May 11, 2006

Riley: This is the Betty Currie interview as a part of our Clinton Presidential History Project. Ms. Currie, we’re very appreciative for your coming to Charlottesville to do this.

Currie: The pleasure is mine, thank you.

Riley: There are a couple of things we usually do at the beginning of an interview, just some administrative chores. The first one is to repeat the fundamental ground rule. You and I had a discussion about the general ground rules before we began, but it’s important to reiterate for the record that our oral history interviews are conducted under a veil of confidentiality. Nothing we talk about in the room leaves the room unless you want to repeat it at some point, until such time as you’ve had an opportunity to look at the transcript and to clear it.

Young: You can edit if you need to.

Riley: Exactly.

Young: Then you approve it.

Riley: The other thing we need to do at the beginning is to do a voice ID for the transcriber so he or she will know who is saying what, and so we’ll go around the table here.

Young: I’m Jim Young.

Riley: I’m Russell Riley.

Currie: And I’m Betty Currie.

Bagchi: Nitu Bagchi.

Riley: Ms. Currie, you had some experience in several Presidential campaigns even before the 1992 campaign, but I wanted to ask you an even more general question about how you developed an interest in politics.
**Currie:** I always tell people I was apolitical until 1982. I voted, I did all the right things, and I voted for whomever I thought was the right person, not necessarily Democrat, Republican, just whomever I liked or looked the part. And in 1980 after the election I was working for Action, and for the first time in my life they asked me to move because it was a political position. I knew it was political but they had let me stay. I had to leave and I went to another office within the administration, and then they asked me to go to HHS [Health and Human Services], Office of Civil Rights. And I said, “That’s perfect.” Civil rights was something I always liked, something I wanted to do. I got there and did what I consider to be nothing. I said, “Well, this is funny. There’s so much to do and we’re not really not doing very much with civil rights.” I got very distressed about it. Luckily they offered an early out for Civil Service retirements who were 50 years old or had 25 years of service and I qualified.

**Riley:** You’d been in the federal government for 25 years—

**Currie:** At the time it was more than 25, I think it was 28. It was my first retirement in ’82. They offered the retirement and I took it. I was still frustrated and wanted to know what I could do. There was a campaign going on and I could do something for civil rights by working on the campaign. It started with that simple thing. And from that I got bitten by the campaign bug and there I was.

**Riley:** So in 1984 you did some work for the [Walter] Mondale/[Geraldine] Ferraro campaign. What kind of work were you doing for them?

**Currie:** I was a full-time volunteer, unpaid of course.

**Young:** You really were bitten by the bug.

**Currie:** Truly, unpaid. I would go in about eight hours a day because they were so desperate. A friend of mine, Pam Fleischaker, had asked me to come and since I had known these people from working at Action and she’d asked me I said sure. I couldn’t wait. It was mostly secretarial, phone, whatever needed to be done. We worked on the campaign on the Ferraro side.

**Young:** Was that at the base headquarters?

**Currie:** Right, on Wisconsin Avenue in Washington.

**Young:** Not traveling with her?

**Currie:** No.

**Riley:** That was with the overall campaign rather than specifically with the Ferraro piece of the campaign, is that correct?

**Currie:** It was with the Ferraro piece. They had a Mondale side, and they had Ferraro side, so we were on the Ferraro side.
Riley: Given what was happening in the country at the time with the [Ronald] Reagan administration, were there a lot of people like yourself who were beginning to find themselves moving in more political directions? Or did you feel you were doing something—

Currie: When I got there it was amazing how many people I knew at the campaign from my various government jobs and people who had worked with me in the government who had decided for various reasons to come work on the campaign. I guess there was a feeling of wanting to do something.

Young: And not being given much to do or being made welcome within the Reagan administration when you were transferred, I got that.

Currie: That was my feeling.

Young: You weren’t doing very much in this area.

Currie: I was very disappointed.

Young: So it was—

Currie: Wanting to do, wanting to see what we could do to change.

Young: But not being offered any opportunity.

Riley: Did you ever have the sense that that campaign might succeed?

Currie: It was my first work in a campaign. I felt as hard as I was working and as everybody was working there was no way we couldn’t succeed. And then I think I started getting the feeling of this is not right after some of the debates. This is not going like I wanted. I remember so well Paul Tully, who is now deceased, told us Election Day or the day before Election Day, that the polls were saying this and our numbers were saying that and if we do this and do that we could win. I said, “Gosh, he knows more than I do.” But as you know it was not to be.

Riley: It didn’t work that way.

Currie: At all, right.

Riley: So what did you do then after ’84? Did you stay at home?

Currie: I went to work for Hecht’s for a while, which I loved. Then I went to work for Miles and Nancy Rubin at their home, sort of managing their house and everything. And then I did a lot of nothing, mostly volunteer work.

Riley: You earned your time.
Currie: Yes. Once you do volunteer work, they know it and your name goes into some little pool or something, they call you back. Then I did that till ’88. And then got another call. “You want to do anything in Boston?”

Riley: Who did the call come from?

Currie: I am trying to think. It could have been Pam again because Pam Fleischaker was up in Boston also. And I said, “Oh, I don’t know. I’d have to go to Boston. Who do I know in Boston?” So she mentioned a couple of friends. I stayed with a girlfriend I had worked with at the Peace Corps who had a nice house. The two of us stayed there.

Riley: Her name was?

Currie: Ellen Yaffe.

Riley: And what kind of work were you doing in—?

Currie: I was working with John Podesta on the rapid research response, I think that was what we called ourselves up there.

Young: Was that basically what otherwise would be called opposition research or was it more than that?

Currie: Basically the same thing. They paid me this time. And the hours were longer, much, much longer. We were really, really dedicated. A lot of the same people from the other campaign were there. A lot of young and energetic, hard-working, bright people were there.

Riley: Do you remember any of the people in particular who bridged from ’84 to ’88? Had Podesta been involved in ’84 also?

Currie: I saw Podesta, he and his brother Tony [Podesta] came through. I think they were probably consultants because they had their own firm, so they weren’t really there at the office but more or less consulting. But Podesta ran the thing. Pam was there. Marcia Hale was there. Tammy Stanton was there. And a lot of people who later told me they worked at the Ferraro office but I didn’t see because I had my little volunteer head you know. But yes, there were a lot of repeats.

Riley: What was your piece of the action?

Currie: Mostly I was in clerical. Anything that needed to be done. If they asked me to do some research I would do that, whatever. If something came up, a statement was made, they would knock it down right away, so we were going through them all day long. That was the first time I heard about Lexis/Nexis.
Young: If I am not mistaken, and I may very well be, the comparable operation for the [George H. W.] Bush campaign, Andy Card was involved in the opposition research. I think we interviewed him way back. I think he was involved in it.

Currie: You know, I didn’t know but when I met Mr. Card he said, “We’ve met before.” And I didn’t remember, I was embarrassed. But one thing I did do at the [Michael] Dukakis campaign, whenever we had a debate, I was sort of the debate person, set it up, make sure we got the transcript right away. They wanted it as soon as the debate was over and we tried to do that.

Young: I have the impression that Dukakis was not the kind of person who would counterattack or put a lot of value on getting down into the negative. Is that true?

Currie: I don’t know for sure. I’ll probably say that’s true, but we did it for him.

Young: You did it for him.

Currie: And we had surrogate speakers we could call to do it also.

Young: You had to deal with this Boston Harbor cleanup business and the Willie Horton stuff. That was pretty dirty stuff.

Currie: When I first saw that Willie Horton thing on TV I was offended by it, but I didn’t realize that the rest of the world, or I hope the country, was offended by it also. But it worked for them. It worked.

Young: It was Lee Atwater. He was a real—

Currie: Genius. Oh, yes. Now at the Dukakis campaign was where I first personally met Governor Clinton.

Riley: Is that right?

Currie: Yes, he was a surrogate speaker and he would come there all the time. He was attractive and nice and fun and we rode in the elevator together once. He didn’t know who I was at the time. I don’t know if he remembers this but it was my first face to face. We had talked on the phone before but that was my first.

Riley: But he stood out even among the other surrogates.

Currie: Dependable, reliable, and a very good surrogate.

Riley: He certainly was a loyal advocate for Dukakis.

Currie: I know.

Riley: There was this story of the speech at the convention.
Currie: Oh, yes.

Riley: Did you have any knowledge of his involvement or the—

Currie: No.

Riley: The story we’ve heard from others is that the speech became so large and unwieldy because the Dukakis people continued to take his basic speech and throw bits and pieces on it.

Currie: I wasn’t aware of that. The only thing I know is that when we heard, I said, “Oh, stop, stop.”

Riley: You’re making a slashing at the throat.

Currie: But I felt confident with that election for a while too. Then all of a sudden, I think what turned it for me was when he was riding in that tank.

Riley: Oh, yes?

Currie: I said, “Who did that?” I didn’t like that at all. It just looked terrible. It was bad. I think the numbers went down after that.

Riley: I think so. Who were the people you worked with most closely?

Currie: John Podesta. Sylvia Mathews, at the time she was 26 years old but brilliant, and I thought so then. Susan Rice was also there, she had just graduated. These were, to me, young kids. Sheryll Cashin was a law student who has also done great things. Terry Bergman, George Stephanopoulos was down the hall. And I thought that he was just a young, funny little fellow, little did I know. Also very bright. Gene Sperling. Mark Gearan. Marcia Hale again. Pam Fleischaker was there but she was working mostly with Kitty [Dukakis], along with Paul Costello, whom I had worked with at Action years before. It was like the circle came back around.

Riley: But it’s interesting because so many of these names are going to come up in ’92 also.

Currie: I know. When I got there I said, “Well, this is old home week again.” And I said, “Is this what we do for a living, go campaign to campaign?” But I thought it was just a calling for people who wanted to make a change or make a difference in any way they could.

Young: Sylvia is one of our favorites too. She is on our governing board here at the Miller Center.

Currie: Sideline. I just hope she runs for Governor of West Virginia one day.

Young: We haven’t gotten any hint of that.
Currie: I know, I know. She’s just wonderful, wonderful.

Young: Yes, she is. She’s very helpful to us with this project and in oral history in general.

Currie: She’s done a lot of things and she has a lot of knowledge.

Riley: So what do you do after ’88?

Currie: I swore to myself never again. I made the comment that it was too hard. You work long and hard and everybody does and you feel good about it and you think it’s going to happen and then when it doesn’t two times in a row, I said, “No more, no more.” So what did I do after? I may have gone back to work for Miles and Nancy Rubin again. They’re very kind. And continued with the volunteer work I was doing. I think we renovated our house after that, too.

Riley: A lot of accomplishments there.

Currie: Right. Yes.

Riley: So that brings us to ’92. You had sworn never again.

Currie: I did.

Riley: What happened?

Currie: Judy Green called me. She had been in Boston also. Judy Green, and who else called? It may have been Pam, because she knows Pam too. She said, “Betty, what about going to Little Rock?” Little Rock? Why would anybody go to Little Rock? She said, “We’re having a campaign down there. We think Bill Clinton can win.” And I said, “No, no, no. I don’t want to.” And the office was going to be in Little Rock. Had they said they were going to have an office in Washington—But I’d have to move to Little Rock. I said, “No, I can’t do it.” So she called back again and said, “Betty, think about it. You can work for James Carville.” I said, “Who’s James Carville?” I said, “No, no, no.”

She said, “Drive on down, it’s a nice trip. Come see if you like it. We need to talk about it.” I’m very fond of Judy Green and her husband. Her husband and I worked together at Action. I told my husband we were going to drive down to Little Rock and see what was happening. So we drove down to Little Rock. I said, “It’s not a bad little town.” I thought there would be segregation all over the place. They’re nicer there than they are in Washington. I said, “This isn’t bad. A country town. Pretty, pretty, pretty.”

So I went by the campaign office and I saw everybody I knew still working there. And they said, “Betty, this is really going to be good.” The poll numbers were not saying much at the time. “Give it a try, come on. And we can get you an apartment. You can decide.” And there I was.

Riley: Okay.
Currie: There I was. I said, “Oh, gosh.” And these are longer hours. At that time I was getting to the age where long hours take their toll, but there I was.

Riley: And you would have begun about what time of the year in ’92?

Currie: July, August.

Riley: So this would have been after the convention?

Currie: Yes, it was after the convention.

Riley: Okay.

Currie: So I missed the convention. Because I wasn’t going to, was not going to go. And then I met James Carville. The first day I walked into this place I said, “Hmm, typical campaign, a little disorganized, stuff all over the place, everyone’s running crazy.” And they said, “You’ll be sitting here, and you’ll probably be doing the phone and whatever.” I said, “Whatever needs to be done I will.” And in walks James Carville. I don’t think he was cursing initially. Loud, yelling out instructions, doing this, doing that. Intimidating everybody. Whew. I said, “Boy, oh boy. Okay, I can deal with this.” I’d worked a long time.

So it must have been day two or day three, I walked over to him and said, “Mr. Carville, I love you.” He said, “What? I love you too.” He was a person I knew was dedicated to winning. Other campaigns, people had other motives, whatever they were, but Carville was there to win. And I felt it. I felt it and it felt good. And I loved him from that day to this day.

Riley: And you certainly had the bug by then. You felt it kick in when you walked back into the campaign headquarters.

Currie: It kicked in and it was a good feeling. A lot a familiar faces. Of course George Stephanopoulos, who was whatever he was to James, they had co-whatever responsibilities. He was there. Eli Segal, whom I had met before. A lot of the same people. And they all were feeling the same goodness about this one. Which we felt before but we felt good.

Riley: But it’s remarkable how much—you tend to think about all of those still very young people involved in the ’92 campaign, weren’t they?

Currie: There was a group of women, I guess there were five of us. We called ourselves the over-50 bunch. And we admitted to being over 50 because there were only the five of us doing it. So we would eat out all the time and move around. But we were, I hate to say grandmothers, it used to be mothers, now it’s grandmothers, to the staff. But it was good. They were all hard working, really dedicated.

Riley: Who were the other members of your group?
Currie: Sara Ehrman, Judy Green, Phyllis Segal, Susan Berger, and maybe Pam—no, Pam wasn’t there. There was another one. To this day we still try to get together.

Young: So you were not only over 50 and you were not only all women but you were also more seasoned.

Currie: True, I like that word.

Young: Isn’t that true. I am trying to get the feeling of this case—

Currie: This is my third campaign and some of the younger people there—because Sylvia was there. I don’t remember her at the Mondale/Ferraro campaign, this was her second. But some of the ones there were also at the three, but they were still a little younger than I was. They were probably in their 40s.

Young: So not grandmothers but mothers.

Currie: Right.

Young: Seasoned women dealing with all of these enthusiastic, wild people. So is that really—

Currie: Wild, enthusiastic—

Young: I didn’t mean wild in a bad sense.

Currie: No, no, but they were go-getters.

Young: Wild with enthusiasm and energy.

Currie: Now although we were seasoned and old, we still had a little bit of that wildness in us too.

Riley: That I detect.

Young: Otherwise you wouldn’t have been there.

Currie: Yes.

Riley: The tape doesn’t pick up a wink. You were very comfortable around young people and—

Currie: True. And they were very respectful.

Riley: Is that right?
Currie: Truly, they were. I think in all the campaigns they were. I think they respected whatever seasoned-ness I had. They respected that. It was easy, it was fun, and once we started feeling like a winning team it got really fun.

Young: That’s important because I’m speaking from age here.

Currie: I can relate.

Young: You’ve seen and I’ve seen younger people who are really very smart, very dedicated, very driven with good reasons. And often during the tensions, you see some people get extremely impatient and that comes out as, I’m thinking condescending but I mean they become inconsiderate of some of the people working under them.

Currie: You know that probably happened but I figured with the tensions as they were, with the end result being what it was, I overlooked it. And the greatest master of being impatient was probably James Carville. He’d bark out orders, but I knew everybody had a deadline. Everybody had worked past midnight. So if they were a little condescending or a little short-tempered or a little something, it was overlooked, on my part it was overlooked.

Young: That’s very important because you’ve got these very intense activities and it carried on well.

Currie: There may have been more battles behind the scenes that I didn’t see.

Young: So long as they didn’t disrupt things. There are stories of other campaigns, people at each other’s throats. Other campaigns—

Currie: We probably saw some of that at one of the other campaigns I worked at.

Riley: What is it about you that makes you so comfortable around the chaos of a campaign?

Currie: I’d like to say my seasoned-ness I guess, because I find it easier when people go crazy not to go crazy along with them. Not to try to out-yell them or out-scream them, just to step back and let them get it over with and it’s okay. That was my philosophy. It seems to work.

Riley: Do you think that’s why people kept coming back to you for your work on these campaigns? That there was a sense of a calm voice among the—

Currie: That could be. I’d like to think that it was my expertise, my brilliance. Another wink. Yes, it could have been.

Riley: Do you have any specific recollections from the campaign about especially good days or especially bad days you had?

Currie: I think I remember a lot of the good days because it was an upbeat campaign, and luckily the numbers kept moving up. It was very rare that we were in the throes of “oh, no, oh,
It was just good. People were feeling good and what I felt at this campaign that I didn’t feel at others, nobody was looking at the “plum” book. You know, what job am I going to get, what job to get. I said, “This is good, people are definitely gung ho on winning here.” I felt that from the beginning and I felt it all the way through. That was a good, good feeling.

Young: That group shared a common agenda and that was to win.

Currie: To win.

Young: To win, not to win for the purpose of getting something given to them.

Currie: And I personally attribute a lot to Carville. He had no other intention but to win. It was good. He would rant and rave, he and Susan Thomases. He asked her for something one day and she was apparently taking her time. Boy oh boy, the phone mess, I was listening on the phone [humming]. They were going back and forth but she got it back to him.

Riley: Susan was doing scheduling, I think, at that point.

Currie: That was an impossible job then, it was an impossible job during the Presidency, and I understand that is still an impossible job. It was hard, yes.

Young: You didn’t have any particular connection with the opposition research with—

Currie: No, they were down the hall.

Riley: You were basically a traffic cop inside a very big open room, right?

Currie: It was a big open room with a sofa for James to sleep on when he felt like it or whatever he felt like doing, yes. Barking out orders.

Riley: But that setup was different from what you were accustomed to working before. It was chaotic but—

Currie: In the other rooms the areas were more confined. This was open and you would yell at anybody.

Riley: Right, you could get anybody’s attention on short notice.

Currie: You could see what they were doing. They could see what you were doing.

Young: Worked well?

Currie: I thought so. The fact that we had how many TVs going, three TVs at any one time. From that day to this, I have CNN on almost every day. Everyone says, “Why do you watch CNN?” I say, “I got used to it.” I use it for breaking news. Then we watched the evening news, 6:30 I think it was, we would all sit there and watch the news.
Riley: What did a typical workday look like for you then?

Currie: In ’92? We had, I think it was a 7:00 staff meeting. I think your notes say that too. My apartment was maybe a ten-minute walk and I felt very comfortable walking to and from work. Then they told me it was not safe to walk the streets at night. I said, “Well, there’s nobody on the street but me.” It was just desolate. They said, “No, no, no, you have to take a car, you have to do this, you have to take a cab.” So I started doing that. My car finally came down so it was okay, but I felt extremely comfortable there.

I would walk to work but then Ricki Seidman lived in the apartment over so she would pick me up and we would get to work together. We got there about quarter to seven, ten of seven. Then we had a 7:00 staff meeting.

Riley: You were in the 7:00 staff meeting?

Currie: It was in the war room so I was sitting right there. Most of the people would get there at seven for the staff meeting. He would go over the schedule for the day—what the candidate had to do. They would have questions and debate, should we do this, should we do that. It was good. Then we had another staff meeting at the end of the day to wrap up what happened.

Young: How did this link up with Clinton himself?

Currie: Sometimes he would call in during a meeting, mostly in the evening meeting, not in the 7:00 meetings. He would say things and everybody would be hushed, silent, listening for that.

Young: So he wouldn’t drop in?

Currie: No. I’m trying to think when he dropped in. I don’t remember him at the war room at all. The transition office but not the war room.

Young: But who kept in constant or very frequent contact during the day with the group? What was that link? Was it Carville?

Currie: We would get phone calls and they would go directly to Carville’s line. They would rarely come through me to Carville’s line. If I would get it, if Carville’s line was busy, I would say that the Governor was on the line. He would jump right off. Wherever he was, he had direct contact. Whoever was traveling with him could get in touch with the campaign. If he had a question or something had come up.

Young: So this was when the Governor was on the road or out campaigning.

Currie: Which was the bulk of the time.

Riley: Do you remember seeing him during the campaign?
Currie: Only at events.

Riley: At the events in Little Rock. So you didn’t go out from Little Rock at any time?

Currie: No, I didn’t.

Young: The reason I ask this question about the link with the candidate, in earlier days it was not easy to get communication signals right between the base camp, so to speak, and the traveling party, the people with the body, as they would say. But with the technology now you can do it. I am assuming it just happened all the time.

Currie: All the time. All the time. Whenever he called everyone dropped everything to put him through. Even Carville would drop his phone to take him.

Riley: Did you seem much of the rest of the family there?

Currie: The first time I met Mrs. [Hillary Rodham] Clinton was after the election when I had gone to work over in the Governor’s Mansion, after the transition and everything. I usually took the early shift because after getting up at 7:00 it meant nothing to me to get up early. I would handle his phone calls and he buzzed down. He said “Betty, could you bring up the telephone list and the call list.” So I went upstairs to the kitchen and he was there. He was reading his list and I rubbed his elbow so I could always say that I rubbed elbows with the President. Little did I know that I would be rubbing all the time. [laughter]

Then Hillary came in. He said, “Have you met Mrs. Clinton?” I said, “No, I haven’t.” He introduced us. That was the first time I met her. I can’t remember when I met Chelsea [Clinton].

Riley: But they weren’t a presence in the war room during the campaign at all during your association?

Currie: No, not at all.

Riley: Anybody else you remember from outside coming in? Were there a lot of outside visitors? I don’t recall.

Currie: I am trying to think if the surrogates came in, and I just don’t remember. First of all I wasn’t stopping to look up at who came in or out because I was too busy. But I don’t remember the surrogates who came in.

Riley: A lot of what people, outside of the scholarly community, know about that campaign comes from the film.

Currie: The War Room?

Riley: Right. What was it like having a bunch of guys—?
Currie: But did you see me in there? Did you see my—Let me tell you what I think of that.

Riley: That’s why I asked you the question.

Currie: We watched the film. I said, “Oh, this is great.” I remember the film crew there and I remember them going around. When it was over I said, “Well, jeez, Betty, you weren’t in it.” Then all of a sudden, blirp, there was my picture on the screen. They probably said, “Oh, you know who we forgot? We forgot Betty.” I think they went back to their roll of film, “Ah, there she is,” blirp, and put me in there.

Riley: At the end.

Currie: But they were there, you just didn’t notice. You just kept on doing what you had to do. I think that conditioned me for later on when all this stuff went on around the President. You become oblivious to it. You just work with it.

Riley: Do you recall there being any internal—the decisions probably were taken long before you got there about whether—

Currie: I kept hearing this company’s name mentioned but—

Riley: But there wasn’t any griping about having these folks wandering around with their cameras.

Currie: No. I’m trying to think when they came in. It was before the election and we were all busy, we were very busy, but no one said a word. They were discreet about not knocking on things or filming confidential stuff or anything.

Riley: Right, as discreet as you can be carrying around a massive camera with a light on it. Okay. Any particular memories surrounding the debates? Did you watch the debates as a team or did you go to somebody’s house?

Currie: Sylvia was in charge of the debates. She had asked me if I would do the debates like I did in Boston. I said, “Oh, Sylvia, I would love to, but so much technology has changed in four years.” One of my girlfriends, Melissa Green, daughter of Judy Green, was there. I said, “Why don’t you have Melissa do it? She is technology, she knows all of this stuff and she can do it and I will help her,” which was the greatest thing for Melissa and also the greatest thing for me. So she did it, and they allowed me to come in and watch it because they had a select group of people who were watching. Whenever I watch the debates, I prefer watching by myself because my heart is going like this [beating sound] at every question, every answer. But we did watch it. They had the transcripts ready as soon as it was over.

Riley: So you were at the site?

Currie: At the site watching the debates. We had a separate room set up. As soon as a question was answered somebody would get a response to it. It was chaotic but wonderful.
Riley: Jim, do you have anything?

Young: No, I am waiting for the next move.

Riley: Waiting for the next move. Well, I am heading that direction. You were in Little Rock on Election Day?

Currie: Before we go on to Election Day, I was in Little Rock and one day they came to me, John Hart or somebody said, “Betty, do you know shorthand?” I said, “Goodness gracious, yes, but why?” Mr. [Joel] Stern, who was in charge of Presidential foundation or transition—I forget the title—was looking for somebody; it was the pre-transition office. They said, “He needs someone to take shorthand. Apparently the lady he has over there can’t take shorthand and he’s the old, old school that uses shorthand.” I said, “Oh, dear.” “Well, if you don’t take it, we are going to have to hire someone separately.” So I said, “I’ll go talk to him and see what he wants,” because I made the decision long ago in life that if I don’t like somebody I’m not going to work with him. So I went over there and met Mr. Stern.

Riley: In Little Rock?

Currie: Yes. They had an office in, I am going to say the Worthen Building. I may be wrong but it was walking distance. Of course everything was walking distance in Little Rock.

Riley: This would have been about what time?

Currie: I am going to say maybe October.

Riley: So this is four weeks or so before the election?

Currie: Maybe a little before. I met with John Hart again. He interviewed me and asked me why I wanted to come over there. I said, “I don’t. You’re looking for a secretary, I can do it. You want someone with steno, fine, here it is.” Because everyone is trying to get in there, wanting to be right there where the action is. They can do what they want to do if they want to look for a job. That’s another week.

So they hired me, they told me to come over. When I went back over to the war room and said, “I’m leaving,” I was sick. I was just sick because I was so happy, I really was happy there. I said, “Oh, I am going to miss all of this excitement.” I went over to work at the transition office, me and my shorthand.

Riley: For the last few weeks of the campaign?

Currie: Yes. With Mr. Joel Stern. We did most of the board of directors. Warren Christopher, [Vernon] Jordan, [Henry] Cisneros, those people came over for meetings all the time. I call it the pre-transition.
Young: That was kept very much under wraps, wasn’t it? As far as the outside world was concerned.

Currie: I’m assuming so because I knew nothing about it until they called and asked me to come over. Then I was over there. It was just different. Quieter, far more organized.

Riley: Were there people coming in and out regularly?

Currie: We had board of directors meetings all the time. Phone calls all the time from the people involved. Cheryl Mills was there, Carol Browner was there. I think Seth Waxman was there too. There were a lot of people who came after the election. I got to know them very well.

Young: Beginning to get résumés?

Currie: Yes. Jan Piercy was getting most of the résumés, trying to find people for jobs and things.

Riley: This is occurring before Election Day or after Election Day?

Currie: Before.

Riley: Before Election Day.

Young: That’s why they didn’t want this to be a subject of any press commentary. Because it would look like—it’s not a good idea. You’re fine until he has to win the election.

Currie: But is that uncommon? You think everyone does that?

Young: I think most everybody does that. But they don’t succeed often so it looks like “Well, he thinks he’s going to win, does he? We’ll show him a thing or two.” It gets that kind of reaction going. Also it contaminates the desire for jobs and everything if it’s not held entirely separate from the campaign. It could contaminate the campaign.

