. It’s a one-year contract. It’s going to be up in 1980, right when the President is in the primaries. You’re going to have an explosion of inflation at exactly the wrong time. And it may even hurt the economy enough that it goes into recession.”
Well, they were so bent on dealing with the relationships with the unions at the time that they made that decision to accept the contract that, if they were really going to try to force prices down, they shouldn’t have accepted. One of the problems is, if you think of something like energy inflation, basically you’ve got to eat some of it or inflation will just spiral. Anyway, that reinforced Moon Landrieu’s lesson. And there were so many different cases like that, day after day, in the White House. So that had a big impact on me.

We really pulled a lot of this together. When I came back up to the Hill after the 1980 election and was hired by a great man that nobody knows about named Gillis Long, who was the chairman of the House Democratic Caucus—at that time he was running for the caucus chairmanship. Two days after the election, he asked me to have dinner with him to talk about the future of the Democratic Party. And I told him I wasn’t interested in the future of the Democratic Party. I was interested in paying my mortgage on January 21. He said there may be something there too.

Anyway, I go in and we talked, just hit it off incredibly. Gillis turned out to be the guru of all these young leaders like Tim Wirth and Dick Gephardt and Al Gore [Jr.] and Gerry [Geraldine] Ferraro and others. But he said he was going to get elected caucus chair, and he wanted me to come up and run the caucus. So I go back down to the White House. The White House guys say, “Nah, Gillis doesn’t have a chance. Tip’s [Thomas O’Neill] supporting somebody else.” Gillis told me he was going to get 146 votes—he got 146 votes. He’s the best internal politician I’d ever seen.

**Morrisroe:** During that initial conversation about the future of the party, what was discussed? What did he articulate to you as what he thought the future should be?

**From:** What you have to remember is that we lost the White House. We lost the Senate. We lost 32 or 33 seats in the House. And while we maintained a nominal majority in the House, we really lost operational control. So the question is, how do you rebound, and how do you shape a politics for the future?

All the analysis that I had done—and I did a lot more in those four years I was in the caucus—basically showed that we were losing middle-class voters. I think one of the first things we ever did as caucus chair, after Gillis got elected, was that we had a retreat of mostly younger members of the House. Gillis wanted to be the convener, because Jim Wright and Tip and then Tom Foley—Tip was Speaker; Jim was Leader; Tom Foley was Whip, and then Gillis was the fourth-ranking—all were a little nervous about it. Wright was willing to put money into the political part of it, but he didn’t really like as much the ferment of the young guys.

I can’t remember everything we talked about at the dinner. But if you want to get a good sense of the kind of things we were talking about at that time, I wrote an opening statement for Gillis, which I’m sure I can find in my 1980 chron books—or 1979, 1980, I guess, or ’81 chron books—for this retreat if you make a note of that. A good part of it was talking about how you get on the right side of the inflation issue and how you get back to middle-class voters and how you restore Democrats as a part of your strength. One of the remarkable things, I think, about the

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3 Opening statement—see appendix.
New Democrat movement—obviously I feel I have some role in this—but there is an incredible consistency to it.

If you go back in the House Democratic Caucus, we actually began to articulate a lot of the philosophy. In 1982 we did a paper called “Rebuilding the Road to Opportunity.” It was called the “yellow book” because it was published by GPO [Government Printing Office] and in a yellow cover. Some people called it the “yellow brick road.” But it was done largely by Tim Wirth and me on behalf of Gillis because Gillis was very sick during that whole time. So I basically did everything for him and Dick Gephardt.

It was the first beginnings of a new economic policy for the Democrats, and the key philosophical point was that our twin goals had to be growth and fairness. Now that seems like a pretty silly thing, but through the ’70s, growth wasn’t part of the Democratic litany. It was all fairness. We gradually moved away from fairness to opportunity over the year because fairness meant to people, “We’re going to take from you to give to somebody else.” Opportunity meant that everybody had a chance to get ahead.

So we did that, and then we did something called the “Democratic Blueprint.” There are a bunch of references that you can find in the *New York Times*. The first thing we actually did was a statement of principles on the budget when Reagan did the 1981 budget, which was the big budget battle that Reagan won over the House Democrats. While we were going through that, what we did with the caucus was that we made it the incubator of ideas and message. It had been a dead deal.

The Democratic Caucus in the House is the oldest political institution in America other than the Speakership. It was the place where we used to nominate Democratic candidates for President. It had an illustrious history, but it had an intermittent history. In other words, there would be periods when it would be really active and then periods when it would be dormant. When I took over, it was at the end of a dormant period, because coming out of Vietnam, the liberals grabbed hold of the caucus, they opened all the meetings to the public, and they used it basically as a stage. So the leadership tried to shut it down.

When I took over the caucus, I went up to the caucus office, and it was a room with no windows on the seventh floor of the Longworth Building—piled with rubble, telephones, telephone wires, just a big pile of rubble in the middle. So I cleaned it out. Some Republican Congressman—poor soul—who was next door had a conference room, and he stuck his conference table outside the door—big mistake. I moved it into our office, re-covered it, and around that table we began the New Democrat movement. I always like to point out it was a room on the seventh floor in the Longworth Building, 1732, with no windows. So we painted windows so we could say the windows were painted shut.

But in any event, Gillis formed this little group called the Committee on Party Effectiveness [CPE], which met every Tuesday—and sometimes even more than that up there—and they talked about politics and policy. Out of that, the first thing we ever did was the statement on the budget. I had to find this, so I know it’s there; it’s either April 8 or 9 of 1981. It was a front page story in the *Times*, and they printed the whole document, so that’s there. Then we did the yellow
brick road, the yellow book, “Rebuilding the Road to Opportunity.” Then we did a thing called the “Blueprint,” which was much more comprehensive, that we released in January of 1984.

The other thing we did was we brought elected officials back into the Democratic Convention through that little committee. Only 39 Democratic members of the House were delegates to the 1980 Democratic Convention. Basically the party had divorced itself from its elected officials. We created the super delegates. Geraldine Ferraro was our agent. There’s a commission headed by former Governor Jim Hunt, North Carolina, and the executive director is the guy who led the just-completed nominating process reform commission, David Price, who was then a Duke professor and now member of Congress. But David, Jim Hunt, Gillis, and I cut the deal on the super delegates because we wanted to bring electeds back. So we did those two things.

And then it was out of the House caucus that, after the ’84 election, we connected with Chuck Robb and Bruce Babbitt and then a group of Senators I’d known from my days in the Senate: Sam Nunn and Lawton Chiles and others, to form the DLC. After a few abortive efforts to try to elect a DNC chairman, we figured we couldn’t do that so we’d do our own deal.

Morrisroe: I have a question about how the House Democratic leadership responded to what was going on, first, in the caucus and then in the CPE. Were you engaging in all these policy developments with their endorsement, their approval, or resistance?

From: It’s very complicated. We both had their endorsement but more at the end than the beginning. We also had resistance and a lot of nervousness and apprehension. At some point I’d love to go back and talk about that in a little more detail. I tried in the Hofstra speech to show how I think the Clinton philosophy was shaped and its historical underpinnings. But we can do that whenever you guys want to.

But here’s what happened: Gillis gets elected caucus chair. Wirth and Gephardt were really the driving forces in this policy conference, which was done at the Capitol Hilton. We did it in January of 1981. Gillis, as I said, took the lead in being the senior person who gave it his imprimatur, and he kicked it off and all that. It was a three-day conference, and at the end of the conference, the Sunday morning, I said to Gillis, “This is too good. We’ve got to keep this going.” The late Kirk O’Donnell, who tragically died as a very young man, was Tip’s counsel. He was there. I said to Gillis, “We’ve got to keep this going.” He said, “Why don’t you talk to Kirk and see if the Speaker would react terribly negatively if we put together a little group?” which became the Committee on Party Effectiveness. Kirk agreed that we could do this. So we announced that we were going to do this. This was around the 14th or 15th of January.

Within about two days, Gillis, who had had a serious heart attack in 1979, went in for quadruple bypass surgery. From my perspective, the most important thing that he ever did for me was to basically say to me, as he was going for the surgery, “Do whatever you want.” I barely knew the guy, really. I barely knew him, and he said, “Do whatever you need to do to keep this stuff going.” So we put together this committee, and we got it together. He came back about a month later, but he never was really in good health after that.
We started meeting. As we started doing this stuff, Tip got very nervous because among the members of this group was the late Les Aspin, who was Clinton’s first Secretary of Defense. If you remember, Les was talking about Tip being on the ropes and all this kind of stuff. They were just very nervous because these new guys were pretty worried about the direction of the House and the caucus and the Democratic Party, and their futures were at stake. For most of the older guys in the leadership, what difference did it make? They were going to be there for their life—as long as they lived anyway.

Tim Wirth once told me this great story, which will give you a sense of the atmosphere of the time: Timmy was part of the class of ’74, this big new class. If you remember, they came in in their first organizing caucuses in 1975 and they threw out three chairmen: [John William] Wright Patman, [William Robert] Poage of Agriculture, and one other I can’t remember. Anyway, it’s a three-day caucus, and on the third day, Wirth is just standing there on the floor, and some older member comes up to him and says, “Young man, I’ve seen you on national TV the last two nights. I’ve been in this House for 26 years, and I ain’t never been on national TV.” He just turned and walked away. Tim said he paid for it for years. But that’s the way the House was. It’s an institution.

I hope we get into this, but it was dominated in those days by southerners who were there forever. One of the big raps on Clinton is that he lost our majorities in the Congress; he didn’t lose our majorities in the Congress. What happened is that the South caught up with its real politics, and the white South went Republican. That was going to happen sometime. It just happened to happen on Clinton’s watch in 1994. Now, there were other things that happened in ’94 too, but it’s a bum rap, and I’m happy to talk about that in great detail.

In any event, in the first few months as we got this committee going, Tip asked Dick Bolling, who was chairman of the Rules Committee, to watch over us to make sure we weren’t doing anything bad. Bolling and Gillis—Gillis was, I think, number two on the Rules Committee, and they were best friends, and when Bolling ran for Leader against Jim Wright in 1976 and Phil Burton, Gillis ran his campaign. So it wasn’t really serious oversight, but it just showed that Tip was nervous. Bolling was his closest ally, too, with any reach to these guys, and Bolling was a mentor for Gephardt.

What happened over time, Tip had two young guys working for him—both Orthodox Jews. One was a young guy named Ari Weiss, who is now over in Israel, a brilliant guy. The other was a guy you know, probably have interviewed for this project, named Jack Lew, who is now the chancellor at NYU [New York University]. Jack was 20, 22 years old at the time. He was a lot younger than I was. We brought them in, and they were friends with Gephardt and Wirth. And Gillis always had a way of bringing people in. So in the end, Ari and Jack and I did a lot of the work for this stuff, and Tip became very comfortable with it.

Part of what we had to do in the House—the institution was a sclerotic institution. I’ll just give you one example: We did this yellow book in September of 1982. It was a pretty big break. The National Economic Council that Clinton put together was really an outgrowth of an idea that was in that book, which called for an economic cooperation council in the White House. We had a lot
of interesting stuff, and it was pretty forward-looking. Somebody asked me how I got Labor to sign off on it. I said, “It’s pretty easy. We didn’t ask.” [laughter]

But in any event, we took a group of Tim, Gephardt, and I think [Jonas] Martin Frost, and I and went up and we did all the network anchors and really promoted the hell out of this thing. We got a good reaction. So Tip, as we’re getting ready for the new Congress after the ’82 election, said, “Why don’t we take the recommendations of the yellow book and ask the committee chairs to move them?” So Tip went to the floor in the caucus, and we had a resolution that he pushed that asked the committee chairs to include the progress they’d made on the recommendations in the yellow book in their submissions to the Budget Committee in the spring, which were required under the Budget Act. Anyway, we passed it. You know how many did it? Zero. Not one of them did it.

That was further reinforced—the ’82 election was fought over a jobs bill, which Reagan had either vetoed or threatened to veto. Tip, after the election, went down and made a deal with Reagan and got Reagan to agree to sign the bill. So we have this meeting in H204 in the Capitol, Tip’s office, with the committee chairs. It was one of the most eye-opening things I’d ever seen. Sitting in there with the committee chairs, and Tip comes to the end and he says, “Fellas, I got the President to agree to our bill. So we need to pass it again, and then we’ll send it down and he’ll sign it.”

Gus Hawkins gets up and says, “Mr. Speaker, that’s not even a start. We’re not going to send that bill again.” They go back and forth, and in the middle of this deal, Tip is saying, “Fellas, I need you on this. This is what you said you wanted. I went down and made this deal. I need your help on this.” In the middle of this meeting, old Carl Perkins, who was the chair of Labor and Education in those days, gets up, walks out. Tip says, “Carl, old buddy, where you going? I need your help on this.” Perkins looks at him and said, “Mr. Speaker, I feel hungry. I think I’ll go get me a sandwich.” Meeting broke up. So that’s what we were dealing with. I think Tip saw us as allies. We had lost two budgets in a row, and in 1983 we had won 26 seats back. There was still a pretty good chance we were going to lose the budget.

We had this little group out of the Committee on Party Effectiveness that would meet up in our room a couple of nights a week to talk about the budget. We had an all-night meeting one night, or pretty close to it, and decided that what we needed to do was to have what Gillis Long used to call “participatory democracy.” We had to get everybody in the caucus engaged in shaping the Democratic alternative. So we had Jim Jones, who was the chairman of the Budget Committee and one of the founders of the DLC—Jones created a nine-page choices memo that had all the big choices that the Budget Committee would make. Tim Wirth and I did this long memo to Tip. Then we went in and saw him and suggested to Tip that if we wanted to pass the budget, what we had to do was get every member of the caucus that we could get to fill this out, going on the assumption that the choices were so obvious that basically we’d get an agreement, which is what happened.

Tip actually drove over from the Capitol to the Longworth Building, came up to 1732, and blessed this. By 1983 he was fully on board, but it was not always easy. We actually passed the budget. We got about 175 of the 242 Democrats in the House. To do it we worked every caucus,
and we got a lot of the people who had been the boll weevils, who had been voting against the budget, to vote for it, and we passed the budget in ’83.

**Riley:** From what we see in the briefing materials, the ’84 election is an important marker in your career and in this effort to try to revisit the nature of the Democratic Party. That’s an accurate assessment?

**From:** Yes, I think the ’80 election was important, but the ’84 election was pretty devastating. I was always attracted to the new-idea approach that Gary Hart talked about. A lot of the stuff we were doing in the caucus was really parallel to what Hart was doing. But I guess I thought that Democrats just were not going to win by trying to put the New Deal coalition back together. I just thought it was humpty dumpty and you couldn’t do it. So you had to figure out a different way to do it.

Essentially what I believed is that you had to reach out to the middle class. So, really starting before the ’84 election, but the ’84 election made it crystal clear. We had started this stuff in the early ’80s, and then we started to connect with the Governors and the Senators as the year was going on in late ’83, ’84. It wasn’t so much that Hart had any specific ideas, but I thought the most important thing about it was the thing that we’ve never really accomplished, which is that he challenged the old orthodoxies, the old political arrangements. So I was a big fan of that. A lot of the old southern Democrats who were part of our DLC at the beginning didn’t have any ties to the old party infrastructure. They weren’t close to Labor in the way that a lot of the northern Democrats were. They weren’t as close to the interest groups. One of the things we said early on was we wanted to reinstall our party with a sense of national purpose.

In late ’83, I guess, Pat Caddell, who was [George] McGovern’s pollster in ’72 and then I hired for Muskie—one of these people who at that point would go in and out of my life—had been [Joseph] Biden’s close friend. Biden’s election really is the race that put him on the map in ’72. Caddell showed up in ’83. He did these polls in Iowa, and he had a candidate named Mr. Smith. Mr. Smith was what a New Democrat would be. Mr. Smith clobbered Mondale and [John] Glenn, who were the two leading candidates.

So Caddell’s dream was to get Joe Biden to get in the race. Caddell had this game plan that we were going to get Biden to announce for President with a lot of the younger House members on board. We were going to announce it the day before the filing deadline for New Hampshire, and it was going to explode. Biden had too much good sense for that, and he decided that that scheme wasn’t going to work. And it was a good thing because by that time Mondale had really gone to work and locked up a lot of the House people—not necessarily because they agreed with his philosophy but because he knew how to play politics. And as it turned out, D-Day for Caddell’s plan was the day that Jesse Jackson got Robert Goodman free from Syria, so we probably wouldn’t have made much news. But in any event, Hart was the candidate who Caddell finally went to. And the House caucus actually sponsored a debate at Hanover, New Hampshire, at Dartmouth, in January of ’84 where Hart came into his own because Mondale blew up in the last hour.
In any event, the Hart movement, the beginnings of a different kind of Democratic politics, was important. When Mondale got beaten, it seemed to me very clear that we just had to change. I did this long analysis, which we can get for you. It’s private but it has been in the public record before. A memo I did on January 2, 1985, that actually led to the formation of the DLC, where I just basically said the Democratic Party is moving in one direction and the country is moving in another. If we don’t change, we’re going to lose forever. So the Mondale results—49-to-1 is a pretty hard market test to go against.

Riley: So from there you begin moving, more pulling in the direction of contemplating an outside organization?

From: Here’s exactly what happened: I did this long memo to Bob Strauss, believe it or not, in the fall before the election—because everybody knew what was going to happen—saying that I thought that we needed to figure out some way to have a force for national interest in the Democratic Party.

At the same time, Sam Nunn and some other Senators were talking to Strauss about trying to fix the party. So there was a dinner at the end of November. I don’t even know who held it. I wasn’t there but Gillis was invited. Chuck Robb and Nunn and Bruce Babbitt, who was the incoming Democratic Governors Association head—Robb was the current one at that point—and a bunch of other people. They were talking about the future of the party, and because of a bunch of stuff I’d done, they asked me to do for Gillis an analysis of what I thought happened to the election, and I did it.

They came out of that with a desire to elect the next chairman of the party and put Bruce Babbitt and Chuck Robb, the two Governors, in charge. So the next day I get this call at about 10 o’clock in the morning from Chuck Robb asking if I could be on a plane at one o’clock to Hilton Head because the New Democratic Governors were going down there for training, and he wanted me to go down there and have a session with them. So I did and we went down there.

There were six candidates for party chair, and we decided none of them were good enough. One of them was Paul Kirk, who was an ex-chair. So we took it on ourselves to try to interview people and find a candidate. After about two weeks, two things dawned on us: One is that nobody wanted it. Here’s the most important political party post in a democracy in the world, and nobody wanted to be head of the party—at least nobody we cared about. The second thing was, even if we had had a candidate, we were not convinced that we could have gotten any votes for them. We may have had a lot of the leadership of the Congress and the Governors, but the DNC was so independent in those days that we didn’t have any votes anyway.

So we called this meeting in December with a bunch of state party chairs, I guess. In December of 1984 it was in Kansas. We actually met in Kansas City, Kansas because John Carlin was the Governor of Kansas in those days. Out of that we decided to try to do an independent deal. But Paul Kirk, who was the leading candidate, countered by trying to create a policy council of his own. So the choice we had to make, essentially, was whether to go ahead and do something on our own, and we did. That’s where my memo was really critical. They decided to put together an independent group.
Then Gillis died during the Super Bowl, January 20, of 1985. I was going to be head of the Joint Economic Committee. He was going to be chair, and I was going to be executive director, and we were going to be elected the Tuesday after the Super Bowl, but obviously we didn’t make it—like the Muskie campaign, I guess, never got to the starting gate. I could have stayed on, though not as staff director of the Joint Economic Committee.

But these guys came to me and said, “You came up with this idea. Why don’t you see if you want to do it?” To be honest with you, the reason I did it was very simple: it was Chuck Robb. Chuck Robb said to me that he would guarantee—I was not in the financial condition to go out and have a start-up that was going to fail—Chuck said that he’d guarantee my salary for a year even if we didn't make it that long, and that was really what allowed me to do that. So we started in March.

Just one other thing, so you get the sequence right, that’s important: at the Democratic Convention in 1984 in San Francisco, there was an effort—I think, in desperation by Hart and Jackson—to try to stop Mondale. But one of the things they promised was that they were going to try to reduce the super delegates and all that. We convened a group of party leaders, a lot of House members. I can’t remember whether there were any Senators—maybe a couple of Senators, maybe some Governors, but I don’t think a lot. We were able to stop that. We convened them in Gillis’ suite. A lot of people say that that was really the beginnings of working together to form the DLC.

**Riley:** How did you go about making decisions about who was going to be signed up at the beginning?

**From:** Part of it was self-selective. There were six people who were, I guess, the first governing board: Gephardt, Robb, Babbitt, Nunn, Chiles, and Jim Jones were the six. The first five were all, to one degree or another, working together right from the election. Jim may have been involved in that too, but he was thinking about trying to create a think tank of some sort. So I talked to him, and he just agreed to pitch in with us.

Then when we went around to get membership, we went to the Committee on Party Effectiveness. That had a group of Senators. Robb and Babbitt worked some of the Democratic Governors. In any event, Jenifer [Callahan] or somebody can get you the list of the originals, but we had about 35 we had put together. Will Marshall, a great graduate of the University of Virginia, who had been Jim Hunt’s press secretary in ’84, came back here to find gainful employment. He had worked for Gillis a little bit from before he went down to North Carolina. Will actually wrote a lot of the stuff, including the description of the DLC and all of that as we were starting it. As I said, we got a lot of the House guys who were engaged with us, their Senate group, and whatever Governors we could hook on, including Clinton, who was one of the originals.

**Riley:** So he was one of the originals?

**From:** Yes.
Riley: Had you known Clinton at that point?

From: Not really very well, but I’ve known Bruce Lindsey forever.

Riley: Tell us how that came about.

From: Bruce’s first wife was a secretary in the legislative department in Muskie’s office, in ’70, ’71, ’72.

Riley: Bev [Lindsey]?  

From: Yes, Bev. So I knew Bruce through that, and he was working for Senator [David H.] Pryor. So Clinton was one of the original people to sign on.

I’m trying to remember—I remember the event. It was probably in ’87, so it was a couple of years after we started. We had this Super Tuesday Summit in Atlanta. Even though the DLC gets blamed for Super Tuesday, it really wasn’t a DLC effort. A lot of the Governors and Senators who were part of the DLC pushed it, but we never did it as an institution. But in any event, as it was looming in the spring of 1987, I just had this feeling that what was going to happen is what did happen in ’88, which was Jesse was going to win all the primaries. And that wasn’t what I thought these guys, Bob Graham and Jay [Hakes] and all those people who pushed for Super Tuesday, wanted.

Riley: No, I don’t think it was the intended consequence.

From: So what I wanted to do was have a session where we talked about the Super Tuesday primary and get people interested in it. We had a summit—we called it the Super Tuesday Summit—and Clinton came. That was the first time he came. Then I don’t think he missed a DLC meeting until well after he was in the White House.

Morrisroe: What were your first impressions of him?

From: Well, I just think Bill Clinton is the greatest political talent I’ve ever seen. I’ve never seen anything like it. We had a retreat in Williamsburg and a Presidential debate then in February of 1988, I think, from which there are probably some pictures around here of young Bill Clinton. He spoke, I think, on education reform, and he just blew people away. I’ve never seen anything quite like it. We talked a lot through the ’88 campaign.

Then in ’89 we did our Philadelphia conference and, again, he was the star of the show. I think, in ’88—and I think it’s referred to in your notebook—Chuck Robb did the JJ [Thomas Jefferson-Andrew Jackson] Dinner speech in Arkansas, and I asked him to feel out Clinton about whether he was interested in being chairman of the DLC. Robb thought that there was some possibility. Then again, he was such an incredible hit. I’d just never seen anything quite like Clinton—still haven’t. So in April of 1989, I went down and asked him to be chair, and he agreed. It took a long time to get that consummated, but that’s just the way things are with Bill Clinton.
Riley: I want to talk about that, but let me fill in a couple of blanks before we get there just to flesh it out. I don’t ever like to presume that people have read outside works, but I did want to ask you a question. Evidently you cooperated with Ken Baer.

From: Ken Baer, yes.

Riley: Is it your sense that his treatment of the internal development of the DLC is a good, accurate portrayal of what was happening in the early years, especially in the ’80s?

From: I’m trying to remember. He talked about the “big tent theory.”

Riley: Yes.

From: I think it’s probably pretty accurate.

Riley: The reason being that it helps if we use that as the baseline, and you’ve got some adjustments that you want to make, it saves us a lot of time without going into a lot of detail.

From: I understand, but to be honest, I haven’t read it in a long time.

Riley: We’ll take a break. I’ve got a copy if you want to see it.

[BREAK]

Riley: We’re back.

From: I’ll give you my version of the genesis of the stages of the DLC. I let Ken Baer have access to all of my private memos and papers up until the day that Clinton got elected. If you read the book, you’ll see that there’s a lot of detail about the DLC until Clinton got elected.

Riley: I did notice that, yes.

From: But I’ve always guarded the memos I wrote to him as President because I just don’t believe in kiss-and-tell books. I really believe, as we talked about before—we talked about what we’d do with this—I think they are an important part of the historical record. But on the other hand, we had some important differences at the beginning of the administration. I think I had some influence on shifts—maybe, maybe not. But Clinton and I remained friends over the years. I’m immensely loyal to him because I would never have been where I am without him.

Anyway, let’s just go. We start the DLC in 1985. My friend Bob Squier, whom I’ve known forever, the late Bob Squier, dubs us as the “southern white boys’ caucus.” The first trip we ever
did was May 17, 1985. We go down to Florida. Bob Graham is Governor; Lawton is Senator. I take Nunn, Gephardt—I can’t remember how many other people, a bunch of others—Bill Nelson. We have a meeting that Graham puts together with members of the legislature. I can’t even remember who it was, but some woman in the legislature complains that there aren’t any women or minorities. So we made a big effort to do that.

The reality is the DLC was formed because there were a lot of people in our party who believed that their survival was in danger, and we didn’t really worry about what their racial or gender makeup was. But obviously that was a big deal. It reflected itself in a number of ways: One was we did make a big effort—and particularly Dick Gephardt, who was the first chair, and then Chuck Robb took over in the spring of 1986, right after he gave up the Governorship—they really made an effort to recruit people. Gephardt had other business to do. Robb was just getting back in the private sector, and he probably spent a good third or half of his time as chair of the DLC. So he really worked on that, and we did.

Riley: And he had Presidential aspirations at that time.

From: Yes and no. Chuck Robb is a really interesting, smart, complex guy. People had Presidential aspirations for him. I’m not really sure he himself did. Robb had a great value in that he knew himself. I remember asking him this question as we were going up to the ’88 campaign: I said, “You know, people think that this is as close as the golden ring will ever come.” And he said, “Yes, well, go back and tell them it’s not close enough for me to grasp.” I just thought that was a really interesting comment.

But anyway, I always do things purposefully. My first chairman was Dick Gephardt. Partially he was my friend from college. We went to Northwestern together in the early ’60s. He was president of the student body in my freshman year.

Riley: There are probably stories that we would love to hear.

From: But we won’t get into that. [laughter] I didn’t know him well, but even though, I’ll just tell you one thing: in those days he wasn’t Dick Gephardt; he was Rich Gephardt. So when I introduce him I say, “I knew Gephardt when he was Rich.”

Gephardt was an important first chair because, don’t forget, we were organized as an insurgent group. I think Phil Gailey, in the story either the last day of February, first day of March of 1985 when we were organized, in the New York Times, front-page story, basically said that there are a lot of people in the party who feared that all the real young, attractive talent is going to go to the DLC, and the rest of the party is going to be left with everybody else. So we were not exactly immediately well received. Jack Germond, whom I call the “conventional wisdom purveyor of the time,” predicted three times on the McLaughlin Group in the first 18 months that we’d have six months to live. So we were not always welcome. Gephardt was a perfect guy because he was a conciliator by nature. That’s why I wanted him to be the first chair, because I figured we had ruffled enough feathers by existing. I didn’t want to operationally do that.
The other thing it did was it made me make, I think, important policy choices for us. There was a group that was [Henry] Scoop Jackson Democrats, called the Coalition for a Democratic Majority, and a guy who died far too young and was part of the Clinton campaign, David Ifshin, was the leader of that group. I remember going down to Ifshin’s office—to the [Charles] Manatt, [Thomas] Phelps law firm—and meeting with a bunch of these guys right after we started the DLC. They were hammering me to get into the fight over equal division and quotas in the Democratic nominating process. I said, “I’m not going to do that. If I do that, I’ll be like you guys—irrelevant or out of business.”

One of my rules is I like to play on my home turf. We’ll get into how that really played out in the history of the DLC and was in the key for the run up to the Clinton candidacy. And I don’t like to take on battles I can’t win, especially when you’re too weak to recover from a loss. I’m willing to take on hard fights, but I want to make sure that you’re strong enough to take them on. Whether I think it was a fair deal or not, the fact that we didn’t have a lot of diversity at the beginning was a big deal for a lot of people in the Democratic Party. I thought that’s probably part of the reason we had been in so much trouble as a party—that we worried about things like that rather than talking to ordinary people. But that’s another matter. We had to deal with that, and we did.

So as Kenny Baer said, we had the open-tent policy, but we really drove it during the Robb period. He went out and he recruited people. A critical person in that was [Marie Corinne] Lindy Boggs. [Ernest Nathan] Dutch Morial, the late mayor of New Orleans, father of another mayor, Marc, was an early DLCer. Maynard Jackson, Andy Young, because of Sam Nunn, came in. But Lindy was really critical. She was actually on the legal board of the DLC after she got out of the House, until she was appointed Ambassador to the Vatican. She helped us very much in getting people in Louisiana. Bill Jefferson, who unfortunately now is in trouble, but a really smart guy, has always been a longtime ally of mine, in part because he replaced Lindy in the House, and Lindy got him into it.

So that is right. Chuck Robb was the second chairman. I can’t remember how Kenny played all this, but I want to tell you my thinking of it because I think it leads up to Clinton very importantly. Chuck Robb was the second chairman—and that was the period that I thought we had to begin to make our breaks with the party and to state our own philosophy. Chuck did a series of speeches as DLC chair, which were highly acclaimed, broke a lot of new turf, including a lot of stuff that later became part of the Clinton philosophy. But at the same time, he was very careful always to try to build broader and broader support.

The third chair of the DLC was Sam Nunn. The reason for Nunn is, going into the ’88 campaign, I figured we wouldn’t have a DLC nominee, even though there were a bunch of them who were running. I hoped, obviously, we’d have a DLC nominee, but I wanted to make sure that we had the most important Democrat who was not going to be on the ticket as chair of the DLC. I figured that because—this was before the Berlin Wall fell—one of the early things we did in the DLC was a paper about Nunn and Les Aspin and Al Gore on security called “Defending America,” which a lot of people think was a critical document in helping the Senate Democrats deal with Reagan and win back the Senate in ’86. I wanted to have the most important Democrat the nominee would absolutely need, but was not likely to be on the ticket as chair of the DLC.
Riley: Was Nunn uninterested in Presidential politics at the time, from your perspective? This is another person, like Robb, whose name was constantly in play.

From: I always tried to keep Nunn’s mind open to it, but Sam Nunn said when he woke up in the morning and looked in the mirror, he didn’t see a President of the United States staring back at him. He saw the chairman of the Armed Services Committee.

Riley: That’s unusual.

From: I think he would have liked maybe to have been President, but Sam Nunn, he’s as honorable a man as you’ll ever find. I probably never met anybody in politics who is more honorable than Nunn. People who disagreed with him on a lot of things would say Sam Nunn is the most awesome guy they’ve ever met in politics. But Nunn is a very conservative guy, and he would have had a hard time winning the Democratic nomination for President, and he knew it. He’s a very cautious guy, and he has no appetite for political combat.

One of the reasons that Clinton was able to do a lot of the stuff that he did with us is because Nunn, after the Gulf War vote in 1991, pulled back from doing stuff that he was going to do for us. Clinton, who didn’t think he was going to have time because of the legislative session, wound up getting everything done early and was free to go. Nunn really never had a race after his first one. He wasn’t a political guy. He was a smart guy. He cared about the security of the country. He was an intellectual guy. He did more homework than anybody I’ve ever seen. I had hoped—and Gordon Giffin, who is my dear friend, and a close door ally in Georgia—Gordon and I used to get on him all the time and encourage him. But I don’t know. I didn’t expect him on the ticket in ’88, even though we pushed him hard to run. My deal was I wanted a chair of the DLC that people have to pay attention to.

One of the hardest periods for the DLC was the ’87, ’88 period because people pay attention to the Presidential race. We undertook stuff that I probably wouldn’t do in my business—after I learned a little bit I didn’t know then about the business of running a place—like we sponsored a bunch of Presidential debates, figuring that you could raise a lot of money around that. It’s pretty hard because, first of all, in ’88 not a lot of people thought the Democratic nominee was going to be President. But also what happens in a debate is, unlike a conference where elected officials come and sponsors can deal with them, well, the candidates fly in and fly out. So there’s nothing in it for the sponsors. I’ve learned that the hard way by eating a lot of money. Anyway, so then I really decided, as the party was going down the tubes in ’88, that we really needed a break.

Riley: You decided this based on the [Michael] Dukakis performance?

From: Yes.

Riley: Did you have serious problems with Dukakis as a politician or as a candidate?

From: I guess what I’d say about Dukakis is, during the convention I was quoted as saying Dukakis “has erased the graffiti from the wall, but he hasn’t painted a mural.” He was a reaction
to the worst of Mondale. He wasn’t the same kind of interest-group politician, but he was absolutely ill-defined. I think he wasn’t a very good candidate, but I also don’t think the Presidency is about competency, and not ideology. It’s about competency and ideology. That’s an important thing for Democrats to understand. I hope we’ll get into all that because that’s the most important part of this stuff. That really tells about why Clinton is so important. In any event, I don’t know, we could never penetrate Dukakis.

I’ll tell you one interesting story about Dukakis: [John] Sasso got banished from the campaign because of the Biden stuff. They bring him back on Labor Day of 1988. I had this long discussion with him. He’s getting hammered by [George H.W.] Bush on the flag and patriotism. I told Sasso I thought that what Dukakis had to do was redefine patriotism in the terms of John Kennedy, of giving something back to the country, and I suggested he use our national service plan. Well, Sasso asked me to do a memo, and I sent a memo up there, and we never heard anything.

I remember once they were planning on doing something on national service, and then they decided they had won one of the debates or something, and so they wanted to do debate spin—all tactical, all the things you’ve seen in the last two campaigns from the same crowd and consultants—all tactical, never strategic.

But anyway, we finally did the swing around the country with Nunn, and I can’t remember if Chuck was on it, but a bunch of other people. We did an event with Bentsen on national service in L.A. But the night of the election and his concession speech I hear all this rhetoric that sounds very familiar, and it’s out of this memo. The next day at his press conference he was asked, “Are there any ideas that can unify the Democratic Party?” He said, “Yes, the DLC’s national-service plan.” I’m sure what happened is he got that memo—it was either on his desk or in his briefcase—never looked at it except on Election Day when you don’t have anything to do but sit around and wait, and he read it.

Anyway, I talked to Clinton over and over again on the phone during the campaign.

Riley: Clinton?

From: Yes, in the ’88 campaign. Did commentary. So the reason I wanted to do Clinton as the chair of the DLC was I just thought he was such a great talent. We had to reach out beyond—he had a great reputation in the liberal part of the party, but he also—see, I believe that the DLC philosophy is the modernization of liberalism. We had that same understanding of where liberalism had to go. So I thought he was a natural choice. Chuck Robb told me, “If he spends the next four years running for President on our stuff, all the better for it.” Clinton was a big step for us because a lot of people, probably, in the DLC leadership thought he was too liberal for us.

Riley: Based on?

From: His history and McGovern and all that. And he had the reputation coming out of that first gubernatorial term. But I just thought he was—I’m probably the only person in America who believes he has this very deep-felt philosophy, that it has driven him, that it’s very similar to
I just thought he was the right guy and that he would expand the DLC. I must say that when I went down there in 1989, I told him that I thought he could be President some day and he’d make us both important, but that I didn’t really think it was going to be ’92. I didn’t tell him that, but I didn’t think it was.

**Riley:** Tell us about the trip down in April. How did you go about preparing yourself to do this? You must have gone with some kind of spiel. Baer includes some mention of that trip, but I’d like to hear your perceptions. Who do you find when you get down there?

**From:** I guess Nancy Hernreich was the gatekeeper. I didn’t know a lot of the Clinton people then except for Lindsey. But about what happened in that meeting—it’s one of those things about which I’m sure that I have a very selective memory.

**Riley:** We’re accustomed to that.

**From:** But I remember going down there and basically saying to him, “You know, I’d like you to be the chairman of the DLC. We’ll pay for your travel around the country. We’ll work on an agenda together, and I think you’ll be President some day and we’ll both be important.” He said okay. I seem to remember him bringing in some of the legislative leaders, but I can’t swear on it because I had so many of those meetings down there. I’m sure we talked a lot about an agenda and how the Democratic Party had to modernize and how we had to get on the right side of the security issue and have a sense of national purpose.

**Riley:** He had almost run in ’88. Were you cognizant of what was going on down there at the time it happened?

**From:** In 1988 the answer was no. I wasn’t part of the inner deals. This was in ’87, I think, that he pulled out, right?

**Riley:** Right. Yes, the big announcement was planned in the fall of ’87.

**From:** Here’s what I remember about it: He had just started to participate with us. Probably one of the reasons he had started to participate with us was because he was thinking about running. Betsey Wright, she’s a longtime chief of staff. I’m sure you’ve interviewed her.

**Riley:** We have not, but this is a joint project with the University of Arkansas, and Betsey would be relevant to the pre-Presidential period.

**From:** I personally just adore Betsey Wright, and I think she has had a hard life—one of the people who was most responsible for helping Clinton get ready for President and never really was able to benefit from that. She, I think, put together this incredible operation. Clinton has friends all over, right?—FOBs [friends of Bill]. They put together an operation, I’m sure, in every state.

It just so happened I was going down to Mississippi—I can’t remember if it was a DLC event—but the guy who was one of my hosts down there—I used to do a bunch of stuff with [A.
Michael] Espy down there; it may have been something for Espy. But I remember I was making a speech, and the guy who had shepherded me around Jackson was guy named Wilson Golden, who was Bill Winter’s law partner. And if I’m not mistaken, Clinton’s announcement was supposed to be on a Wednesday. I was down there on Monday giving a speech. And Winter had gone over to Little Rock to be announced as chair of the Clinton campaign. So I give my speech, and I say there are three candidates from the DLC, Gephardt, Babbitt, Biden, and there may be a fourth. On the way back, I switch planes in Cincinnati, and I get all these press calls and it was, “Why did Bill Clinton pull out?” So I wasn’t part of it.

But anyway, here’s my romantic way of talking about this: I think in ’88 Clinton thought about a campaign the way people ordinarily think about campaigns. He organized, put together an operation. Then, and I’ve talked to him about this, I suspect what happened is, in the aftermath of Gary Hart and all that, he just didn’t think it was quite the year for him. So when I went down there in 1989 and we talked about putting together an agenda, I think he had come to an interesting conclusion—and I think he believes this to this day—that the most important thing about running for President is knowing what you’re going to do.

So we didn’t do any of that nonsense that everybody does. I’m not saying that he didn’t go out and meet rich people and all that, because we did. But essentially we didn’t put together an organization, at least not a campaign organization. We built DLC chapters who later worked on the campaign. I denied for David Broder that that was why we were doing it. Because when we started to do that, Clinton essentially was still either running for Governor or living under his pledge that he wouldn’t run.

What we spent all our time on was figuring out what we were going to do. I still remember, on announcement day, October 3, 1991, being down there, and after Clinton gave his speech, which I think Bruce wrote for him—still on my payroll because he didn’t have anybody on the campaign—we had a drink back there inside the Old State House, and he said to a few of us, “You’d better go over to Lindsey’s office and put together a campaign because I just announced for President of the United States, and I don’t have anybody on board.” The difference was he felt—and probably because of what he’d done in ’88—that he could activate that network and raise the money in a hurry if he had a strong rationale for being President. So he made the argument first. I still think that’s the biggest mistake that our candidates make: they all go out there and try to get support, and they forget about making the argument. When it comes time to make the argument, they haven’t thought about it enough to make it.

Riley: Of course, he had a couple of years at that point doing some organization building. There are two things that I’d like to hear from you about: One is there were the two or three prominent meetings that he was involved in where he was giving speeches before the
announcement. And then I’d like to know more about the day-to-day working relationship and what you can recall of dealing with him on mundane matters like, are we going to start a chapter in South Carolina or Florida?—things like that.

From: I’m happy to do both of those. What I’d love to do, though, I just want to go over what I think is the most important part of the Clinton Presidency and what will, over the long haul, be his living legacy, which is the development of his philosophy, before we get so tied up in the day-to-day operation.

Riley: Okay, let’s go ahead and talk about that now.

From: I want to tell you, this is important to me. As I said when we started, I believe the Clinton Presidency, in some ways, is under appreciated, certainly under appreciated in the Democratic Party. And I think, to some degree, he bears some responsibility for it because he hasn’t—at least from my perspective—hasn’t built on the really historic modernization that he led in progressive politics all over the world. To me, that’s unbelievably important. I go around the country. The day before yesterday I was in Denver announcing the 2006 National Conversation. There’s a whole group of young elected officials who are going to be the future stars in American politics who really want to govern under his philosophy, and they need to know it’s his philosophy, and I’m not sure a lot of them do.

I guess what I’d start by saying is that what I think the New Democrat movement, the Clinton philosophy, New Democrat philosophy, is about is the modernization of liberalism. It is to take what I consider first principles of the Democratic Party and offer modern ways to further them. I define those as Jackson’s credo of equal opportunity for all, special privileges for none. As we talked about a minute ago, in the Carter White House, every economic plank was a public jobs program. I think our innovation, modernization, was to understand for the Democrats that if you want to really create jobs and create opportunity and have incomes go up, you’ve got to grow the private economy, and you have to have an economic policy that is not aimed just at redistribution but at growing the economy.