Currie: It was out of the campaign area, several blocks away.

Riley: Do you recall there ever being any press attention to what you were doing over there?

Currie: No.

Riley: No reporters coming to snoop around?

Currie: No. I probably was not afraid of reporters at that time, as I got to be later on. [laughs]

Riley: Do you have any more questions?
Young: When this work ended and you moved on to something else, this was before the next move?

Currie: I may be wrong on my dates. Election night we had our big celebration. I think the next morning or maybe right after that, Mr. Stern was no longer in charge and Warren Christopher was, because this is now transition, no longer pre-transition.

Riley: Tell us about your Election Day. I want to get your story about what it’s like to win one after—

Currie: You know winning is better than losing. It was ecstatic, Little Rock was jumping. We were all wild. The old people and the young people were wild.

Riley: Even the over-fifties.

Currie: You got it. It was fun, it was good. The scenery was nice, the settings that they had set up, everybody was elated, elated. It was a good, good feeling, good feeling.

Riley: Where were you? Were you down in the crowd when the Governor was giving his speech that night?

Currie: Let me think. They had given us these little credentials where we could be up closer, ha ha. Somebody said that if you go behind the hotel here and come up this way and go—we were climbing over steps so if the President was sitting here, the First Family, we were over on the side this way. I said we probably could have weaseled our way in close, but then if you wanted to get out you had to weasel your way out, so we had this route to go back around so we could move around.

Young: This was all at the Governor’s Mansion.

Currie: No, at the Old State House. And there were parties all over, but we had been up a long time so I was not in the mood. I retired early because we had work again the next day.

Riley: Exactly. Because you were at the transition, were there any people who were aware of your new portfolio before the election who would maybe give you a call before election night and say, “Betty, can you look after me?”

Currie: Before the election I would get calls from people. “I would love to go to the—” First of all it was the inaugural ball, we got those sort of tickets too. Then, “Where do I send my résumé?” We said, “No résumés until we win.” It was easy to say that. At the pre-transition office I didn’t even deal with it. Jan Piercy was soliciting them. She may have been soliciting. I’ll never forget one of the first things I saw when I got there. A friend of mine had sent his résumé in. I said, “Well, aren’t we smart?” I saw he was an elected official in Virginia, I thought Hmm. Got it in real early. He didn’t get a job though.

Riley: So the next day there’s a transition at the transition office.
Currie: Yes. Mr. Stern said he would be leaving and I didn’t think anything about it. I didn’t know if he had been asked to leave or what. But he was leaving and Warren Christopher would be coming. He asked me if I’d stay and work with Warren Christopher. I said fine. I had met Warren Christopher through the board of directors’ meetings coming and going. I said, “No problem at all.” Then we moved our office to another place. The pre-transition office closed down and we moved to the transition office.

Young: Also in Little Rock.

Currie: Up the street.

Young: Did it at some time move to Washington or did it always stay there?

Currie: According to what I was told there were two offices. There was an office in Washington and there was one in Little Rock. What they did in Washington, we didn’t know. Vernon was in charge of the Washington office and we were in charge of Little Rock. We considered ourselves the main office.

Riley: And you knew Vernon at the time?

Currie: I had met Vernon. No, wait, I’d fallen in love with Vernon when he was head of the [National] Urban League. I had gone to hear him speak and I said, “Oh, my gosh, that voice.” Then when I worked for the Rubins they were very good friends, so I would see him quite a bit there. I met his wife and I let her know that I was in love, yes. But yes, I did know Vernon.

Riley: Okay, and he was still running the secondary office.

Currie: Correct. But in contact with Mr. Christopher all the time.

Riley: Tell us about what was going on in the transition office then and in the days after the election.

Currie: We were getting lots of résumés, lots and lots of résumés. I guess Jan Piercy must have still been in charge. Warren was dealing with that. Mr. Christopher.

Young: Any and all positions or—what was that division of labor?

Currie: He was mostly dealing with the Cabinet. He was in touch with the Governor’s office. Of course that’s when I first came in contact with Nancy Hernreich because the Governor and Mr. Christopher were in contact all the time about meeting and talking about various people.

Young: Warren Christopher had also been in charge of the Vice Presidential selection process.

Currie: Oh, yes. Before that.
Young: Now it was basically Cabinet.

Currie: And that was love at first sight too. I’ve worked for a zillion people and one of my top three is Mr. Christopher. He is wonderful.

Riley: Why is that? What is it about him?

Currie: Easy to get along with. I never heard him raise his voice. Extremely bright, knowledgeable, caring, he is a wonderful man. I’ll never forget one day he came in, we had to work on a Saturday. He had on a sport jacket. I said, “Mr. Christopher, I didn’t think you owned a sport jacket.” He said, “Well, Betty, it is Saturday.” Because he never, was never—

Young: Was it a double-breasted?

Currie: I think it was cashmere. But just a wonderful, wonderful man, caring, dedicated family man. When Vernon would come down, he and Vernon would have to go out to dinner every night. He said, “I’m not used to this. I usually eat at home,” because his wife was a wonderful cook. Which I considered a wonderful thing to say. Just nice, nice.

Riley: But that’s quite a different work environment for you than working with James Carville.

Currie: Truly, it’s like night and day. Warren is calm, James is not. But Warren got a lot of things done as did James.

Riley: But that speaks to your own flexibility, doesn’t it?

Currie: It was good. It was working with Warren and Caroleen [Nord], who did she work for? I’m trying to think who the other people sitting around were. I can’t remember right now.

Riley: You mentioned earlier that at some point you were working in the Governor’s Mansion.

Currie: That was after Christmastime when all the Cabinet had been nominated. He had nominated Warren Christopher Christmas Eve day or right before everyone left on Christmas vacation. I asked, “Is our marriage over?” And he said, “No, Betty.” His secretary in Los Angeles, Ackerman, I forget her first name but Ackerman would come to work with him in Washington. And that’s when he said that I would be working for the Chief of Staff.

Riley: White House Chief of Staff.

Currie: I didn’t really want to work for anybody because I was happily retired. But I didn’t mind doing that because that’s Mack McLarty whom I also love. I said fine. So he went home to California to start the Secretary of State stuff and I stayed in Little Rock, I thought to clean up the files. I was going to clean up all the files and get everything organized. They said, “No, could you come out to the Governor’s Mansion? We need help here.” I said okay.
Riley: So your period working for Mr. Christopher in the transition would have been roughly from—?

Currie: From the election to December, Christmas vacation.

Young: Was it already clear by Christmas that Mack McLarty would be—?

Currie: By Christmas it was. And he had an office in the transition office. I don’t remember what he did but he had an office there too.

Young: Because one of the features of the transition was the early selection of the Cabinet before actually the White House staff had been organized or even—

Currie: Right. The first thing he did was the Cabinet.

Young: So it was in doubt publicly who the Chief of Staff would be for some time.

Currie: It was a surprise. Mack is one of his childhood friends. There are pictures of them in kindergarten together. We thought he would pick a Washingtonian person but he went for Mack. It was wonderful.

Riley: How had you known Mack then? It was through this transition office?

Currie: Through the transition. Plus he was a friend. He may have been on the board for the pre-transition too. I may have met him there. He worked here. He was an officer with ARKLA [Arkansas Louisiana Gas Company].

Riley: Okay. So the period of time you were working with Mr. Christopher, he was primarily doing transition staffing. There was another transition office too that I think was doing policy stuff maybe even apart from what—

Currie: They may have been in the building with us, but I was focused only on what Mr. Christopher was doing.

Riley: His focus was on getting the Cabinet together. Okay.

Young: Did the Cabinet of officer candidates come to Little Rock?

Currie: Yes. I won’t say if all of them did, I remember seeing several of them.

Young: And they would have a conversation with the President-elect.

Currie: Yes. They would meet with Warren once I guess, and if he wanted to move them on, they would go on.

Riley: Were there people you were surprised to see in this bunch or were there—?
Currie: I won’t say it’s a surprise, but the only one I sort of bonded with was Bill Richardson. He came in and he was just so much the— I am weak for dimples anyhow. That was a wink. He was just a very friendly person. He was a Congressman at the time and I said, “Gee, he would give up his seat to be—” I was pleasantly surprised at that.

Henry Cisneros came through. I’ve always been a fan of his. He is from Texas and one day I said, “You know, my nephew went to Texas A&M.” He said, “What’s his name?” And I said, “Jimmy Hawkins.” He said, “I know him.” I said, “You’re a politician, yes.” He said, “He played for such and such a school, grade school, etc.” He did know him.

Riley: No kidding.

Currie: And I was very impressed at that too.

Young: Cisneros had been around earlier, hadn’t he? Before he was considered for Cabinet, or I don’t know.

Currie: Probably around, I don’t know what job he did, but he was around. He was probably a surrogate speaker also. But it was fun. It was good. I never had met Robert Reich before, I was impressed with him.

Riley: Was he what you expected when he came in?

Currie: I didn’t know he was what they called a little person, but he was brilliant and I was impressed.

Riley: And a longtime friend of the President’s.

Currie: A long time, yes. He had a lot of friends that he I think took care of, stood by them.

Riley: At this point, is there a great deal of interaction between the President-elect and Mr. Christopher?

Currie: A lot.

Riley: Is it mostly by telephone or—

Currie: A lot by telephone and then he would say, “I have to go over to the Governor’s Mansion.” They did a lot of different stuff together going through the list of candidates.

Riley: Right. And did you have much exposure to the President-elect at that point?

Currie: No. My contact with Warren would ask to speak with the President, I would call Nancy and then she would put the President on, or vice versa she would say the President wanted to talk and that was all.
Riley: Who else was working with you in the transitional operation we might know?

Currie: Caroleen Nord. She worked for O’Melveny & Myers, OMM, in Washington so she knew Warren a lot. She was doing most of the work for Vernon through Washington. She was his contact.

Young: Vernon was with Akin [Akin Gump Strauss Hauer Feld LLP].

Currie: But he had an office in Washington doing transition so they would then deal together with him.

Riley: I am trying to decide if there are any other questions about the transition.

Young: There might be but why don’t we—

Currie: We can come back.

Young: We are following you through still another move. It is very interesting that you are moving sideways and up.

Currie: It’s a test to see if you can follow me.

Young: We follow you where you’re going and we’d like to hear what you observed and did on the way. So at some point you’re going to find yourself in the next move.

Currie: After Warren Christopher left I went to work with what we called the Basement Babes.

Young: What are the Basement Babes?

Currie: I was a latecomer to the Basement Babes. These were women who were working for the President-elect. Nancy Hernreich was in charge, and there were five or six women who were doing gifts, phone calls, and various other things in the basement. It was a basement maybe about the size of this room and they were all squeezed in together. They said, “Could you come over and help us?” I said, “Well, yes, I guess my files will have to wait.” So I went to the basement and that’s when I had the chance of meeting Socks.

Riley: Socks?

Currie: My first encounter with Socks.

Riley: Socks is still with us?

Currie: Socks is still with us, thank you for asking. I’ll tell him that you asked, yes indeed. I have the vet’s home number, cell number, everything. If my husband gets sick I don’t know what I’ll do, but if Socks get sick I’ve got it well covered.
Riley: My wife will be delighted to hear this.

Currie: But I think I may have seen Chelsea then. They kept her sort of isolated, but I might see her walking past.

When I got to the basement I did phone calls and I also helped with gifts. He was inundated with gifts. We didn’t know it at the time but these were gifts he could accept. He didn’t have the legal effect on him like he did once he became President. So we were sorting them and logging them as best we could, putting them away, whatever we wanted to do with them, but there were lots and lots of gifts to take care of.

Riley: Did he see them?

Currie: A lot of them. Oh, yes, he’s a gift guru. He loves them.

Riley: He loves looking at his gifts.

Currie: Yes, so anything that came that was particularly worthy we would show to him, but we had them on display in the basement with all these desks and all of us trying to pack them up. A lot of them went to storage. I am sure they are in archives now.

But we would see candidates come in there too. Once they had been selected he would start talking with them again.

Riley: You mentioned this episode where you went up to the kitchen at one point. This would have occurred right around Christmastime?

Currie: Did I go home for Christmas? I can’t remember. If I did it would have been right after I got back or something.

Riley: And at that point you were not sure you were going to work in the White House.

Currie: No, I wasn’t. It wasn’t an issue. I had told everybody from the beginning that I didn’t want to work because I enjoyed retirement. But if I could help in some way I didn’t mind. My husband and I had said that I could do it for a year or so, I wouldn’t mind doing that and that was my intent. No one had said any—Warren had said something about the Chief of Staff but no one else had.

Riley: You didn’t consider it a deal at that point. How about the others around you? Were there other people at this point beginning to get their positions lined up?

Currie: Since I was out with the worker bees, I didn’t know what they were doing. The only thing I remember is when they selected the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] Director. It was between two people, two qualified people to my estimation, and Warren Christopher asked me to make a phone call to Carol Browner. She and I had worked together at the pre-transition
and she said, “Do you know what it’s about?” “No, I don’t.” [laughs] And she was beyond excited when she got the job. That was the first one who was really—But the other jobs I don’t know about. How they were acting.

Riley: Okay. At what point are you approached about your position?

Currie: I am trying to remember when they asked me if I wanted to be the secretary. It was while we were at the basement, I am assuming. I think Nancy came to me. Also when I went over to the basement base, I am assuming it was the time for him to see if he wanted me or not. Also a chance for me to see him because if he was different in person than he was—I guess he said, “Well, she’s not so bad” and I said, “He’s not so bad.” So Nancy said, “He wants to know if you’ll be his secretary.” I said, “What does that mean?” At the time he had two secretaries.

Riley: This is in Little Rock.

Currie: No, that he wanted to take to Washington.

Riley: Right, but I mean he had two secretaries with him in Little Rock at the time.

Currie: He may have but I had only met Lynda [Dixon]. According to what I was told there were going to be two secretaries, executive secretary and personal secretary. I know her name. I have to get back to her name.

Young: It wasn’t Nancy.

Currie: No. I said, “Oh, okay, I can try this.” I wasn’t overly excited. I was okay. My husband said, “Well, try it then.”

Young: Did he talk with you about this or who did?

Currie: No. Nancy. I’m assuming she was looking me over at the same time because it would be a close relationship. Basement Babes was a fun group. It was crazy busy but good.

Young: And all those interesting gifts.

Currie: Yes.

Young: Isn’t it funny what some people will send?

Currie: And it got more interesting after we got to the White House too.

[BREAK]
Riley: Okay. Anything you can tell us about departing Little Rock and heading back to Washington?

Currie: People were leaving all the time. Nancy left to go check out the White House while we were at the basement. She had gone up to talk to Rose Zamaria. She came back and told us how the White House would be, so we were all excited about that. We were all getting ready for the inaugural ball. We were packing up and it was a chore to pack up because he had to leave the Mansion too. So there were people doing that and we were packing up.

We got to Washington and we worked at the Blair House. And that was mostly to get the inaugural ball things done and whatever we had to do there. They gave us office space, which I think was routine for the new—

Riley: You came back how long before the inauguration? Do you remember?

Currie: The inauguration was January 20th. I’m trying to think. The only thing I can remember is that my sister promised to make me an inaugural ball gown. So I measured my body and sent her the measurements. She was a good seamstress. I think I had the metric side or something wrong because when I got up there to fit it, which was two or three days before the inaugural ball, it was too little. So she had to take it apart and remake it. It was a matter of a day or two, so we got here right close to it. They were at the Blair House, which was wonderful because Blair House is not open for public tours so it is just rare to get in there. We enjoyed that immensely.

Riley: I guess you were back at home.

Currie: Working. My house was right there in Arlington, which is very close. I know Nancy was there, I was there, and I can’t remember who else. But we all had a big table looking right at the White House.

Young: By the time you moved to Washington, was it all settled what you would be doing and what the executive secretary would do, or was that still up in the air?

Currie: I just knew that there was a title “secretary,” and I didn’t even know at that time it was separate from executive, personal, or just secretary. Deborah [Coyle] didn’t know anything.

Riley: So at the Blair House you’re working on the final arrangements for the inauguration.

Currie: Inauguration and as much as we could about the White House too. I think Ron [Klain] may have been there with tickets and things like that, last-minute calls, taking care of everybody, make sure everybody had everything.

Riley: So what exactly are you doing in the Blair House? Are you with the President-elect?

Currie: I am sure he was working on his speech because I don’t remember talking with him at all. We were mostly taking care of the inaugural ball, the parade, tickets, things like that, the churches they were going to. I know one thing Nancy was dealing with at the time, the church
the President was going to attend as his church of choice. Gosh, I didn’t realize that was an issue. Since he was Baptist and Mrs. Clinton was United Methodist they ended up at Foundry United Methodist Church.

**Riley:** Did you have a role in helping steer them in that direction?

**Currie:** She didn’t ask me, I don’t think. But had I been asked, I don’t think I would have made a suggestion. I’m United Methodist also and I was familiar with Foundry so it was great, good. Right up 16th Street, perfect, easy to get to.

**Young:** The President-elect came through here on his way to the inauguration by bus.

**Currie:** Oh, yes, that’s right they had the—

**Young:** I was out there freezing to death waiting for him. He was running late.

**Currie:** Surprise, another wink. We missed that because we were already up there, but people who went said it was wonderful because it was just a glorious occasion.

**Young:** He was there with Al Gore.

**Riley:** Right.

**Young:** They got to have a conversation with schoolchildren about their interests and about education. They were sitting up on these high stools at Monticello in the absolutely freezing cold.

**Currie:** President Clinton loved it though. I did come home for Christmas because I got a ride on Vice President Gore’s plane. It was chaotic at the end. I couldn’t get reservations, and he said he had space so I was able to fly up with him. First chance really meeting and talking with him and I flew back with him.

**Riley:** What were your reactions or responses?

**Currie:** I was very impressed with him. My husband worked at EPA so he liked him before because of his environmental issues, but I didn’t know that much about him. During the Dukakis campaign, he had run and lost and some of the people working that had worked for him before and worked in his Senate office. So I was aware of him. I was impressed with him.

**Riley:** Did you get your ball gown fixed?

**Currie:** Yes. And I looked at it the other day. I said, “Now when Hillary gets—no.” My next inaugural ball, I wonder if this thing will still fit.

**Riley:** Which of the balls did you go to?
Currie: We went to the one at Union Station and I’m trying to think which, it may have been Virginia’s, I don’t remember. But at the time, it was so chaotic and I said we would go to this one. They said the President was going to make it to all the balls. Of course he was late. The problem with the inaugural ball, if my husband was here he would tell you. I took my seamstress sister and a coworker of my husband’s. There were four of us and we went to Union Station. My husband let us all out. We went inside and we were waiting for Bob [Currie] to come in. I said, “It shouldn’t take him that long to park the car.” We waited and waited and waited. Pretty soon I said, “I wonder what’s the matter?” So I looked outside and saw him way back in the crowd.

The fire department had cut off people coming in. Little did I know that all I had to do was go outside and say that he was my husband. I didn’t know I had any influence at all. He went home. He said, “Call me when you’re ready to leave.” It was far too crowded. What had happened was that they were waiting for the President to come so everybody had congregated up here. Union Station is massive and people weren’t going downstairs or around all of the surrounding areas. They were all situated right there, and the fire department said it was a violation.

Riley: Okay. An unhappy tale from the inaugural balls.

Currie: Right.

Riley: Inauguration Day?

Currie: Did I go to the parade? I think I may have stayed at the Blair House. Before my involvement with politics I would not miss an inaugural parade. I loved them, loved them. I don’t go to any now, it’s too crowded. I think we may have watched from the Blair House, which is close as you can see, you can see almost everything. You can see the family, everything in the stands and all, so it was better.

We weren’t allowed to go to the White House. We thought we could go after the inauguration. Once he was inaugurated on Capitol Hill. I went to Capitol Hill too. We didn’t have any passes, so they told us to come to work the next day. After the ball and after the inauguration, we went to work the next day. It was pure chaos because they had a security system, not as tight as it is now but still a security system, and none of us had anything except they had our names. I got there and said, “Betty Currie.” They found something and they gave me a pass. I went inside and I said, “Where do I go?” They said, “Go to the West Wing, which is over there.” I got to the West Wing, and I said, “Betty Currie. Where do I go?” They had a list and they showed me where to go. I went into this room and I said, “Oh, it’s a rose garden.” There were two dozen fresh roses right there. I said, “Hmm, this is probably not right.” So I kept my coat on and sat down and waited for someone to tell me where to go. I think it may have been Nancy who finally came in and said this was it. Wow!

Riley: You were impressed.

Currie: I was impressed. I said, “Whoa,” and hung up my coat and the Oval Office was right there and it was my first day. So the first day was a little bit, everybody was trying to check in, trying to find out where they were going, what they were doing and everything.
Riley: But there had not been an extended conversation with anybody at that point about what you were actually going to be doing?

Currie: No. Being a retired government worker, the first thing I asked for was my job description. They didn’t have that.

Riley: No job description.

Currie: It never became totally clear.

Young: Did you have any interaction with your predecessors in that office?

Currie: Patty Presock, whom you may or may not have interviewed for Bush I, had stayed on. There were probably lots of reasons why she did, my personal reason because she was trying to get her retirement thing set up. She was very helpful. A wonderful person. I met her after we got there. She stayed on, she was somewhat helpful in telling us.

Young: But otherwise that was—

Currie: I said, “Maybe this is how the White House works.” I didn’t know. I had only worked bureaucracies and so I said, “This is different, so I’ll just roll with the punches.”

Young: Your room was already there, that went with the job. But how were other people finding their rooms and what they were supposed to do?

Currie: I’m sure it took half a day for everybody to get in and get situated. Then it worked out. Everybody sort of walked around and said, “Oh, you’re sitting here.” Nancy, probably along with Harold Ickes and some other people, had a floor plan of the White House. They said, “Well, we know where the President is going to be. That’s a known thing.” [laughs] And Betty would sit there and Andrew Friendly would sit there and Nancy would sit there and they had all these places put together. They had the second floor done too so we sort of knew what it would be. But once you got inside everything was much smaller than it looks on that piece of paper.

Young: It’s fairly small.

Currie: Everyone says that and I say it’s just grand. That’s the word I like to use.

Young: So here you were day one, you didn’t have a job description, you had to find out where to go and you finally—

Currie: Where the bathroom was.

Riley: How the phones—

Currie: Oh, and that was chaos, the phones.
Young: How did you connect that, the White House operators were continuous, working—

Currie: I had worked with the White House operators when I worked for Action. I had learned to love them because if I needed anything at all—and I had told them that, Nancy and the girls. I said, “If you need anything, to find anybody, call the White House operators.” In fact, when I was working for Warren Christopher at the transition, he was trying to find some candidates. I would call the White House operator and they said that they were not supposed to do this. I think they’d been told not to. I said, “Hmm, I appreciate that but—” [laughs] So they were able to lead me to certain people he was looking for, which was very helpful.

I learned later that some of the staff members at the White House were disappointed that the White House operators—I don’t know what they were asking them to do and they weren’t as happy with them as I was. But they were very good to me.

I was told the phone system was the same system John Kennedy had. It didn’t have a rotary dial. It had touch tones, but the one thing we found out early is that if President Clinton was on the phone, all I had to do was push a button to listen in on the phone conversation. I said, “Oh, no, no, no.” I didn’t want that because if I wasn’t at my desk anybody else could do the same thing. So we had the phone system revamped. It took a little bit, but yes.

Young: Who discovered that? The button where you could listen in?

Currie: I think I did by mistake. So people started coming in and saying, “Oh, look at this phone,” and they were saying how antiquated it was. We called the telephone man, Al [Alex] Nagy, I think, and he said, “We’ve got to change this system.” So they did, to a much, much better system.

Riley: Were there any early meetings within the office to talk about, “Okay, now we’re here, this is how we want to organize things”?

Currie: I don’t remember anything like that. We would have staff meetings. I don’t think we had them in the early days, but we tried to have a staff meeting every day. They would have a senior staff meeting and Nancy would go to that, and she’d come back and report to the junior staff. We called ourselves junior staff, getting younger now.

Riley: Another wink.

Currie: It was mostly about what the President was going to do, that kind of thing.

Riley: Right. I guess I’m trying to figure out how you go about developing a way of operating in an environment like that without any instruction or any organized effort to figure out—

Currie: I would just use my own experience with what I had done before. I said, “I’m going to do this.” Nancy had written out something—that I would do phone calls. I might be able to find that paper. It’s somewhere.
Young: Scheduling. What did you do about scheduling?

Currie: He had a scheduling office. It came as a surprise to me that the President had an office for everything. When you were a secretary like I was before, you did everything, but he had a scheduling office, he had a Staff Secretary who went through all of the papers. You name it, there was an office for it. He had a fellow in the back in the Navy mess who took care of his coffee needs, that sort of thing.

I did the phone calls for sure. I was going to be handling the gifts, but I don’t think I knew that right away. And then with Deborah there. I said, “What is she going to be doing down the hall?” Because she was going to be the personal secretary, I was executive. It was confusing.

Riley: Okay. So you’re handling phone calls. Tell me what you mean by that. You’re taking incoming or generating outgoing?

Currie: Both. Nobody ever got through directly. I think Nancy had typed this up when we were in the Blair House, his clear call list, which she had gotten—that’s what they did for Bush, and Patty Presock had showed us a copy of it so we typed it up. These are people who can call directly, through the White House operator, unless he gave them a private number, and it was all family members, Cabinet members, Chief of Staff, a few other people. I was on the list. If I had to call through, I could get right through.

Riley: That’s maybe 30 people or something like that.

Currie: Probably 30. Anybody else had to call through me. And I would determine if they could be put through. More times than not they would understand and tell me the nature of the call, and they would wait until the next day or something.

Young: What about the calls during the workday? Would they get to him through you unless they were on the clear call list?

Currie: Yes.

Young: They would have to go through you. Somebody calling who would want to talk to the President.

Currie: He’s unavailable 99.99 percent of the time. I would type a list and show it to him at the end of the day or during the day, or he’d come and ask who called and I would tell him. Most calls could be referred to somebody else.

Riley: The calls that come to your line are first going to the White House operator?

Currie: The White House was 456-1414, that’s where you call and they can transfer you. My direct line at the time, I forget the number, was published in a book so anybody who wanted to...
call him would call through me, they would know it. We learned later, much later, that we should not have put that out there. That was a mistake.

Riley: I was just trying to figure out how you create a system that makes the volume of calls coming into your line manageable.

Currie: Had we known or had we planned it, we would have had what Bush 2 does. They only put 456-1414, and the White House operator would put you through.

Riley: They would do the initial screening.

Currie: If you give out your private line to the people you want to have it, it makes it easier, this select few. But we published all the numbers.

Riley: And so you’re getting calls from—

Currie: Interesting people. We passed a tower coming by here and a fellow asked if it was a microwave tower. It brought back memories of this man who called me all the time and said he was being microwaved by something. I said, “Microwaved?” I didn’t know what he meant. He said, “They’re trying to kill me.” Odd. He would call all the time. Then one day he called and threatened to kill the President. I hung up the phone and I went off to the Secret Service in front of me. She said, “Betty, what’s the matter?” I said, “This man he said he was going to kill the President.” I was pale. She said, “What was his name?” And I told her and they took it from there. But he had been calling all along and had been, you know, crazy but gentle. He was going to be microwaved, they were threatening to kill him, and I was trying to be sympathetic but then he did that and he didn’t call anymore. I don’t know what happened.

Riley: So virtually anybody who has access to a database can get access to this number, which gets a phone line 30 feet from the President’s desk or something like that.

Currie: And there are other calls coming through all the time so you’re trying to be nice without being rude and then you hang up on them.

Riley: Was there ever a situation created where your calls got funneled to somebody else to help you, another clerical person or an intern?

Currie: We got interns. I’m trying to think when we started getting interns. It was not immediate that we had interns, it was later on. Once we got interns it helped considerably.

Riley: They would answer the phone at your desk or the calls would go elsewhere?

Currie: Elsewhere. I don’t remember if they had my same number or not but they would try to get the calls. I would try, if I got a call, I would just forward it to them so they could take care of it.
Riley: So that’s the incoming, what about the outgoing? Does the President make his own outgoing calls most of the time?

Currie: No. The Staff Secretary would sometimes do a list of official outgoing calls, Congressional, if we’re trying to get a vote passed they would give us a list of leaders, NSA [National Security Agency] would give us a list of calls. But when that was done they would usually come in the office and they would place it themselves on his desk, especially the National Security calls because they had a note taker and they had speakerphone so everybody could hear what was being said, there would be no controversy on who said what. Congressional calls for votes were the same way.

But they would send up a call list. He should call so and so because—let’s say the Baltimore man hit 500 home runs. They would call and congratulate him so that would come up and we would call that during his phone in office time, that sort of thing. We can do that ourselves. There were a lot of congratulatory calls, death calls. When the military planes or something would crash we would call the families of the people like that. Those were scheduled by the Staff Secretary.

Then on any given day he would say, “Betty, I want to make sure I call A, B, C, D because I want to talk to them.” So I put it on the list and we tried to call. Often, if we couldn’t get through, the calls would go over to the next day. Sometimes after two or three days the urgency had dropped or he had decided not to talk them, but the call still stayed on the list until he crossed it out.

Young: I’m trying to figure out what the personal secretary does besides handle these telephone calls. Surely you now had regular interaction with the President?

Currie: At the time I was called executive secretary and Deborah Coyle—

Young: Deborah was the personal secretary?

Currie: That’s what they said.

Young: Oh, I see.

Currie: Deborah was mainly Bruce Lindsay’s secretary. That was because Bruce didn’t have one and she was there. Also she and Nancy worked together on budget for the office. They discussed salaries, I think, for the office, so she worked with Nancy on that sort of thing. Deborah and I were good friends, we loved each other, we didn’t argue about who did what, we just did what we wanted to. I was sitting outside the Oval and she was down the hall where Bruce sat. I would have had more access to him than she did.

Young: To the President. I am still kind of confused but—

Currie: You should have been there. You would have known.
Riley: Tell us about that. Did you find it disconcerting going into this organization?

Currie: I did. I told myself, *Okay, you roll with the punches. Maybe this is how they do things here.* Another person we talked to, and I hate to bring up the name because you’re going to ask me more questions later, was Linda Tripp. She had been there a hundred years, give or take a few, and I found her very nice and very personable. I said, “Linda, what happened?” She said, “Things will work out.” I said, “Okay, fine, we’ll deal with that.” She said, “Everyone does it differently so just roll with the punches.”

Riley: So she was there as a representative of the permanents?

Currie: Right, at the time I think she was working—

Riley: She went to the counsel’s office eventually.

Currie: But I was trying to think if she was at the counsel’s office at the beginning. I know that’s where she was eventually but I’m trying to think if she was at the beginning. Since it was so small we would meet in the ladies room at almost any time. She was very helpful. There was a small core of permanent staff people who had been there forever.

Riley: And they were comforting in the sense of telling you not to worry too much about that.

Currie: I found them very comforting, that this is how it is, it’ll all work out, that sort of thing.

Riley: This is the first point at which you are really beginning to work closely with President Clinton himself on a daily basis. With the Basement Babes there was some proximity, but you get the sense that the basement was the basement and there were things going on elsewhere. Now you’re right outside the Oval Office. What are you discovering about President Clinton and his work habits and his way of dealing with people?

Currie: I’ll never forget I was—the only time I was, I’m going to say angry. I was in the Oval Office with Bruce Lindsay and his then-wife Beverly [Lindsey] and the President. I had asked him a question about something and they were all talking. Pretty soon he said, “What are you doing here?” I said, “I was waiting for an answer but I guess I won’t get that.” So then I said, “That’s okay. Fine.” I walked out. In the midst of his talking, he had forgotten what I had asked earlier.

Young: Did he know who you were?

Currie: Yes.

Young: And he asked you what you were doing there? It was a meeting about something—

Currie: Something else. We had probably been there a week or two, and I mentioned it to Bev. She said, “Oh, Betty, please. You know he’s got things on his mind.” I didn’t take offense—and that quickly passed.
Young: Did that establish a precedent?

Currie: I didn’t go in there, no way. I knew when to go in, I knew when to come out.

Young: The meeting was already going on when you went in.

Currie: No, I was in there talking to him and they came in.

Young: Bumped you.

Currie: You got it. I learned also. Then I came on out. So whenever I did it again after that, if someone came in I excused myself and when it was time to go back in I would continue.

Riley: You’re beginning to learn his work style and his preferences.

Currie: His work style, yes.

Riley: Were you finding it difficult to pick up those cues more generally or not?

Currie: I will never forget, years ago, going back to my younger days, one of my bosses said, “Betty, one thing about you, you learned about your boss.” I learned about what they like and what they don’t like. I started watching what he liked, what he didn’t like, how he wants things done. Do you interrupt, do you not interrupt? I started paying attention.

Riley: Can you tell us about the things he liked and didn’t like? I know it’s hard—when you’re doing this kind of work you just intuitively pick it up.

Currie: Right and it was. I never interrupted if he had a meeting going on. The only time I interrupted was when Chelsea called or Mrs. Clinton called or if the Chief of Staff said something or someone was an emergency. Otherwise I never interrupted. Whenever I interrupted for Chelsea or Mrs. Clinton, he always took the call. If he didn’t, there was something else going on.

He was personable. People said he had a temper, which I didn’t hear, it was never, ever, ever directed at me. I knew my ground and I would abide by it. I never tried to take advantage of anything at all.

Riley: One of the things in the briefing materials we saw indicated was that you sometimes were useful for other members of the staff as a kind of barometer of him.

Currie: Yes. “How is he?” “Fine.” My favorite line was “Fine.” I’d say, “No, we’d better not do that,” that sort of thing. He would come in sometimes and I could tell things weren’t going exactly right, so I said, “Leave it alone. I don’t know if it’s personal or official but whatever, just leave him alone, leave him alone.” He could come in one of many ways, but he could come in through his office door, the Rose Garden door, which was my office door, and he would say,
“Good morning. How are you? Fine, fine. Anything happening?” Or he could come in there and shut the door and then open my door. I just left him alone and waited for him to do it. Or somebody would call, if the Chief of Staff would call, “Is he there?” And then I’d say, “So and so wants to see you.” I would knock gently. We had a little peephole in the door that you could see what he was doing.

One way he would calm himself down, he had on his desk a myriad of trinkets, he loved trinkets. He knew where every one was and if he came in and started moving them around, I said, “Uh oh. Something is wrong.” He would move the trinkets around and then he would sit down. Trinket lover, from those gifts we got.

**Young:** The peephole, he knew it was there.

**Currie:** He knew it was there.

**Young:** Right. I think it was installed by Kathy Osborne.

**Currie:** I didn’t know that.

**Young:** I think so, I may be wrong about that.

**Currie:** I didn’t know that. It was awfully helpful because the aide would use it when time was getting tight and they were winding down, you could tell if they were standing up or whatever. So it was good.

**Young:** Somebody goes in and has to say, “Your next appointment is here.”

**Currie:** Yes, sure. *[laughs]*

**Young:** Did you have to do that?

**Currie:** Usually the aide, I have done it on occasion. Andrew, whom I worked with at the time, would say, “Betty, go in there and tell him it’s time.” What I tried to do early, which didn’t work, I would take a note to Mack McLarty if he was in the office to say Mack has another appointment. It didn’t move Mack either. I found it embarrassing to keep going into these meetings and have people looking up. They know that something has happened but he keeps on talking.

**Young:** Somebody said he was unmanageable in that respect.

**Currie:** He had his own timeframe.

**Riley:** The peephole was not, you couldn’t close it off on the inside of the door. In other words, if he wanted privacy—
Currie: I think if he wanted to he probably could have. He could have had something put on there if he wanted to.

Riley: But there was not—

Currie: A lever that flipped up and down.

Riley: Right. You said he had his own time. Is this a morning person? A guy who pops out of bed early and loves—

Currie: I was going to say yes and no. When we first got to the White House he was jogging. He had installed that jogging track, which I think he may have used once, maybe twice. He would jog from like 7:30 to 8:30 and be ready to work. That was perfect timing. I would always get to work early, it’s a habit I have. Sometimes I would see him getting ready to go out jogging, he would wave as he went past. After he hurt his leg at Greg Norman’s, he didn’t jog. The schedule got so he would come over at—he said he was exercising but he would get there at 9:00, that was our starting time.

Riley: He said he was exercising but he wasn’t exercising.

Currie: I think he was. No wink.

Riley: So what time did you normally get to the office?

Currie: I would get to the office, I would say quarter to eight. I’d leave my house about 7:20. Luckily I lived in Rosslyn and if I planned it right I missed the early traffic and the late traffic, so I got there at about quarter to eight.

Young: What was the President’s workday ordinarily? Is it possible to say?

Currie: According to the schedule, he started officially at 9:00 with the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency]/NSA briefings. On paper his day ended usually about seven, seven-thirty.

Young: But what about not on paper? He was reputed to be at work, at least on the phone, at all hours of the night.

Currie: Oh, yes, truly. I would usually get out of there at eight, and I think he left at eight because I think dinner was going to be about that time. Eight to eight was just a regular day. Sometimes later, rarely shorter but usually.

Young: Did the rest of the senior staff keep his hours, 8:00 to 8:00?

Currie: From what we could see up and down the West Wing corridor, upstairs it was a little bit more difficult, but yes, 8:00 to 8:00.
Riley: So he would run and then come into the office. Was he generally in a good mood in the mornings?

Currie: I would definitely say yes.

Riley: Did he come in his jogging clothes?

Currie: A lot of times. Sweating, getting a bottle of water out of the refrigerator, drinking the water, then asking me questions or something. He would always ask me what was on TV. The TV was on, but unfortunately unless I hear that breaking news sound I’m not really listening to it so I’d say I didn’t know. Then he’d stand there for a few minutes and try to get the gist of what’s happening. I’d say, “If you want I could find out,” because press was right down the hall. I could find out but he said that was okay. Then he would go shower and come back.

Riley: Over in the Residence?

Currie: Yes.

Riley: So he would be back by nine-thirty or ten.

Currie: Usually nine o’clock.

Riley: Usually nine o’clock.

Currie: Or earlier if he wanted to.

Riley: And put his day in that point.

Young: Would you call yourself a gatekeeper?

Currie: Two answers. Yes and no. Because the gate was right behind me, but I was told that someone else was the gatekeeper.

Riley: Ultimately, that was not in your job description.

Currie: Since I never got a copy of the job description. Nancy said she was the gatekeeper. I think she got offended when people called me the gatekeeper. I never called myself the gatekeeper.

Young: But usually the person who is sitting in that desk is thought to be. That’s what the place usually identifies you as being, isn’t it?

Currie: I know.

Young: It must have been a very complicated system to master.
Currie: We just rolled with the—bounced with the role wherever it went.

Young: Was Nancy there the whole time you were there?

Currie: The entire time. She had worked with him before.

Young: So nothing changed. Were there any points during the eight years when there was a significant change in what the President looked to you for or the way you related to him or to other people on the staff? There were a lot of changes in personnel on the other staff.

Currie: There were changes in personnel, and we prided ourselves in Oval Office operations on maintaining our staff almost the same. We did. I think that can be attributed a lot to the fact—I’ll give Nancy credit for that, the fact that we’re dedicated to the President and we liked the work we were doing. When someone left we were just heartbroken. We lost the aides—that was the main job that left, and I’m sure they were burned out beyond repair—but when they left it was just sad.

Riley: Tell us about each of the aides. What your perceptions were of them?

Currie: Andrew, Stephen [Goodin], Kris [Engskov], and Doug [Band]. Four wonderful fellows. Alike in a lot of ways. Funny, dedicated. I think Andrew had the hardest job because he was the first one. He had to deal with establishing what the President liked and his temperament. He had traveled with him on the road as an advance person, so he knew him a little bit more. But all dedicated. They had certain jobs to do and I think their job was a little more structured than the rest of ours because they had to be the shadow, be with him all the time. They had to keep a log of what he did each day for archives. They would get there probably about eight o’clock. I was usually there when they got there. I couldn’t even say that I had a favorite because they were really—Andrew was dating Kelly [Crawford] at the time. We had a marriage—

Riley: And now children.

Currie: Yes, two I think. Stephen was dating another staff member. Chris was dating a staff member. And Doug was going to law school, so he had no time for dating. Different personalities. Andrew, of course, Steve always said he lived in a doublewide. Kris was from Bentonville, Arkansas, or one of those little Arkansas towns. Just fun to work with really and they maintained their sense of humor throughout it all.

Riley: And that’s important in that job.

Currie: Oh, it was very important. They would tell us something, they all could do the southern drawl. I could never manage that but they all could mimic him, which was—behind his back we would all laugh about that too. Very good people.

Riley: Were there any changes in the personal aide job as you saw it during the course of your time there? Was the President comfortable with it throughout? I can imagine that there would be some people who would not enjoy having somebody shadow them everywhere.
**Currie:** I think Andrew had to set the pace of how much he wanted to run, of how much he didn’t want to run. There was a picture in one of the papers of him being angry at Andrew or something, have you seen it?

**Riley:** I don’t remember.

**Currie:** There’s a picture of the President, he’s visibly very angry. Andrew’s sitting there, you know, whatever. So I think Andrew had to learn what he liked and didn’t like, how much you could be around, how much you can call to tell him he’s running late for a meeting, getting up in the morning. We all had to call him in the morning many times when he was running late. We all got the same, “I’ll be right there.”

**Young:** And there comes a point that you don’t say that again.

**Currie:** You go over there and you wait. Sometimes we had to send the butlers up. It was a learning experience for him, and I think it got it easier for each aide after that because they learned.

**Riley:** You said you had not seen much of the President’s alleged temper, but is it true that the personal aides might have seen it more often?

**Currie:** Yes.

**Riley:** Do you know why that might have been the case?

**Currie:** I think number one, he respected my age. I also think with my being a woman, he wouldn’t have let off as much. I have heard him yell. I have heard him get angry. There have been reasons where he should have gotten angry at me and didn’t. Not to my face. Behind my back he may have said something. I found him easy to deal with. If I made a mistake and I told him, it was okay. If I did, I said, “I should have done, I could have done, I think you said this but I did this.” I was very honest and open with him.

**Riley:** You said earlier that you didn’t think Carville had cursed the first time you heard him yelling. Did the President curse?

**Currie:** I could probably count on one hand the times I heard him say a bad word. Not that I’ve become immune but my ears always sort of perk up when I hear it. The President—

**Riley:** How close did you work with Harold Ickes then?

**Currie:** Down the hall from the Oval Office.

**Riley:** Down the hall.

**Currie:** Is he noted for doing that?
Riley: Harold? I probably ought to be asking you that question.

Currie: I never heard Harold.

Riley: No kidding.

Currie: No. I got past the damns, they didn’t count anymore.

Riley: You are working in politics, not in combat.

Young: There were hard times and there were good times, there were happy times, there were sad times. That’s in the life of every White House. When we ask these questions we assume everything is moving in a straight line, and it isn’t that way. One of the things I’ve become interested in, as I’ve become a veteran of these oral histories, is what I’d call the culture or the spirit of the White House. You’ve remarked about the spirit of the war room and communicated that well. What was the spirit of that White House and did it change? Now that you’re President, it can’t quite be like it was in the war room.

Currie: I think that was one of the surprises I had. I expected the spirit of the war room or the campaign to carry over. I expected the same enthusiasm, the same oneness, the same purpose we had to be there, and I didn’t find it. I don’t know why. I don’t know if it’s because everybody had a different job, now that we’ve got the President, now we’ve got to do this other thing to make sure the Presidency works. I just didn’t get the connection. That was a disappointment for me.

Young: What took its place to keep them going on together? Or was there a problem of each person buried in his own work?

Currie: I think if someone was the head of domestic policy, that person only wanted to make sure domestic policy worked. I don’t know if they wanted to make it work for themselves or for the President or for the country. I thought we came there to make the country work. I think everyone had—I began to see little agendas forming and that was a concern. I don’t know if I was being super critical or maybe it was, “Wake up, Betty, this is the real world.”

Young: Do you think this bothered the President? Or he was comfortable with—

Currie: I don’t think he was aware of it.

Young: Wasn’t even aware of it.

Currie: I don’t think so. For the most part, he believed his aides’ ideals for the country matched his.

Young: I am just wondering about how he dealt with staff when he was Governor and how it was different for him.
Currie: Now as Governor I don’t know. I wasn’t there for Governor.

Young: You didn’t know that.

Currie: Although some of the staff was still there with him, his Governor’s staff. Bob Nash, I think, worked for him in the Governor’s office. Mack McLarty did, indirectly.

Young: Was it fun? Not all the time of course.

Currie: At the White House?

Young: Yes.

Currie: If I were to total my eight years there, I would say I enjoyed them immensely. It was a learning experience. I would not trade it for anything. I’m glad I did it. And would I do it again? I probably would. Whenever I give speeches, I recommend it to young kids. It’s a job worth pursuing. You’re helping your country, you’re doing something, community service, that sort of thing.

Young: But my question was, was it fun? Did it make you happy? Were people happy around there? Did they joke, did they kid around?

Currie: Someone else—they didn’t ask that direct question but they asked about laughing—did we laugh a lot, and what was so funny. I said let me think. The President would do jokes, people would do jokes. There were a lot of, as you said, up and down times but basically yes, we were happy. We were happy. I don’t know if it was just our office or the whole place but wherever we went we tried to spread the joy.

Riley: You said you felt the President felt he was well served by his staff most of the time.

Currie: I think so. Of course when he wasn’t, pretty soon I said, “Ooh, we’ve got a staff change.”

Riley: And you had a lot of those staff changes during the course of an eight-year period. I don’t know if it was any more than usual.

Currie: I didn’t realize we had so many press secretaries until I heard on TV that when [Scott] McClellan left we had five. Is that what they said we had? Yes.

Riley: That’s probably right.

Currie: To which I said, “Oh, five.” I forgot that George had done it. I forgot to count George.

Riley: The Chiefs of Staff would be important points of change I would think.
Currie: Correct.

Riley: Mack was the first. Did you have a sense about a change in direction when you moved from Mack’s tenure to [Leon] Panetta’s tenure, or if not change in direction at least a change in atmosphere?

Young: Atmosphere and was it working. In discipline or a lack of discipline in the staff.

Currie: Mack was wonderful, but I think he had his friendship with the President and wasn’t used to the wiles of Washington. As you may or may not know, Washington can be a cruel place. It can be nasty and all.

Riley: We’ve heard.

Currie: Once Panetta came—he had been in Washington for years and knew it backward and forwards—it made a difference. Mack is wonderful and Panetta is also a wonderful man. Stern but wonderful.

Riley: One of the pieces of lore coming out of the first year of the White House was that there would be large, chaotic meetings with lots and lots of people involved, that it was an undisciplined place to work.

Currie: I’ve heard that and I’ve heard people could come and go in as they wanted, which I didn’t think was true. I didn’t—certain people were allowed, the Chief of Staff had access. I thought the Press Secretary should, but sometimes he or she wasn’t allowed in. If they weren’t allowed I couldn’t let them in. Rarely did anybody go past me and open the door without saying, “Do you mind?” or “Can I go in?” or “Could you check and see?” I don’t think it was as chaotic as reported.

Now once they were inside that door, if there were too many people at the meeting—the meeting participation was approved by the Chief of Staff. It wasn’t that we would decide we should invite A, B, C, D. Somebody else had made that decision and once they were on the list they were allowed to come in. Now if you weren’t on the list, you could get approval from somebody else but you couldn’t come in. That was the aide’s job to make sure. We helped him with that to make sure the people on the list were allowed in the meeting.

Young: So was there a walk-in list? People who could walk into his office.

Currie: No. Just Hillary, Chelsea, and the Chief of Staff. When there was a meeting if you were not on there—now if there was a meeting and Hillary’s name wasn’t on the list, no one would stop her. She could go in whenever she wanted to.

Young: But I mean persons on a one-to-one basis. National Security Advisor, Chief of Staff could get time.
Currie: Right. He had an NSA briefing every morning, but if something would happen during the day, Sandy [Berger] would call, “There’s a blowup in such and such,” he would call down and the aide or Nancy or I would say, “Mr. President, so and so wants to see you about such and such.” He would say to send them in or tell them to come at whatever time was open.

Young: But they always went through somebody. They didn’t just go into the office through the back door so to speak.

Currie: Well, there was a back door and that was a problem we had. The Chief of Staff could use that, George could use it. I didn’t think most people could use it, even if they knew about it. We tried to control it. Sometimes we would look in there, I said, “Ooh, so and so is in there. We didn’t know that.”

Young: That’s always a problem at the White House. It happened even with [Dwight D.] Eisenhower.

Currie: Ah. We upheld tradition then.

Riley: We talked for a moment about the change from McLarty to Panetta. Track it from Panetta to, I guess [Erskine] Bowles would have been—

Currie: Erskine Bowles.

Riley: Just as a Chief of Staff, it may be that everything was set in order at that point.

Currie: Erskine was a businessman and Leon was a politician. Erskine brought a lot of business order to it. Also a wonderful man. I’ve yet to find someone not so wonderful. I didn’t find one, not yet.

Riley: Think about it.

Currie: Oh, you’ve got a list.

Riley: After lunch.

Young: The not forgiven list, later.

Currie: But Erskine brought order. Leon was approachable but Erskine was and still is approachable. If you had any problem you could go to Erskine and he would hear you out. He would try to help you. And he said to this day, “If I can help you, Betty, let me know.” My niece wanted to go to Duke. He said, “If there’s anything I can do, let me know.” I believe him and he will. He will. He’s a really good man, organized, well liked by his staff. Now a friend of mine under Bush 2 worked at SBA [Small Business Administration], and she said SBA has not been the same since Erskine left. She’s a Republican, and I said that was a great tribute to Erskine.

Riley: All right, and then from Erskine to John. John was the last Chief of Staff.
Currie: John and I had worked together when he was 26, fresh out of law school. So I’ve known him a hundred years. His cursing stopped. You don’t hear that much. He worked as Staff Secretary before that so I knew his work style. But John is good and he is more of a disciplinarian. He is strict.

Riley: More so than Panetta?

Currie: I thought so.

Riley: More so than Bowles too?

Currie: Oh, yes, a different personality. He can be a lot of fun really. I’ve seen him at social occasions and lots of things, but he was very businesslike here, very. I thought he did a good job. Very bright and I’ve seen him through many campaigns. He knows the issues, knows the people, knows the personalities, and knows Washington very well, which I think is almost a requirement for the Chief of Staff. I think that’s one challenge Mack may have had.

Riley: Was your working relationship with the Chief of Staff materially different with each of these four people?

Currie: I’m going to say no because our instructions were that they have to know everyone who goes in the Oval Office, they have access, free call anytime they want, that sort of thing. They had the clear call lists. After Mack it pretty much settled down to how it worked.

Riley: And your sense was that the President felt equally comfortable with these four people?

Currie: Yes. I don’t know from where before but he had known Erskine a long time, and John he knew from campaigns.

Young: Did these changes in this Chief of Staff, other than the one from Mack to Leon, really affect the way you worked or your relationship with the President or with Nancy or the other persons? That stayed more or less constant?

Currie: I think it stayed constant, yes. If the allegation that we were unorganized was true at the beginning, I think once they became aware that we were organized, wink, wink, it became steady. I don’t remember Leon putting down any rules or regulations any different, but I think he made sure everyone did what they were supposed to do. Check with him, clear with him.

Young: Right, and he needed to be kept in the loop.

Currie: Oh, yes.

Young: Sometimes that was a problem, not going through the Chief of Staff. Did you notice a problem with people trying to get access to the President, who the President wouldn’t have
chosen to have access? This is the screening. You mentioned the back door, and I’m not referring to [Monica] Lewinsky or anything like that. This is a normal problem in the White House.

**Currie:** Let me think who would. I don’t want to use names but sometimes like the Press Secretary, something he may deem important but if he goes through the Chief of Staff and he says to let him in, we don’t question him. But if he just runs from his office, which is a lot closer than the Chief of Staff’s, and says, “Oh, Betty, I’ve got to—” we can’t do it. I try not to. I do know that when we had the Oklahoma City bombing, Mike McCurry said we had to go in. Nancy and I looked at each other and we could tell that there was something wrong. He was in a meeting so he went in and told him. It’s not for me to try to judge what is an emergency. I have to trust in the National Security and the press that what they’ve determined is an emergency. They were usually pretty good about it.

**Young:** So that’s not buzzing him on the phone to say something?

**Currie:** Knocked on the door, just knocked on the door. And some people would have issues or agendas and I knew they were just trying to get in. You sort of recognize who they are, you pooh, pooh them.

**Young:** The pests.

**Currie:** That’s a word I would use, yes.

**Riley:** Are you talking about telephone pests or walk-up pests?

**Currie:** The walk-up pests. The telephone pests were easier to handle because you could say, “I’ve got to go” and hang up. But the walk-up pests, “He’s got to see this paper.” “Oh, I think he’s already seen that.” “Well, this is an update.” “It goes to the Staff Secretary and have him bring it up.” They would hate it if something got in and what they think is a final, final, someone else had another copy.

Now there are other ways of getting to him than through me. Sometimes what they would do, each night a Staff Secretary would send the President papers for the night. So if you go to the usher’s office you would say, “The President needs to see this” and they would put it in and someone would walk it over. A lot of things he got that way. We’d get stuff back and say, “Where did he get this from?” because he would bring his envelope over to us the next morning, and we’d never seen that before.

**Young:** Some of the Presidents, and maybe Clinton had the same thing, had an alternate route of access to the floor for Cabinet members. In fact, one President had a special box that if you didn’t want to go through the Staff Secretary or the regular screening and you had something you wanted to get to the President or the President had something you wanted to get directly to, there was an alternate route of access. This gave fits sometimes to people in the White House.

**Currie:** Sometimes he would call, he would say, “Oh, Betty, so and so is going to be bringing something by.” And I would wait, it would come and if it’s a rush time I had forgotten to check
to make sure it had gone to the Staff Secretary because he’d already asked for it. So I’d take it in and oh, boy, now I’m going to get it. But on the way back, when it came out I’d try to tell them that I know it came in.

Young: You probably hear from the Staff Secretary too. What about outsiders? Was that ever a problem? Members of Congress, I’m considering outsiders, people in the agencies, Washington folks.

Currie: Congress was always through—

Young: Reporters.

Currie: A reporter would never.

Young: Never. Always through—

Currie: I’m trying to think, they would never. I think they knew it, number one. They knew they had to go through Mike and all that, the Press Office and everything.