And my point is, there is a philosophical underpinning to it—Kennedy’s ethic of civic responsibility, which showed up in AmeriCorps and welfare reform. It’s [Harry] Truman and [Franklin D.] Roosevelt’s tough-minded internationalism. I think Roosevelt’s incredible legacy is thirst for innovation. Roosevelt always said if something didn’t work, you try something else. It’s for bold, persistent experimentation. We did an event—that I think is in the briefing book—at Hyde Park, in 2000, at the end of the Clinton Presidency, where he actually took all the things he did and turned them back to our basic philosophical document, “The New Orleans Declaration.” Roosevelt’s quote at the Commonwealth Club, in San Francisco, in 1932, was, “New conditions impose new requirements on government and those who conduct government.” You’ve always got to change, and innovation was part of it. [Lyndon] Johnson’s commitment to social justice was part of it.

Historically, Democrats had been, really, a minority party in American politics since the advent of the Republican Party, which first won the Presidency in 1860 with Abraham Lincoln. Since 1860 there have only been three Democrats who have won the Presidency with a majority of the
popular vote. Roosevelt did it four times. Johnson and Carter—and Carter under incredibly unusual circumstances. But because Roosevelt did it four times, a lot of people in our generation—mine anyway—think that it’s the norm. But it’s not the norm.

Between 1860 and 1932, there were 18 Presidential elections. The Republicans won 14 of them. The Democrats, the only time they actually got a majority of the popular vote was 1876, and [Samuel] Tilden got beat in the House by Rutherford B. Hayes. But basically the Democrats only won the White House when there were splits in the Republicans or a big depression. [Grover] Cleveland did it twice, and [Woodrow] Wilson twice. Neither ever got a majority. My own personal interpretation of this, which I think is right, is that in those days we stood for white southerners, segregationists, soft money farmers—the William Jennings Bryan crowd, who now seems to be in some vogue again; I don’t know what he did to win the White House, but he lost three times; I’m not sure that’s my model—and disgruntled urban ethnics. What do they all have in common? They’re all against industrial progress. So we became the remainder party in American politics.

Then Franklin Roosevelt changes it with the help of the Great Depression and we, for a very brief time, become a party, first, of prosperity and restoring the economy, and then of national strength and defending liberty in the world in World War II. And that catapults us into a whole different deal where we are a majority party for 20 years. So between ’32 and ’64, Democrats win seven of nine Presidencies, average 52.5 percent of the vote or something, as opposed to 42 or 43 before that.

Then the coalition disintegrates. We become a party, basically, of constituency and interest groups, and we hit bedrock in ’84. But basically we start averaging 43 percent again in the Presidencies. So what we tried to do with Clinton was reconnect with these grander purposes. Those are some of the intellectual beginnings of this, I think. When everybody knows his or her own experiences, a lot of this will be more personal.

Riley: This is your history, so that’s the purpose.

From: But in 1975, in ’76, Ed Muskie made two very important speeches that I think began to rekindle this, the roots of what Clinton turned into a philosophy. In ’75 he went to the Liberal Party in New York and did a speech where his most important line was, “What’s so damn liberal about wasting money?” As I told you when we started, that was when we were doing the Budget Act. Then he did the same thrust of a speech to the Democratic Platform Committee. He said we represented everything but the views of ordinary people. If you want to meet new priorities, you’ve got to get rid of things that don’t work anymore. In other words you’ve got to modernize, and good government is a good end, because that’s our means. One of the key principles of the credo that’s probably hanging behind me is that we believe in activist government, but it doesn’t mean it has to be old and bureaucratic and sclerotic. It ought to be modern and empowering.

Anyway, so Muskie did those speeches, and they were important. We did the Sunset bill—never passed it, but it was an important milestone. Then when I went into the House caucus, we really began this effort to go back to those core principles of growth and opportunity and strength. I laid a lot of this out in this Hofstra speech, but if you go through, just start with what we did in
’81 and ’84 with the Democratic blueprint, the things are really consistent with what Clinton ran on.

Essentially what we did in the Clinton period here was really try to take that philosophy and hone it in a way we could talk about it, and he’s the best there is at that. We wouldn’t have been able to do it without him because he’s just the best. He finally crystallized it to opportunity, responsibility, and community.

But these are important choices. Gillis Long, who I think is probably an unrecognized hero in all of this, once said that for a Democrat to win, he needs the compassion to care and toughness to govern. Nobody ever doubts our compassion. So as I was preparing the Hofstra speech, I went back and I saw a piece that Bill Schneider had written for the New Republic after the ’88 campaign, which said that what Democrats need to do is nominate a tough liberal in the mold of Kennedy and Truman and Roosevelt, one who was tough enough to stand up to the Russians of the world and the Democratic interest groups at home. We were lucky that the Russians imploded, so we only had to stand up to the Democratic interest groups.

But think about some of these choices that we made. Deciding to have a policy based on fiscal discipline, investment in people and technology, and expanded trade wasn’t exactly the conventional policy or orthodoxy of the Democratic Party, because it was all aimed at growing the private economy. It wasn’t aimed at public jobs programs. I don’t care how many public jobs you create, you’re never going to create 22.5 million new jobs in eight years that way. So part of our philosophy was to figure out how to use the market means and modern means to further traditional goals.

The problem we’ve always had in our party is that people are so tied to the means that they forget about the goals. The reason Bill Clinton won white working people in 1996, even though he had an economic policy that I’d venture to say most organized-labor leadership opposed every single part of, was that it turned out well for working people, which is the point I made at the beginning that Moon Landrieu taught me about politics. But that was one choice, the choice to say that “with rights come responsibilities.” The word “responsibility” wasn’t in the Democratic platform in 1980. That’s a tough choice.

What we did on welfare reform—those were tough choices for Democrats in those days. It doesn’t seem like it now, but when we went to—this goes to the meetings—but when we went to the Cleveland convention, we had Jesse Jackson doing a counter schedule; we had UAW [United Automobile Workers] leafleting—I guess they didn’t call it “picketing” because there were too many House members there, Congressional members there—but it was because we were for fast track on NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement]. Clinton invited, and had a long discussion with, Polly Williams, who was the voucher lady from Milwaukee. We really challenged orthodoxy, but a lot of these were really important choices.

On foreign policy, we made it very clear that we were not going to be afraid to pull the trigger, which is the problem Democrats had. It’s not that we aren’t smarter on foreign policy than the other guys; people just doubt in the end that a Democrat will pull the trigger, and we wanted to make that as clear as we could. I believe that toughness to govern, the ability to stand up to
interest groups, does more to establish your bonafides on security than all the tough talk in the world because what they want to see is a leader who’s tough.

Anyway, the main point I wanted to make, and I did it in a more systematic way, I’m sure, in the Hofstra speech—

Riley: And we’ll be sure that that’s included.

From: —is to show that there are strands of a great tradition that we were reawakening. I think that was critically important, not only to revive the Democratic Party here, and it essentially made us from a 43 to a 48 percent party—of course, we still have a little ways to go—but it also resuscitated the Labour Party in Great Britain because of Tony Blair. I first met him during the Clinton transition when he came over. When we first went over for Third Way discussions in 1997, Tony told me that he still had the notes from that meeting. Opportunity, responsibility, and community—those were his themes too.

For a while Gerhard Schroeder—we’ve got pictures out there of a meeting we hosted with Clinton and Schroeder and Blair and Massimo D’Alema of Italy and Wim Kok of the Netherlands. That was another guy who was ahead of his time like Clinton. So it had a real impact. We went from all-conservative governments around the world to, I think, in Europe, eleven of thirteen governments at one point were center-left governments. So it really changed a lot of stuff. I think that’s something I really wanted to have Clinton build on.

I just want to hit on one other thing because it’s one of those things that we’ll probably miss as we get into the details—maybe we won’t. But I mentioned before that Clinton gets a bad rap on losing the Congress. The first two years he made plenty of mistakes, and they helped [Newton] Gingrich take advantage and win the Congress, and they probably hurt a bunch of Democratic Governors and such. But you also have to put this in a broader historical perspective, because if you don’t, you miss the most important thing that happened in American politics in the last half of the 20th century. That is, it was the movement of white southerners and some northern ethnics into the Republican Party. If you don’t understand that, then you make a lot of mistakes that Democrats are making now because they don’t understand this to a degree.

Let’s just take this, for whatever it’s worth, and you tell me whether I’m full of baloney. Coming out of World War II, everybody assumed the Democrats were the majority party. Roosevelt had won four elections in a row, Truman won unexpectedly in ’48. We had Congressional majorities, for the most part. We lost in ’46; got it back in ’48 in the Congress. But we were a coalition that was unsustainable because we were a coalition of civil rights activists and segregationists. If you adjust the numbers in the 1950s for white southern segregationists, no matter how you adjust them, you’ll find that we’re stronger today than we were then in terms of the core Democratic Party. Without white southerners we were a pretty distinct minority. So we had a lot of building to do.

Anyway, so here’s what happens; this is my interpretation: It’s the stuff Peter Beinart wrote about in the New Republic when he wrote that cover story, “A Fighting Faith.” The most important decision that Democrats made was made with the founding of the ADA [Americans
for Democratic Action] when Arthur Schlesinger and Reinhold Niebuhr and Eleanor Roosevelt and Walter Reuther and Hubert Humphrey and others got together to found the ADA. They decided that if they weren’t right on the most important issue of the time, which was Soviet expansionism, that that was the greatest threat to liberalism and that liberalism would fade away. That probably led to Vietnam, when you think about it. But it sure led to the tough-minded internationalism of Truman and Kennedy.

You have to go 19 sections into Kennedy’s platform before you get to a domestic issue—think about a Democratic Party that would do that today—and yet we like to hold up Kennedy or Roosevelt as models. Roosevelt, in his 1932 platform, the first thing he said was he wanted to reinvigorate the free-trade system. Think about that where Democrats are today. That’s why I say that there is a philosophy to what we did that reconnects. Roosevelt said in ’44 that we built the best military machine in the history of the world, and he was right. I don’t think that that would be a big part of the 2008 Democratic platform, if I’m not mistaken, but it’s part of our tradition. And it’s an important part of our tradition because it was a part of our tradition when people looked to us for national leadership and if we expect them to look to us again—Clinton understood that.

So what happens? In the 1960s Wallace pulls the scab on race. Your friend from Barbour County pulls the scab on race by getting in the primaries against Johnson. Where did Johnson lose? The only states he lost were in the South and Arizona. At the same time, Vietnam melts the glue. It just breaks the consensus on anti-totalitarianism, and essentially, since then, a large part of the Democratic Party—probably, realistically, the dominant center, or the center of gravity of the Democratic Party anyway—has become much more anti-war. So the white South, first in Presidential—but it was only a matter of time before you work through the incumbents who had figured out how to guard their seats—went Republican.

The other thing that happened that nobody will talk about is that in the ’80s, Democrats like Gillis Long, who never won a majority of the white vote, and like John Breaux and others, figured out that to win in the South you had to put together biracial coalitions. All the talk about the black vote in the South being critical and winning the Senate back in 1986, it’s all nonsense. It’s important to get the black vote, but we always got the black vote. Walter Mondale got the black vote. The challenge for Democrats in the South was always getting over the threshold, the white voters you needed in the state to win.

If you looked at the Senate race, the right races in ’86, when we won the Senate back, in every case where there were comparable data for ’84 and ’86, Mondale did better and won the black vote more than the Senate winners. But in each case, whether it was Jim Hunt or Wyche Fowler [Jr.] or whoever it was, there was a threshold—whether it’s 38 or 40 or 42 percent of the white vote you need to get to win in those states—and they got over it. Mondale was always about 20 percent. That’s why. So what Gillis and a lot of these guys—Tom Bevill in Alabama and others—figured out was that with the Voting Rights Act, if they got the black vote, then if they could put together 40, 42 percent of the white vote, they’re probably going to win most of those elections.
What happened is, in 1991 in the redistricting, we resegregated the South, and we re-created ten new black districts, and that’s fine. But the consequence was to take blacks out of all these marginal districts. So essentially you had white districts and black districts in the South, and we paid about a 4-to-1 price for that.

Riley: The Republicans were very supportive of that.

From: That’s exactly right. In fact, I think in the DLC magazine, probably under Clinton’s chairmanship—it may have been before that—we had a piece by Martin Frost talking about that conspiracy.

But the point being, to be sure, Clinton’s mistakes hurt us and cost us some seats, probably cost us some gubernatorial elections, but part of what happened is that, essentially, voters started voting their ideology. That’s a big deal for Democrats. As far as I can go back and look at numbers, there have been more conservatives than liberals in American politics. That’s why Karl Rove loves polarized elections because he starts with a big head start. I believe—and I believe this is the key to the Clinton success—that there is a majority in the progressive center of the electorate, but you’ve got to earn it by going out and convincing people who in a default election would vote for Republicans that they’ve got to vote for you. That’s the key for a Democrat to win, and I think history shows that.

That’s why the argument is so important. That’s why the work we did to build an agenda and a philosophy that you could take to the voters—and we were lucky we had some help in the first race from [Ross] Perot—but that’s why that stuff, to me, was critically important, because without that you don’t have an argument to talk to the voters you need to get to win.

Riley: Was it your sense that when you approached Clinton in April of ’89—is that correct? Do I have my dates right?—

From: I think that’s right.

Riley: —that he’s somebody who already had reached the same conclusions that you had reached? Or is it a case that he’s close enough in ‘89, and what you’re proposing is the continuation of a dialogue in which you can bring him along and he can bring you?

From: I think they’re both true, to be honest. All this is always dynamic and evolving. But I think Clinton understood that instinctively. Clinton had a great advantage: he lost an election. He got his butt kicked. That made him go back and think about it. And he had to think about how he was going to win.

Hillary [Clinton] always gets this bum rap for being a lefty, and maybe she is, but one of the things they did in the ’80s in Arkansas—and I’m not an expert in what they did—was education reform. She led that. And a lot of it was stuff that, in those days, I think, lost them the support of the teachers’ unions.

Riley: Testing.
From: Testing and merit pay. He was the second Governor to do public-school choice. He’s a big advocate of charter schools. The point being that he understood. The political challenge for the Democratic Party, it seems to me, during all those times was to transcend the interest groups, instead of just talking to the interest groups. I think Clinton knew that instinctively. So with that basic understanding, then it was a matter of trying to figure out what are the best ways to do it and how, what principles you further.

I remember when we were on a trip in California and we had this small dinner at some people’s home who wound up being big supporters in the industry, and there were a lot of liberal people there. The first question for Clinton was, “You’re not for charter schools, are you?” He said, “Yes I am, and you should be too, and here’s why.” Clinton—I’m obviously biased about this—but I just think he instinctively understood that you had to connect with ordinary people, with middle-class people, with people who, as he said, “work hard and play by the rules,” or you can’t get elected. And you don’t do that by talking just to interest groups.

Morrisroe: Right before you go down in April to speak with Clinton, you have what I perceive to be a pretty important DLC meeting.

From: The meeting in Philadelphia.

Morrisroe: Right. And at that meeting you put out the “Politics of Evasion” document.

From: We didn’t put out “The Politics of Evasion” at that meeting, but we put out the contents of it, Bill Galston did.

Morrisroe: So that takes on not just the ideology of the Democratic Party but strategy and politics for Presidential elections.

From: Basically what we’ve just been talking about.

Morrisroe: Right, so can you talk about what the reaction was among the Democratic Party, what Clinton’s reaction was when you saw him a month later and engaged in this discussion about how his chairmanship might be mutually beneficial to his Presidential aspirations and the DLC’s?

From: I think the 1988 election was a big shock to Democrats. I think they thought they were going to win. When you think you’re going to win and you get your butt handed to you, people take notice. So there was a receptivity. You lose 40 states in a row, or more, in three elections in a row, people are starting to say, “Maybe we don’t have it exactly right.” So there was an opening for our politics, even as people would attack us, that we didn’t have. Clinton understood that. I’m sure he understood that.

So in January of 1989, I guess it was, I have a breakfast with Bill Galston, who is an old friend of mine, and he has these seven conclusions that were conclusions of “The Politics of Evasion.” The bottom line was that too many Americans saw the Democrats as inattentive to their
economic interests, hostile to their values, and unwilling to defend the country, and that’s what they wanted. It was also that he had looked at the data, and it was not that people said Dukakis wasn’t liberal enough, but really when you look at the data it was that people thought Dukakis was too liberal, the Democratic Party was too far beyond. We got almost everything right in “The Politics of Evasion.” We got the Congressional bastion right. We said that we weren’t going to keep that.

Morrisroe: Turnout myth, I think, was another.

From: Yes, the myth of turnout. I can’t remember if we did it in “The Politics of Evasion” or I did my own stuff. I did a memo, which is probably in one of those books that I did, for the Philadelphia conference, where I—I can’t remember the word I used for it—but I took Carter’s 1976 party breakdown and projected what the Democratic vote would have been, given party identification in ’88, if Dukakis had gotten exactly the same percentage of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents—and Dukakis would have won. So the point was, we were losing ground.

But what happened in Philadelphia is Galston laid down his speech. I think we did a hollow, square table. Jesse Jackson went crazy—we expected that—and Chuck Robb took him on. Robb was usually the one guy who always was not afraid to do anything like that. When you lead night combat in Vietnam [laughter]

Riley: Not a big deal.

From: Jesse, either there at the table or, I think, afterwards—a cluster of reporters—called us “warm spit,” but the battle was joined.

I think Clinton came that night. He wasn’t there for that. He was the feature the next day, and I think he did education reform. He may have done something else. The transcripts are all available, I think. I think we did transcripts in those days. Again, people just went crazy over Clinton. I don’t remember any details except I remember him coming in about 10:30 the night before he was going to speak and spending a couple of hours just talking about the politics in the hotel before he went to bed. He came back the next day and gave his speech. I just think he instinctively knew the politics.

Then we actually wrote “The Politics of Evasion” over the summer and released it in the fall. But essentially we had released it in Philadelphia. Obviously Clinton had seen that and understood the politics of it when I met with him, and he said he wanted to do this. Then we had about ten or eleven months where he kept saying he wanted to do it, but we could never quite get the deal done.

Morrisroe: What was his resistance? Was it the workload that was mentioned, or were there other—?

From: First, there was the question of whether or not he was going to run for re-election. He wasn’t quite sure what he was going to do, whether he was going to run for re-election. Then at
one point he said, “If I don’t run for re-election, then I’m going to have to make a lot of money.” The amount he said was a lot, I guess, if you’ve had an Arkansas Governor’s salary, which was about $25,000 or something at the time, but any of us would have said we couldn’t get by on what he wanted. [laughter] But, of course, the guy had always lived in public housing. I told him he was crazy because I’d pay him what he wanted just to be a full-time chair—or part-time chair, for that matter. But I don’t know, I just think it’s a pattern in the White House. Clinton always had trouble closing decisions. I didn’t think there was any doubt he was going to do it.

We had another meeting in November of ’89—after Doug Wilder got elected Governor—that Wilder came to during that short period of time while Wilder was being friendly to us—that’s a whole other deal. Clinton came up for that and, again, was great. A lot of that was organized around David Osborne and reinventing government. Osborne and Clinton were good buddies from Laboratories of Democracy. In the Clinton legislative sessions in Arkansas, he often took a lot of that stuff. So we were engaged with him all the time but just didn’t get closure.

Morrisroe: In some other readings I did, it mentioned that the decision for new chairs was essentially a consensus decision. Was that consensus achieved pretty quickly after the ’88 election that you as an organization wanted to go to Clinton or—

From: The way the DLC works—Sam Nunn used to call it the “autocratic leadership council.” [laughter]

Riley: Do we know who the autocrat is?

From: You’re looking at him. Actually, in those days we had a governing board, and we tried to do that stuff by consensus, but the key players were always Nunn and Chuck and me; and when Gephardt was really engaged, he was part of it; Jim Jones was part of it; Lawton, even though Lawton by that time had left the Senate and was in limbo land. But you can see in “The New Orleans Declaration” who the people were on the governing board.

But Nunn and Robb and I talked about it, and Robb and I were big advocates of Clinton, and based on our discussions, I went down and talked to him about it. Nunn got some flak from some people, some more conservative Senators, for a while that maybe Clinton was too liberal. Chuck had, probably more than anybody else, convinced him that he was really a perfect fit for us. And Nunn wanted to give it up. He had had it for a couple of years.

Morrisroe: Was seeking out Clinton for the chairmanship part of the deliberate Presidential strategy for the next election, as opposed to, say, the Nunn strategy of having the most senior, impressive, non-candidate in the election? That is, were you seeking to tie, not so much the future of the DLC, but to some extent its next cycle to a prominent candidate?

From: I didn’t know Clinton was going to run. The reason I went for Clinton was because I thought he was the best talent I’d ever seen. I believed his philosophy was very close to ours and that what we really needed to do in the Democratic Party was drive a new philosophy and new message and that he would be the best to do it.
I did a memo to Nunn and Robb and Breaux and a whole bunch of those people in November 1989—so it was after I went down to see Clinton, but it was all part of that time; it was November 3, I think—where I said, “What we need is a revolution in our party like Reagan had in his.” We had to understand that if we drew lines that some of our friends would fall on the other side of those lines. Could we have done that in 1988? The answer is no. But a third election where you get your ass kicked makes people say, “Maybe these guys aren’t so goddamn stupid as we thought. Maybe we ought to try their way.” If you go through the DLC records—I used to be a prolific strategy memo writer—

Riley: That’s very helpful for historians.

From: I don’t write any of that anymore. It drives me crazy. I wish I had somebody doing that for me as I used to do.

But anyway, we decided that we would do—we first called it a mainstream manifesto, but then John Breaux and some others suggested “manifesto” wasn’t exactly the right term for us, so it became “The New Orleans Declaration.” We spent months working on that. We’d do drafts, and we’d run it through supporters and members of Congress and Clinton. In the end, Clinton and Nunn and Bruce Reed and Will and I honed it to the point where it became a very important document. If you looked at it two months or a month before the New Orleans conference, you’d have said this is the biggest monster that we ever did, because essentially the way we did it was we took all sorts of comments, incorporated them, and when you see all the incorporated comments, where they lead you, people want you to start all over. We did, and we honed it and made it sharp and crisp. Those 18 or 22 sentences at the beginning really became defining for the Clinton Presidency. That was the first thing he ever did officially as the DLC chair, because we did that in New Orleans in 1990.

[BREAK]

Morrisroe: When we left, President Clinton had just been named chair. The first year there, as I understand, was a pretty strong push to develop state chapters. How did you go about doing that? How did you pick which states to focus on, and how was Clinton used in that effort?

From: Clinton became chair in March of 1990, and immediately Governor Dick Riley and people in South Carolina wanted to do a state chapter down there. Over the years we had had sporadic interest in Florida and Minnesota and in Louisiana. We did chapters but never anything with any efficiency.

Part of the strategy that I thought about as the ’88 election was unraveling is that if we’re going to be a political movement we needed four things: We needed good political leadership, and obviously with Clinton we had as good as you could get. I thought we needed, if we were going
to be an idea place, we needed an idea center, and that’s why we created the PPI [Progressive Policy Institute] in 1989. We also created the magazine in 1989.

We needed money but we also needed troops. We’ve never been any good at it. We had a one-person field department. We decided we would go out and see if we could at least organize the shells of chapters. Through the work of this woman, Linda Moore—now Linda Moore Forbes—who wound up in the Clinton White House in the political department—now she is helping Evan Bayh—I hate to tell you this, but it was really Linda’s incredible political gut instincts. We had people from all over who were interested, particularly in the parts of the country where the Democratic Party was in deep trouble. The DLC was viewed as a salvation. So people wanted to organize. In some places, there were people in the Senate—like in Kentucky, Wendy [Wendell H.] Ford was helpful. In some cases Clinton had gubernatorial colleagues—in New Mexico, Bruce King; Wyoming, Mike Sullivan, Kathy Karpan. So just from the early leadership, a lot of people in the South looked to Sam Nunn. We had Mike Espy in Mississippi. We pieced it together.

I can’t tell you there was a grand scheme. Again, I think one of these notebooks that Jennifer actually put together—I can’t remember why we did this, but it was one of these history projects; maybe it was for Hofstra. When Clinton went on the road, when we decided to go on the road, we just swept through, met with local people who had expressed an interest in us, who Linda thought were pretty sound politically, often with guidance from the Congressional people or Senators or a Governor that he knew. We put together, really, shells of chapters. We had a leadership of chapters. But it was before the Internet. It’s hard to believe, but it was before the Internet. So there was no real way. Then there were places like Texas, where we had a history, and Bill Hobby [Jr.], who was Lieutenant Governor, was a key player in that. I think Mark White was Governor when we started. We had raised a bunch of money in Texas in the early days. So it was by hit-and-miss.

Riley: You were still principally an elite organization of office holders at this point.

From: We’ve always been an office-holder organization.

Riley: But you were looking to expand beyond that?

From: We wanted to have some advocates around the country. But what we learned quickly is that organizing is manpower-intensive. We actually, for a lot of reasons, not the least of which were legal—because you can’t control those people out in the states, and they did a lot of stuff that we couldn’t do under our tax status—for a while we had marketing agreements with all these state chapters, and then we just closed them.

There were a lot of different reasons for that. One of them was that when we won the Presidency, when Clinton won, a lot of the people who put together these state groups wanted to come to the White House, wanted to come to work in the administration. I’m sure that’s one of the reasons they did it. But it also was harder for us to control. What we learned in those days was that if you didn’t have somebody in the state who was actually creating activity, it’s hard to keep an entity going.
It’s different today because you can communicate with them every day on the web and it’s simple. But in those days we had no web. It’s hard to believe. I remember in the Clinton campaign, I had one of these old—we used to call them teletypewriter machines. They’re the predecessors to the fax. They spun real fast, and they had this funny paper that would come out in one page, and you had to cut it up into the pages. It would take 4–6 minutes a page, so you might be, for a speech, you might take an hour to get it. I thought it was so great. I had one in my house in Bethesda. I had an office in one corner of the second floor, and you could sometimes roll those speeches all the way down the hallway into my daughter’s bedroom. You couldn’t imagine that today. Today it’s all instantaneous.

Riley: But anyway, I interrupted you. I just wanted to make sure that I understood that it was still basically an office-holder operation.

From: It was. Sometimes we had lay leadership of the chapters. Often some of the local elected officials who wanted to be identified with the DLC would organize them. There wasn’t any great rhyme or reason to it. The thing you have to understand is when we started traveling really extensively with Clinton—he took over in March of ’90—we did a big trip to California, where actually I think we launched a chapter that John Emerson, who was later in the White House, ran for a while. Then Clinton had the closer-than-expected primary in 1990 in Arkansas, so we had a joint decision that he would get his butt back to Arkansas and win because he’d be worthless if he lost.

So we didn’t really do a lot of traveling then until after the election. Starting right after the election, early December, we did a four- or five-state swing through the South and created a bunch of chapters. The thing you have to understand is that this was not an elaborate deal. We had a traveling party of five. It was Clinton and me and Linda Moore, who did the logistics—often Lindsey, but if not Lindsey, then Craig Smith and a security guard, and that was it. We didn’t do a lot of elaborate stuff.

You’d have a place like Michigan, where Doug Ross, who was later Assistant Secretary of Labor, but was an old friend of mine from my days with Joe Tydings, a DLC guy, helped us with a lot of the idea stuff. He was there. So he organized the chapter there. There was not a massive organizational effort. If we knew who the rising people were, we’d call them. If they were interested, we’d try to do it.

Morrisroe: How were people that he was speaking to, that he was meeting with, responding to Clinton on these trips?

From: Are you kidding me? It was magic. Traveling with Bill Clinton, even when he was the Governor, we didn’t have any entourage, anything like that, when nobody knew him. There’s nothing like it because this guy mesmerized every audience he talked to.

Riley: Is it possible for you to elaborate on this? Do you remember any trips in particular? Can you paint us a picture?
From: The first thing you have to understand about Clinton is that he’s a great guy. He’s the kind of guy you want to have a drink with—and probably a lot more. We don’t have to go into that. [*laughter*]

Riley: You spent a lot of time with this guy.

From: I think we were in 25 states together over about a 15-month period. I’m not one of the close, personal friends, but I consider myself a pretty good political ally.

One time, in December of 1990, we started off one morning—Monday morning, I think—having breakfast with Jerry Abramson, the mayor of Louisville. He just happened to mention that the University of Kentucky was going over to Chapel Hill that night to play North Carolina. We were flying to Raleigh that afternoon, so Clinton turns to me immediately and says, “Let’s go to the game.”

I called David Price, who was a member of Congress then—and then was out for a couple of years and came back; he was an old friend of mine—and we got tickets. As was the case always when a Governor traveled, the state police from the state we were traveling in came to meet us at the airport. They had one trooper car, and then we had our own car. Somebody was driving the rest of the entourage. We go straight from the airport to the Dean Dome, park our car next to the entrance, go in, and watch the game and come out, and the campus police had towed our car. We must have spent 2 ½ hours at the campus police station because, even though Clinton could have obviously gone back in the trooper’s car, he wasn’t going to leave until that car was back. It belonged to Price’s A.A., who was going to be an important player in the campaign.

The thing I remember about those trips more than anything else is Clinton had this ability to go in to talk to groups of people who were very different. You’d go to two audiences; they’d be very different on the issues or on an issue, sometimes polar opposed. Clinton could give them the same speech word-for-word, and both of them come out feeling good, like he was on their side. There’s a political magic that I’ve never seen and I don’t ever expect to see again, to be honest with you.

The other thing that was always very important to me and I thought really defined Clinton—if you’ve done extensive interviewing with his friends, you’ll know that he didn’t like conflict. I’m sure some of these things that he did he would do with his knees knocking, so to speak. But we were in California one time, one of these groups in Hollywood. Somebody said, “Why don't you give the kind of speeches that Tom Harkin does and really go after George Bush?” Clinton always had that incredible discipline and way of handling that stuff. He’d say, “I could give a speech that’s just as tough and mean as Tom Harkin, but it’s not going to convince one person that I need to get to vote for us to vote for me, so I’m not going to do it.”

We had all sorts of weird deals. One time—I think it was actually going from Raleigh—we were supposed to get to Jackson, Mississippi, and we ran into headwinds. We had a little King Air plane. The only rule was that it had to have two pilots, but other than that Clinton could fly. So we were so late—in fact, I think the event was over, and we just got there for a press conference. A lot of the teachers’ groups, probably the Mississippi Education Association, I think, had a lot
of people around that press conference. Clinton came in and made the argument for school reform and winds up winning a lot of those people over. That happened time after time again.

The other thing that was always remarkable about Clinton—and I’ve never seen anything like this—you travel all day, and you’d get to this place, like on the west coast, and it’s late at night, and he’d run into somebody in the hotel lobby who you couldn’t anticipate, so you couldn’t be briefed on it. He’d say, “Remember when we first met in 1974, and we talked about this, this, this, and this?” It’s the most remarkable thing. It was an incredible experience. I suspect I’ll never have anything like that in my life. But to start out when there are five of you running around the country and wind up, really, in 2, 2 ½ years with this guy being elected President of the United States is quite an experience.

**Riley:** That’s why it’s fascinating for us. I think we’re political junkies before we put on our scholar’s hat. So you hear this and it’s fascinating. I think it’s also a comment about the state of the country. You can start with something like that and manage to end up in the White House.

**From:** I think it is one of the most unbelievable things about this country. This country has plenty of faults, and sometimes we make mistakes in whom we choose to govern us, but generally we don’t do badly. It is such an open country. One of the reasons you get a lot of the controversy you get now is because we’ve had to tighten this country up a little bit. You can argue whether we’ve done it too far or not. But this is a country with unlimited opportunity for people who want to work hard. Obviously it always helps to get a few breaks.

**Riley:** Not this guy. This is a guy who didn’t start with breaks, right?

**From:** Things had to break right for you along the way.

**Riley:** Of course.

**From:** It was an incredible experience. Bill Clinton, by the time I got to know him, was a political talent that was unmatched. For him, going all the way to the White House was, I’m sure, always within the realm. But think about this: in the whole history of the country there have been 39 people who have been elected President of the United States. To have had the chance to be engaged with one of them in his seminal period is quite a remarkable deal.

If you go back and you look at 1990 when we did “The New Orleans Declaration” and Clinton did his inaugural address—because that’s where he accepted the chairmanship—he talked about national service and education reform and maybe welfare reform. We decided that if you really hammered away at an agenda, at a political philosophy, and it connected with voters, your prospects were unlimited. Even before the web, I think—sometimes I think the web gives people too much information too fast. Also it’s not a very discriminating vehicle. A nut case and a senior pundit are often indiscernible on the web. But one of the things that happens, I think, is that you can get known very quickly in this country, even before the Internet. I mean, you win a primary, and you’re on the cover of *Time* and *Newsweek*, and your recognition goes from 25 percent to 80 percent in a week. That’s never the challenge, it seems to me.
Anyway, it’s a remarkable process. The Presidential nominating process, I think, needs to be reformed. I believe it ought to be stretched out, and maybe it ought to be open in a different sort of way because in our efforts to open it up, interestingly, we made it more exclusive. But for all that, it’s the most important political process in America because it’s the way we define our political parties. Parties take on the definition of the nominee.

When you have somebody who runs for President the way Clinton did, which was to focus on the idea side of it, on the message side, on the definition side, and he takes that into the primaries—I’m sure the purist will say that he bent here, and he bent there, and he did, I’m sure—but basically with a pretty consistent message that he was able to use through and a consistent philosophy, you really have a chance to change this country dramatically, and you don’t need a lot of people to do it. That’s the interesting thing.

Let me say one other thing about the difference between now and then, because this is also important. Back then, there was a small group—maybe a dozen, maybe twenty—of political reporters who really set the context of the campaign: [Ron] Brownstein and Broder and [Daniel] Balz and Joe Klein and Paul Gigot and a bunch of those guys. We were able to really work on those, focus on them. We had a lot of advocates in that group. I can’t speak to his relationships with the press as things went on. At least in the early days, we were able to frame the contest in a pretty effective way. That would be harder to do today with the bloggers attacking you for being smart.

**Morrisroe:** The Cleveland convention was an important event, not only for the DLC but also, to some extent, coming out for Clinton. Can you tell us a little bit about setting up that event, the decision not to have Jackson be given the floor for a speech, and Clinton’s speech?

**Riley:** And why did you put it in Cleveland?

**From:** What do you mean? What’s wrong with Cleveland? [*laughter]*

**Riley:** Nothing’s wrong with Cleveland. One of our colleagues who used to work with us was from Cleveland.

**From:** Ohio is a key state.

**Riley:** Enough said.

**From:** I think the Clinton campaign got launched at Cleveland, and Ohio put him over the top. So it’s bookends.

In those days the DLC did a regular annual conference. By 1989 and 1990, those became important just in demands made on our business, because a lot of the money came in around those conferences. We did it in the spring of 1989 in Philadelphia. A couple of people from New Orleans, including a young guy who was by that time a lawyer in New Orleans but had been an intern for Gillis Long, and a guy named Ken Carter—who was, I think, the assessor or tax collector, an African-American guy who had some local post in New Orleans, whose daughter
Karen [Carter] is now a DLC state rep—came to me in Cleveland and said, “We want you to come to New Orleans next year.” They actually got the city to put up a good chunk of dough to get us there.

So after we did New Orleans and did “The New Orleans Declaration” and we started looking around for 1990, we decided to go to the Midwest, and Cleveland made a good offer for us. Mike White was a young, brand-new, 39-year-old, young mayor, a rising star. I liked him a lot, so we decided to go there. But cities, in those days, bid for DLC conferences. It’s hard to believe. But don’t forget, we were so far in the wilderness that this seemed to be the only ray of hope. A lot of cities looked at it, in fact—Denver. We still get deals from the cities. In Denver they’re looking to get the national convention, so they’re hoping that the big National Conversation will help them with the national convention. They’ll take either party, I might add, for the national convention.

So we decided, pretty early actually, like in the fall of 1990, that we’d do this conference in Cleveland in May. We had done “The New Orleans Declaration” in New Orleans, which was the philosophy. We decided we were going to try, if we could, to actually do a governing agenda and try to get it approved in Cleveland at the convention, at the DLC conference. You have to understand, there aren’t any detailed rules on how you do these things. It’s all entrepreneurial. It goes to the point I made before that I like to play on my own turf.

It also goes to the point I just made about the nominating process. In American politics, there aren’t party conferences like there are in the parliamentary systems. There’s no way to have a definition, a party position, in American politics. When Tony Blair says, “We vote at our party conference,” it becomes binding. If the Labour guys don’t vote for it, Labour doesn’t vote for it, your government might fall. In our system it doesn’t work that way. When was the last time you heard anybody say, “I can’t vote like that because it’s against my party platform”? It just doesn’t work that way.

So what we decided is that if we wanted to offer a new agenda, we had to create our own playing field, and that’s what Cleveland was. So we set it up. We decided we were going to have votes on resolutions—with not very good sense about who was going to vote. In 1990 I had invited Jesse Jackson to speak to New Orleans. He did. We had a meeting of our private supporters. Clinton was late, as usual, operating on Clinton time. I just took unbelievable flak for inviting him and doing that. I made the argument that we were going to be an open forum and all of this.

We get the ’91 thing, and we have a meeting in New York. We had had a fundraiser at somebody’s house, and then Clinton and Nunn and I got together. We decided that we were going to actually try to do business and pass resolutions. And while we might have Presidential candidates speak, we weren’t going to do what we always did and just have an open forum. Anybody was welcome to participate in the debate, but we weren’t going to offer special speeches. So when Jesse got that message he was not very happy. He went after me and after Clinton—mostly after me; I was the easier target. But we basically held our ground.

Morrisroe: Did Clinton have to be convinced to take that approach?
From: I’m not sure how much he had to be convinced when we decided, but when we got a backlash, Jackson went to all the DLC top elected officials and screamed. Clinton held his ground pretty well. At one time he said, “Can we give him some sort of a panel or something?” I said, “We’re not going to do that. We weren’t planning on doing that.” But I thought that it was important that we didn’t get rolled by anybody in these kinds of things. It turned out he was pretty resolute.

Then at the last minute we had this big flak with Bill Gray, who had been an old friend of mine, and who attacked me in USA Today pretty viciously, actually. Gray, within a few months, had all these problems that led to his resignation from the Congress. I don’t know if that was part of it. It was a blind-side. But I’m sure Jesse worked hard to get black members not to go to the DLC conference and all of that. We had a lot of black members there, and Clinton brought a lot of people in from Arkansas. Mike Espy, who will forever be my friend, was critical in making sure that we had good representation.

Riley: In the Baer book, which I think cites from the memo that you prepared for Clinton in your April ’89 meeting, one of the things that you had said when you were talking about this symbiotic relationship that you thought would work was that you thought that one of the advantages to Clinton in taking on the chairmanship is it would allow you to do some hard things—

From: To take the heat.

Riley: —to take the heat for things. Is that a fair representation of what happens in his relationship with Jesse Jackson? Are you able to, in effect, become a lightning rod that takes some of the heat off Clinton but allows him to establish a reputation as being an independent actor in the party?

From: I took a lot of the fire, no question about it. But if Clinton had backed down, it wouldn’t have mattered. He had to stand up too. He may not have been directly in the firing line, but in the end, if he had backed down, we both probably would have gotten a lot worse. So this is a pretty hard deal.

Jesse Jackson is the most important African-American leader, or at least was, or he was perceived to be that. He did, in my view, Michael Dukakis a lot of damage by holding him, basically saying he wanted to be Vice President. Part of the challenge for the DLC, and I think the Democratic Party in those days, was to show that we weren’t beholden to anybody. It’s to Clinton’s credit that he didn’t back down. I’m sure he probably had days when he was not happy with the DLC or with me, and there were a couple of times when he let me know that. But he stuck it out, and that was critical.

Riley: Can you say anything about the times that you were not in agreement?
From: I think there were probably times where Clinton’s instinct was to say, “Let’s figure out a way to get him on the program.” I was pretty resolute about it. In the end, it was his decision, because he was going to have to take the public hit on it.

In any event, what happened in Cleveland was that we had done a lot of work on a whole bunch of ideas: national service, charter schools, welfare reform, community policing, reinventing government, our position on trade—a whole host of those ideas, which later became policies of the Clinton administration. We had a set of resolutions that supported them, and we worked them through a mixture—this was probably one of the dumber things we ever did, actually—of lobbyists and elected officials, our financial supporters and elected officials. Finally at the end, approved them by the body, which was something we’d never done, and we never really had any structure for doing things like that. But Clinton did the keynote address, Al Gore gave the closing speech. I thought that was pretty prescient.

We worked a long time on that speech, and Bruce Reed in particular. I remember going over it, over and over again, in my office. Then the night before, since it was a nine-o’clock-in-the-morning speech, Clinton stayed up all night, because otherwise he couldn’t deliver it—worked it and reworked it. We went in—I might not be exactly accurate on this, but I’m pretty close—we went into his suite about seven in the morning and went over it. One of the receptionists or something at the DLC had been there with him typing the speech. He reads this new draft and gives it to us, and we said it looked pretty good. Then he read it again and said, “I’ve got it.” Wrote nine or ten words on a piece of paper, threw the draft away, and went out and gave the speech of his life.

I remember being in that hall when he delivered that speech. Political reporters will say this was the best speech they heard in a decade. Clinton, in his book, called it, I think, the best speech he ever gave. He put “opportunity, responsibility, community” into the lexicon on that day. What he convinced a lot of people of is that you could be a centrist with passion. So that speech and that event turned out to be a real launching pad for him. Of course what happened the day after he went back to Arkansas is another matter, because this was May 7 and May 8. We had a little incident in Arkansas.

Riley: That was the primary day? I’m lost and I’m not used to being lost.

From: Paula Jones.

Riley: The chronology is much easier for me starting in ’93. Okay, you had mentioned earlier that there had been a problem with his primary challenge. That was in ’90, though.