Young: So the pests became people in the precinct—

Currie: We had one in press, Trude Feldman. Did you know Trude? I’m surprised her name hasn’t come up. She still calls me after all the years I have been out of the White House. She called regarding an article she was doing for the President’s sixtieth birthday. She asked me if I could call the President for her. Everyone was aware of Trude, including the Chief of Staff. Everybody viewed her as harmless, but persistent. They also tried to accommodate her as far as they could.

Congressional members would not come. I’m trying to think if they came through without the Congressional office. Rarely, if ever, except perhaps for a golf game with the President.

Young: On an individual basis, of course, there were leadership meetings and business meetings.

Riley: This was true of phone calls also? Did you have some members who were famously busybody with the telephone trying to talk their way in?

Currie: If he asked me to call somebody, I would call and I don’t know if I would, probably not tell Congressional Affairs. But most of the calls were initiated by them for him to call them. I’m trying to think, like David Pryor. They would talk all the time, I never told anybody. Or Senator [Dale] Bumpers. They were old, old friends and that was more personal. I’m trying to think if there were any others like that.

Riley: Were they on a special list?

Currie: They may have been on the clear call list. Pryor may have been.
Riley: Okay, but you just knew if they called, the President was probably going to take the call.

Currie: We’d get a lot of people who’d say, “I’m an old, old friend.” Hmm, don’t recognize that name at all. So sometimes we’d have to call Arkansas. I would call Lynda, his former secretary, and she’d say, “Oh, yes, so and so.” We had a very good family and friend list that we kept up to date. In fact, we had an office that did it. So we knew who the friends were.

Riley: Were there any shakeups inside? There were some changes inside the Oval Office operations, right? You mentioned—

Currie: The aides.

Riley: The aides at one point. Nancy was there the whole time. How was your working relationship with Nancy?

Currie: As you know, each White House is operated differently, and that includes the Oval Office. The role of the personal secretary and the Director of Oval Office Operations many times overlapped, and that could cause some conflict. It worked itself out. I am sure other Oval Offices experienced the same.

Young: It strikes me that that’s a very difficult division of labor to manage, from what I understand, between what Nancy was responsible for and what you were responsible for. It seems to have been a healthy relationship, because you both survived.

Currie: Yes.

Young: Neither of you got fired and neither of you resigned. So something worked. But that must have been quite difficult. In talking with Kathy Osborne and some of the other people who have been in this position, it strikes me that this arrangement—

Currie: Did they have the same problem in other administrations?

Young: No, they didn’t, because they had the Staff Secretary but they had more of the action, generally speaking. I wondered if you had talked with any of your predecessors.

Currie: I talked to Patty Presock a bit. Kathy Osborne and I talked mostly after we had been there for a while, but yes. If I were to do this over again we would have had a meeting with the former administration because every former administration is willing to talk. They want the country to run well so they don’t care. If they lost so be it, but, “I want to make sure that the country moves on. This is how we do it. You can change it if you want to, but this has worked fine for us.” It would have helped considerably.

Young: Kathy had the benefit of being the second person to occupy that job. Helene van Damme had been in that office first, and that was not an entirely satisfactory experience. So it was time for a change, and based on that experience she made it known what would be essential for her to do the job. She already had something of a relationship with Ronald Reagan, she established that
she knew him. One of the things she insisted on, for example, was that she be with the President wherever the President was. She went on all the trips with him and that meant she had to have somebody else to mind the store so to speak.

**Currie:** We didn’t do it that way as you know.

**Young:** Did you travel with him?

**Currie:** I did. Nancy and I would alternate mostly. That worked out for both of us because if she had done all the travel, I don’t know if I would have resented it or not, but probably a little. But since I had a chance to go, it worked out fine. I bet Kathy’s role was different. When we went on travel, we went as his gift person.

**Riley:** Is that right?

**Currie:** I’m sure Kathy went as his assistant or something probably different from us.

**Young:** Yes, she had fairly high rank. She was like a colonel.

**Currie:** When we got there they said, “These are people who go to present A, B, C, D, E” and everyone had this certain job. There was no job for Nancy or me, but we could manage the gifts because we have a foreign gift exchange everywhere we go. We could do that and we did. Because we still carry the gifts here. Now we had a small conflict with Protocol who did gifts also but it worked out as a role that we played. Interesting.

**Young:** She had defined her position vis-à-vis the President. Whether they were in Washington or out of Washington it was the same thing.

**Currie:** I like that.

**Young:** So that was her relationship with the President—

**Currie:** And the Presidential aide was there too?

**Young:** Oh, yes. So it’s two people doing this job, which I think is a tribute.

**Currie:** For sure.

**Young:** To your management cool. You could live with that, but there must have been times when it didn’t work so well. I’m sure.

**Currie:** There were times.

**Riley:** Let me ask you a little bit about that, and if you want to answer you can. If you don’t, that’ll be fine. Earlier Jim raised a question about the gatekeeper role, and you said that there was
a difference of opinion about who was supposed to be the gatekeeper. I’m guessing the difference was with Nancy who considered herself the gatekeeper. Although at times that was—

Young: Unless it was the Chief of Staff who had a different idea, and I got the impression Chiefs of Staff didn’t make any specifications, did they, concerning them?

Currie: Yes and no. She would have more meetings with the Chief of Staff on a regular basis than I did. A lot of things I don’t need to know or don’t want to know.

Young: So she had a more direct relationship, was more in the loop I take it—

Riley: With the Chief of Staff and so forth. Is it fair to say that was one of the places where you sometimes would have preferred to be more involved?

Currie: There are a lot of things I would have preferred to be more involved in. With the Chief of Staff was just one. One incident—I can edit, right?

Riley: Absolutely. This is the first cut.

Currie: I’ll never forget the President buzzed me and said, “Betty, what am I doing at such and such a time?” I looked at the schedule, and I said, “Sir, according to the schedule you’re free.” He said, “Oh, good, I’m going to do A, B, C, D.” Nancy buzzed in. “Where’s the President?” I said, “He went to the Residence.” She said, “He’s got a 2:00 meeting. Did you look on the schedule?” I said, “Yes, the schedule said he was free.” She said he had a 2:00 meeting. I looked at the date on my schedule, it’s the last schedule. She said, “Oh, you have the other schedule.” I said, “What other schedule?” This was some time into the administration and apparently I wasn’t on the high-level schedule. She said, “Oh, I’d better make sure your name is on it.” I said okay. Who knows how many times I may have put something through or assumed we were free this time? That set me back a bit.

Young: Was that corrected?

Currie: Corrected.

Riley: And how deep into the administration—

Currie: I can’t remember the timeframe. I just know I never forgot it. I know that we were very careful about who got a copy of the schedule. The receptionist out in front got a certain schedule, and she didn’t have the final schedule either. She only needed to know who was coming in when she had to greet somebody. But I don’t know.

Riley: Were there any other instances or cases not about the schedule but where you felt you weren’t getting as much information as would have been helpful for you have in order to do your job?
Currie: I’ll never forget two things. When Les Aspin was resigning. Now, I’m sitting at my desk and the Oval Office is right back there and people are coming in, moving furniture. Looking at my schedule I said, “What’s happening?” “Oh, nothing, nothing.” Everyone’s moving around, moving in and out. So Dee Dee Myers came in and I said, “Dee Dee, what’s happening?” She said, “Betty, I can’t say.” I said okay. I can deal with that but don’t say nothing if something’s happening. She said she couldn’t say, so I just waited to see, and they were announcing his resignation. Maybe I didn’t need to know, I don’t know. But it was crazy.

Young: But you did. You were sitting right outside that office.

Currie: Another thing. I got to work one day and Nancy was in her office. The door was shut, which was okay, and Sandy Berger came in and shut the door behind him and [whispering sounds] he comes out, then he comes back [whispering sounds]. Nothing happening. So I turned on the TV and they were announcing that Ron Brown’s plane was missing. So I knocked on Nancy’s door and I said, “Nancy, do you know that Ron Brown’s plane is missing?” “Who told you that?” I said, “It was on CNN [Cable News Network].” “Oh.” But they were discussing it in secret and it was on CNN. Sometimes I don’t need to know things and really I agree with that, but that was a horrible day.

Riley: You mentioned Chuck Hamilton earlier.

Young: Chuck Hamilton’s daughter Carol died in that. They used to visit us on the Cape, and Carol and my daughter were very close friends.

Currie: When I went to the Commerce Department where his body was at rest there was a whole line of cars. There was a sign that said VIP, so I said, “Hmm, should I try this?” I went around and they allowed me to be a VIP that day. They had the pictures up there. Sad, sad. Sad.

Riley: This President had to withstand a lot of personal tragedy—

Currie: He did.

Riley: —during the course of the administration. I would think you must have gotten to know him pretty well in your time there. I guess I’ll ask two questions and we can take this however you want to take it. One is the general question, and that is the sources of his personal reserve to get through and manage these things. The second question is about the particulars of some of the things that transpired, if you have any specific recollections.

His mother passed away, Hillary’s father passed away, which would have affected him I think, and Vince Foster’s suicide.

Currie: I do know the President has a deep faith and I know he calls on it. Because I’ll never forget when my sister died we were in Paris. I was beyond crazy and just out of it. We got back on Air Force One, because I couldn’t get to Washington for some reason. I had to go the Netherlands and they put me up in the front part of the plane because I was a basket case. He
came back to me. He said, “Betty, are you okay?” I would start crying again. He said, “What can I do?” I said, “Will you pray with me?” So we just sat there together, holding hands and praying.

When his mother died, I got a phone call at home about two in the morning. The White House operator said Ambassador Molly Raiser wanted to talk to the President. I said, “It’s two o’clock in the morning. What for?” And she said his mother had died. I said, “What?!” Apparently, it may have been on CNN but I was asleep. I guess in France, which is however many hours earlier, she had gotten word and she wanted to give her condolences. I said, “Let me talk to Molly or you can tell her that the President is asleep. I’ll make sure he gets the message first thing in the morning.” Now I’m wide awake. I think I called Nancy first. I said, “Nancy, the President’s mother died.” And she may have made calls to the Chief of Staff or something after that because I don’t know who knew.

I got to work very early the next day because I knew it was going to be a little crazy. He came into the office, I don’t know what time, and he was singing a gospel song. He has a beautiful singing voice. And I just gave him a hug. I said, “Are you okay?” And he said yes.

Now when Hillary’s father died he had been sick for quite a while. Vince Foster’s death was just beyond, everybody was just beyond belief on that. Ron Brown’s death totally, totally—Then Les Aspin died and that was another.

When people and friends of his died, he’d say, “Betty, I’ve got to call so and so.” He gets on the phone and I hear him talking. I’ve learned from him. “I just want you to know I’m thinking about you. If there’s anything I can do.” He is just very comforting, on the phone too.

**Riley:** But he has a calm outward demeanor.

**Currie:** Very calm, very calm and he knows. People say he feels your pain and I think he does. Some people make fun of it but he really does. If you need him, he’s there.

**Riley:** And his spiritual devotion is something that’s not put on for political purposes.

**Currie:** Oh, it’s not. He and I used to laugh sometimes. He was at a meeting with some black ministers, and they were quoting the wrong scripture and he let them know. I said, “Good.” He knows. He really knows and he doesn’t flaunt it but he knows. He’s just good.

**Riley:** Had you known Vince Foster well before?

**Currie:** Only from at the White House. Quiet man. A good man. Broke my heart. I was watching Larry King the night it was announced and he was going to stay on Larry King’s show a little bit longer or something, and they came back and said he had to leave. How come he had to leave? It was 10:00 PM, he had nothing else scheduled. To this day it haunts me because they won’t let him die in peace.

**Young:** You said it. Washington can be a very nasty place.
Currie: And still is. They say he did this, he did the other.

Riley: Do you recall how the President dealt with that? Was he somebody who had to be ministered to by other people or was he partly responsible for holding other people together?

Currie: I think holding other people together. He dealt with Vince’s widow. I could hear him on the telephone talking to her many, many times, consoling her. He does it very well. Like when Webb Hubbell went to prison, he had to deal with that, his dear, dear friend and his wife. He dealt with her. He’s a consoler, I guess that’s the word.

Young: He’s a warm-hearted person.

Currie: Extremely, extremely. One day I got a phone call and he had spoken somewhere, I don’t know if it was a funeral or what, and he had tears in his eyes. This lady called and she said, “Anybody can make tears in their eyes. I don’t know why—” She said he was faking it. I said, “The President was being very genuine.” You get all kinds.

Riley: It’s still remarkable to me that those calls are coming straight through to you.

Currie: That was before we finally had to change my phone number, but we wised up.

Riley: Of course.

Young: Do you think it’s something that goes back to his early childhood life, or was it something as a young man he acquired this spiritual—also real empathy it seems to me. He knows what grief is.

Currie: He and his mother were very close, and I think he was like a protector for his mother. Not that I’m a psychologist, but I think it came from that. Very devoted to his mother. A big heart. You had two parts. I hope I answered both parts.

Riley: You did, thank you. That was more a question of a general nature with specifics and you came back and even introduced some specifics that I hadn’t dealt with.

I was going to ask you about race. This is a President who seems extremely comfortable with African Americans.

Currie: I think with all races.

Riley: That’s true? You felt it?

Currie: I felt it to be true and I think, being an African American, I like to tell myself I can judge when it’s not true. I felt it totally true with him, really. I like to say he has soul.

Riley: Can you help us understand what the great affinity was between the African-American community and Bill Clinton?
Currie: He was there. He accepted them as they were. So often I think people accept blacks because they have to, because the polls say this or whatever, but I think he was genuinely open. In Arkansas, which had gone through a whole bunch of racial troubles and strife, he wasn’t a part of it but he had seen it and learned from it and said, “That won’t happen again.” He was as comfortable hiring somebody without knowing their race, which is what I liked, as trying to find blacks. A lot of times when they hire blacks they do it because they want a figurehead or somebody there, and you don’t have to be smart or bright. But he felt they were all just as equal or smart as the next. I felt that with him.

Riley: Was it ever a subject of conversation between the two of you, not about your own experiences but about the condition of race in America or—

Currie: Not really. He had a racial initiative, a group of people, and they would discuss it. He was a part of that, and he was as authoritative on it as anybody there. He took whatever information they gave him. I think if I were to tell him that I had racial problems or something, he would be very angry. I think he would.

Young: Did he ever ask you about your own growing-up experiences?

Currie: No, I don’t think he had time to listen to all of them.

Young: How did he and Vernon Jordan hook up?

Currie: I don’t know. Vernon was always there. I’d have to ask Vernon who was his contact, but Vernon was always there.

Young: How their paths in life came to intersect.

Currie: They were what I’d call “best buds.” I’ll never forget, it was early in the administration and I was having some problems at work. I said, “Vernon, I don’t know if I can deal with this or not. I’m having a problem.” I was mad at him when he finished, but he said, “You do whatever you have to, but you stay in that job.” I said to myself, Now, Vernon, you’re preaching one thing—So I sucked it in and kept on going. Vernon is a good person to talk to. He and the President, they’re two of a kind.

Young: We’re getting some resistance from his staff—

Currie: Whose staff?

Young: For scheduling an interview.

Currie: Vernon? I will call him when I get back and tell him how great you are, what fun you are.

Young: I understand we need to establish—
Currie: I’m surprised he’s not more than willing to—

Young: It’s not that. I think some of it is always staff protection. He’s not going to do this interview unless maybe the President himself tells him to. That’s all right.

Currie: Do you think he’s concerned that you’re calling to ask him about one particular issue?

Young: Shouldn’t be because I wrote him a letter and I said we’d met way back at Chuck Hamilton’s house and this is what we’re doing. No, we do describe, but you never know whether the person gets that letter or not. You never know whether it’s stopped.

Currie: Which office did you mail it to, New York or Washington?

Young: New York.

Riley: I may be able to tell you who it was, I had some correspondence with the woman in his office.

Currie: Gail?

Riley: I think it was Gail, but I’m not sure, I’ll find out for you.

Currie: She’s the one I would—she’s very good. She’s in the Washington office. He tells me if I ever—call Gail.

Young: Anyway, we’re not at this point asking—but if you want to put in a good word, say, “They’re okay, they’re not out to get you.”

Riley: Were you surprised that Vernon decided not to come into the government?

Currie: Kind of yes and—Vernon had those personal problems and I think that precluded anything that he would want to do politically.

Riley: Personal problems being—

Currie: It was easier for him to work behind the scenes. He had total access to the President and everything else, so it was better.

Riley: They talked often?

Currie: Often, and his wife Ann [Jordan] was on several boards. So it was the best of all possible worlds.

Riley: Did his calls come through you or did they go straight to the President?
Currie: He was on the clear-call list.

Riley: You said they were best buds? Two people who are very much alike.

Currie: Very much alike.

Riley: How is that?

Currie: I’ll never forget, when Vernon was working with the transition with Warren, he asked Caroleen [Nord] and me to help type up a speech he was giving at a funeral. It was a hundred pages I think, maybe less. So Caroleen typed it the first time and then I proofed it, and then I helped her type it. It was so wonderful, so warm. I hadn’t worked with Clinton yet, but I said, “That’s the same sort of speech that Vernon would give, the same type, the same warmth.”

Young: I think Clinton learned a lot from Vernon.

Currie: I think so too.

Riley: How so?

Currie: I think politically. Vernon is a politician, although he’s not in politics. He’s a charmer, as is Clinton.

Riley: But sometimes people who are so much alike don’t get along very well.

Currie: I think Vernon is also smart enough to know that you may not get along, but you’re going to get along with—like he told me, you suck it up and you—but to me they do get along. And he would take his calls all the time.

Riley: Vernon was in New York the whole time?

Currie: No, Washington 90 percent of the time. He didn’t go to New York until after. I think it was after, I know he was there doing—

Young: He went to Lazard, that was a transition.

Currie: I think he could make more money outside than you could inside.

Riley: Sure.

Currie: You may not know, but the government doesn’t pay much at all. [laughing]

Riley: I’ve done so many of these interviews. It comes up.

Young: Not directly, but indirectly some people get very much, as we’re seeing. You said “best buds,” also they’re peers. That’s my impression anyway.
Currie: And I don’t think he used Vernon to be his “black bud” either. I think Vernon was just a bud.

Riley: Sure. Are there other people who are in that “best buds” category, or is that reserved for one person?

Currie: No, Mack was and still is a best bud. Terry McAuliffe became a best bud also. Who else did he always hang around with? His brothers-in-law, Hugh [Rodham] and Tony [Rodham]. But you see, he could bounce politics off of Vernon, whereas the rest of them, I think it was mostly—Terry McAuliffe was politics also. I can think of some more best buds for you.

Riley: With Vernon it was not just politics, it was anything.

Currie: It was fun, golf, and everything.

Riley: They liked to golf together.

Currie: I think they probably both shaved their scores, but don’t tell them I said that.

Young: Most Presidents do.

Currie: Part of the job.

Riley: Was there any pattern to the consultations with Vernon? Was he a late-night consultation?

Currie: Late nights. When the weather was good and they wanted to golf, Vernon was fortunate in that he could afford to take off and golf with the President.

Young: Well, to move to a different round. There’s something I’d like to pick up on. This is way down there, Jordan is up here. You mentioned at one point that there were two schedules. I’ve used the daily diary in other projects, in several administrations, going back to [Jimmy] Carter. I hope I’m using the right word. That’s the thing where almost every minute of the day of the President, personal time here and so forth.

What I noticed was, going back from Carter to Reagan to Bush 41, they’re identical. The format is identical, the information is identical. This is not the public schedule. The Clinton daily diary is not open. It’s open at all the other Presidential—at least the last time I heard about it.

Currie: Not open because?

Riley: It’s the timing of the archives.

Young: It’s not open at the archives yet. So I don’t have that to compare with. But I was told by one of the directors of the earlier Presidential libraries. I said, “Why is this? I’m looking at Carter, it’s exactly the same, done with the same detail, same format.” He said, “That’s because
the same person is doing it.” The person responsible for the National Archives who went through many, many Presidencies is always doing that.

By the time we get to Clinton, that’s apparently not true. Is it? Who is making it up? Who is keeping the daily—

**Currie:** I do remember her. I think it was Ellen McCathran.

**Young:** A career person?

**Currie:** Yes, we (myself and the Presidential aide) would send Ellen all of the relevant papers that she needed. President Clinton also had a personal diarist, Janis Kearney, doing similar things and we would also send items to her. Ellen was a civil servant. Janis, as a Presidential appointee, was hired at the end of the first term to document the Clinton Presidency. Ellen collected Presidential documents to create a diary, and Janis created a diary based on observations, sitting in on meetings, talking to staff, et cetera. Janis’s diary was more anecdotal than Ellen’s.

**Young:** Okay. She was the official record keeper for anything the President did during the day?

**Currie:** Right, along with Janis.

**Young:** So it would not be possible for him to have a meeting about Les Aspin without that being in the daily diary?

**Currie:** Now, it’s possible that a meeting, I wouldn’t say that high level, but if Chelsea were to walk in, that would probably not be on the record, because Chelsea could come in from one of 20 different places, and we would look in and there she is. If I or somebody else didn’t note it, it would probably not be on there.

**Young:** I don’t remember any of the children walking in, whether that was in the diary or not, but it was pretty complete.

**Currie:** I think the aides tried to make sure it was 100 percent complete. If it slipped by—I don’t think anything is 100 percent because there’s a possibility—

**Young:** They would name the people. The only people they wouldn’t name were the intelligence briefers. They would not name the people from the CIA or—

**Riley:** The position would be identified.

**Young:** You could find out who they were by checking the gate list.

**Currie:** True.

**Young:** So there was somebody out there keeping this document for the official records, and the aide would probably have been the one—
Currie: He was the main one, and then Janis, the diarist, would add little things. We tried to put anecdotes in there.

Young: Was there a daily folder?

Currie: She had a daily, I didn’t. Everything she wanted I would send to her and if she didn’t get it she would call.

Riley: So by and large, with rare exceptions, your sense is that that is a complete picture of what’s going on, in and out.

Currie: Yes.

Riley: That’s helpful because we’ve had discussions even among—

Young: We’ve had arguments with other scholars about whether you can believe these daily diaries.

Currie: Did you ask that question of Andrew or any of the other aides?

Riley: We’ve only interviewed Andrew so far. I’m seeing Stephen in two weeks. So I’ll think to ask him. Andrew was very helpful about his own work on the daily diary. But I don’t know whether I thought to ask him this question specifically. It has come up in subsequent interviews.

Young: We’ve had these arguments with our scholar colleagues. You just don’t know what’s up. I said, “Look at the briefs. They’re very methodically kept.”

Riley: We’re going to break here in just a minute but I wanted to ask you about travel. You said you did a fair amount of travel. This was foreign travel as well as domestic?

Currie: Mostly foreign, very little domestic. If I had to guess, because it was paid out of another fund. Domestic was paid out of another fund. It was easier to justify our reason for going, because of the gifts under foreign.

Riley: How many foreign trips did you make, do you have any idea?

Currie: I don’t know, a lot. Not enough.

Riley: Are we talking about 30 or 100 or—

Currie: Not 100. I would use the 30 figure and I guess I could go back and verify. Somebody has a record of it.

Riley: That’s not necessary.
Young: It’s not the number that is so important, it’s the observations.

Riley: And the sense of frequency. Where did you go that was fun?

Young: What are your outstanding memories?

Currie: I tell everybody, though I had gone to Africa before, going to Africa with President Clinton on his first trip was by far one of the most fun, most exciting. I think he was excited, which reflected back to us. There were massive crowds wherever he went. Massive, in the streets, in the stadiums, they were just so excited to see him. I felt good about it. Each country was wonderful. I liked Victoria, Canada, because it was so pretty. I just loved that. And Kiev, Russia. Moscow got better with each visit. I found it very cold. I think I went four times, maybe five. Each time we went we could tell it was changing. The first time it was cold and gray and I didn’t see very much American stuff. The next time we saw maybe a restaurant here and there. By the time we left they were having discos. Now I probably wouldn’t recognize it.

Young: You observed Clinton with the crowds, giving speeches, and the crowds following him. You mentioned this, particularly in Africa, but it may have also occurred elsewhere, was there anything different about him, and the people he was talking to, the crowds he was talking to in terms of the energy transfer between them and him and back?

Currie: In Africa the Secret Service was panicking because there were a million people almost and he was in the middle of it. I kept saying, “They may have trouble getting to him if they have to.” They were—panic is the wrong word but very concerned.

Young: This is moving among the crowds. What about him standing up and addressing a crowd, did that happen?

Currie: Lots of times. To compare it, when we were in Russia when he gave a speech, there was very little emotion, total opposite almost.

Young: On his part or on their part or both?

Currie: On their part. Of course, that transfers to him. If they’re cool, then he—but I think that was just the country where we were. And he loves, I think, when people are open and receiving, then he reflects it in the way he speaks.

Young: Did you go with him to Ireland?

Currie: Yes. I had never been so impressed with green as I was in Ireland. They loved him there of course, it was wonderful. He loved Ireland.

Young: Gerry Adams was there, getting into the mix.

Currie: It was fun.
Riley: Did you learn anything about the President when you traveled with him that you didn’t know?

Currie: That he, unlike the rest of us—of course, he had sleeping quarters on Air Force One and was ready to go like that. We would take sleeping pills trying to get our body clocks adjusted. I don’t know what he did but his was always ready. He had this thing. He adjusted his body clock and tried to pretend he was there or something, but he was always ready to go, always.

Young: Did he have jet lag?

Currie: Not that I know of. That’s what he said, he had this system that worked for him. I found that you can sleep on Air Force One. The chairs go way, way back, so it’s like a bed. It’s better than first class anywhere. But a lot of the younger people slept on the floor so they could stretch out. You had to be careful at night when you walked up. But trying to get their body adjusted. Most of the flights we would try to leave so we would sleep at night. We would get there in the morning. But he was ready to go. And at the hotels where he stayed, he always talked to the hotel staff. On Air Force One he always went back and at least said hello to everybody on the plane and even the press.

Riley: When you were traveling with him, were you also working on the plane a good part of the time?

Currie: If I had to. We would travel on the plane, NSC [National Security Council] and State Department were usually on the plane with us. They were doing most of the work, because it was an international trip. If anything needed to be done that I could help with, I always would.

Young: This was on the President’s own plane.

Currie: Air Force One. I made a mistake on the Africa trip. Sylvia was having trouble with the manifest. Everybody wanted to travel on Air Force One, or you could travel on the backup plane. The backup usually is a model of Air Force One. So I told Sylvia, “I don’t mind going on the backup.” She said, “Betty, thank you, because everybody wants to be on the President’s plane.” She didn’t tell me that the backup was being repaired, and we had this small plane. We were crunched up like this, and we had to fly for many hours. I said, “Okay, you made it, fine.” Sylvia was happy, I was happy, so it was okay.

Riley: When you weren’t working or sleeping, you were watching movies?

Currie: Yes, they had a list of movies, as many as you wanted. You could bring your own and they would play it on there. I did more reading on Air Force One than anything. It was perfect, comfortable.

Riley: I have heard from others, even among people who don’t like to appear to be overly impressed with something in the White House, that it is impossible not to be impressed with Air Force One.
Currie: It is. And before 9-11 you could do tours at Andrews Air Force base. Or when the President goes to a place, when he’s away the staff would let you come on board. I don’t think they do it anymore because they’re concerned about security. But everyone has been impressed with it.