From: Now, you want to know what a small world this is? When I got married in 1968, we moved into a little house of a guy who had worked with me at the War on Poverty, who was moving back to Arkansas, named Tom McRae. Tom McRae became head of the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation. In Arkansas in the 1990 primary, he ran against Bill Clinton.

Riley: So Clinton was looking to you for dirt, is that right?
From: No—it wasn’t as if McRae almost beat him, but it was close enough. I think McRae got 39 percent of the vote or something like that, a lot more than expected. The Republicans were running an all-out campaign. They knew what they were dealing with. They ran a guy named Sheffield Nelson. A lot of the guys who spent their life digging up dirt against Clinton were digging up a lot of dirt. After that primary—and we did this, as I said, on a trip to L.A.—we agreed that Clinton go back and first tend to business. So all we did between then and the election as the DLC chair was we did a retreat over Labor Day at Williamsburg, and he came back for that.

Morrisroe: Now, in his election he had told the people of the state that he would not be seeking a Presidential bid. By the time he was elected chair, are you pretty clear personally on the fact that he is going to run? At what point in that process do you think he made that decision? Was that decision made clear to you either explicitly or implicitly?

From: It may have been clear to him, but I really didn’t know for sure that he was going to run until the summer of ’91.

Riley: Were you surprised that he pledged to serve out his term as Governor?

From: No. For politicians, you always assume first things first, and if you don’t get elected—

Morrisroe: Well put.

From: He doesn’t have to worry about serving out his term if he didn’t get elected.

Riley: It didn’t surprise you, but then it didn’t surprise you that he unchanged.

From: No, but I’ll tell you what, the skill he used to get out of that pledge was quite phenomenal. He went around the state—

Morrisroe: Letting himself be convinced?

From: No, he wanted to ask permission.

Riley: Did you have a piece of that?

From: No, he was doing that while we were going around the country. He probably didn’t spend a lot of time in Little Rock over those—because he was going around the state half the time, and half the time we were on the road going around the country.

Riley: How often were you encountering stiff resistance to setting up shop places? Some of the stuff in the briefing materials indicates that some of the existing party organizations were a bit reluctant to have a competing—

From: I think that was probably more widespread than we even appreciated, but a lot of it was pretty petty. The place where you probably found it in our briefing materials was in New
Hampshire. There was a guy named Chris Spirou, who was the chairman of the New Hampshire Democratic Party. Chris Spirou came to Cleveland and did one of those things that you sometimes have done to you in politics, which there’s no way you can argue against, but it screws you up. You’ll see it if you get a copy of the brochure that we printed, “The New Choice Resolutions.”

I can’t tell you how long we wrestled with Clinton and Nunn and others about what we were going to call these resolutions. We finally decided on “New Choice.” You know, New Choice, New Deal, New Frontier, all this kind of stuff, right? So Chris Spirou amends the title to make it “The New American Choice.” Now, who can argue against that?

**Morrisroe:** You don’t want to be un-American.

**From:** But it takes the rhythm away from it. We finally made the “New Choice” the “New Covenant” in the campaign. But it was the same themes. Anyway, Chris Spirou came. Then he decided he didn’t like anybody using the Democratic Party name except the Democratic Party of New Hampshire. You know, there are people like that. [laughter]

**Morrisroe:** How does that work?

**From:** You see, that’s in the Young Democrats.

**Riley:** Ah, the Young Democrats.

**From:** So we just incorporated as the New Hampshire DLC, so it was a moot question.

But anyway, the deal was that he told Clinton he wasn’t going to be welcome in the state. We had this group of people up there that included John Broderick, who is now the Chief Justice of the New Hampshire Supreme Court; and Terry Shumaker, who was Ambassador to Trinidad later, now is head of the teachers’ union up there; Mo [Maurice] Arel, who is the former mayor of Nashua; and Dick Swett, who was the Congressman, and they all wanted to form a DLC chapter. They wanted Clinton to come up and launch it. Chris Spirou kept saying, “You’re not welcome in this state,” and Clinton was a little nervous about that.

Finally one day John Breau and I get him at the Washington Court Hotel, and we just hammer on him and say, “Look, you’ve got to do this. You can’t put it off, because there may be a time when you need these guys. If you’re not with them when they want you, you’re probably not going to be with you when you need them.” So he agreed and he said he wanted Mike Espy and Steve Solarz and Jill Long [Thompson] to go up with him. So we took them all up. Actually I had breakfast with the guy who advanced that trip—he’s now in Denver—and brekfast with me on Tuesday.

We go up there and we do this forum. Of course Chris Spirou melts. I mean, what is he going to do, tell Clinton he can’t come to the state? They have this big picture of reconciliation and all that kind of stuff. But anyway, it turned out to be a very important trip because in the last few
days of the campaign after a few of the bombs were dropped, those DLC guys traveled around the state with him 24 hours a day, and they were very critical in his victory.

**Riley:** What about the national party? Ron Brown is the party chair at that point. That wouldn’t have been your choice to be chairman of the party, was it?

**From:** Probably not. But our luck in party chairs has not been very good. I mean, the DLC is really a world unto itself. As it turned out, Ron Brown turned out to be a perfectly fine chair. When he ran, you’ve got to remember, he had run just after being Jesse Jackson’s campaign manager in 1988, and there were a lot of people, particularly in the South, who didn’t think that was exactly the way we ought to go. But as it turned out, he turned out to be a great chairman, actually, and we had a good relationship. But there were always tensions.

I noted in the briefing book that you sent me that there was a reference to a story that Adam Nagourney did. He was then with *USA Today* on a trip we did to Baton Rouge. Actually I think it was a reference to a *Boston Globe* story that really is a *USA Today* story. In April or May—it must have been April of 1991—Nagourney was on the trip with us to do a story. This just makes your point about the tensions. Adam Nagourney is a good friend. I like him a lot, respect him very much. He’s now the *New York Times* political correspondent, but I was always a little nervous, so I taped the interview.

Clinton said, “When people think of the national Democratic Party, I want them to think of the DLC.” What Nagourney quoted him as saying is, “When people think of the Democratic National Committee, I want them to think of the DLC.” Ron Brown had a cow. He was quoted, in a quote that was one of the quotes of the year in 1991, as saying, “The DLC may have a candidate in ’92, but it won’t be Bill Clinton because he told the people of Arkansas he wouldn’t run.” I think that was in the briefing material. But that was representative of the tensions.

Now Clinton, much more than me, because he’s more of a conciliator than I am, worked hard to keep relations up. And in the end, obviously, Brown was a key part of the administration, and he did a lot of stuff to help Clinton win the White House. He’s a very important player. But my view on that was always that I really didn’t care very much about relationships. My view was that the problem with our party wasn’t that we had to get all the pieces of our party together, because I thought when you did that you always ran short. If you’re a minority party and you have perfect unity, you’re still a minority. My thought was, maybe we wanted to be a majority.

I’m much more of a plant-the-flag school and try to rally people around it. I think that was the essential strategy of the Clinton campaign. But Clinton also was very good at massaging people. So we went through a few of those tiffs, and the tensions were, from time to time, great. But you’ll find times at the end of ’91, I think it was, when Mario Cuomo came down hard on Clinton before he decided not to run and all that, because we did run a campaign that was challenging orthodoxy. To this day, for example, I believe the most important thing we ever did in the campaign was welfare reform because the simple message of welfare reform was that Clinton was dogged like the Democrats you’d be voting against, so you can try to give him a chance.
Morrisroe: During this 15-month period or so, in between his being named chair and resigning to form the exploratory committee for President, do you recall any critical discussions you had with him or memos to him that are important for future historians to understand about his development—either ideological development or political development during that period—or how he came to understand what his strategy would be for the Presidential run?

From: Well, I’m sure there were a lot of memos during that time. When I look back on it, what I think is that while it may not have been perfectly and symmetrically laid out, there was essentially a four-part strategy that we followed that I think about. The first I call the “reality therapy.” That goes to “Politics of Evasion” in 1989 and making the argument that we just couldn’t keep doing it the same old way. That had a big impact on Clinton. I know that did. The second was that if we said the old way was bad, we had to come up with a new way. So the second phase was the part that led to New Orleans, which was shaping the philosophy. The third was doing the agenda, and that was what came out of Cleveland. And the fourth was going to the market test, which was the primaries.

Now, there were important discussions along the way. I remember one. We were in Detroit. Jim Blanchard, a very old friend of mine and very close to Clinton, had just been beaten in 1990 for election to his third term as Governor. He lost. We went to Detroit, and the UAW wouldn’t meet with us. They were in a fight with Clinton in Arkansas or something, and they didn’t like me. I remember Hugh McDiarmid—he’s retired now—was the political columnist of the Detroit Free Press. He did a column after our trip saying that if the Michigan Democratic Party didn’t get its head out of the sand, it was going to be a minority party. And that turned out to be prescient because we lost the legislature shortly thereafter and never got it back until 2006.

Anyway, I remember, as Clinton was getting ready to be picked up—he was going to fly back to Arkansas; it was early one morning and we had this discussion. I remember him saying—this was March of ’91 when I thought maybe there was really going to be a prospect that he was going to run—he said, “Maybe we ought to just go in ’92 because if we test our ideas, as long as we’re respectable, we’ll be much stronger for ’96.” Now, I’m sure he didn’t think we were going to test the ideas in ’92 and win in ’96. I’m sure he thought we were going to win in ’92.

Riley: Then why would he say that to you if he believed otherwise? Is it conditional? Is he trying to fuzz it a little bit still and leave himself an out?

From: No, he didn’t say we weren’t going to win in ’92. I don’t know why he said that that way. What I took from it was he thought we were challenging orthodoxy, and it might take longer than one election cycle to get those ideas across.

Riley: The reason I ask is because this is an unsettled theme in the interviews that we do.

From: About when he was going to run?

Riley: Not about when he was going to run, but whether he truly thought, when he got into it in ’92, that ’92 was going to be the year, or whether in fact he was positioning himself ultimately
for ’96. It may be an overly refined question, but it still is interesting to know whether, in fact, he thought at this stage that—

**From:** You’ve got to remember, though, we’re talking about a time that Daddy Bush’s numbers were in the 80s and 90s. It would not be unrealistic for somebody to think, *Look, this is going to be a more open shot for me than people think because a lot of people aren’t going to run; I’m trying something new.*

I started the DLC in ’85. I believed that we weren’t going to win the Presidency until we had somebody, in one sense who would use the DLC, but who took it and really challenged party orthodoxy. I was hoping Dick Gephardt would do it in ’88, but to be honest with you, Gephardt didn’t want to do that. He wanted to go the traditional way, and I think he paid a price for that. Clinton understood it instinctively. I’m not telling you Clinton went in and wanted to bash heads, because that isn’t his way. But Clinton understood that we had to do it very differently, and we had to challenge orthodoxy.

About the only time I ever really spent time with him in the last half of 1990, until after the election, was when I flew down to Little Rock and then flew back up with him to Washington so we could take the train down to Williamsburg with the DLC. I remember talking to him about it at the time. Michael Barone had just done his new book, *Our Country.* I think Clinton thought that if we didn’t win the White House in ’92 or ’96, we might cease to be a national party. I think that’s still a big challenge for the Democratic Party. It’s not like we’re a natural majority in Presidential politics.

It’s very easy in a system where Congress is an institution of parts to become a party of parts and not of a whole. What we’ve always tried to do is do the whole. Clinton understood that instinctively. So even if he probably was less confrontational than I would have been, I never would have won. But he knew how to push. The thing that to me will forever go to Clinton’s credit—for as frustrated as you could get with him for not doing things quickly—is whenever he had to do it, whenever he had to challenge orthodoxy, he’d do it.

That went right through the campaign when he came out for NAFTA in the middle of the campaign when almost everybody high up in his campaign was scared to death he was not going to—they probably all wanted him to go the other way, but they were also scared to death that he’d go off of his position. But he never wavered. He just did it in his own way.

**Riley:** Do you recall when it first became clear to you that he was going to run in ’92?

**From:** It didn’t become absolutely clear to me, because you always have some doubts, but I thought there was a pretty good shot right after the Cleveland speech. That launched him in a whole different thing. Then we did a trip down there. I think Bruce and Linda Moore and I went down to Little Rock, and we had a long meeting with him, and Linda did this thing about all the things he had to do to get ready for the Presidency, based on her experience in the Gephardt campaign. I had a pretty good sense by that time that we were rocking and rolling.
Riley: It was an unspoken understanding that he was very much leaning in that direction and it probably would take something unfavorable to knock him off his stride at that point.

From: Right.

Riley: In that regard, you raised the Paula Jones thing earlier, which obviously nobody knew about until much later. But if you look at the stuff on Clinton as Governor, there was an awful lot of stuff in the air, in Arkansas at least, full of negatives about Clinton. Were you picking this stuff up, and did it ever reach a critical mass with you where you actually were concerned that this was something that could undo him as a candidate?

From: Well, it was pretty hard not to pick it up. The stories were always all over. But on the other hand, I traveled with him for 15 months. I never saw him do anything untoward. He assured me and Sam Nunn and a lot of our other guys that there was nothing that was going to be that damaging. Little did we know. So I can’t say that I ever had a period, until the Gennifer Flowers broke, that I really expected this. I’d talked to Clinton about it. He basically assured me that there wasn’t anything, and they did that 60 Minutes, where they—no, they did the [Godfrey] Sperling breakfast before.

Riley: The fall of ’91.

From: Yes, early on he tried to lance any growing boil. But I’ll tell you what, Clinton came from nowhere. In September of 1991 I did a celebrity Outward Bound, a special two-day Outward Bound. One of the guys who organized it was Arthur Sulzberger, who was just then about to take over the Times. He was going to take over in January. I remember sitting around down there. He asked me who was going to be the Democratic nominee, and I said Bill Clinton, and he barely knew who he was. This was a week or two, maybe, before he actually announced.

Clinton then takes off. When I was sure he was going to be President was right after we did the New Covenant speeches. In the only place that was paying attention, which was New Hampshire, he had already moved ahead of President Bush, and he was off the charts in the numbers. Then Gennifer Flowers and the draft hit, and he had to build it back up. So he was really riding high. Right after Arthur Sulzberger became publisher I went up to see him.

Riley: This is early ’92?

From: This was January of ’92. The New York Times publisher’s office is on the 11th floor. I get off the elevator, and Arthur is there to meet me saying, “You’ve got to call your office. They’ve got an emergency.” So I call it’s Elaine Kamarck, and she’s reading me the Star story on Gennifer Flowers. So here I am with Arthur Sulzberger, the publisher of the New York Times, and Jack Rosenthal, who was the editor of the editorial page, just a wonderful guy, one of my favorite people of all time. Rosenthal and I, for years, had had this unspoken wager where he said the Democratic Party would never have another Bobby Kennedy who could put together working-class whites and blacks, and I said we would.
So I spent some time with Arthur. We go down to Jack’s office, and they’re telling me how brilliant I am because we have this candidate who is able to do all these things that I said we were going to be able to do and they never would have believed it. And I’m sitting there thinking *In 24 hours, 48 hours, they’re not going to think he’s quite so good.*

**Morrisroe:** A little more Jack than Bobby.

**From:** Well, that’s probably not true either, but I was going to be goddamned if I was going to tell the *New York Times* it would be responsible for getting this into the legitimate press. So that was one of the more interesting things.

**Riley:** Was Howell Raines in this meeting?

**From:** No, this was before Howell Raines. Howell took over for Jack Rosenthal, I think.

**Riley:** I don’t remember the sequencing. It just brought to mind the question of whether you fully understood what went on between Clinton and Raines.

**From:** The answer is no, but I didn’t.

But what I was going to say, to close the circle, two months later he wins Illinois and Michigan and, as I say, “wins the nomination the first time.” Then he went and played golf at a segregated golf course, and reopened it and lost Connecticut. But anyway, the week before the Illinois primary, Jack Rosenthal did an editorial in the *New York Times*, which I’ve got in my office, where he essentially conceded this bet to me. As it turned out, it turned out all right.

Howell Raines, when he first came to the *Times* editorial board, I used to—I don’t do these things as much anymore, to be honest with you, in part because the partisanship and polarization just really turns me off. I don’t just want to be another partisan Democrat. But when Howell first took over as the editorial page editor after being on the editorial board a while—and I don’t know what happened. I think there are probably just a lot of people who were disillusioned by what Clinton did. It’s possible that it’s the other way around too, that Howell did stuff that got Clinton really angry. I just don’t know.

**Riley:** There’s a lot of pop psychology about two southern boys at relative success levels, so I didn’t know whether you had a comment on it. Let’s go back then. Did you go down to Little Rock for the announcement?

**From:** Yes.

**Riley:** Did you have any particular role in that?

**From:** Yes, I’d say we had a big role in that. The message in the announcement was essentially the Cleveland speech. Bruce, I think, actually was the writer. One of the interesting things that happened during the announcement—and if you know me, I’m about as far from the pop culture
as anybody could ever be—but Clinton basically had no campaign. They’d just run out of a paint store headquarters.

I go down there and Lindsey is saying, “Boy, we’ve got this problem. We can’t get a campaign song. Every time we suggest something, Hillary vetoes it, and we just can’t get a song.” I said to him, “Remember when we were in L.A. and we had this guy named Shawn Landres, who was an intern here for a while?” He was driving us. He had written these commercials for Clinton and the DLC, and the theme song was Fleetwood Mac’s “Don’t Stop.” I said, “What’s that song that Shawn Landres wanted us to do? ‘Don’t Stop.’” So that became our theme song. Fleetwood Mac actually sued us. But when Clinton became a success they didn’t care anyway.

Riley: They had a career revival.

From: And then after the thing, we went in, and Eli Segal and Stan Greenberg and I had responsibility for trying to put together the staff. That meant Eli had to do all the work because Greenberg and I actually had jobs. But talk about a tragedy. Eli’s death was absolutely crushing—Eli, Sandy [Samuel] Berger, and I. I said we were the middle-aged Jewish caucus.

Morrisroe: At this point when you’re putting together the campaign, you’re moving from a place where his relationship is mostly with the DLC and people with whom you’re obviously very comfortable and have experience and are true believers. You move into the campaign, and you have to incorporate a much broader pantheon of participants. Did you have qualms, concerns about that? How did you approach that? How did he?

From: The way I approach things, I worry about things that I can control, and I don’t worry about things I can’t. Because if you worry about things you can’t control, you go crazy. But here’s my basic deal: When Clinton got serious about running, he said he wanted a DLC person on the plane, and we agreed Bruce would be the guy. Bruce was 12 years old at the time. [laughter] Bruce was, what, late 20s, early 30s, I guess.

Riley: But looked 12.

From: Looked 12. Still looks 12. He started to shave last week. But anyway, here’s how I felt about it: One of the problems with campaigns, particularly Democratic campaigns, you have a lot of people with a lot of experience in losing. The other thing is, as I said a few minutes ago, people are really influenced by their own experiences. So if your experience is with the Dukakis campaign, that tells you what you’re supposed to do. So we had all these people—a lot of them probably thought we were a bunch of nut cases. Certainly they wanted to do things the way they always did it and all that.

I can’t say that there weren’t times in the campaign when I was worried or concerned, but generally my feeling was that this was an unusual candidate. This candidate knew the message he was going to deliver better than the people who were writing the speeches for him. In the end he’d do the right thing. So I really didn’t worry about it.
There were a couple of points in the campaign where I intervened, but I was always pretty comfortable with that. I told Clinton before the campaign started that I would do anything I could do to help him except go into the campaign. I told him after the election that I would do anything I could do to help him in the administration, including doing the transition, but I would not go into the administration. So I always had good understandings with him. I have my reasons for all that, and I’m happy to talk about it.

Riley: We’ll want to talk about both of those things. What about the campaign itself first? Why was it that you were so adverse to going into the campaign?

From: For one thing, I think campaigns are for young people. The interesting thing is I’ve had a lot of experience in national politics, but I’ve never worked directly in a campaign. I’ve learned speechwriting for Senate candidates and all that. It just does not have any particular interest for me. The other thing is, I guess I was scarred in the Muskie campaign. I ran a Senate subcommittee, but I saw all my friends who were on the campaign go for months without pay, scramble to get jobs when they came back. I thought that keeping the DLC strong and keeping the flame for our kind of politics was a pretty important deal.

In the campaign, the role I played—in addition to occasionally goading Clinton or talking to him or advising him—I did the platform for him, even though that role was exaggerated, because Bruce really did it. But in the general election campaign I did a lot of traveling in a lot of what we now call red states, often going in right before or after Clinton and doing editorial boards about what it meant to be a New Democrat and why Clinton was a different kind of Democrat. In the last five weeks of the campaign, I was in 18 states. So it wasn’t that I was inactive, but I was not an official part of the campaign.

One of the things I’ve always believed is that if an entity like this, or a movement like this, is going to be successful and more than a passing deal, it’s got to be more than just one campaign. That means you’ve got to maintain integrity. I always felt that there would have been a time, and there was going to be a time—and it came very early—where I was going to disagree with Clinton. It was important for me that the DLC, and I personally, maintain my integrity on those things. So I thought that was important. It wasn’t that I was completely outside the campaign. I did a lot of the conference calls in the morning and all that kind of stuff, and I’m sure I was not shy.