Riley: You can go out to the Reagan Library, and you can see an Air Force One out there. We actually have a strange connection to that story and I’ll tell you over lunch.

Young: Were you there when Newt Gingrich got his nose out of joint?

Currie: No, but boy did I hear about it. I kept saying, “The back is just right there.” Then they had pictures of it, it was just amazing. I saw him on the street one day and if I see you on the street and I recognize you, I will always say hello. He’d been by the office many, many times. It was after he stepped down. He said, “Betty Currie, how are you doing?” He was always very pleasant. He was at the time.

Riley: That’s good to hear. Let’s take a break. We’re scheduled for lunch downstairs in about five minutes.

[BREAK]

Riley: Were there other foreign trips you made that come to mind?

Currie: They were all enjoyable. I’m trying to think if there were any catastrophes. One trip, one of the staff members—we’d take a gift for the host country person—they got up there and she had forgotten the gift. It was Halifax. She called me, “Betty, I forgot the gift.” I said not to worry. The State Department had taken the big official gift, we could just mail it later. It doesn’t happen often.

Riley: What’s the process of selecting a gift to go on a trip?

Currie: The State Department has excellent records of what gifts were given previously. Their job is to find out what the person’s hobbies are, what they like, what they would suggest. Then we had a $999 limit, but most people would donate. So one, I don’t know who it was, we took a Dale Chihuly, one of those glass bowls that he’s famous for that are priceless. We had it in a trunk about the size of half this table. [Boris] Yeltsin liked music like Clinton liked music so we would take instruments. Whatever their hobby was. Clinton would have the final say. So we’d give him a list of one, two, three. Sometimes he’d say, “No, what about such and such?” They would do likewise for him. They would call Protocol and ask what he liked. He got a lot of sports things, a lot of cat gifts, and a lot of musical stuff too. A lot of saxophone things. A lot of old books, because he likes reading old books. Whatever the hobby was, they would try to make it the gift.

Riley: Do you remember any in particular that he just said, “Look, can you believe this?”
Currie: We went somewhere and he saw it and thought it was wonderful. I saw it and I said, “Okay.”

Riley: Not so wonderful.

Currie: It was a G7 [Economic Summit] and they had seven different globes or something like that, and you put it together. It was a great concept. He said, “How come we can’t do something like this?” Of course, we were limited by $999, number one, but we tried to do something on that magnitude afterward. He couldn’t keep hardly any of them, by law. But we would display them. He could display them in his office or in the Residence somewhere, as long as they were displayed. But most of them are at the library or in the archives.

Riley: Yes, actually, we were down for our advisory committee meeting and got a tour of the gifts rooms. Lots of golf clubs and—

Currie: Lots and lots of golf clubs and golf balls. [Yasser] Arafat would give him the same gift every time he came, a mother-of-pearl nativity scene. We had eight or ten of them. One year President Clinton said, “We ought to display them all.” I said, “Ohhh.” It would make a nice Christmas thing, but every year.

Riley: In order. There’s something about the transition from one year to the next?

Currie: We’d see him, here he comes again.

Riley: What’s the actual protocol of an exchange of gifts on a foreign trip like?

Currie: It’s always done with the State Department, never with the parties. When they would come to the United States, we would usually get the gift the morning of the arrival. The State Department would usually bring it to us and we’d have it on display. The Oval Office is here, my office is here, and the Cabinet Room was here. We’d have a little table right here. After the state arrival they’d go into the Oval Office for a small intimate meeting, then they’d go into the Cabinet room for a large meeting. They would pass by the gift—President Clinton would always say, “The most beautiful, most wonderful thing,” like that, and they would take pictures of it. And vice versa when we went over there. We have no idea what would happen to the gift, how we gave it to them.

Riley: Were there any that were memorably awful?

Currie: No.

Riley: There’s a large wink.

Young: Everybody has very high, good taste.

Currie: Some of them were extremely ornate and expensive. Gold with diamonds—
Riley: How was the office work handled in your absence?

Currie: Nancy was there.

Riley: You and Nancy would trade off—

Currie: Well, he was on the trip, so it would make it much easier. Also, people would take vacations and things when he was gone. Clean house, whatever, when he was gone.

Riley: One of the things I wanted to do with you was to think back through each of the years to some of the major events going on and see if you had any specific recollections about what was happening at the time.

Currie: Now when you gave me that book, which was very good, I said, “I’ve forgotten, I’ve forgotten.” I told myself I’d just come here and empty my mind and try to remember instead of trying to research.

Riley: And I wouldn’t ask you to do that. What I might ask you to do is just follow with me through the schedule. We won’t get into too much of the stuff late in the Presidency right now, but I’m looking here at the task force, the healthcare operation. I know you wouldn’t have had a piece of the policy of that, but was the existence of that large healthcare apparatus an additional complication you had to deal with in your daily work?

Currie: I didn’t think so, it just happened. Mrs. Clinton was in charge of that and she had her own office and staff. They used the Cabinet Room or whatever room they wanted to have the meetings in, or the OEOB [Old Executive Office Building]. So it was not an issue. I didn’t know it was a problem until I started reading in the paper.

Riley: Was it your feeling that the First Lady’s staff was well integrated into the overall operations of the White House or was there a sense of what they themselves began to call “Hillary-land,” in fact a kind of operation apart from the rest.

Currie: Yes and no. We dealt very closely with them on any issue that came up. It was Hillary-land, and they were a little island unto themselves. But they were not exclusive.

Young: Was that the East Wing?

Currie: East Wing, although she had an office in the West Wing and her secretary, Pam [Barnett], was up there and somebody else too.

Riley: Maggie Williams was up there, wasn’t she?

Currie: Maggie had an office in the Old EOB.

Young: Second floor of the West Wing?
Currie: First floor of the Old Executive Office Building.

Young: I meant—

Currie: Hillary’s office, yes, second floor of the West Wing, right above.

Riley: Did you see a lot of Mrs. Clinton that first year?

Currie: I thought so. Not every day, but going to and from the East Wing or the Residence, wherever, to her office, she would pass right past the Rose Garden, I could see her. When she was upstairs, she would sometimes come down, say hello to the President. I would see her at least daily.

Riley: She would check with you before she went in to see him?

Currie: “What’s he doing?” And whatever he’s doing he’s going to stop. I knew that, so yes. She always would. If the door was open she’d sort of—and went in. The door was open a lot.

Riley: He preferred to work with doors open or doors closed?

Currie: I would always ask him, “Do you want the door—” He would say, “That’s okay, whatever.” We tried to keep it quiet in my office, which was somewhat difficult, but we’d leave it open.

Young: Can I ask about the Vice President and his staff? He had an office also.

Currie: He had one down the hall in the West Wing, and he had one also in the Old EOB.

Young: And his staff was also Gore-land?

Currie: We didn’t call them that.

Young: I know you didn’t, that’s a term I just invented.

Currie: This is very good. He had a small staff down in the West Wing. The bulk of his staff was in the OEOB.

Young: Were they separate? Mostly separate?

Currie: I worked a lot with his secretary down there but his policy people, I’m going to say separate. Although they must have dealt with maybe the Chief of Staff or something, but he had his own Chief of Staff who I thought worked with our Chief of Staff.

Young: Had his own National Security people, had his own everything.
Currie: Yes, everything.

Young: That’s a historical trend.

Currie: His security person would come to the briefings in the morning.

Riley: We talked in a couple of instances earlier about the organization, the people you were working with, mostly at the Chief of Staff level. I didn’t know whether you had close dealings with the other Deputy Chiefs of Staff. Maybe the thing for me to do is just throw out some names and get your reaction to these people and what it was that you saw in them and maybe what it was that you felt they brought to the operations. Sylvia Mathews is one of the names that come to mind.

Currie: I have to see if her halo is on straight. I think Sylvia is just bright beyond words. I had met her in the Dukakis campaign, so I knew of her and about her and thought highly of her then. I thought she was very competent. She had worked before with Robert Rubin over at Treasury, and I thought it was a perfect fit for her to come over. I’m trying to think how long she lasted. I don’t remember but it wasn’t a long, long time.

Riley: And that must have been fairly late I guess. I’m trying to think—

Currie: The eight years all start to run together.

Riley: I would think so.

Currie: Who were the original ones?

Riley: The original deputies. I should know this and I’m completely drawing a blank at this point. You mentioned Philip Lader earlier, but he came in the end of the first year.

Currie: I’m trying to look down the hall and picture a face in there and I don’t even—Erskine was later, it will come.

Riley: We don’t have to deal with them in sequence. So I’ll ask you the same question then about Phil Lader.

Currie: The President met Phil I think at the Renaissance Weekend, he and his wife, Linda [LeSourd Lader]. He also had worked at SBA, I think.

Riley: That’s correct, he came over—

Currie: He had a different temperament, very easygoing, and I think people considered that as being soft maybe. I didn’t have as much interaction with him as I’d like and maybe I didn’t need to, I don’t remember.

Riley: Evelyn Lieberman?
Currie: Evelyn had worked as a Deputy to Mrs. Clinton, Chief of Staff, and I think her role was to snap people in place. That’s what I think she did and I think that’s what she was hired for. Very personable, easy to get along with, the door was always open, but she cracked a whip. You had to look and be like she thought you should be. I respected that from her.

Riley: I suspect you probably conformed to Evelyn’s expectations about what ought to be done in your role.

Currie: You got it. She and I agreed on a lot of things.

Riley: But there were a lot of other people for whom there was not that natural inclination. You get the impression that Evelyn would break a few eggs if necessary?

Currie: She would squash them if necessary.

Young: And then scramble them.

Currie: Yes.

Riley: Let’s see, who else am I omitting?

Currie: Harold Ickes.

Riley: Yes, Harold.

Currie: I met Harold initially in Little Rock. He and his assistant Janice [Enright]—I always had admired him because of his father. He was, I think, a good decent person, a political person, knowing what he wants, had a lot in his head, messy, but otherwise just very good.

Riley: Did you see Harold much on a daily basis?

Currie: His office was right down the hall, but he was not one to aimlessly wander the halls. I’m trying to think, he worked on something big and I can’t remember right now what it was. That’s what he did, he did his job.

Riley: He may have been in charge of one of the war rooms inside the White House.

Currie: Yes.

Riley: What about the Congressional Affairs people? Did you see Howard Paster very much?

Currie: I did. I have great respect for Howard and I saw him, I think, at the last recent event, he was there.

Riley: Would you have had much engagement with the Congressional Affairs folks?
**Currie:** Whenever an issue came up, a vote we were trying to push through, they were always down there, always with a list of people we had to call, what we had to do, watching the voting record on C-SPAN [Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network], saying who we should meet with. When they had meetings with people from Congressional Affairs, they would have to set up the table in the Cabinet Room by rank, as to who sat where, which they did. A lot of contact with them.

**Riley:** The same would have been true then with Pat Griffin?

**Currie:** Yes.

**Riley:** Any differences in your working relationship?

**Currie:** None.

**Riley:** John Hilley or Larry Stein?

**Currie:** Larry Stein, gosh, I forgot about Larry Stein, that’s right. I think Larry would have been the quietest of the group and John—I think Howard was aggressive, extremely aggressive. I don’t know if the timing—because before the midterm it was a different sort of atmosphere. We didn’t have as much fighting.

**Riley:** You mentioned earlier occasionally having the Press Secretaries come through your office. Do you have any observations about their differences in style as it related to your shop? Stephanopoulos early and—

**Currie:** I’d forgotten that Stephanopoulos had done it because it was so quick. Apparently George wasn’t the right person for the job. He was brilliant with the press, but doing the press—whatever it was, it just didn’t work. And he became Senior Advisor to Clinton, which was much better fitted for him. I remember Dee Dee more than I remember George. Dee Dee’s complaint was that she wasn’t in the loop. I didn’t know how big the loop should be at the time. I always thought that if she was going to speak for the President, which she had to do on a daily, hourly basis, she should know more. But I don’t think that happened for her.

When Mike McCurry came on I think he had more access. They said it was the “old boys’ network.” True or not I don’t know, but he was able to ease in. Either he knew George better and could get more information via George or whatever. He just was in more.

**Riley:** Was there much concern voiced among women staffers that the men were—

**Currie:** A lot.

**Riley:** The men were not keeping the women fully involved?

**Currie:** They were controllers, the boys—yes.
Riley: The boys were controlling.

Currie: They used the term, excuse me, “white boys,” but that was just a term. Unfortunately, it was probably true. At a meeting you saw more men than you saw anything.

Riley: How would this come to you? Would you just be casually having a conversation with somebody?

Currie: Mostly overhearing. It was a topic—sometimes in a joking form, a serious joke, but still a joking form.

Riley: The fact that it’s commented on in any way, you can say it in a joking fashion and not get in trouble for it in the way that you would if it were made in an accusatory fashion. Do you remember when you first began to hear these concerns raised?

Currie: It may have been early, early in the administration. There was a strong group of men who were taking control, shall we say. I’m trying to think what women—I don’t think he had any women Deputy Chiefs of Staff at that time. I can’t remember.

Riley: Was Mark Gearan a Deputy Chief of Staff originally?

Currie: He was head of Communications.

Riley: He became Communications head, but I keep thinking that Mark may have been—

Currie: Where would he have sat? When I read his bio on something and it said that, I didn’t remember it. But he probably was.

Riley: One of those positions had been earmarked for Harold Ickes until the last moment when he had an ethics problem during the transition. So they had to fill that slot with somebody they weren’t expecting to put in that role, but I can’t remember who the other one was.

Currie: It could have been Mark, yes.

Riley: The other women in senior positions would have been people like—you have Dee Dee as the Press Secretary. She’s Press Secretary but I think an Assistant to the President.

Currie: Her title may have been Assistant to the President/Press Secretary.

Riley: Eventually.

Currie: Not initially?

Riley: I think there’s a chance, there certainly was a salary issue if I recall, in her case. Let’s see who else—
Young: There was the out-of-the-loop problem, even with her.

Riley: Yes.

Young: Was the President aware of this feeling among the women that the boys were in control?

Currie: It may have been in the joking fashion like I heard. The women may have said it, and he may have gone, “Ha, ha, ha, not true.” That sort of thing. Because he prided himself on hiring women. But to hire them and to use them are two different things, so I don’t know. I don’t think he was—

Young: He might not have been as aware of it or didn’t care?

Currie: He would have cared. I would say not aware then.

Young: So you can’t depend on the boys to tell the President that the girls are out in the cold.

Currie: No, they would have considered, “Well, that’s probably—”

Riley: We’ve heard this before, so the characterization isn’t unique from you, but when I mentioned the men controlling things you said it was the white boys. Were you getting the same thing from other blacks in the administration? Was there concern that—?

Currie: I can’t talk for the administration, but I can say within the White House complex, yes. There were some blacks at high level, Bob Nash for one, Minyon Moore, Thurgood Marshall, Terry Edmonds, Cheryl Mills, and Bob Johnson. I’m trying to think who else was an assistant at the time. Rodney [Slater] was a Secretary or Deputy Secretary at the time.

Riley: Was Alexis [Herman]?

Currie: She was head of Public Liaison at the time, before she went to—in the other building, then she came over to our building.

Riley: So there were a few prominent African Americans sprinkled in.

Currie: Yes, there was a concern.

Riley: How much of this, from your perspective, might have been the product of an administration that is having a very difficult first year and people are frustrated because things aren’t going in a good direction? That’s a terribly vague question. Let me see if I can rephrase it. If things are going poorly, one might be inclined to criticize the direction based on a number of different realms, this being one of them, that they’re not being sufficiently inclusive of how they’re going about making decisions. That’s a way of criticizing the process without criticizing the ultimate outcome of the process. Part of this is a question just about commentary on the overall atmosphere of that first year and your sense of whether people were beginning to despair
maybe by July or August of that first year that things were going in a bad direction. You were having difficulty figuring out how to get straightened out.

**Currie:** Most of what I read about the bad direction, I read about it. Things were going pretty well here I thought, a little here, a little there, but I thought basically pretty well. Of course, the press interprets it much differently than I did. We had to get our bearings, that took a learning curve, which I think was maybe longer than most because most of the people there were non-Washingtonians. There were a lot of non-Washingtonians. But I felt we were doing pretty well, I really did. People were growing into their roles.

Pretty soon I got the feeling that more people would get involved. When there would be a meeting I could always say to the President, “You know so-and-so may be—” “Oh, yes, he should come to that too.” So you can always throw in another, an African American or a woman in or something.

**Riley:** It became a concern of yours to try and help the President become more inclusive?

**Currie:** If I didn’t go through him, I could always go through the Staff Secretary or the person setting up the meeting. “Why don’t you—you know you can add so-and-so.” “Oh, yes.”

**Riley:** And the Staff Secretary early would have been John Podesta whom you had known for a long time.

**Currie:** Right, and who was, I think, conscious of how things were looking.

**Young:** In part this was an inner circle/outer circle problem, wasn’t it?

**Currie:** Yes.

**Young:** I’m interpreting this as meaning that there were a number of women and African Americans who were in the outer circle, who should not have been there all the time.

**Currie:** I agree. I had thought from the campaign that there would be no circles. There would just be us, everybody. Then I realized, oh dear, we’ve got—

**Young:** This is different from the single-minded, we’ve got to win, we’ve got to do it. Did people get tired easily in that job? I’m not asking about you, but your observation of others. This is about burnout.

**Currie:** They were saying that burnout was easy, that you get burned out, how do you not get burned out, what do you do. They would always say to take a vacation. But it had to be burnout. I figured the Presidential aide who had a 24/7 job, a lot of them were single, with no life, because what woman wants— “I’ve got an hour here.” “Okay, fine.” But it was difficult. Clinton appointees, on average, stayed in their jobs longer than most administrations. President Clinton, as much as I love him, is demanding. I don’t consider that a fault, but he is.
Young: Some with families don’t have any family life.

Currie: I’m trying to think if we had any divorces. I don’t know, but it makes it hard.

Riley: How did you manage?

Currie: I had a very understanding husband, really. Unfortunately, he retired in ’96, which made my life even more—when he was working it wasn’t so bad. When he was home, “What time are you going to be home?” Before it wasn’t a concern. But he was very supportive. If I worked five and a half days a week, which was normal, with the radio address, Sunday was our day. Go to church, do whatever we wanted to. We tried to make the best of the time when I was off.

Riley: Did you have your Sundays intruded on very often?

Currie: Not often, no.

Young: You were there for the Saturday radio?

Currie: Yes.

Young: Why were you there for that?

Currie: First, it was fun. Also, it was part of my job, as well as other members of the Oval Office staff. We all staffed the President, helped him get prepared for the address, coordinated the radio address invitee list, took care of the guest, and spent the rest of the morning working to take care of everyday business. I would get to the office about 7:30, quarter to eight. We would start letting people in around nine. Invariably Nancy’s assistant would send out the letters that said people should get to the northwest gate at 9:00, but when I’d get there, the phone would be ringing. “So-and-so is here to get in to the radio address.” This is 7:30. I’d say, “Just tell them we’ve got to wait a while. We have to get the office ready.” Then the movers had to come in and move the furniture around, so I would have to watch that. If they were to break anything, heaven forbid. Then the people would come up to set up the electronics for the radio address, open the door, and make sure it all went well.

Young: So there was an audience. This was in the Oval, not in the Roosevelt Room?

Currie: Almost every one was held in the Oval. We had a couple in the Roosevelt Room, when we had more people. But we moved furniture around. We squeezed them all into the Oval Office. Then we had to make sure he was up. I would check with whoever the aide was or Nancy, whoever was working. “Does the President realize what time the radio is—” “Well, he’s been called.” A couple of times he would walk in as the radio address is five, four—

Young: He worked from a prepared—

Currie: He had a prepared, but I think sometimes it was from here. They would set up a subject, he would get a copy of it usually the night before and then he would just read it.
Young: The speeches and speech drafts were worked into and out of the Oval through the Staff Secretary?

Currie: Yes.

Young: Not Nancy.

Currie: Mostly the Staff Secretary. General policy was that the Staff Secretary coordinated this.

Young: Did he work hard on speeches or only on some, do you know? Burning the midnight oil?

Currie: I do know every State of the Union was a difficult speech. Sometimes when he gave speeches from the Oval Office, those were difficult speeches. But regular speeches, when he was going to the Hilton to give a speech to a group, he’d be scratching it up, adding to it, and then just speaking, usually off the top of his head, still he had the gist. But the State of the Union was a long process. Not a long process but detailed.

Young: What do you think he enjoyed most?

Currie: About being President? Sharing with people the office of the Presidency, the White House, things he knew, how he got there, why he enjoyed being there. One of the things I loved that he loved was when someone would come to visit him, especially a “Make-a-Wish” [Foundation] child or something and you opened the door and they went into the Oval Office. They see him standing there—it just brings tears. They were overjoyed and so was he. That happened more than once to ordinary people, to anybody. He knew it. He said, “The importance of the office and its history—” He knew more history of the White House than I could ever try to remember. When kids would come in he would tell them all about this and about that, about everything around. He enjoyed sharing it.

Young: Did he enjoy dealing with members of Congress or was that something he just had to do?

Currie: Probably both. There were a lot of them he considered very close friends, that he had known for years and years. Others he had to because the law says so. He was cordial to them all. Even like Trent Lott who was from Mississippi. I’m from Mississippi, so we bonded. I don’t know if he loved Trent Lott or not, but he was very respectful of him. He couldn’t get anything done unless they were able to work together.

Young: What about Newt Gingrich? What did you observe of that relationship?

Currie: When he was Speaker? He was there a lot. I’m going to say it was cordial. I didn’t realize until after, when he was having his own problems and downing us and he should have been a little more—
Young: I don’t know Newt, but I’ve had a couple of encounters with him. He doesn’t strike me as a very polite person.

Currie: One of the photographers in our office said, “No matter what you say about Mr. Gingrich, he is extremely good to his staff.” I thought that was a nice compliment to pay to someone, because the job—you don’t have to. I said that was very good to know.

Young: I’m an academic, so I don’t count.

Riley: Also you’re from Georgia.

Young: He’s not a Georgian.

Riley: That was my point. Jim is a real Georgian and Newt is not.

Young: He’s a carpetbagger.

Riley: And I’m from Alabama.

Young: Now you see our biases.

Riley: I was going to back up on the calendar and ask about some things from the first couple of years. One was the first World Trade Center bombing. Does that bring back any memories for your recollection?

Currie: We were all concerned about it, but it doesn’t come to me like the bombings in Oklahoma City.

Riley: Why?

Currie: This was very early. And there weren’t as many casualties there.

Riley: It wasn’t too much after that before the Waco situation.

Currie: Yes. The Waco happened—

Riley: My guess is you’ve got your television on.

Currie: You’ve got it. It had been going on for a while at Waco, what are they going to do. I’m watching TV and the President comes out of his office, “What’s happening?” I said, “There’s a fire.” He said, “Where?” I said, “In Waco. They’re just reporting that there’s a fire.” We didn’t know the severity at the time. So he had to go somewhere and he was being briefed as he went. But that was horrible, horrible. We just sat there. It was obvious nobody was going to get out of there.
Riley: Do you recall the President voicing any particular frustration about how that event had been handled or the aftermath of it?

Currie: The only thing he voiced at that time was sorrow that these people were dying.

Riley: Sure.

Currie: He didn’t say anything about what was happening or whose fault it was.

Riley: In May of that year, David Gergen was brought in as a counselor. Did you have much of an opportunity to get to know Gergen and can you give us your sense about what he was brought in to do?

Currie: I forget his title. He worked with the press mostly.

Riley: He was a counselor originally.

Currie: I had met Mr. Gergen somewhere before. I always thought very highly of him, he’s been around a long time. He was very nice, I thought very nonpartisan. He had a job to do, that’s what he did. I thought the President did depend on him a lot. I think he went to Renaissance Weekend also.

Riley: They had known each other evidently for a fairly long period of time.

Currie: I thought whenever David was asked an opinion, he gave an honest opinion, minus any political—

Young: Who was Press Secretary then?

Riley: That was at the point where I think George Stephanopoulos’s portfolio was beginning to shift. It was May of ’93. So he was there very quickly.

Young: It didn’t last too long, did it?

Riley: Gergen? No, I think within a year’s time he had gone over to the State Department to help them do press over there. We talked about Vince Foster already. In October of that year you’ve got Mogadishu. Do you have any recollections about the President’s reaction to the news coming out?

Currie: I don’t. My own reaction, those soldiers died in Mogadishu, which is in a small country over there.

Riley: In these kinds of situations with these international events, maybe this is a naive question. Are there ever briefings for the rank-and-file staff about what’s going on there, to give you a basic education about—
**Currie:** At the senior staff meeting they may give an overview. Later on I got a chance to become a participant in the senior staff meeting. Nancy would give the staff a report.

**Riley:** Can you explain why it took some doing to get yourself access to senior staff?

**Currie:** Because I didn’t need to go. I thought I should be able to go.

**Young:** So you just went?

**Currie:** Whenever Nancy couldn’t go she would call me and say, “Why don’t you go sit in there for me?”

**Young:** You went in there anyway, didn’t you, later on? Not just when she couldn’t make it.

**Currie:** Later on I went anyway, yes. It was approved.

**Young:** By her?

**Currie:** Yes.

**Young:** Just want to know who’s controlling the need to know here, which is—was that useful or was it an impressive performance? What went on?

**Currie:** I found it useful because they would go over the schedule, where he was going and why he was going, so you’d have a better idea of what he was going to be doing. The issues of the day, each office head would talk, the press would talk about the issues of the day that we should be looking for, things like that. Congress would talk about things that were happening up on the Hill, so you got a vague idea of what was happening with everybody. We were doing something different over in the Oval Office but everybody else was doing their little thing, so we could sort of tie it all together. If somebody were to come in and say, “Betty, such and such is happening. They mentioned that at senior staff.” I would be a little bit more aware of what was happening.

**Young:** That certainly should have been helpful.

**Currie:** It was.

**Young:** Was there discussion or was this only a briefing by each person in charge of this or that?

**Currie:** They would have discussion also. If anyone had any questions or anything, they would open it up. But a lot of times if we weren’t aware of something we would come back, or at the beginning, I would ask a question at our staff meeting. She said, “All they said was A, B, C, so I don’t know any more than that.” If I wanted to find out more I’d have to go inquire myself. If you didn’t know, I don’t think they were patient with trying to give you a little lesson here.

**Young:** At what point in your time in the White House did this happen, your getting into that kind of loop?
Currie: I want to say late. I couldn’t give you a date, but late.

Young: Was the fat in the fire about the scandals at that time, or did this pre-date that?

Currie: Scandals?

Young: The second term.

Currie: I don’t think anything was scandal related.

Young: So it wasn’t something that happened in response to [Kenneth] Starr, the independent prosecutor, all of that stuff.

Currie: If it was, I didn’t make the connection.

Young: We talked about some scandal, I remember once, it was at the advisory board meeting and Bruce said, “Well, which one are you talking about?” He said, “We had kind of a scandal management process there,” at the White House.

This is a change of subject, but not entirely. The subject is Clinton hating.

Currie: People hating Clinton.

Young: Yes, that phenomenon. You were in Arkansas. You were an observer of this. It is something a lot of people have trouble understanding why this is, where it came from. It’s basically funded campaigns where you’ve got the politics of personal destruction. But this seems to be unusual for the Clinton Presidency, that it appears even before he came into office. There were people who were just gunning for him or Hillary or both of them.