But there were two points in the campaign that really were important for me. One was in—we were running third after the New York primary.

Riley: Third among?

From: In the general. We had won the nomination essentially, we just had to close out the primary season. We had won the nomination, but we were running third. Clinton was not a happy camper. I guess this was in mid-May. We had a meeting down in the basement of the Governor’s mansion in Little Rock. Do you know about this?
Riley: I’m not sure. There were a lot of basement meetings in the Governor’s mansion. Is this the Manhattan Project?

From: No, I don’t know what they called it, but who knows. The outsiders were [Robert] Reich and [Ira] Magaziner and me. Then Bruce and George [Stephanopoulos] and Greenberg and [Frank] Greer and [James] Carville and [Paul] Begala and Hillary and Diane Blair and Betsey Wright. I can’t remember who else.

Riley: That’s the group, isn’t it?

From: The question was, how are you going to get back? Clinton was beside himself. We go all day. These guys, particularly Magaziner and Reich, are talking about the—it may have been what they called the Manhattan Project. They were talking about some cradle-to-grave social Democratic idea that was going to bribe the middle class into supporting Clinton. It would have made healthcare look simple.

So finally, we’re almost done with this day, and I said, “I think you guys are crazy. I think the reason Bill is running third is because when he started people thought he was different from the Democrats they’ve been voting against, and now you’re trying to prove he’s just exactly the same. You’ve got to get edge to your speeches. We’re rounding the edges off our speeches. It doesn’t matter what you say. If the picture in the paper is with all the old pols, they’re going to think you’re part of the old crowd. And you’ve got to change that. You’ve got to be a different kind of Democrat. And until you do, you’re not going to knock Perot out of this race or reduce him.” So we had this long argument and ended this meeting without a conclusion, which is the way meetings often ended.

Riley: Even very long ones?

From: Yes. Then that night I was at a party. I actually stayed to have dinner with Betsey Wright. Betsey and I went to a party that somebody on the staff was having. Bill and Hillary showed up. Hillary came up to me and said, “You know, I thought about it and you’re right. And we’re going to be a different kind of Democrat by the convention.” She asked me to do a strategy for doing that. With David Osborne and Doug Ross and Galston and Will, I did this very long memo, which laid out a bunch of steps for Clinton that showed that he was different. I’ll be damned if they didn’t follow it.

One of them was to let Jesse Jackson know early that he wasn’t going to be Vice President so he couldn’t play him along. That was really what caused a lot of the furor about Sister Souljah, I think. But one of them was to have our own platform, go back to the New Covenant, to our themes, to run the convention on our themes. One of them was to do counter-scheduling. One of the things we did was a reinventing-government speech to AFSCME [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees].

Riley: The venue for that is important because he’s tackling a tough issue and showing that he can be tough with an unreceptive audience.
From: A toughness-to-govern issue, just like Sister Souljah was. That was critical. Without it, my guess is Clinton would have a harder time. Clinton had to show—it’s what I said before: a Democrat has to show the toughness to govern to win. So all of these things were designed to do it. The most important thing was to pick a Vice President who didn’t go by the conventional rules, who wasn’t there to balance the ticket. We were going to run a message campaign, and we wanted clarity.

I’ll never forget when he picked Gore. He called me and said, “The message is going to be ‘the changing of the guard.’” Al Gore met none of the rules, right? None of them. In fact, in our memo, David Osborne dissented from that part, and he said he thought Cuomo ought to be the Vice President. My argument was, if you had Mario Cuomo, there’s no such thing as balancing the ticket in today’s world because it’s a national electorate. To be honest with you, I don’t think anybody delivers states anymore. I don’t think anybody has since Lyndon Johnson in 1960. I said, “If you pick Mario Cuomo, people are going to say, ‘What is this guy anyway? Is he going to run as a southern moderate or as a northeastern liberal?’” I thought that was really important. What happened is we drove Perot way down, and he got out of the race, and then he came back.

The other critical juncture, for me anyway, was right after the convention when Bush accused Clinton of raising taxes in Arkansas 128 times. The campaign responded by saying no, it was only 65, or whatever the hell it was. So I called Clinton. It just so happened that he and Hillary were going to be in the next morning to speak to the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations]. I went up to the Wardman Towers, the old Sheraton Park, to see them.

I said to them that the campaign—in the effort to not repeat the mistakes of the Dukakis campaign—had learned only part of the lesson. The lesson they should have learned was that you can’t let your opponent set the context of the debate. What they learned was that you’ve got to answer your opponent. That was probably right, but not always right. Sometimes when you didn’t answer, or when you gave the wrong answer, you helped your opponent set the context of the debate. So I said, “Next time he says you raised taxes in Arkansas 128 times, you respond this way: ‘I don’t know what he’s talking about. I’m for capital punishment; I’m for ending welfare as we know it; I’m for asking kids who get college scholarships to serve their country; I’m a different kind of Democrat. I don’t know what he’s taking about.’”

We went on the air with a welfare reform ad and got everything back. But those were the only two times that I really did anything serious in the campaign in terms of intervention.

Riley: Do you feel comfortable letting go of that memo again, under the same ground rules?

From: I think we probably can do that.

Riley: We can hold onto this. Just to make a more general point, to the extent the Presidential records exist, scholars at some future point are going to have a single repository to go get a lot of this stuff. Our briefing books and the interview transcripts will be available to people who want to study things too. You’re in a different position because you don’t have Presidential records. But any of these documents that relate to your relationship with Clintons—it will be a gold mine
for people if they can come to this transcript and also find a good, hearty collection of these materials at the same time. So just keep that in mind as we’re going along. I know we’ve already talked about that in several instances.

**From:** Just clarify for me, what’s the timeframe of this?

**Riley:** The general timeframe would be, for cleared materials, probably is going to be sometime in 2009.

**From:** So it will be—

**Riley:** After the next election.

**From:** After if Hillary runs.

**Riley:** Yes, after the next election. But note that I said the cleared materials. As I said earlier, you have the opportunity when you see the transcript to place stipulations that you want on any particular passages. The same could be true of any documents that you want to submit. Anything that you place an embargo on—

**From:** This is really a tough question. My inclination is to let a lot of this stuff out to you guys. I’ve not done it. I thought about doing it for the John Harris book, and then I just decided not to do it. I talked to Clinton a little bit about it. It’s not like the stuff I have is going to be extraordinarily revealing, I think. Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t. What you’d see is a constant stream of sometimes pretty-tough memos telling him that he’s got to stick to the message.

[two pages have been redacted]

**Riley:** Why don’t we take a five-minute break now.

[BREAK]

**Riley:** We jumped around various stages of the campaign. I wanted to go back to the very beginning and ask you about some of the appointments. You mentioned that Clinton wanted someone from here, and Bruce Reed went there.

**From:** Yes.

**Riley:** But there was a heavy representation of folks out of Illinois.

Riley: Yes, did that make you nervous?

From: It made me absolutely content. Actually, I always considered Daley one of the great New Democrat mayors. To this day Richie is one of my favorite guys.

Riley: So you’ve got [David] Wilhelm and Rahm Emanuel and I don’t remember who else.

From: The first press secretary, Avis [LaVelle].

Riley: Those were all the same pipeline. Okay, that answers that question.

From: They all came out of Kevin O’Keefe, and there are some stories about the Daley stuff. It was on a DLC trip that we met Wilhelm. We were in Chicago. We used to stay at this little hotel that Clinton liked called the Tremont on the Near North Side, just off Michigan Avenue. I went to school at Northwestern, grew up in South Bend, and I still live and die every day with the Chicago Cubs.

Riley: More dying than living.

From: I figure if Northwestern can get to the Rose Bowl in my lifetime, and they did, then the Cubs can get to the World Series in my lifetime, but they’re stretching it.

Riley: So who’s the guy who screwed up out of the stands?

From: Steve Bartman? I was with Rod Blagojevich, whose seat Rahm Emanuel has now. Obviously he’s the Governor, but he’s a wild Cubs fan. I was there with him the day they blew up the Bartman ball at Harry Caray’s Restaurant. He was just so excited.

In one of our trips to Illinois—it must have been in ’91—we, among other things, met with Mayor Daley. This doesn’t seem like a big deal, but let me tell you, it was, because Daley wouldn’t see any other potential candidates. But Bill Daley and I were friends. But the real connection was a guy named Kevin O’Keefe, who, you may know, was in the Clinton White House.

Riley: I don’t know.

From: He’s one of the great secrets of all time. O’Keefe will probably kill me for mentioning his name. He grew up and, I think, went to high school with Hillary. His family was part of the Daley machine. So the combination, I suppose, that I’d been doing a lot of stuff with Bill Daley, including a lot of DLC stuff in 1989, 1990, 1991, and O’Keefe got us in. We went to see the mayor. As I said, he wasn’t seeing anybody, so this was a big deal.

Two great stories that have something to do with Chicago: So we go into Daley’s office, and it’s Clinton and Lindsey and me, I think, and probably O’Keefe. Bill Murray and Robert DeNiro are
coming out. So we have a chat, talked a little banter back and forth. Finally they leave. Clinton says to Daley, “What were they doing here?” He said, “They’re shooting a movie.” I can’t remember what the name of it was. He said, “They had a scene where Chicago police officers were sleeping in their squad car while on duty, and we had to correct it.”

So we go in. In his office there’s a big bust of the original Richard J. Daley. Daley sits down. Clinton says, “Mr. Mayor, if you had a Democrat in the White House and he said you could have anything you want, what would you want?” Daley looked at him straight in the eye and he said, “No urban policy. Let me run my city.” So when I’m Domestic Policy Advisor in the transition, I get this 500-page document from Daley about how much it costs the city of Chicago to take federal money. He’s not a big fan of the Federal Government.

Anyway, O’Keefe and Bill Daley—who obviously later had a couple of big roles in the Clinton administration—and a couple of other people, we had dinner, I think, that night or the next night. O’Keefe and a guy named Jim Lyons, someone I see now because he’s in Denver, we hung around a lot during the DLC days. So when it came to putting together the campaign, Daley really had run a New Democrat campaign. The day that Clinton gave his Cleveland speech, Daley did one of his inaugural addresses, and it was not as eloquent as Clinton’s, because he can’t be that eloquent, but thematically it was almost exactly the same approach.

So I felt very comfortable with Wilhelm. He did the Daley campaign and obviously Rahm. Bruce Reed is now writing a book with Rahm and Billy Daley and everybody else. There’s a guy named Frank Kruesi, who was later at the Transportation Department, who was Daley’s policy guy. All those guys. Today Daley’s policy guy is Jose Cerda [III], who worked in the Clinton White House and then worked here and then went out there to work for Daley. So we still have a close relationship.

Riley: That was an unexpected answer.

Morrisroe: Other than Bruce Reed, were there any other people from your operation or PPI that went into regular work for the campaign?

From: I’m trying to remember about the campaign. Well, Bruce took some people who were here who were in the issues campaign. Like Rob Shapiro, who was one of his key economic advisors, was our PPI economist. Elaine had a role, Galston. They all had advisory roles, but they also, for the most part, had other jobs. I guess Linda Moore didn’t go in until after. Kiki Moore, who had been my press secretary, went in to work, I think, first with Gore and then with Tipper Gore on the campaign. We all had a hand in it. I’m trying to remember. I’m sure there were other people who went in, but nobody of note like Bruce Reed. The other thing to remember is that we were really small then.

Riley: In the preconvention period, were there either any policy decisions that were announced, or were there any campaign developments that looked to you to be off message as a New Democrat?
**From:** I’m trying to remember. I’m sure that as we went through Florida there were probably some things on Social Security that were less reform-oriented than we would have liked. But I don’t remember anything serious.

There were a couple of interesting things: Clinton ran, I think, a different kind of campaign. Since I wasn’t in the operational part of the campaign, I may be way off base on some of this stuff. When we did it in Arkansas actually, I did the pre-campaign, and Wilhelm did the campaign for the University of Arkansas, the Little Rock thing.

Right about the time of the New York primary, on one of the conference calls, there was the question of whether Clinton should walk the picket line at Caterpillar. Everybody in the campaign, everybody on the call just wanted him to do it. I said, “I’m happy they’re going to do it. I just have one question that I think we ought to answer before we send him out there and that is, what’s the issue in the strike? If you want to run a message campaign, you ought to at least know the message you’re delivering by taking this action.” Nobody knew, which goes to your question about people coming into the campaign. They’re very tactical, less strategic. They’ll say I’m crazy, because the strategy is to get the UAW on board. But in any event, it turns out that it probably wasn’t something that Clinton would have gone to war for. He may have been against it, for all I know.

But in the middle of this conversation, somebody who was on the campaign from the AFL says, “You may have good ideas at the DLC, but how many people are you going to drive to the polls on Election Day?” I just said, “Millions of people come to the polls on Election Day because of our ideas, and every one of them is going to vote Democratic. You’ll have a few hundred thousand people that you drive to the polls, and how many of them are going to vote Republican?” To me, that was always the challenge in the campaign. People who run campaigns worry about crowds, and they worry about, I guess, excitement and all that kind of stuff. I worry about connecting with people who aren’t going to go to campaign rallies but who are going to decide whether you win or lose. So that’s probably why it’s a good thing I don’t work directly on a campaign.

In 2000 I was on the plane with Joe Lieberman, just as a friend, for most of the time, and that was an interesting thing. You really get a sense when you’re on a campaign plane of how important institutions like Labor are to the party. Literally, at every stop, there were these guys in the black-and-yellow t-shirts, the painters. They’re driving, they greet you, they fill up every event, they’re driving the motorcades, they’re doing everything. I once was teasing John Sweeney and I said, “I don’t think you guys ever paint because they’re always at our campaign events.” But you get a different view of that than you do when you’re sitting here and you’re saying, “Why don’t you deliver a message that’s going to appeal to some people that goes beyond the groups?” But if your focus is making sure you have a crowd at the next event, it's a little different. Again, I don’t know if this is helpful to any of the understanding of Clinton or not, but I think Clinton had a better sense of my point of view than most candidates do.

David Broder, in 2004, during the convention, wrote this interesting column, which said that everybody was united around John Kerry but not really. There was really a split in the Democratic Party between what he called “its head and its heart.” He said we won its head, and
almost every candidate that wanted to run knew that DLC policies were the smartest thing and the best way and the way you had to run. But we never created the passion. As a result, what he called the “heart”—I’d call the “muscle” of the campaign, the people that got the crowds out, did the phone banks, all that—all those people never bought the DLC approach. And that was a tension in every campaign.

Clinton was able to transcend it, in part, because—and I think this is a critical understanding of his Presidency—he internalized and embodied the philosophy. And he had the ability to give passion and create energy among the regular troops without pandering to them like other candidates have to do to get them excited, and therefore was able to talk to a broader audience.

Riley: But isn’t it also the case that he had developed an alternative muscle system, to use your metaphor. He hadn’t relied on organized labor most of his political career to get things done. He had a larger network of friends and the DLC network.

From: He did, and he had a good southern base, which was critical. If you ask me what saved Clinton after Gennifer Flowers and the draft and why Clinton didn’t go the way of Gary Hart, I would say two things: the DLC and the southern base. The DLC, the work we did in Cleveland, we got a lot of attention. You can go through all the stories about how the ’92 platform was the same as Cleveland and all that, and we influenced that and all that. But the other things we did, we engaged all these elected officials, and not one of them turned tail and ran. What the Cleveland process did for the Clinton campaign was it made it a campaign that was larger than just about the candidate. That was critical.

The other thing was the southern base. All those guys—Breaux and Mike Espy, even Sam Nunn and all those guys—were with him right afterwards. Nunn, sometimes, we had to push and shove because it wasn’t exactly his kind of politics, Gennifer Flowers and the draft. I’ve often wondered why people didn’t desert Clinton they way they deserted Gary Hart, especially after the draft letter. I just think it’s because, in part, a lot of the people were engaged in this process with him to redefine the party, and that turned out to be a more important thing than people will ever give us credit for. Maybe they’re right. Maybe that wasn’t very important. But if you go back and look at the pictures on the day after Gennifer Flowers or the draft letter hit—Gennifer Flowers I remember because he was down in the South, and that southern base was really important—most of them had been engaged with us, probably all of them that were there.

Riley: Can you recall how you were dealing with Ross Perot through the course of ’92? You’re smiling at me. Did that come out of left field?

From: First of all, Clinton and I had dinner with Perot in August of 1991. So I was not surprised that Perot was going to run.

Riley: This was just the three of you?

From: Ross [Perot] Jr. was there. I think maybe one or two of our staff people—whoever was traveling with Clinton—and Tom Luce, who was Perot’s lawyer.
Riley: What was the purpose of the dinner?

From: Some point in either 1990 or 1991, Sam Nunn called me and said, “You’ve got to go see Ross Perot. He’s really interested in the idea of service.” So I went down and made a pitch to him, and it never got anywhere. But Ross Jr. came to a couple of DLC events, and I liked him. I won’t say we had a great friendship, but at least we were acquaintances, talked occasionally. So in Clinton’s last trip as the DLC chair, we were going to Texas and Mississippi, and I just said, “Let’s try to set up a dinner with Perot.”

As it turned out, what happened is that Perot said, “I can’t do it, but do it with Ross Jr. and Tom Luce. I’m going to be out of town.” So we set this dinner up and, lo and behold, we’re there for about five minutes at the Petroleum Club and there comes Ross Perot. I was convinced after that that he was going to run because he just hated George Bush. It was an irrational hatred. The other guy he hated was Dick Armitage, who was Colin Powell’s best friend and was Under Secretary of State to Powell, right?

Riley: This was from the hostage rescue?

From: It was from the MIA days. Perot had all this stuff about Armitage trying to frame him and being involved in drug dealing and all this. This was when Armitage was up for Secretary of the Army.

Riley: He’s airing all this at dinner?

From: He’s airing a lot of it. But he just really disliked Bush. But this is a guy who, if I remember correctly, wouldn’t let his employees wear shoes with tassels. I just figured that he wasn’t going to go for Clinton on character grounds. Anyway, it was one of those all-time great nights.

Riley: I guess so. I wish you’d tell us more.

From: We were going to Mississippi the next day, but Clinton had this rule—and it probably had to do with the laws in Arkansas—but whenever it was close enough to Little Rock to fly back overnight he would do it, and then he’d meet us the next day. So he was close enough, obviously, to fly back. He flew back to Little Rock, and Ross Jr. said, “I’ll drive you to the airport.” So they go off, and I’m down there getting a cab. This is 1991. This 1984 Oldsmobile pulls up, and this little guy peers out and says, “You need a ride back to your hotel?” It’s Perot. He’s driving, looking through the steering wheel. [laughter] I kid you not. This car had plastic seat covers. He said to me, “When I was on the board of General Motors they wanted to give me a new car every three months, but I told them I didn’t need it because this one was perfectly good.” And he drove me back to my hotel.

Riley: Had Clinton been prepared? I guess you don’t think the father is going to be there so had there been much—

From: Clinton is prepared. It doesn’t matter. He’s prepared for all that.
Riley: I guess they were neighboring states, and Perot is a pretty big—

From: He may have known him outside of that too.

Morrisroe: Did they have any natural rapport? How did it go?

From: I remember it being a pretty friendly dinner, but I came out of there thinking he was probably going to run.

Morrisroe: Do you recall what Clinton’s impressions of him were?

From: No, not really.

I think that was probably the end. We did one more day. We were in Mississippi the next day because Clinton was doing the JJ, and Espy had put together a DLC meeting together in the afternoon. Then that was the last time he traveled for the DLC, because the next week he announced his exploratory committee, and he had to resign before that was announced. So literally, as he was getting ready to go to the press conference, I was negotiating—see, he never did this stuff early—the resignation letter.

But anyway, the key for us, I always thought, in a three-way race, you had to drive down the Perot vote, at least the part of the Perot vote that we could get.

Riley: Were you surprised about how well he was doing in the spring and early summer?

From: No, because when you’re in the primaries and you’ve got an unpopular President—or a President that people think is losing touch, which is what happened with Daddy Bush—there is just a lot of discontent in the country with traditional politics. And the primaries bring out the worst in everything. If Clinton hadn’t lost Connecticut—and he probably wouldn’t have lost Connecticut if he hadn’t had that experience at the golf course—then I think it might have been a different deal, and Perot might not have gotten as much traction. But when Clinton had to go and compete in New York like a New York traditional politician and play all that old-politics stuff, I think, coming out of that, it did not surprise me that there was a big boost for Perot.

Morrisroe: Why don’t we move to the convention and platform development and your role as, I understand, Clinton’s personal representative to the platform committee?

Riley: No fights, or no fights public?

From: Harold Ickes deserves a lot of credit for that. We wrote a lot of the platform. Bill Richardson was the platform-drafting committee chair. There were, I’m sure, a lot of people who contributed to it. We wrote big chunks for Richardson, but Bruce was the inside guy. So in the end it was going to be how Bruce wanted to frame it, and so it was not surprising that it was the New Covenant; opportunity, responsibility, and community; and the Third Way and all this stuff. So I was perfectly content with the platform.
I wanted to be on the drafting committee. And for whatever reason, Ickes picked the committee and didn’t pick me. So I called Lindsey and said I really thought I should be on this. And the next thing I knew, Clinton said, “Why don’t you just be my personal representative?” So I was the spokesman on a lot of that. But in fairness to Harold, Harold worked his magic with all of his liberal friends, and there were no serious fights.

In the committee itself, though, when we got to the full committee, David Dinkins had a lot of them. We basically voted them all down. We just didn’t take anything, and Bruce was responsible more for that than anybody else. He negotiated him out of almost everything. But that was an important thing for us, I think, because what had happened traditionally is the Presidential candidates had given away the platform as the consolation prize to the losers. My thought about that was that if you couldn’t run on your own platform, you’re going to have a hell of a time running for President. I think there’s a connection between not being able to run on your own platform and losing. I thought it was a pretty important deal.

Riley: The tone of the convention you were satisfied with? That seems to be a great place where, almost by design, interest-group politics is going to prevail. How did you manage, or how did they manage?

From: I think, again, Harold and Alexis Herman, who had a big role in that, probably Ron Brown, basically scheduled most of the mischief off prime time, and that was critical. I’ve never had a convention week that was like going to a fantasy baseball camp for me, because all these people who over the years had always said we weren’t real Democrats were falling all over us.

One of the big stories of the convention was here’s this New Democrat DLC candidate, and the platform really came out of Cleveland. I couldn’t have had a better week. I had the most unbelievable press I’ve ever had in my life. I’ll never have that again, including my style profile in the Washington Post. But the highlight of my week was when Eleanor Holmes Norton and Donna Brazile were wearing DLC buttons. I figured we’d come a long way.

Riley: I guess so. Did you have any particular role in the general election campaign?

From: As I mentioned before, I had that one intervention that I think was probably important. My role was, as I said, I did a lot of traveling. I was a validator. Clinton was running as a different kind of Democrat. My role was to be a validator for that, but I didn’t have an official role. I talked to him occasionally in the campaign, obviously. Bruce was involved and I talked to him a lot.

Riley: You mentioned the Sister Souljah thing earlier. Did you have a piece of the preparation for that, or was it something that was generally consistent with—

From: The answer is I didn’t even know who Sister Souljah was. So I didn’t have anything to do with it. But the only thing I had to do with that was to suggest to him that he do something early on to make it clear to Jackson he wasn’t going to be Vice President, because I didn’t want him strung along for six weeks between the end of the California and the convention. I think Paul
Begala may have been the guy who knew about Sister Souljah and talked to him about doing that.

**Riley:** A great deal was made in late ’91 and early ’92 about the interpretation of Harris Wofford’s victory in Pennsylvania, because healthcare was seen as the issue there. Did you feel like that was the proper reading of what happened in Pennsylvania? Were you offering an alternative reading of what happened there, or you just figured this is a special election?

**From:** I’m trying to remember. I don’t ever remember making a big deal of it. We were big fans of Carville. Will Marshall had worked with him in the Dick Davis for Senate campaign in 1982. We all pushed hard for Clinton to hire Carville. So that was a good deal. I just don’t remember.

**Riley:** I guess that’s a more specific way of getting into the more general question about the thematics of the campaign. Healthcare was one of the issues that gets emphasized in ’92, and it is a place where, evidently, you begin to have some divergences of opinion after the inauguration. So I’m trying to set up a series of questions for discussion later on about that. Were you thinking that healthcare was something in ’92 that was going to be a big issue for Clinton later?

**From:** I did by the time the election was over. Then when we got in the transition, I knew it was.

Healthcare was the only issue that was an important issue on the campaign that we really didn’t spend a lot of time on when he was DLC chair. It wasn’t that we didn’t want to, but we just ran out of time. I can’t remember what we said in Cleveland, but it was nothing inconsistent with the themes of the campaign. We all always were prone to what became known as the “[James Cooper-Breaux approach,” which was essentially managed competition, as opposed to managed care. And if I remember correctly, because we didn’t do it in the DLC, when we got into the campaign, he was less defined on healthcare than almost every other issue. So they tried in the campaign—Bruce tried to draft, craft together something—which is always hard to do because the groups are all over you in the campaign when that happens.

**Riley:** Also, it’s a bit reactionary, because the candidate who was pushing it was Bob Kerrey—early.

**From:** Right. And Clinton never liked to have anybody have an idea that he didn’t have first, which is one of his great strengths, I might add. I don’t say that in a derogatory way. Clinton always wanted to own every idea, which just makes him so much different from most people who run for public office. I don’t remember all the details—Bruce probably knows this better than I do—but I think by the end of the Clinton campaign, they were pretty close to where Breaux had been. Then we got into the transition. In the transition, I did domestic policy, but we split off healthcare, and he had a woman named Judy Feder do healthcare. Sandy Berger did national security, and Bob Reich did economics.

In fact, there’s this story, which I felt was pretty funny but probably not. On the day before Clinton was supposed to announce the transition, I get called on a Wednesday afternoon, and he says, “Come on down here tomorrow. Get on the next plane because we’re going to announce
the transition, and I want you to do domestic policy. And then you can go back over the weekend and get your stuff and then move down here.”

**Riley:** This is after the election?

**From:** This is the Wednesday after the election. So I go down there, and the next morning we have this press conference. He’s supposed to announce the key people in the transition. Of course, it was all about gays in the military, so we never got to the announcement.

But in any event, there’s a woman you may interview for this thing—her name is Sarah Ehrman—who for years has done Jewish liaison. On the list of leaders of the transition, he had liaisons for everybody but for the Jews, and Sarah Ehrman—Sandy Berger and I were standing in the back of the room, and Sarah Ehrman comes up to us and she’s really upset because, “There’s this liaison and that liaison, but there’s no Jewish liaison.” Berger looks at her and he said, “Let’s see, Mickey Kantor, Eli Segal, Bob Reich, Sandy Berger, Al From, Judy Feder—this transition is one-third orthodox, one-third conservative, and one-third reform.” [*laughter*]

Anyway, so where were we?

**Riley:** I don’t know. You lost me on the story. The fundamental question was about healthcare. But we don’t need to get stuck on that right now. Anything about the debates?

**From:** Other than the fact that on the night of one of those debates, I was in Florida, and we were going to fly from the private airport at Opelika, near Miami, to Tallahassee. And we were with this labor leader named [Alexander] Doc Cullison, from Marine Engineers, who later went to jail for a very short time. He was all over us and trying to get in to the Clinton campaign, I guess. He was driving us to the airport. I was riding shotgun, and Linda Moore was in the back. We were going to watch the debate at the airport and then fly up to Tallahassee.

I don’t know if you’ve been down there, but Opelika is in a terrible area in Miami, about 135th Street. You come off the expressway and it’s like this steep street ramp, a ramp and then a stop light at the bottom. We stopped at this light, and then all of a sudden I hear BAM!, like a shot, and I thought somebody had shot Linda Moore in the back seat because there’s glass splattering. This hand reaches in and grabs Doc Cullison’s briefcase. Somebody had taken a brick to the back window. So, needless to say, we were a little traumatized that day. Linda Moore doesn’t like to fly, and I still have the nail prints in my arm from that trip.

**Riley:** Most of them were not that traumatic for you.

**From:** No.

**Riley:** Did you go to Little Rock for the election?

**From:** I did. That was a good time. We had a big DLC deal down there. I took the whole staff. We got down there in the morning when Clinton was coming in. It’s one of the things that happens in campaigns. This goes to one of your earlier questions about outsiders in a campaign. I was not really a happy camper because we were behind a rope line, and all these people who had
given a lot of money but were for other candidates first were out on the tarmac. Anyway, Clinton gets off the plane, and he sees me immediately. He came straight over to me, grabbed me, and hugged me and said, “Did you ever think it would turn out to be this when we started?” Then he said, “Come see me before you go.”

So I stayed another day. The Thursday morning after the election I went into the Governor’s office. That’s when he wrote his little book blurb by hand for Mandate for Change. Anyway, in the middle of this meeting, Herrreich comes in and says, “You promised the guys in the Arkansas Senate that you’d go down and spend some time with them.” So he said, “Come with me. Let’s go down.” We get to the edge of the front door of the office and the Secret Service says—to get to the Senate you had to go down a big flight of stairs—they said, “There’s a bank of cameras at the bottom of the stairs. You just need to be aware of it.”

So as we walk out of the office, I looked at Clinton and said, “You speak to me, it’s worth a million dollars.” So he put his arm around me. The picture was on the front page of the New York Times and the Washington Post the day of our invitation for our December fundraiser to celebrate the New Democrats. I’ll be goddamned if we didn’t sell out. It was at Union Station. We sold out so much that we had planned to have one room for cocktails and the other two rooms for dinner, and we had to put tables in all three rooms. In one of them you couldn’t see the podium, so we had to do a video screen. Speaking of the people we met around the country, we had all the people that we brought in from around the country who had been part of the chapters. We put them in a room with a video screen. They couldn’t see the podium, but we also did a rope line.

We had Clinton and Gore and Vernon [Jordan], who was head of the transition, all the leaders of the transition there because there were no Cabinet people yet. In fact, it was at that dinner table that Mike Espy, on a napkin, wrote Clinton a note saying, “Ten reasons I ought to be Secretary of Agriculture.” I bet you he rues that day. But anyway, it was quite an interesting time.

Riley: When was the decision made about your portfolio in the transition? You had said that you would be willing to help with the transition.

From: He told me when I saw him two days after the election that he would be back to me. And then he just called me and asked me to do domestic policy about four or five days later, so sometime in that period.

But you remember—I think you probably know this, but maybe not—Mickey Kantor had done all this preparation. One of the things I told Clinton when I saw him, I said, “Don’t get rushed into something on the transition. Set it up the way you want to set it up.” I think he basically threw out a lot of that stuff Mickey did. He gave Mickey the responsibility, which he did brilliantly, of doing the economic summit. Then Clinton organized the transition however he wanted to, or differently, I think.

Riley: My understanding is that there was a division within the transition between the policy apparatus and the personnel apparatus.
From: Yes, there was, and it got worse after Dick Riley was made Secretary of Education. Riley was in charge of most of the subcabinet stuff. He brought in Gordon Giffin, who was Nunn’s guy and my buddy from Georgia, to be his deputy. The answer is yes, we had separate operations. We had a lot of ability to have input.

But I must say that for the DLC in the first round, victory came too early. We really weren’t prepared for it. The thing people don’t understand about us, they thought we were this powerful, big group. I mean, there were a dozen of us or something. We had a budget of less than $2 million for DLC and PPI. It’s not like we were this juggernaut. So everybody expected us to be like the Heritage Foundation.

As it turned out, Bruce and Bill Galston were the deputy directors of domestic policy. Bruce really ran that. Elaine Kamarck went in for the Vice President. She probably didn’t go in at first, but I can’t remember whether Jeremy Rosner went in or not. But basically our guys went in, a lot of our field people. I think some incredible number of the first Cabinet people were DLC people. We just weren’t in the same position that some of the bankrolled conservative groups were. But there were a lot of expectations.

The other thing is that the Democratic Party is a different party. It’s not a homogenous party. So you’re going to have a lot of people who have different points of view. One of the points of contention that I always had with Clinton and that I pushed him on—and I think it finally evolved into the right answer—was that he needed a really powerful White House staff. Because in a party like ours, with Cabinet officers, you want them to be your emissaries to the groups, but often they felt they were their group’s emissaries to you. I always thought the White House needed a lot of strong, central direction, and I think it took Clinton a while to understand that, but he did. That’s when we really started producing the stuff.

Riley: Eventually. My assumption is that you didn’t have any personnel component in your domestic policy transition portfolio. Tell me, then, what were you doing?

From: We put together a game plan. I’m sure there’s a transition book around somewhere that Bruce wrote, essentially. Bruce and I wrote a strategy memo on how to get national service and welfare reform and a whole bunch of other things. In the end, I think everything we wanted to do got done. It just didn’t get done quite in the sequence that we probably would have liked in the beginning. But we had priorities. One of the early things we did was push hard to get Family Leave done, and that happened early. We did the groundwork for the National Service bill. Bill Galston actually did that for us. I don’t remember what other things we did, but we had four or five priorities, and all of them got done. But it was a policy deal, as opposed to a personnel deal.

Let’s say it wasn’t the greatest transition of all time. I just personally believe part of the early-season problems that the Clinton administration had were trying to try to avoid making the mistakes of the Carter administration as a Governor coming in from the South. Some of these things were done intentionally. Some of them, I think, were subconsciously done to avoid trying to do the same things.
But the other thing that happened is, between the time of Carter’s leaving the White House and Clinton’s ascending to it, the whole nature of the relationship between the White House and the Congress had changed. I think that a lot of people who were brought in to do a lot of the strategy on Congressional stuff never really appreciated how much it had changed. I’ll explain to you what I’m talking about, for whatever it’s worth. In the 1970s, when Carter was President, there were two things that were different: One, there was a lot of bipartisanship in the Congress. When I worked for Muskie, one of my good friends is still Bill Brock, former Republican chairman. He lives in Annapolis where I do. I think the world of him, and he was always an ally of ours on important stuff even though he’s a conservative Republican and Muskie is a liberal Democrat.

But the big difference was that Congress moved from an inside operation to an information-age operation, and Ronald Reagan made that change. People don’t appreciate the importance of Reagan in a lot of ways because he didn’t always sound smart. Look, I disagreed with him. We fought with him tooth-and-nail when I was in the House caucus, but I respected him because I thought he really knew how to lead the country. When Carter was President, in order to get something through the Congress, you had to get the leadership on board. When Hamilton Jordan got Tip mad and Tip called him “Hamilton Jerkin,” that was the end of Carter’s ability to get anything through.

But Reagan changed that, because when Reagan got elected in 1980, he knew that he couldn’t look to the House leadership because Tip was his adversary—not his enemy, incidentally, but his adversary; an important difference that people today forget. They could have a drink at six o’clock every night, but they were adversaries in the political world. So he knew he couldn’t get anything through the Congress. So Reagan widely used his great skills as a communicator to talk to the voters. Ever since the Reagan budget in ’81, if you want to get a major Congressional initiative done, you’ve got to go outside. You can’t do it by the old way of twisting arms inside. I don’t want to cast aspersions on particular people, but I think a lot of the people who were Democratic lobbyists in the ’80s, when we didn’t have power—the way they got things in that were important was to try to work under the radar screen, really did not appreciate the importance of going outside.

For Clinton it was even more important because that was his great skill. He wasn’t a good arm twister, but he was a good persuader. I think, by the time all that became really clear to him, we had probably lost a year or two in Congress. At the worst point, he got his first budget done. It was not pretty, and he did it by a vote, and he lost a lot of the initial stuff like any kind of worthwhile energy tax and all that. But he also got National Service, and he got NAFTA. He got some hard stuff done in those first years. So it was never a washout. When the administration really found its stride, I think, is after the ‘94 election. He came back to the New Covenant themes, and we did welfare reform and [Edward] Kennedy-[Nancy] Kassebaum and a whole bunch of other things.

**Morrisroe:** During the transition, PPI puts out the *Mandate for Change*. How did that come about, and what influence do you think that had on the transition or the administration strategy?

**From:** Two days after the election, when I went in to see Clinton, I gave him a notebook like this of *Mandate for Change*. He wrote on a yellow piece of paper a blurb, the one on the cover—
made it a bestseller in China and Japan—also got it on the bestseller list in the New York Times for a week or two. It’s amazing what that little blurb did.

I think it’s a chicken-and-egg question. What Mandate for Change was, to a large degree, was further refinement and development of ideas that we had talked about and pushed in the campaign and in the DLC time. It was a lot of the real analysis that we should have done beforehand, but because we were trying to send a political message, as well as being wonks, we didn’t do a lot of that early. It wasn’t as if we had four new ideas that Clinton had never heard of in Mandate for Change. It laid out and explained a lot of the ideas that were going to be part of the administration that go back to “The New Orleans Declaration.” But Mandate for Change was written during the campaign in August and September, in October, I guess. Will edited it, but a lot of the people who had actually helped shape the ideas originally then wrote the chapters in Mandate for Change.

So I think it served as a very good guide as to what was likely to happen in the Clinton administration. It probably had some influence, but we’d already had that influence by the time the book itself came. Michael Kramer and Time helped it a lot because he said it was the best guide for what Clinton was going to do. So I can’t tell you that reading Mandate for Change convinced a bunch of people to do something differently, because most of us who were driving those ideas had been living with them for two years before.

Riley: I want to go back and ask you a question that builds off of the fact that you just made about Congress changing. That is that you’re looking at a situation in 1993 where the Democrats are controlling both Houses for the first time in a long time.

From: Right. They had control of both Houses since ’86.

Riley: But I mean, and the Presidency. The fundamental question is about learning to be a Presidential party—

From: A governing party.

Riley: More of a Presidential party—or maybe a governing party is a better way of putting it.

From: I think it’s a really interesting and important point. I think it goes to the question that I was talking about before about our system and the parts and the whole. The Democratic Party—just to go back to that thing that I alluded to that I probably bored you with about the South—but we have a lot of fiefdoms in the Congress, including [Howard] Judge Smith from Virginia, right? So those guys weren’t interested in governing for the country. They were interested in preventing certain kinds of social progress, racial progress. They were interested in guarding their own fiefdoms. It was government by part.

I mentioned I did the Budget Act. You know that before 1975, probably, before we did the Budget Act in ’73 and ’74, there was never a Congressional budget. There were just 13 appropriations bills. They were not related to each other. There were no priority choices. This is a government that wanted to reduce the power of the Executive, and so we created institutions
where the parts rule. For the Republicans, that wasn’t as big a problem for two reasons: One, they didn’t hold Congress as much, at least in modern times—I can’t speak for the 1910, for Teddy Roosevelt’s time. Even I wasn’t around. The Republicans were, one, for most of that period, a minority party, and second, they were a homogenous party. They’re all white, mostly conservative. Back in those days, until Reagan came around, they really didn’t even have a big old religious wing. Evangelicals were Jimmy Carter Democrats.

So they were always better at, in those days, what I used to call the “cross-cutting issues.” I’d call them “Presidential” or “Executive issues” today maybe: crime, issues that cut across every constituency—welfare, even economic growth. We were always talking about a program for this constituency or that one. So part of what Clinton did was re-instill the whole into the party and into the Congress. But that was a hard thing. I think one of the reasons that the first two years were tough years is that we had a hard time figuring out when to defer, and when not to defer, to Congress, and we probably deferred too much.

I mentioned the weekend of the transition after we got appointed and I went back to get my stuff to come down to Little Rock. Bruce and I rented a house, and two weeks later I decided nothing was happening down there anyway. So we came back up here where our staff was to do most of our policy stuff. But in any event, that weekend the Congressional leadership came down. I knew Clinton was going to be in trouble when Bob Byrd talked him out of the line-item veto and Foley, or [George] Mitchell or somebody, told him we didn’t have to do Congressional staff cuts because they’d already done them.

Basically what he was trying to figure out was how to deal with the leadership in Congress. My view is that the people weren’t very fond of the leadership of Congress, and they liked Clinton, and they thought he was going to come in and he was going to shake up that leadership. I think part of the price we paid in ’94, as we talked about before, is that losing the white South was probably the overwhelming big problem. But I think we also lost points because people expected Clinton to be a different kind of Democrat. When you defer to Congress, you were deferring to the kind of people that they wanted to change.

Riley: Exactly. You’re dealing with a Democratic Congress that’s used to governing as an opposition party. It’s the flip side of the coin. Is there any way in that situation where you can teach them to defer to the Presidential direction?

From: Well, you know, when they get their ass whipped, they learn to do it. [laughter]

Riley: That’s true, but you’ve got two years before you could do that, right?

From: It’s tough. It’s almost an impossible thing to ask somebody who is coming in from a state house, just learning the ropes. The thing that’s different about Congress and a state legislature is, in Congress everybody has a constituency. In a state legislature, the Governor has a constituency. Can you name your state legislators?

Morrisroe: Yes, but I’m a political junkie.
From: I can name one of them. That guy can’t say, “I can’t do anything because Russ won’t let me,” because Russ doesn’t even know who he is. I’m sure he doesn’t know who you are. He’s more likely to know who you are than you are to know who he is. But in Congress a lot of these guys are bought and sold by the time they get here. They’ve got constituencies of their own, so you can’t just run roughshod over them. It’s a lot harder. What I’d argue is that it’s not just learning to be in the opposition, but what these guys learned how to do is govern in their area, to really protect their parts. I think that’s hard for them to do because when a President says, “Okay, Bill Ford, your part on education isn’t going to be as big as it used to be because we’re going to do more on healthcare,” Bill Ford says, “Screw you.”

I’ll just tell you a couple of things that happened in the transition that actually give you a sense of what it was like in the first two years: I’m in there, and by that time, ’92, I’d been around this town for pretty close to a quarter century, probably longer than that. I’d spent a lot of time in the House and the Senate, and two years in the White House. So one of the things I had to do was do courtesy calls to some of the chairs who were going to handle some of the big legislation.