The first time I went to Little Rock when this project was announced, and I met Clinton for the first time, I looked at the articles and the letters to the editor in the Gazette, and it was an eye opener to me.

Currie: When was this?

Young: This was after, 2001. The Clinton oral history project was being announced and it was at the University of Arkansas. The President spoke, I spoke, and so forth. These were write-ups. Then these were responses to the write-ups appearing in letters to the editor, just pure poison.

Currie: I didn’t realize there were Clinton haters in Arkansas, because he won there by such a massive margin. I thought it was all Republicans who hated the fact that he had won, so they said, “We’re going to fix him.” That’s when I felt the Clinton hating started, and it was an organized campaign. I think after the scandal, people started looking at him with a different eye. Arkansas, I won’t say turned on him, but were not as supportive as they had been.
Young: He was in his first year, and I noticed, because I drive 16 or 18 miles on the back roads, I look at bumper stickers.

Currie: So do I.

Young: The construction workers have to travel sometimes quite a distance, and I started noticing these bumper stickers saying “Impeach Clinton.” I think this began to appear his first year in office.

Currie: Really?

Young: Yes, and I said, “Impeach him for what?” Was this connected with gays in the military?

Currie: That was a problem.

Young: That might have triggered it, but it kept coming up in one form or another. We all hear Russell [Riley] along with the study of the Presidents and the Presidency, and I knew there were [Franklin] Roosevelt haters, but the depth and the scope and the persistence of this with the Clintons is something I’m not aware of earlier in history. Did you see it? Did you feel it?

Currie: We used to get, in the weekly mail, a bunch of cartoons. And there’d be a lot of anti-Clinton cartoons. They’d put them in because they were published. I’d say, “Why do these people think so nasty—” I couldn’t put a finger on why. I always just said, Republican haters, right or wrong. He was young, he was attractive, he was great, he was going to do great things. I think they wanted to stop him in his tracks.

Young: So there were no Bush people around when you came in, or very few.

Currie: And those who were at the White House, I don’t know if they were Bush people or just career employees. We didn’t ask for political affiliation.

Young: You didn’t experience any resentment?

Currie: To my face, no. I know Linda was concerned about what a mess we were and how we didn’t do things right. That’s what I’ve read that she says, but she never said it to me.

Riley: Were you hearing rumblings of any discontent among the permanent staff about the Clinton team coming in and what they were doing in the first year?

Currie: No.

Young: So they were just gone and the professionals who stayed, the White House operators, like that, it didn’t matter to you.

Currie: The White House operators were all very nice to us. They thought we were nice to them, of course, so were the Bush people. So they never complained. The decorator people never
complained, the ushers’ office, people who had been there, to my knowledge. They might have, but I never heard it.

**Riley:** This was a President who, in some respects, and I’m thinking more in terms of the security detail than anything else, had a pretty undisciplined schedule in comparison with his immediate predecessors. Which in and of itself is fine, but it has implications for other people’s lives.

**Currie:** Correct.

**Riley:** Was there much grumbling about that? I understand people would be upset if the President were late for a meeting, but there’s a broader question about whether there was any friction between the permanent staff because of what it meant to have a President who kept to his own schedule rather than something that was more consistent.

**Currie:** I only heard complaints about time, I didn’t hear—that’s all I heard was about time. I never heard the Secret Service complain. If he wanted to venture out to a crowd, sometimes he would ask them. When they told him no, he usually listened to them. Usually. But as someone said, he’s never met a hand he didn’t want to shake.

**Riley:** Did he develop favorites among the standing staff there and the Service?

**Currie:** I’d say yes. I think he liked them all. He also had the military staff, each one—they would leave every two years, I think, and we would lose them. We became so attached to them, we would all be just hurt when they left. One lady was a pilot, he really, really liked her. I think he liked all the agents because they were very close. They risked their lives for him and he knew that, so he would be very concerned.

**Riley:** I’m continuing to track through the calendar things as they come to mind. Can you tell us what the mood was like after the midterm elections in 1994?

**Currie:** I guess the one word I’d have to use is down. Not having been in the White House or really in any government agency before where it made a difference. Where I worked it just happened. But you could tell the difference. We were no longer in control. You didn’t set the agenda, the agenda was set. Programs you wanted to get through now were going to be blocked. It was just not good. You could tell, Congressional Affairs, every time, defeat, not good.

**Riley:** And the President himself, was this another case where he was taking it on his own shoulders to keep the team pumped up or—

**Currie:** I’m going to say he never felt defeated. It was just another way of working through it. Instead of what we were doing, we had to find a different way of getting it done. We had to pick our battles, what we had to fight for.

**Young:** He was down, but he also had this, I think it was Mario Cuomo who called him the comeback kid, much earlier.
Currie: Yes.

Young: But that wasn’t apparent in the immediate aftermath.

Currie: After the midterms.

Young: You said it was kind of down. That was perfectly apparent, even in his face and in his behavior when you saw him on television. He was asked, “What does this mean?” And he started to explain—then he stopped and said, “I don’t know what it means. We’ll have to figure that out, we’ll have to think about that.” This was in a press conference or a public questioning. So it was really a shock, a political shock. Everybody was down, this was just—if he’s down, everybody else is down.

Currie: Yes, because it was bad, it was bad. You tried to put a good spin on it but it was not—couldn’t spin it.

Young: So how did the recovery start?

Currie: What did we do then? We pick our battles, we’re going to do A, B, C. How can we do it? We had to start dealing more with the Republicans, catering to them and making friends with them, to try to get bills passed.

Young: That can get you in some trouble with some of the Democrats.

Currie: Yes. There was a lot of fence building and a lot of—

Young: There was also a lot of outmaneuvering of Gingrich.

Currie: Trying, yes.

Riley: One of the things that happened in April was Oklahoma City. It’s a tragedy but it’s a tragedy that has a consequence for the President.

Currie: A 9-11 sort of thing.

Riley: Were you in the White House that morning?

Currie: What time was that?

Riley: The bomb went off, it was a weekday morning.

Currie: I think Mike McCurry came in to tell him that. We didn’t know much other than that there had been an explosion. He came in and flipped on CNN and we started getting more. Of course, each newscast got worse and worse.
Young: At some time there was even speculation in the press about this being a foreign terrorist attack.

Currie: We lost one of the President’s Secret Service agents in that too, one we knew.

Riley: He had just gone down there from the White House detail. Do you remember any of the President’s reactions to this?

Currie: I may have heard one of the few four-letter words. It kept getting grimmer and grimmer the more we heard. We were hoping it was just a small attack, but then—

Riley: Did you make the trip down to Oklahoma City with them?

Currie: No, I didn’t.

Riley: This seems to be a President who is remarkably adept at addressing pain in others.

Currie: I agree.

Riley: Can you help us understand what it is about him that puts him in that position?

Currie: I think he suffered a lot himself, and I think he is just generally heartwarming. I think he really feels for you, for me. I think he likes to be a comforter and he does it very well.

Riley: You’ve seen this on an individual basis many times I would think.

Currie: Many times, yes.

Riley: The President is a physical man, he’s a big guy. And he’s also physical with people, is that right?

Currie: Yes, he’s a hugger.

Riley: I guess what I’m trying to get at is, physical contact with others is something very natural for him, and it’s with men and women, right?

Currie: Very natural. The word they use is charismatic, and I think you’re born with it. You can’t learn it or anything, you have it. I think he was born with it. People are drawn to him, and to me that’s a good thing.

Riley: And he can do this with individuals, one on one, he can do it with small groups of people, and we’ve shown he can do it nationally also.

Currie: When you talk with him, he looks you in the eye and you feel like you’re the only person there and he’ll talk to you. In Washington, you’re at a cocktail party, you’re talking but your eyes are looking at the room to see who else you can talk to, who is more important than
you are. You never got that with him. At the time you were the most important person. I’ve watched him with people.

**Riley:** This is a guy who had to take his own shots. I start with Oklahoma City, but I’m wondering if there were cases where he became so overwhelmed that it wasn’t possible for him to fill this role.

**Currie:** I’m sure there were a lot of times. He had, I forget the name of the group, from Little Rock, it was a group of handicapped people he dealt with. Tonight I’ll think of it. They all had problems, physical, mental, emotional, whatever. Sometimes a parent would write, “Can you help me with this?” There were certain things he couldn’t do. He did what he could but there were certain things, he hit logjams that he couldn’t move. But he would try.

**Riley:** I see. You get through ’95. The Republicans are in control of Congress. November of ’95 [Yitzhak] Rabin is assassinated in Israel.

**Currie:** They have a picture of the President and Nancy. They were looking at the TV, the look on his face was pure hurt, just pure hurt. He was very close with Rabin, and for him to be assassinated. I don’t know if he was thinking of his own mortality or something, but he had lost a good, dear friend. That process they had worked so hard on, what would happen with that now with Rabin gone?

**Riley:** Had you met Rabin?

**Currie:** Yes, the day of the picture.

**Riley:** I picture you downstairs, pulling the ties.

**Currie:** Whenever he came to the White House, they would always come to the Oval so I’d meet him then.

**Riley:** Was he a real human as they say?

**Currie:** Very. Very quiet. His demeanor was very quiet.

**Riley:** What is it about the two of them that led them to get along so well?

**Currie:** My personal opinion is that they both wanted to have the peace done. They both wanted it badly, and they were both working their ways to try to get it.

**Riley:** Did you meet other foreign leaders?

**Currie:** Hussein [bin Talal] of Jordan.

**Riley:** You told us downstairs that you had seen Hussein before you came to the White House.
Currie: It must have been ’67, ’68, when he came to Washington at the State Department. I was working at AID [Agency for International Development] and they announced that we could all run to the diplomatic lobby and see this leader. I was right there looking down at him. He was the first foreign leader I had a chance to see. Second foreign leader.

Riley: First one being?

Currie: When I first came to Washington in 1959, before anyone in this room was born I’m sure, I was coming here for a job interview because I decided I wanted to work in Washington. And before any problems with security, the President would ride in an open limousine down Pennsylvania Avenue. I was downtown and I said, “What is everybody standing up for?” They said President Eisenhower and [Nikita] Khrushchev were coming down. I said, “A real President?” So I stood there in the hot sun and waited and waved at Eisenhower and Khrushchev.

Riley: How about that.

Currie: So that was my second leader.

Riley: Back in the White House. Do you have any special recollections about the other foreign leaders you met?

Currie: Tony Blair was impressive. I think the President and Boris Yeltsin had a mutual respect for each other. They were both funny, enjoyable, and behind the scenes I think they had their differences but tried to work it out. Of course, meeting Nelson Mandela was a highlight. I say it to any group I speak to, a joy. When he was meeting with the President, they had the option of going in the center door of the Oval Office and going back that way, because they weren’t going to have another meeting, or coming through my office. I said, “Please come through my office, please.”

So when I heard the door open I jumped up. I had pictures taken with him. It was obvious that he and President Clinton were talking and I’m sitting there, but it was a great, great—we got a chance to meet him again when we went to Africa and they had become very good friends, just wonderful.

Riley: Any others?

Currie: Almost everyone I met I was impressed with. I’m trying to think of the lady we met. I’d have to get back to you, but everyone who came would have to pass through my office and he would always say, 99 percent of the time, “This is my secretary, Betty.” There would usually be translators because a lot of them didn’t speak English.

Riley: The government shutdowns occur in the fall of ’95. You were essential or nonessential at this time?

Currie: At the time I think I was essential.
Riley: It’s an important question. If you’re essential you get to go to work, right? Or have to go to work.

Currie: I think we all thought we were essential but then they had categories of essential versus not.

Riley: There was a lot of snow, I seem to recall.

Currie: Right.

Riley: So you’re working then. There were negotiations going back and forth trying to get things open, so I guess members of Congress were coming through. Do you have any particular recollections about that period?

Currie: I worked in the government before when they were trying to get contingency bills. Usually you get a special contingency, blah, blah, blah. I figured this was going to happen. I said, “Oh, we’re going to have to work through this again.”

Young: Newt Gingrich overplayed his hand on that one.

Currie: Yes, right, stalemate.

Riley: In ’96, of course that’s a campaign year. You were telling us downstairs you had at least one campaign story. I’m not sure we’ve talked on the tape about the cats and the dogs at all, have we? I know we talked off the tape about cats and dogs. You became a partial caretaker for Socks early on?

Currie: In Little Rock Socks was an outdoor cat. When he came to the White House he wanted to continue to be an outdoor cat, but we couldn’t do it, so they put him on a long leash and stuck a thing in the ground right behind the Oval Office. So whenever I’d walk in he would be there or he’d be walking around and doing anything. If it rained I had to run and get him and then he’d sit in my office, so we bonded early.

Riley: He couldn’t be an outdoor cat because—

Currie: First of all, the fences are small enough where he could go through it, number one, or someone could reach in and get him, or he could climb a tree and never be seen again. There were also rumors of critters around the White House that may or may not have been safe for him to encounter.

Riley: Do I need more detail on that?

Young: We’ll leave it to historians to figure out what these critters might have been.

Riley: Very good. So Socks starts taking up residency in your office. We determined early on that Socks is still alive.
Currie: Socks is happy and well.

Riley: But you’d said over lunch that there had been a campaign event. Am I recalling this correctly, with the [Robert] Dole campaign?

Currie: The Humane Society wanted to do a debate between Socks and Leader, Senator Dole’s dog. He was named Leader because he was Leader of the House. The Clintons wouldn’t let me take Socks to the debate, but I went with a couple of staff members. Senator Dole was there with Leader. I was trying to speak up for Socks on these issues that they asked. It was funny, John McLaughlin was the moderator. It was a fun, fun evening. They were raising money for the Humane Society, it was cute.

Riley: Did you do any traveling domestically that year?

Currie: The only trip I remember, we came from an overseas trip, I don’t know when it was, but we had to stop through Florida at Edwards Air Force Base, so that was a domestic trip, but basically no, 1995, no.

Riley: This is ’96 actually. I’m trying to get a sense of whether there was any change in your routine because of the fact that you have a President who is also a Presidential candidate.

Currie: He was away a lot, but we were all busy as usual. As you said, with the communications, he was only a phone call away. I think he tried to do most of his campaigning in and out, so he wasn’t away any length of time. Plus he was doing foreign travel during this time too.

Riley: But to the extent that it affected your own travel schedule, it was because he was doing less foreign travel, so you were home more often than you might have been otherwise.

Currie: Yes.

Riley: Did any of the business about the sleepovers and the use of the Lincoln Bedroom and things of that nature, did any of that cross your desk?

Currie: I would hear about it, but to my knowledge, anything they did regarding campaign stuff was done in the Residence. Because legally they couldn’t do it I was told—that’s just how it is. So nothing came across my desk. Now if he were to ask me to pick up something and take it to Hillary or something like that, but nothing crossed my—I would read more about it in the papers than I would actually hear about it.

Riley: Then probably the more logical question is, you’ve got a President who, because of the circumstances that year, evidently has dramatically increased the number of personal guests who are staying at the Residence. If a part of your job is to help in the care and feeding of the President’s friends, I was just wondering if there was any additional interaction as a result of that.
Currie: Anything that happened at the Residence was 99 percent of the First Lady’s staff or the ushers’ office staff. I had no idea we were doing more or less than any other President.

Riley: Not than any other President, but than you had been doing a year before or two years before. So there wasn’t any increase in activity in terms of visits to the Oval Office, or—

Currie: Not to my knowledge.

Riley: Who handled the requests for seats at the radio address?

Currie: Nancy and whoever her assistant was at the time. She had several of them.

Riley: So that was going on in the same precinct as you but it was not—

Young: Almost by law, they have to keep the campaign-related activities quite separate.

Riley: I understand that, and I’m afraid I’m being ineloquent in the phrasing of the question. It’s not meant to suggest that there were overlaps between the campaign and Oval Office operations. It was only the fact that because of the nature of what was going on with the fundraising, there was evidently a fairly dramatic increase in house guests in the White House. It might naturally be that if there’s a tremendous increase in house guests, the people in the West Wing who are largely responsible for helping out with the closest friends might have been brought into this.

Young: You’d get an increase in people wandering the halls.

Currie: Not an increase, but we would see Carolyn Huber, whom you may or may not have met. They did a lot of tours. I wouldn’t have known if they were Joe Smith or John Doe, they were doing a tour. If they came by, “Betty, I want you to meet—” “I’m delighted to meet you, can I show you the Oval?” Then they would keep on going. We had a lot of that.

Riley: Was there anything in particular about the ’96 campaign that was memorable for you? You probably wouldn’t have gone to the convention.

Currie: Where was the convention in ’96?

Riley: Chicago.

Currie: We went to Chicago, my hometown.

Riley: Did you go?

Currie: I did go. What was memorable about it? We were busy, it was crowded, we had a hard time getting in because we had to show security—we thought if you wore a Presidential pin, which is security approved by Secret Service, that they’d let you in, but no. We had to stand on line with everybody else.
Riley: No kidding.

Currie: We didn’t want to make an issue out of it. We stood on line and went on in. It was just very busy.

Riley: But you were not working?

Currie: Who was I helping? Marsha Scott, I think. We were doing dignitaries or something, so we were working, but not working on speech prep or any of that kind of stuff.

Riley: Just kind of helping host people. Would you have gone if it hadn’t been Chicago?

Currie: Probably. I may be wrong, you’ll know better than I. When there’s a midterm election, I think the staff tries to go because they want to be there to hear the speech and just be a part of it.

Riley: I think that’s largely true, but I don’t know how expansive it is.

Currie: I think if I had wanted to go, if I had asked, I probably could have gone. But since it was in Chicago it made it even better.

Riley: Exactly. Did you do the debate components in the ’96 campaign?

Currie: No, I didn’t. I was able to go to them. We watched them on TV here but I didn’t do any work on it. I gave it to Melissa Green.

Riley: Did you ever have any anxiety about what was going to happen in the ’96 campaign?

Currie: Always.

Riley: That was an unexpected reply.

Currie: It’s just that you never know, you never know what’s going to happen. Things can change, I was always concerned. Dole was a likable fellow, I thought. But his poll numbers never really came up. I remember when we worked for Dukakis and they told us that day that we still could win, and we were losing terribly, I thought maybe it was going to be reversed. But I never take anything for granted. But happy.

Riley: Was it a foregone conclusion that you would stay for a second term?

Currie: Did he ask for resignations? I don’t remember. He may have asked for resignations. I don’t think it was foregone, but I was willing to if they wanted.

Riley: You were happy to stay on.

Currie: Yes.
Riley: You were enjoying what you were doing.

Currie: I was enjoying it. We were having fun.

Riley: And your husband was content with your doing it? He had retired you said.

Currie: He retired and the question would come up, “How much longer are you going to work?” I said I didn’t know. I was enjoying it. He had taken up flying and was enjoying that.

Riley: You were not enjoying his flying?

Currie: I’m always fearful of these small planes.

Riley: Did he ever travel when you went? Was there ever an occasion when you could invite him on a trip?

Currie: There was an occasion but I was reluctant to do it because I didn’t know—he’d have to pay, he’d have to fly there separately, meet me there, fly back alone, because he couldn’t get on Air Force One. I said it was just too much for me to figure out, and I had things to do. He did complain about one trip, we went to Barbados, that he could have met me there and had a couple of days. But we didn’t do it.

Riley: It was too much trouble?

Currie: To me it was. Others had done it and it worked out fine, but I said, ohhh.

Riley: What about the mood going into the second term? Were there a lot of people who were in the same position as you who were having fun and thinking, Oh boy, I’m ready for four more years?

Currie: I don’t remember, but I think a lot of people left to go work on the campaign and they weren’t going to come back, or they took a job within the administration. The Cabinet, I think, stayed pretty much the same, so there was not going to be much change. I don’t remember. But I think people wanted to stay.

Riley: I’m trying to remember if there were any significant departures from within the immediate shop. I guess Evelyn had left.

Currie: To go to Voice of America.

Riley: Panetta had already left.

Currie: I think so, to go to—

Riley: Yes, Bowles was—
Currie: Was Chief of Staff.

Riley: I should have asked you about this ’94 to ’96 period. There’s an individual who becomes a part of the White House operation who was not there earlier. He is of some interest to us, his name is Dick Morris.

Currie: Dick Morris.

Riley: Yes. Did you have occasion to meet and work with Dick Morris?

Currie: I did.

Riley: What was your reading of Dick Morris?

Currie: We had a nickname for him.

Riley: Charlie.

Currie: You got it right. I didn’t know exactly what Dick Morris was there for. My first impression was what was he here for? Who is he? I asked a dear friend of mind, Vicki Radd, whose judgment I valued. She said, “Betty, he’s a great man, he’s smart, he’s this,” she went on and on and on. I said okay. The President liked and trusted him. To this day I don’t know exactly what he was there for, still don’t know. But yes, I had contact with him whenever he came.

Riley: This is from the very earliest stages when the President is consulting Charlie without many other people being aware that he exists?

Currie: Yes. I was aware of him but it was most—I don’t know if they met in the Residence or where they met, but a lot of people didn’t know he was there or what he was doing or why.

Riley: Did his presence around the White House create any anxiety that you picked up among others?

Currie: When I confronted Vicki, who reassured me that he was A-okay, others were asking who he was. What is he? What is he doing? They didn’t have the same level of confidence that Vicki did. I think they were right and Vicki was wrong.

Riley: It turned out to be that way. I guess that must have been a bit of a shock going to Chicago for the convention—

Currie: That’s to put it mildly. I said, Dick Morris? He was, I don’t know, I was shocked.

Riley: We haven’t interviewed him yet so we have to rely on secondhand information.

Currie: Will he be asked?
Riley: Certainly.

Currie: Did anyone else say that he was a great person or that he was—

Riley: A great person is not—

Currie: Great is not the word. Useful, informative.

Riley: Yes, of course. There is a division among those who felt he brought some vigor to the administration at an important time, and there are people who would under no circumstances be convinced that he had any value and thought he was poison from the word go. So we’re never sure. We’re an equal opportunity employer when it comes to gathering information.

Young: Except we don’t pay for it.

Riley: Second inauguration, anything special about that?

Currie: What dress did I wear, let me think.

Riley: Did you even go to the balls then?

Currie: No, let me tell you what we did. Melinda Bates, head of the Visitors’ Office and also the lady selling those things on eBay. She was a classmate of the President’s at Georgetown, and she decided that all the Georgetown classmates and all those who wanted to would rent a restaurant and have our ball there. We would have dinner and dancing and fun because at the other inaugural balls I attended you have to find food, you’ve got to walk around, no dancing, and we went to a nice restaurant on 7th Street. They were trying to get the President to come by, which we were told he would but he didn’t. But it was a wonderful time. We had a great, great time, and my husband got in.

Riley: That’s a terrifically enlightened response. I’ve been to one of the balls, and not as a member of an official party, but it’s not—

Currie: I told myself I wouldn’t do it again.

Young: We’re moving toward the second term, and the bad news is beginning to come in. I was just reviewing the timeline here and I’m watching the movement from Whitewater to Starr and everything.

Riley: We’ve got about half an hour left today. I’m trying to figure out how to get into this. The problems with Monica Lewinsky actually began cropping up during the time of the government shutdown. Let me ask a generic question about whether, in your time in the White House, at least leading up to the reelection campaign and thereafter, there were occasions when, Ms. Currie, you felt uncomfortable with things going on in the White House.
Currie: Are you talking about Monica or just in general?

Riley: I guess I’ll ask the question in both ways, whether with Monica in particular and then more generally.

Currie: Now your timeframe is better than mine and I can’t picture up until ’96 that there was a problem. I’m going to say no, from ’95 to election time.

Riley: The President’s encounters with her began during the government shutdown. Some people said if there hadn’t been a government shutdown and therefore a personnel situation change, the President might never have gotten into any trouble because there wouldn’t have been the kind of compromised protection system for him. Does that sound plausible?

Currie: Compromised protection system. She wouldn’t have been in that position, that’s what I would say.

Riley: That’s what I meant.

Young: I feel it is necessary to say we’re not interested in second-guessing or replaying the Starr stuff. We’re not interested in that.

Riley: Or revisiting the grand jury.

Currie: I appreciate that.

Young: That’s very clear, we’re not doing that and we’re not interviewing her or anybody connected with her and so forth. But what is of legitimate and deep historical interest in this, as in the Reagan administration with Iran Contra, people get into trouble. The President gets into trouble. It balloons. There is an investigation and what we’re really concerned with is its effect. Not the facts of the case, but the effects of what’s happening on the work of the White House, the people in the White House, the President. How do you cope when this kind of thing comes down and hits you from the outside?

When the Supreme Court ruled that the President could do his job perfectly well and handle and defend himself in a civil suit—was this the Paula Jones or the Gennifer Flowers? All of us who study the Presidency thought they must be out of their minds. It’s got to have an effect, not only on the President but on the whole way of working, the attention he can give to his job. So that’s where we’re coming from with this and the effect on the White House staff and how the White House kept functioning reasonably well from all external appearances, while this very difficult, persistent attack was going on, one after the other from the investigation. I just wanted to give that background because we’re not putting you through—this is not a grand jury, this is not a deposition, you’re free to amend your testimony. I just wanted to give the context for this.

Riley: I am going to ask one question because I think it is important for the historical record. Is there anything about your grand jury testimony that needs to be revisited?
Young: If there is anything you want to set the record straight about, this is an opportunity to do so, that’s all.

Currie: The grand jury covered everything in the world, as you may or may not know. At this point, as you ask more questions I may start thinking of things, but right now, it’s just a muddle in my head still.

Riley: I understand that and it’s a generic question because historians will want to consult your testimony to develop their sense of what had taken place. They will read that testimony as the authoritative record.

Currie: Then I probably will later on want to make a statement or clarify or something. But I believed in him and that was the bottom line.

Riley: In a legal proceeding they’re asking you questions of fact primarily, and there may be interest in your perceptions of what is going on that would be helpful for us to know or that they would not have asked as a matter of law.

Currie: One thing that happened. The many, many, many times I went up there and every time they would ask me whether, when I talked to the President, he was influencing my thoughts. I tried to tell them, in the best way I knew how, that he wasn’t. He was doing this and doing that, but he wasn’t trying to make me say anything or tell me to do anything. Despite my telling them over and over and over again, obviously they didn’t believe me because they kept on with it.

Riley: This is the conversation you had with the President after his own testimony in January?

Currie: Correct.

Riley: The questions kept coming to you, and the spin that the independent counsel was putting on this was that he was attempting to coach you in your own testimony.

Currie: Right. And I never felt it, and I tried my best to relay that to them but they didn’t hear it, they didn’t hear it. From that day to this, there was no coaching.

Riley: Can I ask you then what you felt the purpose of the conversation was from your perspective?

Currie: I’ll tell you like I told them. I felt then and I feel now that he was refreshing his memory. The questions came up that way. I said, “You’re right.” That’s all it was.

Riley: How did you go about preparing yourself to go before the grand jury?

Currie: Prayed. I think I was more scared than I realized. We had met with the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] before, which in retrospect I was told was a mistake. Whether it was or not I don’t know, but my lawyers thought I should, so we did.
Riley: This was also in January, just to get the sequencing right.

Currie: You help me because it’s one big blur, I don’t have my dates. We met and then we went over everything. It was horrible. There were tears, it was horrible. Then my lawyers said, “Okay, you lived through that, you can live through the grand jury.” I thought they were right. Then I went to the grand jury. The people who talked to me there were smiling and were nice and I said, “Okay, they’re not going to kill me here,” but it was not easy. It was not easy. And every time I went it was not easy. They would allow me to interrupt whenever I wanted to go get my lawyers, but then as you’re talking sometimes you forget. Let me stop, let me stop. As I told anybody, basically they were all very nice to me. They tried to make it easy on me. One interviewer whom I’d never seen before came in one day and was like Perry Mason. He was grilling me. I said, “Can we stop?” One of the jurors said, “Please stop because he’s not being very nice.”

I went out in the hallway and I saw one of the other lawyers and I said, “Can I ask you a question?” He said, “Not without your lawyer.” So we went to where my lawyers were and I said, “Who was that man there? I’ve never seen him before and he was not very nice.” So they took me back in and introduced me to him and everybody. I never saw him again.

Young: They were out to indict.

Currie: Yes. At one point they kept asking me questions about people and at one point I told them, “I cannot mention another name to you because as soon as I mention a name, you subpoena these young kids who can’t afford any lawyers. Now ask me what you want, but I’m not saying any other names.” I just couldn’t do it anymore.

Riley: At the White House by this time, you had a lot of friends who had been through these things, not on the delicate issues that you had to deal with but Whitewater and so forth. Was it impossible for you to consult with them to get a sense of how you keep body and soul together through something like this?

Currie: I think they told me not to talk to anybody. You can’t talk to anybody. And I was feeling like they were blaming me. But nobody did. I said, “Oh, they’re hating me,” but nobody was. All these feelings. Nobody mistreated me. Everybody was very nice. That helped a lot. Had I been shunned, I don’t know if I would have made it. But they were extremely gracious and helpful, wanting to help me.

Young: One of the things I’m hearing here is that normal conversations and interactions with people are interrupted. Don’t talk with this person, don’t talk with that person.

Currie: “Don’t discuss this subject” was what it was. I could talk to anybody I wanted to but not about that. They would ask me how things went, which I felt fine in saying, “Things went well, I’m here and alive.”

Riley: But your lawyers I presume were debriefing you when you were coming out of the grand jury room.
Currie: I was debriefing them because they couldn’t come in. “What happened?” “This, that and the other.” I tried to remember, I really tried to remember. “But, Betty, on May 2nd you said—” I said, “I don’t remember.” They could take notes but I couldn’t. So they had an advantage I didn’t have. And I was told to be nice, instead of—So I was trying to be very nice, tried to tell everything they wanted to know and keep my cool.

Riley: Then you were talking with your lawyers afterward to give them a picture of what had transpired. My assumption is then that your lawyers were probably consulting with others’ lawyers.

Currie: I don’t know. They may have been. They wanted me to be up to date on what was happening.

Riley: How was it possible for you to keep doing the job you were doing with this investigation going on?

Currie: I can’t say I put it out of my mind because that’s not true. It was always in my mind. I had a deep belief in President Clinton, and when he said nothing happened I believed that. I just knew I had to do a job and I knew people were watching me. The press passed by my desk every day, and I knew they were watching for signs that I had broken down or something, and I refused to let it happen.

Riley: Your family was giving you support for these things?

Currie: Yes. I lost three members during this time.

Riley: I had read where this would have been an awful period for you.

Currie: You add that on to it. One of the last things my mother said, she was listening to the TV. “Betty?” I said, “Yes, Mama.” “What’s up with you and Clinton?” I said, “Mama, there’s nothing with me and President Clinton. They have accusations about somebody else.” Add that to it. I think that was more of a concern of mine than the grand jury. If I could make it through this, the grand jury was secondary.

Riley: Your husband was okay through all of this?

Currie: He was very supportive. Wanted to know how come I didn’t tell him more before. I couldn’t. I didn’t want to. First of all, had I done that, his name would have been next on the list of people to call. The little bit I knew about law, I just knew not to and it worked out better for that.

Riley: Exactly.

Currie: But very supportive.

Young: What kept you going?
Currie: My belief in him really, and my belief in myself and the good Lord above. I kept saying, “What’s the worst that could happen? Okay, I could go to jail maybe, but I’ve not done anything wrong. I could lose my job maybe, that’s not the worst thing that could happen to me.” I kept doing, “What’s the worst, worst, worst?” I said, “I can deal with anything.”

Riley: Did your faith in the President continue through the point that he confessed he had done something untoward?

Currie: Yes, and I still have faith in him. I do.

Young: Your faith was larger than his deception.

Currie: Forgave.

Young: Forgiving.

Currie: Yes. We’ve not talked about it. I’m sure his lawyer told him not to discuss it with me and my lawyers told me—and we haven’t and we don’t have to.

Riley: Were there other people in the White House staff who were particularly helpful to you during this period, again, to keep everything together?

Currie: Cheryl Mills, she was a lawyer but she was a sister also. A soul sister. I could just go there and say, “I’m getting a little tired.” “No, no, no, just hold on.” She was good for me. The rest of the staff, Janis Kearney, Carol Cleveland and members of the Oval Office operations staff, all the office staffs were very good. Now, if they were talking about me behind my back, I don’t know and I didn’t care. They were good to my face, that’s all I had to go on. They made me feel good. I was worried about Mrs. Clinton but she never said anything to me, so I didn’t know what to say to her.

Young: Clinton had his own defense team of lawyers, [Robert] Bennett, [David] Kendall, there were some changes in there. This was as you were coming toward impeachment. At some point Greg Craig joined that team. He was in the State Department with you at that time.

Currie: He had left.

Young: Maybe he had left.

Currie: I don’t remember.

Young: What I’m asking about is how normal work was handled and how people did their jobs while this other thing was going on. Were these two things, the defense and the scandal management or the defense of Clinton and Starr and the later impeachment problem with the House, was that compartmentalized pretty much so that other members of the staff, with some exceptions, were not involved? Just kept their noses to the grindstone and did their own work?
Currie: I’m going to say yes. I know I was not out and about as much, so I don’t think anybody—I don’t know if that was intentional for us to give that impression, which worked, I think, very well, or if, in fact, it was just Clinton and his problem that he was dealing with. I know the lawyers would come in, but they usually would go over to the Residence to do their talking.

Young: That’s right. So in the time of trouble you work, you just keep working at your job, that’s my impression.

Currie: We had to run the country.

Young: That became very important to people.

Riley: It’s an interesting take on the point you raised earlier, Jim, about the Supreme Court’s reasoning in the Paula Jones case. Probably the strongest argument for somebody who wanted to claim that the court was fundamentally sound was to point to how the White House staff managed to operate afterward, because most of the evidence we get indicates that this was very much compartmentalized. The harder case is with the President himself and his own focus and intention.

Young: The toll it’s taking on him. But in a case like this, it’s easy to imagine that this unanticipated event, the shock of finding that Clinton actually had done something wrong—It’s easy to imagine that that could have just blown things apart, demoralized people so that the White House—they leave or they can’t do their job and this becomes the obsessive thing. Now, I’m sure it was very much on everybody’s mind.

Currie: Is this when George left?

Riley: George had been gone considerably before that.

Currie: But I know he was devastated by this, he was.

Riley: He had already moved on to doing television commentary because he was very critical the weekend after the Washington Post story had broken, had been very critical of the President in print.

Currie: And there may have been others, but they weren’t vocal. I didn’t see or hear, so I just—

Young: We call that denial. You do your work, you’re denying the whole thing, you’re putting it out of your mind. I think we know of at least one person who had been planning to leave, and when this broke did not because it could have been misinterpreted that they were leaving because of this.

Riley: Did you ever consider resigning?
Currie: No. Another advantage to my coming back, I retired early when I retired the first time. When you’re with the federal government you take a penalty for every year you’re under, whatever it is 50 or 55. I’d like for you to think there was a whole bunch of years that I had. For me to regain that penalty I had to work a total of five years, and the law did that because they want you to work in more than one administration. So for me to get that five years, it was—when did the story break?

Riley: January of ’98.

Currie: It was almost to the day, five years. I said, “Well, I could leave now,” but I couldn’t. I couldn’t and I wouldn’t. That would be to me—so I said I’ll stay on. It got easier as things got better.

Riley: How much time were you spending in the office in the months when the grand jury was—

Currie: I’m going to say my regular 12 hours. Maybe the first time I went they kept me away from the office. The FBI didn’t want me to go back to the office because they were afraid I was going to talk to somebody. So I was away and I was a nervous wreck, a total nervous wreck. So I went to the grand jury, did however long that took, I thought it was 100 hours, I know it was eight. When I was finished we went by the lawyers’ office, had a debriefing, and they said, “You can go home or go to the office.” “I’m going to the office.” I hadn’t been there. I was petrified when I walked in, but everybody was very nice, very good. The next day I did my regular job.

Riley: Were your relations with the President strained at this point?

Currie: I’d love to say no, they weren’t, but they had to have been because I know what I was going through, so he was going through it only worse and we couldn’t say anything but good morning and go on and do the regular routine work.

Riley: But you were doing it.

Currie: I sure was giving it a hell of a try. I kept thinking, We’re going to beat this so just keep on working.

Riley: So you worked your way through that year.

Currie: Was it one year or was it ten?

Riley: A long period of time. He comes back and has a public pronouncement, I want to say August.

Currie: On TV.

Riley: I guess he has to go back, he testified on August 17 before the grand jury and then he made a televised appearance. Did you have a reaction?
Currie: A bunch of people in the office were watching it. I heard someone say, “He didn’t say anything.” They were not pleased with it at all. I kept saying, “Maybe I didn’t hear right, maybe I need to hear it again.” It was not the world’s best.

Riley: Your own reading of it was that it was deficient.

Young: Clarify for the record, please, and for me, what speeches you are talking about.

Riley: This is the President’s—it’s about a five-minute televised address on August 17. He has just come out of the grand jury testimony, having been recorded, I guess from the White House through closed-circuit TV. He had testified in the White House. He then made a snap decision to go on TV that night, and gave an address that was panned by a lot of outsiders.

Young: Because he didn’t say enough?

Riley: It was not a contrite address, it was a combative address. We interviewed someone fairly recently—

Young: He was mad.

Riley: He was mad, yes.

Young: He was mad as hell.

Riley: There were some staff people we talked to who said it was a staff mistake in letting him go on TV that night. Because it could have been predicted. He was tired and mad. But there are some events after that where the tone is considerably more contrite. Ultimately you felt more comfortable with his response to this after you had seen those subsequent addresses.

Currie: Right.

Riley: One was a prayer breakfast I think.

Currie: In the White House. Is that the one in the East Room, where he had the ministers and he made a statement?

Riley: I think so.

Young: He was doing a lot of personal apologizing at least to people outside the White House. I know this from talking to people in Congress and Senators. He was listening a lot to them in this period about what he should be doing. At one point he said, “How many more of these apologies do you need?”

Riley: Did you ever have a subsequent conversation with him about your ordeal through this?

Currie: We never talked about it.
Riley: So there was never an apology from him.

Currie: Never an apology. And as I tell anybody who’ll listen, he didn’t have to. With someone like that you can look and you can tell, you can feel it. He regrets it, putting me through this and everything, I just feel it. If I’m wrong, I’m wrong, but I feel it.

Riley: It’s you and him, it’s your relationship and nobody else’s and I think that’s the thing that counts the most.

Young: He’s bound to have been ashamed. But he was also angry at what they were trying to do.

Currie: Yes.

Young: Very angry. But he couldn’t say all of it in public, because it looks self serving.

Currie: How much time he wasted, how much more he could have gotten done had this not been an issue in the way of what he was trying to do, his agenda.

Riley: We have put you through a very long day today, and it’s about four o’clock. So I think we’ll call an end to today. There may be some follow-up questions on this tomorrow.

May 12, 2006

Riley: This is the second day of our interview with Betty Currie. Ms. Currie, you were just saying you saw President Clinton on television this morning and that had caused you to think about something you might want to say on tape.

Currie: They were having a segment on Mother’s Day and they had four men. President Clinton, [Barack] Obama, a writer whose name I’ve forgotten now, and a football player I didn’t recognize. But they were all four famous men who were raised by their mothers. President Clinton went on to say how much he loved his mother, how much he had to protect her because his father was a little violent. I think that just set a precedent for his life. He was devoted to his mother. A day doesn’t go by, he said, that he doesn’t think about her.

Riley: When he was President did he talk to her a lot on the phone?

Currie: Yes, a lot.

Riley: How often? On a daily basis?
Currie: I wouldn’t say daily. A lot of the talking that they did would be in the Residence after work and all. She would come by quite a bit. The first time I met Mrs. [Virginia] Kelley, we were in Little Rock and I was sitting in the war room. This lady came in wearing I think it was red running pants, maybe a white top, and a blue something. She had Bill Clinton earrings, pins that she had made into earrings. She had sunglasses with Bill Clinton on them, more paraphernalia than I’d ever seen. I said, “Who is that?” They said, “President Clinton’s mother.” From that day to this—she was just that type of woman, wonderful.

Riley: She made quite an entrance then.

Currie: She did.

Riley: Was his mother somebody, to your knowledge, he would consult with about things, or was it mostly—I don’t mean on policy things, not tax cuts or—

Currie: The relationship they had, it would surprise me if he didn’t ask her what she thought. It would surprise me. Knowing Virginia like I do, she would not hesitate to tell him what she thought.

Riley: I bet. She was a fairly frequent presence in the White House?

Currie: She would visit quite a bit.

Riley: Her husband had passed away before then?

Currie: He had died in an automobile accident and she had remarried.

Riley: I was talking about her last husband. He may still be alive. I can’t remember.

Currie: To my knowledge, Dick Kelley had his 90th birthday party recently. He is ill but alive. I talked with him recently.

Riley: We had a conversation off the tape yesterday afternoon in which we emphasized that one of the most important aspects of your interview was the opportunity for you to speak to the record about things that you went through at the White House that are on your mind. I thought maybe I would just leave that open ended and see if there were some things you had thought about regarding how you’d like to have your history recalled.

Currie: I’ve never really thought about how I’d want my history recalled, because I didn’t think I had a history. I feel I was hired to do a job and I did the best I could. Like I said yesterday, the part about the grand jury, I want to make sure people know that the President and I—that I was never influenced by him. How much I enjoyed working with and for him. For anyone to think otherwise would be a mistake. It was a fun place, an interesting place. I, for one, thought he accomplished a lot. There’s a difference of opinion on that. He was a hard-working, dedicated man.
Riley: It would be very helpful for us to hear from you about the experiences you had, I think probably after December ’97 or January ’98, with respect to the investigation by the independent counsel and with the grand jury. The only thing you told us yesterday about your experience before the grand jury was that there was one episode where someone you had not seen before came in and was very rough on you and you complained about it—

Currie: Didn’t complain, just made a fact of it.

Riley: But you were at the unfortunate tail end of an important episode in American politics with the existence of an independent counsel, and you lived through the culmination of what many people would consider to be some of the excesses of that. Historically it’s important for us to have your view on how you actually experienced all of this, as first-hand testimony to the difficulties this can create for people in high-ranking government positions and what happens to the government when people are put through this process.

Currie: If you can help me with whatever questions you have, we can just keep on going.

Riley: I’m happy to do that.

Young: This is a general question. There’s no longer any special prosecutor law. This is looking at it from history’s position, but I’m sure there are going to be more down the pike. You were a witness to this and a participant in it. I think it is important for people who find themselves in your position to be given an idea of what to expect, what it’s like to go through this, and what you would advise them to do to prepare for it. It’s like giving others the benefit of the experience of being a target of a special investigator, a special counsel, going through the grand jury and all of that.

Currie: First of all, I think I don’t know much about lawyers and the stuff, as much as I’ve seen on TV. I’m not a legal scholar or anything, and what I’d seen on Perry Mason, I figured that’s how it all worked. And it’s not like that at all. Once you get a subpoena, the first time it happened, I was watching Nightline on TV, 11:30, 12 o’clock and they had a whole segment about Betty Currie and Monica and stuff. Promptly at 12:00 when it was over, I called Chuck Ruff. Didn’t even occur to me that it was midnight.

I said, “Chuck, I’m just watching something on Nightline and they’ve got this segment about me and all this stuff going on.” He said, “What channel was it?” “Channel 7.” He said, “I’ll check it out and let you know.” So the next morning we got to work and he said he had gotten a briefing on it. Didn’t know what it meant. Then not too long after that he said, “You may be getting a subpoena.” Oh, brother. So we got home from work one night and these men were in our driveway. I said, “Who are they?” They were well-dressed white men standing in the driveway. Bob said, “I think this is it.”

They were very nice. They said they had a subpoena for me. I said, “I thank you very much,” and I took it. I was instructed by Chuck to take it. Then I called him and told him I had it and I read it to him, whatever it said, “You’re subpoenaed to appear.” He asked me if I had a lawyer. I said, “No, of course not.” He said, “I will get a lawyer for you. I’m going to recommend—” How
could I ever forget the name? [Lawrence] Weschler. It came with his recommendation, and I trusted his judgment. So he said, “I’ll let you meet with them.” Therefore I’ve got two jobs now. I’ve got this subpoena job and I’ve got my regular job.

He said at the office others were getting subpoenas also. So I told Nancy and the rest that I had to go meet with the lawyers to see if they liked me and if I liked them. I didn’t know what to expect. They told me at the beginning their job was to protect me, not that they could care less about the President, but they weren’t concerned about that. They were concerned about me. If I’m honest and upfront with them, they will take care of me. I felt good about it. So they were, I’m going to say hired. I didn’t worry about the fee, I didn’t think about that at the time. So we met quite a bit.

**Young:** So you first heard about this. Somebody put out a story. That’s how you first heard about it.

**Currie:** There was little stuff going around. Monica had called and said she had been contacted by [Michael] Isikoff. She said they were asking her all these questions and asking about this and asking about that. I said, “I’ll be darned.” Then it started getting tighter, the circle started—so I still wasn’t concerned because I didn’t know what was happening. Once I met with the lawyers and more stuff started happening—We would talk, we would talk, they would ask me questions. I would answer the questions. I felt comfortable with them.

Then they decided I should, as I said yesterday, meet with the FBI. I didn’t know if that was good, bad, or indifferent, but I trusted their judgment. We went there and then the next day the story came out that I was meeting with the FBI and was somehow or other against the President. That, I think, put me in a spiral. Why would they say that? I hadn’t said or intimated anything to indicate I was going to be anything but honest with them, unless something I said triggered something they thought.

**Young:** The FBI was sent to you by the special prosecutor’s office?

**Currie:** I’m assuming that the lawyers and the FBI worked it out, I don’t know. They just told me to appear here. We met at a hotel in Silver Spring. That was where we had the crying session, it was awful. They would ask me things, and I didn’t want to say, I couldn’t lie. I always thought you could lie. I thought you could just lie, lie, lie and nobody would ever know. And Vicki Radd, the one I mentioned yesterday, said, “Betty, no one ever lies, you just can’t.” I said, “Okay.” So it never occurred to me but to tell the truth. They were asking me things about him that I didn’t want to say, I didn’t want to reveal, but I had to. That was very difficult. I felt like I was being disloyal by saying things that—he and I, between the two of us. So a lot came out. I was shocked at how much they knew already.

They would ask me questions. I said, “How did they know that?” I didn’t know at the time that Linda Tripp had done her thing and had given them all this stuff. I knew I had to tell the truth because they knew more than I knew, or as much as. That lasted for I don’t know how many days. They put me up at the hotel. Then I had to go to the grand jury.
Riley: Your lawyer was with you through the entirety of the FBI?

Currie: At the FBI thing. That was comforting. But then they told me once I went to the grand jury, they wouldn’t be there. I said, “What do you mean, you won’t be there?” They said, “No, it’s just you and the grand jury. You can interrupt at any time if asked a question that you need to get advice on or something.” So I could do that. But, like you said, once you’re in the throes of it, you forget that you can stop. I tried to as many times as I could because I wanted the record to be complete and accurate and consistent.

Riley: When you were talking with the FBI and your lawyers were there, were there occasions when you excused yourself from the interview to consult with your lawyer privately about what was going on?

Currie: Sometimes I would. I would say, “They’re asking this and I don’t know if that relates,” or “I don’t like that, this is what I know happened but I don’t want to say that to them.”

Young: So the lawyers weren’t present at the FBI—

Currie: They were, and I could go into the bathroom and consult with him if I had a question. They would tell me how far I could go, if I could step back.

Young: Did they stop it at some point and give you advice or did you always have to stop it?

Currie: They would too. They would say, “Hold it.”

Riley: The FBI, you said this was an awful crying session. They were pushing you?

Currie: I guess they were, I think it was all new to me, I didn’t know what to expect from them, I didn’t want to say anything. I’m private—they were going on and on, and I’m wondering, in the back of my mind, Where is this going? Where is this going? What do they want? How do they know so much?

Riley: Were you able, under those circumstances, to not answer questions? If there were questions you didn’t want to answer, could you say, “I don’t want to answer that”?

Currie: I would look at my lawyer and they would tell me—

Riley: “You’ve got to, you need to do this.”

Currie: “You need to do this or something” or “No, you don’t have to do that,” if it was not relevant to what—that’s why it was so good to have them there because I thought a lot of it was irrelevant but they were saying—

Riley: And your lawyers were, again, to emphasize the point, you were their client and the President was not their client.
Currie: They stressed that over and over again.

Riley: We have to look after Betty Currie and the case against the President will have to take care of itself. Our client is Betty Currie.

Currie: They always told me to tell the truth, because no matter what you may think, it’s going to come out. I said, okay, fine. They had enough stuff building up to it. So it’s easy to do that.

Riley: In the course of an interview like that, there must be times when you feel like you’re getting tangled up in your own story.

Currie: I’m sure, but the lawyers were there to help me go through it. They had a list of, I think, very pointed questions they wanted answers to. I felt like it just went on and on and on. I cannot say that they were nasty, I wouldn’t say that. I thought they were very nice, but they had their job to do and I had mine. As long as they weren’t nasty about the President, okay, we’re trying to get to a point here.

Riley: Do you know if they were back in communication with Chuck Ruff after the FBI interview?

Currie: My lawyers?

Riley: Yes.

Currie: I don’t know. It wouldn’t surprise me because, first of all I know they were close friends when they recommended me, but I don’t know what legal grounds—I know I was confined and I’m assuming they were too.

Riley: So you weren’t in telephone communication with your colleagues back at the White House?

Currie: No, and that was a hard part. It was, how many days, I forget, my husband would remember. I couldn’t talk to the office, I couldn’t talk to anybody. The day I went to the grand jury I got a page from Cheryl wishing me good luck. They had a record of that.

Riley: I remember seeing that.

Currie: How did they get that? Okay, they know. They asked me why Cheryl had sent it. I said, “She’s my friend and she’s wishing me good luck.” I should have had more, but I had the one.

Young: How did they find that out?

Currie: I think the pagers probably have a system they can go in and find out who paged you and everything.

Riley: While you were at the hotel, were you watching CNN?
Currie: Probably, because I’m a junkie. I probably was. They didn’t tell me I couldn’t.

Riley: Were you reading the newspapers and seeing your name in the newspapers at the time?

Currie: Probably flipping past.

Young: How long did this interrogation go on?

Currie: I’m trying to think. I’m going to say a couple of days. I’d have to go back and double check. Bob would know.

Young: You were physically removed from the White House while it was going on.

Currie: I didn’t realize that they wanted me away so I couldn’t talk to anybody. I thought, *Gee, I have a job, I hope to keep my job*. So we went straight to the grand jury.

Riley: You went straight to the grand jury?

Currie: After the FBI thing.

Riley: You started your grand jury testimony on your wedding anniversary?

Currie: January 27, right.

Riley: You had mentioned it.

Currie: I didn’t know what to expect. When I give speeches, I always clear with the lawyer what I can or cannot say. That morning they told me there would probably be cameras there. I said, “Okay, I can deal with that.” We pulled up in front of the courthouse and there were maybe three or four cameras. I said, “This isn’t bad at all, this is fine.” Little did I know that the courthouse is here, and we had come to a side entrance and they were over here. So we went in, I took a deep breath, and then it started.

Riley: Tell us what the room looked like.

Currie: A small jury room, not like *Perry Mason*, but small. I sat at a table with the lawyers, FBI lawyers over here. They had a stenographer, transcriber, sitting there. The jury foreman was over here and then the 12 jurors were there and I looked right at the jurors, mainly because I wanted to see if I knew anybody. Did not know anybody, didn’t recognize anybody. I think they took my name and everything. I had to, of course, swear in every time, and then they started.

Riley: Was the jury primarily black?

Currie: They were primarily black. I would say, if I had to guess, if there were 12, eight and four, black and white. The men and women I don’t remember, there was an even distribution. I
was told later that that was one reason they wanted to have it in the District. They felt they would get more sympathy from the blacks. Right or not I don’t know.

**Riley:** Ms. Currie, you went straight from the hotel to the grand jury or did you get to go home for a day or two?

**Currie:** I may have gone home to put on my “jury suit.” I went home to change clothes and then went straight there.

I recognized the lawyers who were at the hotel, there were some others there too. They all introduced themselves. I think they were very cordial. After I got what I called the “mean man,” they asked their questions and I would respond. They would repeat a question. It went back and forth and back and forth. Then they would play recordings of telephone conversations that Linda Tripp had had. I was puzzled by that. I said, “Whoa, so they’ve got a lot more than I thought.” I thought the jurors had some sort of briefing books or something because they were looking at stuff. Maybe it was not, maybe it was just their own notes, I don’t know. I think they were well briefed. I think they had a briefing session after each appearance I had. I think they were told to ask certain questions. Maybe not, I don’t know. I felt that.

It was just hard. I thought it would never end. We had a lunch break, went downstairs, and the lawyers asked me how it went. I told them everything I could. The younger lawyer was taking notes of everything. He was very good. When it was finally over, they said, “We’ve got to go out, there will be cameras again.” I said, “Good, there were just three cameras.” They opened the door and I think I stood back, I couldn’t see anything. There were cameras everywhere. As I say in my speech, hand-held, tripods, lights.

We had told the limousine driver to pick us up where he let us off. We couldn’t find the car or anything. I said, “I’m going to fall.” Tripods, lines, wires, everything, people in your face. I said, “I’m going to fall, I’m going to fall.” Finally the lawyers said, “Over there, the car is over there.” I’m just being pushed and pulled. I didn’t know. The one funny part in it, Bob Franklin, I had met him a couple of weeks earlier at a holiday party, must have been Christmastime. I heard “Betty, Betty!” I said, “Who’s calling me?” I looked up and he’s up on this thing out there. He talks about it now whenever I see him, but it was awful, awful. *I may not get out of here*, that was my first thought. Finally, when we got to the car, they opened the door and kind of pushed me in and that was it. Then we went by their office and had a debriefing. They said, “You can go home if you want or go to the office.”

Well, I hadn’t been to the office forever it seemed like. So I went to the office. As I say in my speech, I was scared because stuff was saying I was going to be against the President. I walked into the White House and everybody was extremely—those who were there, because it was about maybe six, which is a normal day at the White House. But they were very nice to me, asked how it went, supportive. I don’t think the President was there. I don’t remember him being there. That was the first time. I didn’t know there were going to be however many after that.

**Riley:** They were basically asking you to reiterate the testimony you had offered to the FBI or they were doing—
Currie: They had taken whatever I said and used that as points to question me because I think they wanted it for the official record. The one question that bothered me a lot, and I couldn’t get a good—I thought I had a good answer. President Clinton had called me one night, midnight maybe, and we talked on the phone for about an hour. They said, “What did he say?” I said, “I don’t remember.” “What do you mean? The President of the United States called you and talked for an hour?”