So I go up to meet with Bill Ford, chairman of the Education and Labor group. He’s going to get national service. I said, “Mr. Chairman, one of the President-elect’s top priorities is national service, and you really ought to get that bill out early.” Ford said, “Don’t worry about it. We’ll get it done. We’ll just pass the bill we passed last year on higher education, and we’ll call it ‘National Service,’ and he’ll get his bill.” I said, “I don’t think that’s what we’re talking about.” Then I go in to see Jack Brooks, who’s chairman of the Government Operations Committee and a key guy on the Judiciary Committee. He’s going to have a big hand in the crime bill. Brooks tells me he doesn’t like cops. [laughter]

You think this stuff is funny, but this is the way it is. So he just makes his point, “We’ll give the President a crime bill, habeas corpus reform, all of that.” The only thing that mattered to me in the crime bill was 100,000 cops. So, literally, we’re 90 days into the administration and things are starting to unravel. My older daughter was graduating from a little college that I call Jay Rockefeller University. It’s called West Virginia Wesleyan. Rockefeller, I always say he bought it when he wanted to run for Governor. He became President there, and every building is called the John D. Rockefeller IV building.

Anyway, I promised the president of the university that I’d go down and talk to the political science kids. So I go down there—and I remember this well because it was April 14—I was speaking to them. I go down the night before. Donna Shalala, who is a dear friend, Secretary of HHS [Health and Human Services] in those days, had floated the idea of a value-added tax within the previous few days. You don’t float a new tax around April 15. You just don’t.

Morrisroe: Politics 101.

From: So Buckhannon, West Virginia, which you probably never heard of except that latest mine disaster was five miles from there. It’s one of these little college towns where the reporter and the cameraman are the same person. So I do this press conference, and the only question I get is about this new tax that Clinton is going to impose. The next day there’s only one flight
back from a little town near Buckhannon to Washington, and it’s at six o'clock in the morning, which is earlier than I like to function. So I have to get on this flight, and I fly back.

I’m in my office by 7:15 or so, 7:30, and I decide I’m going to write Clinton this long memo about what’s happening. Essentially I said, “It’s been 90 days. I’ve purposefully kept my mouth shut because I told you I wasn’t going to come in. I thought people who were in the administration ought to have a chance to get their feet on the ground before I start screaming at you.” But a lot of stuff about why I thought he was starting to slide. So that day—I guess it was either that Friday or the next Monday—I get this call from Clinton. “Meeting on Friday. I want you to come down.”

I go in and sit in the Roosevelt Room—I guess it was in the Roosevelt Room—and it’s Gore, Clinton, and the top staff, and [Robert] Rubin and Hillary—the whole shebang. Clinton starts this list, and he has all these DLC ideas, and he’s asking the staff where they are on the DLC ideas. The first thing is the crime bill. Stephanopoulos says, “If you just call Chairman Brooks, he’ll give you a crime bill next week, all worked out.” Having been through this experience with Brooks in the transition, I said, “George, how many cops are in this bill?” He said, “Oh, the Chairman will give us the 100,000 cops later. He just wants to get habeas corpus reforms” and all this stuff.

I said, “Mr. President, don’t call him, because all you care about is getting the 100,000 cops. Because you want somebody looking out the window in 1995 when they’re thinking about what they’re going to vote to re-elect the President and saying, ‘I feel safer because I see a policeman on the street, and my President put him there.’” Anyway, needless to say, we didn’t get the crime bill until a year later, and then we had all sorts of problems with it.

Morrisroe: During the transition period, you’re working on things like welfare reform that are obviously mentioned. When did you get a sense that most of those, with a few exceptions—like family leave and a number of others—were not going to be high on the first-year agenda, and that the economic issues—budget deficit and healthcare—were going to be in the fore?

From: I had a pretty good sense that economic issues were going to be important and that he wanted to do a healthcare bill early. That was pretty clear—even though Gore kept telling him that it wasn’t going to be simple to get a healthcare plan through.

Morrisroe: At the time did you think he was ill-advised to be pursuing healthcare before welfare reform or some of these other issues?

From: I think he would have been better off if he had done welfare first. I think it would have been hard to do because that was one of the things the Congressional leadership did not want to do. The reason, incidentally, is not because I had any problem with doing anything on healthcare, but I just thought there was a consensus on welfare reform, and I thought we were a long way from a consensus on healthcare, probably still are. I just thought you’d get a sense of a degree of momentum that you would otherwise not get. By the time he did the healthcare thing, he had already put in the national service bill. I think we’d already signed it by that time.
Riley: It was signed in August?

From: Early September maybe?

Riley: Ninety-three.

From: That was a big deal for us. That’s our cornerstone idea. I can remember the day, the minute, that Clinton decided that national service was a good idea. It was in the bar at the Williamsburg Inn. It was at this conference in February 1988. We were having a drink and he said, “You know, I listened to Sam Nunn and Charlie Moskos, and boy, what a good idea. I never really thought about national service, but I think it could really do a lot of good if we had kids going down working in the Mississippi Delta and earning a public college scholarship on top of it.” But in any event, it wasn’t as if we weren’t getting a lot of stuff done, but healthcare, in a sense, became all-consuming.

One of the things I think about politics that’s important is that timing is important in a lot of this stuff. The issue of gays in the military, which consumed an awful lot of that first year—gays in the military is not a problem for me; I served in the military; I supported it. But when you do it out of the box, it becomes definitional, and then you have to fight the definition for a long time. If Clinton had waited six or eight months to do that and gotten a couple of other things done first and gotten the military a little more comfortable with him, my guess is he probably could have made more progress than he did.

But on healthcare, I think that the Congressional leadership wanted to do healthcare early. They really never did want to do welfare. I just think we would have gotten a better welfare bill, and we probably would have had a better chance of passing healthcare if we’d done welfare first.

Riley: If you look at the universe of things that you were interested in, it seems to me that national service is almost a case study of how something could be done right in this hostile environment. What’s the story behind the success of this idea? How do they manage to get this one right when so many of the other things seem, for whatever reason, not to go exactly as planned?

From: I guess there are probably a couple of things. National service—we did a book here called Citizenship and National Service, in early 1988, where we outlined a basic national service plan. The brains behind it was a guy named Charlie Moskos at Northwestern. Charlie had done his own book called A Call to [Civic] Service [: National Service for Country and Community]. But we popularized it, put it in political terms. In ’88 Sam Nunn and Joe Duffey, who was then President of American University, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, and Barbara Mikulski and a bunch of us did a lot of travel promoting the idea. This was before Clinton. Clinton, I think it was early ’88 that he said he liked the idea, but he really didn’t have very much to do with it at that point.

In January 1989, George Mitchell became majority leader. So what we’re talking about is essentially four or five years before Clinton’s Presidency. In ’89 Mitchell becomes leader, and out of the first five bills, the majority leader’s bills, two of them were DLC things. One was the
repeal the War Powers Act, and the other was national service. I can’t remember whether
national service was S2 or S3. We had pretty broad support. We got Teddy Kennedy on board
and Sam Nunn. Kennedy and Nunn and the Democratic caucus was pretty good support. We
couldn’t get it through, but we got a pilot program through. So there had been a precedent.

But it’s also receptivity of the idea. I think, consistently, national service was the best Clinton
applause line in the campaign. So when Clinton started making it a centerpiece, he really built
support for the idea, but it wasn’t as if it was hitting Congress for the first time. We had to get
through Billy Ford and some of the old guard. But a lot of the political opposition to it had
already been surfaced, so when it came around the second time, we knew how to deal with it.
You might not believe this, but the presidents of the University of Chicago and of Harvard
opposed the GI Bill. The reason they did is they just didn’t want that riffraff that saved
democracy and the world to soil their campuses.

When you do something, interestingly enough, that affects colleges—I probably shouldn’t say
this to you guys.

Riley: We’re research faculty, so we’re a little different.

From: It’s really fascinating. I think, in 1989 we had a conspiracy of the elite colleges and the
black colleges to oppose the Nunn-[David] McCurdy bill on national service. My theory on this
is—it’s probably all BS, but it’s my theory anyway—is that it didn’t matter to elite colleges
because they could afford to get whatever people they want. But they kept telling the black
colleges, “They’ll cut your other aid if they give you national service,” when, in fact, one of the
reasons we proposed national service was to increase college aid because in the ’80s, Pell Grants
and all those things were going down because there was no political support for higher
education. We thought, maybe if kids were serving their country, we’d be able to build a broader
base of political support for college aid. But anyway, a lot of that had already been exposed.
They had been made comfortable.

The other thing is that the original Nunn-McCurdy bill had military and civilian service. The
military had originally opposed that because they thought, given the choice, everybody would
choose civilian service. The Army personnel headquarters at Fort Sheridan, north shore of
Chicago, finally went out and tested, and they found out 75 percent of men wanted to go in the
military and not into civilian service. So the Army, being pretty responsive actually, created
something called the Montgomery GI Bill, which was our bill by Executive order. So the
military part of it had actually already been implemented by the time we came around with what
became AmeriCorps. In other words, a lot of the political obstacles were removed. It’s easier to
do it the second time than it is the first.

Riley: Was it also more deftly handled within the administration?

From: Well, Eli handled it, and that is always a good thing. But when you have allies like Sam
Nunn and Teddy Kennedy in the Senate, that’s pretty powerful. I might disagree with Teddy
Kennedy on some substantive issues, even though we’ve gotten closer over the years, but there’s
nobody who has been a greater Senator in the last, not 40 years, than Teddy Kennedy. Can you imagine, he’s been in the Senate 44 years?

Riley: Third-ranking or second?

From: Bob Byrd. Who else is there?

Riley: [Carl] Hayden.

From: Oh, in history. Hayden, and then Byrd has been there longest.

Riley: But I think that’s it. Budget politics from that year: that was where most of the energies were invested.

From: A lot of them.

Riley: Fighting off incoming fire and then trying to deal with budget. Where were you positioned on the budget? What were your priorities in that first budget cycle?

From: We weren’t big fans of the stimulus package. I think the stimulus package actually had a lot to do with some of these political forces that we were talking about in the Congress at the beginning. I think it was a response to try to get through some of the old-guard leadership to resurrect a lot of the old investment programs. We weren’t big fans of that, but generally we were supportive of the Clinton overall thrust on the budget, getting the budget under control. Worked hard for the—at least I did—to help him get the votes. In fact, I think I was coming back from the USIA [United States Information Agency] trip, could that be right? I know I was in Germany. I can picture it. I was on the Rhine. They asked me to call Sam Nunn to try to get him to vote for the package. I called him and Nunn asked me where I was. He said, “Just get another bottle of wine.”

Anyway, Breaux, who was the political chairman of the DLC at that point—at least I think he was still chairman—was not a particularly happy camper about the energy tax, and he led the fight against that. But the truth is, when you get into a thing as complicated as a set of appropriations bills, we tend not, as an institution, to be able to take positions because we have elected officials who vote their own way on those things. But generally we were not big fans of the stimulus package. We thought that was old politics. Breaux led the fight on the energy tax. We tried to round up the votes for him best we could, to get him to pass it.

Riley: I have a broader question in this context about the place that deficit reduction held in the DLC theology at this time. I don’t recall deficit reduction being a keystone issue of the DLC up through the election cycle. Am I correct or incorrect about that?

From: I’m sure we had a very complicated position. I’m trying to remember precisely. We took a position on this. We pushed for fiscal discipline. But I think we had a position that Shapiro had worked out that was really trying to balance the operating budget. Then, of course, you get into
all these definitional questions about what’s operational and what’s investment. But I remember talking about BOB, bureau of the budget.

Riley: I haven’t heard so much about BOB in these interviews.

From: You probably haven’t. So we were pretty much behind the thrust of the Clinton—the Clinton campaign was to cut the deficit in half in four years or something. Now, I remember—I don’t know if Bruce told you this or not; he probably wouldn’t tell you this—but I remember one day in the transition when Bob Reich and Sperling—Sperling was Reich’s deputy like Bruce was mine, which meant that Sperling did all the work, just like Bruce did—Reich and Sperling are really serious, and they ask us to come over and see them. We go over and they’re basically telling us that they have to go in that night to tell Clinton that all the numbers they used in the campaign were wrong. Did you know about that?

Riley: Well, I’m not sure that I knew about this particular moment, but I was aware that at some point during the transition they got news about the deficit numbers being much worse than they had expected. But please go ahead and tell the rest of your story.

From: That’s basically it. All these numbers were wrong. They just couldn’t have been farther off. So we go in. Bruce and I are basically backing up Reich and Sperling. “Numbers change” and all this kind of stuff.

The key thing for us, I believe, was the shift of the thrust of Democratic economic policy from redistribution to growth. We believed that fiscal discipline and having a sound fiscal policy, tax policy, was critical. It was the critical first step for that. So that’s the context in which we talked about it in the DLC, not so much in terms of being accountant-like, green eyeshades. I think, in the end, that’s the way it worked for Clinton.

The first budget deal, which he passed by one vote, turned out to be, again, a good political thing for him because it created an economic foundation that allowed the economy to grow, or at least didn’t get in the way of growth. To me that was the most important thing. I am sure there was a lot of give-and-take here with Shapiro and Breaux and some of us on the politics during the whole thing, but I just don’t remember a lot about it.

Riley: On the spending side, other than the stimulus package, did you feel like they were being sufficiently disciplined in that first budget package, the one that won by one vote, or were you pushing them to go further on the spending side?

From: I just don’t remember. We may have pushed for more cuts on the spending side, but I really don’t remember.

Morrisroe: Shortly after the election, you hire Stan Greenberg to do some analysis of the election results for you. Do you recall this?

From: We hired Greenberg several times. The first poll he ever did for us was in 1987 on national security. We hired him in ’93, I think, to do a Perot-voters study.
Morrisroe: Exactly, that’s what I’m referring to. So what was your strategy in having somebody look at those numbers and how did—?

From: Real simple. There were 17 or 18 percent of the electorate that voted for Ross Perot. We wanted to figure out how to get them on our side. That’s what it was about. We thought those were the voters that were up for grabs. They were going to break 2/3-1/3 one way or the other, and we wanted to make sure they voted for us.

Morrisroe: If I’m correct, you concluded that they would not, absent Perot, break for Clinton.

From: I think we concluded they were about even. But look, I think it’s hard to tell. Clinton will argue to this day, I’m sure, that it wouldn’t have mattered whether Perot was in the race or not. He would have won.

But I think if you look where the Democratic Party is, even today, we have a big problem getting white voters to vote for us, and particularly middle-class white voters. Perot took a lot of those white men out of the contest. Clinton was able to do a lot better, probably, among a lot of them in ’96 after he had a record. But without a record, the question is whether Clinton had convinced them enough to take advantage of their disgruntlement with Bush, and I don’t know that it was a complete case.

Morrisroe: Do you think your results showed that to be successful with this cadre of voters that the President should be focusing on things like welfare reform and national service?

From: Is that what we did? Is that what the results were?

Morrisroe: That’s what it was reported as, as the strategy that the administration should then take on.

From: I should have reviewed that stuff.

Morrisroe: No no, that’s all right. I don’t know if you can answer the question, if it’s fair to ask the question. Do you think that registered with the White House?

From: I’m sure it registered with part of the White House and not with all of it. I think Clinton probably took all that stuff pretty seriously. Clinton and Bruce Reed were the best New Democrats in the White House. I think the message registered a lot more when they saw the real voters come in in 1994.

Morrisroe: It’s no longer hypothetical.

From: I believed then, I believe now that when Clinton was reasonably faithful to the New Democrat approach, he did pretty well. When he strayed, he got in trouble. I think he’d probably tell you that.
Riley: I was going to ask you about the original personnel assignments in the White House, in particular, and maybe the Cabinet too. You said that you had a remarkable number of DLCers as Cabinet officials. Were there appointments that you were concerned about?

From: Yes.

Riley: Either in the White House or the Cabinet?

From: I think I did an op-ed, actually, after Clinton pulled Lani Guinier, but I pushed him to do that. Then he came back to me and said, “Okay, we’ve done it. Now you’ve got to defend it.”

Riley: That comes a little later, though. I didn’t know whether any of the first—

From: It was an initial.

Riley: Yes, it was an initial appointment that occurs, I think, sometime close to the summer, isn’t it before the Guinier appointment comes out?

From: The spring, I’m pretty sure.

Morrisroe: The withdrawal was in June.

From: Was it that late? You guys are probably right.

Riley: But any of the other early appointments to the White House staff? I’m trying to think. Congressional Affairs, Howard Paster, had a long history with Labor.

From: Yes, I’ve known Howard Paster forever, and I like him very much. I worried more about the internal Washington lobbyist, as opposed to somebody who understood how to marshal public opinion behind Clinton stuff. I’m trying to think about that original White House. Rahm did political. That was interesting.

Riley: For a little while he did political.

From: I was never a big Stephanopoulos fan.

Riley: His association was with Gephardt. We’ve gotten the impression from your mentions of Gephardt before that that had two faces to it.

From: It sure did. I like Dick Gephardt very much. The truth be known, in the end, in 1988, I voted for him because of a very important rule: he was the only candidate who ever had dinner at my house. Just personal—we used to take our kids to ball games, all that kind of stuff. I like Dick very much. I thought he made a terrible mistake on trade. I thought he let his politics become very old politics. So we had disagreements. But to this day I think the world of him personally.
I’m just trying to think. Mack [Thomas McLarty] had been a longtime DLC supporter—great friends. Still raises a lot of money for me. But he was really not an assertive type. He wasn’t going to get control of that place.

Riley: You mentioned toughness many times as being important, and that’s not the first word that comes to mind.

From: No, grace is what I think about when I think about Mack McLarty. He’s just a wonderful man to be with. I never was a big fan of giving Harold Ickes very much power.

So there were some deals. But I think you had to be realistic. Our troops were really pretty thin. In the domestic policy area, which was what we were most interested in, we had the two key jobs.

Riley: Did it matter that they weren’t the head of the shop, that Carol Rasco was the head?

From: No, Bruce was the most important player in that for eight years. I guess Carol, when she was in that job, did focus on education, but a pretty narrow focus. Bruce really, from what I could tell, was doing everything that really mattered for Clinton. Would I have liked Bruce to have been Domestic Policy Advisor? Yes. But I think there were some deals made in Arkansas that I didn’t know about, which in a sense made it easier for him to carry it out. Because when I was Domestic Policy Advisor in the transition, it was natural for Bruce, who had worked for me for a long time, to be my deputy. Otherwise, if somebody else had been brought in in the transition, Bruce would have had a pretty good claim to be the director, the head of it. So, inadvertently, I may have helped the Carol Rasco appointment. But I never got the sense that she was really trying to run the whole domestic policy operation.

Riley: You were comfortable with Bob Rubin?

From: Yes. Rubin turned out to be actually brilliant. He had helped me from time to time at the DLC. In the time before, Rubin played his politics very carefully. He really wanted to get into a job like he got into, and he played his politics very carefully.

But Clinton just blew him away. He had this group that was meeting with potential candidates in 1990, ’91. I’ll never forget. Bob Rubin was one of the first people to support the DLC, because this thing got built out of Bob Strauss’ Rolodex, and Rubin was a Strauss protégé. So one of the first people Strauss got to give us money was Rubin. But we went for a long time when Rubin didn’t help us. I’d talked to him. He didn’t want to make a choice between the DLC and the DNC and all that. Then at one of these dinners that he was having with potential candidates, he had Clinton. I got a call the next day. “This guy is the most brilliant guy I’ve ever seen.” All of a sudden Rubin was right back in the DLC.

But anyway, I was very content with Rubin. He’s good. Roger Altman, who was the Deputy Secretary of Treasury, was an old friend. But the thing about all these guys is that they weren’t integral to the DLC. As I said, we were really small. The DLC was mostly a roster of elected officials. If you think about the initial Cabinet—I may have missed one or two—but you had
Bentsen; you had Leon Panetta at Budget; you had Bentsen at Treasury; you had Dick Riley at Education; you had Bruce Babbitt at Interior.

**Riley:** Espy.

**From:** Mike at Agriculture. I’m trying to remember.

**Riley:** Shalala.

**From:** She was not part of the DLC, but we got to know each other in the transition, and we just always hit it off. There were maybe seven out of the 17, which is not bad. There were a lot of people who were disappointed, but I really wasn’t. In the second term, when we had a chance to really put together a personnel thing, we did very well. Bob Nash actually had somebody who was guarding my interests when he was personnel director. I never really had any complaints.

There were a couple of people like Shapiro who probably had eyes bigger than their stomach in the first term and didn’t get in who were disappointed. But basically people from here who wanted to get in wound up getting in. It’s just that we didn’t have a lot of numbers.

**Riley:** You’ve been very patient with us today, so why don’t we close the books on this one? You’re generous to let us come back and put you through the paces one more time.

**From:** That will give me a chance to go through these documents too and see what I think is appropriate and what isn’t.

**Riley:** For our purposes, if we can do this in the next couple of months.

**From:** We’ll work it out.

**Riley:** That sounds great. I appreciate it very much. This is a good stopping point. We haven’t covered everything in the first year, but we’ll put our heads together about what we haven’t covered and go through it.