I said, “Listen. Yes, but, it was—” Who knows. I know at one point I thought. Gee, would he please get off the phone because I want to go to bed. But it was nothing I really remembered, and they kept pressing and pressing on that. It had to be something, it had to. But it wasn’t.

Young: Did you ever feel intimidated?

Currie: By them?

Young: Yes. While they were nice and polite, but—

Currie: The system, I didn’t enjoy it at all. I felt like they were the big monsters and here I was trying to do my job and tell them what they wanted. I felt a lot of times they didn’t believe me because they wanted me to say something else. “No, I’m going to tell you what I know. Now you may have heard something from someone else, but this is what I know,” on and on. They never yelled or anything like that.

Young: But did you get the idea they might be considering a perjury charge against you if they didn’t get the answers they wanted?

Currie: They never threatened me with that. I told them I was under oath and I would tell them the best I could. Some things I couldn’t remember and I said I didn’t remember. I didn’t want to say that at every statement, it wouldn’t have been true. If I didn’t remember exactly or correctly I said, “I don’t know,” or “Can I think about that?” or “I’ll let you know” and they were okay with that.

Riley: My guess is your lawyers were probably encouraging you, if there was some imprecision about your memory, to emphasize the point that you don’t—

Currie: Correct, they were very good. When I would meet with them afterwards, they said, “The record said that this is what you said.” They assured me I had said it correctly. If they had gone into anything we hadn’t discussed to let them know. I told them how shocked I was to hear the tapes and how they knew—some of the nasty things Linda said about me. I said, “My, and I thought she was my friend.”

Riley: So this was the first of, I don’t know how many.
Currie: Five, six, seven, eight, I don’t remember. I thought that would be it, but my lawyer said, “No, you may have to come back.” I think they would interview other people and then, “Ah, we have to ask Betty.”

Young: Did it get worse?

Currie: I think I got better. I like to think that. The first day was, I won’t say pure fear, but I was—and they weren’t mean to me, they weren’t bad. They allowed me whatever I wanted to do, to stop or to ask my lawyer something. So I said, “I think I can live through this.” I thought I got better.

Young: How did the questioning change? Did they get much more specific as time went on about a certain conversation? Did they recall your earlier testimony?

Currie: They recalled my earlier. They would say, “You said this on such and such a date, but now you’re saying that.” I’d say, “No, if I remember correctly, dah, dah, dah.” Both are right. I’m trying to emphasize that. They would ask me about my mother.

Riley: Your mother was still alive at this point?

Currie: She had died in May.

Riley: You had, like you said, three losses in about a 12-month span of time.

Currie: Because Monica had given her a gift and they brought it out. I said, “I don’t want to talk about that.” She never got it. They didn’t do too much of that, about my personal life. I think they tried to, because they knew how sensitive I was about it. When they brought up about the gift I had to leave. The attorney with the—name started with a B, thought I wouldn’t forget that ever. He said, “Betty, take a break,” and he apologized. I said, “That’s okay.”

Whenever they had to ask something they apologized first and said, “Oh, we have to ask this.” Which I appreciated. So I knew, except the one man who came out.

Riley: Do you know who the one man was?

Currie: No, I had never seen him before. He was the youngest of the group that came and he was there just one-half a day and he left. I think it was because one of the jurors even said he was being a little too aggressive.

Riley: Interesting.

Currie: I thought so too.

Riley: Were there any women in the prosecuting bunch that you recall? Any African Americans?
**Currie:** No, no African Americans. I’m going to say yes for women. I think there was one, but I don’t remember her name. I was mostly with three men, from the hotel room, and they were the same ones there. I’m saying FBI, they could have been something else.

**Riley:** Did they have a presence in the FBI interview?

**Young:** The prosecutors?

**Currie:** Yes.

**Riley:** I didn’t think to ask that question.

**Currie:** They were the same ones, yes.

**Riley:** This is easily checkable, but the interviews you said were spread out over some time and you felt like you got better with them.

**Currie:** I felt I did.

**Riley:** You kept going to work.

**Currie:** Yes.

**Riley:** You felt like the people at the office received you well and that you were able to—

**Currie:** I felt they were supportive, but by the same token, I’ll never forget when Maggie Williams had to testify when Vince Foster died, with the papers missing. Someone said it was a big contradiction. I felt so sorry for Maggie because she was getting slammed and slaughtered. But I felt okay. I don’t know if someone had a meeting and said, “When Betty comes back, make sure we treat her—” but they treated me nicely.

**Riley:** Had you, just as a point of reference—

**Currie:** Something just came to me. Something they kept stressing in the FBI thing.

**Riley:** I was just going to ask you, you had not received any subpoenas before the ones related to this business, is that correct?

**Currie:** The White House would receive subpoenas on a routine basis.

**Riley:** I just ask the question because there were so many subpoenas that came through this White House on various things.

**Currie:** All the time at work we would get these things. We would have to go through all our phone logs and all our this, and it was because of the subpoena for the White House. So we had
to go through our logs and make sure we didn’t have A, B, C, D and then turn them over to the general counsel’s office.

Oh, the FBI, one of the things at the beginning that we went over and over and over again, the layout of the White House. I would draw little sketches and everything. They would say, “Wait a minute. How far are you from there? Where is this and where is that?” Over and over. Then my little sketches—finally they got a better idea—but I thought everybody had been to the White House.

**Riley:** You’d think a floor plan of the White House wouldn’t be a hard thing for somebody like that to get.

**Currie:** It was in the papers, just routinely. But they didn’t—

**Riley:** Ms. Currie, how was your relationship with President Clinton during this period of time? You were sitting right outside his office.

**Currie:** I think fine. I think he was going through whatever he was going through also. So we didn’t lean on each other, but I think he understood my situation and I understood his. We just went right on.

**Riley:** It was completely unspoken.

**Currie:** Unspoken.

**Riley:** But you’re continuing to do business as usual.

**Currie:** Continuing to try to do business. I’m hoping I did it okay.

**Riley:** Were there any people in the White House who were giving you a hard time at this point?

**Currie:** Not to my face.

**Riley:** And you weren’t picking up any signals from others?

**Currie:** No.

**Riley:** I just imagine it would be an extremely difficult—

**Currie:** I may have just been oblivious. I had to do this and then if anybody denied anything or was rude or anything, I was unaware of it.

**Young:** I’m just thinking, if I were in that situation, if this were the Miller Center, and I’d been called out to a grand jury or I was being investigated and you were testifying, I can’t help but think we would keep some distance. It wouldn’t be the same as before, because there are so many things you could not talk about. I would think it would sort of—
Currie: I think President Clinton, being a lawyer himself, knew the legalities and I’m sure the counsel had told him, as they had told me—

Riley: Of course.

Currie: I hate to think, but I hope we were keeping up this image that we were proceeding as normal, a normal situation.

Young: Yes.

Riley: Did you continue, as time unfolded, to read the newspapers and watch TV?

Currie: I read that I was testifying against the President. I read that and I was totally angry. I said I wasn’t. I don’t know if he thought that or the rest of the people thought that. I told my lawyers, “Please, don’t let them say that if you can.”

Riley: Did you actually tell that to other people? Did you say, “I’m not out there testifying against the President”?

Currie: Other than my husband, I don’t know if I did or not. I don’t know. If someone asked me how it went, I would tell them it was good, bad, or indifferent, that sort of thing. I said, “I’m doing the best I can to tell the truth.”

Riley: But you just didn’t feel comfortable, given the legal circumstances, of even signaling to folks that you were okay.

Currie: I’d tell them I’m okay, and I hope they were reading into that that I’m okay.

Riley: Similar to Jim’s point, I think it would be extraordinarily difficult if you’re seeing—there have to be mounds and mounds of if not absolute untruths at least these fantastic speculations ranging in the press that you would worry that people were taking seriously, friends of yours were taking seriously.

Currie: I was concerned about that, but if they were, and I’m assuming some of them were, they didn’t relay it to me.

Riley: There just wasn’t some way of communicating.

Currie: If I had just been sitting there looking at everybody when they came in, I might have been able to pick up something, but I wasn’t going to.

Riley: Do you remember roughly how long the experience went with the grand jury, when you finished with them?
Currie: Sometimes I think it lasted forever. I thought I’d never, ever get it out of my system, but it’s something you’ve got to put it behind you and move on.

Young: The Starr Report came out to Congress, and then impeachment proceedings started. Now it’s a new ball game. The President at some point had made his confession. He was apologizing, and now the impeachment thing was rolling. Did your life change at that point? You were through with the grand jury then.

Currie: I was through.

Young: There was talk that you were going to be called up to Congress.

Currie: There was, and I told my lawyers, “Oh, dear. I don’t want that.” They also did a taping. They didn’t go to Congress but they did a taping of Vernon, Monica, and Sidney Blumenthal. Those three were chosen, and I was blessed and happy about that because my name had been bandied about, about doing it. My lawyers were talking about what would happen. I saw Trent Lott at something. He said, “Betty, we weren’t going to let that happen to you.” True or not, I don’t know. But I was concerned.

When Cheryl Mills had her statement before the Senate floor, which I thought was wonderful, she mentioned me in it. That was the closest I got.

Young: The Judiciary Committee of the House, when it was considering and then voted on the articles of impeachment, didn’t call any witnesses.

Currie: Didn’t call any witnesses, no.

Riley: They used the Starr Report as their evidence.

Young: Which meant that none of the witnesses who might have been sympathetic to the President got called, and only the negatives were out there.

Currie: Yes.

Young: Then when it moved to the Senate for the trial, the Republicans in the House were demanding that all these witnesses be called before the floor of the Senate, and you were on their list.

Currie: I know.

Young: Monica was on their list.

Currie: I know.

Young: There was a very intense negotiation about whether there would be witnesses in the Senate and if so, who they would be, whether they’d be cross-examined on the floor of the
Senate or whether it would be by tape and video. I think the assumption was that you would be there.

**Currie:** I was getting from my lawyers that they were really looking at me. That’s when Trent Lott said they weren’t going to let anything happen to me. He may have been talking about that. Also, in the paper, they were saying they didn’t want to have a black woman there and get the Senators getting at her. That may have been a salvation for me, I don’t know.

**Young:** It might have been a help.

**Currie:** But when they picked Vernon and Sidney and Monica that was—

**Riley:** Had you been proscribed by your lawyers from talking to Vernon through the course of all of these activities also or were you able to talk to Vernon?

**Currie:** Vernon was by the White House a bit, we had been social but no legal.

**Riley:** I’m thinking more in terms of just moral support, whether Vernon—

**Currie:** If he ever came by the office, we always got a hug. Every female in the office got a hug. He was always very supportive.

**Riley:** He’d stop by your desk and you’d have a chance to chat for a couple of minutes.

**Currie:** If it was during that time, yes.

**Young:** But not about the legal issues.

**Riley:** Not about the legal issues, but just about how to keep body and soul together.

**Currie:** He would be supportive.

**Riley:** Who else did you rely on primarily during that year?

**Currie:** Cheryl Mills. I don’t want anyone to think she was helping me, but Cheryl was just a comfort to me. She was. Of course Bob was. My family. I’m trying to think of anybody at work. Janice Kearney was there, she was the diarist. I think Nancy in her own way was supportive too because she could have been— But nobody showed me any animosity or anger at all.

**Riley:** The President’s videotaped testimony aired in the fall. Did you watch that?

**Currie:** That was the same time with Monica and Vernon?

**Riley:** This would have been the testimony just before the, I guess it was the August testimony where he had basically confessed to an inappropriate relationship.
Currie: I’m sure we watched it. I’m just sure.

Riley: I just don’t know. I was going to ask you also, did you read the Starr Report?

Currie: Would not read it. I didn’t want to.

Young: Why not?

Currie: I thought I’d lived so much through it, I’ve never read it. Friends of mine have read it and they say, “Oh, Betty, you said—”

Riley: I would think it would be difficult but I didn’t know whether it’s a situation where because you’re part of the action, you would feel compelled to do it out of self-preservation.

Currie: I will probably do it, I will.

Riley: Let me say, I’m not sure I would recommend it.

Currie: Okay.

Riley: Especially on lovely days like today, there are better things to do in life.

Young: I just wanted to get to the question of, again, the changes in the situation as the inappropriate relationship became confirmed by the President. Impeachment was under way, and in fact was going to be voted on. At this point, did things in the White House really get gloomy?

Currie: Gloomy?

Young: And people got frozen, or maybe that’s not the right word, but did it make things even different from what they were?

Currie: It was a real concern. I kept saying, “Impeachment?” I didn’t think it would ever get to that point. First of all, I believed in him. But then when he admitted it, I said, “Okay, the only thing he’s admitting to is an improper relationship, whatever. Is that impeachable?” I guess other forces pursued it, who were definitely trying to get him for whatever reason they could. I think there was a concern at the White House, but there was not a gloom, not a gloom, I didn’t feel a gloom.

Young: Like circling the wagons?

Currie: We all wanted to help make sure—

Young: Like a disaster is on the way?

Currie: No. I didn’t feel impending disaster, I didn’t feel anybody—if he gets impeached, what’s the next step we’re going to do? Others may have been doing that, because you’ve got to
plan ahead, but I was unaware of that. We were, I think, supportive of him or feeling in our heart—I know what he must have been feeling. I kept saying, if this happens, what—but we kept on doing.

Riley: At what point then do you feel like you’re in the clear?

Currie: When they voted that he was okay.

Riley: In the Senate.

Currie: I forget what the vote was, but we felt, whew, he survived that. We knew he would. We had that feeling. We had faith in him all along.

Riley: Was there ever any point in the fall where—I guess by the time Starr issued his report, you must have felt that your legal exposure was over.

Currie: I sure did. Then they decided I should get a legal defense fund. I said, “Oh, gotta pay.” I talked it over with, I think, Cheryl. I said, “What does this mean?” She said, “If you get a legal defense fund you can get money and they’ll pay your lawyer.” So I asked the lawyers about it and they said they had done this once before and they got a total of like a hundred dollars. I said, “Suppose that happens to me?” He said, “That’s what we get. That’s what we put out there.” I said, “Let’s see what happens.” So they did.

Riley: And do you remember?

Currie: It was more than enough to pay for the bill, because there was money left over. And I gave it to juvenile diabetes, which is my charity of choice.

Riley: Each of you individually had set up defense funds. Is that correct or you don’t know what happened?

Currie: I asked the lawyer, and he said it was up to the people, because each person who wants to, because sometimes the lawyers were not charging, I don’t know how that worked out, or they had a minimum rate. Others, if they charged, had bills to pay. Mine, I think, was expensive, and I was happy to have it.

Riley: So you get through. This is January of ’99, by the time the Senate’s impeachment vote is taken. It’s pretty much a foregone conclusion. You feel like you came through this reasonably okay physically and mentally?

Currie: I felt I did. Lots of prayer, lots of prayers. And, as someone told me, many a bended knee was thinking about me. People were—churches were supportive. My church members. The cameras followed me to church one day, I said, “Oh, boy.” They got inside the church. They said, “We want to tell everybody that we said this about Betty Currie.” I said, “We’ve got to have a sermon, we can’t talk about Betty Currie.” They were very good. Very supportive.
Young: Was there an event at the White House when the impeachment vote in the Senate was announced? Was there a party? Was there joy in the streets?

Currie: I think joy may have flowed all over but I don’t remember a party. I don’t think we wanted to be too whatever, just continue going on. But I do remember, when was it? They took a picture of me hugging the President when something had happened. We were stepping back from that, but we were all happy that that was over.

Riley: Did the President ever make even a veiled reference of this to you afterward, or did you just sort of—

Currie: I made a comment to somebody, said we never talked about it. Bob said, “Did he ever apologize?” I said, “No, that wasn’t necessary.”

Riley: So you go into ’99 and life is back to normal?

Currie: We’re getting ready for the end.

Riley: Was there ever any period, and more specifically this interval, I may have asked you this yesterday, when you contemplated resigning?

Currie: I never did. Since I had my five years in by law, and this happened almost to the date of my fifth year, I decided I could make it to the end.

Riley: So you were having fun again, you could go back and have fun again.

Young: You weren’t a wounded veteran. You were a veteran but you weren’t wounded.

Currie: Not wounded. I was a survivor.

Riley: I’m trying to recall events from the last year. Did you start traveling with the President again?

Currie: Any international trip. Of course, we were trying to gear up for 2000, Al Gore doing his thing. Of course, whatever strain there was, there was published that there was a strain. I didn’t realize it. So he wasn’t doing as much campaigning. We were closing down, a chore within itself. The library issue had come up, we were working on that, the papers act or whatever, how we took our papers, making sure everything we had went to the right place. That became encompassing, getting that done.

Riley: No kidding.

Currie: There’s a law for this, a law for that. We cannot take this, we can take that.

Riley: So you’re making decisions about your own files?
**Currie:** And his files, his personal stuff, where it goes, the library, GSA [General Services Administration], we had meetings with the archives, what goes. That took a big part of our time.

**Young:** The archivist was there in the White House, wasn’t he? They would have somebody from the archives getting ready to ship the records, to categorize them, to advise them.

**Currie:** And we had the Residence—of course others were doing that. We had that to do.

**Riley:** Check my timeline again to see if there was anything that came up then toward the end that I was going to ask you about.

**Young:** Were you there to the very last?

**Currie:** The last day.

**Young:** So you were there when he was doing all those pardons and last-minute things.

**Currie:** Yes. I read about the pardons. I figured every President is allowed by law to give pardons. They’d be meeting about different people. Then the list came out and all of a sudden there’s this whole hullabaloo over certain names.

**Young:** He also wrote a lot of executive orders on environmental matters and the National Park Service matters.

**Currie:** Getting it all in.

**Young:** Right up to the very end, he was putting his signature on those things.

**Currie:** He gave me a note, which I had to give to the Staff Secretary, and he said, “This is the last piece of paper I did.” It was dated the last day at two-something in the morning. He was up to the last doing paperwork. The last day when we were there, we had to be out by noon, I think, because President Bush was being sworn in and by noon we had to be gone. We were there, getting all the boxes and everything out. The construction workers had already come in. I said, “They could have waited.” We had a hard time getting out because there was all this stuff in the way.

**Young:** The President-elect came to the White House?

**Currie:** He came by the office, I don’t remember the date. I guess in December.

**Young:** A courtesy.

**Currie:** He came by. They walked not past the Rose Garden but to the Oval Office door, and they were talking. I stood up. He said, “Oh, that’s Betty, I want to say hello to Betty.” So he came over and said hello to me. I said, “In this White House, sir, we give hugs.” So he gave me a hug. He was extremely charming and cordial. Andy Card was with him. That’s when Andrew
Card said, “I met you before.” I said, “Delighted.” Very nice. They walked around and then back out.

Of course President Bush had been there before since his father—so he was familiar with the Oval Office and everything.

Riley: You elected to stay on for a brief time working for President Bush, is that correct?

Currie: By law, he’s allowed six months’ transition, every President. They have an office on Jackson Place I think, which is right across the street from the White House. I wasn’t going to do it. I got all my retirement papers in order. They said, okay, I would get so much a month and dah, dah, dah. I said, “If I decided to work six more months in the transition, how much would I get?” He said $200. I said, “What’s $200?” “That’s $200 more a month.” My math skills were not that great, but I could add that up very quickly. I said, “That’s really worth it for me to get $200 a month.” President Clinton said fine. So I did that. That was an interesting time because we were still closing stuff down and trying to set up New York also. That was a fun time.

Riley: You were around when the decision was made that they were going to go to New York. Were you ever a party to conversations about—?

Currie: The only thing I knew was that they couldn’t make a final decision until after the November elections. If Hillary had not won the New York Senate, I think they would have done something different. I had never considered going to New York. I told my husband after the eight years I would not do that.

Riley: About the decisions for the library, to go to Little Rock?

Currie: I think there had always been the decision it would be in Little Rock. I think Bruce was in charge of 99 percent of that. People would come back and forth, Nancy would work with him, and I would see plans come by. That was a big, big to-do there toward the end also.

Riley: You had known Ted Widmer when you were together in the White House.

Currie: Yes.

Riley: He had been a speechwriter.

Currie: A speechwriter, I’m trying to think what else.

Riley: A speechwriter at the National Security Council for a while.

Currie: He would travel with us overseas a bit too.

Riley: But he came to have a portfolio as sort of the resident historian. Did you have to deal with Ted on these questions of Presidential records and things or was that completely apart from what he was doing?
Currie: He may have been doing it, but we were doing it with archives, GSA, that sort of thing.

Young: At some later point during the transition, the former director of the Miller Center, Philip Zelikow, was helping Condoleezza Rice. He was given an office somewhere in the West Wing. Did you know about that? Maybe not in the West Wing, maybe in the Old EOB. He was there, writing a transition plan for certain policy areas. He had been in the Bush 41 White House also with Condoleezza Rice. They had both been on the National Security Council under [Brent] Scowcroft.

While he was doing that in his capacity of a helper of the new administration, he was also wearing another hat, which was talking with the people in charge who were thinking about a Clinton oral history, this project.

Currie: Really?

Young: Yes, he was giving a sales pitch for the Miller Center to participate in doing an oral history. He and somebody, Jeanie Whayne, from the University of Arkansas, were both making these proposals to Ted Widmer. You didn’t know about it?

Currie: I didn’t know about it at all.

Young: We’re always looking for an inside story of how this project came about. I think Ted was part of that.

Currie: He was very supportive.

Young: Very soon after Bush was inaugurated, we went to finalize these plans at his transition office.

Currie: Clinton’s transition office in New York?

Young: No, Washington, and Bruce was there and [Karen] Tramontano, I think.

Currie: I was there then probably.

Young: We were there then too. We were setting up. We presented a plan for how we would both work on the project, what the division of labor would be, who would be on the advisory board. Bruce was there, Philip was there, I was there, Jeanie Whayne was there. I know an advisory board was approved and Tramontano. We looked at the list and she said, “This looks awfully male and white to me.”

Currie: She would do that.

Young: There was a revised list very quickly.
Riley: And then you ended up with the cat. How did that happen?

Currie: I’d like to say I was very lucky. President Clinton and Mrs. Clinton and Chelsea were going to be moving to New York because she was going to be the U.S. Senator. They had gotten her a residence in Washington because they never had a house. They had, as they said, always had federal housing, from Governor to President. Both houses were being renovated. Buddy the dog would go and they had a problem about what to do with Socks. I was more than happy. He said, “Could you, please?”

The day I was getting Socks, someone said Chelsea called. No one had advised her of what was happening. I said, “Oh, let Chelsea decide what happens with the cat.” She said she had no problem with me having the cat.

Riley: My wife reminded me last night after I got home, that when I returned from the Presidential library after our last advisory meeting down there, I brought her back a mug with Socks the cat on it. I said if she gave it to me I would take it and show it to you. She said, “I have it in my office, I use it all the time.” So tell Socks he’s well thought of and remembered in Charlottesville.

Currie: I want the record to know that Socks and Buddy eventually got along. I know people don’t believe it, but they each had their own little area and they respected each other’s territory.

Riley: Peaceful coexistence.

Young: I’d like to go back and ask about Bruce Lindsey. He was there the whole time you were there, through thick and thin. Was he a “best bud” of the President?

Currie: He was not one of the President’s school buddies that he grew up with, he came later. I think they may have met at a law firm, because they’re both lawyers. I think that’s how they met. They were longtime friends. They grew close during President Clinton’s early political career in Arkansas. Bruce was at the core of the Clinton friends and advisors. Initially when we got there, he had one right down the hall. That’s when Deborah, the personal secretary, worked for him. Then he moved upstairs, he had an office upstairs, so he was always close by. If you needed an opinion from someone who was going to give it to you straight, you could always go to Bruce. He was that sort of a person, accessible to anybody and everybody.

Riley: During the difficult times of ’97 or ’98, did you ever find it necessary to go to Bruce?

Currie: I had to go to him, I think it was when Monica called and said something about Isikoff asking about something. I ran right up to Bruce. “What does this mean?” He was helpful to me then. Within the bounds of the legalities, I could always depend on Bruce to help me. I figure today, I could do the same thing. He’s the kind of person you can depend on.

Young: So he didn’t have this assignment, he was a general counselor to the President.
**Currie:** Yes, and I’m glad he’s still around now doing the library and all the other things. It’s in good hands.

**Young:** Do you know anything about why President Clinton decided to locate his office where it now is, in New York City?

**Currie:** Rumor.

**Young:** Rumor is fine.

**Currie:** We were told he was looking at several places in New York, and Congressman [Charles] Rangel came to him and approached him about getting a place in Harlem. The prices he was looking at in midtown were exorbitant, and the place in Harlem was affordable and would do a lot, he thought, we thought, for Harlem. I think it worked out fine.

When I went there to help with the transition I said, “Hmm, so this is Harlem.” It’s in a wonderful building. I think they made an impact on the city there, the whole area in Harlem, and I think he likes it.

**Young:** And they like him.

**Currie:** They like him up there, they do.

**Riley:** That connection stays very warm.

**Currie:** It still does. Sometimes I go to an event, he doesn’t even know I’m there, I just watch him.

**Riley:** Were you at Mrs. [Coretta Scott] King’s funeral?

**Currie:** No. I thought about that, I could have probably called and gotten an invitation. It’s not my thing.

**Riley:** Did you see him there?

**Currie:** Yes.

**Riley:** It remains remarkable how the comfort level and the—

**Currie:** Toni Morrison was the one who coined the phrase that he was the first black President. I use the word “soul” a lot. He has a lot.

**Riley:** Looking back on your time, you’re glad you did it.

**Currie:** I have no regrets, I really am glad. When I give speeches I try to tell young people to do public service. I say, “You don’t have to be the secretary to the President, you can be the
Secretary of State, you can be any other Secretary, but you can help. And it’s a job worth doing to help.”

**Riley:** Do you have nightmares ever about the hard times?

**Currie:** No more. There were times when I’d wake up—always concerned, what did I say, did I say the right thing. I don’t now. It was not a pleasant time at all, but it’s over and done and if it has any impact on history I hope it’s positive.

**Young:** So you no longer replay it at night.

**Currie:** I don’t replay it and I don’t reread it. I’m afraid if I start reading, I’ll start replaying it again and I don’t want to do that.

**Riley:** You’ve been good to let us have you think about it again.

**Currie:** This is the first time I’ve done it and it was not difficult, but then, I’m hoping I’m remembering as much as you wanted to hear and it was helpful to you.

**Riley:** It absolutely has been.

**Young:** It’s a way of getting messages to people about what it means. So when you’re saying you’re one of those who didn’t come away embittered, hurt, wounded, that says a lot about you and it carries an important message to young people. Why would anybody want to go to that place, it’s awful, Washington is a nasty place. Who would want to do this? A lot of people hear that, so it’s important for them to hear that it doesn’t have to matter in the end. That’s a very important message.

**Riley:** As I often tell people at this point, we have a very broad definition of public service in the oral history program, and that is not just the kind of public service that you conventionally think about that you served during your time in Washington, but the public service that you can provide by spending a day and a half reflecting on these moments for historical purposes. We think that is as valuable a public service as anything.

**Currie:** I agree and I hope that when you get others here, anyone you want, they’ll realize the importance of what you’re doing and how you make it so easy for us to do it. Really, it’s a wonderful thing you do.

**Riley:** We appreciate it.